



Source: AP, 'US Army chief resigns over treatment of wounded', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 04/03/07.
Tags: death, child/parent, husband/wife, home, workplace

Writer/s: M. G. White

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"It's Dad," Kath whispered, wiping her arthritic hands with more than usual agitation on her flour-smattered apron. 'He took the tractor out to Hill Paddock early this morning and he's not back. Something's wrong. You'll have to go up there Ted.'

Old Kath didn't notice the grease all over Ted's jeans, nor the hard glint in his eye, as Amanda did. Kath was just glad her Ted was home at last 'to help', as she and 'Dad' had told everyone in the district. Amanda, frozen with prescient tension, noticed it was a 'bloody beautiful day' outside the old house as usual—sun shining, cattle lowing, insects screeching.

Ted slowly drew a hand through his thick mane of greying hair, and with his other sweaty arm almost crushing his mother's shoulders, tried to reassure her, 'I'll zip up there in the four-wheel drive, Mum. Bet he's just been havin' a snooze. Geez, he's eighty-one after all. I'll be back in an hour. Why don't you and Amanda start getting tea ready.'

Amanda had been on edge all day since Ted emerged from the machinery shed. 'Just fixing the tractor,' he'd called to her, 'Dad's taking it up to Hill Paddock to widen the dam.'

'Aren't you going with him?' she'd asked.

'No,' he'd replied. 'Mum wants me to prune fruit trees and fix up the chook pen. She's far too old now to do all this stuff. It's crazy the way they hang on here!'

While Kath put stew on the stove and finished 'whipping up a pudding'—moving in old familiar patterns which gave shape to her eighty years—Amanda returned to scrubbing at the mould on the tiles, in the fridge, at the far reaches of the lino floor, in a valiant attempt to clean up the old lady's domain.

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Was it only two years since Ted had leapt from that red Audi, beamed his familiar white-toothed smile and laughed, 'Honey, I'm home!'

Thirty years he'd been in the States. She'd been armed against his charms when they were young, but now, well, here he was, both of them divorced, her three children off in other cities, his two in Europe. She'd said, 'There's a fantastic restaurant by the lake. All the politicians go there. Let's make a night of it.' And later she'd added 'Are you sleeping in the spare room or in my bed?'

She'd called in sick from work and they drove in the red Audi to Melbourne, where he had 'business' and she moved her youngest out of smelly student digs into a new apartment. They had indulged themselves in nostalgia and sex. They stayed for days in a green valley, wine-tasting at the end of every quiet dirt road.

Remember...."Remember that time at uni when we hitch-hiked up to Queensland? Gawd, I'd never let my kids

do that today!' Yes, she remembered being terrified to find herself in a car on a dark winding road at night, with a drunk who had a stash of bottles in the back seat, and a criminal record most probably. Today's crims, she reflected, are not much different from yesterday's, really.

'Family is all that matters.' He prattled on while the road unwound inexorably under them. 'Tell you what, let's get married, we should be together you and me. Mum and Dad's place is a great place to live. When Dad dies, I'll inherit it, fix it up a bit, and then we'll have a place for the kids to visit. We'll draw up an agreement of course—I'll write you in for a third. You've brought your kids up alone, done without for years—you deserve this!'

And it was another year until it occurred to Amanda to ask, 'But hasn't your sister been running the place? Doesn't she inherit something?' They'd taken another long road trip, this time to the family cattle property. 'She's been housed in this mouldy place for years, just like the aboriginal stockmen were years ago. She's worked the mustering camps, the fences, the dams. Doesn't she get something for all that?' Amanda could feel fury taking hold. No, all Ted's sister got was a few cattle and a payout 'so she could buy herself a little house in town'.

'Look, you might think a patriarchal system is old and dated, but I tell you that's what's driving the rest of the world! You think there's gonna be much individual freedom, or rights for women, in the Middle East, huh?—not bloody likely. All that freedom we had when we were young, that's not going to work for our kids. We need to think more in terms of Family with a capital F now!' Amanda had already noticed that when she ignored north Queensland custom by addressing Ted's father as 'Frank' rather than 'Dad', the family seemed to draw its collective breath and glare at her.

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She sees through the kitchen window the Toyota as it scrunches onto the homestead driveway. Ted looks straight ahead. His father's body is slumped in the back seat. Kath screams, rushes out, folds hysterically on the verandah. Amanda moves warily from the house. Is that glint in Ted's eye, that turn of his mouth, is that grief—or something else?

He ambles over to Amanda. 'I fixed the brakes on the tractor this morning. Don't know how this could've happened...' He puts his arm around her, then bends to his mother. 'Dad always wanted to die in the saddle. Mum, it's okay. We'll look after you. You've been in this house most of your life. We'll look after you now. That's right, we're here.'

Amanda turns back to the house. She can still smell the ammonia on her hands.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by M. G. White.