



Source: Dina Kraft, 'Defiant Jewish settlers march back to West Bank', *New York Times* in *The Age* online, 28/03/07.

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My old friend Thompson has been lying low, in hiding and in fear of his life. In truth, I think he's actually hiding from his life, but there's only so much a friend can do—especially when you have no idea where he lives anymore! He just sends letters. The last one detailed his kitchen catastrophe, and begged me to drop into his old flat to rescue the fish and check the mail. There was nothing in the mail other than unpaid bills. As for the fish, its water was distinctly murky and, as it was pretty clear that Thompson had abandoned ship, I brought Edgar home—a single tattered goldfish in a circular bowl with nothing but a plastic pirate's chest and strand of weed to keep it company.

That was weeks ago, and I had almost given up on the man, until yesterday, when I received another missive from him. This is what he wrote:

'I went home the other day, for the first time in years—eight years I think. By 'home', I mean where Mum and Dad live, on the northern outskirts of the city. It's funny that I still call their place 'home'—I suppose it's because I don't have any sort of 'home' of my own now—not even that ghastly little flat around the corner from your place.

As for that other 'home'—the one you read about in those glorified self-help books by that poncy Swiss philosophe Alain de Botton—well, it seems like ancient history now—from this particular vantage point I really find it hard to imagine myself as any kind of pater familias—suburban Dad, father of two strapping girls, husband of the tragic Sonia. Lawn. Station wagon. Barbeque. A job, even. All these apparently solid things melt into air, dissolved by the combined corrosive effects of alienated labour and Sonia's maddening insistence on me 'doing the right thing'. Which is why I decided, finally, to go 'home'. Besides which it did occur to me that I could probably hit the olds for a small loan.

I got the bus, which dropped me at the corner of the old street—with about a kilometre to walk to Mum and Dad's place. I dawdled. I was ashamed I think—to be 'coming home' in these circumstances—fat, fifty, totally fucking unemployed and bugged all to show for a lifetime of indeterminate graft except that week's social security payment.

But. Here I was.

When she answered the door, tea towel in hand, I almost lost it. The thing is, she was just happy to see me—this tiny little 80 year old woman just reached up for a hug and a kiss and I wanted to be a child again, to simply let

go and collapse and surrender and be comforted. But you can't go back. Ain't it the truth. So it's 'hi Mum, I was just in town on business for a couple of days, and I thought I'd finally come and see you and Dad...can't stay long tho' my plane leaves this evening, and I have to get back to the hotel, blah blah blah bullshit.' If Mum knew it was bullshit, she didn't say anything—just beamed and sniffled and kept on saying how glad she was to see me and why hadn't I called ahead, she would have made some scones, and I'll go and call your father (who was in The Shed, as usual). And then there were the three of us, and tea and fruitcake, and quick tour of the garden—grape vine loaded with grapes, fig tree loaded with figs, shade house, palm trees huge now—the whole yard a manicured botanic garden of suburban dreams, a tribute to hours of labour and an endless supply of bore water.

I'm not sure how much they know about My Circumstances. I hadn't told them about leaving The Old Job, but probably Sonia had. I confabulated about how wonderful it was finally working in 'the book trade', but waxing wise on the fact that 'publishing is getting tougher', and didn't elaborate. A recent photograph of the girls, taken by Sonia and sent as part of a Christmas package to 'Nan and Pop' had pride of place on their sideboard. They look heartbreakingly beautiful, long hair, smiles and braces, mid riff tops and hipster jeans, posing for the grandparents in a leafy backyard in suburban Sydney. Their home. Their smiles damned me as I sat there, bullshitting to the two people in the world who would, in a moment, simply take me in and feed me and love me. At least for a while. But I couldn't do it—I couldn't go home. It was just a one-day visit.

After a couple of hours, I declared 'well, I really must get back—I can't afford to miss this flight.' We checked the bus timetable. I had another cuppa, promised to ring more often. Mum chided me gently for not seeing more of the girls, and Dad reminded me that being a parent wasn't easy, that it was a responsibility that never left you. He grasped my hand, and I felt his grip shake, an old man now. Hugs and kisses on the porch and, looking back three houses away, they were still there, side by side, waving.

I caught the bus back to town. Cried all the way.'

I read his letter, and looked up at Edgar. 'Thompson sends his regards', I said. Edgar kept on swimming, unconcerned, in and out of his pirate's chest.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tony MacGregor.*