



Source: Ramin Mostaghim and Borzou Daraghi, 'Experts pour cold water on Iran's claim to be nuclear power', *LA Times* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 11/04/07.

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Bargelt had left Wanda, Jane, Selene, Billy and Luis with their well. He had begun to feel that evening up the sexual ratio had disturbed the group's equilibrium. They'd be better off without him. Or human interaction wasn't really his thing. They'd said no, stay, but not tried too hard, and given him some supplies. Bargelt thought he was probably in what had been western Arizona, maybe southern California, and the supplies were gone. He was going south, only because he'd once decided to (were there rumours about Mexico, did he recall? Or care?). The end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it had its liberating aspects, mused Bargelt: but water was an issue.

He hadn't found bottled water since he'd had to stop scavenging back in the Texas ruins, which was why he'd stayed at the well as long as he had, and now he was scraping. Sometimes he'd find a sump, usually just a patch of mud, and squeeze what he could out of that; he carried an empty plastic bottle and a folded-up square of black plastic, about six feet on its long side, which he could drape over the lower branches of a bush so that it funnelled down to a small hole, where he'd tie the bottle: left overnight it might get a few drops. He'd chewed on a few roots, too. Upside, he was so thin he seemed to need less water. Downside, he understood this might be a symptom.

Bargelt had seen behaviour he'd rather avoid. Five days out from the well, he'd been cautiously approaching a wrecked gas station, when he'd caught a flash of movement and taken cover. Two men staggered out of a collapsing service bay, naked, wizened, gesticulating jerkily. Each held a bottle. One picked up a stick and drew a shape in the sand, then they made elaborate show of stepping into the shape. They bowed to each other, turned their backs, and pissed into their bottles. Not much there, Bargelt unsurprised to see. They turned, sat down cross-legged, lifted their bottles to one another. Bargelt couldn't hear them, but it was clearly a toast, then they threw their heads back and drank. Not very clever, Bargelt thought, though impressed by the gusto with which they embraced their situation.

That had been over a week ago. Now he wondered whether he shouldn't have joined the convivial fellows for a drink, after all. He'd spent the last hours in a hidey hole, seeing out the sandstorm, and was scrambling up the slope of a ridge with scrub and cactus along its spine, planning to lay out his plastic, when he heard voices. Out of habit, Bargelt dropped to the ground, to crawl up the rise. He discovered that the scrub and cactus extended down the other, steeper side in a wide swathe for several hundred yards in the direction of a rocky outcrop, and someone had beaten him to it: every plant in front of him was festooned with black plastic. Bargelt was so stunned he stood up, then dropped back to the ground in sheer confusion when a woman in a white shirt appeared from nowhere beside him and announced, in a distinct Australian accent, 'It's a water farm, mate.'

Bargelt wasn't sure whether he was more shaken that she'd got the drop on him, or because her shirt was so white. She held out a hard hand and he pulled himself up. She was taller than Bargelt, thin but not as emaciated as

he, tanned just as leathery, wearing a glass pipette about four inches long on a string around her neck, with a trace of moisture evident in its bowl.

'Your shirt', he said.

'Washed', she replied.

'There must be water, then', said Bargelt, feeling foolish.

'Some'.

She walked down the slope for Bargelt to follow. He saw men and women busy on the farm, straightening and rearranging the plastic, fiddling with bottles and containers suspended below it. Their clothes, he noted, were not so clean.

'There's a trickle of artesian water in the caves', she said, 'supports the bush here. Dress the farm after the storm every evening, undress at sunrise. Let's get you a drink.'

Bargelt said nothing but went doggedly behind, as she stooped to enter a cave at the base of the outcrop.

It was cool inside, large rocks were arranged in a circle for seating, and a larger man who looked harder than the rocks sat behind a bar rigged from a few coarse timbers. On the bar sat a plastic tank, full of maybe ten gallons of water, more than Bargelt could remember seeing in years. Luxury, he thought.

'Water for our guest, Walter', she said to the large man. Bargelt remained poker-faced, thinking it best not to register the rhyme. Bargelt was shocked, again, when Walter thrust an actual glass toward him.

'Drink', the rock man said, and Bargelt understood that this was a threat, but had no choice but to drink, anyway. He drank in sips, fighting the urge to gulp, treasuring the sensation, hoping some acuity might return, suspecting he'd need it. White Shirt and Rock Man stood and watched, while he drank. He handed the glass back.

'Welcome to the New Economy, mate'. Bargelt looked the question.

'Water for work', growled Walter.

'You'd want to pay for that, wouldn't you, mate?', said she. 'It'd only be fair.'

By the end of the next day, Bargelt understood the new economy. Whitey and Walter controlled the cave water, and collected the farmed water from the peasants, which they doled back out in rations according to tasks performed (less tax, of course): farming, maintenance in the caves, where everyone slept, scavenging for food, etc. Aside from Walter's implicit violence, they weren't overly repressive. The thing was, you could leave any time, after you'd worked off your debt in a couple of days—the seventeen people there had all taken that first glass—but you couldn't come back.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Frazer Ward.*