



Source: Paul McGeough, 'A taste of life on the outside',
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[husband/wife](#), [travel](#)

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In my dream, a small bird repeatedly slams its frail body against a pane of glass, trying again and again to get into the room. The gentle thud, thud, thud makes me wince each time as it flaps its tiny wings in shock. Sometimes it makes a small chirrup, and it backs away, hovers, gathers its forces and flies straight into the glass again.

I awake to a bright shiny day outside, the sun pouring in through the window. The bird is nowhere to be seen. The willow tree out in the garden is the new colour of spring, tendrils of simmering green dropping all the way to the lawn. Rebecca left an old chair out there for reading, and dew is glistening on the peeling white paint on its tired legs.

Rebecca is away on business, so I have the run of the house. She left three days ago, and phoned to say she'd arrived in Abu Dhabi safely but it'd be a longer trip than imagined. Her voice was thin and crackling across the line, and she sounded tired. I tried to engage her in cultural observations about the locals but she said she had to go to a meeting.

I get up, walk into the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee. There is still an early spring chill in the air, and I wrap my robe tighter. The steam seems reluctant to leave the cup, curling around its edges lovingly. On the radio, politicians are talking about the latest bombings in Iraq, in Algeria, in Morocco, and their excited, distant chatter only makes the silence of the house more encompassing.

I get out the butter and the honey to make some toast. As I'm the only one home, I dip my finger into the honey jar and lick. As I'm slicing the bread, the announcer says, 'In news just in, several bombs have exploded in the central business district of Abu Dhabi. Details are unconfirmed, but there are reports of multiple casualties.'

I put down the knife and call Rebecca's hotel, but all I get is an engaged signal. I try again, and again, the long string of numbers passing me through exchange after exchange, all the way to a dead line somewhere on the other side of the world. The radio has moved on to a program about Bach.

There's nothing to be done, for now. I sit at the sanded wooden table and open the past week's mail, for something useful to do. There are bills, and advertisements, and forms. Then, a handwritten envelope addressed to me. As soon as I open it I can see it's a letter in Rebecca's handwriting. It's postmarked from here, the day she left. 'I know this will be a shock,' it starts, 'but it

was the only way I could do this.' I finish my coffee and open a beer, try the hotel again, and get the same repeated beep, beep, beep.

Outside in the garden, some sparrows are flitting between the branches of the willow, on the lookout for something. I sit in the old white chair and watch them. Their small brown wings look frail. I try not to think of the dream.

The radio is now reporting a government hotline, and I call the number. A young man speaks to me condescendingly. There's no mention of Rebecca on the lists, which he says is probably a good sign. He asks, 'Are you married to Ms Marchant?' When I say no, he loses interest.

I open another beer, not knowing who to call. I read Rebecca's letter again, struck by its finality, its coldness. There's no note of regret, or even nostalgia. A very businesslike manner.

I decide to take a shower. I feel as though I need to be ready for something. I make the temperature scalding, to burn away the night. As I'm drenching myself, the phone rings. I run out naked and dripping to answer it. It's Rebecca.

'I'm fine,' she says. 'I thought you'd have heard it on the news, I thought you'd want to know.'

The bombs were not so close to her, she says, though she heard them echoing along the concreted streets near her hotel. For the moment she's staying in her room, watching CNN, not going near the windows.

Water runs down my face and trickles along my back. I'm getting very cold. 'I read your letter,' I say. She doesn't reply.

I want to talk longer, but there's a terrible echo on the line, and she needs to call someone at the Australian embassy. I ask her to let me know when she's coming home. She says 'Sure, I'll need to arrange a time to get my stuff anyway.'

I dry myself and put on some old clothes. The bread toasts to perfection, and I cover it in butter and honey and head out to the garden, to sit under the tree with the sparrows and let the sun warm me.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sam Grunhard.