



Source: Kim Sengupta, 'Sunni leaders mull concessions by Shia as constitution talks go to the wire', *The Independent online*, 27/08/05.

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September 1956

Irene and I were friends because we both started school on the same day in the middle of June in 1956, the only new kids in the midyear intake. She lived down the road from us, and we had smiled at each other once over her fence. Nevertheless, it was fairly clear to every five year old in our street that Irene's mother was a witch, and perhaps, if I had started school at the beginning of the year with all the other kids, I wouldn't have chosen to play with her.

Her mother wore her black hair in plaits, wrapped in a coronet round and round her head. Her front garden was full of vegetables, and along the fence was a row of huge yellow flowers whose heads turned slowly, following the sun. She shouted a lot, and knew scary things that other parents didn't, like how an eagle flew through the night looking for wakeful children to snatch away to their nests.

I was as scared of Irene's mother as anyone else, but her mother seemed to like me. She smiled at me when I came to play, and pinched my cheeks vigorously, talking to me in her witch-language. I don't know why she liked me, but something told me that it had something to do with my mother, who, unlike the other women in the street, made time for her. Once, when Irene's mother came to pick her up from our house, she and my mother fell into conversation at the back door. Irene's mother was speaking in witch-language, and my mother was answering in English. They were both crying. My mother said that Irene's mother was a New Australian, not a witch, but I was not so sure.

Once Irene, her brother and I were in their kitchen. On the sink was a dead chook with the feathers still on it and a bloody knife next to it. Her mother was still in her nightie, and her hair was out, hanging down her back, almost to her feet. She was shouting at her husband in the next room, and I wanted to go home. Irene's brother picked up the knife, and, pretending to be a pirate, waved it under my nose. I smelled the metallic blood-smell on the blade.

Then her brother was on the floor. His mother was sitting astride him, her hair flying around her, and she was holding the knife at his throat and shouting at him. He was crying and I remember the knife-tip, still covered in blood, nudging at his throat, whilst she screamed at him, and he begged her to get off him. I don't remember much else, except that I saw that when he stood up, he had peed his pants.

Not long after that we went overseas. When we got back, Irene and her family had moved away. My mother said that they had gone to live in Queensland. Someone new had moved into their house, and the sunflowers and

vegetables had gone from the front garden, replaced by a stiff row of rosebushes and a tract of lawn.

June 2001

It was a bit of an anticlimax as armed hold-ups go. I mean, I stood there for a full minute before I realised what was going on. Admittedly, it was a cold winter Friday night, it was getting late, and the thought that was uppermost in my mind as I stood there with a packet of frozen peas and a tin of cat food in my hand was how soon I could get home and crank up the heaters. Still, looking back on it, I was a bit embarrassed that it took a silent jerk of the head from the woman in front of me in the queue to even look in the direction of the check out.

He was a young man in a black baseball cap, a scarf wrapped round his face. It was the cradle from the till, lying on the counter, that I noticed next; then the way in which the checkout attendant, a young boy about the same age as my daughter, was calmly bundling the money from the till into the man's backpack. That seemed odd—shouldn't it be the other way round, I thought? And then I saw the knife, and it all fell into place. By then it was almost over. He picked up the bag, and pushed through the doors of the supermarket out into the cold night air.

The strange thing was that no one seemed to be frightened—everyone present seemed to intuitively understand what had to happen and we simply let it unfold before us. Afterwards, I made an entertaining story of the whole episode, laughing at what a disappointing witness I made to the policeman, built like a small truck, who arrived on the scene to take our evidence. Nevertheless, friends and family were very thoughtful: they rang to see how I was over the next few days, and about a week later a letter arrived from the police, expressing their regret that I had witnessed a violent crime, and offering me counselling if I felt I needed it. I didn't.

Some days later, I went in to the police station to repeat my evidence, such as it was, to the detective in charge of the case. He told me that hold-ups like this were endemic in Canberra, the offenders usually drug addicts looking for money for their next hit. It all seemed to confirm what I had been feeling all along: that the whole thing had been a strangely banal experience.

Time went by, and the event slipped into the past. I stopped thinking about it until some months later, when I woke up in a cold sweat and shaking from a dream of chicken feathers and that bloody knife, and the smell of Irene's brother's urine-soaked trousers.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.*