



Source: Hassan M. Fattah and Nada Bakri, 'Dozens slain as Lebanese army fights Islamists', *New York Times* online, 21/05/07.

Tags: [discomfort](#), [intimacy](#)

Writer/s: [Ingrid Wassenaar](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

The next day Cees would leave Sydney for England.

This evening he sat for several hours out in his friends' garden. The light gradually faded from the day. The huge citrus gum in the neighbouring churchyard rattled its coat of leaves, its trunk a naked grey-pink. Then it too dwindled into a sullen black as the evening drew on. Henny was out at one of his meetings, but had promised to be back before Cees went to bed.

Jane had cleared away a raspberries-and-cream dessert. He had heard her somewhere behind his head in the kitchen, scraping and slopping it into a bin, posting plates, tchink-tchink, into the cavernous dishwasher.

Then she had returned with a careful glass of white wine for each of them. She too sat on in the quiet dusk, listening to the cicadas, and the occasional kookaburra's laughter.

Cees noticed her quiet reserve. It was the most silent she had been since his arrival. Normally she rushed off to scrub every counter until it rang with cleanliness. Until tonight he had avoided her company. Her doll-like face with its pink desire to please confused him.

'About the other day, Cees,' she began, after a long sip of Chardonnay. Her eyes glistened in the light from the living room. 'I was fine about it, you know, when you walked in. To the shower. But I didn't really want to tell Henny. He's a bit *funny* about things like that. Do you see what I mean? I don't mean he's jealous or anything stupid, he's lovely, just that he's a bit funny. Wouldn't like it, wouldn't know what to do. I just put the 'Do not Disturb' sign up from the last time we took a trip to—Singapore, I think it was—no, Fiji. Lovely place. Anyway, put it up, and just told him it was because we didn't have a lock on the bathroom door. For visitors.'

Cees was bewildered by the endless unbundling of sentences on his right hand side. He had left his hearing aid in his room. He was too frightened of falling to get up and retrieve it.

'Jane, it's...fine. I was very—embarrassed. But please, I didn't mean to —'

'Oh I know *that!*' a light giggle floated across.

The realization filtered through Cees's mind, a coloured drop into clear water, that she had enjoyed being looked at.

He twisted his hands in his lap, and was glad of the darkness for hiding them.

'That's good, then, I would hate to give offence.'

They did not talk for a while. Mosquitoes whined around them, and Jane scraped back her chair to fetch a citrus oil candle for the wooden table. Its violent smell seemed to collect under the parasol, hanging there in a yellow fester.

'Have you had a good time in Australia, Cees? I worry that you haven't got out and about very much. I'm so sorry that we couldn't lend you the car, but what with Henny's golf and meetings, and just a few things that came up for

me while you were here...'

'Please don't worry yourself at all, Jane. It was a lovely few days. Very hot in Sydney, though, I found it very warm.'

'I know, it's fantastic isn't it? Such a great climate. We love it.'

Cees gave up. He wanted to make a speech about the beauty of the harbour, about how grateful he was to be here while he could still travel, but he had no words to explain to this bird-woman that he was expecting to die a madman.

He knew he would never see her again, and he did not care. He was terribly tired. Jane receded as though she was on a conveyor belt, disappearing into a jumping popcorn of faces from the past. Figures jutted and leapt forward in front of his face. An unidentifiable woman in a tweed suit with large mother-of-pearl buttons, gloved hands and an umbrella, swam towards him. Her face was black and her mouth opened wide in a silent scream. Cees pushed up at the figures with a sharp lunge of his arm. He grunted out loud with the effort.

'Are you all right, Cees?' Jane's concerned voice was right at his ear. 'Come on, maybe we should go inside, it's starting to cool down now.' She had him by the elbow, and was pulling at him to make him stand. He realized he was slumped over to one side, and straightened himself in his chair.

'Don't worry, my dear,' he mumbled, 'I have these funny moments. Age, you see, creeping up on me.'

'Are you going to be all right for the flight back, Cees?' Why was she so worried, she didn't have to fly with him? He just wished she would stand further away from him, he wanted to take her by the throat and squeeze her silly voice out of her.

When his hands went up, he found them seized in a surprisingly firm grip.

'Come on now, it's time to go in,' she was saying. There was a hard edge to the trill. He allowed her to heave him to his feet, banging his head on the parasol, ducking feebly to free his hair from the tangling spines. They walked in silence through the French doors.

'Henny should be back any moment,' came the bright voice as she bustled about switching on lights. 'Why don't you take a cool bath, Cees? I think you're tired out by the heat. You need to sleep well tonight, why don't you let me give you something?'

Cees sat down on the sofa before his knees gave way. 'I'm not going to sleepwalk, Jane, you don't have to worry.'

She straightened a Whiteley print of Sydney Harbour that was hanging askew above him. She looked down at him out of cool blue eyes, smoothed her wraparound dress. She said with a slow firmness, 'That's just it, Cees.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ingrid Wassenaar.*