



Source: Joshua Partlow, 'Flying standby on Air Baqubah: sun, sand, fleas', *Washington Post online*, 02/07/07.

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It's the same every night. I sit here waiting. Or I pace up and down. Smoke a cigarette. Or not. Bite my nails. What's left of them. Waiting for the words. The clue. The spark. The instruction. The cue. The cue out of which, like a magician, I am to conjure the evening's entertainment. It has been going on like this for what seems like forever. If he likes my story it will continue, though sometimes I wish it would stop. Then it will be someone else's turn. I am not the first, to be sure. And there seems no reason to think I'm going to be the last. But who can say? He may run out of words one day. Reach into his storehouse and find it empty. Though it seems unlikely. The words. Sometimes he finds them on the internet, sometimes in an old almanac, sometimes he takes them from a forgotten anthology, sometimes from a poem translated from Sanskrit or from Chinese, sometimes he finds them in a magazine, on television, on a billboard advertising cheap flights to Genoa, or at the bottom of a dustbin, on a screwed up piece of paper, written in the hand of a child. There are never many. Just a few words, like 'explained over tea', 'ahead in the line', 'mopping his brow', 'temper tantrums', 'the chaos next door', 'the movement of ghosts'. You turn the words over in your head, caress them, coax them, letting them open out, sometimes into a forest, a windswept strand, a river scene, a busted marriage, a shootout, an internet café. You are in a boat, sailing down the Amazon, surrounded by the deafening screechings of unfamiliar brightly-coloured birds; you are lying on your back on the floor of a ramshackle tenement in Dublin, aching, bruised, and drunk, masking tape over your mouth and ears; you are sitting in an internet café in Berlin, looking at your empty inbox, clutching a bundle of screwed up tissues, red eyed, and yes, you have to admit it, unhappy.

What will the words be tonight I wonder? There's no way of telling. Though as I wait, pacing up and down, smoking a cigarette, biting my nails, which are now bleeding, sometimes I have what seems like a kind of premonition. In my mind's eye I see the words clearly spelt out in blue neon lights. It will be: 'abandoned in Spain', 'they hit me', 'a subtle change', 'morphed in space', 'fortune's omelette'. Usually I get it completely wrong and have to start all over

again when it comes to the crunch; other times I get it almost right, 'they hit me' instead of 'they patted me', say, but this doesn't help much either; yet sometimes I get it just right, and on these occasions, rare as they are, I have my tale prepared in advance, carefully crafted and polished down to the last minute detail. Then when I deliver the story he is wide-eyed with wonderment, and speaks to me with soft and tender words, calling me an enchantress, a word magician, a Booker of Bookers, and that night I know I will at last sleep soundly.

No such luck tonight however. I feel nothing. Zero. Zilch. No premonitions, no hunches even, just raw nerves. And a total lack of inspiration. Perhaps, this time, he has finally won. He has me defeated. At last, he has shown me up for the failure that I am, reduced me to a worn out husk to be thrown out with the morning garbage. If only I could summon up some kind of sense of what's coming and steal a march on him. If I was forced to hazard a guess, on pain of death, I'd say...No, here it is, quick, open the envelope, unfold the paper, that's it, ahh: 'ominous sepia'. Quick. Think. Now there's no time to lose. Ominous. Think woman. Sepia. Give it one last shot. Ominous sepia. I know, I'll write something about sepia painting, something about Constable's late and ominous monochromes, the ones that look like sketches, though they aren't, they're done after the large oils, something between landscapes and funeral masks, or something about the uses of cuttle-fish bones in Oriental medicine, why not? No, ominous sepia, what about the story of a poisoner, a restaurateur who poisons his victims with dishes in which the presence and flavour of the poison is disguised by sepia ink, set in Venice, of course. Yes, deadly and ominous dark risottos steeped in cuttle-fish ink and arsenic. How would it start? 'Nobody who has not tasted the great cuttle-fish, his feelers cut up and stewed in the black ink or sepia which serves him, apparently, for blood, can imagine how good he is...' Or would that be too louche? No, that's not it, forget that, I see it clearly, yes, that's it, that's what it'll be, this should get him. The bastard. Here goes...

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Philip Terry.*