



Source: Rory McCarthy, 'Blair sees hope after first talks with Middle East leaders', *Guardian Unlimited*, 25/07/07.

Tags: [France](#), [countryside](#), [food](#), [husband/wife](#), [death](#), [war](#)

Writer/s: [Cathy Naden](#)

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Grace was worried the love between them had gone flat as it will do over time. The question that kept repeating as she chopped the onions was, Is it terminal? Is it over? Is love dying?

She was making a chilli from a recipe out of an old cookbook, its pages stained and sticky from many years' use. She didn't know how it had come to be in her possession. The recipe called for 'braising steak cut up into very small pieces', not mince. This, she thought, can be translated as quality. As always, when Grace followed recipes, she liked to add a little twist of her own and her twist this time was to add three times more chillies than the recipe stated.

If something has gone cold, she reasoned, you try and spice it up. If something is dying, you try and kickstart it into life.

Her lips stung with chilli where her fingers had touched them. The mouth, she found herself thinking, as she gazed at the sizzling tiny cubes of meat, is where love first takes hold. This is where something seemingly untranslatable can be translated into something real and concrete: words and kisses. The physical and verbal expression of a very deep feeling. The heat of the chillies would shock their mouths back into life, shock their tired tongues back into talking, sting their lips back into kissing.

The meat was browned. Grace combined all the ingredients in a casserole dish—beef, black turtle beans, six birds eye chillies, coriander stalks, onions, garlic, 2 tins of tomatoes—put the lid on and slid the dish into the oven, where it would simmer all day at a very low temperature.

It was half past seven on a grey summer's morning. Grace set off to work.

It was drizzling—the kind of fine rain that looks beautiful in the countryside on spiders' webs and barbed wire fences, but is rubbish in the city where it only makes everything look cold, damp and depressing.

Grace turned the corner onto the main road, where the early morning rush hour was already building up. She crossed the funny little hump-backed bridge with its squat flat-topped plinth at each corner where the teenagers used to hang out. There was a sentence in chalk graffiti that the elements never seemed to erase: 'hang your own car cough terrorists or be washed away by the floods'. Grace didn't know what a car cough terrorist was. She guessed it probably didn't exist. It was just a spelling mistake or a tag thing.

The route took her past shabby shops: the betting shop, the off licence, the blacked out windows of Portofino's Italian restaurant and the blacked out windows of simplypleasure.com. Grace stopped off at the newsagents and bought 10 cigarettes. After seven years of giving up she'd started smoking again, just when it had been outlawed. What kind of sense was there in that? Can be translated only as perverse, she thought.

Grace reached the municipal park. She found a broken bench amongst some trees and sat down to smoke amongst the dripping leaves.

She'd been with George for seven years. Was it just a seven year itch they were going through? Can restlessness be translated as boredom? Can boredom be translated as death?

The last place they'd explored together were some mountains on the border between France and Germany.

They'd taken a train out to one of the villages in the foothills and got out randomly at the sixth stop, Schirmeck. Something like that. It had been a grey drizzly morning then too. They'd found a tabac open and bought a map of the region, which they'd studied over coffee in the café next door.

The walk had started out at some steep steps cut into the side of the mountain but they'd quickly lost the path. They'd decided to head for a landmark named '*chambre a gaz*'. The woods and fields that the path took them along had natural drinking fountains at intervals along the way. For some reason they'd both imagined that the *chambre a gaz* would be a glorified version of one of these—a natural fizzy spring at the summit, where thirsty walkers could reward themselves with a long refreshing drink.

The path had led them round a large solitary white house. The back of the house turned out to be a café. They'd been about to stop for a beer when they'd noticed another building on the opposite side of the road. They crossed to read the board nailed to the wall outside.

It was the *chambre a gaz*.

It's not a fizzy water fountain, Grace had said. It's a gas chamber. They'd peered at the white path, disappearing into thick pine trees. Somewhere hidden up there on the mountainside high above the picturesque villages was France's only concentration camp.

Imagine that, one of them had whispered, a guilty little secret camouflaged by all this beautiful countryside.

Grace remembered glancing back at the house. She remembered wondering if it had been a café at the time the gas chamber was constructed. George had seemed to echo her thoughts. Where, he'd said, do you draw the line between what is tainted by the past and what isn't?

They'd stopped off for sex in the trees somewhere and they'd run out of time. They ended up pelting all the way back down the mountain afraid they'd miss the train.

They'd stumbled out of the wild terrain straight into the tarmacked roads of the village. They'd walked past properties, serene and peaceful in the late afternoon, and talked about living there one day.

Grace stubbed out the cigarette.

It seemed like such a long time ago, but it wasn't really. Time couldn't be translated into seconds, minutes or hours. Time was events that had already happened turned into memories. Time was about turning events in the present into memories for the future.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Cathy Naden.*