



Source: Leonard Doyle, 'Maliki accuses U.S. politicians of meddling in Iraq', *The Independent online*, 27/08/07.  
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Time at the water farm went by. Food, shelter, and especially water were appealing, after all, Bargelt reflected, though he worried, ironically, that he might be losing his edge. Bargelt thought Whitey and Walter's rule contemptible, had considered fomenting revolt among the now eighteen other peasants who'd wandered in, but couldn't muster the energy. He'd actually been enjoying the routine, the mere fact of a routine, dressing and undressing the trees, harvesting the water, consuming the meagre but regular meals, sleeping in the cave.

Habitually close-mouthed, he'd even struck up something like a friendship. He'd work alongside Sanjiv, one of the only people he'd met who would talk about what he'd done, before: he'd been an economist before the end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it, and they'd debate the nature of the New Economy. Sanjiv, loquacious and sardonic, argued for emergent neo-feudalism, while Bargelt maintained it was just a remnant of fucked-up capitalism. 'We're all just illegals,' he'd say, and Sanjiv would counter that there was no law in what he called the White Hotel, in honour of Whitey. It went round and round, kept them amused, and whenever they ran out of gas on that topic, they'd speculate about the ogre, Walter, and what he had ever been good for, before, other than beating people up, they presumed, though no one had ever seen it happen. Lip curling, Sanjiv called him 'an impressive fellow,' thought he'd have done well as a living statue: 'Primitivist,' he said, 'nicely rendered sense of menace.' Bargelt, less imaginative, saw a doorstep.

Bargelt had even come to admire Whitey's white shirt, regularly washed clean, something he saw as a symbol of stupid inequity, but now also appreciated as a vain relic of civilization: a dandy after the end of the world. Sanjiv had laughed, 'But she looks like my cousin Vanessa.'

Then one day, Sanjiv took off. Bargelt woke as usual in the early evening after the sandstorm died down, was lying there in the gloom, preparing to get up to go and drape the trees, when he registered at the end of the ancient blanket he slept on Sanjiv's handful of the scraps of sponge and fabric they used to catch any last drops of water that didn't find their way into their various receptacles. People left occasionally, just walked off, others would walk in, it was barely discussed, perhaps in tacit recognition among the peasants that they weren't up to calculating what was tolerable under the circumstances, or perhaps because it made it all too clear that the water farm was only a blurry facsimile of a life they could barely stand to remember anyway. Bargelt kept on with his day, gathering sheets of plastic and containers from storage and heading out with the other peasants to work, faintly irritated that he'd just have to stage their arguments in his own head now, shrug Sanjiv off like every other post-civilized attachment.

Two hours of work later, though, at the end of a row of the tough, scrubby bushes that Bargelt and Sanjiv had agreed it was generous, really, or wishful, to call trees, he

couldn't get Sanjiv out of his head. The problem with fucking Sanjiv, Bargelt observed grimly, silently, to himself, was that he was prepared to remember the old world. 'And what good did that do?' he said out loud, frustrated, before first going numb, then feeling a rush of nausea as the ground peeled up to hit him.

Bargelt came to, minutes later, face down in the dirt. He felt for scratches on his cheek, and realized he had tears running down his face. Heaving himself up on all fours, he started when he felt a hand at his shoulder, turned awkwardly to see Whitey standing over him, shirt haloed brilliantly by the lowering sun, a scrap of sponge between two fingers. 'Don't waste that, mate,' she said. It was as if her dry Australian accent scorched Bargelt's last shreds of strength—he collapsed sideways into foetal position, half howling, half retching, 'fuck you Sanjiv, fuck you, fuck you,' before dissolving into heaving sobs, snot running from his nose as he gasped helplessly in the thin desert air.

'Sanjiv?' Whitey asked herself, puzzled, 'Ah, shit.' And walked away, boots casually scuffing dirt into Bargelt's face as she went.

Bargelt woke on the ground in the dark and the cold, immediately began dry retching, which soon turned into dried-out sobs. Eventually, curled up in a ball, his breathing began to calm down. He tried to spit, to clear his dirt-caked, gummed-up mouth, but there was nothing there. Shivering, Bargelt felt someone might as well have stabbed him, he was so emptied-out. At last, just lying there, a violent twitch whipped his spine down its length, behind a wave of self-disgust. The end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it had been good, for him, Bargelt realized, appalled. Apocalypse is great, he thought, bitterly, you don't have to remember anything at all. The White Hotel had been just enough like a human society, and Sanjiv—an economist, for fuck's sake—just clear-eyed enough to remember the names of his family, from before, 'and how hard could that be,' Bargelt wailed at the night, chest heaving again uncontrollably as the world he'd buried under his emaciated survivalist rat guru cool boiled up into his consciousness in an agony of longing. Convulsed, his knees hit his chest, and he passed out again.

Bargelt was sitting with his back against a tree when the peasants came out in the morning. Everyone carefully ignored him. Whitey sent Walter out to check on him—peasants had gone psychotic on them before and no one needed that—but Bargelt saw him coming and got stiffly to his feet. 'Primitivist,' he said, smiling, as he walked back toward the cave, 'nicely rendered sense of menace.' Walter barely shrugged his massive shoulders.

Bargelt fetched his few things from the cave and left.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Frazer Ward.*