



Source: Alexandra Zavis, 'Iraq secures Iran deal to cut rebel aid', *LA Times* and *Washington Post* in *The Age* online, 01/10/07.

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Promises are difficult things to define -

*But Mum you promised we'd get home in time for Doctor Who.*

They keep shifting in your mind, in your hand, as if liquid mercury. Sometimes the intention behind the promise weakens with time. Motivations aside, the promise gradually slips, new day, new place and you find you have forgotten the gift of your contract. Slipped away from the frontal lobe as Peter Pan's shadow.

*I promise this won't hurt.*

Promises for pain, for suggesting we might tolerate a simpler response to hurt knowing they've done this too, or that darker shades of emotion might control physical response. Contractual arrangements that proffer lollies or rewards, perhaps a holiday or junket, when words really suggest:

*If you surrender to this, we will reward you.*

These kinds of promises are everywhere. A kind of verbal littering, office baskets filled with days lost to the system, to circumstances beyond what we had imagined for ourselves. Instead we dream random days of sunshine. Breathing outside the box.

*A promise to self. I will suffer this and survive.*

They'd kept him on because he was the nice guy, more able to deliver the kinds of hard words they wanted to tell the other employees, phrases which began to fill his mind as he slept at night: redundancy, flexible retirement, end of your contract. Great wheels of corporate machinery stifling and stiffening the arteries of his heart.

You'd expect the nature of promises to be simple, straightforward. Slipperier than eels, they suggest something in the future. They are ideas. Ideals.

*Promise me one thing.*

Grand things, we bind ourselves with words, invisible social contracts between friends, lovers, and family. We promise faith, love and honesty. Values which counter our fears.

*I promise you won't get pregnant.*

She didn't mind that it was in the back of his car, or that he was drunk, or that her other friends had all done this before. It was just that she had expected something different. Something more sensory, more imaginative, than his rude, purpling penis.

Promises shield our disappointments.

*But you promised.* If you are receiving the promise, politely remove yourself from responsibility. If it all goes wrong, you were not there.

*Not my fault.*

That night he looked over his hands. Following the

deepening lines and wrinkles, he flexed his fingers on the table. He grabbed a toothpick from the jar in the centre of the table and began picking at the grime from under his nails. Grease. Dirt. It was the blood he wanted to be rid of most of all. Soap wouldn't shift it. All these years and it was the weather that took it away from him. Dreams were useless if God wouldn't promise rain.

*I'll look after the farm Dad.*

Promises are conditional. They should be marked with the words 'fragile' in italics, or 'this way up' with giant red arrows. These kinds of promises suggest that if we follow a certain rule for living, promises will be kept.

She didn't mind the way he licked her back. It was something her husband didn't do. She expected that it would be a bit different, but perhaps not this different.

*Do you like this?*

*Will you promise to get me a cup of coffee after you've finished?*

At other junctures promises are like washing left out in the rain. Suffering from circumstances beyond our control, trains delayed, weather wild, these promises nag and whine. Unfulfilled, they are what could have been. Closely aligned with Guilt, they punctuate expectations; the possibility of what could have been delivered had the winds been favourable. These kinds of promises are particularly associated with children and deadlines.

*You said you'd have this done by four o'clock!* Not to be confused with false promises, which are illusory, and deliberately misleading.

Election promises are these days tinged with green, they try to hide themselves as trees or as subtle ripples in shallow pools of dam water.

*I never promised you a rose garden.*

Often spectacularly false, these promises are issued forth in a wave, often accompanied with advertising, colour and rhetoric.

He hadn't done this before and found the whole experience an inconvenience to his Saturday. First the barrage at the school gate, then the queue to find his name on the role, and now his electoral booth pencil had broken. Reaching deep into his jeans he found the stub of a pencil he used to do the Sudoku that morning. Sighing, he placed a ONE next to the guy with the biggest teeth.

*Can't make any promises.*

Sometimes, however, promises are much simpler, gentler things. Coloured balloons, days spent at the beach, the span of a lifetime.

She watched her children dip in and out of the waves as if they were fish.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kristin Hannaford.*