



Source: Robin Wright, 'US sanctions to isolate Iran's military', *Washington Post*, Reuters, Sarah Smiles in *The Age online*, 26/10/07.

Tags: [death](#), [child/parent](#), [intimacy](#), [husband/wife](#), [travel](#), [nostalgia](#)

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The flight from Brisbane landed just on dusk. Brisbane had been hot and muggy, but in Sydney it was raining, and it was cool, a late spring cool change. As we taxied toward the terminal, hard rain drops whipped across the small windows, and the lights refracted off the wet tarmac, crazy patterns of flashing lights: nav lights, warning lights, guide lights: an electric abstract of intersecting optic arrhythmia. In the rain, it was beautiful.

I was still thinking about my meeting and wondering if I had convinced them to give me the gig, and reflecting upon the failure of my deodorant after a day in a suit wandering between the gallery and museum and library, the grand cultural palaces of the riverside cultural precinct: I had a couple of hours to kill between the end of my meeting and the flight back to Sydney. It's amazing, the mix of rumination and observation that runs inside your head, a non-stop mix of non sequitur, self admonition, monologue and stray checklists. They say meditation makes it stop. Death too, no doubt. I can't recall exactly what such idiosyncratic train of thought I was entertaining at the time, but it was derailed by a sudden lurch, a twitch of my stomach muscles and a fleeting certainty that SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED TO RACHEL. This was odd, because I couldn't recall having even a passing thought about Rachel since heaven knows when—a decade perhaps. God, I hadn't seen her in 15 years. This sudden sense of her—of her in harm's way, of her somehow LOST or in pain—took me by surprise. I must have gasped—the hipster in the seat next to me looked askance, then resumed flicking through his copy of *Wallpaper* magazine.

The moment of actual premonition was sharp and brief, but of course, the thought stayed with me: Rachel?

I was prey to false premonitions. Returning from any kind of trip away, at some point on the return journey, I would imagine the worst—Sally in an accident as she drove down to pick me up; Nikki or Tom getting hit by a car as they crossed the road after getting off the bus on the way home from school. In a flash, my imagination would run out whole scenarios—me the grieving husband supported by grim-faced friends; Sally's mother hysterical, somehow blaming me—'if you hadn't gone to Brisbane for that stupid meeting, Sally wouldn't have been on the freeway...'. These tragedies play out in seconds: willed intimations of loss and pain, preparations for the inevitable, inevitably delayed, but leaving my heart beating furiously. I am always relieved to see Sally and the kids outside the gate, waiting to meet me, no matter that Sally's first words are usually, 'you're late', or some such banal return to earth and duty.

Given my predilection for imagining the gruesome wreckage of my wife and children in the course of returning from an overnight business trip, Rachel's

intrusion into this irregular script gave me pause—yes, I hadn't thought of her for ages, but then again, deep within all of us lie forgotten faces and names and incidents, called suddenly forward by some unpredictable conjunction of light and smell and circumstances. If anyone was going to leap out at me from the past in this way, it would, of course, be Rachel. The moment passed, but I was kind of pleased to be able to recall the pain for just that moment—as if, for a few seconds I was once again a broken-hearted lover, on the tarmac at Charles De Gaulle, a protagonist in an airport weepie of my own devising. Fuck Rachel, I had said then, and spent the next 20 hours brooding on her, alternately wishing her dead, and plotting a way back into her heart.

There's a weird pleasure in looking back at first love from here—a kind of Schadenfreude directed at your past self, or that sensation of being warm and dry in bed while outside it's raining cats and dogs. A sense of comfort all the more delicious because you have a distinct sense memory of freezing to death in the rain.

I heard from Rachel every now and then—a letter from London, postcards from Spain, a phone call when she came back for her mother's funeral. I saw her then. I felt a moment of panic when she walked into the cafe, but it passed, and we talked like civilised people, old friends. That was the last time I saw her.

The plane docked at the airbridge, and we all shuffled out into the terminal. Sally was there, a quick kiss, and the usual catching up: Nikki was at Becca's, Tom was at Simon's, and the traffic was bad because of the rain. Oh, and a package arrived for you this afternoon, from France. My stomach twitched again, but we kept on chatting, and I was glad when Sally switched on the radio and I could just stare out of the window as we crawled through the traffic-choked wet streets.

The package was sitting on the table in the hall, just inside the front door. Sally was sorry to just drop me and run, but she had to go and pick up Nikki, did I mind terribly? No, no, not at all, I'll put a bottle in the fridge, we'll have a drink when you get back. Maybe we can just have takeaway tonight. Yes, yes.

When she left, I picked up the package—one of those padded bags. I didn't recognise the handwriting, nor the sender's name and address. Inside was a small brown paper parcel, and inside that was a brass giraffe. There was a brief note: 'I am so sorry to tell you this', the writer said, 'Rachel passed away a week ago. She had been sick for some time, a kind of cancer. Rachel spoke of you often, and she asked me to send you this.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tony MacGregor.*