



Source: Sabrina Tavernise and Karim Hilmi, 'An oasis of peace in the heart of old Baghdad', *New York Times* in *The Age* online, 14/11/07.

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It's the kind of town you fall in love with. There's nectar in the breezes. At night you can hear accident-music made from fog-horns and pilot-bells.

Young Constable Mubarek came to this town and he met a girl at work. A girl with a soft hint of red in her hair. An exotic tribe in her name. He saw her and thought: "Stenographer!" What is that? The name of a job?

Was this girl inexperienced? Or without interest? She was so slow to respond to the men who stuttered all around her. And she was especially tardy with Mubarek because of how slowly HE apprehended HER. Only indirectly, only through administrative accidents—that's how he discovered in his heart his own interest in her. It's why their friendship grew up and sheltered them easily—because it started so roundabout, because they took to each other in tiny increments, commencing ignorant, surprising their feelings, free from that needfulness that's usually messing young love.

One morning in mid-winter, encountering her at the desk, Mubarek felt the surprise of possibility slap him ever so gently. For she had put a new style of braid in her hair! Thinking about it later, he decided she had let in a new feeling, early that morning while she was composing her face, and once she'd been caught by this feeling, she kept and carried it into the Police Station—this new department of hers—she carried it neatly all the way in from her home. It's how everything changed. A subtle change in a hair-style—everything alters. No longer every-thing the same.

At lunchtime Mubarek visited a barber and came back freshened with bay rum. Every week after that, a visit to the same barber—the sweet peppery sting of a cold blade—the pleasant alcohol anointment disturbing his skin. From now on, a DIFFERENT same every-thing. The weeks gathered their months. It was a time that seemed blessed with a strengthening kindness. And he felt a burgeoning ardour. Which made sometimes a delicious confusion. Plus anticipation. He was a young man making plans. He saw a chance in their future.

Till one day she mentioned how she sometimes spent entire days all seized with an ailment. Increasingly during these recent months, she'd been feeling evermore poorly, in this ripening time when she should have been strengthening into their happiness! For example, in a lengthening list, food was affecting her like poison. Against the nutrition she should be taking from a world all plush and joyous, she had become hedged by interdictions. It seemed she was ruled now by toxins. To almost everything, she was becoming allergic and wary. ('Allergic'—it was a word they'd never even considered before then.) Inside herself, some wolf was stalking her brittle poise, its sharp teeth at her ligaments and linings, its tongue prying and meanly supping her energies. A wolf ravenous inside and all over her. 'Lupus'. This was another new word.

Mubarek looked on bewildered as she lapsed into her negative self. His stranger maiden! She should have been blooming but she was being shocked by the world! She was declining all nourishment, declining everything he brought her, including himself, and before long she was not robust enough to exchange even the slightest emotion with him. Him—so replete with new sentiments. So weltered in feelings. How strongly he sensed all these feelings, especially for her who was weakening down now.

Ill-advised, angry and tripped up in grief, Mubarek took himself back to himself. He isolated himself—this man suddenly a boy again in his feelings, all roundabout again, without direction, no straight lines of expectation. Untethered. He went adrift in his work. Drunk mostly with misery.

Mubarek took to blundering across a city of accidents. Mapping the town's wretchedness—his motor-bike leaning and idling—its unshockable eye—measuring brawls in the traffic—assessing the causes at fire-scenes—bitter ash on his fingers—dabbing the tip of his tongue—numb as he walks into gaseous rooms atop boarding-houses—all those donkey-eyed men, unembarrassed by their decrepitude, scratchy genitals on show—every name in his notebook recalling a king—these boarding-house men—Abdullah, Khalid, Faisal—every man cast down to the same place. Every-thing the same for everyone in these rooms. Mubarek included.

He took to wandering off-centre, prying at the town's edges. Numb as he dropped plumb-lines off jetties. Numb as he trawled grapple-hooks across the deep end of some beige canal. Numb as he stared at the wolf that kept eating his girl.

Mubarek—ineffectual.

Imagine this young man's feelings—his outlander girl gone into the curses he thinks his mother must have made for them—his feelings all carapaced now—his innards all ticking. Imagine the machine he's become, while the year's gone so cruel. Imagine his girl giving herself over now to disappearing, losing another fresh smidgen of her person every day—each pulse a new loss. Measure her short experience—starved and aching, never easing—vigour leaching away from her into careless dumb matter.

Till she departs from this world, barely two months ago, as the weather's come in warmer and most of the town's youngsters are at a canter again, catching buses back to the beaches, everyone else smiling like sunlight. Same as it ever was. But everything different now.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Gibson.*