

Story for performance #954  
webcast from Sydney at 08:02PM, 30 Jan 08



Source: Anne Davies, 'Troops out by midyear but more aid: Smith', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 30/01/08.

Tags: Cambodia, animals, death, child/parent  
Writer/s: Tony MacGregor

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

The last I heard from Thompson was a letter he sent me almost a year ago, from the West. It had a valedictory air—he'd been to see his elderly parents at their home just out of Perth, bullshitting them about things 'looking up' and him 'settling down'. In truth, Thompson's life was a shambles and he'd virtually gone underground, on the run from various debts and imagined demons.

I still thought about him from time to time, but you know how it is—your life moves on and the woes of others don't intervene unless their presence keeps reminding you. I still had Thompson's stupid goldfish, Edgar, but it had been two years since I had rescued him from Thompson's hastily abandoned apartment, and I only occasionally remembered that Edgar had once been Thompson's fish, and wasn't simply a piece of furniture that had always been here.

Looking back, I think it's fair to say Thompson had become a Missing Person, and one of us—one of his old friends, his ex wife, his parents—should really have reported him to the Missing Persons Unit or whatever. But we didn't, and Thompson just slowly faded from view. No-one had noticed. Except his daughters I imagine, but they kept their counsel, as the deeply wounded often do, and whatever tears they shed remained private. Much as I hate to say it, I suspect Sonia (his ex-wife) was rather glad not to have to deal with the complications that came with Thompson—the confusions, the failed arrangements, the sheepish borrowings, the chaos. Single motherhood had unleashed her inner executive, and by now she had the girls in one of those posh schools on the upper North Shore. They lived in a big apartment in a leafy suburb not far from the school, and Sonia was a CEO in a bank with offices in North Sydney.

And then things started happening.

Last Monday morning, I was making coffee and listening to the news on the radio. There was a report about an outbreak of dengue fever in Cambodia, and the death of an as yet unidentified Westerner, believed to be an Australian, in a remote province near the Thai border. A flicker of curiosity, and nothing more. The news moved on—more on the subprime lending crisis in the US, more car bombs in Baghdad. The usual stuff. And then I noticed that Edgar had stopped swimming. Indeed, he had turned upside down, and hung suspended in the water of his bowl, 'poor Edgar' and 'stupid fish', and hoicked him out and placed him, without much ceremony, in the bin. I briefly considered ditching the whole thing, but realised I rather liked having the fish there, and promised myself I'd buy another one on the weekend.

Shortly after I returned from work, I had a phone call from Sonia. She sounded anxious, and wanted to know if I knew how to get hold of Thompson. It turned out he had written to her and the girls at

much the same time as he had written that last letter to me, and like me, she had heard nothing since. She had already rung his parents and they were mystified too. It seems we had all assumed that someone else was keeping in touch. I asked why she needed to contact him now? She said Kelly, the younger of the girls, had somehow caught meningitis, and was in Royal North Shore. She had come down with a fever and nausea on the Saturday after netball. Sonia had taken her to the hospital just to be on the safe side, and Kelly had been rushed into intensive care. Every parent's nightmare. She was going to be alright, but for two days as she moved in and out of consciousness, she asked for her father. Sonia was angry and scared and heartbroken all at once.

I promised to ring if I heard anything, and to see how Kelly was doing.

When I got home from work the following afternoon there was one of those cards from the post office telling me there was a registered letter to collect, and because I had left work early for the first time in months, there was still time to go to the post office. I handed in my card, and the guy behind the counter fetched an envelope from the back, and asked me to sign for it.

The minute I looked at the address and the stamps my heart started beating faster, my stomach lurched, and I could barely hold the pen in my hand. The address was in Thompson's messy printing, and the stamps were Cambodian, banal, colourful images of butterflies and soccer players.

I staggered outside, and sat on a bench in front of the post office, caught my breath, and tore open the envelope. There was an antique postcard, a sepia portrait of a bare breasted Khmer woman from the 1930s, an image from the days of French Indochina. Thompson's note was brief, a quick scrawl to let me know he was alive and well and that he had found his way here into the hills of Cambodia in search of something that "...might be different. Don't worry", he wrote, 'I'm not doing a Kurtz. The place is cheap. The people are interesting, and it's all a long way from everything I've known. I'm even learning the language. Give my address to Sonia. Take care. Love, Thompson.'

I should have been relieved, but I knew what was coming next, and I cried all the way as I walked across the park to the flat.

When I got in, there was a message on the answering machine. It was Sonia, in tears. All she could manage was 'Foreign Affairs. Thompson'. I already knew. He really had vanished. I sat there, looking at the vacated fish bowl and its slightly murky water.

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