

Story for performance #955
webcast from Sydney at 08:02PM, 31 Jan 08



Source: Abraham Rabinovich, 'Iran and Egypt to restore relations', *The Australian online*, 31/01/08.
Tags: corporeality, disease
Writer/s: Sarah Leighton

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

'Promise me you'll try,' I'd said, not really giving the statement much thought—more to encourage her between now and the next visit.

She started flapping her hands, her body kind of rotated different ways at the hips as she sat on the edge of her chair, her legs crossed at the thighs and again at the ankles and squeezed very tightly together. Then she started punching her thighs. She wouldn't look me in the eye any more.

'I don't have to make promises to anyone, I only have to do what is good for me, I only have to keep the promises I make to myself.' Her voice was low, staccato, and from a long way away.

The fisherman had almost landed the fish, then realised that it was close but too soon. The fisherman has to give the fish a long line again, and try later to bring it in slowly so that no damage is done. The fish has gone out to sea, down very very deep.

We sat quietly for a while.

I said, 'I'm sorry. You're right, you don't have to promise me anything at all.'

I thought of all the old promises with which she'd battled. She'd allowed me to glimpse only the tip of her iceberg. The depths were hers alone. Monsters loomed in the depths of that memory. Monsters who'd so often called on her to promise—secrecy most often.

She'd struggled with her physical form. She hadn't wanted to exist, she told me. Even as a baby, she said, family and doctors had not presumed her existence would continue. She herself had never expected to continue to live, and had 'failed to thrive'. I'd spoken to her long-suffering mother. She had nurtured her with all of her heart. The physical form that was the child had grown, a little, not as much as her peers, until at adolescence, her separation of soul from body had prevented her from taking a fully adult form.

The doctors had said she had an eating disorder. She said she simply had trouble nourishing the body that she didn't want, couldn't accept, couldn't really move into. She didn't feel like it was hers.

Monsters had made her promise to remain a child. Predators who preferred the child form to that of a woman. She had acquiesced. They still threatened her. Some had taken the form of 'helpers', she said. Wolves in sheep suits.

Now, here she was, prepared to be in this room with me, prepared to accept a little food. Prepared again to maybe accept her existence. In physical form, at least, and nearly forty years old, battered and bruised, in spirit and body. And I had asked for a promise?

'Are you thumping your legs so you know they're real?' I asked.

She snapped back into her eyes, and looked up at me. She smiled. 'Yes.'

'Well, you're here,' I said.

'Yes,' she said.

'So, is it still good? What we've talked about?' I asked. 'I'm sorry for asking you to do this thing for me. I know it's for you, and it's your choice, and it's between you and yourself. How about you write the plan for yourself?'

She took the pen and paper as I slid them along the desk in her direction.

She bent her thin frame over the paper, her long hair like a veil around the writing. The pen scratched forcefully into the desk as she wrote line after line of instructions to herself. She muttered softly as she wrote. She punctuated with underlines and exclamation marks and when she'd finished she quickly folded the page and stuffed it into the pocket of her tight and fraying jeans.

She sat up straight, legs unfolded now. She wore a purple top with an 'Om' symbol on the front, and a leather necklace with protective amulet strung from it, which she fingered often like a touchstone in between wringing her hands together. Her nails were rough and bitten. Her lips dry and cracked. Her eyes blazed indigo. She smiled.

'Okay?' I asked.

'Okay,' she said.

Finally, I thought, the thaw comes.

She stood and put out her hand to shake mine. We organised her next visit. She said she'd come.

She didn't.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sarah Leighton.