

Story for performance #958
webcast from Sydney at 07:59PM, 03 Feb 08



Source: 'Hamas strategies must be matched—Blair',
The Australian online, 03/02/08.

Tags: [food](#), [intimacy](#)

Writer/s: [Anne Brennan](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

When she thought about it afterwards, she realised how he might have construed it as an opening gambit. At the time, however, she had simply been absorbed in the tussle to unscrew the cap on her bottle of organic pomegranate juice, a struggle which reminded her of an elderly aunt's long-ago complaint that someone kept coming in at night and tightening all the lids on the bottles in her larder. So when he reached across and offered to open it for her, she took it at face value, smiled her thanks and returned to her paper. She couldn't remember how they had fallen into conversation, but it was long enough after the bottle-opening for her to have consumed a poached egg on toast, a coffee and most of the Sydney Morning Herald's analysis of Labor's election victory.

They talked about Canberra. He told her he had lived here for fifty years, having arrived from Melbourne as a young man. That qualified him as a true Canberran she said—someone who could remember what it was like here before the Lake went in. He must be in his seventies, she calculated, maybe more; clearly still mentally active and fit. They talked a little about what it had been like then—the ricketty wooden one-lane bridge that had spanned the Molonglo River; the paddocks around Civic where everyone parked their cars; the river swimming and the flies—she, good-naturedly dredging her early childhood memories to match those of his lost youth. He told her about what he used to do before he retired and his sporting interests, and they reminisced about the tennis courts in Manuka where he used to play 'a good social game' and where she, at the age of ten, had unwillingly endured tennis classes on endless Saturday afternoons.

She liked older people. Her parents had died when she was young, and she found herself cultivating the parents of friends in order to have the kinds of conversations that brought them back. She noticed that he said 'orf' instead of 'off', like her father used to. She had forgotten that.

He was talking about the present, now: asking her what she thought of the election results, and pointing out the way in which the journalist in the Herald had used the word 'disinterested' to mean 'uninterested'. She asked him if he lived nearby, and he named a street about five minutes' walk away. They talked about the café, and how they preferred it to the chic bakery up the road with its crowds and bad service. He told her that he had spent time in Greece, even lived there for a while, and had met Leonard Cohen there. She made him laugh at her account of the small dingy hotel she had stayed in once in Ukraine, with its rickety lift and the yellowed walls, kippered with decades of cigarette smoke.

And then he asked her if she lived alone.

She looked across at him. His face was quite inscrutable. She thought that perhaps he was making the assumption that older people sometimes did about someone younger than them, that they have a

right to know things about you. Years of self-contained singleness had left her unprepared for how to parry such a potentially loaded question, and she was both amused and disconcerted by the obedient urge she felt to tell him what he wanted to know. She thought of the daughter, now grown up and living in another city, the occasional housemates and the brother with whom, at one time or another, she had shared her home in recent years. Her slightly ineffectual answer irritated her.

'Sporadically', she said.

The conversation drifted back to more neutral territory. She found herself thinking about the dinner she had cooked the previous night for a friend, a colleague whose company she enjoyed immensely, thirteen years younger than her, but just old enough for her to be able to acknowledge the potential for an attraction between them.

He leaned across the table. 'You say that you live alone "sporadically". I assume, then, that you occasionally take lovers?'

She laughed. She was not sure whether she was more amused by his practiced audacity, or the quaint Edwardian turn of phrase, redolent of afternoon trysts and slightly uncomfortable chaises longues. Was this the moment, she wondered, to raise her lorgnette and quiz him? She let a little silence hang in the space between them.

'I'll take your silence as a "yes"' he said.

'Take it however you wish', she replied stiffly. She remembered her friend telling her the night before about a term he had heard recently to describe women of her generation, the objects of attention of men like this one, twenty or thirty years older than them. The word was 'codger-babe'. She felt herself flushing. She had felt irritated at the time, demeaned by the implication that whatever women did at her age there was a jaunty put-down to describe them.

'I'm sorry', he said. 'I've offended you, I can see. I used not to be so...forthright. It's a frankness borne of my age. We always think there will be more time, and suddenly we realise that there isn't. I find myself behaving like a three year old, asking inappropriate questions because I want to know everything, right now. You're an attractive and intelligent woman. I want to know you better. Have I ruined things?'

She looked into his face, and took in the neatly clipped white beard, and the weathered, tanned face. His eyes were quite clear and direct and when she looked into them, they suddenly filled with tears. Wordlessly, she took his hand in hers and raised it to her lips, gently kissing the pleasantly papery skin before picking up her bag and paper and walking slowly to the counter to pay.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.