



Source: The Associated Press, 'Opposition wins vote in Lebanon', *International Herald Tribune online*, 21/06/05  
Tags: [evidence](#), [tattoo](#), [husband/wife](#), [death](#)  
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She arrived home from her quietly focused day at the library, parked the car as usual, outside the factory. His van was not parked there. Nor were there any barking noises coming from inside, no quivering nose poking wet through the letterbox slot. They must both be out. A walk perhaps, some things to collect.

She held the blue key by its matching plastic tag. He had prepared it for her back when she had special guest status and had inserted a smiling photo of himself into the tag. She turned the key to the left: another idiosyncrasy of this place that this front door locked and unlocked counter-intuitively. But she was used to it now and was soon inside.

The phone was ringing loudly in the office: one of those hands-free models. The place was so big they needed three of them. She loved to walk around while talking. It felt very modern.

'Hello? Oh Kate, hello! No, I just got in...No, no, no, don't apologise. It's fine. I tried explaining it to him but you know what he's like—wants a happy outcome for everyone. Loves a fairy story...No, you're not being difficult. Actually he's not here at the moment, but I'll tell him...'

The doorbell broke in like an intruder.

'Oh, hang on Kate, that's the buzzer.'

She recognised the distinctive hat-shapes. To the phone: 'It's the police. Oh what now? Probably my car. It's always getting into trouble. No, the rego's fine. Kate, sorry, I'll have to ring you back. Bye then.'

There are two of them. They always seem to come in twos. They are on the very threshold, asking her to confirm her name. Now they are inside.

No she didn't want to sit down, she would stand up. Her hairs were up: the fine blonde hairs all over her body. Her skin was prickled. There were knife blades behind her eyes. Her sinuses were pinched. Her shoulders pulled in. Where were her hands? In her hair? Pulling at her clothes? Her stomach was moving upwards in her body.

Why wouldn't they leave? She didn't want them here anymore. She moved further away from them, pinned now between the bookshelf and the sofa. The front one was still talking. She wanted him to stop talking. She wanted him to go away. She wanted them both to go away. If he stopped talking, if they went away, if they left now, it wouldn't be true. It would be just like it was before.

But he kept talking. The words came in broken English, yet with the weight of authority: 'This morning...the train line near the abattoir site...dog running on the track...in front of the train...driver saw...driver braked...then a man...reached in towards the dog...reached too far...too close...no time...hit...killed...instantly...dog too...legs...yes, killed as well...at the shelter...in your own time.'

The other one was speaking now. He wanted to make tea. He had to make tea. Where was the tea? He wanted to ring someone. Who could he ring? Names. Address book. Kettle. Tea caddy. These things she showed him. She drank the tea, but was it she drinking? She spoke on the phone. Was she speaking?

They all sat at the beautiful big pine table that he, the one who wasn't there, had found. It seated eight easily. It had

very particular traits: the three holes in a triangular pattern where a vice must have once been fitted; the gap between the planks, filled with yellowing putty; the metal band around the whole circumference locking the legs in place and cutting into the wood at the corners.

Then the evidence. Just to make sure. Do these belong to him? One by one, the objects appeared on the table, turned to face her: a brass belt buckle, rectangular, the figure of an eagle with wings spread wide, stamped into it deeply like a wound, like a scar. She'd seen it before but how odd it looked now, no longer attached to the leather. It had changed. It was distorted and scratched. It looked hurt. And now it was hurting her.

A large gold ring. So big and thick. Could a finger really be this big? It always amazed her. It always would. She knew what was engraved on the inside, didn't need to read it. The date just three years gone. She ran her finger along the faint indentations of the inscription. Just like her own much smaller one, still attached to her finger, where it belonged.

A man's watch. Big too. This had been customised. Unique, like the table, like everything. The face had been scratched back to bare metal. No numbers on it. Just the hands remained but even they were wrong. The one that told the seconds was ornate, Victorian perhaps, in contrast to the other two of starkly modern design. She would usually smile at that attention-grabbing second hand. But not now.

A Polaroid photo. An arm. No, just a forearm turned to reveal the white underside. Such pale, pale skin. So vulnerable and fragile and naked.

They always ask, don't they, 'any identifying marks?' And there it is. There is his tattoo. Dark blue ink on baby-pink skin. The design is of a loose plait: just three elegant sinuous lines, lightly crossing each other, here thin, now thick, here under, there over, tapering to nothing at the ends.

She shouldn't have to see this. Not a photo. A body fragment. Who took this photo? Who saw him like this? She badly wanted to cover this arm, to cover him up, his baby skin, put him in a blanket. Take him home. Hold him. Make him better. But it wasn't he who could be healed.

She didn't know it then, but from that moment on she would be faced with the challenge of her own healing. Months, no years later, she asked a friend to read the dictionary like an augury. This is what she said she found. The word 'challenge' comes from the same Latin root as the word 'calumny': calumnia, trickery, false accusation. 'Challenge' can mean an accusation, a reproach, a calling to account, the opening and crying of the hounds at finding a scent. It's a nice thought, isn't it, to think that the challenge of healing might be such an active, defiant idea—a calling to account of fate, an open-throated cry that announces a new way through?

I looked up 'healing' as well, and it told me the obvious things about making whole or sound, about cleansing, repairing, amending. It wasn't this that held me, though: it was the beautiful word-route on the next page, describing what might be your own wild, zig-zag chase:

Heartless—heartfelt—heartlike—heartling—heartly  
—heart of grace—heart piercing—heartquake—heart  
rending—heart searching—heartsease—heart shaped  
—heart sick—heartsome—heart sore—heart  
spoon—heart strike—heart strings—heart struck—heart  
whole.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from stories by Barbara Campbell and Anne Brennan.*