

The Child and the Bondi Islets

‘Christmas orders being taken now!’

The gaudily-chalked sign catches my eye as we slow for traffic lights. It stands proudly erect on the sizzling pavement in front of the ‘Florist and International Delicatessen’.

“Go in and give them some orders, Susan,” I comment, deadpan.

The colours of seaside energy whizz past my rear side-window while, inside, we each sit in silent contemplation. At least two of us are just obstinate hermit crabs snapping like juveniles from behind the protection of our assumed shells. The third is officially the child... our child.

We three are fleeing up the hill in my wife’s brand new Audi. She is the driver, whooshing us away from the weathered pancake cliffs at Sydney’s famous beach; leaving behind the bustling hive of holidaying humanity... and even the shops, which she has been so expensively plundering. I am not normally so verbose but I am having real trouble with incongruity today. My reasoning mind thinks it to be glaringly indisputable that there is no work for a mining engineer in Bondi – but logic is no match in a joust with feminine emotion.

I am a prisoner in paradise – shamefully misunderstood.

Sitting in the air-conditioned back of the Audi, I wink across at our six-year-old daughter, Emma.

From the driver’s seat comes, “You always were a shining wit, Spooner!”

Now, my name is not Spooner. I can only blame myself for marrying a woman so much smarter than I am.

Emma beams with her innocent smile, making her father’s life a thing of hope through this messy separation process. She doesn’t understand the malapropos flipping of start letters in words nor the humorous fame of the Reverend Spooner.

That’s the thing about Susan; she can stick a stiletto into me while smiling at our daughter, who is mercifully oblivious to the subtle barbs.

Of course, I pretend I don’t care – the only way I can hang on to my last vestige of masculine dignity – yet we both know it’s an act. I am out of my depth in this battle of spousal wills.

But Christmas is approaching and we carry the charade forward for Emma's sake – and she still seems happy enough.

There is no appropriate rebuttal to Susan's comment so I grin, as cheerily as my discomfort will allow, and look out the car window again onto the moving feast of fast-gentrifying Sydney. I don't like these renovated old terraces, mutton dressed up as lamb, plaster facades over early twentieth-century plumbing and, anyway, I can't live here. Clearly, there is no work in this place for a problem-solving extractor of mineral resources.

It must have been abundantly obvious to Susan, as we moved through our first lustful blush of matrimony, that we would be living in mining towns which are often slightly isolated and sometimes overseas. That was, I believed, our shared plan for our world.

An essential in my consciousness has always been that a happy husband needs a happy wife. So I ensured that we were well-housed even in mining towns; and well-paid – enough to buy a large rental property in Brisbane and the terraced sardine-can in Bondi; and still have money in the bank. I have provided well. Where else has her current-model Audi come from? Our chosen lifestyle has been good to us.

So it is quite beyond me why she should have become so excited when I said our next posting was the Atacama in Chile.

'It's a chance to learn Spanish,' I had suggested quite reasonably. 'Think of the experiences for Emma.'

But it has all fallen on stony ground and now we are in a trial separation – her lawyer's advice, my money.

Which is why, for a few days around this festive season, we are all trying to live separately in the same bookshelf terrace. How bizarre are these family power games? Naturally, my place is on the couch until I leave for places exotic and elsewhere, after Christmas. As usual, I continue to give her my best happy vacant smile. Well, we have to look on the bright side, do we not?

I grin now across at my Emma as she perches cheerily with me on the Audi's back seat. She appears small, lost in the spread of the cream leather upholstery, her blue summer dress making her look so special. We are like two recalcitrant school kids being taken home by the stern mother.

Seeing the wonder in a child's eyes gives purpose to life, even as we are driven through the sweltering streets of Sydney in summer. But we are cool in the comfort of the air-conditioner's blast.

I pull a face at her. She pouts a kiss at me. Cheeky! Her father's daughter. She moves slightly to avoid the direct flow from the cold-air vents.

"Chilly, eh?" I return her smile, grasping my upper arms in a shivering motion.

"You never give up!" comes Susan's snap from in front.

"What?"

"Can't you give up on this Chile thing? Isn't it enough what it is doing to us without worrying Emma too?"

"I meant it's chilly in the car." How can we get back to co-existence with her attitude?

"Yeh! Yeh! I've known you too long."

That seems to sum up her viewpoint in a nutshell – too long. It's not my perspective, though. I don't want our relationship to end; just to get back to when we were all happy.

I still have our cherubic little daughter to consider – she who can bring sunshine into my darkest hours. I refuse to let adult animosity ruin our day.

We arrive at the terrace and I carry in the necessary food shopping, along with the designer carrier-bags of the unnecessary. Say nothing.

"Daddy, can we go to the park?"

"Of course, Angel. Unless your mother has other plans?" I am saccharine sweet.

Susan shakes her head at me in despairing wonder. "Don't stay too long in the sun. Take hats. Sunscreen. Be careful." We are dismissed.

We skip outside, suitably clad, into the freedom of the rides in the park.

I am past trying to double-guess my wife and her recent hostile barrier. We need a laugh, a bit of fun. My frivolity with Emma is a normal parental interaction – not, as Susan has so recently taken to portraying me, 'behaving like an idiot'.

Don't we all have a bit of clowning, at heart?

Our romance began long ago from our ability to make each other giggle. That is who we are. I love being flippant, irreverent and irresponsible, particularly at home – always the contrast to my much more serious workplace. Life's too short and valuable not to try for some levity as often as possible.

But now we are two immovable rock islets of sniping stubbornness.

She wants to live in Sydney but needs my income. I need to go to remote places to earn because that's where the mines are. It's so logical. We both know that. Yet for all our education, maturity and problem-solving abilities, we are like lemmings approaching a cliff-top, persistently taunting each other with the merciless jibes which now have us spiralling towards increased desolation.

Emma is the bridge between our fortress mentalities – the common bond, a linking life-line; the joy, the memory of what has been and the promise of what might be again.

My mind is rolling with all those thoughts and scenarios until I am jolted back into the present by her laughing shout from the slippery slide.

“C'mon, Daddy. See what I can do!”

Carefree pleasure. Half-an-hour of unquestioning love on every new parkland challenge as we run beneath leafy trees and gurgle while we roll on the soft grass. Warm air, happy cuddles.

We finally rush back into the cool apartment, cheerily tensionless... and hot.

“Mummy, Mummy, we had great fun. Daddy pushed me on the swings and I pushed him on the roundabout,” the words gush from Emma's excited face. “Do you know what made the roundabout move?”

“You did, dear.” Susan is cutting carrots at the sink, determined not to look at me or give any acknowledgment that she knows I love my daughter. I don't believe her. She appreciates my fatherly relationship with our daughter alright but she has painted herself into a cranky corner with this tizz of hers and she is damned if she will give in.

“A ‘grow plier’! Daddy taught me that.”

“What??” Now she turns to look, confusion mixed with care.

“A ‘grow plier’. It's called an anagram. Is that right, Daddy? The letters are jumbled up.”

Susan looks at me anxiously, suspiciously, and I beam back in all innocence, palms upturned in a casual shrug.

“It means ‘girl power’, Mummy. Isn't that clever?”

Susan looks fleetingly relieved. “Oh, yes! Your father is a cruciverbalist from way back.” Her expression morphs to mirror the sarcasm in her tone. No nice

compliment there. Perhaps she's miffed that I've reduced her ability to use spoonerisms as a tactic, with Emma learning the skills of jumbled words.

"Is that an anagram, Daddy?"

"No, Love. It means a crossword-puzzle solver. I do them out on the mine-sites when things are quiet. Looks like I'll have some time on my hands in the future." I grin pointedly at her mother's now-turned back, and I'm sure she knows what I'm up to as I say, "Maybe I'll make up some more anagrams for you to work out."

Susan tenses across the shoulders, as she carefully places the carrots in the salad bowl. "Your father is 'a forlorn goat'... and he knows it." She slowly turns and smiles cynically. "Two words. Shouldn't be too hard for you."

She's quick – university sharpness used for a nasty purpose. But I'm with her – reading her current mindset. That four-letter word was really too obvious. But, imagine calling me an 'arrogant fool'.

Emma looks puzzled.

"Is that an anagram, Daddy?" she asks, straining to understand.

"I don't think so, Angel. Calling me a goat is bad enough, isn't it?"

"Yes." She thinks for a second. "Mummy, you shouldn't do that."

Her reproach is mirthful music to my ears.

"I agree. She's a 'best choir'." I pout quickly at her mother. "Two words, where one is 'sore' in the American sense of angry."

I turn back to my daughter. "Being in the best choir is better than calling someone a goat, eh Emma?"

She nods slowly as she tries to follow this banter between her parents.

I count seven seconds till Susan's cheeks redden and the eyes flash.

I have definitely angered her now. Chile couldn't be any more chilly than the frosty Bondi stare she is giving me.

"One big happy family," I say chirpily, scooping the questioning Emma into my arms and blowing a kiss to my wife.

Susan is looking at me; confused. I widen my eyes and grin. It works for circus clowns. Is that just a flicker of a smile from my estranged spouse? No, probably not. How long can she stay angry in the face of such flippancy?

I lower my child to the floor. Emma looks at each of us in turn, then stomps her foot on the parquet tiles. "Can I have a hug?" she calls.

Haven't I just hugged her?

Susan tosses her dark hair in competitive bravado and, smirking, bends to pick our child up – clearly the winner in the parental duel. Such is my life, it seems.

“No! Go tether!” my annoyed daughter asserts with a childish frustration.

My wife freezes in amazement. She looks at me in genuine question and I give my best confused stare back. Tether? Not goats again?

Emma’s position has not changed – arms upstretched to be lifted but foot defiantly planted; a pocket-sized assertor in a little blue dress. I have to grin that the determined jaw jut is aimed at her mother and not at me.

I watch my wife slowly smile.

“Go tether,” Susan repeats with her dawning awareness and she turns to me with the first real grin I have seen from her in many days. “See, Spooner? See what you have done?”

Chuckling, she reaches her arm out to beckon me closer and I comply – well, I would, wouldn’t I? – although mesmerised in my befuddled fog of trying to interpret her hidden meanings.

We lift our daughter between us.

A beaming smile lights our child’s face and her mother responds, “Together!”

I feel my wife’s arm strengthen in a warm cuddle around my back. Our daughter’s accidental malapropism appears to have created a miniscule crack in the ice. We all have smiles, mine perhaps more foolishly wary than theirs – but happy nonetheless. Might our bitter Bondi contretemps be about to thaw?

Emma says, “Together. See!” She kisses her mother and then me with a laughing gurgle, seemingly unaware of her invaluable catalyst role.

Susan looks at me with an expression I haven’t dared to believe would ever return. It takes a few seconds – a silent melodramatic pause – before, chortling gently at our daughter’s joy, her pouted lips peck me on the cheek. An apologetic warmth in her eyes shames me from claiming any innocent moral high-ground.

I’m not game to speak. She neither, clearly. Too many regrettable comments already said on both sides – but now our isolating moats might have a bridge. We are reading each other’s eyes – comforting bonds are perhaps reactivating – hope for a common familial islet of sanctuary at last here in Bondi.

My confidence is restored a little. “Truce?” I ask.

“Only a short-term contract, then,” she asserts. “And only once.”

“Agreed.” That was all that had ever been offered for Chile

Emma sits on the bench-top between us, grinning. I wonder if her child's intuition had sensed how to solve the problem from the start.

Tingling relief is washing through my veins. I am seeing our surroundings through new eyes. The Bondi sunlight no longer oppresses with brash heat but, rather, uplifts us in combination with the gentle ocean breeze. The formerly-maligned crass gentrification of olden buildings seems somehow more tasteful and picturesque than I have appreciated.

Through our kitchen window on the high terrace, the poinciana colours seem brighter, the glimpse of turquoise sea laps lovingly towards the yellow smile of the beach. I can breathe the aromatic frangipani blossoms filling the air with romance. Harsh gull calls now sound like sweet serenades.

Susan's face has relaxed. Emma still smiles from her high perch. My wife turns back to her salad preparation and picks up her chopping knife.

She holds a large red banana-chilli in her hand.

"For a side dish," she says quietly. "To add spice."

She turns to slice the ripe fruit into small pieces while giving me an impish look from the corner of her eye – followed by an enigmatic grin.

There are too many metaphors there for me to deal with today.

I prefer being free in a sensory paradise – and it is Christmas, after all.