

Philip Witts

LITTLE DARLINGS

As my only son hovered between life and death, and my only grandchild dribbled banana custard all over my favourite cashmere sweater, I suddenly burst out laughing.

I used to love children. Couldn't wait to fill a whole house with them. ... And then you have them, and they're yours forever.

Jack was never any problem. Jack was smiling way before he had teeth, or anything much to smile about. Jack was a dream. I know all mothers like to think that, but in Jack's case it was true. Jack was walking at twelve months, talking at fifteen, taking himself to the toilet before he was two. Jack was musical. Jack was artistic. Jack could play sport. Jack loved life, and lived it like there was no tomorrow. He also loved girls. And girls were certainly attracted to Jack, who had inherited his father's chocolate box good looks. Jack was charming, considerate, and affectionate. You always knew where you stood with Jack and, if you didn't, you could always ask.

If Jack was the yang, Michelle, his older sister, couldn't have been more yin. Shell was solitary, insecure, and as tight as a clam. If she hadn't inherited my razor thin lips and stringy blonde hair, I'd have sworn she'd been swapped at birth. Life was always hard work for Shell. She just didn't get it. Life sucked, and would always suck. Shell didn't want anything to do with it. So she'd just lock herself away in her bedroom, with chocolate bars, pulp romances and mindless videos.

Then, when she was barely fourteen, Shell decided that life in her bedroom sucked even worse, so she simply walked out. Disappeared for a whole week. I was beside myself. Hysterical. Camped by the phone. Unable to sleep, eat, shower, or even change my clothes. Then the phone would ring, and I could barely bring myself to answer, for fear of what the news might be. Until one rainy Tuesday morning Shell simply walked back in. No explanation. Just filthy, hungry, and surprised at all the fuss.

Of course I'd never planned on being a single parent. Who does? In fact I'd spent years looking for just the right man to father my children. Being a Virgo, I even had a checklist.

The father of my children had to be stable, mature, nurturing and endlessly patient. He had to be a non-smoker and social drinker, with a warm whimsical sense of humour. Of course he also had to be devastatingly good looking, and of a similar age, race, faith and skin colour, with good career prospects and a decent disposable income, and, if he were also a gourmet cook, well, that wouldn't be held against him.

And then you find out what's out there and you reluctantly reign in your expectations. Looks were the first to go. Then age. And how important is religion these days? Or birth signs, or musical tastes, or political differences?

So where do you find a soulmate with perfect genes? Work was no good. I was working as a Visualiser for Summit Advertising Solutions, and SAS was full of dreamy artists, cynical wordsmiths, and oily Account Execs. So I spread my net wider to include parties, pubs, clubs, art openings, and arthouse movies. Oh, yes, and other people's weddings. I even invested in the opera and one terrifying singles night. ... I looked everywhere. Airport lounges. Ski lodges. Book launches. Often at great expense and inconvenience, if not actual physical danger. No mountain was too high. No valley too deep. No stone left unturned. In fact, by the time I was twenty seven, I'd kissed so many toads my lips were raw, and I still hadn't found a single man who rated even fifty percent on my paternity meter.

Somehow there was always something missing. They were either too tall, or too intense. Painfully shy, or primitive in bed. Bitterly divorced, or resolutely uncommitted. Or their mothers hated me. Or their mother's dogs. Or they preferred anything to conversation. Even sport.

The trouble with children is that they grow up. It's a fact of life. One day they'll eat anything you put in front of them, the next they'll only eat something out of a designer plastic wrapper. One day they're happy to have a story read to them, the next they're glued to "The Simpsons". One day they're only too happy to take advice, the next they're dishing it out, at the tops of their voices, usually in very public places.

Two in the morning and I'm woken from a deep sleep. Doors are banging, the television blaring. Nervously, I head out in my comfy, zebra striped, pyjamas to investigate. The prodigal daughter is back from her latest expedition. Pupils like pinheads. Flying in the face of fate. "Hi, Mum." Only this time she's not

alone. This time she's groping on the sofa with some pathetic, homeboy wannabe, built like the Giant Merino, and barely able to string two short words together. While on the table, lies a hand gun. Shit! Suddenly I can't breathe. A firearm in my own home. I can't take my eyes off it. I pray it's not real. It certainly looks real. Jack emerges from his bedroom in his holy blue jocks. "Hey, Sis." Shell giggles. "Hey, Jack. This is Joe." Jack yawns a greeting. Then he notices the gun, and stops yawning.

Of course you don't want your children to be bland, or backward. You want them to develop personalities. Have their own points of view. But you have to draw the line somewhere. Yet somehow, as a single parent, you tend to make far too many allowances, and often end up drawing the line around your own throat.

Of course children have to make their own mistakes. It's just that the mistakes kids get to make these days seem to be so much more serious than the minor scrapes we used to get into at their age. Which often leaves us, as parents, watching in appalled amazement as a slight miscalculation turns into a larger misjudgement and finally into a fully fledged catastrophe. Until suddenly you find yourself in the middle of "The Exorcist", with a hand gun on your coffee table, a handy new homeboy vocabulary, and a whole new set of friends in the Police Force. Not to mention enemies in Social Services.

So, where did we go wrong? Life is so unrelenting. There are so many decisions you make every day without really thinking. So many choices, so many forks in the road. So many chances to stuff things up. ... Maybe we shouldn't have moved to Melbourne? But, with my marriage over, it seemed easier, cleaner, neater somehow. We wouldn't be constantly tripping over each other. We'd all be free to start afresh, and reinvent ourselves. ... So that's how I came to be living in darkest Glen Iris, with two small children, no husband, no family support, no baby sitting facilities, and a little casual finished art work. I found I'd reinvented myself into the last thing I ever wanted to be: A struggling single mother.

Of course, when I finally stumbled over him, Lowell was nothing at all like I'd imagined him. Or my checklist would have led me to expect.

My friend, Jen, had taken me to "Company" for my twenty-eighth birthday. You know, the Sondheim musical about the guy who can't commit? Brilliant, if a little close to the bone. Anyway Jen had scored a couple of seats from her friend Roger, who was operating the lights, and Lowell was playing the lead. ... "Lowell"? I know. It's not a great start. And of course he was American, from Jesup, Georgia. But he was the right colour, the right religion, and the right look. In fact he was gorgeous, in an old fashioned, matinee idol, kind of way. And talented. He could sing. (Even Sondheim.) And he could dance. And he could act. In fact he never stopped acting. I'd wake up to a new character every morning. Which was fun, to begin with. ... Anyway Lowell was attractive, attentive and very funny, in a bitchy, non-whimsical, kind of a way. I couldn't stop laughing. Or hiccuping. I was so pissed. It was my birthday after all. So what did he see in me? God knows. A good audience probably. Who cares? I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Lowell was desperate to get married. "Company" was closing in less than a week and he didn't want to go back to Jesup, Georgia. So what could I do? I ditched my carefully honed checklist and married the poor bastard. ... It was the happiest day of Mum's life.

And the first six months were perfect: Planning our lives together, exploring each other's hopes and dreams, carefully skirting around each other's deepest fears, and of course making love, gloriously, inventively, tirelessly. Usually just as my mother was pulling up in the drive. ... And, on the rare occasions when I did manage to get Lowell out of the bedroom, I'd showed him my Sydney: Watson's Bay. Cooper Park. The Fish Markets. The Corso. Coal and Candle Creek.

And then we discovered this divine cottage in Neutral Bay, nestled in cul-de-sac near Military Road. Only two bedrooms, but that was one more than we needed. And suddenly we were home owners and up to our necks in debt. Or at least I was, as Lowell, still finding his feet in Sydney acting circles, was a little short of a credit rating.

The trouble was that back then no one was looking for American actors. This was way before the dollar had plunged, FOX had taken over the Showgrounds, and we'd become yet another Hollywood backlot.

The other small problem was that Lowell didn't just see himself as an American actor, he saw himself as a "star". He wasn't about to prostitute himself by playing two line "walk-ons" on "Flying Doctors" or "Cop Shop". Which meant that the matinee "idle" did a lot of "resting", and whinging about racist casting agents, while his wife went out to work.

It was the cops pulling up that first alerted me to the shiny new BMW in my driveway. Shell and the Giant Merino had already disappeared out the back. So I went to let the young cops in and, when I returned, the gun had also disappeared. Leaving just my son smiling, nervously. Jesus! Just when you think things can't get any worse.

The cops though couldn't have been nicer. They knew I hadn't stolen the Bimmer. I filled them in on the little I knew. Apart from the gun. And they, in turn, filled me in on the Giant Merino, also known as Joseph Poli, and Bogdan Janovich, the heroin dealer he usually hung around with. They even show me Bogdan's mug shot. In case I ever come across him. Would I mind if they took a look around? No, of course not, I've got nothing to hide. ... And then I remember the gun. Jack looks petrified. He's no more cut out for a life of crime than I am. ... Fortunately the cops don't find Shell, or the Giant Merino, or the gun.

Two days later and I'm again woken in the middle of the night. This time it's the phone. I hesitate. Heart in my mouth. When have you ever had good news at four a.m.? ... It's the hospital. Another slight miscalculation. An overdose. Only this time she's lucky. Someone found her in time. She's going to be okay.

I take Shell home. Numb with anger, pain and incomprehension. But, even half dead, she's still my daughter. What ever happened to that tiny baby with the pink matinee jacket? Or the fairy princess whose elusive smile could almost break your heart?

Of course I wasn't planning on playing a supporting role to my unemployed leading man for ever. I wasn't getting any younger. (Thank you, Mum.) And it seemed a pity to waste all that sensational sex. We had a dynasty to create after all.

Lowell was horrified when I announced our "good news". He couldn't start a family. He'd only just mastered the basics of one day cricket.

Shell was anything but sorry. I can't understand it. She seems to have inherited a whole alternate set of values to me, and her brother. So we fought some more, before she took off with half my jewellery.

Lowell did what he could to face his responsibilities. He sacked his agent. Took voice classes to try and sound, if not more Australian, at least more English. He even agreed to attend auditions for lesser roles. ... The trouble was that he was out of practice. He'd lost both his confidence and his concentration. Now he wasn't even getting "callbacks" for carpet ads. He'd obviously peaked way too early. And, as I assumed the proportions of a pantomime dame, Lowell was forced to take ever more ridiculous jobs: Labouring. Pulling beers. Even spruiking ladies underwear.

Not long after Shell's second overdose, everything else portable and of value was cleared from the house. No mess. No sign of forced entry. My new friend, Detective Sergeant Les Darling, suspected an inside job. At least they didn't wake me this time.

I suppose our marital difficulties must have started shortly after Michelle's birth. Lowell was feeling pretty low. His acting career seemed over, his wife had no time for anything other than her demanding new baby, and the screenplay he'd been sweating over for months, had just been ridiculed by even his closest friends. ... So what did I do to help? I got pregnant again. I was sure that motherhood couldn't be as difficult the second time round. ... And I was right. Jack proved the perfect baby. Or maybe his mother had other things to worry about?

A few weeks later Shell was back with a new friend. Bogdan Janovich. The drug dealer's drug dealer. Why bother with the supporting cast when you can swan around with the leading player? Bogdan was every mother's worst nightmare. Cold, calculating and condescending. And my daughter was hanging on his every word. I tried desperately to get to the phone, but it wasn't easy. There's only one, in the living room, and they'd come for tea. Meet the family? What a great idea. ... Jack was obviously equally rattled by Bogdan. Couldn't dredge up anything even remotely amusing to say. The evening dragged on and I was no closer to the phone. In the end I just gave up and went to bed. ... Only of course I couldn't sleep. What on earth was going on? What had any of us done to deserve this? Where had I gone wrong? How could one child have turned out so user friendly, and the other so inaccessible? I wondered if I should sneak out of the window and make a break for the nearest police station? But what would happen if they caught me?

Too late. It was morning. The birds were singing as I headed nervously for the kitchen. My migraine securely in place. But my house guests had already gone, relieving us of the last of our valuables. ... Not much point phoning the cops now.

So what did happen to our marriage? Lowell's failure as a leading man obviously didn't help. Or his depression. Or his drinking. Or all those pathetic jobs he kept having to take. And, as if all that wasn't enough, there was my exhaustion, my obsession with the kids, and my missing libido, not to mention Mum's withering commentary on where we were going wrong, as if her own three failed marriages had nothing whatsoever to do with her. And then there was the final straw. Rolly Watson. In bed with my husband. Well that was it. I took the kids and moved back to Mum's. Allowed her to believe that it was another woman. And, despite Lowell's pitiful protestations that he'd been researching a role, that he'd been drunk, that it would never happen again, somehow the gossamer thread that keeps marriages aloft had sheared, and our temporary separation became more and more permanent. Until Lowell returned to Jesup for an extended vacation, and I decided to sell the house and move to Melbourne.

With his sister addicted to a wanted drug dealer, Jack began to stay away from home, as well as school. Smoking dope and hustling pool. Only I was too distracted to notice. Missing copy deadlines for the first time ever. Scarcely eating, sleeping, or even breathing, as I waited for the next disaster to strike.

And it wasn't long coming. Shell in floods of tears. "Boggie" had been arrested. I had trouble containing my delight. ... And Shell was pregnant. Shit! Just when there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel it turns out to be a train. Barely sixteen and pregnant to a wanted felon. At least, I assumed it was "Boggie's"? Shell, as usual, was non-committal. I told her she'd have to get rid of it. And Shell just lost it completely. Showered me with language so unspeakable that I could only guess at most of it, then borrowed fifty bucks and disappeared. I just burst into tears. Left an obscene message on her father's answering machine. I was far too young to be a granny. Les Darling, my friend in the constabulary, was sympathetic. (My prodigy had just been picked up joy riding in a stolen Subaru.) I found I now had friends in Legal Aid, as well as Law Enforcement, and I'd just missed another deadline.

Jack performed well in court. Maybe he had inherited something other than his father's glossy packaging? He certainly looked wonderful in his borrowed suit, and he really couldn't have been any more object. ... Or grateful, when the magistrate gave him a suspended sentence with no conviction recorded.

Shell was also sorry when she next showed up. But still determined to keep the baby. And of course she still had to visit "Boggie" in jail. But she was definitely giving up drugs. She intended to give her child at least a fighting chance.

And, for once, Shell was as good as her word. Stocked up with videos, chocolates and magazines and locked herself in her bedroom. Went cold turkey: Sweating, cramps, diarrhoea, vomit. The whole works. I'd never been more proud of her. She even stopped visiting "Bog" in jail, after he'd abused her verbally once too often. ... It was nice to have her back.

Jack was also back at school and making a big effort. While I finally caught up with my deadlines. And, as Shell grew bigger, stronger, and even vaguely communicative, an unexpected, but welcome, calm descended on Carmen Street, Glen Iris.

Milton was born on April Fool's Day. I hoped it wasn't an omen. It was a difficult labour, over thirty hours. Shell showed interest in her son. ... For all of forty eight hours. Before the wheels fell off yet again. Shell decided that she couldn't breast feed. Which left us back in the shit, with an extra mouth to feed. Shell was now suffering from serious post natal depression, on top of her regular depression. She and Mill just didn't bond. In fact it often seemed as if Mill was doing all he could to push his mother away. ... And finally he succeeded. Shell took off, with a loan from her brother, and I was left holding the baby. Yet again. ... I could have killed her. Just when I thought my child rearing days were over. Just when I was looking forward to having some time to myself, reading a few novels, maybe doing some painting? It was back to Napisan and midnight feeds. ... If I'd had the Giant Merino's gun, I'd have killed us all.

Jack, the innocent bystander, was also having trouble adjusting to his whinging nephew, as well as his mother's impossible demands. He was slipping away, and I was again too caught up in my own self pity to notice.

Until Detective Sergeant Les Darling came pounding on my door at almost midnight. Waking the baby. Embarrassed that he hadn't phoned. "But, er, you know ..." I nodded. I knew. It's another fact of life. Men don't phone. Women phone. "So why the sudden rush?"

Les examined his feet. "There's been an accident." My heart sank. "Shell?" Les shook his head. "No, Jack."

After our move to Melbourne, Lowell began to show less and less interest in his kids. I worried about the absence of a male role model, but, for the first few years, everything seemed fine. And then, of course, by the time they'd started to exhibit anti-social tendencies and appalling lapses of judgement, it was already too late.

By this time, Lowell had dropped all pretence of hetro-sexuality and was living, quite flagrantly, with Alex, a bitchy, bad tempered, bottle blond, window dresser. Lowell had even got a regular performing gig at "Les Girls". I understand he was very good. I just never had the heart to go. And neither of his children showed the slightest interest. Mum, who by now knew the whole sad story, would have gone, but didn't have anyone to go with. How would she explain "Lolly" to her friends?

Occasionally, when he'd been paid for a commercial, Lolly would swan down to Glen Iris and take the kids out on extravagant outings. Then he'd vanish, like the Wicked Witch of the West, leaving them with vague promises of tickets to "Sunset Boulevard" or backstage passes to The Eagles, or holidays on the Gold Coast. None of which ever eventuated. ... So much for male role models. ... I just looked at him with his coifed hair, his puffy face, and his shattered dreams, and wondered how I could ever have got it quite so wrong?

As Les explained it, it had just been bad luck. Jack and his mate, Murph, undoubtedly under assorted influences, had had the bright idea of stealing a Porsche. The cops had spotted the car and taken up chase. The boys had panicked and wrapped the car round a power pole. Murph was already dead. While Jack was hanging by a thread.

So here I was, sitting in another garish, lemon scented, hospital waiting room, in near hysterics, with Mill wide eyed on my lap, waiting to hear if my only son was alive, or dead.

You like to think you have at least some minimal control over your own life, don't you? And then something like this happens and you realise that you

don't. Shell had been right all along. Life sucks, and would continue to suck until it had sucked the life out of me and all my loved ones.

I tried to stop laughing. But I couldn't. Through my tears, I could just make out the Receptionist calling for re-enforcements. I wondered if you could really die laughing? At that particular moment, it didn't seem such a bad way to go.

Alright so I might have chosen a better father for my children, but I could also have chosen a lot worse. Just look at Shell and my mother. At least Lowell hadn't abused his children, and wasn't in jail, or fighting for Al-Qaeda. Alright so he wasn't there much at all, but at least his children knew where he was, in the unlikely eventuality that they should they ever need to talk to him. And I'd certainly always been there. To feed and clothe them, support and encourage them, smother them with affection. They couldn't avoid me. I worked from home. Alright, so there had never been much money, but they hadn't missed out on much. And I certainly hadn't paraded a whole succession of seedy, no-hoper, boyfriends in front of them. In fact I hadn't had sex with a man for twelve years. Until Les Darling came along.

How much more could they have expected from me? ... No. Damn it. It wasn't my fault. I did all I could. I certainly didn't ask them to take drugs. Or get pregnant. Or steal cars. They'd decided that all on their own. No. Fuck it! It was them who stuffed up and not me.

And now it was high time I did something for myself. With a big effort, I stopped laughing, wiped my eyes, and rang my mother.

Mum came down from Sydney. We took it in turns with the baby and the hospital visiting. ... Lowell also came down for a few weeks. ... And even Shell finally put in an appearance. Hungry, broke, and pregnant again. I left Mill with her as much as I could. And mother and son warily sounded each other out. Before Lowell and I had our first serious heart to heart with our daughter. Shell agreed that having another child wouldn't really solve anything. Her first priority was to the son she already had. See? I knew she wasn't really an alien. ... Lowell suggested that if it would help she and Mill could come and stay with him. (He and Alex had recently had an explosive parting of the ways.) And Shell, to everyone's amazement, agreed.

Jack took this as his cue to regain consciousness. I was so excited that I kissed Doctor Singh. And, while Jack would never play footie again, he now had that sexy, swashbuckling, scar down his left cheek to explain. And the smile was back. He was going to be okay. Apply himself to something. He didn't know quite what. Maybe music? Or web design? While I persuaded him that Mum's

house in Sydney was a far better place to recuperate than Glen Iris. ... Then I had to persuade Mum.

So here I am. In splendid isolation. Surrounded by lush green bush. Hills and valleys. Birds and butterflies. My accommodation isn't too flash. Barely more than a garden shed. But it does have a roof, a septic tank, a cold shower, and a great view. What else do you need? I'm reading, and cycling, and painting. I'm going through my blue period. I've run out of red. But you don't go into Lismore any more than you have to.

Of course it does get lonely sometimes. But lonely is easier to cope with than waiting breathlessly for the next police raid, the next armed junkie, or the next major miscalculation. At least you know where you stand with lonely. And there is always Lismore. Or Byron Bay.

I hope the kids are okay. I'm sure I'd hear if they weren't. Mum and Lowell both have my Post Office Box. I miss Jack, and Mill, of course, and even Shell sometimes. I think she's going to be okay. I don't think she plans to kill herself anymore, to let me off the hook. At least I hope she doesn't. We'll just have to wait and see. One day at a time. She may have made a few mistakes, but she's still the only daughter I'll ever have.

In the meantime, I'm taking time out. God knows, I deserve it.

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