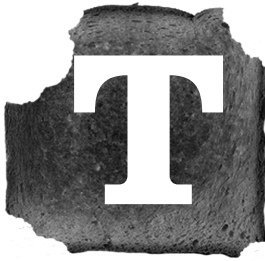


CHAPTER 12

Pigs might fly



ony Delroy is a late-night broadcaster on ABC radio. At midnight he hosts ‘Tony’s Quiz’, a twenty-five question general knowledge situation where callers ring in and answer the questions, with the winner receiving a gardening magazine in an ABC calico bag. In the mid-’90s John and I became hooked. Every night, without fail, we’d get into bed, turn off the bedside lights, turn on the radio, snuggle under the doona, and between us try to answer Tony’s questions. Sometimes we would have been in the kitchen having a screaming argument about issues such as betrayal, deception and infidelity when suddenly one of us would look at the clock and say, ‘It’s nearly twelve o’clock.’ With all the panic of Cinderella at the ball, we would immediately forget our fight and race around, cleaning our teeth, getting undressed and jumping into bed where Tony’s reassuring voice would immediately calm us.

Years later I was doing a fill-in shift on the evening program at the ABC, and as part of the show I would talk to Tony Delroy. One evening while we were chatting on air, I told him that his quiz had helped John and my relationship. He wasn't that surprised. In fact, he went on to tell me that he'd once met a woman who confessed that she and her husband used to make love while listening to his quiz. What a revelation. The thought of Tony's dulcet voice asking what is the capital of Zambia while a sweaty couple at home approaches orgasm, screaming, 'Yes! Yes! Yes, it's Lusaka!' has meant that I've never been able to listen to Tony's quiz in quite the same way since.

John had only recently moved back into number 26; for two months he'd been living at his brother's place. He'd moved out the day after I threw a large piece of marinated pork at his head. As the marinade dripped down his stunned face, bits of parsley and rosemary remaining stuck in his hair, we stood looking at each other, knowing that this was it – we'd hit rock-bottom and something or someone had to give.

Trouble had been brewing and gathering intensity for some time. John's work schedule had become crazier and more stressful than ever. He was directing large festivals as well as continuing to run the Little Big Tops. At one stage he drove under a low bridge in South Melbourne in a high truck he'd hired to transport some festival equipment. The roof peeled off the top of that truck as easily and smoothly as the opening of a sardine tin. John, being in a hurry to get to the festival, simply left the roof by the roadside and continued on his way. It wasn't until the following day that John learnt the hire

company's insurance policy didn't cover people driving a truck that is clearly too tall under a bridge that is clearly too low, and we were informed we'd have to pay for a new roof on the truck. Somehow we got out of this debacle but it was a tense couple of weeks.

Meanwhile, I'd been working as a full-time cast member on a comedy show called *Full Frontal*. One Friday afternoon while we were having a few weeks' break from filming before shooting the next series, a courier delivered a letter from the *Full Frontal* production team. (This was not unusual as it was in the days before email.) The letter contained the usual information, including all the starting times and location details for the following Monday. It was the last sentence that was a little out of the norm: 'Unfortunately, Denise Scott has decided to pursue other interests and will not be joining us for the next series.' I read it out to John. 'What do you think that means, John?'

'I think it means you've been sacked, Scotty.'

These were not the best of times.

If further proof were needed that things were a little unhinged at number 26, I provided it by choosing to wear a bare-midriff outfit to my fortieth birthday party, which was held at home. That's right, a bare midriff, beautifully highlighting my white stomach which was covered in moles. When one guest arrived, she poked her finger right into my flesh and said, 'I just had to do that. It's just like mine, all soft and pudgy. I've been going to the gym for years but at our age nothing helps, does it?'

Before the birthday cake was cut, John made a speech that ended with the words, 'Life is a struggle and life with Scotty is a ... magnificent struggle.' The giant mud-cake was topped with cream and strawberries. The candles were lit, happy birthday was sung, it was time to cut the cake. I had the knife poised when my brother-in-law yelled, 'Use the chainsaw!' He'd borrowed it some weeks earlier and had returned it to us that evening, which was why it was sitting in the corner of the living area. I heard my mother's voice in my head: 'All the time and all the effort that's gone into making that cake, not to mention the fortune you paid for it. It would be such a waste.'

I kickstarted the chainsaw. Cake sprayed everywhere. Chocolate and cream splattered the guests, who were screaming and trying to run, but there was nowhere to run to. I felt like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, grinning my head off with evil intent as I kept attacking that cake. Okay, some of the guests' outfits were ruined and yes, I'll admit that the bits of cake that were salvaged didn't taste great with all the petrol that had seeped into it; and yes, it was very hard, in fact impossible, to get the cake off the ceiling; and yes, it was a waste. But it was a **MAGNIFICENT** waste.

A few months later, John held his fortieth birthday party in our backyard. It featured a huge bonfire and guests were asked to bring something to burn as a symbolic gesture of letting go of the old and bringing in the new. John chose to burn his full-length caftan, and as it disappeared in the flames John let out a raw, guttural cry and took a spontaneous leap over the

hot coals, strongly indicating that some form of release from the past was taking place.

John then got a job working on a major festival in country Victoria. He was frequently away, and one morning he flew back to Melbourne on a regional flight and called in to see us at home before heading off to his city office. We were all sitting on the bed together when I innocently asked John about the farming family he was supposed to have stayed with the night before. 'Well, actually, Scotty ...' It was the word 'actually' that did it. I knew right there and then that John was having an affair. It was that night I threw the pig and the next day John moved out.

It seemed incomprehensible that life had come to this. Jordie and Bonnie were dazed and confused: what had become of their happy, loving, devoted family, where Mum worked in comedy and Dad was a clown?

A few weeks later, a note came home from the school about Bonnie. There was a concern that she appeared to have forgotten how to read or spell. She had to have a series of tests done on her eyes and ears, and for things like dyslexia. They all came back clear. When we told her the news her large eyes welled up with tears. She whispered, 'Then that means I must just be stupid.' I recalled the pork incident and knew without a doubt who the stupid ones were in this scenario.

After John moved out, I did things I'd never done before, such as drink vodka straight from the bottle while lying under the Hills hoist in the foetal position. Then there was the day I answered the phone and a woman in a ridiculously happy

voice said, 'Hello, Mrs Scott, Jocelyn here from the RSPCA, how are you today?' I burst into tears and told Jocelyn that I was in a dreadful state. She listened to my plight and then said, 'Well, Mrs Scott, perhaps you'd like to help the RSPCA by buying some biros?' I bought the biros and it did make me feel better knowing that I was at least able to help an unhappy dog or cat.

I was angry too. I didn't intend to take it out on a complete stranger in our local shopping centre carpark but that's exactly what happened. I was coming back from the fruit and vegetable mart when I saw a chap standing between two cars. I looked at him and thought, 'Is he ...? My God, could he be ...? I don't believe this. He is, he's exposing himself!' I abandoned my shopping trolley, marched over to him and screamed, 'I've had a gutful! Do you understand me? I've had an absolute gutful of men and their dicks. I don't want to see it. They [referring to onlookers who had gathered] don't want to see it. No one wants to see it. Do you understand me? So for God's sake, put it away, keep it away and don't you EVER hang it out in public again!' And by the look on his face, I suspect he never did.

John, the eternal happy optimist, was the saddest I'd ever seen him. He looked terrible. He visited us all the time, and I mean *all the time*. As the kids correctly observed, 'We see more of Dad now that he doesn't live here than we ever saw him when he did.'

One of the worst consequences of John moving out was having to tell my mother the news; I dreaded making that call. She adored John. He was a brilliant son-in-law. All she

had to do was ring and John would drop everything and race out to Greensborough to replace Mum's fire-alarm, or clean out her spouting, or climb up into the roof and check for rats. Mum also loved that we'd managed to hold a family together. According to Marg, there was NOTHING more important in life than that. I was sure she'd blame me for our demise.

I dialled her number. I braced myself for her disappointment and disapproval. I told her very briefly about the affair and she muttered something about men being stupid sometimes. And then she said, 'Oh Denise, I do love you, you know.' I hung up the phone and wept. The real reason I wept was because Mum didn't know the full story behind John's departure and I didn't want to tell her. Of course I didn't. What daughter wants to confess to her mother that she has contributed to a family breakdown? I preferred my mum to think it was all John's fault.

A year and a half earlier, John, the kids and I had moved into a small flat up the street while number 26 was being renovated. A team of like-minded, hippie-style, environmentally aware builders had set to work tearing down the back half of our house. Like many others of our generation, we were replacing it with a large open-plan living/dining area.

A quick word of warning: the open-plan dream seems like the most sensible thing in the world when your kids are young. It's only when they hit adolescence that you realise it's nuts because the LAST place an adolescent wants to be when they're hanging out with their friends, or even on their own for that matter, is in the same room as their parents. I know of

a family who, after spending a fortune building an award-winning, architect-designed, open-plan living area was then forced to erect a series of unattractive, makeshift, plywood walls recreating the small rooms they had just torn down. The final effect was not dissimilar to a row of shantytown brothels in a Kalgoorlie street. This was all because their teenage kids needed privacy to pursue their Facebook and MySpace activities. But the issue of adolescents and their needs was still some way off for us so we proceeded in blissful ignorance.

During the reno period John was working flat-out. I wasn't working so I was landed with the responsibility of making all the tough decisions, like choosing the doorknobs, taps and light fittings. The renovations presented all the usual stresses such as the ceiling rose crashing to the floor a minute after we'd been standing there admiring it, the chimney coming close to collapse, and the shade of white turning out not to be the shade of white promised on the colour chart. But I guess it was the fact that I had an affair with the builder that really took our home reno nightmares to new heights. And I have to acknowledge that the builder being one of John's best friends at the time took these particular renovation stresses off the emotional Richter scale.

I had written about this entanglement on a piece of paper, trying to work through what I should do about it. I'd put the piece of paper in the pocket of my dressing gown – except that it wasn't just my dressing gown; John and I shared it. To this day, John remains wary of putting his hand in a dressing-gown pocket, scared of what life-changing item he may find.

This was big. This was momentous. This was a catastrophe. Uncertainty, broken hearts, shock, tears, guilt, anger, love, passion, pain and hurt – you name the emotion, we covered it; there was even an ulcer involved. With no one quite knowing what to do, the builder left the project a little earlier than expected and John and I moved back into number 26, which fortunately was close to completion, except for the bathroom.

While the kids excitedly explored their new bedrooms, John and I sat in the middle of the new open-plan living area looking like a couple of war-torn, shell-shocked refugees. The bay window, with its delicate leadlight glass, the highly polished golden Baltic pine floorboards and the steeple ceiling, featuring inlaid parquetry in the shape of a star, created an almost church-like sense of peace. But in reality we were in turmoil.

We attempted to get our lives back to normal. By ‘normal’ I mean John resumed his manic work schedule, driving big trucks under small bridges, and I went back to TV with a sad heart and no commitment to it and hey, I got the sack. It wasn’t until I threw that piece of pig at John’s head that we both snapped out of our emotional paralysis and took some action. We knew we couldn’t go on living like this and that’s when John moved out and we had a rest from each other.

While we lived apart we came to four conclusions: a) we were both miserable living together but we were even more miserable living apart; b) we both loved living in number 26; c) we both loved spending every single day with our children;

and d) we'd both been stupid and cruel to each other and maybe, just maybe, with the help of some good counselling and Tony Delroy's midnight quiz, we might find our way back to loving each other again.

John moved back in.

Fourteen years later we have definitely managed to find our way back to love but unfortunately the bathroom remains unfinished.