

Love and the mother superior

By Ruth Ostrow

"YOU really should be wearing your hair in a bob," says my mum, sitting in the back seat of our car, pulling a comb through her own hair. "A nice, neat bob. Short hair is in. Long hair is out. Sharon Stone has her hair short now and so do all those pop singers. It's so youthful, so lovely. Don't you want to be trendy?"

"Mum, there isn't a trendy bone in my body," I say, staring out the window at the hills rolling by. "Why do you think we moved up here?" I sigh, wondering if it will ever be any different.

We have picked up my mum from the airport. She has come to spend time in our new house and see her grandchild.

I've been apprehensive all week, wondering how she will react to our domain in the mountains. She is the type of woman who doesn't go anywhere she can't wear high heels. Elegant, groomed, hair always coiffed, she's a real city slicker. The sort of woman who appreciates a good bit of beige carpet.

I haven't had the heart to tell her where we are really living. In order to calm her, I've told her we live "just outside of Surfers Paradise", one of her favourite spots. She loves the pretty shops, the hotels that line the beach, the glamorous women in their bikinis.

I told her to fly to Coolangatta, a familiar destination on the Gold Coast. But as we head in the opposite direction and into the hinterlands of northern NSW, I'm thinking of how and when to break the terrible news that there isn't a five-star hotel within cooee of where we live. That the wild grass around our property is taller than she is. That yesterday we fished a python out of our garden. That spiders as big as human hands hang from the ceiling when it rains. Worse, that we don't have carpet.

Everyone wants their mum and dad to be proud of them, even into our adult years. Perhaps we get over needing their approval for the way we have chosen to live but at least we want understanding and acceptance for the courageous decisions we have made.

And I believe my decision to extricate myself from the riches of society in favour of a more spiritually abundant lifestyle is a truly courageous decision.

But the minute she arrives there is trouble. Hardly off the plane and she hands us our presents. She has bought my husband and me watches. Which is bad enough since our new lifestyle is about losing track of time.

"Imitation Rolex," she beams, holding up the huge, hideous things. "They are exactly like the real thing. People won't know the difference." My husband and I plaster fake smiles to our mouths.

Where we live people are naturists. They swim naked in places where there are no tiles on the bottom. They wear denim and cheesecloth. Make-up is unknown unless it's painted on the centre of the forehead like a Hindu bindi.

My anxiety grows as we drive towards home with mum carrying on about hair. "I mean, if you are going to let it go like that," she says, referring to the mop on my head, "it's out of control. You used to blowdry it. I didn't like it long but at least it wasn't so, so, unkempt."

Unkempt is one of the worst things a person can be in my mother's eyes. English by birth and a woman who values discretion, tidiness and order, it's no accident she became a beauty therapist, spending her days plucking and shaving away mess. I keep my arms down so she can't see what is going on under my armpits.

"Where is the beach?" she suddenly says, noticing that the road is growing darker from the overhanging trees, and windier as we climb higher. "We don't actually live on the beach, mum, we live in the hills but we can see the sea from our veranda."

"Oh, that's nice," she says. I calm down.

"Mum, it's very, um, rural where we live."

"You mean like a farm?"

"Yes. Like that."

We drive into a little country town near my new home. The streets are full of hirsute people in kaftans. Hair removal is not a priority here. It's hippie terrain. A throwback from the 1960s. My mother gets it straight away.

"Drop-outs," she says. "They look like they need a good wash."

"Unkempt," I say, and she bursts out laughing. "Mum, where we live is really, really rural."

There is silence. "They don't wear Rolex watches." She still doesn't speak.

As we begin the ascent to our house I wonder what impression she is gaining. It's magnificent country. Tropical flowers, lime-green palm trees and banana plantations lining the hills.

"Very pretty," she says, not giving anything away. "In fact, you all need a trim," she says as the foliage grows more dense.

It takes me a second to realise she is talking about hair again. Or is it a metaphor for my soul? I have always been unkempt, unruly, rebellious. The sort of child who didn't fit neatly into the routines and regimes of domestic life. It has been a hard battle for me.

And her. Much as she tried to teach me to be "nice" and "disciplined", I was a disappointment. I could never fit the mould.

"You love it out here, don't you?" she suddenly says. "It is probably more like who you really are. Wild, a free spirit, natural. You always were a natural person." My eyes unexpectedly fill up with tears. "Like your father."

"You know that? I mean, you realise that about me?"

"A mother always knows the soul of her child," she says, speaking into a stunned silence.

"I know you're worried about whether I'm going to like your home or approve of your new life. I don't care how you live or who you live with. I just care that you are happy, that's all. And you seem very happy in this hippie lifestyle."

I feel my body fall into a relaxed space at the depth of her acknowledgment. I could weep with relief.

"All I ask is one thing. That you consider cutting your daughter's hair if not your own," says the ever-hopeful hair-police, not missing a beat, as we mount the final stretch towards home.

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