

So special to be a tooth fairy

By Ruth Ostrow

I FEEL the wet before I hear the muffled sounds of grief. Big teardrops against my cheek. Then small hiccupping sounds.

"Mummy, Mamma," my daughter's voice is calling. Sadness in each note. "Mummy, wake up! Something terrible has happened."

I've been woken by these pleas before. "Something terrible" to a child means anything from a mosquito bite to a dolly's broken leg. But her tone is insistent.

"Mummy..." I open my eyes and look into a face so crumpled and hurt. The light of dawn is beginning to filter in.

"The tooth fairy didn't come," she says, before starting to sob again.

I am delirious with exhaustion, having had a very late night. My mind is still dreaming.

She says it again, slowly, meaningfully, each word clear.

"The tooth fairy didn't come, Mum. I must have been a bad girl or maybe she doesn't like me or something."

Suddenly my mind catches up, and the words stab at my heart like knives.

"Oh God!" my head is saying. "I'm a terrible, terrible mother," but my mouth opens and a gobbledygook excuse rushes out instead.

"Darling, we ran out of salt," I say, prizing my eyes open with my fingers. "You need salt in the water to clean the tooth so the fairy can carry away a clean tooth," I burble, surprised my brain is working at all.

Fairies get big billing in our house, as do good witches, tree spirits and a host of wonderful beings. It's my deep belief that children should remain open to their imaginations, and to the possibility of magic.

"I didn't want to put the glass in your room in case the fairy thought we were giving her a dirty tooth. I thought it was better to wait until I went shopping for salt this morning," I say, as if pleading with an armed robber for my life.

Which is really what I am doing: pleading for my life.

Because I allowed myself to have a life last night instead of tending to my daughter's need.

The simple fact was I got caught up watching schlock telly and, by 3am, had forgotten about the tooth on the bench -- the fourth tooth to have fallen out this year.

And herein lies the dilemma of the parent. The omnipresent choice between a child's continual happiness, or a moment snatched by frazzled mothers and fathers for some R&R; for some much-needed sex; for the chance to travel, party

all night, or simply to stay up watching infomercials.

The price is high either way. And I'm paying dearly now, witnessing the disappointment of a gentle soul who opened her eyes a hundred times during the night in hope.

A girlfriend of mine has an interesting perspective on parenting. She says: "A happy parent creates a happy child.

"If you don't give yourself time to have fun and find your own childlike expressions of joy, then a lot of stuff will be projected on to your children -- like my self-sacrificing mum who used to say: 'I did this all for you,' and then had all these expectations that we'd make her happy.

"But if you give your soul time to play and stop being so hard on yourself for not being the perfect parent, then your contentment will be infectious."

She is right. We must forgive ourselves our inadequacies. For though we all want our children to feel special, we can't always be the perfect tooth fairy, can't always be there for them with money, love, to carry away the old and usher in the new, always present and full of magic, ready to grant all wishes.

Later that day, while shopping in the chemist, I'm drawn to a tiny mirror with jewels around it, although I don't quite know why I prefer this to the rings and necklaces nearby.

The next morning I'm woken by an excited voice. "I must be so special, the fairy gave me money and a magical mirror," my little girl coos.

In the car, on the way to school, she asks: "Mamma, why do you think the tooth fairy brought me a mirror this time? Because she didn't come the night before?"

"No," I say, thoughtfully. "The tooth fairy wasn't feeling guilty. I think she just wants you to see yourself -- how beautiful you really are, inside and out. And that you are a gorgeous, deeply lovable person, whether she visits you or not.

"The specialness is inside you," I say driving along, thinking about all the tired tooth fairies, past and present, and how important it is to start breaking the insidious cycle of self-doubt, passed on unwittingly from parent to child in so many ways.

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