

## Curse on men who dare to care

By Ruth Ostrow

A GROUP of friends and I are basking in the sun at the public swimming pool. Several of us have small children and the beach is too rough for the patter of tiny feet. Instead we spread out on towels and rugs thrown over the grass, prop ourselves up on pillows, and lounge about drinking, eating and watching out for our little ones who are splashing in the baby pool nearby.

A friend from interstate, who I have known for more than 15 years, is with us. Simon is a divorcee in his late 30s, sexy, intelligent, unbelievably warm and charismatic. We laughingly refer to him as a "chick magnet", given the number of women who always seem eager to hang off his arm.

He lolls about having a joke with a few of us. But he soon grows bored with our company. Most of us are reading -- welcoming the peace that comes with occupied children -- so he wanders off to play with the kids.

They run up to him, and there are squeals of joy all around. My daughter joins the merry throng as they circle him, hug him and dive into the pool together. I shut my eyes and listen to the precious sound of my daughter's ecstasy.

It is a gift this man brings. Since coming to stay with my husband and I a few days ago, Simon has opened me up to my child by putting me back in touch with the pure joy of her. There is nothing quite so wonderful as being in the company of someone who adores children but hasn't got the responsibility of rearing any.

Childless friends like Simon, aunties, uncles and grandparents, have a tolerance and open-heartedness that parents -- exhausted by the endless cries of "stop it", "don't do that", "leave it alone" -- can't give. It is such a pleasure watching these souls embrace a child in the special way you would if only you weren't so strung out by the brutal routine of it all.

Anyway, because of the noise by the pool, other children end up approaching Simon. Before long there is a gaggle of kids clinging to his legs and arms. As I shut my eyes, the last thing I see is him leading giggling kids across the lawn to play a game of wheelbarrow racing.

I doze secure in the knowledge that all is well.

By the time I open my eyes something has changed. I feel it in the air. Several mothers are standing close by with folded arms and tight lips. They seem to be circling Simon, closing in. A few of them have banded together. They are whispering but never taking their eyes off my friend for a moment.

I recognise immediately the body language. Here are women who are suspicious of what's going on. In a world littered with stories about men who prey on small children, these women have clicked into protection mode. "Why would any strange man be interested in playing with my children?" "What real motive does he have in tipping them upside down?" they ponder while moving closer to keep an eye on their progeny.

It is obvious they can't see me or my group of friends sitting nearby. They just see a lone man, in a corner of the grounds, surrounded by kids.

I wander up to Simon and put my arms around him. Immediately the mothers relax. The body language changes. Folded arms drop to the side. Ahhhhh! There is a female attached to this wandering fellow, so things must be okay. The women retreat.

The incident affects me deeply. It's not that I would not do the same as these mothers. But it is such a worry that in our society, lone men around children are automatically seen as pariahs.

My friend Simon has a way with children that is very special. I am indebted to him for the generosity of time and love he has shown my family. Were he a woman, he would be hailed as a marvellous child carer and nurturer.

But as a man he must always be guilty until proven innocent of the charge of loving. This isn't the first time I have seen people looking on suspiciously as a result of his enthusiasm and ebullience with their kids.

I understand Simon's relationship to children. He is an intensely expressive man, making up songs, funny poems and ditties that often have adults falling about with laughter. Children are particularly mesmerised by his sense of fun, as he is mesmerised by theirs. "But why isn't he married?" is the first question asked by mothers sussing out a potential paedophile, as if this makes any difference.

It must be a horrible time in history to be a man -- as teacher, day-care worker, stepfather, or innocent dad -- torn by suspicion and conflicting messages that say "nurture children" but at the same time "keep your distance!"

I reacted badly and unfairly myself last year to a male care-giver at a day care centre, quizzing the manager about the man's history and why he should want to work in a kindergarten. I, too, asked the bizarre question: "Is he married?"

I am writing this as much to myself as to anyone. As a child I was subjected to two incidents of what I now regard as inappropriate behaviour -- one was from a teacher. Both men, incidentally, were married with children.

I understand what can happen. But I also know that by living in fear, women are making a noose for themselves.

There are paedophiles in society. But do we condemn all men for the acts of a small, sick few? And are there not women abusers, too? A friend of mine tells a very awful story about a woman carer she had as a child.

In the end it is females who will suffer from this prejudice. We have asked men, begged men, to set us free from our roles as primary care-givers, to come into the classroom, the kitchen, to play with our children; to share responsibilities, open their hearts and form more nurturing relationships. To allow women careers and lives, too.

If we condemn all nurturing men as potential abusers, as the mothers by the pool seemed to be doing at the sight of a playful male like Simon doing cartwheels, then there is only one place for women. Back in the kitchen holding the tea-towel.

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