

Sharing life's stinky moments

By Ruth Ostrow

"THEY haven't come. They haven't come, again," says my husband, holding his head in his hands. He looks distraught, defeated, confused. Around him are at least 12 bulging garbage bags. The stench is excruciating.

"I called the removal guys three times. I don't know why they are not here," he says, glancing down at the bags as if this will make them evaporate.

Unlike me, my husband is not one for dramatics. So to see him in this state is very disturbing. But it is the third week of his new garbage regime and the system is clearly not working.

It's the way of the world up here, in the country. One has to come to terms with the refuse of one's life.

We are two city slickers gone bush. Two urban yuppies on a sea change. We are alone on a vast stretch of land, without the aid of society's hidden helpers. And we have come plumb up against our own garbage. Literally.

Human waste, disposing of the detritus of life in all its various forms, has suddenly become a reality. There are no council workers to alleviate the burden of garbage. No noisy trucks to hide from us the mess we are making of our lives, our planet, ourselves.

No one comes, under the cloak of darkness, to clean away all traces of our excessive consumerism, traces of trees that have died so we can blow our noses. We alone are left holding a horrible array of plastic containers, cartons and papers that testify to our selfishness as a species on this earth.

When my husband and I first arrived at the property a couple of months ago, we took our garbage to the tip ourselves. That journey in the car, with the wafting smell of decay assaulting our nostrils, was the most unsavoury we had ever made. Not to mention how the car smelled afterwards.

So my husband arranged for a local company to come and take our rubbish from outside the property to the tip. As we live on the top of a hill, this has meant he must walk a wheelie-bin 20 minutes down a rocky incline, and 20 minutes back up again. He has been crabby and irritable with this chore.

And to make matters worse, each week the truck has mysteriously passed us by. Until our garbage is sitting here in front of us in an accusatory, angry way.

And now I am angry. At him. For the mess our lawn has become. I'm angry because I'm tired. I've been on mosquito duty for the past five weeks. My daughter has a red eye. Last night I put insect repellent on every patch of her skin, so the bastards went for her eyelid.

Tracking down mosquito nets that fit, trying to get screens fitted to the windows, experimenting with citronella plants, peppermint plants, coils, has become an obsession, until there is nothing else on my mind but defeating those critters.

Garbage has been my husband's domain. He chose it. "It's not my problem. It's your problem," I say. "I didn't make you worry about mosquitoes. I don't want to worry about this!"

And suddenly I realise why I'm so upset. I'm having a problem with responsibility. As well as confronting the reality of owning one's own rubbish, I'm having to confront the metaphor. As in who carries the burden of the unpleasant things in a relationship. And what if one party is carrying more garbage than the other?

Like so many couples, our main trouble-spot has been "divvying up" the chores. Who spends time paying the bills, doing the tax, bathing our child? Who cooks, who washes up, who plays taxi driver?

As a New Age couple, we both want equality and balance. But it is the hardest thing to achieve. What I found as a sex and relationships writer was that nobody seemed to be able to get it right.

Traditional couples complained to me over the years about traditional inequities: the male playing the exhausted breadwinner, the female playing the undervalued mother and carer. Modern couples complained equally, with both parties struggling to bring in money and bring up children.

If he is working and she is working, then who should take Johnny to his guitar lesson on Saturday? And if she takes Johnny on Saturday, does that mean he should cook dinner?

What is fair, what is reasonable in this world of ever-changing social rules?

My husband and I have been trying to get it right for years. Fighting and buck-passing, then vowing to be kind and supportive of each other's need for free, creative time.

We took our sea change so we could both have time out. But here on our 6ha hideaway we have found new and onerous chores: insect and pest management, lawnmowing, cobweb eradication. Paradise is hard to maintain. Last week 10 cows wandered up to our front door. Who should go looking for their owner amid the peaks and gullies we now call home?

In a nutshell: who should take out the garbage?

"Sorry, I'm angry," I say, looking at the plastic bags that have multiplied around his feet. "I'm stretched to the limit. It's hard to make new friends for us, to seek out tradesmen and doctors, to settle us into our new home. I feel frightened by all the demands."

"I'm sorry to have put the garbage on you," he smiles. "I know you've been doing a lot recently. I'll find a solution."

The next day he has one. Not only will we reuse our plastic containers to cut down our waste so we are not so ashamed of ourselves as human polluters but we will separate the smelly food from the other stuff by getting a compost bin for our garden. This way we need only make one trip to the tip a month.

That afternoon we go to our new compost bin together. We walk to the end of our property and throw our rotting food in the heap where it will ferment and

transmogrify into something nurturing that will feed the ground that sustains us.

It's a special moment. We are pulling together, sharing the cycle of life. Germination, birth, death and decay. Hand in hand under the waning sun, we are two people in a relationship, learning how to deal with their own garbage.

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