

Flying beyond our fears

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was some time in the 1940s. A Ferris wheel collapsed. Little Johnny Somebody died in that collapse. He was a friend of my father and it had terrible consequences for me.

My father had developed a fascination with Ferris wheels, fast rides and such. He would take us to Luna Park on St Kilda beach in Melbourne. But we were never allowed to go on any good rides.

His four children would stand next to him as he stared up at the mechanical monsters, telling us the morbid tale of Johnny Somebody-or-Other who went down with a thud. "Never, never go on those things. They aren't bloody safe," he'd say, and we'd spend the rest of the afternoon dragging around behind him feeling depressed, eating sticky fairy floss in sad compensation and going on awful rides such as the dodgem cars, which he liked because he could legally ram other moving vehicles.

I am sorry for Johnny Somebody and his family. But given that I can't even remember his name, it is a source of profound anger that because of his death a lifetime ago, I am hurting my little girl now.

"Please let me go on it, mummy, please!" she begs, pointing up at the Ferris wheel as I squirm with nausea.

"They are not safe, darling. Your grandfather knew someone who died on one of these," I say, as she looks up to the clouds and tries to instigate another awkward discussion on death.

I am truly at a loss to know what to do. It is only fair she has some fun, having spent days traipsing after her parents at the Blues and Roots Festival in Byron Bay, NSW. Five years of age, her little legs dragging through the crowds, reggaeing on into the night, I have looked at her often these past few days and wondered what life must look like from down there, so close to the ground.

Will she thank me in years to come for giving her an interesting and diverse childhood, keeping her up all night to listen to the most excellent musicians in the world? Or will she end up on a therapy couch moaning about ill treatment? "I was so tired and they made me stay up funking to zydeco music and bopping to bluegrass."

I have done everything to placate her. She has downed more ice-cream than I'd care to admit: a child's version of fabulous jazz, her eyes lighting up and going dreamy in ecstasy. But now is the moment of reckoning.

For days it has been: "Please, please please." The Ferris wheel, in the middle of the festival site, has been her symbol of my compromise. The vehicle to take her higher than her status of pipsqueak. Her chance to soar.

For my part, I have remained confused, fixating on the monster out of the corner of my eye -- heart pounding, palms sweating with imagined vertigo -- avoiding her questioning.

Finally I confront her. "It's dangerous."

"But why?"

I am about to say, "They can fall down", before stopping in shock. In a moment I can see that I've turned into dad. And I know that if she does end up on the therapy couch, it won't be because we taught her joy and music, and kept her up late dancing with pleasure. It will be because I instilled fear where there was none and there was no need for any.

It's the eternal battle of the good parent. How fearful do we make our children? There is a need to be fearful of roads -- to look both ways -- or of patting stray pitbull terriers. A certain amount of fear is healthy. But how many Ferris wheels really do fall from the sky? I've already had to play the exhausting fear game about water, to make her so frightened of it that she won't accidentally wander off to play by a pool. But now I have to deal with a child who is terrified of the beach and swimming.

We are all a seething mass of fears drummed into us by our parents. We spend the next decades of our lives trying to outgrow paranoid, phobias and mantras that were drilled into our heads: "Be careful", "Don't trust people", "Don't touch yourself", "Careful of the edge!"

Our parents' fears limit us, take away our sensuousness and exuberance. They were put there to protect us from things our parents feared, which were put there by their parents.

But how many are relevant to our lives?

I've walked over hot coals, spoken in front of 750 people at a time, endured childbirth, trekked through Asia alone, but put me two steps up a ladder and I whimper in terror.

All because Little Johnny Somebody plummeted to his death 60 years ago.

"Please, mama," comes the final challenge, as my daughter throws down the gauntlet.

"I'm frightened," I admit, looking deep into her eyes.

"I'll look after you," she says so bravely that my heart melts. I grab her little hand and we stomp towards the Ferris wheel. "C'mon, then. Up we go. We'll be fine," I say, fighting back the tears.

I clutch at the metal bar as the carriage goes higher and higher. Ferris wheels are a nightmare in slow, steady torture.

The wind is howling around our ears. As we stop up high to let on more children, I hear the sickly groan of nuts and bolts trying to cope with the load. I look towards heaven and pray to my late dad.

The festival sprawls out below. I can hear the exquisite music, the multicultural mix of exotic sounds. And I can see all the dancing, whirling adults looking to rediscover their sense of childish abandon and joy.

Then I notice my little girl's face. It, too, is filled with joy and exhilaration. She has no natural fear of heights. And she won't learn it from me, I whisper to

myself, smiling in her direction.

Smiling, for her sake, even as I turn a nasty green. Even as the bile fills my mouth, even as my heart pounds so hard I can hardly gasp in air. Tears of terror are being ripped from my eyes by the wind as we descend.

A warm, little hand clasps mine. "It's wonderful, mummy!"

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth. "Beautiful," I say, turning my tortured face away, to allow her the wonderment that childhood can really be.

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