

Living large on the little things

By Ruth Ostrow

THE old song keeps going through my head, much as I try to stop it. "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got till it's gone ..." Joni Mitchell sings as I climb out of the shower, shivering with cold, a mop of shampoo still on top of my head.

Busily giving myself the old rub'n' scrub moments ago, I noticed that the water pressure had dropped dramatically. I turned the taps to full blast and continued sudsing away at my hair, but the pressure got weaker and weaker.

Then it became a trickle, too weak to even wash away the shampoo, while I stood glaring up at the hose in startled disbelief. Finally, large and heavy blobs of water came smashing down, making the shampoo run rivulets down my face.

So out of the shower I now jump and head towards the basin. I turn on the tap. A short, sharp, spurt of brown water gushes out. Then it, too, stops dead, silent. I run to the kitchen, slopping water down the corridor, and lunge at the tap. Same thing. Splutter, splutter, blob, nothing.

If a camera were to be on me at this moment, it would capture it. The look of total shock, childlike bewilderment. Innocent disbelief. Who ever said children ever grow up? I feel like a child who suddenly realises that mummy's milk has run dry. The five-year-old who battles to make sense of the word no.

Incredulous, I walk around trying to fathom the meaning of this apocalyptic disaster.

I'm not very good with the little things in life. Give me a planet to save, an impossible deadline, a friend who needs rescuing from kidnappers, and I jump in boots and all. But disobedient inanimate objects -- a broken telephone, a computer or car that plays up, a tap that won't deliver -- and I break into panic.

Finally, I get myself together enough to throw on a bathrobe, wrap a towel around my soapy, leaky head and get on the phone to my neighbour. "There is no water coming out of my taps. What does it mean?" I hiccup in hushed tones. "Means your water tank could be dry, love. It's a drought. No rain for weeks. Haven't you been checking the levels?"

"No," I say sheepishly. Because you don't know what you've got till it's gone. I remember the first time I moved out of home. I flatted with an older woman who left the place to me while she went away for two weeks.

The day she returned, she knocked on my bedroom door, red in the face and screaming. There were letters bursting out of the letterbox, there were urgent bills that had fallen out and been drenched in the Melbourne rain. "How could you not have brought the mail in from the letterbox?" she yelled, outraged.

Fact is, I didn't even know we had one.

My mum had always brought the mail in. I guess I never thought about how it came to be in her possession, how it got from friends in Sydney or around the

place to my desk. It was a miracle of science that just happened, like shoes always staying polished and doctors' bills always being paid. Like the constant supply of milk that kept popping into the fridge. Magically.

This is the tragic process they call growing up. It is realising on a daily basis all the things your parents did for you that you took for granted.

Once you leave home, life is one nasty shock after the other. Until one day you meet and marry someone who'll share the load. Which is the main advantage of tying the knot. A sugar daddy to pay the bills, a large-breasted mother substitute to buy the milk, arrange the social life, and tuck you into bed at night.

Over time you forget you ever learned that milk doesn't grow inside refrigerators, while your partner rants and raves at you about how you take the things they do for granted, and you rave back that they take you for granted, and everyone gets all pooped and resentful because they've taken on "too much responsibility in this relationship".

And you can hear the voices of your mum and dad bellowing through your partner's mouth as you head towards the divorce courts: "You wait till you move out of home. Just wait till you have to clean up your own mess, pay your own bills ... then you'll appreciate what I've done for you."

Sorry, I digress. But moving to the country is just like moving out of home. You abandon the comfort and security of hot and cold running everything all the time. Go far enough out of town and you leave behind the authority figures who service the roads, collect the garbage, supply water and often electricity.

Without society's parent substitutes, you have to take responsibility for yourself. Suddenly self-sufficient, you get a horrid shock. If God doesn't fill up the water tank, then you die of thirst. Or at least get left with shampoo in your hair. And God does have a wicked sense of humour.

Climbing on top of the water tank in the broiling heat, I follow my neighbour's advice and gaze into the empty void. A chill shoots through my body. The bottomless pit, hollow as a fridge without milk, drops down before me. Joni starts again in my head.

"Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got till it's gone ..." I ring the water man, God's representative on earth, who will sell you water for a hefty fee. It's a two-week wait. Country people, sensing the drought, booked their water weeks before us city folk worked out where water really came from.

I read once that actor Kim Basinger only washed her hair in the very best, bottled, spring water. Putting on a large hat, I drive into town to buy up whatever's left of the bottled variety.

But not just to get the suds out of my hair. I'll have to use the expensive stuff on the family towels, dirty underpants and for flushing the toilets. It'll send us broke.

Like the teenager just out of home or the new divorcee, I'm about to learn one of life's great lessons. The real cost of taking for granted the things you have.

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