

THE SPARE ROOM

This wonderful monologue is about a man becoming a father, about the process of entering the "fatherhood constellation" with its gains and losses, its joy and sadness. This man is at the opposite end of the rapist...

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Editor of the Signal

By
Joanna Murray-Smith¹

This monologue was first performed by Neil Pigot in Melba Hall, the University of Melbourne on Friday, January 16, 2004, as part of the program of the 9th World Congress of the World Association for Infant Mental Health. Joanna Murray-Smith is a Melbourne based playwright, screenwriter and novelist. Her plays, which include Honour, Rapture, Bombshells, Nightfall, Redemption, Love Child and Flame, have been produced around the world. Honour has been produced in over two dozen countries, including productions on Broadway and at the National Theatre in London. Her latest play, The Female of the Species, opens on the West End in July. Joanna is the author of three novels, Truce and Judgement Rock and Sunnyside, published by Penguin.

1 Not to be performed without permission from the author.

Stephen. Forty. Well dressed. Confident. Very intelligent.

‘Let me just say this as a preface. There are a lot of things I like about my life, and the thing that gives me the most satisfaction, in an incidental way, is the spare room. A good man deserves a spare room. A mark of success is having a place where useless and obsolescent objects can be stored. The kinds of things you only think about when you’re staring at them, you never miss. They are the transitory relics of a human being’s inability to focus or commit. And that’s fine. I’m man enough to know it. The spare room eliminates guilt and depression caused by awareness of money wasting and intellectual dilettantism. You chuck everything in the spare room and you close the door. It doesn’t seem like much, but believe me, it is. It’s everything.

[BEAT]

My wife is Fran. She has big eyes and long legs and she drives with one foot on the accelerator and the other foot on the brake. At the same time. She’s proud of this. Until recent events overtook it, this one act of marital treason was the thing that brought me closest to the edge of insanity. Apart from this, the big difference between us is that she thinks things only

exist if they’re spoken. Whereas I’m suspicious of things that are spoken and trust the existence of something much more if it’s silent. She bangs on about everything. We’re watching the news and she starts on about the starving masses and that’s fine. But I care about the starving masses without trivialising them with words that can never be adequate to the horror. Somehow, she thinks I am only my spoken self. I can’t persuade her, or maybe I don’t want to, that the better part of me doesn’t have a voice.

And that’s how it was from the start. I’m not kidding, she’d wake me up at 3am screaming: BERTIE or STEPHANIE or AURORA or SEBASTIAN. At one point she was considering Mandela. Mandela McPherson. Almost certainly the only one at kindergarten. At that point I think I did ask why stop there? Why not...Butrous Butrous McPherson... Some nights she’d take my hand and lay it on her belly and say: *Just think, we made it, it’s in there, real. Isn’t nature incredible, isn’t a woman’s body a brilliant mysterious thing, doesn’t love deepen with the act of creation, you know the stuff. All well good. All true. Just... what? Overstated. I had the distinct impression that there was only one appropriate response to fatherhood, and that was Misty Eyed. What she*

wanted was a misty eyed handy man. The sort of fellow who would cry tears of joy at the spiritual dimension of procreation whilst niftily assembling an Ikea change table, cot and nursery wall unit.

Okay, look, I’ve got tertiary qualifications. I’ve read every Thomas Hardy and all the Russians, I can even make pasta, I’m not an idiot. But I’m not a handyman. I have a visual/spatial problem which rules out all diagrams and if they’d only call it something, name it, Spatially Challenged Affliction or whatever, people would start feeling tender towards me instead of holding me in contempt.

I’m an intelligent, cultivated person, but Misty Eyed wasn’t my response to the news. I’m standing on the dock and my life is on the ocean liner and we’re connected by one, blue crepe streamer and it’s stretching, stretching and then comes the realisation that I’m never, ever, ever going to leave the dock. There is no leaving. There is no future point of embarkation on HMAS The Good Life. I’ve jettisoned my ticket for one very brief moment of ordinary hanky panky and there... Gosh... there on the upper deck is every single man I’ve ever known and disliked. Yes... Bradley Kershaw from the rowing team and Two Boots Maltravers from

first year law... whose head was so far up the Dean's arse, you could only see the soles of his boots... and every surly waiter I've ever endured, the various bureaucratic arseholes, customs officials, aggressive roof plumbers, the guy at the Thai takeaway who always leaves one dish out of the order necessitating a return to the shop, my cousin Ted the walking Cornflake and Harry who made a pass at Fran in our living room while I was in the study writing him a fucking reference... all of them... off they go... ready for the banquet of life, the strange and interesting sexual positions, the whimsical trips to the Seychelles or Tibet, the self-indulgent spending on, you know, phones that transform into irrigation systems, whatever... there they go, so blase... so expectant that of course life is just a pleasurable cruise. And here I am on the dock. Holding a Target bag full of nipple shields.

Okay, I'm selfish. I never asked to have a baby. It just came. I used to see Fran's body as this soft, firm, luxurious, sweet-smelling... thing. This gorgeous, inviting, impractical refuge and I'd sink into her and smell her neck and taste her skin and feel hungry for her and the appetite was completely connected to the sense that she was not necessary, not something that worked for you, that had some kind of technological imperative, some orderly managerial role in your life, but something extra and highly impractical. And then... who would believe it... that luxurious human day-spa that was Fran's body, that invitation to indulge, turned out to be hiding an extraordinary Meccano set of functioning parts. And there it was. A few tiny pieces of not immediately tantalising machinery in Fran's body came together with perfect synchronicity and a human life started. Kaboom. There it is. And you can bang on as much as you like about pro-choice and God knows I'm all for it, but nobody's telling me human life doesn't start in an instantaneous breeze, a breath of air that eddies and flows and dips over you right about the time... you feel like a cigarette.

In moments, there's a heart-beat. And forty weeks later, your ship, the ship

you've always believed had a very very nice cabin waiting for you, sets sail. And you're on the dock with a streamer blowing kisses to Two Boots Maltravers.

At the hospital... We'd taken in a full kit of stuff all the books had.. aromatherapy oils and photos of sunset in the Himalayas and a couple of camellias from the garden, because apparently women like this stuff when they're experiencing interminable diabolical pain. It's amazing how a few drops of lavender essence can make all the difference. And then... what?

Fourteen hours later, there she was. Pale blue and wrinkled like one of those weird puppies. I saw her and nothing happened. I mean, nothing is an overstatement. I felt confused. I felt... as if I had a small anonymous role in a major event. Like the guy who, say, who suggested a convertible for JFK's ride through Dallas... or the NASA scientist who designed moon-boots.

It couldn't have happened without me, but who was to know. Really. There was Fran and My God, she was beautiful. She always looked good exerted. Hiking at Kosciusko, when I proposed. Rushing down the city street towards me waiting outside the cinema, flushed, hair loose. I like her raw. And here she was, smooth, hot skin, unbelievably fantastic breasts and a smile that said: Hello, I've just been to Pluto and it was a blast and now I'm home and I've brought something back with me and she's ours, and she's moving in to the spare room, so you'll have to move the golf clubs and she's never, ever, ever, moving out.

And then.. how was it? We started visiting and being visited. You know, showing her off. And friends said those things, the right things and aren't you thrilled? Aren't you thrilled? Isn't she incredible? Isn't it the most incredible? And I'm thinking most of the time... how disappointed everyone would be to know that mostly I'm tired. I'm tired in a way I've never been tired before, so deep in my bones and what I want

to do is crawl into bed, alone, and just stay there, nurse myself, be left there, with nothing calling for me, no Fran, no baby and then I'd think: *I'm the father!* I'm the strong one! She's breastfeeding, left at home with the baby all day, in shock, never sees the real world, depressed about her body, cracked nipples and I'm the one whose complaining. Me. Who still gets to go out for a café latte at eleven and talk to adults about political events or popular culture while she's at home nursing a human hand grenade in a bomb site. What a fucking selfish prick. No wonder women went berserk in the seventies with men like me walking around. No wonder they said all men were rapists! I'm a disgusting insensitive spoilt middle-class Yuppie male who is completely out of touch with what is important and real and true. I'm the reason Andrea Dworkin existed.

And I wanted to fall, to tumble, to tip headlong into love. Believe me, I wanted to. But I couldn't trip. I didn't fall. I felt... like a witness to somebody else's story. Like I was in a movie. And Fran and the baby were up there, in some beautifully rendered story of love and pain and transition, and I was in my seat, eating popcorn, simultaneously wanting to be in the story and relieved that I wasn't.

And then... when was it? Maybe around four months... I couldn't sleep. There was an electrical storm and the lightning kept flashing into our bedroom and the rain was pouring down and I got up. It was that Spring when there was wild flooding and some months before, there was a story in the newspaper about new parents who had woken up and went to check the baby and floodwaters were lapping the edge of the cot. A half hour longer and the baby would have drowned. This was in my head and I went to check the kid.

There were no flood waters. But she was awake. I looked into the cot and there she was, her huge eyes looking up at me. She didn't cry. She seemed perfectly happy just lying there, enjoying the lightning flashes. And our eyes locked. I had thought, foolishly, during those 40 weeks, that

the baby was... somehow just another bit of me. That suddenly, there was just this extra accessory made available, an extension of an already familiar apparatus that was myself. But when I looked at her, lying there half in shadow, this bundle of life, I had this sudden sense of... what? Her intactness and differentness. That, really, regardless of the process of getting here... she was weirdly unto herself and quite possibly would not love licorice and rugby. She had her own little momentum, an energy that was... distinct. Something... shifted. I can't say that I fell, nothing so perfect as that. But I had a sudden sense of... the impossibility of keeping her... safe. And the moment the idea of it hit me, I realised how huge it was and how much of me had been filled up with the thought.. That life stretched ahead, not so much a calendar of lost opportunities for me, but of hazards and obstacles to her well-being. Forks in toasters, Madeleine McCann intruders, cars in driveways, peanut allergies, sadistic teachers, pederastic priests, unexplained lumps, unsafe balconies, plane crashes, suicide bombers.... I mean the Twin Towers were full of somebodies' babies... babies grown into stockbrokers or janitors... and what could I do?

What could a thirty eight year old graphic designer from Templestowe do to stand in the way of her vulnerability? This little one looking up at me, as if to say: Well, well, *you're the caretaker, caretake.*

And I thought well, it's just not possible. It's just not feasible. A year or two, perhaps, if I'm vigilant, I'll keep her safe. I'll watch the driveways, never leave her in a locked car, feed her organic everything and even try.. try to take an interest in the world at large, the rainforests and the ozone layer and women's health issues.. try to make it better for her. But to be honest... a few years would be it. And even then, even then, a glance in the wrong direction, a sudden distraction, a quirk of fate, engine trouble in the plane, a suicidal train driver, a gas leak... meteors... the chances of her actually making it were... slim. Slim.

Baby. My baby.

Okay, Fran and I had shared most things. I had told her about my one homosexual experience as a nineteen year old. She had told me about the anorexia. I confessed my fetish about women applying lipstick. Once we talked about hiring a... a woman... so that she could watch me making love to someone else which was a fantasy of her's. I mean, there really wasn't much we couldn't say. But now.. now... the baby had walled us in... Not together, but into two separate spaces. There wasn't a way to share it. And now, it seemed as if I was inside my own, ghastly bubble. There was nothing I could say to her... that would not ruin us. She was keeping her end up.

She was battling... for all I knew, other demons, not letting on, somehow getting through the vast, impenetrable strangeness. And if I said these things (beginning to break:)... that the... mmm... the.... love was.... not absent but... (breaking:) strangely not absent, but... too intense... too present... too huge... then, then... my sense was, that all three of us would collapse, would fold into the chasm and never get out. Sometimes the pretence at normalcy is actually what delivers it.

And for three days I wept. I left the house, as if I was going to work, but didn't go and wept in the car. The day went like this: happy, kisses, leaving, in the car, driving down the Peninsula, weeping, eating a chicken sandwich, weeping, walking on the pier, weeping, drinking a milkshake, weeping, driving home, happy, kisses. And this was what I thought. That no matter if we got through this, no matter if I did... fall... did collapse into the baby... did begin to feel like a... father... Even if I did and the weeping stopped and I didn't feel strange any more and my life felt like my own and suddenly the change-tables and baby clothes and play-gyms all began to resemble my life and everything went back to normal and we got takeaway and had dinner with friends and saw movies and changed jobs and planted gardenias, even if all that happened, it would

still never be like it was.

It will never be Fran and me.

It will never be simple.

Love arrived in a new form and it was terrible in its size and it would never, ever go.

And you could leave your wife, you could change girl-friends, you could fly away from complicated relationships, but you couldn't do anything about this kind of love, because nothing... neutralised it.

And the sadness... the sadness was... The simple recognition that loving is an act of suffering...And the knowledge was eating me up from the inside, spreading throughout me, stretching into my corners, agitating at me, knocking at my heart, whining, wheedling, insisting its way into me and I was fighting and I was fighting but I couldn't win. I couldn't turn away and I couldn't win. Just like the spare room, she'd moved into me and she was never moving out.'

End

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