

Beyond the years the locusts have eaten

THAT SICKENING MONDAY AFTERNOON in early March 2007, I drove to the primary school gates where I would collect my children after their father's access weekend. They were not there. I drove around the block to the other entrance. Not there. I drove to the front gates again. No one. I waited. Still no one. I ran to the office.

'Have my children been in class today?'

Suddenly, my son Jay's teacher appeared. No, Jay had not been in class.

The bursar checked the rolls, No, my daughters, Bea and Em, had not been in class either.

I phoned my solicitor. She told me to go to the local police immediately. I drove to Hendra Police Station, and jabbered out a statement. I did not realise at the time that it would be the first of many. I did not know then that I would not see my children for months, nor know where they were, nor if they were alive.

Early the next morning, I saw my solicitor and then appeared at a 10am emergency hearing with the judicial registrar. As we went into court, I foolishly thought – insofar as I could think through a process I did not know – that we would tell the relevant legal person what had happened and she or he would order immediate action.

This did not happen. I was aghast as my solicitor had to prove that the children were missing and/or abducted, that I was not the one at fault, that there had not been some silly misunderstanding on my part and that the children should still be with their father.

I was staggered at this, given that the case had been heard in the Brisbane Family Court and the officials were familiar with Morton's personality and antics.

Again our lives were laid out on the dissection slab as I lay there while they cut me open to pull out intestines, relevant and irrelevant. Yet again, I looked down on myself, feeling as if I was observing an operation gone nightmarishly wrong. I sat in the courtroom, my guts being clawed out by some impassive grizzly bear. The voices seemed a great distance away, yet the solicitors were beside me. For a moment, I wondered if this was how people felt when taking drugs.

My solicitor spoke for me. How bizarre to hear the previous day's events related while having no way to describe the horror, disbelief, terror that my children were gone.

The courtroom took on the distorted perspective of Alice in Wonderland after she obeyed the Drink Me instructions. In some moments, I was peering at the court through a tunnel. At others, I was floating near the ceiling, observing an unbelievable soap opera. At that moment, I would have preferred to be in *Days of Our (Very Bad) Lives* – at least I could send the script back to the writers' room for a total re-write.

Hours later, we emerged with retrieval orders *ex parte* (made in the absence of the other party). Then, to the Federal Police with photos and descriptions, and to rack my brain to think where he could have taken them.

Leaving police headquarters, I headed for the freeway south to the Pacific Highway. In some desperate way, I thought he may be in a caravan park near a beach. One part of my brain said, 'this is crazy' while another said, 'at least you're doing something'. Several hours and futile detours to van-parks later, I realised this was madness. How could I possibly find four people in Australia? The utter hopelessness of it seeped into me as I turned around to drive back to Brisbane. I phoned every person I knew who had any contact with Morton. They all denied knowing where he was, but then as Christine Keeler said, they would say that, wouldn't they?

AS THE WEEKS aged into months, I began to realise that the Federal Police, with the best will in the world, had no hope of finding my children. So, in May, my solicitor and I went back to court to ask that the publication ban be lifted. Another hearing, another Drink Me out-of-body morning. Fortunately, this time, the hearing was shorter. The judge was familiar with the case, and the publication ban was lifted, effective immediately.

From the court, I went to the Federal Police. Photos, descriptions of what the children had looked like and worn months ago. Media statements prepared, sent. And then I waited.

The storm broke at 7 the next morning. The doorbell rang. A TV reporter stood there, explaining he had found me in the electoral roll, asking if he could interview me.

This was the first of innumerable TV, radio and newspaper interviews that lasted all day. I could not keep up with the voicemail and text messages. As fast as I cleared one, two more replaced it.

EARLY the next morning, the Federal Police phoned me, saying I should expect news later that morning. I asked if I should stay in Brisbane or catch a plane to somewhere, anywhere. They were careful in their response while agreeing that flying to Sydney would be in the right direction.

By the time I landed in Sydney, I had received a voicemail telling me to phone the Federal Police. Yes, they had found the children. They were safe in Launceston.

A friend joined me in Sydney, and we flew to Launceston. As we stepped out of the plane at dusk, camera flashes popped. I asked my friend, 'Who's the celebrity?

'I think you are.'

I had no idea the media were descending on Launceston Airport. All I could think of was getting to my children as microphones bristled in my face.

‘Do you want him to go to jail?’ ‘How do you feel?’ ‘Are you angry?’

The only thing I felt was dazed – at the lights – and annoyed at the delay, but the reporters were merely doing their job. Besides, it was the media’s coverage which had flushed Morton out.

Then, a crazy dash to the airport door and waiting car. A cops-and-robbers chase to the police station, with media cars streaming out behind us. Doors slamming, police keeping media outside, paperwork to sign before I could go upstairs. Suddenly they were there. My children. After the lost months. Taller, older. Familiar strangers. We all hugged, but it was an awkward embrace. As if we had forgotten how, as if the pieces had changed slightly and did not fit together anymore.

I did not know what to say. It was not like collecting them after a day at school I remembered my own mother’s response in any awkward situation. ‘Would anyone like a cup of tea?’

The children smiled weakly at the Granny joke, and said no.

‘Okay. Does anyone need to go to the toilet?’ Another of my mother’s icebreakers.

‘No thanks, Mum.’

‘Right then. Off we go. Ice cream, then bed.’ Yet another sensible English mother’s approach to life’s bad moments.

VICTOR FRANKL wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) that ‘humour was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. Humour ... can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above a situation, even if only for a few seconds’.

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), Harry wins the Triwizard tournament and 1000 gold galleons – at the cost of Cedric Diggory’s life. Harry, not wanting his blood money, gives it to Fred and George Weasley, telling them it is for their joke shop. They refuse but he is adamant.

‘I don’t want it and I don’t need it. But I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I’ve got a feeling we’re going to need them more than usual before long.’

DESPITE all that has happened, good has come out of the years that the locusts have eaten. More than 15 years later, my now young-adult children have finished studies and are working. Their scars from more than seven years in the Family Court are all different, all similar. Very rarely, they speak of the father who betrayed them and they struggle to make sense of his quest for revenge through the court, a quest that impoverished us all and left us homeless for a while. The three of them are slowly emerging from the ashes, but unlike the phoenix, their wings are yet to heal from the fire that would not go out. Perhaps they never will mend. Or perhaps, they will fly with difficulty or in a different path to those with undamaged wings. As for me, miraculously I met a good man, an engineer-turned-farmer. We married and now farm a property in regional New South Wales. My children visit and stay with us, delighting in newborn calves tottering in a paddock, wood ducks skittering on the dam, magpies dawn-carolling to herald a glorious day. ###