

# Family matters



Back in the day, it never occurred to Hobart author **Helen Hayward** that family would become her life

Picture: GETTY IMAGES

When Paul first floated the idea of a long work trip, I worried that five weeks were too many. Wouldn't our relationship fade or quietly unravel? Wouldn't he want to keep sailing the seven seas, building up his reputation and eating out as a matter of course? Wouldn't our marriage be reduced to email exchanges about utility bills and our son's refusal to do homework? However, our marriage had endured so far and I had no reason to think this occasion would be any different. Nor did I have time to fret. I was busy editing a magazine and looking after our children, who had become demanding as teenagers. Besides, I had no desire to hold Paul back from what looked like his next big step.

But then a week before Paul's departure, I burst into tears on our bed one Sunday afternoon. He, I spluttered, would be attending a spring conference in a Swedish forest. I would be encouraging our dog not to growl at strangers, raking autumn leaves and cooking hearty meals. He would be walking to work along the canals of Amsterdam while I would be attending parent-teacher interviews and ferrying our daughter about. How, I cried through salty tears, could I not envy him? What, I sniffed, if he never came back?

"Don't be ridiculous," said Paul, leaning against the bedroom door, torn between hearing me out and reading an urgent email on his phone. "But you do know," he said quietly, "that I'd love you to come too." I rolled towards the window. From where he stood we had made a choice. We were living the life that we wanted to live, with two wonderful children in a house we adored. A life that sadly didn't extend to shared work trips. However I might feel

at that moment – face to the pillow wet with tears – our life was coming together.

Minutes passed, not much more was said and Paul left the room. Knowing that as soon as I got off the bed housekeeping would claim me, I kept lying there, watching naked branches dance across the window. The house was oddly quiet for a Sunday. The wind picked up. A branch tapped on the window, asking to be let in. My thoughts strayed. Why had I always been beguiled by the idea that life is elsewhere? Was this why I felt caught unawares, unprepared for the strongly rooted present I found myself in, and that Paul seemed so adept at defying? All that time spent as a young woman refusing to embrace a feminine future, in denial that a man's and a woman's future might be in any way different. Year upon year of not conceiving of a home-based role as creative, substantial, chosen. As anything more than second best. Back then it had never occurred to me that family could ever become my life, and that I might fall into fairly traditional roles with a husband who eschewed housekeeping and travelled for work.

In my first book, the proofs of which I fell asleep over while pregnant with Alex, I wrote about Tolstoy's *Family Happiness*. The story opens with the heroine Masha, a girl, and it ends with her married with a son in the wake of a failed love affair. Masha is drawn to the bright lights of the city, tantalised by the idea that life is elsewhere. The older Sergei is drawn to the beauty of the country, the challenges of farm life and the emotional ties of home.

After a few years of marriage, Masha and Sergei's love remains strong. Yet they both know that they are more taken up by their life together than by each other. There is less passion between them than when they enjoyed languid afternoons courting in the orchard. Masha longs for this intensity to return. But it doesn't. Even more she can't bear that Sergei doesn't mind its passing. Accepting that their feelings have changed, yet deepened, he urges her to accept it.

The family goes out for a walk, leaving Masha alone in her childhood home. Dusk falls and she is assailed by old memories. Life minus her girlhood hopes seems hardly worth living. How can she go on loving a husband who no longer wants to be the centre of her existence? How can she be proud of their life in the country now that she has slipped and fallen?

Dark clouds gather. Halfway through a sonata her fingers fall from the keys. Again she imagines her future as a blank, as a nothing. Then she takes up the sonata, stops wishing for an audience and plays it right through. During the final bars Sergei appears at the door. Clouds break, lightning flashes and they enter into a painful conversation on the veranda. Masha berates Sergei for letting her follow her whims, for allowing her to betray him. He admits that he let her be tempted by another man out of his own hurt. Big drops of rain fall, there seems nothing more to say and they fall silent.

One by one the family comes in for tea, wet from the rain. Masha's baby is brought in by a servant and put in her arms. Looking into her son's eyes she sees his need for her and her love for him. She also recognises, thanks to her husband's sincerity, the woman that she's longing to be. With this she lets go of the past and – it's a novella – embraces their life in the country.

On first reading this story I was convinced that Tolstoy's ending was melancholy. Masha was putting a bright face on a tragic marriage. She was making the best of things. At that point in my life I had no inkling of the changes that family life might have in store for me. Instinctively I identified with Masha's girlhood longings over the maturity and golden compromises that long relationships often bring.

Now that many years have passed since my first reading, I read Tolstoy's novella in a new light. I still see Masha as vulnerable and brave. Yet I see her as brave in her honesty, rather than brave in her melancholy. I recognise that it takes courage to realise that her heart has changed, and that loving her family, and their life in the country, is the happy ending she seeks.

For all our wrangles, what has saved Paul and me as a couple with young children chimes with this story. Though I haven't had an affair, and Paul is younger not older than me, ultimately we have stayed together not because romantic love pulled us through when times were tough. Because it didn't. What pulled



Helen Hayward reflects on being a wife and mother in *A Slow Childhood*.

us through wasn't some amazing insight or self-knowledge. This may sound hopelessly unromantic, but really what pulled us through was our willingness to endure each other. Somehow we've found it in ourselves to love each other as the individuals we are striving to be, despite letting each other down in some areas. When conflicts arise, we're usually able to see the person we're struggling to be beneath whatever we're squabbling about. My hunch is that if we hadn't been able to make this distinction, we'd have given up long ago.

Over the years Paul and I have believed in each other, even when we've had doubts about ourselves. I've believed in Paul's intellectual powers even when he hasn't. And he has believed in my determination to keep family life buoyant, even though this has sometimes meant putting up with me throwing myself on the bed and wondering whether it's all worth it.

Family life has been a revelation. But it's also been a struggle. In my experience, it's infused at a deep level with two distinct feelings – love and panic. Firstly, and most importantly, a deep well of love that hopefully never runs dry. But also a subterranean panic never far from the surface. For Paul, this is expressed in his fear that family life will waste his promise, leaving him bleached and 60 on some windswept Australian beach. For me, it's expressed in my fear that family life and worldly success are profoundly exclusive.

Life is more difficult than I ever imagined when I was young. It's perhaps this realisation that separates my younger self from my mature self. Having a family has brought home that some problems, perhaps the biggest, don't have answers. Except, Paul and I agree on this, to live graciously without them.

As it turned out, family life didn't stop when Paul left for Europe. Alex and Emma missed him a lot. And yet hardly at all. From their emails to him, jolly replies bounced back. Our dog kept Emma busy, focused and buoyant. Yes, she missed playing with Paul. Alex missed Paul's input with homework, and other things too. But they both accepted that their life was full even without their father in the middle of it. When Alex came off his bike at the traffic lights, in pelting rain, the world didn't come to an end because I couldn't reach Paul.

And I've enjoyed having time off from my marriage. It's been revealing in a good way to experience life without Paul at the centre of it. Is this disloyal? I don't think so. Marriage and family life do such weird things to my personality that sometimes it's a relief to step back and just focus on being myself for a while. And I feel sure Paul feels similarly.

One of my biggest fears on becoming a mother was that having a child would involve a huge sacrifice. This fear was founded.

Having a family has meant giving things up. I have ducked and weaved. Yet what I've also discovered, what no one ever told me, is how liberating family life can be. What might look like a sacrifice on the outside has felt more like a surrender – and this is what has been liberating. Being around my children has opened up parts of myself that had been dormant since I was a girl. I had no idea, before Alex and Emma appeared, just how much I might enjoy being loved and needed. Loving two children who love me back – “to the moon and back” as Emma puts it – has been life-changing.

When I was a girl, my thoughts about love had a rosy glow. I had no inkling of how strategic my experience of love might one day be. Strategic in what way? Learning how to foster Paul's ambitions without extinguishing my own; how to let go of Alex, who has fallen in love with tall ships, without fretting about his wish to sail the world; how to tune in to Emma without over-identifying with the loss of her brother's company; how to make my family's rumped beds without feeling demeaned by doing so, knowing how much a loving and attractive home means to me; and, finally, how to embrace my dawning awareness that half the work of bringing up children involves letting them go. Already, Alex is off sailing the seven seas, and one day Emma will find her own way of following.

Caring for my family, loving them unreservedly and creating a way of life out of this love has changed me all the way down. My love for them and their need for me have often felt like the same thing. Being around them has felt very creative – far more than I'd been led to expect. To the point that when I'm true to this love, when I'm gracious amid the whirl of family life, I feel at one within. I still have misgivings about my so-called choices. I'll never be completely without regret. Even so, the experience of family life has anchored me in a way that has also set me free.

As a young woman, I just assumed that one day my conflicts would resolve, my girlish hopes would translate into reality, and my life would come together in a fluent, composed way. Without being totally naive this is how I imagined my life would unfold. Perhaps I read too much 19th-century fiction but I really did think this. These days my hopes are less lofty. Then again, these days I play the piano and draw and cook a lot more. Above all, these days family love is real to me. It sits beneath everything I do, like the prickle of horsehair that old sofas were once stuffed with.

*This is an extract from A Slow Childhood: Notes on Thoughtful Parenting by Helen Hayward, Editia, \$32.99, on sale now*

