

FAMILY AFFAIRS

(The secret to a happy marriage)

The bell rang as I placed the last folded napkin next to its plate, completing the table setting whilst my wife answered the door to our guests, unknowingly inviting an evening of disturbing memories to unfold.

Under the umbrella of a star dotted sky, not even a gentle breeze blew in the backdrop of the tropical garden, edged by a flowing river running the length of the manicured lawn.

Two long-time friends, we had not seen for a while, both divorced, came towards me through the sliding glass doors of the kitchen. She looked radiant as always, whilst he was casually dressed and smiling, both of them glad to unwind after a hard day's work.

Four candles glowed a gentle light over the dining table set for an evening meal beneath the large pergola erected to one side of the dominating two-story home, painted white, the back of which was little more than one large expanse of windows. Tall glass panels allowed the sunlight to flood the house during the day and the illuminated garden to be viewed from within at night. Our guests walked past the array of wicker lounges, littered with soft cushions, which lined the back patio, fronted by four dominating Roman columns.

I gave her a hug and shook his hand in a welcoming gesture, and then simultaneously we all stood for a minute, gazing at our surroundings and the effect of the spotlights as they shone from the base of several Palm trees. They highlighted the leaves, some green and some yellow, while smaller lights sprinkled a glittering shimmer in the darkness of the surrounding bushes.

I felt proud of my home as I watched them admiring my garden, listening to the cascading sounds from a small but dominating statue of a winged fairy breaking the silence as she poured water from a leaf cupped in her hands. Her face, lit by a single white light, made her the crowning jewel, as she perched on the edge of an oyster shaped pond. The sculpture formed a magical setting by the brightly lit crystal clear water of the swimming pool.

This is my tranquil domain, shared with the love and loyalty of a woman I have been married to for the past forty-three years.

"I just love this place and what you've done with it," she said.

"Nah," he bragged. "This is nothing compared to the home I'm going to have."

From within the house, soft background music was switched on to the outdoor speakers, filling the air with the operatic sounds of Andrea Bocelli, promising a start to what should have been a relaxing dinner party.

My wife, smile on her face and looking beautiful, joined us, and after seating was allocated and glasses topped with wine, we all gave a toast to our good health.

While they all shared small talk, I ran back and forth from the house, placing an array of platters laden with food on the table. Finally sitting next to my beloved wife, I instinctively, reached out to touch her hand in a show of affection, an act that was noticed by both guests.

“You two are so lucky,” commented our guest as I offered him a serving spoon to help himself. “Joking aside, you have a beautiful home, good food and a loving relationship. What more could you wish for?”

Both our guests were separately in search of love, but only related to each other as good friends, without the spark needed.

“To have a relationship like ours for as long as we’ve been married takes far more than just luck, my friend. One has to have an open mind, dedication and work hard at being more than just nice to each other. Like that river out there.” I indicated to the flowing water that reflected the moonlight on its every ripple. “Nobody ever sees the turbulent waters that rage beneath the surface.”

Our female guest, with wide eyes and a curious smile, leant forward, “I am intrigued. Tell us more. Personally, I tend to jump off when the water starts to rock the boat.”

“So, come on,” he said. “What is it that makes you never tire of each other? You spend practically all day, every day together. Something must keep that flame alight. How about sharing your secret on -”

“I don’t think so,” my wife interrupted, but the two guests caught the scent of a story that may add a spark to the evening.

“You just had family over to stay with you for a while didn’t you?” she asked.

He let out a sarcastic laugh. “Bet that went down well. You never really got on with her family and I heard you had several of them stay with you. How did that go?”

“I don’t think we need to get into that.”

My wife smiled whilst encouraging them to help themselves to more food and hopefully change the subject.

“No you don’t. You don’t get off that lightly,” he said and they both just stared at us to tell the story. “From the beginning.” He gestured, waving his knife in the air before his face. “You’re the perfect couple. That doesn’t just happen. So come on. How have you managed to hold it together and come out the other end, especially with relatives camping on your -”

“Really,” she butted in, filling her glass with a little more wine. “What were the worst times and how hard was it to get to where you are now? God knows I’ve tried so often to hold on to somebody. Not worked out for me so far.”

“That’s far too long a story and it has too many wounds that are best forgotten. Let’s just eat and enjoy the evening,” insisted my wife.

“Come on my friend,” he said, ignoring her. “You’re a story teller and this is a story I want to hear. No intimate details please, just the diary of your escapades. The hurdles and hoops you had to both go through in order to make your marriage work.” He glanced at our other guest before adding. “God willing, I may find somebody new to share my life with. Dare say I could do with all the help I can get.”

“Knowing we love each other is what makes it work.” I looked at my wife. “I mean, if two people know that they love each other, regardless of problems, there should never be a time to call it a day. We just had to work it out.”

“We had to work it out?” our female guest questioned. “Now that sounds like something rocked the boat.”

“What does it take to hold it together for so many years?” he asked. “You already know we both cocked our marriages up, maybe we can learn something.”

There was a silent pause as both my wife and I tried to ignore the comment.

“Sorry,” he added. “I didn’t mean to pry into your relationship. But I’ve known you both for some time and I have to tell you that I sometimes think being married to this man,” he told my wife whilst pointing at me, “Well what can I say?” His eyes darted in my direction. “Let’s face it mate, the little lady needs a medal.”

“I love you too my friend,” I responded with a grin.

“The truth is, you’re not the most tactful of people and when it comes to her family, for some reason all hell breaks loose. No disrespect but when I hear you talking about others the way you sometimes do, I have to wonder what you might say about me behind my back.”

“And you’re accusing me of having no tact?”

They all let out a giggle making me feel picked on, as they seemed to find it amusing at the thought that I would deny the allegation, trying to defend myself.

“Now you know how much we love you, darling,” said our guest as she reached across the table to serve herself. “You are who you are, and right now I strongly get the distinct feeling that you are diverting us away from the news of your relatives’ visit. Something really bad must have happened.”

Talking about our past was never a preferred subject for my wife. She especially felt it was inappropriate at the dinner table to relate any personal story in preference to sharing a generally casual conversation.

She was right, of course, but our guests seemed determined.

“In everybody’s life,” I began. “There are ups and downs. There are hurdles we all have to overcome, making each one of us think we are unique. In reality, most of us go through the same traumas, family upsets, in-laws and so on. I suppose the important thing is, how much can we learn on the way. Yes. I did have in-laws stay with us and it tested our love. But I suppose for a marriage to last as long as ours it’s not always plain sailing.”

“That sounds like the visitors left a bit of an impression,” he gestured.

“Just a bit. I’ve got to tell you that it was shortly after our first visiting brother left us that I decided to write him a letter. Writing that letter really made me appreciate my personal attitude towards any relationship, not just my marriage.”

My audience sat in silence, willing me to continue.

I excused myself from the table, got up and walked into the house, returning with several sheets of paper contained in a folder. “This is my letter. But before I read the events, as I wrote them to my brother-in-law, I would like to fill you in on some information.”

I glanced at my wife who gave me a discontented look. One that indicated that she may not stay seated at the table for the duration of my tale. I placed down the file and picked up my glass, took a slow mouthful and relented.

“Maybe I should give this up and we can talk about something else.” My wife smiled but my guests showed an overwhelming disappointment.

“Come on. Let him tell the story.” He insisted.

My wife shook her head a little and shrugged her shoulders, saying nothing. I continued eating, fearing the letter was not something I should ever have held on to, let alone offered to read out.

Forcefully, I asked how they were, and what they had been up to, in order to veer away from the subject that my wife was clearly finding distasteful. But it made little difference. They just would not back away from the possibility that I was holding on to what could be a scandalous story.

I walked to the side of the pergola and turned on a brighter light before returning to my seat.

“You’re going to read this. Right?” he said, wide-eyed and expecting.

Slowly I finally picked up the folder containing the letter.

“I learned a lot these past months,” I explained. “Emotionally, I sincerely feel that I am now a better man. Impossible as you two may think it is for me to change, I am doing the best I can to alter my personality. I guess the reason is due to the understanding of our recent experience.”

“You lost me a little here.” She said. “You, of all people are so confident all the time. What could have happened to make you say that?”

“I really never thought that I was in the wrong, not till I had recounted our situation through this letter did I start to understand the real pressure that I was inflicting, especially on my wife.”

He put his hand up in the air, stopping me from talking, as he directed his question to my wife. “Sorry, don’t mean to touch a nerve, but why didn’t you jump on him with both feet and put him straight if you thought he was out of line?”

My wife thought for a minute before informing them that she reacted in the only way that she felt she could. “I can only describe my mind at the time as having been hijacked; carried back to my younger dependent days of my brothers’ guidance. All the same I have to tell you that the letter, as written, is viewed only through his eyes, which may not interpret anybody else’s view.”

“In any event,” I said. “Writing this letter to my wife’s beloved divorcing brother, who first visited us, made me feel better if nothing else. I mean, at the time of the letter writing I thought I would say what I wanted to and that would be that. You know what it’s like. Something upsets you and you just have to let the person know about it.

However, the saga continued, and so I kept adding to the letter as the following visitors persisted in churning my life into a complete turmoil. Even after they had gone, the saga didn’t end. My dear divorcing brother-in-law, without realizing, unintentionally started something whilst visiting. It began a chapter in our life that drove an even deeper wedge between myself and certain members of his family, so I felt he needed to know. Although it wasn’t till I had written all I wished to write that I learnt how to view my life in a different light. But to be honest, it seems unlikely that he will ever read this letter, for the short note that I intended to write turned into a ‘small book.’”

My guests kept eating and intently listened, so I continued.

“I never thought it possible to allow myself to contemplate the thoughts that emerged from events following his visit. Like a frightened animal, my choice was to either do something stupid, or run away. The question being: which of the two was the stupid decision? One thing I did know was that I was willing to comply with anything, rather than lose my wife.”

“Lose your wife!” he exclaimed and they both looked directly at my wife for an answer. They got nothing as she totally ignored them and continued eating.

I took a large swallow from my glass, emptying its contents and refilling it once more for a later time.

My wife excused herself, rising from her seat whilst saying that she was going to the kitchen, an obvious indication of her annoyance at my offering to disclose the contents of a letter that should really have been destroyed.