

The Scope of Skype

She didn't come in the night, like they often do, with no regard for others or convenience. She came at a scheduled moment in the program for that day, by Caesarean section, and I was told of it, arriving, clumsy in my uniform and boots by comparison with the silently flitting white-clad nursing staff. My first sight of her was not flattering, face down and still in the foetal position, there under the subdued light. I thought she looked like an up-ended supermarket chicken. Her mother was awake, relieved and considerably slimmer, and we murmured the things that one does at such special moments, her hand strong and hard in mine as ever, not the limp grasp of an exhausted new mother. For years, we told this new addition to our twosome that she was born on the 8th because the doctor was playing golf on the 10th - a joke that still somehow confuses us all when her birthday comes around.

That was 3 decades and almost half a lifetime ago and not a day has passed in regret or doubt. The Snow Princess has filled every dark corner we may have had in our lives. A lover of words, I've never forgotten something I read somewhere "*The scariest part of being a parent is watching your heart walking about outside your body*".

Babyhood and childhood passed as though on greased rails, but not so quickly that incidents have blurred. Her excited urging for me to chase and catch an enormous mole snake we found in the park, a species not given to being man-handled. Her delight when we caught a baboon spider and she was able to take it to playschool in a screw-top glass jar. Indignation when a terrified teacher called us to remove it, because it's hairy black legs were exploring the air-holes in the lid, the other children all standing on desks in terror. Hurling alone down the biggest water-slide we could find. A brief excursion into tennis, with all the best clothing, shoes and racquet we could afford, to give it up after two lessons in favour of Judo, Olympic sport and passion of her mother and I for most of our lives. Medals here and there, some national, but I thought my heart would burst when a visiting team, far superior to our provincial standard, put their *enfant terrible* on the mat looking for a match. The Snow Princess muttered something like, "Get out of the way, I'll fight the bitch." And outmatched and at a weight disadvantage, she did. The result was inevitable but is not the point of the story.

School came and went as I could only wish mine had. Effortless, industrious, varied, even enthusiastic Her mother and I still smile at the image of her first day of high-school, striding in through the gates, her mother slinking in behind her under cover of the crowd of arrivals, protective maternal instincts at full alert. Her father sensed her independence and confined himself to finding parking.

It was no surprise that she proved to have a flair for languages, first with isiXhosa and then with French, Afrikaans being a necessary by the by. It was in Paddy Killick's garage, in some exchange of news about our daughters, that an old gentleman, paused in mid-story, and said, in mystified tones "Where did all the time go?". It registered with me then and still does.

It's made me that painful, but kindly, old grey-haired man that says quietly to young fathers with their own very young daughters in the super-market "Never forget this moment!" Often, I can see in their eyes that they understand and that we are a brotherhood, staunch protectors against growly things under the bed and for our lifetime.

University came and went, largely a mystery to me, and suddenly....it was over, done and dusted as they say. And the Snow Princess had signed up to teach English in China.

Pride and anticipation helped to mask the growing realisation that she would be too far away to share a joke, a hug or a goodnight kiss. At an early stage, the miracle of technology came to my rescue, and like Neanderthals crouched over the first fire, we maintain visual and verbal contact on a regular basis, exchange news, argue and reassure while furtively studying each other via Skype for visible signs to be concerned about. In time, China changed to South Korea, and from there, she's been to Japan, Bali and Viet Nam, all a short flight from her base, with photographic images exchanged with a finger- click.

The days of addressing envelopes and licking stamps, to say nothing of anxiety when a reply was delayed, are over. Befuddled as I am, most of the time, by science, today has been good to me.

Mike Job