



# Keep it in the family

Is there any way you can take the best of your parents and not the worst? Their amusing, smooth, intelligent side and perhaps just skip the rest? **Kate Hennessy** investigates

**S**OMETIMES, MEN TELL their mates stuff about how they feel. Usually, these rare tidbits end up in the ear of said mate's partner. Initially, she feigns mere casual interest until the story runs its natural course; should her partner suspect her genuine interest in how men feel, he may clam up, worried he'll betray the brotherhood. But once she's caught a whiff of a good story there's little to stop the interrogation. And, a short while later, the full story is laid bare upon the table.

Such was the scene when my partner told me about his best friend Paul. It turns out Paul had been terribly disquieted when he met his future mother-in-law. Why? It was like looking at his girlfriend 30 years down the track. "And your problem is?" I thought, disgusted by his superficiality.

After berating my husband for something his friend, not he, had said, I guiltily began to doubt it was really what it seemed. Paul was a nice, normal, in-love guy. I knew he wasn't hamstrung by unrealistic ideas about how women should or shouldn't look.

So why did this future specter of his loved one so perturb him? Could it be that Paul had realised he too was barreling towards his own fateful encounter with... himself as his dad?

We all become our parents. There, it's said. It's prickly and strange to touch, like an oversized jackfruit. It's not that we don't adore our parents. Mostly, hopefully, we do. It's just that we're afraid we'll miss out on their brilliant bits and wind up some grotesque medley of their worst.

Our physical inheritance is the least of our concerns: we're used to the idea. Commentary on family resemblance is a cheerful public pastime everyone is licensed to play.

Tiny doppelgangers are the easiest target with shop assistants, for example, liking nothing more than tailgating a pram until opportunity arises to peer in – "Oow, may I?" – and erroneously declaring the baby (a clone of her father) "exactly like her mother". The most sporting scenario is when babies display a combination of both parents, so that visiting family friends can drink tea and muse over which features are whose, languorously, one by one.

Sometimes, offspring only start to resemble their parents later in life. Not going to happen to you, you say? The best all you opportunistic sons and daughters can do is use your parents as a genetic crystal ball. Telltale thinning coupled with a bald dad? Shave it off!

No, the seriously creepy part starts when you begin acting like your parents. Here, you are outflanked by two powerful forces called nature and nurture. I, for example, yell at the TV. Short of physical attack, I really give it my all. Just like my mother. My husband makes peculiar remarks to waitresses, such as "I bet you're dying to bring me a pepper grinder". Just like his father. Can either of us remember when we crossed the line? Nope, it just kind of happened.

Not everyone is terrified of their inner parent. For some, it has huge and lucrative appeal. Take James Packer for example – bravely carrying the torch of his father's media empire.

Tracing your notorious parent's footsteps is a risky path, however, and it's not for everyone. If you go through a bad patch, can you bear the comparison? At least if you strike out alone, your failure will be original.

In a perfect world, we would choose the parts we wanted. Ear for music? Tick! Perfect legs? Tick! Aptitude for academia? Tick! After all, it's fair to feel cheated when we're not given our due. Gorgeous, talented celebrities are one thing, but to be robbed of qualities that are within reach of your inheritable grasp? Cruel. I recall girls at school bringing in photos of their stunning mothers and torturing their friends with mournful checklists of the features they had missed. Brilliantly gifted siblings merely compound the injustice.

But like it or hate it, it's DNA at work. The chain of life, the code of humankind. The more you writhe, the more you're entwined. Try to think of it romantically, like Shakespeare or Greek tragedy. Without the concept of fate, neither of these would exist.

Chances are, if you've already noticed the signs, your drawbridge is already down and you're already overwhelmed with the invading force. Abandon your defenses; we're talking about your parents here. You forfeited your right to free will on the very day you were born ■