

FIRST PERSON PIECE IN 'STELLA', DAILY TELEGRAPH SUPPLEMENT (Jan 2011)

When my husband first met Rohini, my daughter from a previous marriage, she was an obstreperous seven-year-old with special needs and a serious attitude problem.

Never the shy sort, Rohini stuck an empty Hello Kitty bowl out towards Ash and demanded, 'Gimme nuts'. This was usually my cue to instantly dish out some food, always worrying that hunger pangs would translate into bad behaviour. However, Ash, who had not at that point seen one of Rohini's fearsome temper tantrums, looked at her and said, 'You must be joking, honey, you had lunch less than an hour ago'. The bowl was flung across the floor followed soon after by my daughter's small chubby self, kicking and writhing as though wrestling with some invisible opponent. Dismayed, I watched her rolling around on the floor, hollering and gnashing her teeth, and reckoned that Ash was going to promptly scarper out of my life, sensibly taking his solvent single-man I-can-get-whomever-I-want status with him.

To his credit, he didn't. Despite all that kindly, well-meaning advice from his parents and friends. My own mother was horribly nervous too, though in quite another way, unable to see beyond the stereotypical image of bad step-parents perpetuated by a whole industry of fairy tales. Even I was at pains to warn Ash early on in our relationship that my situation was something like one of those Buy-One-Get-One-Free offers in the supermarket: a big bottle with a little one attached permanently to its side, insidiously cute. A relationship with me, I said, could not be merely a relationship with me but involved an entire package deal that came with the noisy presence of my daughter and lots of complicated fine print.

Amazingly (and, I later found, typically), Ash stuck around, proving everyone wrong and helping to bring Rohini up with the kind of common sense that sometimes only a step-parent can bring to the tricky business of parenting. He dealt with Rohini robustly but kindly – never overdoing either, thankfully – and she soon tuned into the fact that here was someone who, unlike mum, would brook zero nonsense and yet was rather nice to her. Being an outdoor athletic sort, Ash also introduced Rohini to the novel idea that treats did not always have to involve vast quantities of food, showing her instead the joys that were to be had in running around behind a football or taking a dog for a walk.

Before I knew it, Rohini was not just warming to Ash, blooming like a flower in the sun, but revealing a whole new side (and shape) to her that I never realised lurked below the surface. She became fitter and healthier and developed aspects to her personality never seen before. Charm had not been one of Rohini's best assets – my assumption hitherto being that it was an ability directly related to high IQ – but, suddenly, there they were: new-found winning ways, albeit turned on mostly for Ash's benefit when he was around. For his part, being adored in this unquestioning way, plumbed ever more tender depths and I watched, heart-in-mouth on occasion, when a bruised knee would be gently washed or angry tears wiped away. What were these blessed bonds that brought strangers together and then held them by a force that was gossamer fragile and yet so strong?

It wouldn't be true to say there were never any problems and, of course, there were times when we all needed complete breaks away from each other. Besides, there was the time Ash read Nick Hornby's 'About a Boy' and was struck by a line in it (spoken by the single man protagonist who sets out to meet single mothers whom he thinks offer easier date-bait). Ash read the line out to me, apparently relishing every word: 'When a man marries a woman with a child, he is dealt a marked card,' it went. Or something like that. Despite being a fan, I suddenly

hated Nick Hornby for that, and Ash, of course, for quoting the line to me. Not only did it reduce all the joys and sorrows of parenting into one banal statement, it was plain old hurtful to think that Ash actually agreed. However, twenty years down the line, I am proud to say that - marked card notwithstanding - Ash is still with me; a beloved husband and Rohini's much-adored 'Papa'. Sure, we've had our ups and downs but, all said and done, our experience is testament to the fact that good men exist, that bringing up special needs children can be surprisingly good fun and that step-parents can be an unexpected and fabulous boon. Fairy tales (oh, and Nick Hornby), eat your words, I say.