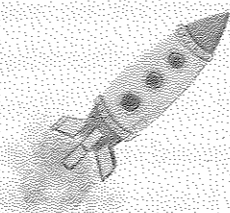


FATHERS HAVE CHILDREN



That was the night I finally took down my 'It's Your Solar System' glow-in-the-dark mobile. It wasn't even astronomically accurate. It still had Pluto on it. Everyone knows that Pluto's not a planet any more. It's something a bit too big for an asteroid, but too small for a planet. It's nothing.

Like someone who's too big to be a kid and too young to be an adult.

Then the phone rang.

A friendly voice said, 'Hi. Drax Communications. Still want to be the World's Best Dad?' This time I waited for the options to come up. But they didn't. There was a pause and the friendly voice said, 'Hello? Mr Digby?'

'Oh. What? Yeah. Yeah, that's me. Who's that?'

'Dr Dinah Drax here. I've been waiting for your call.'

'YOU've been waiting for MY call?!'

'Yes.'

'But I tried to call this morning and I was on hold for about a year. I thought there must've been a million people in the queue.'

'But I told you that you were specially selected. Didn't you believe me?'

'Yeah. But . . . the on-hold thing went on so long.'

'I really wanted to share that piece of music with you.'

'Well . . . thanks. I enjoyed it.'

'And to find out how patient you were. Patience will be an essential quality on this trip.'

'Oh, I can be patient. Really. I can sit for hours.'

'Good. Well, Mr Digby, you're through.'

'That is completely cosmic.'

'A car will collect you from your registered address at 08.00 on Tuesday morning—'

'Dr Drax . . . the Rocket . . . What kind of ride is it? Is it a reverse bungee? Or a roller coaster? Or—'

'Wait and see. That's one of the ways in which you can exercise your patience. Now tell me a little bit about the child you'll be bringing . . .'

I'd completely forgotten that dads have children.
'... I do hope it's a girl. We're very short on girls.'

'Oh. She's a girl then. Definitely. Anything you say.'

'And what's her name?'

'Who?'

'Your daughter, Mr Digby.'

'My daughter?' Time to Engage. I said the name of the only daughter I'd ever had. I said, 'It's Florida. Her name is Florida.'

If Liverpool city centre was Level Two, a secret location in China must be Level Fifty at least. I wasn't going to make the same mistake as last time. This time I was going to skill up before levelling up. In World of Warcraft you can have weapon skills, gathering skills or trade skills. You can have mining skills too, but they're a bit rubbish and you have to buy a pickaxe.

If I was going on a quest disguised as Florida's dad, I would need dad skills.

I went through all the books on my dad's bedside table. They were mostly colour charts of quick-drying low-odour bathroom paints with mad names

like 'Antarctic Glow', but there was one called *Talk to Your Teen*, which was all about how to trick your teenage son or daughter into talking to you.

Un.

Be.

Liev.

Able.

It was like finding the cheat sheet for Orbiter IV. Except it wasn't Orbiter IV; it was My Life. Look at this:

Does your teen sometimes seem sulky and uncommunicative? Meals are the most natural place for conversation to flow. To create the best possible conditions for this, you should turn off the television before eating and try to serve fiddly food. Fiddly food keeps everyone at the table longer. Whereas a pizza can be dispensed with in a matter of minutes, a kipper can keep a hungry teen at the table for fully half an hour.

In other words, meals are traps. Except what sane person would bait a trap with kippers?

It also said:

It's very important to show an interest in their world. Ask them about their friends, their music, their books and their computer games.

So he was never interested in the history of Azeroth or the Wanderlust Warriors' weapons at all! He was just keeping me talking.

I should've realized this before, because when I carefully monitored my dad's conversations for several days, I discovered that they can all be broken down into five headings, namely:

1. How we got there.
2. What the parking was like.
3. What it was like in the old days.
4. Something thoughtful which it made you think.
5. Something to do with last night's football.

For instance, on the Saturday morning we went to the New Strand to look for new handles to put on the new kitchen cupboards. We didn't find any (though

we did get an amusing cactus holder, shaped like a donkey). This is what Dad said:

1. The main road was so choked, we'd've been better off walking.
2. Two pounds to park for two hours! And it takes you half an hour to find a space.
3. In the old days, if the shop didn't have the right door handles for your cupboards you came home empty-handed. Nowadays, with shopping malls and what have you, if they haven't got door handles, you buy a cactus holder. It makes you think . . .
4. . . . are we really any happier now than we were then? Are we happier because we've got a cactus holder? It's not like we've got a cactus.
5. It's no good scoring lots of goals if you also concede lots of goals. We need a terrifying central defender.

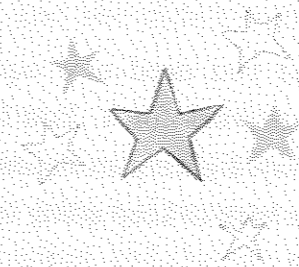
These five headings apply to anything. For instance, if my dad ever did go to Azeroth, he'd probably say:

1. We took the Deeprun Tram to Stormwind (Dwarven District).

2. The tram is free. It's very reliable and you don't have to worry about parking. On the other hand, it was raided by the Undead Scourge and a lot of us were killed. Luckily my guild companions have healing powers.
3. There was no such place as Azeroth when we were little. If we wanted to play a fantasy game we had to use sticks for swords and run round on pretend horses. The sticks really hurt.
4. We looked stupid, but we did get lots of fresh air.
5. Money has spoiled football. Players now spend more time advertising hair products than they do training.

I felt I'd mastered Level One of Being a Dad. Now I had to get myself a daughter.

YOU'LL LIKE IT WHEN YOU GET THERE



The first person I thought of to be my daughter was Florida. After all, she already had extensive pretending-to-be-Liam's-daughter experience and had gained lots of pretending-to-be-Liam's-daughter skills.

On the other hand, her main pretending-to-be-Liam's-daughter experience was nearly putting her in incredible danger during that whole Porsche incident. So I knew I'd probably need to coax her slightly.

When I tried talking to her in school she either totally blanked me (but then she always did blank me in school) or hissed at me like an angry cobra. When I tried phoning her – calls from my number were barred. When I tried emailing and MSNing her, messages bounced back.