

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

How can we possibly live up to our doting parents expectations of us?
Matt Ragghianti shares his experiences as the apple of his mother's eye.

It seems absurd to me now. What with the perspective of an additional decade of living to draw upon. Nothing more than an amusing story to tell my friends over drinks. But I have to admit, that night at my boss' wedding back in 1998, it honestly didn't seem the worst idea in the world.

Maybe it was the scotch talking (I was heroically drinking my way through my fourth), or the warmth of the summer evening wrapping us in its embrace. Then again, perhaps it was simply being among all those movie stars, but I felt wonderful. And why wouldn't she want to dance – God, she's beautiful – it was a party after all, wasn't it? So, as the band began to play and people made their way to the floor, I decided the time had come:

I was going to ask Elizabeth Hurley to dance...

I'm just going to leave us there for a moment. We'll go back and see what happened, I promise. But I think it's important for you to know how I got there in the first place, to learn about the dynamic required to convince a 27-year-old on \$400 a week he had a shot with the friggin' Estée Lauder Girl. And to do that, we have to go back.

From the time I was old enough to understand her, Mum told me I was special. It could've been something vaguely artistic like a story I had written or a game of whatever sport I was playing at the time – Mum was and still is my most unshakable fan and fervent supporter. Now, I want to be careful here. I wasn't taught to believe I was better than everyone else. Absolutely not. But Mum worked diligently to convince me I was just as good as anyone else. And if you had a minute, she'd convince you as well.

Later, during my days as one of the top hundred thousand stand-up comics in Los Angeles, it took a unique perspective to view me as a success, no matter how

rose-colored the lens. Mum never wavered. A childhood friend also called Matt grew up to become a brilliant doctor and researcher. My mother and his remain friendly to this day and when they bump into each other around town they still inquire after their respective Matt's. One such exchange, later relayed to me by my father who happened also to be there went like this:

My mum: "So, how's your Matt doing?"

Other Matt's mum: "He's just finished a map of the human genome. And your Matt?"

My mum (proudly): "Terrific, he's the opening act at The Chuckle Hut all month!"

So when does maternal optimism collide with rationality? If not in the aisle of the local market, faced with the mother of the guy who mapped the human genome, then where?

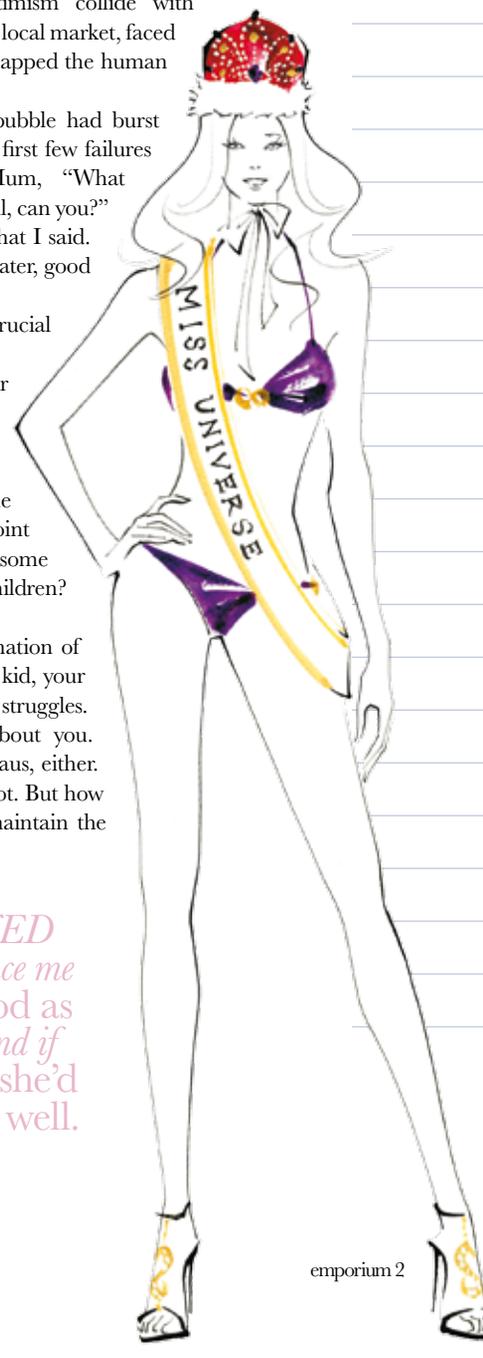
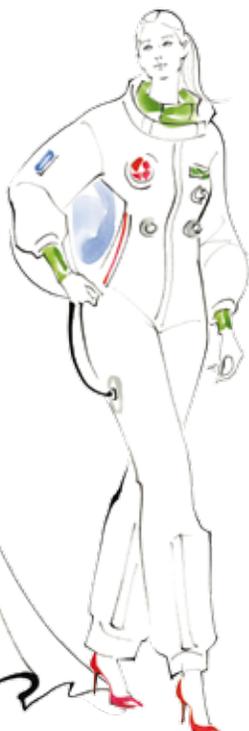
Of course, by then my own bubble had burst many times over. Still, when those first few failures arrived I remember asking Mum, "What happened?" "You can't win them all, can you?" "Wait, but you said..." "I know what I said. Just keep being you and sooner or later, good things will happen."

And right there is the most crucial piece of the puzzle.

Parents have always revered their children. Increasingly, however, it seems everyone else has to as well. How did an unattainable ideal towards which to strive overtake the current parental reality to the point where perfection is the only thing some parents will accept from their children? Or, worse still, for them.

Am I advocating the elimination of childhood innocence? "Listen kid, your life is going to be a series of struggles. And nobody really cares about you. Oh, and there's no Santa Claus, either. Night, sweetie!" Of course not. But how long can any of us hope to maintain the

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charade if our goal is to completely eradicate failure from our children's lives? Reward is directly linked to risk. And what is the reward for building a human being who is both ignorant of the possibility of failure, and totally unequipped for how to deal with it? That's not a world I want my child to live in. And I haven't got much interest in visiting either.

Like us all, sooner or later my son will fail. And while I certainly want his dreams to come true, there's a great deal to be learned from failing. Don't get me wrong, I'm as competitive as the next guy. Okay, as long as the next guy isn't Ian Thorpe. But is it really our job, as parents to stack the deck in every game our children play? When did failing at something, even just one thing, make you a 'failure'?

At the writing of this article, my son is only 10-months-old, so I freely admit this whole opinion is an easy one for me to have right now. At his present age, the stakes in my son's life are pretty low. And as much as I make of this whole 'tough love' thing I am threatened by one, undeniable truth: I adore my son. He began walking at eight months, prompting his pediatrician to tell my wife and me our son was the youngest walker he'd ever seen. Enough to make any parent feel good, but, beyond ringing the grandparents most people would leave it at that. Not me. "Darling," I said, that night in bed, "I think Vince could be a Superhero." My wife told me to stop watching so much TV. But I wasn't finished. "No, think about it. He can already bend metal in his bare hands (Okay, it's aluminium foil, but that's still metal!). And I'm not sure yet, but he might be able to see through porcelain." I won't repeat what my wife told me next.

In my mid-twenties, I fell into a job as the assistant to an Academy-Award-winning movie producer. The job afforded me the opportunity

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to meet just about every movie star in the business. Not long after I started, I began to receive calls from my mum, asking me if I had met a particular actress.

"I just saw *Speed*, have you ever met Sandra Bullock?" "Yes, she was in just a few weeks ago..."

"She's cute, why didn't you ask her out?" Because I'd be fired. Because she's a movie star. Because, I don't know, she's Sandra Bullock!

That I was a glorified secretary was a fact my mother seemed unwilling to grasp.

"She's just a girl, Matt." "But Mum, that's not the way it works. What if say, the Queen of England came to the office, are you saying I should hit on her, too?" There was a long pause. I might finally be breaking through. I was wrong. "You're not seriously attracted to the Queen of England, are you?" From there it was only a short trip down the optimism highway to the next phase

of our relationship. Now, when the phone would ring Mum would get straight to it:

"Are you with somebody?" It was 4:15 in the afternoon, on a Tuesday. Without question the least sexy day of the week (once in a while, I find Monday is part of a three day weekend).

"Of course, I'm with somebody. Can I ring you back?"

"Oh, sorry. Sure you can, have fun!" After several months of this, I began to feel guilty. But how do you tell your mother you aren't quite the Lothario she thinks you are? Hallmark doesn't make a card for that. Turns out I didn't need to worry.

"Son," my mum would say to me, "if someone can't see how special you are, that's their problem." Funny, but it sure felt like my problem. Still does, to be honest. She wasn't finished...

"You just continue to try your best and, sooner or later, good things will happen. Remember, you may not always win. But you'll never win if you don't try."

Which brings us back to Liz Hurley...

There she was, not 20 metres away and stunning in a pink slip dress and strappy heels that cost (a lot) more than my suit. She was talking with a group of ladies on the periphery of the dance floor, one of whom was even a friend from work. Perfect, that's my entry! I approach on the pretense of speaking to my workmate and then something like... "Oh, hello Liz, didn't see you there, how are you? Say is that Sinatra? Well, what are we waiting for?" What could possibly go wrong?

I finished my drink and asked a friend to give me the once over. And being cleared for launch, stepped forward towards immortality...

Everything was going just the way I'd planned. I even got a knee-bending smile from Liz when I arrived at their little group. So, I took a deep breath, looked to Liz Hurley (Estée Lauder Girl, movie star, supermodel) and said, "Wooo... woovleveluptoodiz?"

Oh crap.

It was as if I were having some sort of horrible out-of-body experience. My brain was somewhere close by, appalled by the primal grunt I had let forth and demanding some sort of damage control. But my mouth simply stopped working. I'll never forget the look on Liz's face – a benevolent cocktail of amusement, pity and embarrassment. The woman with whom I worked did the only thing she could and started to laugh, which sent the rest of them off and, with them, any hope of redemption. So, I did the only thing I could, and ejected, spinning on my heel and walking straight back to the bar and the raucous delight of my friends, who had seen the whole thing.

Nobody likes to fail. Particularly in front of their supermodel crush. But sometimes that's just the way it goes. And although Liz is the only person to ever make me lose the power of speech, I've fallen on my face more times than I can count. But guess what? I've also written an Emmy-winning TV show. And become an Ironman triathlete. I've found the greatest wife ever. And, well... you know how I feel about our son.

I've no idea what Vince will be interested in as he grows, what his dreams will be and what he'll be prepared to do to follow them. But I know one thing for certain: He will 'grow up.'

And who knows if there will be such a thing as the Estée Lauder Girl when he's 27-years-old – God, he's beautiful. And if there is, the odds say he probably won't have much of a chance with her. But I'm going to make him think he does anyway. Only I'll remind him to go easy on the scotch. ☺

