

SMALL TALK

W

e were without the children for the first time in over a week. My wife and I and the other couple dining with us could scarcely remember how to eat with nobody in our laps. Moments after being served I had to repress the instinctive urge to lean over the nearest plate and cut our guest's smoked salmon into bite-sized pieces. But here we were, on sweet reprieve from parental travails, with a world of conversational options before us—politics, literature, global issues, any of the subjects we had yearned for while reading *The Stupids Step Out* for the tenth time. And what did we talk about? We talked about our children.

On this particular evening it was our lives as parents that provided the closest

ety old fellow. I was putting the baby to bed and Phil was in the kitchen fixing the chocolate soufflé, so Sarah was left alone at the dinner table with the stuffed shirt. From the kitchen Phil heard an unbroken silence of eight minutes finally interrupted by Sarah's piercing voice saying, 'I have a uterus and you don't!' Then five more minutes of utter silence before Phil brought in the soufflé."

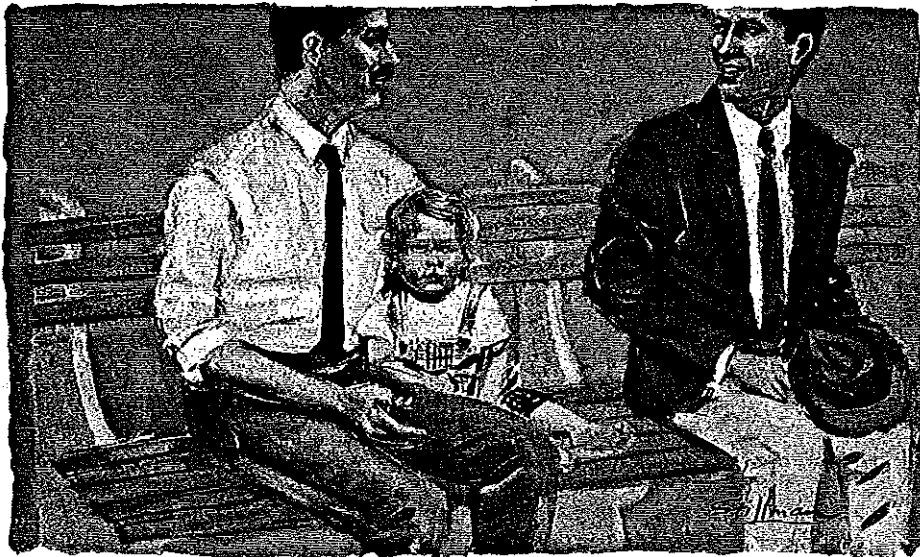
Katharine and I responded with equivalent tales of daughters undaunted, and so the evening went.

I've often seen the same special effect at large parties, between total strangers. Concerns over preschools and ski-wee programs—or over a child's insistence on sleeping in the same frayed pair of paja-

gambits. For many of us, children are the most vital element in our lives; they give us incomparable delight. We feel a little bit less uncomfortable about being away from them when we are addressing the issues of their tastes and well-being. We sense future friends in devoted parents, strangers in disinterested ones.

Such connections have proven particularly poignant to me when I've been traveling. A couple of years ago I was seated beside a very old-school Britisher on a London-bound train out of Cambridge. He was the true Savile Row-type, one of those Englishmen who carry off the bold-striped shirt and pin-striped suit with perfect aplomb. With my baggy American button-down and wrinkled khakis, I felt like a visitor from another planet. But then he noticed the vintage Peter Rabbit books I had just purchased from an antiquarian bookseller. "Lovely books, aren't they?" he said. "I've recently been reading *Jemima Puddle-duck* to my young Edwina." Instantly I thought him a soulmate.

We exchanged notes on the joys and tribulations of little girls' birthday parties and discovered that parental hatred of *My Little Pony* paraphernalia was an international phenomenon. We mutually admired our daughters' generosity toward their friends, their resilience after knee scrapes, their eagerness at swimming. As we discussed our children we were clearly discussing ourselves. This gray-eyed gentleman and I would never have talked about our own cravings or attributes directly, but as the train headed southward and we exchanged information about "my Edwina" and "my Lucy," gaps were bridged, loneliness thwarted. We made one another laugh with tales of toddler humor and firecracker tempers. He understood what it was like to be unable to get the melody of "Little Bunny Foo Foo" out of one's head during a critical business meeting. And now when I think back on that three-week trip to Great Britain, my memories of the church facades and must-try restaurants are mostly hazy; but I remember my unnamed seat-



link that could be forged between two otherwise disparate couples. On most topics we found the other pair treacherously conservative ("our favorite neofascists," my wife, Katharine, privately dubbed them). Of the fiction we devour, they read naught ("borderline illiterates," K. said). But on the subject of children, they were funny, warm, enchanting.

Marcie was bursting with the latest about five-year-old Sarah. "Last night," she began, "we had a dinner guest, one of Phil's business associates, a rather crotch-

mas every night for a month—establish mutual territory among parents of young children. We delight in comparing lunchbox preferences ("How could a child growing up surrounded by such flawless design insist on a *Smurf* motif?"). We exchange the most recent malapropisms. (Our three-year-old, Charlotte, maintained that a Shaker candle stand was "yucky." "That's your opinion," I told her, upon which Charlotte replied with rage, "I'm not a pinion!")

But these aren't just conversational

mate as if I had been with him yesterday. I read news of England and I picture him; I imagine his home and the way his *Times* is rolled up next to the toast rack each morning. Through our children we became intimates without becoming friends.

Even the most trivial of foreign encounters can be made memorable when children are at the center. Our children permit us our indulgence; we can track down a pair of size-6 rubber-wheeled French roller skates with a tenacity and obsessiveness that would seem offensive if it were something for ourselves. Once when I was in Zurich, I searched long and hard for a ribbon-trimmed bathrobe for my daughter's Lisa II doll. An elderly Swiss woman, a work associate, took interest in my plight, in fact coached me eagerly in my pursuit. We discussed the elusive tiny bathrobe for some time. "It must be soignée, yet dignified," she advised me. "Make it *un peu sportif*, if possible." When I finally returned with a miniature acrylic garment that met her standards, we reveled in a shared sense of victory.

I will never forget a discussion with the proprietress of a centuries-old umbrella boutique on the Boulevard St. Germain in Paris. Despairing of ever finding a cab or a useful bus route in the torrential downpour, I had stopped in to buy a plain black *parapluie*. I found what I needed, but also latched onto one of those objects that make the French cultivation of life so remarkable—a flowered, lace-trimmed umbrella for a doll. The shopkeeper, who seemed straight out of Colette and was clearly carrying on an old family trade, turned to me and inquired gravely, "*C'est pour vous, monsieur?*"

I tried to muster the right words in French to say that no, it was not for me, that it was for my daughter's doll; then, feeling that perhaps I looked foolish standing there in my dark suit and Burberry coat, holding this lovely little lace umbrella, I smiled and explained that it really wasn't the sort of thing that I would use personally. "*Hélas!*" she exclaimed, "*à Paris il y a tous les goûts!*"

"Alas, in Paris anything goes." The words have come back to me many times. So has the long and delightful conversation that followed with that charming purveyor of umbrellas. It seems that when we talk about our children, we wear our love on our sleeve and come close to people we would never have known. I can thank my two daughters for providing friendship, even when I'm far from home. ■

Nicholas Fox Weber's new book, Leland Bell, will be published in November.