

A matter of commitments

Their separation is a necessary journey towards their ultimate goal – to be a happy and fulfilled family unit, writes **INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL**



Play time with mummy and daddy

WITHOUT warning, the dark clouds roll in. From posing prettily for the camera, three-year-old Lily Maryam's face suddenly contorts with unbridled rage as she lunges at her mother, who had been getting herself into position with her husband for a special pose for photographer Rohanis Shukri.

There's no way Ida Baizura Bahar's little girl is going to allow mummy and daddy to get "cosy".

As Ida patiently tries to soothe her only child's tempest, daddy, or Mohamed Feizal Razali, looks on, bewildered. Then, with a resigned smile, he gets up, leaving Ida with the unenviable task of chasing the clouds away.

It's not easy being the favourite when you're hardly around.

Feizal works in the UK as a retail supply chain analyst. It's been over eight months since the affable 36-year-old last returned to Malaysia to visit his wife and daughter. "My daughter and I aren't that close. She prefers her mother and her grandmother!" he sheepishly confides.

Married for five years, the couple and their daughter were previously living together in the UK. In fact, Lily was born there in January, 2006. Ida was doing data collection for her PhD at the School Of Oriental And African Studies. But when Lily turned four months old, Ida returned to Malaysia to fulfil some prior commitments, taking Lily along.

"I stayed on because we'd just bought a house and I had to settle things here," adds Feizal. "Initially we were only supposed

to be separated for six months, but it took my wife nine months to complete her work."

Having calmed her daughter, Ida chips in: "Feizal made a surprise visit in September 2006. But by the first day of Ramadan, he had to go back to London. We didn't meet again until March 2007 when he returned to Malaysia to take us back to the UK."

They were a family for a year before Ida had to return to Malaysia once again to report to her sponsors, UPM (Universiti Pertanian Malaysia). It was only in November that year that they met again as a family in KL.

For Feizal, it's not easy to be away from his family. "It's a sad feeling not being there to see my daughter grow up and missing important milestones like Lily's first birthday, her Aqiqah (slaughtering an animal to celebrate the birth of a newborn to show the parents' gratitude and joy to God), our first Raya as a family, Fathers Day..."

But the couple keeps in constant touch. "We'll call each other, send sms-es and do tele-conferencing — skyping. The weekend is used for communicating. We'll tell each other when one of us is on skype so the other will switch on his/her camera. Skyping is an integral part of our communication but sometimes it'd be quite frustrating as the connection would be quite bad so all you see are pictures but the words didn't come out."

Chips in Ida: "Lily would talk to the camera. She knows that it's daddy on the screen. But I think because she's still small, it isn't



We are family... albeit a long distance one!

Pictures by ROHANIS SHUKRI

the visual that's important, it's the voice. She recognises the voice more."

Despite the constant communication, distance is never easy to handle. Confides Feizal: "It's tough for both of us. We quarrel, we make up but it'll all be on the phone. There's always pressure from both sides as being away is not easy emotionally. I miss my wife, my daughter, the connection, everything."

But Feizal's comforted somewhat by the knowledge that his wife and daughter are safe. "Thankfully, they're living with Ida's parents. Knowing that my wife comes back to a strong support system helps a lot. The safety side is taken care of. I can

just focus on what I have to do."

Ida, who currently tutors at UPM's English Department's Faculty of Modern Languages and Communications, adds: "It's very important to have family support. Without it, I wouldn't have been able to cope."

Looking thoughtful, the chatty 35-year-old continues: "I really felt like a single mum in the beginning. Whenever Lily fell sick, I'd be very worried and often wished that my husband was back because when there are two of you, the burden is halved."

Fortunately she had her family. "I depend on my father or my brothers to take us around. Whenever Lily is sick, they'll step in on Feizal's behalf. My father,

or Lily's Tok Bah has become the father figure."

The bigger challenge, agree the couple, is dealing with other people's sentiments. "A lot of people don't understand why we have to be apart," says Ida. "What they don't know is that we both have prior professional commitments, which need to be acknowledged and respected."

Nods Feizal: "Whatever it is, we know what we're doing and what we're trying to achieve. Ours is a journey that's taking longer than most but we're confident that we'll be together again as a family... a happy and fulfilled one."