

My Mother, My Monster

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In late 2006, Channel Nine screened a reality show called *Wife Swap USA*. Two wives swap households for two weeks. In the first week, they have to do things the way their counterpart does them. Each wife has provided the other with an operating manual which not only includes information on how the household is run but also the wife's philosophy, for example, "I believe a wife serves her husband; he is the head of the household; his opinions are her opinions." In the second week, they get to impose their own idea of domestic congeniality. By the end of the first show, I was hooked. What hooked me was recognition. At least one of these wives each week was a domestic monster. Some of the situations were so familiar that all I could do was laugh. I wished my brothers were there to watch with me. But I abandoned my family twenty years ago and I enjoy my freedom too much to give any serious thought to going back.

One of these monstrous mothers in particular interested me. She didn't do housework and she didn't spend much time with her two children. On the surface, this seemed fair enough: she was the breadwinner: her unemployed husband ran the home. She went to work at a call centre in the late afternoon; in the small hours, after knocking off, she visited a casino where she plugged the poker machines until late in the morning, whereupon she returned home to sleep off the night's activity. Her husband hadn't seen the marital bed in three years.

In some ways, this woman was unlike my mother: she didn't impose rules on her children, aged nine and four; she let them do whatever they liked as long as they didn't bother her. My mother had a rule for everything; my life was hedged about by all the things I was not allowed to do: I was not allowed to have friends; I had to come straight home after school and not get sidetracked at the shops; I was not to play outside unless she specifically said I could; I was not to talk to my father or play with my brothers; I was not to wear clothes I liked, I must wear only the clothes she had approved for me. And yet these two women, one dictatorial, the other anti-authoritarian, struck me as similar. They were both women who did not engage with the members of their families in any but the most limited ways. The Wife Swap mother's hours in the casino reminded me of my mother's weekends in bed with a stack of Mills and Boon romances.

The Wife Swap mother switched households with a woman who was as strict and traditional as the first wife was lax. The traditional wife cleaned her house with the zeal of caustic soda, waited on her husband hand and foot, and rang her sons, aged nineteen and fifteen, several times a day to see where they were and remind them of curfew.

As I write, I note that it was the lax, withdrawn wife who reminded me of my own mother, not the one who imposed rules. The reason comes to me in an image of the lax wife trying

to put her son to bed when he doesn't want to go. She tries and tries – probably for the sake of the camera. The look on her face reminds me of the look on my own mother's face when I acted up. Her rules were real; they were rigid; she had a violent, unpredictable temper that threatened to flare when she was opposed. Yet there were moments when my own rebellion overwhelmed her. If, instead of saying 'No!' I evaded her rules by pretending to misunderstand them, she retreated in confusion. At these times, she was a helpless child, not a parent. The rule-setting wife on the show was a parent par excellence, the mother to end all mothers, a woman whose reason for being was to nurture and instruct, the very antithesis of my own mother.

In order to gain the most conflict out of the wife swap the show's producers find pairs of opposites. For example, in one episode, a vegan animal rights activist who imposed raw food on her family, who had banished the stove from the house, along with the furniture, even the beds and chairs, was swapped with a carnivore whose husband went hunting every week. The pairs were so obvious that it annoyed me; and yet, week after week, it worked. I enjoyed seeing these women dismantled by the conditions of the swap, their cherished beliefs challenged, their habits overturned, their selfishness exposed in all its many varieties.

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At the end of each episode, the two wives and their husbands meet to discuss the fortnight they have all just endured and to reveal what, if anything, they have learned. This is the camera as therapist. The camera has been watching them for two weeks, recording their conflicts and their attempts to resolve them either through stubborn adherence to their own beliefs or through conference and compromise. The proximity of the scrutinising lens must have inhibited them somewhat, the way any camera does; at the same time it would have directed some of their behaviours: it would have reminded them of the producers' instructions to let it rip when it came to disputes. All the same, it was surprising how much got through. In the pair I have been discussing, one family was white and racist, the other black and ambitious. It was the second family that was run on strict rules. The black wife was genuinely upset by her white husband's contempt for anyone who was not white. She could barely contain her agitation. One could almost see her internal efforts to work through her anger and use her intelligence to persuade him to see his racist remarks from her point of view. And yet, I couldn't help but wonder how much the strained moderation in her response had been dictated by the presence of a camera.

Occasionally, deep-seated resentments got out of hand. In the final segment, when the couples described what they had learned, the white, withdrawn mother told her authoritarian counterpart she was fat. The authoritarian mother leapt across the table dividing them, intent on pulling hair and scratching eyes. It was the kind of moment I feel guilty about enjoying. It was the single most entertaining instant in a show full of pleasing *aperçus* into the lives of extreme people. I love a good sticky-beak. At the same time, it smacked of the Colosseum. The camera is not only the therapist, there to ensure the

participants make an effort to work through their conflicts, it is also the occasion for those very conflicts; it is sanctimonious on the one hand, and on the other it incites the women to throw punches for the good of the ratings.

The show and the situations it sets up and resolves are so facile that it would be easy to forget that extreme people, as these women always are, impose extreme lives on their families. As I watched each week, I kept looking for signs of stress and unhappiness in the children. These were few and moderate. The authoritarian mother's sons hooted with joy when their new mother-for-a-fortnight said curfew was over, they were young men and could decide for themselves when they came home. The nine-year-old daughter of the slack, withdrawn wife said she wished her mother would spend time doing things with her. The authoritarian mother talked to the child, taught her the domestic arts and listened to her accounts of difficulties at school. I asked myself whether there were few signs of stress because, despite appearances, these women were not abusive mothers, even if they were not the best mothers; or perhaps the editor had cut anything that was too uncomfortable to screen, anything that resisted the camera's therapeutic gaze, any problems that could not be modified in the course of a forty-minute show plus ads. Watching the authoritarian mother with the lonely daughter of her counterpart, I realised how much thought and planning had gone into the selection of these women. They were opposites, and in being so, they offered their temporary families a healthy alternative to the old regime. The adolescent sons were allowed to be young men; the lonely daughter had a mother for two weeks who paid motherly attention to her. I wondered what it must have been like for that little girl when her birth mother returned.

In the final segment of the show, when the two couples discuss what they have learned, the husbands are usually more ready to admit that they got something out of the experience. There's no surprise in that: they are not under the same degree of scrutiny as the wives, which often allows them some leeway to compromise. Perhaps the presence of the camera urges them to appear to be dispassionate and reasonable, as men are traditionally thought to be compared to women. However, the wives are the focus of viewer attention. It is more interesting to know what they say. The slack, withdrawn mother said she had learned the need to get more involved with her family.

Two weeks later, the camera returned to see whether the wives had put their lessons into practice. The lax wife's husband was smiling from ear to ear: after three years in the wilderness, he was back in the conjugal bed. The contrast demonstrated how sombre and depressed the household had been in the earlier segments because of the wife's cold, withdrawn behaviour.

The question I always ask is: do people change that easily? What would the camera find if it returned in secret six months later? In fact, I wonder this about all these makeover shows. *Wife Swap USA* is nothing more nor less than a makeover show, like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. It offers to change lives by altering the external conditions of a life, in this case the wife's method of controlling her husband and family. And because all these

makeover shows are essentially superficial, I wonder what kind of harm they do along the way. For example, it seems unkind to show the lonely daughter what a loving, attentive mother can be like, and then take her away.

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I am a writer of fiction. It is my nature to imagine alternative scenarios. So it was natural for me to imagine a therapeutic camera coming to my family as it was during my childhood in Wellington New Zealand. It would never have happened, of course, even if there had been reality TV in the 1970s. My mother didn't trust anyone not related to her by blood; and her relatives, sadly enough, merely put up with her, keeping her on the margins of family get-togethers, falling silent when she spoke and resuming their conversations as if she had not said a word. If my brothers brought their friends over (my father preferred to see his friends at the pub), she spent the visit in her room or doing something that kept her away from them. She would never have accepted a wife swap.

Still, I want to imagine a camera entering my family and roaming the rooms to see what it can see. Since I am breaking Mother's rules, I have given it instructions to be discreet. Let's make it a Saturday in the summer of my sixteenth year. This day happened; I have only added some details to accommodate the visiting lens.

My father gets out of bed first. On weekdays, he usually gets up at two or three o'clock in the morning to drive to the butcher's shop where he makes sausages, cures hams and serves behind the counter. Staying in bed until 7am is a luxury. He walks on silent, slippers feet through the house, making himself ready for the day. This involves smoking; a cigarette is rarely out of his mouth; there is an ashtray on the window ledge in the bathroom. He carries a cup of tea up to my mother just before he leaves the house to run errands and see friends.

Over the next two hours, the rest of the household gets up, all except Mother, who remains in bed, reading a Mills and Boon romance. Breakfast dishes pile up in the sink. Mother shouts at me to wash them: she knows they are there even if she can't see them. I am in my own bedroom, reading *Jane Eyre*, one of my favourite novels, while eating a plate of toast with apricot jam.

Like my father, my brothers spend as much time away from the house as they can. I am left alone with Mother. After breakfast, I wander into her room, having popped the camera into my skirt pocket in such a way that it can peep over the edge. I don't like being in this room: the smell of unwashed flesh, stale makeup and her hair gives me a headache. At the same time, I am anxious if I don't see her; it is part of my daily routine to make sure she is where I think she is. I told the camera, when planning to visit Mother, 'I wish I could act like other girls. I want to wear nice clothes and have a weekend job like other girls. But Mummy says I can't. She doesn't let me do anything.'

Mother is an obese shape in the bed. Her head rests against the pillows she has propped behind it; her brown eyes skim back and forth across the page with now and then a blink. She wears a tiny, crooked smile, as if she is reading a light comedy. She wears this expression through most of her day, no matter what she is doing; it doesn't mean anything. Her fat breasts have sagged against her arms under the flowered cloth of her sleeveless nightie. Her obesity fascinates me. Everything is fat, just everything. I push back the covers to peer at her feet. Even her toes are plump. They smell of nylon stockings. She has almost no arches. Mother ignores what I am doing; she seems to be absorbed in her book. I wonder how absorbed she really is. To check, I run my finger up the hairs growing from her shin. Scowling briefly, she grunts and shakes her leg to make me stop. Mother hates being touched, yet I find it hard to resist riling her sometimes. Her face settles back into its habitual half-smile.

On the cover of the romance she is reading, a man and woman are locked in an embrace of smouldering passion and hostility. I know there will be sex in its pages, the kind of sex that humiliates the heroine and makes her gasp with pleasure. I sneak Mother's romances into my room and read them. She has never forbidden me to do so, but I know she will if I ask. As I have already told the camera, 'Mummy's favourite words are "no" and "don't".' Despite my age, I have no experience with boys. I watch them talking to other girls in my class and feel I am seeing a foreign custom, one I will never take part in. I imagine sex is all about humiliation anyway, and though it occupies my mind to an embarrassing degree, I am also determined that I will never allow such a horrible thing to happen to me.

Mother sends me away to do the housework. 'You should've started washing the clothes by now. When you've finished, you can dust and vacuum.'

I dawdle over the chores. I resent having to do them when everyone in the family makes the mess. I argue with her when I have the courage, cringing because I expect her to answer me with blows, 'Why don't the boys do any housework?' She answers in words. She usually does. That doesn't stop me expecting her anger, which flares these days more as a reminder of what can happen. 'The boys take care of the garden,' she says as if repeating a commandment. This is patently untrue. The backyard is a jungle of overgrown weeds. My mother mows the front lawn once a month, not my father or brothers, who vanish every weekend. Our neighbours complain if we let it grow. It is dotted with dog droppings, some fresh, some dry, some white as bones. They get mown once a month too.

On this particular afternoon, while I am dawdling with a duster in front of the trophy cabinet which my eldest brother has filled with his many awards as a middle-distance runner, Mother gets dressed and goes outside. On her way through, she stops with an irritated grunt, stoops and takes a sock off the floor. She is wearing a short skirt. She bends at the hip, showing me the crotch of her knickers and the discoloured skin around it. I close my eyes, at the same time putting my hand over the lens. After she has left, I tell the camera, 'She's probably gone out to make sure I've hung the clothes in the right order.' I spent the morning at the twin tub. This is an unpleasant duty. My father changes his

underwear on Sundays, which means his old underpants have been mouldering at the bottom of the basket all week. Even if he changed them daily, I would still hate this job. I want to be free to roam the world the way my brothers are.

I don't speak of the crotch incident. This is something I try not to think about. Mother often shows me her crotch. Once I said to her, 'You should bend at the knees.' Her face flushed and her eyes grew hot, which made her look like the man on the cover of a Mills and Boon romance. She answered, 'Then you'll see everything.'

It gradually comes over me that Mother has not returned from checking the clothes on the line. I go outside to see what she's doing. She isn't in the backyard at all. I hurry inside and run upstairs. She isn't in her room, or in the bathroom, or in my bedroom or my brothers' bedroom. I run downstairs and search the rooms there, then outside again. She isn't anywhere to be found. I burst into tears before the camera. 'Where's Mummy?' The camera follows as I hurry from room to room in a fruitless search. I know she isn't in the house, but I can't think of anywhere else she could be. 'She's always here,' I tell the camera. 'She never goes out.' I see a neighbourhood child walk past. I open the window and call out, 'Have you seen my mother?' She shakes her head. The neighbourhood kids don't like Mother; they say she's a witch. I invite them in while Mother is at work; I know I'm not supposed to; I break the rules a lot in secret. They won't eat our food because Mother is a witch and they say her food is poisoned. Whenever they say this, I know that I am a witch's daughter and what that means.

Two hours after she disappeared, Mother returns.

'Where have you been?' I cry, drenched in tears of anguish.

Laughing at my distress, she says, 'I went for a walk.'

I sob even harder because I realise that, while I must be a fixture for her, while I must maintain a narrow, undeviating orbit, she is not a fixture for me. I have always known this, even if I have not acknowledged it until now. I understand that Mother can't be trusted, that she will always betray me, and that I can never be at ease in the world as long as she is treacherous.

The following day, we are watching Disney when the show is interrupted by a special broadcast for my family alone. It opens with my father and brothers gulping down their breakfast and leaving the house to attend to their own concerns. At first my brothers, arrayed along the sofa, are puzzled by the broadcast; but many things in our life are puzzling, thanks to Mother, and they soon settle down to see what this is all about. Mother appears bewildered. My father is snoring in his armchair; he has to get up in a few hours and go to work. The show soon cuts to the afternoon's upset. My brothers watch with scorn and confusion as I run from room to room, trying to find Mother. Mother laughs; she points at the screen and laughs.

I watch my actions in shame and anger, struggling to control the outburst that is twisting and roiling and thrashing its heavy tail like a caged dragon inside me. The screen goes black. My brothers shift with sighs of irritation. I know what they're thinking; the question is almost palpable: Why can't she control herself as we do? I clench my fists, I grip my mouth shut, my whole body is coiled tight with the effort of controlling myself. It isn't enough. It never is. The harder I try, the more savagely it comes when it breaks out.

Mother shows me her fist. 'Say one word and I'll hit you so hard.'

I run upstairs. The ferocity of my rage can't be contained. I strip the sheets and blankets from my brothers' beds and fling them onto the floor, trample them into the floor. I smash their black vinyl records that smell of the outside world. Then, horrified at what I have done, I run into my bedroom and dive under the covers, where I remain until morning. I hear my brothers come upstairs for bed. I bury my face in my knees, waiting for them to come in and beat me up. They don't. They don't mention the state of their room to anyone, not even Mother.

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It could seem an insult to victims of abusive parents that a show like *Wife Swap USA*, with its overtly therapeutic angle, can presume to solve family problems in two weeks before the scrutinising lens. Oddly enough, it never seems insulting to me. The show is facile. It uses the therapeutic angle to excuse its own vulgarity, to make "good" out of an experience that could easily be degrading. But something about it engages me beyond mere recognition of neglectful or overbearing mothers, even beyond the understanding that some of these women are clearly victims of abusive parents too. I wonder if it engages me because the participants, in understanding what they have got themselves into, escape the degradation by revealing only what they choose to reveal. This is a tricky point. The viewer only gets to see what the show chooses to display. Still, given its primary aim to sell itself by entertaining the audience, it is hard to believe it would choose not to reveal incidents that humiliate the participants if they will amuse the viewer. Or perhaps I am being too subtle. It might be that I watch these extreme mothers because they remind me of my freedom from that kind of life.

I am far more interested in the mothers than in their children, including their lonely daughters. This is part of my pattern. Mother was the centre of my life; I was her satellite. I believed that if I could understand Mother, if I could dismantle her by analysing how she worked, she would lose her power. The show dismantles these controlling mothers by challenging their beliefs and showing them their own selfishness. In response, they promise to surrender some of their power for the good of husband and children. Again and again I watch the show, always hoping that in the end, these women, these surrogates of my own mother, will change permanently and for the good. As the end credits roll, my native scepticism reasserts itself.

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During many years of therapy, my counsellors asked themselves what sort of person my mother was. I myself described her in obsessive detail. I didn't think of her as strange: she was the mother who raised me; she was familiar, if frequently hard to understand. My therapists found her strange, though: they had never come across anything like her. What sort of mother laughs at her daughter's distress? What sort of mother has no friends and forbids her daughter to make friends, keeps her in the house, dresses her like a little girl? What sort of mother almost paralyses her family with prohibitions? They suggested to me that she might have psychotic episodes. I myself wondered if, growing up on an island where she knew everybody and was related to most of them, she found living in a city among strangers an uncompromising trauma. Added to that, she was Maori in a society that insisted being Maori was shameful. At the age of thirteen, she was sent away from her home and family to a boarding school on the mainland and never saw her island again. She often seemed stuck at that age. Perhaps that was the problem.

One therapist surmised that Mother had Asperger's Syndrome, a condition at the high-functioning end of autism. It can never be verified. Having read a description of the condition by Tony Atwood, an acknowledged expert on the subject, I can only say that it looks as though this is the answer. It has afforded me some relief to put a label to her. The label says to the world that my mother had a personality defect. To me, it says I was not a bad daughter.

Another therapist recommended I read a book called *Toxic Parents*, by Susan Forward. The author includes a list of twenty-seven possible indicators of abuse: my mother met sixteen of them. I was a little disappointed that she came up to scratch on only sixteen counts. My therapist said that was a very high rating, which pleased me. Yet the book's measure of her harmfulness continued to fall short of my sense of having been occupied by a hostile foreign force throughout my childhood and young womanhood, a force that clamped down on every thought and action of my own. 'You don't belong to yourself,' Mother told me. 'You belong to me. You're like my arm. You don't have thoughts of your own. You don't do anything I haven't said you can do.'

This is the contradiction: I knew she had been bad for me, yet she didn't seem that bad – she hadn't broken my bones, she hadn't burned me with cigarettes, she hadn't invited my father and brothers to rape me. I knew she had been extremely abusive, and no external measures could adequately gauge how terrible it had been.

I use the word "abuse" just as my therapists have used it, because that is the word, it's in our common vocabulary, there is no other. It doesn't match my experience, though, or my understanding. It has been handed around too often and, in being passed from therapist to victim in thousands of consulting rooms across the world, it has lost its jet-black brilliance and potency; it has become smudged, limp and weary.

Many years ago, I wrote a story called "Another Name for Orange". In this story, a young girl has to suck her grandfather's penis. He paints it vermilion so that, if she describes what he makes her do, nobody will believe she sucked an orange penis. The other word for orange, the word she doesn't know, though she has experienced it many times, is incest. I propose to rename abuse as I felt it. This label will have marvellous powers to describe not only what happened to me but my recovery. It will stand for my unique relationship with my mother; it will stand for her inability to bend and for my own resilience; it will stand for the Tasman Sea that stretches between us, a sea she can never cross, not by ship or plane; and it will stand as my tribute to her, the frightened child who could never grow up. It will be my word alone, not the word I must share with the many thousands of other victims of harmful adults. I will call it Wife Swap USA.