

***My Mother-in-law is Wrecking Our Marriage***  
***by Margery D. Rosen , "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" Ladies'***  
***Home Journal, July, 1997.***

The most popular, most enduring women's magazine in the world. This month's case, about a couple struggling with family interference, is based on interviews with clients and information from the files of Pamela Monday, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist in private practice in Austin, Texas. The story told here is true, although names and other details have been changed to conceal identities.

***Joy's Turn***

"Everyone always says her mother-in-law is crazy," said Joy, forty, a soft-spoken woman and mother of nine-year-old Lauren, "but in my case it's literally true. Elana has hated me from the moment she met me. Russ and I had just gotten engaged, and we drove four hours so he could introduce me to her. When we got to her apartment, she was wildly drunk and wouldn't even let me in the door. She's an alcoholic, but she's never gotten treatment - Russ and his two younger sisters refuse even to admit she has a problem.

"Believe me, I know. My father was an alcoholic, too. He was warm and loving when he wasn't drunk, sad and miserable when he was. Mother was very withdrawn and unemotional. She often went out in the evenings, leaving me alone with my father, who was usually drunk. My two sisters were already in college. Dad would ramble on and on to me about his problems, and sometimes he'd cry. I was scared and overwhelmed.

"I wanted to be a veterinarian when I grew up, but my parents never even encouraged me to go to college. After high school, I went to Texas to visit my oldest sister, and I never left. Then at twenty-five, I patched together enough financial aid to go to college to study business administration.

"That's when I met Russ, who sat behind me in class. He was such a flirt, and at first, I was put off, though I was impressed by his comments in class. We bumped into each other at a party and, though I was with another guy, we spent most of the evening together.

"Three years later, we got engaged. All this time, we'd never talked about his mother. The day he took me to meet her, she locked herself in her bathroom and screamed, 'Get that bitch out of here!' Finally, we left, but Russ refused to discuss the incident.

"That's been the pattern. Elana says and does the most vile things, but Russ pretends they never happened. I know he feels responsible for her. His father, a diplomat, deserted them when Russ was only ten, and Russ held the family together. His kindness is a great quality, but it has reached the point where his mother is destroying me - and our marriage.

"Elana's cruelty is astounding. At our rehearsal dinner, she stood up to make a toast and said, 'Well, I hope you can hold onto him, though I seriously doubt it.' I was stunned at first. Then I burst into tears and ran out of the room.

"A few years ago, when I told her my mother had cancer, the first thing she said was, 'Well, I'm not going to the funeral.' If we go out for dinner, she insists on sitting between Russ and me.

"Russ doesn't even tell me when she's coming to spend the weekend. Whatever plans I've made go out the window when she shows up. She also calls at all hours, often waking us up.

"I'm furious that Russ never defends me. When his mom behaves this way in front of my daughter, though, I draw the line. Here's an example: It was Elana's birthday, and it was about fifty-five degrees outside. The first thing she said when we got to her condominium was, 'Let's go for a swim.' She grabbed Lauren and raced to the courtyard pool. Then, with her clothes on - shoes and all - she jumped in and yelled, 'Come on, Lauren, jump in.' I told Lauren not to go in, but Elana kept insisting, and Russ just laughed. Lauren burst into tears.

"I swore I'd never allow Lauren to be alone with Elana again, but she's forever calling and enticing Lauren with shopping sprees, movies and presents. Russ refuses to tell Lauren the real explanation for her grandmother's odd behavior, so I look like the bad guy.

"As a result of all the tension, our sex life has really suffered. Russ complains that I'm never in the mood. He's right. But the truth is, he often arrives home from work hours late and goes straight to his computer.

"We rarely argue, though - except about his business trips, which he springs on me at the last minute. I get totally overwhelmed and anxious.

"I could have been the best daughter-in-law anyone ever had. But I can't forget what Elana has done."

### ***Russ's Turn***

"This was a classic example of alcoholism's destructive effects on a family," said the counselor.

"Russ and Joy, who grew up taking care of others, came to believe they had no right to assert their own needs. This sense of failure lingered, triggering deep-seated insecurities that later played out in their marriage.

"Children of alcoholics are often afraid of conflict. Joy had trouble expressing herself to her husband, let alone her mother-in-law; Russ couldn't confront his mother or his wife because he was afraid of hurting either of them. What's more, instead of listening, brainstorming and then negotiating solutions to problems in their relationship, Joy clammed up and Russ threw himself into his work.

"Much of our work in therapy was devoted to helping them recognize these patterns. To do that, we drew a family tree of relationships over three generations - which can reveal personality traits as well as individual problem-solving strategies.

"Seeing the family history in black and white, Russ realized that he was still the family caretaker. And although he thought he was mediating between his wife and his mother, he was really only paying lip service to that goal. I pointed out that it was his job - not Joy's - to stand up to Elana, to say, 'We have plans this weekend' or 'You can't speak like that to Joy.' Further, instead of letting his mother ramble on when she calls drunk, he should hang up the phone.

"No matter what he said, Russ was still in deep denial about his mother's alcoholism - classic behavior for someone who lives with an alcoholic. Of course, Russ had witnessed Elana's outrageous behavior his whole life, so her actions weren't unusual to him. Over the course of several sessions, Russ finally admitted that his mother was an alcoholic. 'That doesn't mean she's a horrible person,' I emphasized. 'She has an illness that can be treated.' Elana continues to refuse treatment, but Russ no longer feels he's a bad son because his mother is still drinking. Recently, when his mother announced that she wanted to move in with them, Russ told her unequivocally no.

"Joy, for her part, had to stop being a doormat. She was either meek and apologetic toward Russ or nagging and complaining. A reflective-listening technique (one person talks, the other listens without interrupting and then repeats what the partner has said)

enabled Joy to say, 'I need you to be present when your mother is with Lauren' or 'I want you to call if you'll be late getting home.' Russ was able to say, 'We need to work out a schedule so that my mother sees Lauren more often.'

"I suggested that Russ give Joy more notice of a trip, so they can talk about ways to ease her fears. Joy realized that she used to punish Russ for leaving her, and she has worked hard to master her anxieties.

"Russ admitted that he was afraid to talk to Lauren about her grandmother's alcoholism, but he understood how important it was to bring family secrets out into the open. Since he felt less shame about it, he was able to tackle the subject.

"Russ and Joy have made great progress. No longer caught in a tug-of-war between his wife and his mother, Russ has more energy to devote to his wife. Joy knows that to some extent she simply has to learn to live with an intrusive mother-in-law. But with new skills - and the support of her husband - she can do.