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### Ruler of The Roost

When two individuals eventually join together in holy matrimony, a balancing act often emerges to determine who will be the head of the new family. Perhaps it will be equally shared, or perhaps the pair will vie over which of them gets to choose what Netflix show to watch, what color the drapes will be, and on the tug-of-war goes. However, a third contender is rarely far off and the pair is sorrowfully unprepared for what is to come. The third individual will often be coated in sugar, doused in flowery words, and have a mask thicker than the makeup she painted on that morning before coming to visit. You cannot predict how your own third contender will affect your marriage dynamic, until in the thick of it; by then, it could be too late. Who could or even should lay claim to leading the family?

The relationship trope of a newly-married spouse and their new mother-in-law is so legendary, it has worked its way into the fabric of our oldest fairytales. In the version of “Sleeping Beauty” by Charles Perrault, the jealous mother-in-law literally tries to eat her grandchildren because she is so upset with her son’s choice of wife. Like a fairytale, you may also not take the relationship as seriously as you need to. Villainizing a mother-in-law is easy. Many if not most individuals will experience having one, but whether that relationship will thrive or take a dive is a complex matter, dependent on all

involved parties. Overbearing, invasive, controlling, manipulative, all these words come to mind. Could it be that a mother-in-law is lonely, misses her children, wants to contribute to the new family, and is trying to offer her own guidance and foresight?

It is not easy to step back and see these traits, especially when in the thick of it yourself. I have witnessed many things that make me want to label my mother-in-law this way. I am sure my husband could say the same of my mother in some ways too. But is it possible to take on the challenge of empathizing with the villain, rather than casting them aside? I cannot say that I am willing to put aside every part of my own needs and just let my mother-in-law waltz all over my boundaries, but perhaps, in examining the dynamic, I can come to a better understanding of her, even if I do ultimately say she isn't allowed to control my household.

A single woman, raising three children on her own, is undoubtedly one of the strongest forces to be reckoned with. She had to pull through thick and thin to ensure she provided for her children, and in being their only provider, a strong bond is inevitable. It would be jarring to have that bond pushed aside when her children grow up, move out, and find partners of their own, while she is left wondering who will be there for her. When I examine my husband's family, his mother's plight of sacrificing so much for him, then having him leave to choose me, there is an echo of heartbreak I feel for her. I can understand why she would cling to her son. In a way, he had to be a surrogate spouse to her. When a new woman has come along to take him away, she likely feels a profound sense of loss. Her way of life for the past couple decades is now being uprooted and nothing is wrong with feeling that loss. So when she approaches

me, with anger and accusations, my instinct is to lash back, but my that echo stays my words long enough to try hearing her; the real her.

It is not right for me to villainize her for her very human emotions, just as it is wrong for her to villainize me for mine. My own mother cannot stand her mother-in-law and refuses to visit her. My father has no choice but to be close with his mother-in-law because she has become dependent on my family in her old age. There are concessions I simply cannot make to please my mother-in-law, and I would never ask for her to change just to please me.

Butting heads is normal for any relationship, but whether you choose to partake in a fairytale cast with those around you is ultimately your own decision. You cannot control others, and must let that go and decide what you will be. Just as the individuals being married must put aside their differences to be united, so too jealousy, anger, and manipulation must go. There is a point one must agree to disagree with an in-law, just to have a peaceful (and hopefully enjoyable) relationship. The dynamic is a riddle unique to each and every person, but I believe the real answer of who, or rather what should rule the roost, is empathy, love for our common bonds and most of all communication.