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Once a Boss, Always a Boss

A mother and war correspondent has a hard time letting go even when she's half a world away.

By [JUDITH MATLOFF](#)

My work writing about conflict often takes me to nasty places and I'd rather not count the number of close misses. Machetes, landmines, missiles -- they're all part of the job. Yet what keeps me up at night is not gunfire, but whether my kid back home is doing his homework.

Take a recent assignment in Kashmir. The photographer and I stumbled upon a riot, and found ourselves in the midst of youths hurling rocks at each other. When the police intervened with tear gas, we bolted for the hotel. The photographer had to get eye wash fast.

While he went upstairs to look for the drops, I stopped by the lobby business center to read my emails. There was something about a Pokemon party -- could my son, Anton, attend? Another mother asked about a sleepover. My suggestion for Friday night sounded just fine. She'd pencil it in. Then there was a query from the accountant about our tax returns.

As I fired off replies, my eyes drifted to a missive from my husband, John. How dare I message the school to confirm that he had paid next year's tuition. Of course he had -- early. Why couldn't I just let go?

His rebuke gave me pause. Admittedly it felt a bit surrealistic to come from street fighting in the Himalayas to arrange our first grader's schedule 10 and a half time zones away. John was well within his rights to be mad. My husband is a thoroughly grown up man who supervises 35 people at work. He's also capable of making pasta and does more than his share of household chores. He even bakes his own bread! Yet I can't stop micromanaging him when I'm on the road. For this, I married a man who rightly calls himself a feminist?

My tendency to meddle from afar has spawned some ridiculous situations. A recent flight to the Ukraine was almost missed because I *had* to change the pet Chinchilla's water before leaving for the airport. No matter that even the 7-year-old could have done the chore. And who could forget that scramble all over a refugee camp in Africa to find a satellite telephone? I hadn't spoken to my son in two days and was convinced that he was traumatized from the lack of contact. When I finally got my hands on the only phone on the Angola-Zambia border -- it cost \$15 a minute to borrow from the U.N. -- the voice on the other end was of a well-adjusted boy happily in Dad's hands.

"I'm in a play meeting," Anton replied calmly. "Please call back later."

This compulsion to confine my husband to the domestic sidelines is a source of mystery to anyone who knows my family. I return from overseas assignments to a spotless house and a serene son, not the tear-streaked wreck I envisioned from afar. The bills are up-to-date and the fridge full of fresh vegetables.

In contrast, John comes home from trips to encounter a frantic single parent -- that would be me -- who can't find the kid's homework and has forgotten, once again, to buy milk.

Lest you think I'm nuts, domestic control freaks are not uncommon among my circle of professional women. To be sure, there are plenty of husbands who can run companies but not an impromptu game of tag. More often than not, though, women feel they have to set things up no matter what. One friend laboriously prepares dinners for her children ahead of the nights that she works. That's ridiculous. Her husband actually likes to cook, and surely he can defrost chicken nuggets. Then there are the women who hire babysitters on the Saturdays when their husbands are in charge, "just in case." I won't even begin to count the number of needless reminder notes and voicemails about such obvious matters as brushed teeth and wearing a jacket in winter.

Soul searching with a couple friends about this henpecking led to the following theories:

- We are so hardwired by our feminist mothers to be independent that we can't accept relying on someone else -- for anything.
- We feel guilty about not making as much money as our men, so we try to inflate our domestic worth.
- Once a boss, always a boss.

Number three really applies to me. A former incarnation saw me running a news bureau and earning the bread while my husband happily freelanced. We switched roles when Anton was born, but seven years later, my mindset is still having trouble catching up. Rather than accept that I've married a housetrained man, I treat him like a member of staff.

To be sure, delegating was never my forte. I was the sort of supervisor who bothered staff every half hour to make sure everything was fine. I lingered late in the office for fear everything would fall apart otherwise. Put bluntly, I need to feel self-important. If everything goes smoothly in my absence I could be out of a job, right?

The irony is that we over-concerned mothers are sending the wrong message to the kids. One justification for doing this macho reporting instead of spending time with Anton is that I'm setting a wonderful example. Mama works too! She's so accomplished! But by dominating housewifery we're subliminally suggesting that fathers aren't cut out for the role.

Of course, none of this makes life any easier for my husband. Nor, as he grows older, our son. Calling on arrival in Ukraine -- to ensure Anton had reviewed his flashcards of soft vowels -- I recognized that weary "Oh, knock it off" tone.

"Geez, Mom," he sighed. "Don't you have enough to worry about?"

Judith Matloff is the author of "Home Girl -- Building a Dream House on a Lawless Block." (Random House)

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