

MOTHERS-IN-LAW, FACT AND FICTION

By Fred Hobbs

Who was (or is) the worst mother-in-law ever? That is a question that can be answered best and with authority by the wives or husbands involved in the particular domestic triangle being examined.

Initially, my wife and I avoided much of the potential for unpleasant mother-in-law encounters by the luck of geography. My mother lived in California, hers in Illinois, each several hundred miles away from Denver.

Being the youngest of five kids in my family, I benefited or more especially, my wife benefited even more from the fact that my mother had sons and daughters-in-law experiences before we got married. My mother was probably more skilled in “mother-in-lawing” and less involved in the process by then.

My wife’s mother, Helen, was another story. She was an immigrant from Ireland who endured some hardships early in life. As was the custom, her older brother inherited the family’s assets and she had to make her own way in the world. At age 20 Helen emigrated to the U.S. and settled near relatives in Chicago. My wife had a younger brother, Larry, who was clearly the favorite in the Irish eyes of his mother. Consequently as time passed my mother-in-law began largely ignoring my wife and me while doting on Larry and his wife, June.

Larry and June are friendly and congenial; we have enjoyed many pleasant visits with them over the years. Still, my wife was hurt by the ongoing inattention of my mother-in-law, whose actions eventually morphed into outright hostility for no apparent reason.

In an ironic twist, my criticisms of my mother-in-law centered not on how she treated me, but how she behaved toward her own daughter. Helen certainly doesn’t qualify as the worst mother-in-law ever. But somehow she was unable to be a truly loving mother to the woman who was definitely the love of my life.

This made it impossible for me to have great affection or admiration for my mother-in-law.

So, who overall *are* the worst mothers-in-law ever? Well, maybe they are among the ones who inspired this sample of the omnipresent list of mother-in-law jokes:

I really DO have a soft spot for my mother-in-law. It’s out in the garden behind the garage.

My mother-in-law is banned internationally from playing poker; she keeps all the chips on her shoulder.

I wouldn’t say that my mother-in-law was ugly, but every time she puts on lipstick, it tries to crawl back in the tube.

And consider this one a bit closer to a real situation. I haven’t spoken to my mother-in-law for two years. We haven’t quarreled. I just don’t like to interrupt her.