



# Mistress in the Den

WHEN ONE COUPLE HAS A CHILD AND GETS A NEW TV IN THE SAME WEEK, IT TAKES SOME TIME TO ADJUST. **BY TRACY MCARDLE**

**I**n the middle of my emergency C-section, I opened my eyes and asked about the TV. “What did she say?” the anesthesiologist asked my husband.

“She said, ‘Who’s going to be there for the flat-screen delivery?’” he told her.

It was January, and snow was expected. I had suddenly realized that because I was giving birth, we wouldn’t be home. This meant the expensive, three-years-in-the-purchase-decision plasma television would be sitting helplessly in our driveway! Why this occurred to me as my abdomen was being sliced open I’m not sure. When people ask about my labor, I have to admit I wasn’t really there. After being artificially induced with Pitocin, rocketing into fast, hard contractions, caving to painkillers, then an epidural, and

pushing for two hours before my caesarean, the fact that I was worried about the new TV tells you something about my mental state.

Our first day home, resting in bed with our son in the bassinet beside me, I heard a truck outside. The TV men were here. Like most things involving home electronics, it took longer than anticipated. A lot longer. This wouldn’t have been a problem before, but I hadn’t counted on being unable to shower, feed myself, or think rationally for a week. My husband disappeared downstairs, and after a couple of hours, I screamed his name in that nightmare wife tone other wives use.

He appeared in the nursery, where I was breastfeeding for the billionth time. “I need to eat!” I wailed like a cavewoman.

He looked surprised – and even a little scared – and he ran to the kitchen to whip up a turkey club. “I need to shower,” I barked after inhaling the sandwich. “Why are you installing the TV today?” Suddenly I understood what Brooke Shields was talking about.

After a week, we settled a bit, the baby and I living in our bedroom while Nat ran the household and his business all day, and then retreated to the den, where the flat-screen waited for him like a shiny, new, extremely accommodating mistress. Exhausted, he would fall asleep in front of the giant screen – sports, fishing shows, and action flicks lulling him gently, with high-definition colors and sounds, into grown men’s lullaby land. I went to bed alone. Sometimes I woke up alone, too. It was as

if my husband were having an affair, but the mistress had more features and lived in our house.

The baby would wake for his midnight feeding, which Nat could do, since I was pumping. I’d hobble downstairs and switch the screen off, Nat’s eyes opening in surprise and fear as I pried the remote from his hand. I began to resent the flat-screen, which had clearly replaced me as a source of comfort and nourishment now that I was caring for our baby.

“Honey,” I said one day after calculating that I could keep my voice relatively stable, “can we have one night a week with no television?” He agreed. I made an effort to prepare decent meals, figuring that my grandmother’s Bolognese sauce would be too good to eat in front of the screen. But most of the time I was too tired to cook, and if Nat made dinner in addition to dealing with my mood swings, well, I felt he’d earned the right to eat wherever he wanted.

Friends of ours, an older

couple whose children have left the nest, told us that marriage is like a “U.” A couple starts at the bottom, together, and as the kids take over their lives, their paths diverge as they spend less (or no) time alone together. As the children become independent, the partners go back down the U and rediscover life as a couple. And I realized, so what if there’s a giant plasma screen in the middle of our marriage for now? It’s better than gambling, drinking, or other women.

When my parents came to baby-sit so we could spend an afternoon together, my husband introduced my father to the flat-screen. We came home to find Mom and Dad nestled like teenagers in front of *Dances With Wolves*, our son asleep upstairs. The next week, my father had one installed. Sorry, Mom, back to the top of the U for you.

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