

Mom on Strike

Fed up with her kids' messy behavior, Tova Sobel stages a one-woman walkout.

by Lee Barnathan

Tova Sobel of West Hills never has considered her life a sitcom, but like TV moms Lucy Ricardo, Carol Brady and Roseanne Conner, she turned the tables on her unsuspecting family by going on strike.

Hilarity ensued! But the Sobel family discovered — in two weeks, as opposed to 22 minutes — how important the female lead is.

Let's meet the cast of characters. There's Tova Sobel — mother and star. It was her actions in response to her perceived lack of appreciation by her family that started things.

Doug Sobel is her husband. He works in the IT industry. They have three children: Ilan, 13, Jacob, 10, and Hannah, 8.

The scene opens the weekend before Mother's Day. An open suitcase belonging to Hannah sits in the foyer, where it has sat for four days. Tova said she continually has tripped over it.

"I said to Hannah, 'When you get home from school, I want you to put your stuff away,'" Tova said she told her daughter.

Came the reply: "But I didn't put it there."

Tova said she told Hannah, "I don't care. It's your stuff."

Hannah repeated that she didn't put it there (in fact, Doug had left it there after picking her up from her friend's house where she had spent the night).

"I said, 'You know what? I've had it,'" Tova said. "I've done plenty of moving stuff that wasn't mine, and I'm sick of hearing, 'It isn't mine' or 'I didn't put it there.' You don't want me to move it? Fine. I'm going on strike. I do plenty of stuff in this house that isn't mine. You're all on your own."

At 7:45 a.m., Doug received his usual phone call from his wife. But the content was different.

During the call, two thoughts entered his mind. First, he wanted to know what the kids had done. Second, he realized, "Now, I have to come home from working after nine or 10 hours and cook dinner. I knew it wasn't going to be fun.... I need to eat dinner. The kids need to eat dinner; lunch and breakfasts, too."

In fact, Doug had angered Tova the night before, complaining that she mixed the chili

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West Hills mom-on-strike Tova Sobel pickets in front of her home.

con carne with the rice, and she knows he doesn't like his textures mixed.

So, she went on strike, with no predetermined length.

She would still drive her children to school, baseball practice and scouts, but nothing else: no cooking, cleaning, laundry, preparing lunches.

Doug forbade them from playing in the park, enjoying playdates or going to Chuck E.

Cheese.

Hannah and Jacob protested. Hannah said it wasn't fair.

Jacob said, "But it's not me."

Ilan said nothing because, Tova said, "Ilan knows better than to say anything when I'm in that mood."

Ilan admitted later that he was surprised. "I think she would've done it for a day or two and then she'd stop," he said.

After shock came disbelief. A child who asked her to make lunch got a large smile and this response: "Nope, on strike."

They'd try again.

"C'mon!"

Came the response, with the same smile: "Nope, on strike. Ask your brother or sister."

The man of the house said he felt frustrated.

"It kind of sucked," Doug said. "I had to make sure I had to wash clothes because I needed underwear and clean shirts."

He made sure the children increased their efforts. "I got on the kids to put the dishes in the dishwasher [and] put stuff away. More than usual."

Since he is the oldest child, much of the work fell to Ilan. He had to reach the high places and run interference on his sister. Hannah called her mother often when Tova left the house to ask when she was coming home, to report on what was happening and to ask a question that she could have found the answer to by asking a sibling.

"I made sure she didn't do that," Ilan said. "Now I say, 'You are not allowed to talk on the phone,' and then I hide the phones.... She yells at me, but better at me than Mom."

For her part, Hannah said she felt bad for her father because he had to cook all the meals. And she eventually put away her suitcase.

Tova said she enjoyed the time off, only having to cook, clean and launder for herself. She likened it to being a bachelorette living in a house with four roommates.

"I had fun. I read some really good books," she said.

But Jacob didn't find the strike particularly funny. The only positive was that his mother didn't ground him.

Tova told any mother who would listen about her strike. Their typical response: "Wow! You're really going to follow through with this stuff?"

"You betcha!" she told them.

"We all thought about it, but I'm the only one who followed through."

It took two weeks, but Tova finally ended her strike after seeing how her family adapted. A month later, the house remains cleaner. When she tells someone to pick up something, they do it faster with less arguing or bickering.

Ilan thanks his mother more. Jacob will do what is asked quicker.

"I don't make her mad. Otherwise, she will go on strike and I will not like it," Jacob said.

Doug plays the fatherly enforcer, reminding the kids that their parents are not maids.

And Tova feels far more appreciated than before.

"Absolutely a great learning experience," she said. "It's not what I learned. It's what the kids learned." ●