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This is an excerpt from Susan Maushart's book

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONNECT

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How three totally wired teenagers (and a mother who slept with her iPhone) pulled the plug on their technology and lived to tell the tale.

Introduction

Raising three teenagers as a single parent is no Contiki Cruise at the best of times. But when I decided we should all set sail for a six-month screen-free adventure, it suddenly came closer to *Mutiny on the Bounty*, with me in the Bogart role. There were lots of reasons why we pulled the plug on our electronic media ... or, I should say why I did, because heaven knows my children would have sooner volunteered to go without food, water or hair products. At ages fourteen, fifteen and eighteen, my daughters and my son don't use media. They *inhabit* media. And they do so exactly as fish inhabit a pond. Gracefully. Unblinkingly. And utterly without consciousness or curiosity as to how they got there. They don't remember a time before email, or instant messaging, or Google. Even the media of their own childhood – VHS and dial-up, Nintendo 64 and 'cordful' phones – they regard as relics, as quaint as inkwells. They collectively refer to civilisation pre-high-definition flat-screen as 'the black and white days'.

My kids – like yours, I'm guessing – are part of a generation cut its teeth, literally and figuratively, on a keyboard, learning to say 'puter' along with 'mama,' 'juice' and 'now!' They're kids who've had cellphones and wireless internet longer than they've had molars. Who multi-task their schoolwork alongside five or six other electronic inputs, to the syncopated beat of the Instant Messenger pulsing insistently like some distant tribal tom-tom.

Wait a minute. Did I say they do their schoolwork like that? Correction. They do their *life* like that. When my children laugh, they don't say 'ha ha'. They say 'LOL'. In fact, they conjugate it. ('LOL at this picture before I PhotoShopped your nose, Mum!') They download movies and TV shows as casually as you or I might switch on the radio. And when I remind them piracy is a crime, they look at one another and go 'LOL'. ('Aargh, me hearty!' someone adds, as if to an imaginary parrot, and they LOL again, louder this time.) These are kids who shrug when they lose their iPods, with all 5,000 tunes and Lord-knows-what in the way of video clips, feature films and 'TV' shows (like, who watches TV on a television anymore?). 'There's plenty more

where that came from,' their attitude says. And the most infuriating thing of all? They're right. The digital content that powers their world, like matter itself, can never truly be destroyed. Like the Magic Pudding of Australian legend, it's a dessert bar that never runs out of cheesecake. There's so much that's wonderful, and at the same time nauseating, about that.

The Winter of Our Disconnect – a.k.a. The Experiment (as we all eventually came to call it) – was in some ways an accident waiting to happen. Over a period of years, I watched and worried as our media began to function as a force field separating my children from what my son, only half-ironically, called RL (Real Life). But, to be honest, the teenagers weren't the only ones with dependency issues.

Although a relatively recent arrival to the global village, I'd been known to abuse information too. (Sneaking my iPhone into the toilet? Did I have no self respect?) As a journalist, it was easy to hide my habit, but deep down I knew I was hooked.

The Winter of Our Disconnect started out as a kind of purge. It ended up as so much more. Long story short: our digital detox messed with our heads, our hearts and our homework. It changed the way we ate and the way we slept, the way we 'friended', fought, planned and played. It altered the very taste and texture of our family life. Hell, it even altered the mouth-feel. In the end, our family's self-imposed exile from the Information Age changed our lives indelibly – and infinitely for the better. This book is our travelogue, our apologia, our *Pilgrim's Progress* slash *Walden Pond* slash *Lonely Planet Guide to Google-free Living*.

At the simplest level, *The Winter of Our Disconnect* is the story of how one highly idiosyncratic family survived six months of wandering through the desert, digitally speaking, and the lessons we learned about ourselves and our technology along the way. At the same time, our story is a channel, if you'll excuse the expression, to a wider view – into the impact of new media on the lives of families, into the very heart of the meaning of home.

'Only connect,' implored E. M. Forster in his acclaimed novel *Howards End*, published a century ago. It must have seemed like such a good idea at the time. In 1910, the global village was still farmland. The telephone had only recently outgrown the ridicule that first greeted it. The first commercial radio station was still a World War away. It had been a scant sixty years since the debut of the telegraph. ('What hath god wrought?' inventor Samuel F. B. Morse brooded morosely in the world's first text message.) Ninety-nine years and one trillion web pages later, 'only connect' is a goal we have achieved with a vengeance. So much so that our biggest challenge today may be finding the moral courage to log off.

Today, some 93 per cent of teenagers are online. Three quarters own an iPod or mp3 player, 60 per cent have their own computer, and 71 per cent a cellphone, according to figures from the 2007 Pew Internet & American Life Project. But the most provocative statistics are those that show how *intensely* our children interact with their media. In a large-scale study young people who use media, conducted in 2005 – ancient history already – up to a third told the US-based

Kaiser Family Foundation they were using multiple electronic devices simultaneously 'most of the time'.¹ An average American teenager spends 8.5 hours a day in some form of mass-mediated interaction. That's more time than he or she will spend doing anything else, including sleeping. Because media use in families is directly correlated with income, the figures are higher still in households at the more affluent end of the socio-economic spectrum, and where parents are more highly educated.²

For Generation M, as the Kaiser report dubbed these eight-to-eighteen year-olds, media use is not an activity – like exercise, or playing Monopoly, or bickering with your brother in the back seat. It's an environment: pervasive, invisible, shrink-wrapped around pretty much everything kids do and say and think. How adaptive an environment is the question – and the answer, not surprisingly, seems to depend entirely on whom you ask. The Pew Project found that, among teens, 88 per cent are convinced that technology makes their lives *easier*. A decidedly more ambivalent 69 per cent of parents say the same – although two-thirds also make some effort to regulate their children's use of media in some way (rules about safe sites, file sharing, time use, etc.).³

Yet an astonishing 30 per cent of parents believe media have no effect on their children one way or the other.⁴ Maybe that's wishful thinking. On the other hand, maybe it's not wishful enough. 'One way or the other' – to me it's like saying the food we eat, or the air we breathe, or the communities we live in have no effect on us one way or the other. Or it could be these parents simply had a hard time imagining life outside the technological bubble – and if so, who could blame them? Before undertaking this project, I had a hard time imagining it myself. The question of whether communication technology makes our lives easier is much more specific, and less difficult to answer. Or is it?

When I first read the Pew research, it reminded me of a study I read in 2007 in the *British Journal of Sociology* on the impact of domestic technology on housework.⁵ Among other findings, the researchers discovered that having a washing machine and a dryer actually *increased* the time families – okay, women – spent on laundry tasks. For a start, people with dryers wash more clothes. And although a washing machine definitely makes it easier to get dirty clothes clean, it also raises the bar on the underlying question of 'how clean is clean enough?' The new technology, in other words, solves an existing problem but in the process it creates a new and improved problem, and more laundry. It's a tale that the history of technological innovation tells us over and over again, as if on an endless loop of tape. The promise of 'better living through technology!' – and you can take your pick which one – is *always* a loaded deal, and often a paradoxical one as well. It tends to be both true and untrue in equal proportions. Our technologies invariably start out as responses to a need. But over time, and in subtle, unpredictable ways, they come to redefine those needs. So ... how connected, I found myself wondering, is connected enough? As a social scientist, journalist and mother, I've always been an enthusiastic user of information technology (and I'm awfully fond of my dryer too). But I was also growing sceptical of the redemptive power of media to improve our lives – let alone to make them 'easier' or simplify them. Like many other parents,

I'd noticed that the more we seemed to communicate as individuals, the less we seemed to cohere as a family. (Talk about a disconnect!)

There were contradictions on a broader scale too – and they have been widely noted. That the more facts we have at our fingertips, the less we seem to know. That the 'convenience' of messaging media (email, SMS, IM) consumes ever-larger and more indigestible chunks of our time and headspace. That as a culture we are practically swimming in entertainment, yet remain more depressed than any people who have ever lived. Basically, I started considering a scenario E. M. Forster never anticipated: the possibility that the more we connect, the further we may drift, the more fragmented we may become. Or not. Because, just to complicate matters, I happen to believe that the possibilities held out to us by media are hugely exciting. I am not a Golden-Ager, lamenting the decline of the candle in a neon-lit world. Not in the least. I love my gadgets (and I've got a gazillion of 'em to prove it). I think my life is enhanced by technology. And I know the world at large is. Yet the idea that there might be a media equivalent of what micro-finance guru David Bussau calls 'an economics of enough' continued to occupy my thoughts.

It was an intriguing set of questions - and I was pretty sure I would *not* find the answers on Wikipedia. But how on earth could I test my hypotheses-slash-hunches? That's when I remembered Barry Marshall – the Australian microbiologist who won a Nobel Prize in 2005 for the simple but astounding discovery that stomach ulcers are caused by bacteria. Not stress, or spicy foods, or excess acid. Germs. Plain old germs. In retrospect, it seems so obvious. In the early eighties, Marshall's theory was dismissed as outlandish – especially by the pharmaceutical companies who underwrite the clinical trials by which medical research is tested. Frustrated but undaunted, Marshall decided to take matters into his own hands ... indeed, into his own stomach lining. He swallowed some of the bacteria in question and waited to see whether he would develop an ulcer. He did. And the rest - give or take a decade of intensive further research – is history. So it occurred to me: if Marshall could use his own life as a petri dish, why couldn't I?

(Gulp.)

Chapter One:

Who We Are, and Why We Pressed 'Pause'

I love technology
 But not as much as you, you see.
 But I still love technology,

Always and forever, Kip's Wedding Song, Napoleon Dynamite (2004)

When I first announced my intention to pull the plug on our family's entire armoury of electronic weaponry – from the ittiest bittiest iPod shuffle to my son's seriously souped-up gaming PC (the computing equivalent of a Dodge Ram) – my three kids didn't blink an eye. Looking back, I can understand why. They didn't hear me. Well, they are teenagers. And they were busy. Uploading photos from last night's gathering, stalking a potential boyfriend's ex-girlfriend's Facebook friends, watching Odie Who We Are, and Why We Pressed 'Pause' the Talking Pug on YouTube ('I ruuuu ooooo,' he howls to David Letterman). 'Guys, are you listening?' I persisted. 'Can't you see we're doing homework, Mum?' my son replied irritably.

To be fair, it was the kind of thing I say a lot. Such as, 'That's it – you're grounded for life!' or 'Wait till your father gets home, young lady' (and I've been divorced for fourteen years). It probably sounded to them like just another in a long line of empty threats. It even sounded that way to me, to be honest. The urge to do a full-scale digital detox had been building for years. But it was more in the nature of a wistful but essentially ridiculous fantasy – like having a torrid affair with the Dalai Lama, or learning to tie a scarf four ways.

And then I reread Walden. (Note to self: friends don't let friends reread Thoreau during an oestrogen low.) Walden – the story of the most famous stint in rehab in literary history – is my favourite book in the whole world, and I try to read it at least as often as I have a pap smear. I love Walden for lots of reasons, but mostly for its economy – the way it distils life and language to its most intoxicating essentials. You probably already know that it was written by transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who left his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts in 1844 to conduct 'an experiment in living' in the woods near Walden Pond. He lived there for two years in a wooden hut he built with his own hands, subsisting mainly on a monkish diet of wheaten cakes and pond fish. No neighbours. No running water. And, needless to say, no kids.

To be honest, I'd had been thinking about running away to the woods myself a lot towards the end of 2008. It wasn't just the three teenagers I was wrangling: Anni, who'd just turned eighteen (terrifyingly, the legal drinking age in Western Australia, where we live); Bill, fifteen, the man of the house (in his own mind, at least); and Sussy, the baby, fourteen ('Juliet's age when she got married, Mum,' as she constantly reminded me).

They were at tricky ages, to be sure. But then, at age fifty, so was I. A career journalist, I was now part of the brand-new podcasting platform for ABC Radio. I loved the challenge of spitting out a weekly program, and I especially loved mastering the digital technology that modern broadcasting entails. What I didn't love was the huge time pressure. I was away from home more than I'd ever been since I'd started having babies, and the sense that I was losing control of my house and its contents – i.e. my kids – was ominous. At the same time, our media habits had reached a scary kind of crescendo. It wasn't just the way the girls were becoming mere accessories of their own social-networking profiles, as if real life were just a dress rehearsal (or, more accurately, a photo op) for the next status update; or the fact that my son's domestic default mode was set to 'illegal download', and his homework, which he'd insisted he needed a quadcore gaming computer and high-speed broadband to complete, was getting lost in transmission – although that was all part of it.

Thinking back, I realise there was no one breaking point, no single epiphany or a hal moment, but rather a series of such moments: scenes and stills I can scroll through in no particular order of importance, like a digital slideshow set to shuffle.

The abiding image of the back of Bill's head, for example, as he sat, enthroned before his PC in the region formerly known as the family room. Or the soundtrack of the conversations we'd been having for the last year or so, the ones that began with me saying anything at all ('Have you done your homework?' 'Are you still enrolled in high school?' 'Can you please put down your weapon and press "pause" now? It's dinnertime') and ended with him replying, 'Yeah. What?'

Maybe it was the evening the videoclip playing on the corner of Sussy's desktop unexpectedly waved and called out gaily, 'Hi, Susan!' It turned out to be a school friend streaming herself live on webcam via Skype. When my vital signs restabilised, I moved swiftly from simple fear to profound panic. What other visitors were logging onto her bedroom, in real time, full colour and stereo sound, while I slept?

Anni generally hit the trends first and most furiously. Always precocious, she'd been the first in her school to launch into MySpace way back in Year 10. (Not content with her own profile, she'd speedily created one for Jesus Christ [Relationship Status: It's Complicated] and another for Rupert, our pug [Favourite Movie: Men in Black].) At eighteen, she was still bingeing on social networking – Facebook being her drug of choice – and was also prone to sudden-onset gaming benders. Most recently, it was the online multiplayer word game called TextTwist. I'd watch her shoulders tense as she stabbed the keys with a viciousness normally reserved for conversations about curfews. And when she started gaining on her goal to become the world's number-one player, her jubilation had (for me) a disturbing edge. Watching her rapt, LCD-lit eyes, I couldn't help but think of Nero updating his status while Rome burned. My own patterns were getting a little weird too. I never thought I'd be the kind of single mother who'd openly sleep with her iPhone, but . . . yeah. (I told myself it was no different from reading a book in bed – which, if I hadn't been watching feature-length movies and shopping for

underwear, may well have been true.) In fact, if I didn't drag my laptop, a pair of speakers, my digital recorder and a camera in too, I sometimes felt a little lonely. I told myself I was just doing my job. But there were times I looked less like a journalist than some demented IT technician in a nightie. Good times, good times.

However, it wasn't until I started surfing the net, replying to text messages, listening to podcasts and on one memorable occasion doing a live radio interview – all the while 'otherwise engaged' in the loo – that I admitted I had problem. I was using media to (gulp) self-medicate. I was the Amy Winehouse of Windows Live Messenger. Was it time to check myself in to rehab?

There was other stuff that was bothering me too. We were eating meals as a family less and less often. Never, if you want to get technical about it. The girls were either bingesnacking or experimenting with weird diets. For days on end I swear Sussy ate nothing but condiments. Bill – a.k.a. the Cereal Killer – seemed to survive largely on Weet-Bix and instant noodles, foods that shared a common, disturbing resemblance to roof insulation.

They were still having friends over, but more and more their socialising took the form of little knots of spectators gathered around the cheery glow of YouTube – or, worse, dispersed into separate corners, each to his own device. Their sleep patterns were heading south too – hardly surprising given the alerts from their three cellphones were intermittently audible through the night, chirping like a cadre of evil crickets.

And there were other things they'd hit the pause button on. Music – either playing it or listening to it as anything other than the background buzz to an instant messaging exchange. Books. Exercise. Conversation. And that other thing. Whaddaya call it? Oh, yeah. Life.

Although my own media habits were hardly what you'd call immaculate, I could at least remember a time when things had been different. Simpler. More direct. Less tangled up with freaking USB cables. I found myself fantasising about what life would be like in our house if I pulled the plug once and for all, hurtling us cold turkey into wi-fi withdrawal – myself and my omnipresent information IV included. And at that stage, it was a fantasy. As a journalist and author, my livelihood depends on technology. Equally important, I am not the sort of person who goes in for the whole 'good old days' schtick. People who wax nostalgic about a golden age of any kind, whether technological or political or cultural, have always seriously annoyed me. It's like listening to my mother talking about going to the movies for a quarter and having change left over to buy a hamburger and a Coke and, for all I know, stock options in MGM. The way I see it, it's hard enough to live in the present moment without somebody trying to drag you back to some sepia-tinged, hyper-idealised pseudotopia that is usually three parts 'La Vie en Rose' to one part irritable bowel syndrome. Every mythical 'golden age', I have always believed, was exactly that. Mythical.

I grew up in the sixties and seventies, and although I have fond memories of *I Love Lucy*,

instant mashed potatoes and the Latin mass (in no particular order of importance), I do NOT believe my own childhood was superior to that of my own children. Parents and kids lived in two separate worlds in those days. There had its pluses, sure – like when you jumped on your bike and went to play at your friend's house till puberty, and nobody panicked. But it also had its minuses. Like most everybody else in my generation, I watched way too much dumb black-and-white TV, ate ridiculous snackfood – come on, aerosol cheese? – and wouldn't have dreamed of confining what I really felt and thought to a grown-up.

So nostalgia for 'the way we were' isn't one of my weaknesses. I don't believe in avoiding your own reality, and I don't believe in the healing power of deprivation. The temptation to fix our family's discontents by ripping the modem from its socket smacked of both these fallacies. Plus, I was menopausal. Sweet reason was not exactly what you'd call my strong suit.

If it hadn't been for Thoreau – or, more accurately, Sherman Paul, who wrote the introduction to my well-thumbed Riverside edition – I would probably have put away the idea with the rest of my hare-brained maternal schemes. It was Paul's succinct explanation of why Thoreau took to the woods in the first place that was the tipping point. 'He had reduced the means of life,' Paul had written, 'not because he wanted to prove he could go without them, or to disclaim their value in enriching life, but because they were usually factitious – they robbed one of life itself.' Thoreau's inspired mania for simplifying life, in other words, was just like Michaelangelo's gift for 'simplifying' a chunk of stone: 'I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.' It was an act of creation and courage – not destruction, not fear. By isolating himself at Walden Pond, Thoreau hadn't run away from life. He'd run towards it. Why couldn't we leave our lives of quiet, digital desperation and do the same?

Now that I'd done the reframe – it wasn't something I'd be doing to my family, it was something I'd be doing for them! – I couldn't wait to begin. There was only one thing stopping me. Oh, all right. Three things. * A family uniform involving brown felt and Velcro; eating breakfast for dinner and dinner for breakfast, etc. Anni, Bill and Sussy, like most teenagers, live in a pre-Copernican universe. They are convinced the sun revolves around them. As their mother, I have done little to challenge this view. So when I finally worked up the courage to spring The Experiment on them for real, I chose my moment carefully. The stakeholders would need to be in a good mood. There would need to be lots of distractions: lights, music, refined sugar, whatever it took. And there would need to be witnesses.

Gracetown, Western Australia – go on, Google it – is a remote and ridiculously tiny coastal community on the southwest coast of Australia. It is renowned for its jaw-dropping Indian Ocean beaches, fearsome surfbreaks and curious lack of normal utilities. Gracetown is 'electrified', but has no municipal water or gas supply – each house has its own rainwater tank and gas bottles – and no cellphone or internet coverage. A persistent teenager climbing to the cliff side community's highest peak might get reception for a minute or two – and of course they're *all* persistent – but, that aside, we're talking Walden Pond with an Aussie accent. So choosing to spend Christmas at Gracetown with our BFF (Best Friend Family) the

Revells wasn't exactly a coincidence.

We'd arrived a few days early to settle into the rhythm. I'd insisted that everybody pack light, even the girls. It was one roll-on trunk of hair products each, I told them sternly, and no exceptions. And when Bill asked me if I'd seen his Nintendo DS, I thought, okay, this is my moment. I took a deep breath, looked him in the eye . . . and lied. I said I had no idea where it was. I had, in fact, hidden it at the bottom of a box of disused printer drivers the previous night, may the Good Lord have mercy upon my soul. 'Let's read books in the car, honey,' I suggested brightly. He muttered something under his breath. It was either 'good' or 'gay', and I was pretty sure I knew which. In the end, I hauled out the iTrip, and we listened to podcasts on the three-hour car journey south – public radio WBEZ Chicago's 'Th is American Life' (my favourite radio show on any hemisphere), 'Hamish and Andy', 'The Moth'. Just being in a small space, listening to the same medium, made it feel like an old-fashioned family vacation already. But in a good way, in a good way.

Maybe I'd choked on the Nintendo thing, but the car trip had renewed my courage. Gracetown was the perfect setting in which to do the deed, even down to its name, with its faintly fundamentalist-slash-Elvis-impersonator overtones. It was just a case of choosing my moment. Christmas Day was only a few days hence, I reflected Grinchishly. Why not lower the boom then?

My dark thoughts about going off the grid dated as far back as Anni's four-year-old fixation with a certain 'Lady Lovely Locks' video, featuring characters with names like 'Shining Glory' and 'Furball', and fiercely hair-driven plotlines. At the same time, like every other parent of toddlers, I was grateful for the thirty-minute break. (Bill's first sentence, which he bellowed solemnly at 5.15 every morning, was 'Watch *White!*' – as in, 'The name's White. *Snow White.*') But, as the years – and the technology – flew by, I rarely got beyond the grumbling stage. Occasionally I'd announce dramatically that I was 'pulling the plug' so that everybody could read a book, or play a game, or just bicker with one another the old-fashioned way: face to face. Sometimes I'd even make good on it. 'But I was doing my homework!' they'd wail, as the anime or the YouTube video or the MSN conversation froze mid-frame, exactly as if an evil fairy had waved her wand of doom. It felt good to pretend I still had some power in my own home. But, deep down, even I – a woman so out of touch I still referred to 'taping' shows on TV, as if they were packing boxes, or sprained ankles – was aware that ripping the modem out of the wall once every three or four weeks was a case of spitting into the Zeitgeist.

Who can ever say for certain what makes a person finally take that crucial leap into a life-changing decision? In my own case, I suspect The Experiment had roots as long and tangled as my fourteen-year-old's hair extensions. They probably went back to my graduate work in Media Ecology at NYU, my fascination with transcendentalist thinkers like Thoreau and Emerson; and my move to Australia in the late eighties. There were more proximate causes too. One was an interview I did for one of my podcasts with a family of six kids, ranging in age from two to twelve, who were growing up entirely screen-free. Naturally I'd expected

cult involvement, or at the very least a full-time helicopter parent-at-home. But, no. Both parents worked as real-estate agents. There was no evidence of an extra-terrestrial link. And the kids were amazing – full of excitement and ideas and trouvé collections and craft projects. Not fussy, adult-designed ones made from kits, but the kind you make from dead leaves and macaroni and toilet-paper rolls. They had a fort in the woods, and a tree swing, and a big dress-up box full of old clothes. 'Don't you guys ever get bored?' I asked towards the end of the interview, almost desperate to find an edge to the story. But I already knew what the answer would be: a resounding 'Nup.' These kids knew they were a bit unusual, but they didn't feel deprived, if they thought about it at all – which, until the arrival of a woman with a microphone, I'm not sure they had. After all, their compensation for living without media, to borrow Sherman Paul's phrase, nothing less than 'life itself'.

When I think it through, I realise there was all this backstory to my own decision. But reduce it to a soundbite and it was simply this: I was worried about my kids. About how they were using their time, and their space, and their minds. That's the centre of gravity that pulled the whole thing together . . . and it's also, maybe, where my somewhat off beat and bizarre life story crosses your own.

So, when I lowered the boom amidst the happy detritus of a normal Australian Christmas morning – for chestnuts roasting on an open fire, substitute bacon and eggs on the barbie and the intoxicating whiff of 30+ sunscreen – there was nothing impulsive about it. Why I was making this decision was pretty clear in my mind. How I was going to obtain buy-in was a total blur. Granted, I do have kind of a gift for the pitch. In another, more lucrative life I would have made a bang-up used-car salesman. My enthusiasms – of which I have many – are as infectious as swine flu. My kids could tell you stories. Like the time I came home, flung open the door and announced gleefully, 'Hey, kids! Guess what?! I've lost my licence for three whole months! Isn't it great? Because we are going to have such fun learning all about public transportation!' (It was just a few speeding fines. And not big ones either, until you added them all together. 'Where I learned to drive – on the Long Island Expressway – anybody who doesn't go 10 mph over the speed limit is a pussy,' I tried explaining to the constable. LOL he did not.)

I did such a consummate smoke-and-mirrors number when my marriage broke up that my eldest, who was four, literally didn't notice. 'Where's Dada, anyway?' she finally inquired several weeks later. 'Oh, didn't I tell you? He's got a cool new house and lucky you will get to stay there sometimes, just like Karen Brewer!' (Oh, for the days when a well-placed allusion to *The Babysitter's Club* was all it took to save one's sorry maternal ass!)

I don't lie, ever. Hardly. I sell. ('That's not a "vegetable", Bill. Why, that's a mouthwatering side-dish of tender, buttery baby beans!') But, let's face it: spinning slightly over-ripe bananas to your toddlers is one thing – yes, I've been known to sing the Chiquita Banana Song, and fake tap-dance too, if that's what it took. Selling your teenagers on the concept of giving up their information and entertainment lifelines for six months is quite another. To be honest, it kind

of made giving birth in a manger in Bethlehem look like level one Tetris.

Part of my strategy revolved around the presence of friendly witnesses: Mary and Grant and their teenaged daughters, Ches and Torrie. Our fellow holiday-makers and oldest family friends would support me, and their presence would prevent any attempted worm-outs. It was Mary who unexpectedly fed me my cue that morning, as she watched the girls unwrap their main presents – obscenely overpriced appliances hyped as ‘the Rolls-Royce of hair straighteners’ (Lady Lovely Locks, may you rot in hell).

‘But, Suse,’ Mary blurted out. ‘Will they be able to use those when The Experiment starts?’

I shot her a look that could depilate, but it was too late. Everyone had heard her.

‘Kids, I have an announcement to make,’ I began. All rustling of wrapping paper and gnawing of candy canes ceased. The girls put down their straighteners. Bill popped the lid back on his Sex Wax (a hair product, essentially, for surfboards). Even Rupert looked up with a mixture of anxiety and apprehension. But then he’s a pug. He always looks like that. I took a deep breath and I hit them with it.

I didn’t talk about being worried about their wellbeing, or their school performance, or their sleeping habits, or my fears for the arrested development of their social, intellectual, or spiritual skills. That would have been too much like nagging. It would have put them on the defensive. It would have started a conversation, and a conversation, frankly, was the last thing I wanted. The important thing was to announce, not to ‘suggest’ or, heaven forbid, ‘discuss’.

I concluded my announcement, eyes ablaze with missionary zeal (also fear), ‘It’s an experiment in living. We are all going to do it together, as a family. And it’s going to change our lives.’ There was a frozen pause. If life was a MacbookPro, this was our spinning colour wheel of death.

Sussy broke the silence.

‘You mean ... like *Wife Swap*?’ she asked. ‘YES!’ I roared. Bless the baby for throwing me a life raft. ‘Exactly like reality TV! Exactly! Except, of course, we won’t have a TV ...’ I trailed off. I could see Bill and Anni exchange glances.

‘What about homework?’ Bill asked cannily.

‘You can do it at the library, or at a friend’s house, or at home using ...’ ‘What? A stone tablet and a chisel?’ Anni snapped. ‘If you like,’ I replied evenly. (Pretending I don’t get it is kind of my genius as a parent.) ‘But the point is, I can’t control the universe. Alas. So it’s only our *home* that’s going to be screen-free.’ I’d thought about this one a lot. In a perfect world – i.e. in which I did control the universe – The Experiment would be a total disconnect: no electronic media, at all, full stop, anywhere. It pained me to accept the reality that not even I could

orchestrate such a thing. Short of moving to Djibouti, or imprisoning everybody in a backyard bomb shelter, there was no way I could pull it off. Like every other parent in the universe, I'd just have to find the serenity to accept the things I couldn't change, the courage to change the things I could, and sufficient download speed to tell the difference. While they were still digesting the shred of good news I'd thrown at them, I added I'd be writing a book about our adventure. 'Wait a minute, wait a minute.' Anni interrupted. 'A book? Like for money?'

'Maybe. Eventually,' I allowed.

'Well, what do we get out of it?'

I winced. It was ugly, but I was ready. I knew that sooner or later we'd get around to talking turkey. As the eldest, and most practised plea-bargainer, Anni'd had plenty of experience in brokering damages claims on behalf of her plaintiffs. I could have quoted Thoreau. I could have explained the thing about Michelangelo, or produced a recommended reading list in media, cognition and learning. Instead, Reader, I cash-incentivised them.

'Play along and play fair,' I muttered, 'and, yes, there'll be something in it for everybody.' I sounded like a mafi a boss. But, *madre di dio*, I have three teenagers. What else am I supposed to sound like?

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, they say. And if there's one thing I've learned in my fifteen years of being a single parent, it's that a surprise attack – a pudding in the face, as it were – can be your best offensive strategy. I know that makes it sound as though you and your children are on opposing armies or something, but . . . well, aren't you? Boundary-setting can be so hard, especially if, like me, you are secretly just a little intimidated by people who are more powerful, better looking and wealthier than you are. Sure, they're your kids and you love them. But they can still be pretty scary.

That may be stating the case a little strongly. But as far as I can see, most parents of my generation – from the tail end of the Baby Boomers to the tender tip of Gen X – don't really rule the roost. We sort of scratch around it apologetically, seeking consensus. We are bad at giving orders. But we are wonderful at giving options, and it's a habit that starts right from the git-go. 'Milk, sweetheart?' we wheedle like some obsequious sommelier. 'Our specials today are cow's, sow, breast or goat's.' We ask our children to cooperate. We don't tell them to. And when there is an objection, we negotiate. I have one girlfriend who for many years paid her kids a weekly fee for brushing their teeth. I myself once slipped my seven-year-old a twenty for agreeing to a haircut. I think of that today and cringe. I'm sure I could have gotten it for ten. So it's no wonder children today have a lively sense of entitlement. And that, metaphorically and otherwise, they take up more space.