

My Not-So-Wicked Wicked Stepmother

Though my family's story has been nothing like a fairy tale, we may just get the happy ending

By DIANA FRIEDMAN

IF 20 YEARS AGO SOMEONE HAD told me I would one day consider my stepmother a role model, I would have laughed scornfully.

Back then we were a family in crisis: my parents' marriage had rapidly disintegrated, my mother had moved out and my brothers and I found ourselves caught between our squabbling parents. My stepmother-to-be had begun dating my father within what felt like minutes of my mom's departure, and my siblings and I were not pleased. No matter that my mother had instigated the breakup, no matter that my older brother and I were already in college, my younger brother not far behind. As far as we were concerned, my father's new wife—only 11 years older than I was but 18 years younger than my father—was the embodiment of the classic wicked stepmother.

My father could not have married two women with less in common. My mother, passionate and disorganized, aired her most private thoughts publicly. My stepmother, orderly and formal, seemed possessed by an unrelenting drive to accomplish.

Within a few years the house in which we had grown up was sold, and I found that I could no longer assume that my father was automatically available to me. The year I graduated from college, my stepmother gave birth to her first child—a son. I'd like to say that I put away my childish notions that someday I would get back the time my father once reserved exclusively for me, but only five years ago I found myself weeping incessantly when he adopted a 7-year-old girl two weeks before I had my own daughter. I felt that whatever thrill the birth of his first grandchild might have brought us was

tempered by the fact that at 61, my dad once again became a new father.

No blended family comes together without conflicts, but ours finally gelled, albeit into a form that caught us by surprise. My half sister has emerged as my daughter's hero, spending hours indulging her preschool shenanigans. Likewise, my 15-



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year-old half brother is the master of piggyback rides. Although the family relationships are confusing at times (“No, he’s her uncle, not her cousin”), if you don’t look too closely, we appear to be one nuclear family.

Our children have brought us together in a way that nothing else has. When my son turned 1, my stepmother collected a card from each member of the family, including the dog, and FedExed them to arrive on his birthday. I often take my half sister to the

park with my kids so my father and stepmother can sneak in an afternoon nap.

If children’s fairy tales or modern media ever portrayed a kind stepmother, perhaps I’d have taken advantage of having a second mother, instead of assuming that our relationship was destined to be adversarial. I thought that because my stepmother’s approach to life was so different from mine, I had nothing to learn from her.

In fact, the reality has been quite the opposite. I watched my stepmother bush-whack her way through the promises and defeats of that first supermom generation. Her anguish at not being able to get pregnant with a second child in her late 30s pushed me to start my own family earlier than I would have otherwise. And that determination of hers that I perceived as obsessive? I’ve tried to emulate it as I battle my way down my own career path.

A few months back, while accompanying my stepmother on a visit to her parents, I recalled with embarrassment how I had once ridiculed her close relationship with her mother. I couldn’t fathom how anyone could choose to speak to her mother every day. (At the time I was experiencing such a healthy rejection of my own mother that we weren’t speaking at all.)

As we sat with her parents, an overwhelming sadness infused the room. In their mid-70s, they were both quite ill. But even as they complained steadily about their loss of independence, I saw nothing but pride for their daughter, my stepmother. I suddenly understood that if, when I’m old, my kids love me enough to cross the Hudson for regular visits, I will have done right by them. That day my stepmother and her parents showed me the true meaning of family.

When my stepmother’s mom died a few weeks later, I knew she was facing the enormous challenge of a life without her mother. And while I’ve always wondered how I’d bear the loss

of my own mother (having now reconciled with her), there was my stepmother, composed and graceful, offering up her gratitude and sorrow to the hundreds of people who came to pay their respects at the funeral. She was, I realized, demonstrating a critical life lesson, showing me how to navigate what lay ahead. Like a mentor. Like a mother.

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