

Recollection Unit  
ELA 20  
Lit. Exp. 7

Family



# My Stepmother, Myself

Garrison Keillor

RECENTLY in Weeseville, Pennsylvania, a woman was dismissed from her job as a human-resources coordinator and driven over a cliff by an angry mob of villagers carrying flaming torches and hurling sharp rocks after they learned that she was married to a man who had custody of his three children by a previous marriage.

In California, soon after her marriage to a prince (her first marriage, his seventh), a woman named Sharon Mittel was shut up in a dungeon under the provisions of that state's Cruel and Unnatural Parent Act, which allows the immediate imprisonment of a stepparent upon the complaint of a stepchild. The prince's oldest daughter accused Sharon of slapping her. She was later freed after an appeal to a king, but she now faces a long series of tests to prove her innocence, such as finding a tree of pure gold and a seedless grapefruit. She also must answer some riddles.

Are these merely two isolated incidents? Or are they, as a new and exhaustive report on stepmothers clearly points out, fairly indicative?

"The myth of the evil stepmother is still with us," the report concludes. "Stepmothers are still associated with the words *cruel* and *wicked*, which has made them easy targets for torture and banishment as well as severely limiting their employment, particularly in the so-called 'caring' professions such

as nursing, social work, and education. The myth that stepmothers use poisons and potions has virtually barred them from the food and drug industries. In general, stepmothers are not only underpaid and underemployed but also feared and despised."

How cruel is the typical stepmother?

Not very, according to the report, which examines many cases of alleged cruelty and finds almost all of them untrue. "The media have jumped on every little misunderstanding, and have blown it up to outlandish proportions," the report finds. Recently, three stepdaughters whose relationships with their stepmothers are well known agreed to speak out and set the record straight. Because each has suffered from publicity in the past and is trying to lead as normal a life as possible under the circumstances, only first names will be used.

#### SNOW

The story the press told was that I was in a life-threatening situation as a child and that the primary causal factor was my stepmother's envy. I can see now that there were other factors, and that I didn't give *her* much reinforcement—but anyway, the story was that I escaped from her and was taken in by dwarves and she found me and poisoned me with an apple and I was dead and the prince fell in love with me and brought me back to life and we got married, et cetera, et cetera. And this is what I believed right up to the day I walked out on him. I felt like I owed my life to Jeff because he had begged the dwarves for my body and carried it away and so the apple was shaken loose from my throat. That's why I married him. Out of gratitude.

As I look back on it, I can see that that was a very poor basis for a relationship. I was traumatized, I had been lying in a coffin under glass for *years*, and I got up and married the first guy I laid eyes on. The big prince. My hero.

Now I can see how sick our marriage was. He was always begging me to lie still and close my eyes and hold my breath. He could only relate to me as a dead person. He couldn't accept me as a living woman with needs and desires of my own. It is terribly hard for a woman to come to terms with the fact

that her husband is a necrophiliac, because, of course, when it all starts, you aren't aware of what's going on—you're dead.

In trying to come to terms with myself, I've had to come to terms with my stepmother and her envy of my beauty, which made our relationship so destructive. She was a victim of the male attitude that prizes youth over maturity when it comes to women. Men can't dominate the mature woman, so they equate youth with beauty. In fact, she *was* beautiful, but the mirror (which, of course, reflected that male attitude) presented her with a poor self-image and turned her against me.

But the press never wrote the truth about that.

Or about the dwarves. All I can say is that they should have been named Dopey, Sleepy, Slimy, Sleazy, Dirty, Disgusting, and Sexist. The fact is that I *knew* the apple was poisoned. For me, it was the only way out.

#### GRETEL

When Hansel and I negotiated the sale of book rights to Grimm Bros., he and I retained the right of final approval of the manuscript and agreed to split the proceeds fifty-fifty. We shook hands on it and I thought the deal was set, but then his lawyers put me under a spell, and when I woke up, they had rewritten the contract and the book too! I couldn't believe it! Not only did the new contract cut me out (under the terms, I was to get ten shiny baubles out of the first fortune the book earned and three trinkets for each additional fortune) but the book was pure fiction.

Suddenly he was portrayed as the strong and resourceful one, a regular little knight, and I came off as a weak sister. Dad was shown as a loving father who was talked into abandoning us in the forest by Gladys, our "wicked" stepmother. Nothing could be further from the truth.

My brother was a basket case from the moment the birds ate his bread crumbs. He lay down in a heap and whimpered, and I had to slap him a couple times *hard* to make him walk. Now the little wiener makes himself out to be the hero who kept telling me, "Don't cry, Gretel." Ha! The only crying I did was from sheer exhaustion carrying him on my back.

As for Dad, he was no bleeding heart. He was very much into that whole woodcutter/peasant/yeoman scene—cock-fighting, bullbaiting, going to the village on Saturday to get drunk and watch a garrotting or a boiling—don't kid yourself, Gladys couldn't send us to our *rooms* without his say-so. The truth is that he was in favor of the forest idea from the word go.

What I can't understand is why they had to lie about it. Many, *many* parents left their children in the forest in those days. It was nothing unusual.

Nowadays, we tend to forget that famine can be a very difficult experience for a family. For many parents, ditching the kids was not only a solution, it was an act of faith. They believed that ravens would bring morsels of food in their beaks, or that wolves would take care of the kids, or a frog would, or that the fairies would step in. Dwarves, a hermit, a band of pilgrims, a kindly shepherd, *somebody*. And they were right.

And that is why I was never seriously worried for one single moment while we were there. Deep down, I always knew we would make it.

I don't mean to say that it wasn't a trying experience, an *emotional* experience. It was. And yet there isn't a single documented case of a child left in the forest who suffered any lasting damage. You look at those children today and you will find they are better people for having gone through it. Except for my brother, that is. The little jerk. He and my father live in luxurious manors with beautiful tapestries and banners and ballrooms, and I live above an alchemist's shop in a tiny garret they call a condo. As for Gladys, she was kicked out without so much as a property settlement. She didn't even get half of the hut. I guess she is the one who suffered most. Her and the witch.

I often think about the witch—I ask myself, Why did I give her the shove? After all, it wasn't me she was after.

I guess that, back then, I wasn't prepared to understand her type of militance. I couldn't see that she was fattening up Hansel in order to make a very radical statement. If only I had. Not that I necessarily would have joined her in making that

statement, but I would have seen that from her point of view it had validity and meaning.

And I would have seen that Gladys, in proposing the forest as a viable alternative, was offering me independence at a very early age.

I wish I had been able to thank her.

## CINDERELLA

A woman in my position does not find it easy to "come out of the palace," so to speak, and to provide intimate details of her personal life. I do so only because I believe it is time to put the Cinderella myth to rest once and for all—the myth that one can escape housework by marrying a prince.

The truth is that I am busier than ever. Supervising a large household staff—cooks, maids, footmen, pages, ladies-in-waiting, minstrels and troubadours, a bard or two—is just plain hard work. Often I find myself longing for the "good old days" when my stepmother made me sweep the hearth.

We see each other almost every day—she comes up here and we play tennis or I go down there for lunch—and we often reminisce and laugh about our little disagreements. She is one of my best friends. Other people treat me like royalty but she treats me like a real person. My husband won't let me touch a broom, but I go to her house and she puts me to work! I love it. I tell her, "Mother, you're the only one who yells at me. Don't ever stop." And I mean it. Anger is real. It's honest.

Honesty is a rare commodity in a palace, and that is why so many "fairy-tale" marriages end up on the rocks. You wouldn't believe the amount of fawning and flattering that goes on! Between the courtiers bowing and scraping and the supplicants and petitioners wheedling and whining, and the scheming of bishops and barons, not to mention the sorcery and witchcraft, the atmosphere is such that it's terribly hard for a man and a woman to establish a loving, trusting, sharing type of relationship.

It's true that we lived happily ever after, but believe me, we have had to work at it!

