



When she was 6, my stepdaughter, Lily, told me that her favorite character in “Cinderella” was the evil stepmother. This wasn’t entirely surprising. During play dates, Lily often liked to play orphan, writing down long lists of chores: dishes (dishes); moping (mopping); feeding (the fish). She and a friend liked to drink something they called pepper water, which was ordinary tap water they pretended their cruel orphan-handlers had made undrinkable. Maybe it was thrilling to stage her own mistreatment, to take power over the situation of powerlessness she had imagined. Maybe she just liked a virtuous reason to dump water on the floor. When I asked Lily why Cinderella’s stepmother was her favorite character, she leaned close to me and whispered, like a secret, “I think she looks good.”

For all her cruelty, the evil stepmother is often the fairy-tale character most defined by imagination and determination, rebelling against the patriarchy with whatever meager tools have been left to her: her magic mirror, her vanity, her pride. She is an artist of cunning and malice, but still — an artist. She isn’t simply acted upon; she acts. She just doesn’t act the way a mother is supposed to. That’s her fuel, and her festering heart.

In many ways, fairy tales — dark and ruthless, often structured by loss — were the stories that most resembled Lily’s life. Her mother died just before her 3rd birthday, after a 2½-year struggle with leukemia. Two years later, Lily got a stepmother of her own — not a wicked one, perhaps, but one terrified of being wicked.

I wondered if it was comforting for Lily to hear stories about fairy-tale children who had lost what she had lost — unlike most of the kids at her school, or in her ballet classes, whose mothers were still alive. Or perhaps it brought the stories dangerously near, the fact that she shared so much with them. Maybe it peeled away their protective skins of fantasy, made their pepper water too literal, brought their perils too close. When I read her the old fairy tales about daughters without mothers, I worried that I was pushing on the bruises of her loss. When I read her the old fairy tales about stepmothers, I worried I was reading her an evil version of myself.

COMMENTS

Debbie R 25 minutes ago

Stepmother Sarah Bush Lincoln was a bright, warm light in Abraham Lincoln's austere childhood. She is the one who encouraged him to read....

Ally 1 day ago

"A woman mothering another woman's child, Winnicott observes, 'may easily find herself forced by her own imagination into the position of...'

Louise 1 day ago

I've been in my step-daughter's life for over 20 years. Recently she sent me her questions and answers to a quiz "How well does an adult..."

I sought these tales avidly when I first became a stepmother. I was hungry for company. I didn’t know many stepmothers, and I especially didn’t know many stepmothers who had inherited the role as I had inherited it: fully, overwhelmingly, with no other mother in the picture. Our family lived in the aftermath of loss, not rupture — death, not divorce. This used to be the normal way of being a stepmother, and the word itself holds grief in its roots. The Old English “steop” means loss, and the etymology paints a bleak portrait: “For stepmoder is selde guod,” reads one account from 1290. A text from 1598 says, “With one consent all stepmothers hate their daughters.”

The fairy tales are obviously damning: The evil queen from “Snow White” demands the secret murder of her stepdaughter after a magic mirror proclaims her beauty. The stepmother from “Hansel and Gretel” sends her stepchildren into the woods because there isn’t enough to eat. Cinderella sits amid her fireplace cinders, sorting peas from lentils, her ash-speckled body appeasing a wicked stepmother who wants to dull her luminosity with soot because she feels threatened by it. It’s as if the stepmother relationship inevitably corrupts — it is not just an evil woman in the role but a role that turns any woman evil. A “stepmother’s blessing” is another name for a hangnail, as if to suggest

something that hurts because it isn't properly attached, or something that presents itself as a substitutive love but ends up bringing pain instead.

The evil stepmother casts a long, primal shadow, and three years ago I moved in with that shadow, to a one-bedroom rent-controlled apartment near Gramercy Park. I sought the old stories in order to find company — out of sympathy for the stepmothers they vilified — and to resist their narratives, to inoculate myself against the darkness they held.

My relationship with Charles, Lily's father, held the kind of love that fairy tales ask us to believe in: encompassing and surprising, charged by a sense of wonder at the sheer fact of his existence in the world. I uprooted my life for our love, without regret. Our bliss lived in a thousand ordinary moments: a first kiss in the rain, over-easy eggs at a roadside diner in the Catskills, crying with laughter at midnight about some stupid joke he would make during an "American Ninja Warrior" rerun. But our love also — always — held the art and work of parenting, and much of our bliss happened on stolen time: that first kiss while the sitter stayed half an hour late; those diner eggs on a spontaneous road trip possible only because Lily was staying with her grandmother in Memphis; our hands clamped over our mouths during those fits of midnight laughter so we wouldn't wake up Lily in the next room. This felt less like compromise and more like off-roading, a divergence from the scripts I'd always written for what my own life would look like.

I approached the first evening I spent with Lily as a kind of test, though Charles tried to stack the deck in my favor: He decided we would get takeout from the pasta place Lily liked, then spend the evening watching her favorite movie — about two princess sisters, one with a touch that turned everything to ice. That afternoon, I went to find a gift at the Disney Store in Times Square — not only a place I had never been but a place I had never imagined going. I hated the idea of bribing Lily, trading plastic for affection, but I was desperately nervous. Plastic felt like an insurance policy.

The clerk looked at me with pity when I asked for the "Frozen" section. I suddenly doubted myself: Was it not a Disney movie? The clerk laughed when I asked the question, then explained: "We just don't have any merchandise left. There's a worldwide shortage."

She was serious. They had nothing. Not even a tiara. Or they had plenty of tiaras, but they weren't the right tiaras. I scanned the shelves around me: Belle stuff, "Sleeping Beauty" stuff, Princess Jasmine stuff. There had to be other movies Lily liked, right? Other princesses? There was a moment when I considered buying something related to every princess, just to cover my bases. I had some vague realization that the low-level panic in the back of my throat was the fuel capitalism ran on. On my cellphone, I was on hold with a Toys "R" Us in the Bronx. On my way out, I spotted something shoved into the corner of a shelf. It looked wintry. It had ice-blue cardboard packaging: a sled.

I cannot even tell you my relief. My sense of victory was complete. The sled came with a princess, and also maybe a prince. (A Sami ice harvester, I would learn.) The set came with a reindeer! (Named Sven.) And even a plastic carrot for him to eat. I tucked the box under my arm protectively as I walked to the register. I eyed the other parents around me. Who knew how many of them wanted this box?

I called Charles, triumphant. I told him the whole saga: the clerk's laughter, the worldwide shortage, the frantic phone calls, the sudden grace of glimpsing pale-blue cardboard.

"You won!" he said, then paused. I could hear him deciding whether to say something. "The princess," he asked, "what color is her hair?"

I had to check the box. "Brown?" I said. "Sort of reddish?"

"You did great," he said after a beat. "You're the best."

But in that beat, I could hear that I had the wrong princess.

Charles wasn't criticizing; he just knew how much a princess could mean. He had spent the last two years knee-deep in princesses, playing mother and father at once. The truth of the wrong princess was also the truth of unstable cause and effect: With parenting, you could do everything you were supposed to, and it might still backfire, because you lived with a tiny, volatile human who did not come with any kind of instruction manual. The possibility of failure hung like a low sky, pending weather, over every horizon.

In "The Uses of Enchantment," the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim makes a beautiful argument for the kinds of reckoning that fairy tales permit: They allow children to face primal fears (parental abandonment) and imagine acts of rebellion (defying authority) in a world reassuringly removed from the one they live in. Enchanted woods and castles are so conspicuously fantastical, their situations so extreme, that children don't need to feel destabilized by their upheavals. I wondered if that was still true for Lily, whose loss lived more naturally in fairy tales than other places. It can be a fine line between stories that give our fears a necessary stage and stories that deepen them — that make us more afraid.

In an 1897 letter to the editor in *Outlook*, a high-circulation turn-of-the-century American lifestyle magazine, one reader laments the effects of reading “Cinderella” to young children: “The effect or impression was to put stepmothers on the list of evil things of life.” But in our home, it was less that “Cinderella” put stepmothers on an evil list and more that the story raised the question — with a kind of openness that might have been impossible otherwise — of whether stepmothers belonged there. Often, Lily used the figure of a fairy-tale wicked stepmother to distinguish our relationship from the one we had just read. “You’re not like her,” she would say. Or when it came to the stepmother she admired from “Cinderella,” she was generous: “You look better than her anyway.”

I wondered if claiming the stepmother as her favorite was another version of playing orphans — a way of claiming the source of fear and taking some control over it. Did she worry I would turn cruel? Did she love me fiercely so I wouldn’t? I wondered if it helped her to see us reflected and distorted by a dark mirror, if these more sinister versions of our bond made her feel better about our relationship — or gave her permission to accept what might feel hard about it. I actually found a strange kind of comfort in the nightmare visions of mean stepparents I found in popular media — at least I wasn’t cruel like them. It was a kind of ethical *schadenfreude*.

In many ways, these stories my family inherited mapped imperfectly onto ours. In fairy tales, the father-king was often duped and blind. He had faith in a woman who didn’t deserve it. His trust, or his lust, permitted his daughter’s mistreatment. Charles was like these fairy-tale fathers in only one way: He trusted me from the beginning. He believed I could be a mother before I believed it. He talked openly about what was hard about parenting, which made it feel more possible to live in love and difficulty — love as difficulty. He knew what it meant to wake day after day, choose three possible dresses, pour the cereal, repour the cereal after it spilled, wrestle hair into pigtails, get to school on time, get to pickup on time, steam the broccoli for dinner. He knew how much it meant to learn the difference between the animated ponies with wings and the animated ponies with horns and the animated ponies with both — the alicorns. He knew what it meant to do all that, and then wake up and do it all over again.

My relationship with Lily, too, was not like the story we inherited from fairy tales — a tale of cruelty and rebellion — or even like the story of divorce-era popular media: the child spurning her stepmother, rejecting her in favor of the true mother, the mother of bloodline and womb. Our story was a thousand conversations on the 6 train or at the playground in Madison Square Park. Our story was painting Lily’s nails and trying not to smudge her tiny pinkie. Our story was telling her to take deep breaths during tantrums, because I needed to take deep breaths myself. Our story began one night when I felt her small, hot hand reach for mine during her favorite movie, when the Abominable Snowman swirled into view on an icy mountain and almost overwhelmed the humble reindeer.

That first night, when we sang songs at bedtime, she scooted over and patted the comforter, in the same bed where her mother spent afternoons resting during the years of her illness, directly below the hole Charles had made — angrily swinging a toy train into the wall — after a telephone call with an insurance company, a hole now hidden behind an alphabet poster. “You lie here,” Lily told me. “You lie in Mommy’s spot.”

If the wicked stepmother feels like a ready-made archetype, then its purest, darkest incarnation is the evil queen from “Snow White.” In the Brothers Grimm tale from 1857, she asks a hunter to bring back her stepdaughter’s heart. After this attack fails (the hunter has a bleeding heart of his own), the stepmother’s aggression takes the form of false generosity. She goes to her stepdaughter in disguise, as an old beggar crone, to offer Snow White objects that seem helpful or nourishing: a corset, a comb, an apple. These are objects a mother might give to her daughter — as forms of sustenance, or ways of passing on a female legacy of self-care — but they are actually meant to kill her. They reach Snow White in the folds of her new surrogate family, where the seven dwarves have given her the opportunity to be precisely the kind of “good mother” her stepmother never was. She cooks and cleans and cares for them. Her virtue is manifest in precisely the maternal impulse her stepmother lacks.

The evil stepmother is so integral to our familiar telling of “Snow White” that I was surprised to discover that an earlier version of the story doesn’t feature a stepmother at all. In this version, Snow White has no dead mother, only a living mother who wants her dead. This was a pattern of revision for the Brothers Grimm; they transformed several mothers into stepmothers between the first version of their stories, published in 1812, and the final version, published in 1857. The figure of the stepmother effectively became a vessel for the emotional aspects of motherhood that were too ugly to attribute to mothers directly (ambivalence, jealousy, resentment) and those parts of a child’s experience of her mother (as cruel, aggressive, withholding) that were too difficult to situate directly in the biological parent-child dynamic. The figure of the stepmother — lean, angular, harsh — was like snake venom drawn from an unacknowledged wound, siphoned out in order to keep the maternal body healthy, preserved as an ideal.

“It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all good,” Bettelheim argues, “but it also permits anger at this bad ‘stepmother’ without endangering the good will of the true mother, who is viewed as a different person.” The psychologist D.W. Winnicott puts it more simply: “If there are two mothers, a real one who has died, and a stepmother, do you see how easily a child gets relief from tension by having one perfect and the other horrid?” In other words, the shadow figure of the fairy-tale stepmother is a predatory archetype reflecting something true of every mother: the complexity of her feelings toward her child, and a child’s feelings toward her.

Even if Lily didn't split her ideas of motherhood into perfect absence and wicked presence, I did — assigning precisely that psychic division of labor. I imagined that her biological mother would have offered everything I couldn't always manage: patience, pleasure, compassion. She would have been with Lily in her tantrums. She wouldn't have bribed her with ridiculous amounts of plastic. She wouldn't get so frustrated when bedtime lasted an hour and a half, or else her frustration would have the counterweight of an unconditional love I was still seeking. I knew these self-flagellations were ridiculous — even “real” parents weren't perfect — but they offered a certain easy groove of self-deprecation, comforting in its simplicity. A woman mothering another woman's child, Winnicott observes, “may easily find herself forced by her own imagination into the position of witch rather than fairy godmother.”

In a study called “The Poisoned Apple,” the psychologist (and stepmother) Elizabeth Church analyzed her interviews with 104 stepmothers through the lens of one particular question: How do these women reckon with the evil archetype they stepped into? “Although their experience was the opposite of the fairy-tale stepmothers,” she reported, insofar as “they felt powerless in the very situation where the fairy-tale stepmothers exerted enormous power,” they still “tended to identify with the image of the wicked stepmother.” She called it their poisoned apple: They felt “wicked” for experiencing feelings of resentment or jealousy, and this fear of their own “wickedness” prompted them to keep these feelings to themselves, which only made them feel more shame for having these feelings in the first place.

Folk tales often deploy the stepmother as a token mascot of the dark maternal — a woman rebelling against traditional cultural scripts — but the particular history of the American stepmother is more complicated. As the historian Leslie Lindenauer argues in “I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750-1960,” the figure of the American stepmother found her origins in the American witch. Lindenauer argues that the 18th-century popular imagination took the same terrible attributes that the Puritans had ascribed to witches — malice, selfishness, coldness, absence of maternal impulse — and started ascribing them to stepmothers instead. “Both were examples of women who, against God and nature, perverted the most essential qualities of the virtuous mother,” Lindenauer observes. “Moreover, witches and stepmothers alike were most often accused of harming other women's children.”

The stepmother became a kind of scapegoat, a new repository for aspects of femininity that felt threatening: female agency, female creativity, female restlessness, maternal ambivalence. By the late 18th century, the stepmother was a stock villain, familiar enough to appear in grammar books. One boy was even injured by his dead stepmother from beyond the grave, when a column above her tombstone fell on his head. The particular villainy of the stepmother — the duplicity of tyranny disguised as care — enabled colonial rhetoric that compared England's rule to “a stepmother's severity,” as one 1774 tract put it. In an article that ran in *Ladies' Magazine* in 1773, on the eve of the American Revolution, a stepdaughter laments her fate at the hands of her stepmother: “Instead of the tender maternal affection ... what do I now see but discontent, ill-nature, and mal-a-pert authority?” The stepmother offers bondage cunningly packaged as devotion.

But the American popular imagination hasn't always understood the stepmother as a wicked woman. If it was true that she was an 18th-century gold digger — a latter-day witch — then it was also true that she was a mid-19th-century saint, happily prostrate to the surge of her own innate maternal impulse. In the Progressive Era, she was proof that being a good mother was less about saintly instincts and more about reason, observation and rational self-improvement. You didn't have to have a biological connection — or even an innate caregiving impulse — you just had to apply yourself.

When I interviewed Lindenauer about her research, she told me that she was surprised to discover these vacillations, surprised to find the figure of the virtuous stepmother showing up in the very same women's magazines that had vilified her a few decades earlier. She eventually started to detect a pattern. It seemed as if the stepmother found redemption whenever the nuclear family was under siege: in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, or when divorce emerged as a social pattern in the early 20th century. The stepmother became a kind of “port in the storm,” Lindenauer told me. “It's better to have a stepmother than no mother at all.”

The golden era of the American stepmother archetype — the summit of her virtue — was the second half of the 19th century, during and after the Civil War, when sentimental novels and women's magazines were full of saintly stepmothers eager to care for the motherless children who stumbled into their laps. In Charlotte Yonge's 1862 novel, “The Young Step-Mother; or, a Chronicle of Mistakes,” the young stepmother Albinia is portrayed as a woman with a surplus of good will, just waiting for people with needs — read: grief — deep enough to demand the deployment of her excess goodness. Her siblings worry about her marrying a widower with children, afraid she will become a kind of indentured servant, but the novel reassures us that “her energetic spirit and love of children animated her to embrace joyfully the cares which such a choice must impose on her.” When her new husband brings her home, he apologizes for what he is asking from her. “As I look at you, and the home to which I have brought you, I feel that I have acted selfishly,” he says. But she won't let him apologize. “Work was always what I wished,” she replies, “if only I could do anything to lighten your grief and care.”

With the children, Albinia says everything right: She is sorry they have her in place of their mother. They can call her Mother, but they don't have to. Although the novel is subtitled “A Chronicle of Mistakes,” Albinia doesn't seem to make many. When I read in the novel's epigraph, “Fail — yet rejoice,” it felt like a lie and an impossible imperative at

once. In fact, the entire voice of the saintly stepmother felt like an elaborate humblebrag. She knew she would always be second — or third! or fifth! or 10th! — but she didn't care. Not one bit. She just wanted to be useful.

I thought I would be glad to discover these virtuous stepmothers, but instead I found them nearly impossible to accept — much harder to stomach than the wicked stepmothers in fairy tales. My poisoned apple wasn't the wicked stepmother but her archetypal opposite, the saint, whose innate virtue felt like the harshest possible mirror. It would always show me someone more selfless than I was. These stories forgot everything that was structurally difficult about this kind of bond, or else they insisted that virtue would overcome all. This is why fairy tales are more forgiving than sentimental novels: They let darkness into the frame. Finding darkness in another story is so much less lonely than fearing the darkness is yours alone.

I punished myself when I lost patience, when I bribed, when I wanted to flee. I punished myself for resenting Lily when she came into our bed, night after night, which wasn't actually a bed but a futon we pulled out in the living room. Every feeling I had, I wondered: Would a real mother feel this? It wasn't the certainty that she wouldn't, but the uncertainty itself: How could I know?

I had imagined that I might feel most like a mother among strangers, who had no reason to believe I wasn't one, but it was actually among strangers that I felt most like a fraud. One day early in our relationship, Lily and I went to a Mister Softee, one of the ice cream trucks parked like land mines all over the city. I asked Lily what she wanted, and she pointed to the double cone of soft serve, the biggest one, covered in rainbow sprinkles. I said, Great! I was still at the Disney Store, still thrilled to find the sled set, still ready and willing to pass as mother by whatever means necessary, whatever reindeer necessary, whatever soft-serve necessary.

The double cone was so huge that Lily could barely hold it. Two hands, I would have known to say a few months later, but I didn't know to say it then. I heard a woman behind me ask her friend, "What kind of parent gets her child that much ice cream?" I felt myself go hot with shame. This parent. Which is to say: not a parent at all. I was afraid to turn around. I also wanted to turn around. I wanted to make the stranger feel ashamed, to speak back to the maternal superego she represented, to say: What kind of mother? A mother trying to replace a dead one. Instead I grabbed a wad of napkins and offered to carry Lily's cone back to our table so she wouldn't drop it on the way.

As a stepparent, I often felt like an impostor — or else I felt the particular loneliness of dwelling outside the bounds of the most familiar story line. I hadn't been pregnant, given birth, felt my body surge with the hormones of attachment. I woke up every morning to a daughter who called me Mommy but also missed her mother. I often called our situation "singular," but as with so many kinds of singularity, it was a double-edged blade — a source of loneliness and pride at once — and its singularity was also, ultimately, a delusion. "Lots of people are stepparents," my mother told me once, and of course she was right. A Pew Research Center survey found that four in 10 Americans say they have at least one step relationship. Twelve percent of women are stepmothers. I can guarantee you that almost all these women sometimes feel like frauds or failures.

In an essay about stepparents, Winnicott argues for the value of "unsuccess stories." He even imagines the benefits of gathering a group of "unsuccessful stepparents" in a room together. "I think such a meeting might be fruitful," he writes. "It would be composed of ordinary men and women." When I read that passage, it stopped me dead with longing. I wanted to be in that meeting, sitting with those ordinary men and women — hearing about their ice-cream bribes, their everyday impatience, their frustration and felt fraudulence, their desperate sleds.

In the methodology portion of her "Poisoned Apple" study, Church admits that she disclosed to her subjects that she was also a stepmother before interviewing them. After an interview was finished, she sometimes described her own experiences. Many of her subjects confessed that they had told her things during their interviews that they had never told anyone. I could understand that — that they somehow would feel, by virtue of being in the presence of another stepmother, as if they had been granted permission to speak. It was something like the imagined gathering of unsuccessful stepparents, as if they were at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a church basement, taking earned solace in the minor triumphs and frequent failures of their kind: a kind of kin.

The decision to call the stepmother Mother, or the decision not to call her Mother, is often a dramatic hinge in stories about stepmothers, a climactic moment of acceptance or refusal. In a story called "My Step-Mother," published in *The Decatur Republican* in 1870, a young girl regards her new stepmother with skepticism. When her stepmother asks her to play a song on the piano, trying to earn her trust and affection, the girl decides to play "I Sit and Weep by My Mother's Grave." But lo! The stepmother is undeterred. She not only compliments the girl on her moving performance; she shares that she also lost her mother when she was young and also used to love that song. The story ends on a triumphant note, with the daughter finally calling her Mother, an inverted christening — child naming the parent — that inaugurates the "most perfect confidence" that grows between them.

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For Lily, calling me Mother wasn't the end of anything. The day after Charles and I married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel — just before midnight on a Saturday, while Lily was having a sleepover with her cousin — Lily asked almost

immediately if she could call me Mommy. It was clear she had been waiting to ask. I remember feeling moved, as if we had landed in the credits at the end of a movie, the soundtrack crescendoing all around us.

But we weren't in the credits. We were just getting started. I was terrified. What would happen next? What happened next was pulling into a 7-Eleven for snacks and feeling Lily tug on my sleeve to tell me she had an "adult drink" at the laser-tag birthday party and now felt funny. She didn't want me to tell her dad. It was like the universe had sent its first maternal test. Was she drunk? What should I do? If I was going to let myself be called Mommy, I had to be prepared to deal with the fallout from the laser-tag birthday party. Charles eventually deduced that she had had a few sips of iced tea.

It felt less as if I had "earned" the title of mother — the way it has figured in so many sentimental stories, as a reward for behaving the right way and defying the old archetypes — and more as if I had landed in the 1900 story called "Making Mamma," in which 6-year-old Samantha layers a dressmaker's dummy with old fabric in order to make a surrogate mother for herself. It was as if Lily had bestowed a deep and immediate trust in me — unearned, born of need — and now I had to figure out how to live inside that trust without betraying it.

Once I stepped into the costume of a well-worn cultural archetype, I got used to hearing other people's theories about my life. Everyone had ideas about our family without knowing anything about our family. One woman said our situation was easier than if I had a terrible ex to compete with; another woman said I would be competing with the memory of Lily's perfect biological mother forever. When I wrote about a family vacation for a travel magazine, the editor wanted a bit more pathos: "Has it been bumpy?" she wrote in the margins of my draft. "What are you hoping for from this trip? A tighter family bond? A chance to let go of the sadness? Or ... ?? Tug at our heartstrings a bit."

I realized that when this editor imagined our family, she envisioned us saturated by sadness, or else contoured by resistance. More than anything, I liked her "Or ... ???" It rang true. It wasn't that every theory offered by a stranger about our family felt wrong; it was more that most of them felt right, or at least held a grain of truth that resonated. Which felt even more alarming, somehow, to be so knowable to strangers.

But every theory also felt incomplete. There was so much more truth around it, or else something close to its opposite felt true as well. I rarely felt like saying, No, it's nothing like that. I usually wanted to say: Yes, it is like that. And also like this, and like this, and like this. Sometimes the fact of those assumptions, the way I felt them churning inside everyone we encountered, made stepmotherhood feel like an operating theater full of strangers. I was convinced that I was constantly being dissected for how fully or compassionately I had assumed my maternal role.

I only ever found two fairy tales with good stepmothers, and they were both from Iceland. One stars a woman named Himinbjorg, who helps her stepson through his mourning by helping him fulfill the prophecy his mother delivered to him in a dream: that he will free a princess from a spell that had turned her into an ogre. By the time he returns from his mission victorious, the royal court is ready to burn Himinbjorg at the stake, because everyone is convinced that she is responsible for his disappearance. What I read as her selflessness moved me. She is willing to look terrible in order to help her son pursue a necessary freedom. I worried that I cared too much about proving I was a good stepmother, that wanting to seem like a good stepmother might get in the way of actually being a good stepmother. Perhaps I wanted credit for mothering more than I wanted to mother. Himinbjorg, on the other hand, is willing to look like a witch just to help her stepson break the spell he needs to break.

Then there was Hildur. Hildur's husband had vowed never to marry after the death of his first queen, because he was worried that his daughter would be mistreated. "All stepmothers are evil," he tells his brother, "and I don't wish to harm Ingibjorg." He is a fairy-tale king who has already absorbed the wisdom of fairy tales. He knows the deal with stepmoms.

But he falls in love with Hildur anyway. She says she won't marry him, though — not unless he lets her live alone with his daughter for three years before the wedding. Their marriage is made possible by her willingness to invest in a relationship with his daughter that exists apart from him, as its own fierce flame.

The closest thing Lily and I ever had to an Icelandic castle was a series of bathrooms across Lower Manhattan. Bathrooms were the spaces where it was just the two of us: the one with wallpaper made from old newspapers, the one where she insisted that people used to have braids instead of hands, the one at a Subway with a concrete mop sink she loved because it was "cool and simple."

Bathrooms were our space, just as Wednesdays were our day, when I picked her up from school and took her to the Dunkin' Donuts full of cops at Third Avenue and 20th before I rushed her to ballet, got her suited in her rhinestone-studded leotard and knelt before her tights like a supplicant, fitting bobby pins into her bun. At first, I expected an Olympic medal for getting her there only two minutes late. Eventually I realized that I was surrounded by mothers who had done exactly what I'd just done, only they had done it two minutes faster, and their buns were neater. Everything that felt like rocket science to me was just the stuff regular parents did every day of the week.

But those afternoons mattered, because they belonged to me and Lily. One day, in a cupcake-shop bathroom in SoHo — a few months before Lily, Charles and I moved into a new apartment, the first one we would rent together — Lily pointed at the walls: pink and brown, decorated with a lacy pattern. She told me she wanted our new room to look like this. Ours. She had it all planned out. In the new place, Daddy would live in one room, and we would live in the other. Our room would be so dainty, she said. She wasn't even sure boys would be allowed. This was what Hildur knew: We needed something that was only for the two of us.

A few months later, reading Dr. Seuss's "Horton Hatches the Egg" to Lily in that new apartment, I felt my throat constricting. Horton agrees to sit on an egg while Mayzie the bird, a flighty mother, takes a vacation to Palm Beach. Mayzie doesn't come back, but Horton doesn't give up. He sits on a stranger's egg for days, then weeks, then months. "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant," he repeats. "An elephant's faithful, one hundred per cent!"

When the egg finally hatches, the creature that emerges is an elephant-bird: a bright-eyed baby with a small, curled trunk and red-tipped wings. Her tiny trunk made me think of Lily's hand gesticulations — how big and senseless they got, like mine — and how she had started to make to-do lists, as I did, just so she could cross things off. But she also had a poster of the planets in her bedroom, because her mom had loved outer space, and she was proud to say she always had her "nose in a book," just as her grandmother told her that her mother always had. She has two mothers, and she always will.

For me, the stakes of thinking about what it means to be a stepmother don't live in statistical relevance — slightly more than 10 percent of American women might relate! — but in the way stepparenting asks us to question our assumptions about the nature of love and the boundaries of family. Family is so much more than biology, and love is so much more than instinct. Love is effort and desire — not a sentimental story line about easy or immediate attachment, but the complicated bliss of joined lives: ham-and-guacamole sandwiches, growing pains at midnight, car seats covered in vomit. It's the days of showing up. The trunks we inherit and the stories we step into, they make their way into us — by womb or shell or presence, by sheer force of will. But what hatches from the egg is hardly ever what we expect: the child that emerges, or the parent that is born. That mother is not a saint. She's not a witch. She's just an ordinary woman. She found a sled one day, after she was told there weren't any left. That was how it began.

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