

Introduction

My marriage was meant to be. It was also doomed to fail. You see, I chose a man with children. Experts estimate that more than half of all adult women in the U.S. will do the same in their lifetimes, and that up to 70% of those partnerships will fail.¹ Factor in all the odds and on the day I said “I do,” I might as well have picked out a divorce lawyer as well: the greatest predictor of divorce is the presence of children from a previous marriage. In fact, divorce rates are fifty percent higher in remarriages with children than in those without.² Even more alarming for my marriage, according to the statistics that I was blessedly unaware of until after I committed for life, was the fact that my husband had not one but two teenaged daughters, and was living with one of them when we got engaged (unbeknownst to me, experts recommend delaying marriage to a partner whose child is between the ages of ten and sixteen, so great are the risks of conflict for the couple and the household during that particular period of a child’s development).³ The final high-risk factor: I was a childless woman marrying a man with children (some experts suggest that women with their own children fare better in a marriage to a man with children, although they face a whole different set of emotional and practical challenges).⁴ The chances of our union surviving were arguably in the realm of the hypothetical.

And I had no idea. Not because everything was fine—from the very first moment things hadn’t been fine, exactly—but because I had my head placed firmly in the sand. I wanted this thing to work. I wanted a wedding and a happy ending, and I was going to

ignore everything and anything I had to in order to make it happen. When a co-worker, a stepson himself, advised that I should run from my boyfriend as fast as I could owing to a less-than-ideal co-parenting situation with his ex-wife, I attributed it to sour grapes.

When a friend saw a picture of my stepdaughter-to-be (looking every inch the rebellious preteen she was) and commented, “Uh-oh,” I pretended not to hear. And whenever I came across books or articles about stepmothering, I rolled my eyes if I noticed them at all.

They were full of gloom and bland advice, from where I stood in those early, everything’s-great days, and stuff about other people. None of that was going to happen to me. I was nice, I was fun, I was young(ish). Stephell was for stepmonsters, and I wasn’t going there. Until I was.

We were going to find a wedding dress.

It was our first weekend alone together in two months. My fiancé and I—who had decided to elope and had told everyone, including his kids—were about to set off in search of something modern and fashion-forward (no princess-y flounces and lace for me). And then his teenaged daughter, the one who didn’t live with us and who was not scheduled to be with us that weekend, called to say she’d like to come. My fiancé told her she could without asking me about it. I said the wrong and wicked thing. I admitted, insisted, in fact, that I wanted a quiet weekend without his girls. I wanted us to pick out my wedding dress alone, together. My fiancé went silent, obviously unhappy. I went silent, feeling misunderstood, guilty, and then resentful. Was I being unreasonable? I

didn't know anymore. When it came to marrying a man with children, I was finding I couldn't find my footing or trust my judgment much of the time.

It wasn't that I didn't like them, I insisted defensively to my future husband on that day and many others; I *did*. I looked forward to spending time with my older stepdaughter-to-be especially—the one who didn't live with us—because I wanted to have the opportunity to get to know her in the way I was getting to know her little sister, who did. But in those early days, I found the girls equal parts “adorable and fun to be around” and “exhausting and demanding.” Sometimes, even though I didn't want to admit it, I even found them “bratty and difficult.” Let me add that this was not their fault, not by a long shot. It couldn't have been easy for them, getting used to me. And to make matters worse, I was coming to understand that for the entire ten years of his separation, divorce, and subsequent single life, their father had made sure that weekends were a whirlwind of activities planned with the girls' wants in mind. They were pretty much in charge of all the decisions—where to have lunch, which DVDs to rent, how many glitter pens and henna tattoos and pairs of shoes to buy, when to go to bed. In my future husband's words, “They've come to expect they can show up whenever they feel like it, and that my life is all about them whenever they do.”

It was only natural that, during the deepening of my relationship with my husband-to-be and my acquaintanceship with his girls, he and I would not always see eye to eye regarding the fact that I needed a little more time away from them than he did. But it felt like a failure to argue so much—Does the tv have to be *that* loud? Shouldn't she do her homework? Can they put their own dishes in the dishwasher? Where was his sense of

privacy and of romance, anyway?—and I could sense it pulling us apart. We were in the outer circle of stephell, though I didn't realize it yet.

I wrote this book about women with stepchildren, for women with stepchildren, because being a woman with stepchildren is not easy. Dr. E. Mavis Hetherington, psychologist and author of the landmark, three-decade Virginia Longitudinal Study of 1,400 families that divorced and remarried, notes that, while children frequently come to appreciate having a stepfather—particularly if he brings in income, provides companionship to mom, and proves himself to be a friend to the child—“the situation with stepmothers is more difficult and stepchild resentment is more intense.” And this state of affairs is more or less unavoidable. As Hetherington writes, “Even those [women] who would like to be less involved [in running the family] rarely have the chance. They are often expected to be nurturers to already difficult and suspicious children [and] to impose some kind of order on the household, which is angrily and bitterly resented by many stepchildren.” Hetherington noted “a real demonizing of the stepmother” in those situations where a husband did not support his wife's efforts to parent and discipline, and when the husband's ex treated her as a rival and was highly involved in her children's lives and their father's household. Reporting with some surprise that so many of her subjects described their stepmothers as “evil, malevolent, wicked or monsters” and nicknamed them things like “Dog Face” and “The Dragon,” Hetherington concludes, “Stepfathers rarely encountered this level of vitriol.” Of course there are plenty of kids who give their stepfathers a hard time; some ultimately break off relations with mom's second (or third)

spouse all together. But the stepmonster, it seems, is a uniquely *female* hybrid. She is easy to hate; she is everywhere pervasive in the culture (including our collective unconscious); and we are petrified of becoming her. Often, we turn ourselves inside out to avoid it, or berate ourselves for having feelings that strikes us as “stepmonsterish.” It is perhaps no surprise that several studies find that stepmothers have the most problematic role in the “family” and experience significant adjustment difficulties.⁵

Yet stepfamily life, remarriage with children—whatever you want to call it—has been largely viewed through the prism of its emotional repercussions on the children. Books on the subject tell women how their stepchildren feel, what their stepchildren need and want, and how they can help their stepchildren adjust to and accept their father’s remarriage. This is no doubt helpful—it can only improve matters to know where his kids are coming from, and to have confirmation that it is all more or less normal. But where, we are likely to wonder at some point, is the stuff about stepmothers and how we feel? That is more difficult to find. And friends, however well-intentioned and sympathetic, aren’t always a lot of help either. None of mine had stepkids, for example and so, like the how-tos I finally picked up when the going got rough, they tended to advise things that felt maddeningly child-centric and unreasonable—even impossible. How, for example, could I possibly be expected to “always think about the kids” when they weren’t mine and their mere presence sometimes seemed enough to tear my relationship apart? How could I “not take their behavior personally” when his girls apparently reveled in the discord they caused, from passing along their mother’s pointed remarks to dramatically disliking my cooking, to hanging up when I answered the phone? How could I become a

“better stepparent” when his girls wouldn’t look me in the eye? What got lost in these child-centric exhortations and lists about how to be a better stepmother, it seemed, was any acknowledgment that the experiences and emotions of the woman with stepchildren mattered just as much as anyone else’s.

Exploring the issue of how children can threaten and stress a marriage, rather than how a remarriage may affect a child, is a reframing many are likely to find unsettling. As a society we feel for the children, and we identify with them, and all for good reason. Children *are* in fact powerless when it comes to their parents’ decision to divorce and remarry. In this most fundamental and urgent matter, they have very little say, and much to lose. Once their parent has *remarried*, however, it’s a different world. Dr. Marilyn Ihinger-Tallman and Dr. Kay Pasley note that stepchildren have incredible power to break the remarriage up.⁶ They may intentionally create divisiveness between spouses and siblings and set parent against stepparent. They also may pass along unkind messages or invite interference from members of the other household, creating conflict and tremendous resentment. Stepfamily researchers like Dr. James Bray emphasize that in stepfamilies, children all too often set the emotional tone for the entire household, while pre-adolescent and adolescent children are often the initiators of conflict with stepparents.

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Acknowledging the simple fact that stepchildren can and do affect a remarriage, sometimes for the worst—that they are, if you will, actors as well as acted upon—can help us better understand what we might call “Stepmother Reality,” the specific, shared experiences of women with stepchildren. This reality has been largely ignored by

feminists, sociologists, and even some of the very authors who write about stepmothers and stepmothering. Why might this be? I believe that we tend to sweep the stepmother's difficulties under the rug because they strike us as unseemly. Her pain, struggles, and failures set us on edge, make us want to turn away, because they smack of guilt. A stepmother's suffering is, more than anything else, an indictment—of her. An admission not so much that she is falling short as that she is flawed. Thinking we understand it, we decide there is nothing more to learn—“Anna's stepmother is awful!” “If the stepmom is nice, then everything will be fine; if there are problems, it's because she's not trying hard enough”—and so we are left comprehending very little. Disliking stepmothers is easy; suspecting them is more or less automatic. Caring about stepmothers, expressing concern about what they're going through, considering their reality at any length, requires a leap of faith.