



MY STEPMOM & ME

With her cold glare and steely manner, the “Ice Queen” was my real-life evil stepmother—until everything changed. TEXT: BRIONY SMITH

My stepmother, Brigid, came all the way from Zimbabwe. She was tall, slim and gorgeous, with creamy skin and a piercing hazel gaze. She wanted to make it in business and, at the age of 19, landed at Kelly Douglas, a now-defunct grocery company in Vancouver where she started her career in labour relations. She didn’t have a degree—just a steely manner acquired from the good sisters of the convent where she had attended school. “Sit up straight; picture a string pulling you up, up, up” she was taught.

Despite her strict upbringing, she was drawn to a group of hard-partying young professionals at work. There was Pamela, a beautiful, bold woman with a platinum-blond pixie cut and a quick temper. (Meet my mom.) There was Andy, a tough but charming bohemian-gone-corporate in search of a good time. (Meet my dad.) Pamela fell for Andy; Andy fell for Pamela. They got married. They had a kid. (Meet me.)

Brigid even attended my mom’s baby shower. Little did she know that that baby would soon be *her* baby. Surprise! A couple of years after I was born, things began to cool between Andy and Pamela. (It happens.) Andy and Brigid got together. (That happens too.) I was dragged into a shared-custody arrangement, from

Saturday-morning cartoons at Mom’s to weekend visits with Dad and Brigid. Then it happened: My mother was visiting a friend’s place on Vancouver Island when she left a cigarette burning in the ashtray and slipped off to sleep, my puppy curled up beside her. The entire house burned down, and she was gone—just like that. I was six.

I was sad to lose her, but, strangely—surprisingly—it didn’t faze me much. I’ve heard that small children are excellent at adapting to terrible situations—I was more concerned with making sure that my toys made the journey with me to my new life.

Gaining a new full-time mother, however, did faze me. She hit all the evil-stepmother stereotypes. Scary accent? Check. More rules? Check. Mandatory church—and weekly catechism—attendance? Check.

Any hopes that I would get special treatment because of my dramatic childhood were quickly quashed. She wasn’t into winning me over, and she wasn’t the June Cleaver type. “Get a grip” was a common refrain in the Smith household, as was “You’ve got legs—use them.” Weren’t stepmoms supposed to overcompensate with sweetness for not being the real deal? Instead, she wielded her mind-melting death glare for even the smallest infraction—heaven help me when she trained the ▷

rear-view mirror on me in the back seat during one of her “talks.” My friends called her the “Ice Queen.”

She was a good parent to me and my half-sister and half-brother, but she just didn’t seem to like me much. Where were the heartfelt talks? Shopping together for my first bra? Giggling over boys? I would watch movies like *Little Women* and *Stepmom*, where Susan Sarandon played the ultimate mother, and secretly wish that she was my mom, addressing me as “my darling” and dispensing little nuggets of life truths. I thought our relationship would stay this way forever. I moved away to Victoria for university and then to Toronto, and we only spoke every few months or when there was news to share.

Then one day, about four years ago, she called. “I’m in town tomorrow for work,” she said. “Let’s get dinner.” “God,” I thought, “this will be awkward.” In 24 years, I’d only hung out with my parents one-on-one a handful of times. There’s a reason you have siblings: They’re parental buffers. It was the first of many dinners over the next few years. She came to Toronto every three or four months; other than my annual holiday trip home, it was the only time I saw her. At first, there were silences. We spoke about the weather and how my job hunt was going. In a struggle to find common ground, she asked about old friends I hadn’t seen in years.

But we found that we could talk freely about family—it felt safe. Christmas, for some reason, seemed like the easiest access point (who would host what and who would bring what?), so for the first year’s worth of dinners (and the occasional news update on the phone), we talked about just that—a lot. Then, one day, while planning yet another holiday, she sighed and said, “Oh, these family things can just be the worst sometimes.”

I was stunned. You could practically hear the record scratch. Our family gatherings felt like some kind of strange TV show I’d been watching for years, but there was nobody there to talk about it with. Having my stepmother weigh in honestly was like finding out that she’d been watching the same show too—and she couldn’t wait to yak about it.

“I know!” I said. Did I dare complain? Was this an elaborate trap? Had the rear-view-mirror glare transformed into a face-to-face death ray? “Ha! How dare you say that about your family?!” she would snap and then zap me with her stare, leaving only a pile of smoking ash in the place where I once sat. But, no, she wanted to bitch about Christmases past. It was fascinating, like

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getting intel from the enemy. After all these years, I had access to the Top-Secret Parent Files.

I wanted to know it all. Once we’d covered all the gossip about our family in the second year of dinners, I mustered up the courage to ask the big questions. I asked her what I was like as a kid (precocious) and what life was like with my dad (still tough, still in love after two decades). Then I asked what it was like getting a six-year-old dropped on her.

“Your father was absolutely reeling from the news that his ex-wife had just died in this horrible fashion, I was eight months’ pregnant and we just got you? It felt like getting hit with a 10-ton truck!” She sounded...human.

At one dinner, she talked about what it was like being a mother. She told me she worried that she was too hard on my younger sister when she was little. At another dinner, she said she worried when she was pregnant that she wasn’t maternal enough. Another year passed. I asked her if she’d ever wished that she had a third kid. “I did have three kids,” she said, an eyebrow raised.

As we slowly grew closer, I acted more and more like myself. I still remember when I jokingly told her to take a hike after she ragged on my sister and me about our track records with men—same as I would with any other friend. She just laughed and affectionately called us a couple of floozies. I couldn’t have been more delighted because that’s what friends do: They take the piss out of each other. After all these years, she wasn’t just a stepmother anymore; she had become my mom.

In honour of this unforeseen shift in our relationship, I gave her a version of this very story last Mother’s Day—one of the scariest things I’ve ever done. Would she tell me to get a grip? Instead, she sent me a thank-you text. I don’t know what I was expecting—maybe for her to call me in tears saying “Thank you for saying all the things I never could!” But that wouldn’t be her.

We may be friends, but she’ll always be the Ice Queen. She still barks at me to use my own legs. Her glare is as powerful as ever. I’ve come to realize that that’s just who she is; she’ll never be June Cleaver. But when I asked her if she would be okay with me publishing this piece, she shrugged and said: “Why not? I already sent it to everyone I know.” Now *that* was shocking. (Susan Sarandon would *totally* do that.) Her sister, Susan, forwarded me a copy of that email. There, at the top, my mom had written “Time is wonderful and gives a chance to all.” Even stepmothers. Even us. □