



(Mis)step Mother

Molly Cardenas

Retold Fairy Tales

No one chooses to lead a life of hardship. Just the same as no one chooses to be born a woman, much less a poor woman, with little rights, no money, and even less human decency afforded her in a cruel and pitiless world. So I ask, with the earnestness of one who genuinely seeks an answer, was I wrong? And if I was wrong, for I do not deny that I likely may have been, can I be faulted? Reared by a broken and unfeeling mother- who held together the jagged, cold pieces of herself just long enough to see her only child grow into womanhood- I have known what it is to suffer and to scar, but survive all the same. I know what it feels like to plunge a creased and blistered hand into the ashes of a life burnt out, a spirit extinguished all too quickly, hoping against hope to unearth something whole and unscorched. Know what it sounds like to splatter face-first onto the slimy, stinking cobblestones of a lane every bit as lonely and trodden upon as the woman sprawled across it; abandoned by the same aimless men who falsely promise never to stray. Know what it looks like to gaze pleadingly, desperately into brooding eyes that cannot, that will never, see you in return; no matter how much they appear to gaze back.

In spite of all this, I have twice writhed and wrestled and wrested from this body my sole reasons for living, their shapes bare and beaten, but beating; with life though always against odds. My daughters had hearts defiantly, tirelessly thrumming from the start; the cadence that inspired me to march on, the only rhythm worth dancing to. Screaming with vigor and crying out for protection, I instantly, instinctually, bonded with these two little souls. It was the moment after their births, in the heavy darkness of a midwinter night that I realized I'd never felt more at peace. I felt, for the first and only time, a love so true and so pure as to be incapable of breaking. The two little creatures I cradled had saved me. And I determined to save them in

return, no matter the cost, physical or spiritual.

Little by little, I gathered the scattered, torn fragments of my life and made to mend them- as one does a moth-eaten quilt or an outdated frock- in hopes that it might be refashioned and repurposed to benefit my daughters. It happened that I had such a gift for mending (indeed, mending had been the ongoing project of my life) that I was soon hired as handmaid and wet nurse to a widely respected aristocratic family; one of a consequence almost as great as their wealth. However, reality rarely lives up to reputation, and the Lady of the house, though beautiful and young, was spiteful and suspicious; often accusing me of indiscretions I did not commit and crimes I had no hand in. She knew the power of her status, as well as the dubiousness of mine, and with a vindictive spirit, paired with a temperament easily bored by her domestic duties, she set out to make my work arduous and degrading. After three thankless years of unwavering (though, admittedly, not always blameless) servitude, my disdain for my Lady reached its peak. So, when her husband's wayward eyes inevitably began to wander in my direction, I felt no guilt- indeed felt a vengeful satisfaction- in bewitching them. At last I had become bold enough and wise enough to test the bounds of my limited agency. Little by little, I cast my morals aside and set out to gain influence through temptation; the fates of my daughters always foremost in mind.

It wasn't long before my Lord and I began sharing; at first only glances and whispers followed soon after by our shared, secret affection, which eventually resulted in our sharing a bedchamber, along with a mutual and vehement animosity for his wife. Though I was keenly aware of my low rank in the world, I was also aware of certain key assets at my disposal. True, I had, at that time, nothing financially or socially valuable enough to guarantee lasting security- much less lasting comfort- for myself or my daughters. But I did have beauty, along with a developing sense of how to use it to my best advantage, and to use it before it left me forever. And so it was with rouged cheeks, charcoal-black eye lashes, and my best, crimson gown that I administered, ever-so daintily, the poison that would ultimately leave my beauty- and thus, my Lord's affections- permanently uncontested. At last I had grown just as pitiless and unfeeling as the world often encourages us to be. Thus, though freshly widowed, my Lord wasted no time in affecting grief, and we were married within the week. Sadly for my girls, both burgeoning on womanhood, the late Lady was not without legacy, as the very child I'd originally been hired to nurse and nurture was positively blooming with health. Indeed, to this day I question if it was not a steadfast devotion to mothering which finally led to my undoing. But the damage was done. I'd long ago determined that motherhood was my truest, happiest destiny and I (perhaps naively) took personal

pride in my step-daughter's strong constitution, as much as I did my own daughters'.

The same could not be said about her demeanor. Every bit as pompous and entitled and jealous as her mother, my step-daughter set out to torment my poor girls. My adopted daughter, while slightly younger than my true daughters, was raised to know her status and superiority. So much had this awareness been ingrained in her that when my own daughters (however hesitantly and clumsily) rose to the rank of equality, their little step-sister was quite undone. She bemoaned the elegant state of their dresses, the number of their playthings, even the quality of their education. All of which I made certain were absolutely equal to her own, if not slightly less so. For even then I was paranoid almost to sickness that my Lord would accuse me of mistreatment and throw us all back to the streets if any minor, perceived injustice occurred.

So it was in this way that each sister was raised and bred in an identical manner. Yet, while the daughters of my blood grew ever closer and ever more affectionate towards one another, my step-daughter became increasingly more indifferent to them, preferring instead to maintain her delusion of primacy. Motherless and embittered as the child was, I took pity, realizing that her former superiority was all she could still recall of her life with her natural mother. I did try to be as much a mother to my self-child as she would allow, though I now regret the extent to which my efforts rapidly devolved into over-indulgence. She was spoiled and petted even more than my own daughters, to such an extent that they accused me more than once of favoritism; failing to understand that their place in the household was not so fixed as their step-sisters, that it in all likelihood depended on her tolerance of them. As my youth and looks started to wither, the obsession to secure their futures consumed nearly every free hour. Meanwhile, the actue knowledge that my own daughters supposed me unfair and inattentive tormented any spare moment that remained. That they could not recognize the sacrifice, love, and necessity underlying my actions and saw only the special attentions paid to their less-than deserving step-sister, was almost enough to break me. So I made concerted efforts to sympathize when their jealousy soured, over time, into derision and contempt for the girl. Tragically, this breech in maternal judgement backfired horribly, as I'd failed to foresee how any outsider might (and evidently would) easily misinterpret their characters based solely on their ill-treatment of her. Out of everything, I regret my lack of foresight the most.

I was short sighted and, more shamefully still, I was superficial and selfish. Thus, the more mature and more vibrant my girls became, the more my plans for their respective futures seemed to depend on socially, financially advantageous marriages. Though a simple enough desire on the surface, I knew all-too well the

degrees of manipulation and deception it would take to successfully execute. Most especially with respect to my daughters, disadvantaged in more ways than one. Although I was no doubt as doting a mother as any-believing my girls to be immensely talented and vastly witty- I was never naive enough to think them especially handsome, and not a third so handsome as their vapid and immodest step-sister. I was pragmatic enough to know that in her presence, my daughters stood no chance of ascertaining any young lord's attentions. But with room and time to let their other merits shine, away from the stifling presence of my step-daughter, then perhaps there was hope for them yet. But if and when they would ever get this chance seemed heartbreakingly doubtful.

However, when the King of all the surrounding villages announced there was to be a ball in honor of the Prince, on a date which coincided seamlessly with the leave of their step-father on business, I felt I, or rather that they, at long last had this chance. With an animalistic and almost savage desperation, I gathered every suitable stitch of clothing my step-daughter owned and tossed them into the great fireplace, until thick tendrils of smoke threatened to shroud the whole house in ash and cinder. With nothing suitable to wear- no visible marker of aristocratic superiority- she would never be admitted to the ball. I hardly need mention the predictable, though no less extraordinary, severity of the girl's reaction; dismayed, enraged, and despairing as she was. Less because she would miss the ball (indeed, having been to countless others, she frequently made complaint of their banality) and more because her most exorbitant and ornate gowns were consumed by flame before she could so much as wail in protest. By the time it even occurred to her to salvage them, there wasn't much left to be salvaged, save a few precious gems that had once bedecked the bodice of her favorite dress. thoughtlessly, she plunged in after them, and it was a tremendous stroke of luck that nothing save mounds of smoking ash remained of the great fire.

Shortly thereafter, my step-daughter emerged, as a phoenix from the ashes of her ruin, so sodden with soot and cinder she was barely recognizable. This is when my own girls, mirthful in her misery, giggled and croaked a name of infamy, the single taunt that would mark our collective ruin; Cinderella.

Of course no one, not even Cinderella, could then have predicted the egregious, immortal injustice that was soon to transpire. Or perhaps that's too generous, too soft-hearted of me. Perhaps even then the wretch was calculating her vile revenge, even as my daughters clamored into the carriage. In those last golden moments of joy, my daughters appeared more decorous and radiant than they'd ever been before; for once every bit as lavish and breathtaking as their step-sister. Meanwhile, Cinderella chased after the carriage, sobbing and

cursing and pausing only to hurl an impressively large pumpkin in our direction. I can hardly fault my daughters for giggling at this scene, a little nervously, as they approached their first and last ball.

Although I cannot attest to what exactly transpired after our departure, I can say with certainty that the dance came and went in a dreamy, blissful haze for all involved. For my daughters in particular, the night was filled with dances, blushes, stolen glances, and glass after glass of the finest wine that part of the country had to offer. And indeed everything seemed similarly intoxicating and sweet until the clocks chimed the twelfth hour all-too suddenly. Whether drunk on drink or laughter, my girls and I passed the happy carriage-ride home speculating on who of the many mysterious, flirtatious courtiers had actually been the Prince Charming. None of our trio had so much as glimpsed Cinderella, despite her alleged awe-inspiring, time-stopping entrance. Even during breakfast, after rumor of a lovely, anonymous peasant-girl stealing the heart of the Prince had reached our table, the possibility of her being Cinderella seemed unlikely. Not only because her mannerisms (if not always her manners) bespoke of a background far removed from peasantry, but because, even as we speculated, Cinderella fumed at the table; childish enough to pout and ignore us but inconstant enough to appear at breakfast all the same. Indeed, the state of the garden- in which everything was stomped and mashed and ripped to shambles- left us with little doubt that she'd passed the evening tormenting the household with a routinely epic tantrum.

In fact, dirt and soot and the pulp of various vegetables still clung to her skin, hair, and clothes even as the royal footman slipped on the fated slipper. Let it never be said that I didn't make my best effort to cram each of my daughters' feet into the cursed thing, that I didn't plead and reason with the royal entourage that they had made some atrocious mistake in anointing Cinderella Princess of the realm on the spot. For I did both to the fullest and most desperate degree; at first only to secure an easy title for one of my girls, but then in a grave attempt to save us all from the vengeful schemes of a thankless step-daughter rendered untouchable by law. But to no avail.

And now, having been forced to watch as my only children- my only loves, my only saviors, my only reasons for existing- were blinded with hot pokers before my eyes, I can say that I have known injustice so immense and so overwhelming that i'm in perpetual danger of suffocating beneath it. So, dear reader, with my tale told and my burdens unloaded for all the world to see (apart from those poor and wretched and lowly step-sisters), I ask you; was I wrong if I sinned? And if I was, for I allow that in many regards I must have been, then can I be blamed?

With that, I take leave of you forever with these parting lines; that every tale has many sides, and not everyone gets a fairy godmother.

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