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MARTHA GRACE DUNCAN

So Have I Been a Good Stepmother?

I will speak for her. She is, after all, my stepmother.
—Ever After: A Cinderella Story

After crossing over the Duwamish Waterway, the number 137 bus climbed up Boeing Hill. It moved with agonizing slowness, and I worried it would lose its grip on the road and roll, like the rock of Sisyphus, backward to the bottom. But it didn't. The bus reached the summit, and I jumped off and looked around to get my bearings. A short distance away, a man with a black patch over one eye was walking toward me; his clothes were old and tattered, his hair in disarray. When I noticed him, he called me by name, gesturing for me to follow.

As the man led me up a steep hill, past white frame houses and neatly tended lawns, I thought the neighborhood seemed peaceful enough, and I couldn't understand why the concierge at my hotel and the lady on the bus had warned against my going there. After we had been climbing for about ten minutes, the road before us fell away, so that only the sky could be seen ahead. My guide turned off into a yard littered with old mattresses, trucks, and cars. The vehicles had been stripped of their parts, which lay strewn about: truck seats with springs poking out, automobile carpets encrusted with mud. We stumbled over the debris to approach a tall, thin woman in a red sleeveless blouse and blue shorts who was bent over, her back to us, tending a plant. A few feet away, a nine- or ten-year-old boy, barefoot and dressed in a dirty T-shirt and jeans, sat on a tire and flipped through a picture book about dinosaurs.

The woman stood up, and I easily recognized my stepmother, Elaine, though I had last seen her as a delicate young woman of twenty-three, and she was now over fifty, with a gaunt, sunken face and gray hair so irregular, it looked as if it had been cut by a child. When she spoke, I saw the reason for her hollow face: she was missing several teeth, including one right in front. My stepmother offered no hug or greeting, nor did she introduce the boy, but instead began to tell me about the plants, speaking proudly of the islands of beauty she had created, seemingly heedless of the chaos surrounding them.

On this raw morning in early May, the chill began to penetrate my wool slacks

and blazer, and at length I asked if we could go inside, but it proved to be no warmer there. The windows of the house were all boarded up, and Elaine had to leave the door open to let in some light. When my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I saw that the house was cluttered like the yard, with every inch of wall space covered. As in the yard, occasional attempts at adornment broke up the scene of utter squalor. From a naked lightbulb in the ceiling hung red and green Christmas ribbons, the kind that curl when scraped with scissors. The rippled ribbons had been entwined around the dirty lightbulb and fashioned into a bow. On a nearby wall, I noticed a picture of me and my three younger siblings; it was a photograph I had sent to Elaine two years earlier, upon first making contact with her.

We had planned to meet then. I even bought a plane ticket to Seattle, but she stopped answering my calls, and I didn't go. After some months, I learned the reason for her disappearance: right around that time, her husband, Tommi, had been murdered on their property, an attack the police first characterized as a hate crime because Tommi had worn bras and dresses around the neighborhood, but later explained as an attempted robbery gone awry, when they discovered the fifty-seven marijuana plants in Tommi and Elaine's basement.

So Elaine cared enough about me and my siblings, I thought, to frame our picture and hang it on the wall, with a crinkly gold ribbon taped around it. Moving closer for a better look, I touched the photograph with my finger and felt the glass thick with grime.

After Elaine and I reestablished contact, she began to write letters to me, odd, messy letters written on the back of business receipts or on a child's stationery. She used a lot of quotation marks, placing them around my name and title, the name of the university where I teach, and many other words as well—ordinary words used in perfectly ordinary ways. As I came to know her better, I wondered whether she just liked the look of the curly double marks and employed them for decorative effect rather than for reasons of grammar or tone. Often she included drawings in her letters, offering them as gifts: crayoned drawings of yellow and green parrots, and pink roses with yellow and green leaves.

In my letters to Elaine, I explained my desire to talk to her about my father, who had taken his life at the age of forty-seven. Elaine had been the last person to see him alive; yet in the twenty-seven years since his death, no one in my family had spoken to her. My sisters tried once, but Elaine's parents, afraid of upsetting their daughter's fragile emotional state, refused to tell them where she had gone.

As for me, it had taken all these years to get up the courage to search for my stepmother. Once I began to look for her, she hadn't been that hard to find.

"What attracted you to my father?" I asked, sitting down in a canvas chair and immediately falling through a hole in the seat.

"The first attraction was over diving," she said, as I extricated myself from the hole and moved to the floor. She sat down a short distance away from me on the dingy carpet. While she talked, she scraped the rug with her hand, corralling the dirt into a pile near her knee. "I was more athletic than your mother," she said. "I'll call your mother 'Mom.' You don't mind if I call her 'Mom,' do you? After all, we *are* all kind of in the family." I smiled at her logic, imagining what my mother would say if she were there. Elaine, who was a generation younger than my father, had embarked on a secret relationship with him while he and my mother were still married. The affair had precipitated my parents' divorce and—after he and Elaine moved away—the loss of our father's daily involvement in our lives.

"Your father helped me with a swimming and diving class I was teaching at the Y," Elaine went on. "Do you have any idea how good he was at diving? Do you know what a half gainer is? Your father was a better diver at forty-three than most boys half his age!" She seemed indignant at my presumed ignorance and talked faster and faster, like a railroad train gaining speed.

"The fact that Dick and I were having an affair embarrassed your little brother a lot," she said. "Maybe Dick was like a father to me; he was forty-three and I was nineteen when we fell in love." Barely two years younger than Elaine, I had left home for college soon after she and my father started going together, so I had only seen her a few times. One Christmas, I remember, she and Daddy came to my mother's house to exchange presents with my brother and sisters and me. Daddy had made us all laugh with his antics—first graciously admiring a blue sweater we gave him and then suddenly, with an impish grin, rolling it into a ball. Elaine, silent and nervous, had clutched a tissue in her hand and dabbed at her forehead over and over.

"Alcoholism cropped up because of the guilt," Elaine said, "and because his mother died at fifty. He didn't want to get to be old. People have this age phobia and your Dad had one. The last two months he started on vodka; when you drink it, they can't smell it on your breath. His job was such a high-responsibility position that if he had gone back to wine, they would have noticed." At the time of his death, my father was managing a trailer park in Morro Bay, a small fishing

village on California's central coast. I supposed the job *was* "high responsibility," yet the description struck me as grandiose, because his final job seemed so far beneath his talents and his dreams.

Elaine continued to talk with furious rapidity, sweeping the dirt with her hand, while I made a vain effort to keep up by scribbling on my yellow legal pad. She seemed oblivious to the noise around us, which felt overwhelming to me—the blaring of the television that no one was watching and the nonstop barking of two large black dogs, who had wandered into the room. The man with the patch over his eye came in the front door and spoke to Elaine, slurring his words: "She's writing in shorthand! I can tell!" Before I could explain—I was only using my own abbreviations—he staggered outside again.

"He bought a gun," Elaine said. "And by the end of two months' time it was all out of hand. He said, 'I can't pull myself up this time, Elainy.' " That my father had a pet name for her rang true, because he had made-up nicknames for all our family. Mine was *Beautycute*, and it dated from the years of closeness my father and I shared on a Pennsylvania dairy farm.

"I said, 'I'm going to call the suicide hotline,' " Elaine continued. "But I didn't really believe him; I thought it was the bottle talking. I was tired because he wouldn't do any work and I had to do it all."

The man with the black patch came in again, lurching and banging his leg on the door frame. "You're a motormouth," he told Elaine in an aggressive tone. Turning to me, he said, "Apparently somebody loved you. You know that?"

The nine- or ten-year-old boy started climbing up a trellis just outside the front door. The trellis swayed perilously, making a creaking sound, and Elaine looked up and spoke to the boy in a matter-of-fact way. "I hope you don't fall down, Reggie, and break your neck."

"He got in the car that night," she said to me, "and went and got booze. I don't think he would have had the nerve if he'd been sober." She lifted up her hand to her eyes, apparently inspecting it for dirt. "He murdered himself," she said. "Suicide is just a polite word for self-murder."

The man with the patch stood behind me, leaning over my shoulder, attempting to read my notes. "You women got your problems," he said thickly. "Us men got ours."

Flies flew in the open door and swirled through the corrugated red and green Christmas ribbons to get near the lightbulb. Reggie came in and lay down on the floor in a sleeping bag, looking up at a cartoon on the television screen. Elaine

said, "You should brush your teeth, Reg, and take a bath," but he stayed where he was.

I had noticed another room in the back that I thought might belong to the boy, and I asked Elaine, "Where does Reggie sleep?"

She answered cryptically, "Where he falls." Scratching her head, she seemed to remember her cropped hair. "I had the flu last week," she explained, "and I knew I shouldn't wash my hair, so I cut it off." Unable to come up with an appropriate response, I sat silent.

Elaine had wound down; she stood up and went into the kitchen, while I sought out the bathroom. I found it off the corridor leading to the back of the house. The bathroom door was off its hinges, lying on the floor. In its place, a dirty blue blanket drooped down from a nail on one side of the door frame. I stretched the blanket across the opening and tried to hook it on a nail that protruded from the frame on the other side, but it kept falling down, pulling the nail with it. At last, Reggie came over and held the blanket in place while I used the bathroom.

A few minutes later, I entered the kitchen, a long narrow room in which every inch of counter space was covered with dishes. Elaine was in the middle of making egg salad sandwiches, and I began to debate with myself whether I should take the risk of eating there. But, as it turned out, the sandwiches were not for us; Elaine handed them down to the dogs, whom she addressed as Moon Doggie and Ken Boy. After feeding the dogs, she picked up a bowl from the counter, lifted it to within a few inches of her eyes, and inspected it thoroughly. Apparently satisfied, she filled it with vanilla ice cream and set it on a crowded table where I had pulled up a chair. She repeated the elaborate inspection with a second bowl, then with one spoon, evidently forgetting there were two of us.

"Could I have a spoon?" I asked, when she had seated herself and begun to eat. But she ignored me, immersed in her own thoughts. She began to talk a mile a minute, and I resumed taking notes while my ice cream melted.

"Dick came in about eleven o'clock," she said. "He said, 'I've decided to take my life.' I said, 'What?! I'd better go call Richard and Karola!' but he said, 'No, it's too late,' and I was really tired and I went to bed, and the next thing I heard was a shot."

I realized that I had just heard, for the first time, what had actually happened the night my father killed himself, twenty-seven years earlier. This was what I had come for, to learn about that night, which had forever changed my life and all my siblings' lives. I felt awed and sad, but a surge of righteous anger toward Elaine

interfered with the purity of the moment. I kept my voice even. "So you didn't call anyone?"

"I did make a call," she said then. "I called Richard and Karola Ricketts, and they came over that night. They said the cops won't do anything until he tries." I didn't believe her, but it didn't matter; my anger was already starting to subside. Elaine had been very young then, and suggestible; blaming her would be like blaming a child.

"Why do you think he chose that time to end his life?" I asked.

"I think the job itself got to Dick," she said. "The largest part of the job was trash. Every morning for two hours, he had to go through everybody's garbage and separate the burnables from the non-burnables. He had to clean the bathrooms too. He said he didn't want to do the garbage anymore; he said, 'I'm tired of living.' "

Elaine had spilled a dab of ice cream on the table between us. She stood up and grabbed a sponge to wipe off the table, then used the sponge to mop her bare legs as well. "Our relationship was suffering," she went on. "Dick was handsome, and every time it was six o'clock and I would be making dinner, ten thousand women would call and want him to help park the trailers. Toward the end, I was mostly a mother to him. His deep-seated problems with alcohol and his anguish over his mother: those were the things that took his life—that and his obsession with getting old."

Her candor impressed me, and her summary of the factors that had led to my father's death. Nevertheless, my hunger pains were worsening, and when she paused, I asked again, "Do you think I could have a spoon?"

But Elaine, in her own world, appeared not to hear my request. "Dick did talk about you a lot," she said. "More than any of the others. He said he couldn't believe how much you ate. At the farm you ate as much as he did, he said, and you were so little." Daddy had always spoken nostalgically about our years on the farm when I, as a toddler, was his constant companion. We would make believe I was a lady named "Mrs. Marigold," who crossed the dirt road in front of our house to visit him in the barn. And we would ride together in our Jeep, taking apples to the cider mill or milk to the cooperative in a nearby town. On one of these excursions, in winter, on an icy road, my father lost control of the Jeep, which zigzagged down a steep hill. After he had put an end to our wild descent, I turned to him with a jubilant cry, "Do it again, Daddy!" Years later, when I was a disengaged teenager, he would recall our old, fierce attachment by repeating—out of the blue—my adoring cry, "Do it again, Daddy!"

Flies swarmed around Elaine in the darkened room as she finished her ice cream, stood up, and handed me a spoon at last.

In the late afternoon, Elaine's boyfriend, Lloyd, showed up after working most of the day as a street musician in downtown Seattle. Because he was nice looking and well spoken, I wondered why he was with someone as disturbed as Elaine. He answered my question without being asked, explaining that he had just come out of a treatment program for alcoholics after drinking for three months straight. "My father had a problem with alcohol too," he said. "I don't have as much of one." I was pondering that statement when he added that his father had been lost somewhere in the Ohio penal system, after a fire destroyed the records.

At the end of the day, Elaine, Lloyd, and I sat on tires in the debris-strewn yard, while Lloyd played the guitar, and we sang old folk songs from the sixties. After talking to me nonstop for so many hours, Elaine's voice was shot, and she lamented that she could hardly sing. But she tried anyway, as Lloyd played "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?," his pleasant tenor mingling with my rusty alto and Elaine's hoarse soprano. The sun had come out in the afternoon, burning away the chill of the morning, and I had the impression that we all felt light and happy. I was surprised at how natural I felt with these deeply impoverished, troubled people, singing songs on a spring day.

At last, I said that I needed to return to my hotel. "Could I please see the bus schedule?" I asked. Elaine ignored my request, so I decided just to say good-bye, walk down the hill by myself, and wait until the bus came along.

When she saw that I was determined to leave, Elaine asked me to wait for her. She disappeared for a moment and reappeared, clutching something to her bosom. She held it out to me: a navy and white angora sweater, smelling strongly of perfume, with a hole under one arm. Touched by her attempt to give me a gift, when she had so little, I thanked her warmly, and then she, Lloyd, Moon Doggie, and Ken Boy accompanied me down the hill. About halfway to the bus stop, the two dogs darted into traffic, prompting Elaine to shout at them in a desperate, high-pitched voice: "Come back here!" When she had succeeded in getting the dogs back on the sidewalk, she turned to me. "I shrieked like a fishwife. I'm sorry." Her apology struck me as strange and revealing, because the dogs had been in real danger, and she had done the right thing—unlike the time she had gone to bed in the face of my father's peril.

When the number 137 bus pulled up, spewing exhaust, I shook hands with Lloyd and hugged Elaine gently, as if she might break under the pressure of my

arms. Elaine handed me a magenta-colored rose she had picked along the way. "So have I been a good stepmother?" she asked.

I had been on the verge of mounting the bus, and I turned back to look at her, hesitating. Her question made me want to laugh, but the impulse subsided when I saw her face. She was looking at me expectantly, waiting for my affirmation. At that moment, I felt a wave of tenderness for this childlike woman whose life, so different from mine, had been linked to it by the vagaries of chance, and I answered, "Yes." Climbing the steps, I sat down in a window seat near the front, and the bus pulled away.

Kathleen de Azevedo

Stephen Dunn

Christine Benvenuto

Chris Offutt

Margaret MacInnis

Others

Paintings by Tula Telfair

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