



Count Your Blessings
by

Becoming a stepmother is a little like having selected what is behind Door Number Eight—you realize very quickly why there are typically only three doors from which to choose! The reality, no matter how much you try to pretend otherwise, is that you've come to live in a home that has been torn apart by tragedy, by grief; you are, in a sense, the personification of loss. This is true even if your new husband wanted his divorce; the ghost of the first wife, of the biological mother, never really goes away. Your very presence in the home is a daily reminder to the children that they are not going to get what they want above all else—their parents back together.

It was clear from the beginning that Paul's family did not exactly consider me God's gift to their universe.

His ex-wife's anger when he told her I was moving in was palpable enough to make the air vibrate, and she gave us new insights into the use of expletives. His two children shrank in terror whenever I walked into any room they occupied and chose, by and large, to pretend that I wasn't actually there. ("Daddy, will you tell her I want a glass of milk?")

We won't even go into the reactions of his family of origin; suffice it to say that his mother didn't speak to him for weeks after we got married. (We had both changed our last names, preferring to select a third "family" name rather than have either of us adopt the other's; there was, as I recall, talk of betrayal of his heritage.) His sister

amused herself when she met me by making constant references to, of all things, the bed he had shared with his first wife.

But we persevered, and after six months of dating, the moving truck brought me, all of my worldly goods, and my cat Spike to live with Paul. Also sharing the house were his children: Jacob, then aged five, and Anastasia, who was almost four.

To make things worse, I came with baggage. Rules! Manners! A closed bedroom door! Furniture was rearranged or, worse, gotten rid of; toys could no longer be strewn throughout the house. To say that the children were not happy with the new regime is an exercise in understatement.

The first year was difficult; I'd be lying if I said anything else. Jacob and I from the beginning were locked into an ongoing, exhausting form of mental combat. It seemed that we argued over everything, from saying "please" to getting a new bicycle. Unlike his sister, he never tried to charm me: it was all pretty much in-your-face interactions. And that made sense, I realized, when I finally had an insight as to why we were so much in opposition and why we had so much in common. We both had the same secret wish, really: the other one of us out of his father's life. And while I was more discreet than he about this desire, it was nonetheless real.

The first summer after our wedding, Paul suggested that we adopt another cat. Spike was clearly mine, he argued; it would be good to cement our new family with something that was "ours." And so we all trooped down to the humane society and, after a couple of fits and starts, eventually came home with Kirsipuu, named for the wearer of the yellow jersey that particular day in the Tour de France bicycle race.

Spike was, to put it mildly, not amused.

He had come from the relative solitude of living with just me to the chaos of living with two small, active, and very noisy children. Adding someone of his own species to the mix, he let me know in no uncertain terms, was simply asking too much. He hissed and hid and yowled at regular

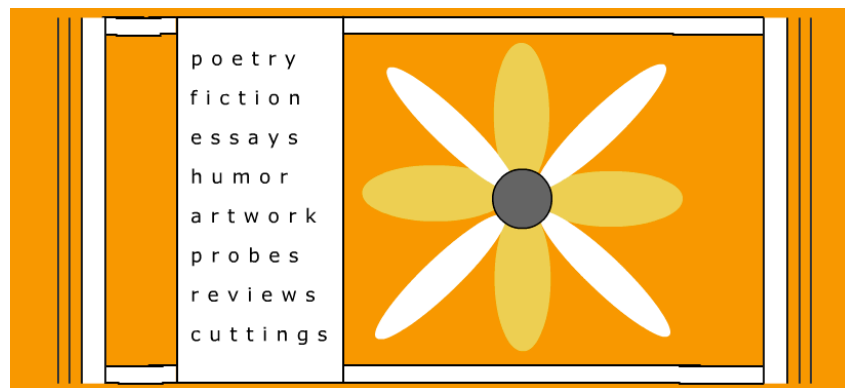
intervals.

And eventually found his way into Jacob's room and Jacob's heart.

I was carrying some fresh towels into the bathroom when I passed the doorway and heard my stepson talking. Pausing just out of sight, I listened. Jacob was sitting on his bed, stroking a surprisingly docile Spike. "I know what it's like for you," Jacob was telling the cat, his voice soothing. "They just move her in and nobody asks you if it's okay with you, and suddenly you have to see her all the time, even when you don't want to."

A pause, filled only with the sound of Spike's tentative purr.

Jacob took a deep breath and leaned in closer. "But you know," he continued. "You should count your blessings. You have it better than I did. At least she didn't bring *furniture!*"



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