

Stepmother

by Beth Vaughan and Helen Kunze

Beth Vaughan, a storyteller in the oral tradition, is also a professional actor, director, and teacher. She and her husband Chuck, a self-employed electronics engineer, live in the rural hills of Maryland, north of Baltimore. They have four married sons and nine grandchildren. Says Vaughan: "Part of me winces at putting a story into a fixed medium, because I know I will never let a story stay in one place. Be forewarned: this is 'Stepmother' as it is this moment, and perhaps only at this moment."

1 Once there was a woman who married a man who had been married before and had a child. So, she was a "stepmother"—a harsh word only because of fairy tales about bad people called "wicked stepmothers."

2 This stepmother was trying very hard to get along with her son, but the boy would have nothing to do with her. When she made him a new coat, he walked in the briars and tore it. When she polished his shoes, he walked in the mud. She'd make him the kind of food he said he liked, but he wouldn't eat it. After a long time of trying really hard to win the boy's friendship, she went to see a wise woman for advice.

3 Up the mountain she went, full of hope that she would soon have a solution to her problem.

4 "Please, please make me a love potion so that my child will like me," she begged.

5 And the wise woman said, "Tell me about it."

6 The stepmother explained all the things she had done, how she had been trying for such a long time to win the boy's acceptance and love, yet still he rejected her. "That's why I need a love potion!" she declared.

7 "All right, I'll help you," said the wise woman, "but first you must gather the ingredients. First, you'll need three hairs from the face of a mountain lion."

8 "How can I do that? A lion would kill me!" The mother was frantic.

9 "I don't know about lions, but I do know about love potions, and you will need three hairs from the face of a mountain lion."

10 The stepmother went down the mountain frustrated and angry. Instead of a solution, she had just another problem.

11 Early the next morning she took a piece of fresh meat and went to the part of the country where she knew mountain lions lived. She put down the meat, and hid a long way off, and watched. It took a while, but the scent of meat finally found its way to a lioness. Because the lioness could also detect the smell of human, she looked around carefully, then took the meat far away before eating it.

12 Next morning, the stepmother went out with another piece of meat. She put it in the same place and hid not quite so far away. This time, it didn't take nearly as long for the lioness to find the meat.

13 For days, the stepmother took meat and hid from the animal, each time a bit closer. Finally, she stood out in the open as the lioness came and ate the meat. Another day, the lioness took meat from her hand while she stroked its fur. Then came a day when the cat rolled on its back to let the woman scratch its belly as it chewed the meat and purred. The woman was able to pluck three hairs, and the lioness didn't seem to care.

14 That day, the stepmother went back up the mountain jubilantly. To the wise woman, she said, "Here! Here are the three hairs. Now will you make me a love potion?"

15 And the wise woman said, "Tell me about it."

16 The stepmother explained how, patiently, day after day, she had won the confidence of the lioness.

17 And the wise woman said, "As you have worked, gently and persistently, with the wild animal, go now and do the same with your stepchild."

18 The stepmother was so disappointed. She went down the mountain as frustrated as before. She didn't have a love potion or a solution or any hope of finding one.

19 Two days later, the child came running into the house, fearful because a lioness was in their yard, carrying a cub. The cub was hurt and sick and needed attention. The boy watched as his stepmother went out into the yard.

20 The big cat rubbed against the woman and purred as she stroked its fur. Mother Cat then gave her cub one long licking with her tongue, deposited the baby cat onto the lap of Mother Human, and trotted away.

21 The stepmother was very good at healing. She cared for the cub unwearyingly, day after day. And, the boy watched.

22 Before long, his curiosity led him to join her. Together, they mixed the herbs and cleaned the wounds, and coaxed the cub to eat. Together, they decided when the cub was ready to return to his mother. Together, they walked to that part of the country where they knew they would find the lioness. And, she was there waiting. From deep in her throat came the big cat's rumble of gratitude and thanks. Her busy tongue checked all over her child, then licked the hand that had fed her, and she carried her cub back to its own part of the country.

23 Together, stepmother and stepson walked back to their home, hand in hand.

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