



Blended Love

Serena is the very first one to step into the auditorium, her steps timed to the beat of “Pomp and Circumstance” banged out on the old piano. She is the shortest by a hair of the twelfth-grade graduating class, not quite four feet eleven inches, with shiny black hair; a very starched white shirt peeks above her satin graduation gown. As the girls walk in, I notice that some of them are wearing shirts that are slightly rumpled. Indeed, I might have worn a creased shirt many years ago at my own graduation, but not Serena. I don’t know what magic she possesses but she has a way of looking neat, her hair pulled tightly back or hanging straight down, never grungy. This morning, she doesn’t hesitate, and walks with a quick step up the stairs to the low stage where three long rows of chairs are lined up. She sits in the first row.

Serena is my youngest stepdaughter. She joined my family when I married her father, Mendy, a man who found my love by seeping into the gaps left inside me when Dovid died. We blended our two families—his three daughters, my five sons and

young daughter. Blended, though, is a misnomer for our family; we are a lumpy family—chunks remain, pieces need chewing before we can swallow. Sometimes we divide into two distinct families separated by history and habit.

“All it takes is lots of love,” someone once advised me.

Serena was only seven when our families joined together. I remember her as a small girl, quivering in the middle seat of our Taurus station wagon because she couldn’t grasp the difference between New York City and New York State. If we were leaving New York, how could we still be in it? She rejected all of my attempts to explain or comfort. “I don’t understand,” she repeated, crying. She was confused, I think now, about the splintering of her family. How could a family break up and a new one form; could she leave one family and join another? Would it still be a family?

That was a long time ago. Now I watch Serena on the stage and my eyes fill with tears. I don’t know why this is. I am proud of her poise, but also sad. She, though, is calm—like her name—and whispers something to the friend beside her. The two smile and

watch the valedictorian walk to the dais centered in front of the stage.

“All it takes is lots of love.”

It also takes stamina and patience. Raising a stepfamily is growing a garden on rocky soil. It can be done, but it isn’t easy and it’s not always successful. *Nachas* is hard earned, but if the lily sprouts, it can be very beautiful, as Serena is on the day of her graduation.

We have a complicated relationship, Serena and I. In private, she can be warm and very loving. The other day she made lunch—salad and salmon served on a real plate—just for me. No one was in the kitchen but us. When I thanked her, she looked pleased. “It was easy,” she said. “I have time today.” And when she went on a class trip to Washington, she bought me a present—a keychain that I still use for my car keys.

In public, though, she will not acknowledge me. I wonder about that. Does she feel guilty because she has another Mom, who is not me? Am I, perhaps, not as neat and “put together” as she feels I should be? As her family of origin always is? Or is it as simple as the fact that some members of her original family reject me—though I’ve been married to her father for ten

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years—and she is confused? It must be easier to pretend that I am not there.

I always make an effort when I appear with her. Today, for her graduation, I am wearing a nice pale blue summer suit, makeup and polished pumps. I am also carrying a camera. When the valedictorian, an energetic young lady with a blonde ponytail, strides up to the dais, I focus on Serena and snap a photo. It is my role: proud stepmom with camera. I want Serena to have someone there snapping photos. And there is no one at the graduation but me. It's an all-girls affair so her father's not invited, and her mom hasn't come. I don't know why. Did Serena not invite her or was it too difficult for her to travel? I haven't asked. I don't interfere in Serena's relationship with her mother. That is between the two of them.

Without me—despite her starched shirt and dignity—Serena has no cheering squad. To compensate, I take lots of photos. A zoom of Serena marching in, Serena sitting down, Serena receiving her diploma, Serena marching out. The photo we won't have, though, is the typical graduation picture with proud Mom hugging daughter, who holds diploma victoriously like a trophy. Because Serena is my stepdaughter, not my daughter, and I don't know how to hug her. Or she can't receive my hugs. I don't know which came first, the chicken or the egg.

Sometimes one person's love can't do it. The soil is too rocky, there isn't enough water. Or the family of origin doesn't give permission. I try, though; I embrace the rocks, though they hurt. I love them all, my children and stepchildren. In an ocean of acceptance, I choose to wear my beach shoes and walk over the gravel into the waves.

When graduation is over, the other graduates join their moms. I see tight family groups laughing and talking. Balloons float. But Serena is nowhere to be found. I walk outside to the car thinking she might be there, but she is not. I return to the large auditorium and, suddenly, she's here, a young woman full of life and potential. Her excitement is palpable. "Mazel Tov!" I say and reach my arm across her shoulder. She doesn't withdraw. She smiles, and I am grateful. ■

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