

# Step dance

## She would never replace the mother who was lost

By Judith Paterson

**M**y stepmother and I have our last fight during the summer of 1984. I sit at the kitchen table watching the "Today" show and eating one of the millions of meals she has cooked for me since she married my father in 1948.

Jane Pauley is interviewing Geraldine Ferraro. The contempt on my stepmother's face is as familiar as the old toaster she jiggles to make my breakfast pop up.

Here it comes: "A woman for president. You know there's just no sense in that."

To the contrary, my dear. And so it begins.

Nobody wins, and we both feel guilty.

I am back in her house in Montgomery, Ala., for a few weeks because my father is dying. Although there is little left to fight about, the old enmity stands its ground.

We were natural enemies the day we met. She was 40, a childless widow in love with my charming, tempestuous father. I was 10, wary, bookish, used to the unquestioned authority that falls to the eldest child in a troubled family.

Compared to my flapperish, Zelda Fitzgerald-like mother, whose life had ended a year earlier in a shambles of alcohol and drug abuse, my stepmother Dot seemed old and staid. Looking at photographs now, I see a handsome woman with bold features and thick auburn hair, a woman of immense vitality and determination. But back then I saw only that the auburn hair was rolled in matronly buns above her ears. I had lost my mother, and I didn't want another.

The Montgomery of the 1920s had produced more than its share of disturbed and disturbing women like my Mama. Skittish as over-bred horses, they were glamorous, half-educated, with just enough imagination to dream dreams they couldn't fulfill. Like Zelda, my mother died awash in half-formed aspirations, overwhelmed by marriage and motherhood.

Dot came from North Carolina, wearing the mantle of generations of preachers and teachers. Her aspirations were firm. She aimed to control her new husband's drinking, put his house in order and tame four children already skilled in the guerrilla techniques that motherless children practice on outsiders who try to tell them what to do.

The stage was set for cosmic struggle, and Dot won all the early rounds. My baby brother left me for her without a backward look. (I had, I'll admit, been a ruthless and fickle surrogate mother.) Our beloved and oh-so-lenient housekeeper had to go. Unsuitable friends were banished. We had to curl our hair, go to Sunday school and wear shoes in the summer. It was awful.

But stepmothers have weak spots, and 10-year-olds have Geiger counters when it comes to locating them. We were the only children Dot would ever have. She wanted us to love her and she wanted us to show it. Fat chance, old girl!

As soon as I realized that Dot's competition with my mother's memory included the conviction (never mind how ill-founded) that her education was inferior to Mama's, the tug-of-war between us took on new dimensions. I—who had previously found school less than riveting—became an honor student.

After that, our relationship throbbed unceasingly around an exposed nerve that represented my mother. Dot pushed me to achieve and envied my successes when they came. She commissioned me to represent her in worlds she feared, then pulled me back. Push-pull. Push-pull. I wanted to please her, and I wanted to outdo her. I don't know which I wanted the most.

Dot wanted me to go to college but not to graduate school. When I started writing about women's rights and moved to Washington, D.C., she said with a sigh and the straightest of faces, "I guess Judy will become a communist." Feminist, communist—it was all the same to her. I had gone too far, and she wanted me back.

The birth of my son and daughter brought us closer together. I never thought to tell them that she was not their grandmother by blood, and they were 10 or 11 before they figured it out. "She was our grandmother," one of them said to me recently. "We never thought of her as anything else."

When my father died after a four-year struggle with cancer and my brother died unexpectedly a year later, the cloak of family life Dot had wrapped so tightly around her began to unravel. I was troubled by the depths of her pain and loneliness and touched by her undisguised need for me.

Soon she was dying herself, more, I think, from grief than from the lung disease the doctors said killed her. I went home to Alabama to be with her the last summer of her life and ended up saying, "I love you," words I never thought would cross my lips.

Now into my third holiday season without her, I notice all the things I do the way she did them—wrapping gifts lavishly with foil from the florist, for instance.

Maybe I loved her all along. She wins again.