Families (that have been torn, re-cut with dull scissors, and then messily glued back together) Are Forever

I sat uncomfortably on the green, floral sofa. It was an uncomfortable sofa. Twenty years ago, Kathleen had covered the old sofa herself because she didn’t have any money to spare. You would never guess that the sofa was twenty years old. Ugly as it was, it could have been bought yesterday. Most of Kathleen’s things were that way: old and in perfect condition. I think that this could probably be attributed to two reasons: 1) Kathleen liked things the way she liked them and 2) Kathleen had never had any children.

When she married my father, Kathleen had obviously had high hopes for the construction of this new family, consisting of my father, herself and my father’s four children. In order to make her dream of perfectly performed dinners and quiet family evenings of board games and laughter a reality, she had decided to become a martyr, hoping that she could lay her personal sacrifices down into a neatly formed cobblestone sidewalk directly into our hearts. It was for this reason, and not the age of the sofa, that I sat so uncomfortably.

“We have a surprise for you!” she and my father had announced after dinner one evening. Since I was the only one of my siblings who had decided to go beyond the required, two week quota of “quality time with dad” that summer, I was the only one around for he and Kathleen to focus their attention on.

This strange entity that was my stepmother was a new phenomenon for me. I had met her six months earlier, the day before she had married my father. The two had then hurried back to Florida so quickly that the gray weekend in February we spent running from formal rehearsal dinner, to chapel, to reception, had been my first and last encounter with Kathleen. I had not been surprised when my father had announced his engagement to a woman neither I, nor my siblings, had ever met; he had done this before. Although we got along very well, my father and I had never been very close, and it was this gap in my life that I had come to Florida to fill. However, Kathleen and her somewhat imposing efforts to make me believe that my father’s home was some
sort of extension of Disney World—“The Happiest Place on Earth”—had added a new dimension to my already daunting task.

I had been herded into the family room and was now being crowded with overly selfsatisfied grins as they hovered over me in anxious anticipation. A large, glossy gift bag, with yellow tissue paper protruding from the top was handed to me, and as it was, they seemed to lean in a little closer, like wolves, waiting to feast on my gratitude for their gift.

I smiled. “Oh, you really didn’t have to do this.”

“We wanted to. Just open it.”

I slowly dug through the clouds of yellow tissue, and lifted out a yellow Hawaiian print sundress, with matching jacket. Every person in America has seen this dress. I believe it is given away for free to every second grade teacher on her 65th birthday. The intensity of the fuchsia and green flowers printed on the yellow fabric gave me a sudden flash of understanding as to why sunglasses are so popular in Hawaii. My eyes wandered from the floral print of the sofa, to the floral print of the dress, then back to the sofa. Kathleen must have picked it out.

Realizing that they were both staring at me, looking as if they were waiting for me to announce whether it was a boy or a girl, I knew I had to say something.

“It’s beautiful!” I exclaimed, with the smile I had become so good at. “Thank you!”

“You’re so welcome! We know that you have the stake luau coming up, and we didn’t want you to feel out of place.”

The crushing reality that there was a set date, upon which I was doomed to wear this blasphemy of a dress, overwhelmed me. I was speechless.

“Go put it on! We want a fashion show.”

The sincerity of their excitement over what they believed to be my happiness was touching. Faking enthusiasm, I bounced off to my room, only to emerge in the yellow abomination. My father’s eyes twinkled as he expressed how proud he was of his “little angel,” while Kathleen sat back in satisfaction, exclaiming that I looked “positively elegant.” I paraded about with a large, toothy smile, thanked them profusely for the gift, and
at the soonest possible moment, excused myself on the grounds that I was tired and going to bed. I entered my room with a sigh of relief, flipped the lights on, padded across the thick white carpet, unbuttoned, unzipped and let the dress fall to the floor. Knowing that I was now obligated to put my excuse of going to bed into action, I quickly put on my orange cotton shorts and a grey t-shirt, and headed for the bathroom. As I crossed the hall, I could hear my father and Kathleen’s content chatter coming from the kitchen, as they discussed how “elegant” the dress had looked and how beautifully it set off my blue eyes. As the chatter approached from around the corner, I quickly ducked into the bathroom and busied myself with toothpaste and the turning on and off of faucets, until I heard their footsteps pass by.

The next morning I emerged from my room groggy, rubbing my eyes as I greeted my dad in the living room.

“Good morning, Daddy.”

“Good morning, Sweetie. Did you sleep okay?” His voice was weighted with the undertone he tries unsuccessfully to hide when he has something on his mind.

“Yea, I slept fine.” Trying to discern why the house was uncommonly quiet, I suddenly realized that Kathleen was not walking about, performing three tasks at once, while talking on the headset she attached to her cell phone when she was working on a business deal, as was usual.

“Where’s Kathleen?”

“Kathleen decided to go into the office this morning,” my father said in the gentlest voice he could muster, a cloud of concern settling over his face. “She was a little upset today.”

“What’s the matter? Is everything alright?”

“Oh yea, everything’s fine. It’s just that…” Pause for effect. “Well, the truth is, Kathleen got upset last night because she saw your dress on the floor and it really hurt her feelings. The fact is, Sweetheart, that Kathleen and I have sacrificed a lot this year, and that wasn’t an inexpensive dress. Kathleen was really excited
to give it to you, and when she saw it on the floor it made her feel like you don’t really like it or appreciate it, and it hurt her pretty bad.”

I stood there in dumb amazement, a fog of despair slowly settling over what had started as a beautiful day.

“I think she’ll be alright. She just had a lot of left over feelings this morning, and decided to go to the office to sort them out.”

I suddenly came to, and began stumbling all over my own explanation.

“Dad, I leave all my clothes on the floor. You know that. I didn’t mean to. I really like the dress. Really. I do. And I appreciate it. It wasn’t anything intentional, I just… I didn’t mean to…”

“I know, Sweetie, but Kathleen just goes to such great lengths to take care of things that mean a lot to her, so seeing that dress on the floor just made her feel like you didn’t care about it.”

I was completely helpless, stranded on a deserted island of guilt. Kathleen did not forgive easily. I could see her perfectly in my mind, sitting in her office all day, digging for the strength to return home that evening and look upon the ungrateful teenager who was being harbored in her home. A wave of helplessness and remorse overtook me, and I grasped for any possible way to undo the damage I had so unwittingly caused.

“Do you think it would help if I wrote her an apology?” I asked, fighting back tears of despair.

“I think she would probably appreciate that.”

I stumbled back to my room, my mind racing in a jumble of confused questions. Why did she care so much? Didn’t she realize that I didn’t mean anything offensive by it? I left everything on the floor! Surely she knew that by now. Why did I ever come to Florida? Why did I put myself through this? Why did everything always have to be drama with her? Why couldn’t there just be five minutes when I didn’t feel like I was on a stage, and every mistake I made was being carefully observed, recorded, filed and analyzed? Why did everything I did, from how I arranged my room to whether or not I laughed at a joke, have to be taken as an outright statement of my feelings about her? What was the big deal? Why couldn’t she just chill out?!

I sat on my white bedspread, hot tears streaming down my face as this concoction of guilt, entrapment and confusion overtook my entire being. I had hurt someone, and I felt horrible, but at the same time, I didn’t
know if her hurt was all my fault. Wasn’t she overreacting just a little bit? What was the matter with her? Why was there always a crisis? Why was every day with them so painful? Why couldn’t I have a happy family? We were Latter-Day Saints! Isn’t that what Latter-Day Saints do--have happy families?

In my despair, I fell to my knees. As the tears evolved into sobs, I pleaded for guidance. I knew that the trouble over the dress would come and go, but my broken family would still be there. It seemed impossible, or at best, not worth the trouble. But I was stuck there, hundreds of miles from my home in New York, and with no chance of escape. I poured out my soul to the Lord, and when I had nothing left to say, I reassumed my position on the white bedspread. The sobs had given way to silence, and I sat there, drained of everything I had and out of tears.

Something had changed, but I didn’t know what, and after several minutes of not knowing what to do with myself, I wandered to the bathroom and turned on the shower. As I stood under the faucet, my eyes closed and as the hot water saturated my hair, warmth poured over me. But it went far beyond the water. I felt myself being overtaken by a feeling of calmness, and I knew that Heavenly Father was pleased with me. I had come to Florida to learn to love my dad; Heavenly Father wanted me to know that He was happy with that. As I let the cleansing water flush over me, I contemplated the beauty of the insight I had just received. I felt an enormous weight being lifted from off the top of my head, and the iron bands that had been wrenching my heart were vanquished, as the doom I had felt about the whole situation seemed to be suddenly subtracted from this complex equation. In place of despair, my mind was filled with reassurance. I wasn’t told anything about whether Kathleen’s actions were right or wrong, justified or irrational. I guess Heavenly Father decided that that was between Kathleen and Him, but it hit me like a ton of bricks that what I was doing was right, and if I continued to work hard, and learned to love my dad and Kathleen, then the rewards would be endless.

I think that we often underestimate the importance of family relationships as we get caught up in the little crisis of our lives that we believe to be so pressing. Perhaps, if the Lord had to narrow down the Day of Judgment to a single determining factor, it wouldn’t be “Did you attend church meetings?” or “What was your Visiting Teaching record?” but simply “Did you love your family? Did you treat them well? Of course it was hard, but that’s when it was most important for you to show your strength and worthiness. Did you treat them
well?" It is in our families that our Christ-like attributes, like forgiveness and patience, are tested the most. It is there, when we don’t need to fear that they will reject us or stop loving us; when we have the security but still have to make the choice as to whether or not to abuse that power; when we have to make the choice whether or not to be like Christ. Maybe that is our chance to prove ourselves, and that is why the stakes with families are so high.

Sitting here, a year and a half later--after I got out of the shower that day, dried off, wrote Kathleen a letter, accepted her hug of forgiveness, endured the humiliation of the yellow dress at the stake luau, went home to New York, graduated from high school, went back to Florida, had other run-ins with Kathleen, resolved them, came to college, took an English class and am now writing my personal essay--I finally realize what it was that felt different that day, what I couldn’t figure out had changed as I got off of my knees and sat down on my bed, wiping tears away. The situation had remained, but the importance it bore had increased a thousand times. I was no longer in this house, learning to love two strangers, because I felt an obligation to the obscure idea I had always grown up with, that “families are forever.” I suddenly understood that, not only are our families eternal, but also that those eternal relationships have eternal bearing. They will influence us, for better or worse, forever. It is these few years on Earth that we are given to forge relationships that will last for all time.