

# THE ODD COUPLE

by Perrin Ireland

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In Perrin Ireland's novel Chatter, Sarah and Michael's marriage begins to unravel with the appearance of a beautiful young girl, who turns out to be Michael's daughter from a long-ago affair, and who is less than interested in her*



Perrin Ireland,  
author of  
Chatter

**T**he day I met my future stepson, he was a blue-eyed, curly-haired gamin, a blond slip of a boy with cherubic cheeks, a ready smile, and eager ways; I've carried that picture with me for twenty years because I never saw that child again.

On that sunny day, we went to a drive-in for hamburgers, and Larry, my stepson, lounged in the backseat (it was only later that I learned the significance of the front seat versus the backseat in stepfamily dynamics, and I've taken many a turn in the backseat). Larry kept up a running commentary on places and people we passed, always looking at me, it seemed, for approval. He loved to tell jokes and could hardly wait to tell the one he'd just heard.

When we returned to his father's apartment, Larry spread a large white paper on the floor; he was a budding artist and

*new stepmother. Thrust into her new role, Sarah discovers that it's hard enough behaving like a mother, let alone trying to mother someone who's resistant to the idea altogether. As Perrin Ireland explains below, she's thought a lot about all of this.*

planned to spend the afternoon drawing. His father was eager for my opinion of a painting (by the wife of a friend), but before I could form a diplomatic

response, Larry glanced up at me from his position on the floor, then announced to his father, "She hates it, Dad."

I've been naked ever since.

The next time I saw Larry, five months later, he was six-foot-one and sported a Mohawk above his sleeveless camouflage shirt. With head bowed, unspeaking, he stared at the table in a mood so contagiously black that his father and I would have jumped off a cliff right beside him. We were at Chi-Chi's. The plan was for a jolly dinner.

Months later, Larry agreed to be best man at our wedding, but ran away two days before the ceremony. After he was found and returned home, he ran away three more times.

**CHATTER**  
by Perrin Ireland  
**ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-540-7**  
Hardcover  
Publication: October 2007

He came to live with us, which meant living with me, since his father was constantly traveling for his job. Larry and I made *The Odd Couple* look like identical twins. I cooked red-and-white teenage food (pizza, sloppy joes, spaghetti) and sat down with his dreadlocked, tattooed self at an elegant glass dining room table and asked about his day. Long silences would be followed by one of us suggesting music, and I asserted my authority by insisting that we listen to Paul Simon as often as we experienced hardcore punk bands. "It's as if he was raised by wolves," his father heard me say to a friend.

Still, I wanted to excel in my new role, so I read all the books, consulted with experts, and tried to be my mother. I'd been told that being a stepmother was particularly difficult for childless women, as they would inevitably seek to fill the emotional void with another woman's child. It was impossible, I discovered, to overcome the gargantuan force of this pull. I found Larry's biological mother flawed, of course, but, as a psychologist explained, even if she beat him every night, he would run to her. Hooray for survival of the species.

Between PTA meetings, I had a demanding, full-time job, and as I lugged grocery bags into our apartment one evening, Larry said he knew how this task could be simplified. I was ecstatic that he'd figured out he could help. The solution, he said, was for me to park and unload the car by the elevators, and then I could return later to park in our assigned spot.

Another grocery-lugging evening, he complained that I'd forgotten to buy the Cokes he drank. Breaking my policy of perfection, I said he could damn well get his own Cokes.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For talking to me."

In spite of our efforts on his college application essays, the first college didn't pan out, nor did the second. Eventually he was accepted at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in

D.C., but fell in with a bad crowd, and if a young man in a big city is going to fall in with a bad crowd, D.C. offers a very bad crowd indeed. There were expensive lawyers, hands pressed against glass walls of visiting booths, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. Between episodes, I sent him for testing and to counselors to see where the difficulty lay. It lay deep.

Yet by some miracle—there's no other way to describe the transformation of a teenage boy into a man—Larry has grown into a kind and gentle adult who loves his work as a carpenter and the art he does on the side. He has a serious, live-in girlfriend, and there is talk of children.

He cooked us a vegetarian dinner the other night at his apartment, which is studied with Aztec drawings and African masks, and as I examined his bookshelves, I tried not to notice the old, battered tomes about pit bulls and gangs.

But he was watching. And knows. ■

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