



Readers Write

STEPFAMILIES

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I FELL IN LOVE with a strong and handsome man named Doug. He was divorced, and his two children, twelve and fifteen, lived in another state with their mother. Doug loved his children and could not wait for the four of us to spend time together. He assured me that I would grow to love them and admire their talents and intelligence.

I wasn't so sure. I had never wanted children of my own; why would I want someone else's? Besides, I was only in my late twenties, and the thought of having adolescent stepchildren made me uncomfortable.

I tried to express my feelings to Doug. He was as understanding as he could be, although he had difficulty with my reaction. His children had always been an integral part of his previous relationships.

My fear was new to him. He truly loved me, however, and he was dedicated to our relationship.

Secretly I knew I was being selfish. I didn't want to share his love with anyone, including his kids. I also knew that to be stepmother to his children would have required of me a level of moral responsibility and maturity that I felt unprepared to attain.

I struggled to keep my distance from Doug's children. Every time they came to visit for a holiday, I left town. I never vacationed at the beach with them, claiming I didn't like the ocean.

Despite my behavior, Doug continued to show me the utmost patience. He was convinced that I would eventually be ready to include his children in our relationship.

Doug and I seriously considered getting married. He longed for the traditional family life that had been lost to him years before. As time went by, though, conflicts arose over my inability to grow and sacrifice. Our discussions about marriage tapered off. The conversation grew heated each time he mentioned his children. I could not deal with them being at our house. No way could I be a stepmother!

Today Doug and his children live in a cottage on a lake. They do everything together: eat meals, go kayaking, play computer games. They are always there for each other.

I live alone, in my big, quiet house. I sit here and long for Doug and the sound of children's voices.

Name Withheld

MY FATHER LEFT WHEN I WAS TEN. HE was overwhelmed by the responsibility of providing for too many children, and he embraced alcohol because he could not embrace his manic, paranoid wife.

When my father remarried the next year, my mother, with her usual mercurial logic, insisted that we children attend the ceremony while she stayed home and cursed the bride. I did not argue with her. She was on the crest of a manic frenzy, which always marked the start of a descent into a depression of equal magnitude. By then I knew enough to stay out of her way. I got the younger kids cleaned up as best I could, and we went.

My stepmother was everything my mother was not: pretty, quiet, well educated. She barely concealed her distress, however, at having her husband's children from his first marriage present on her wedding day. After my siblings and I had posed for a pained and awkward picture with the new bride, we were quickly relegated to a corner table.

We rarely saw my father after that. He always had a last-minute excuse for why he couldn't come see us: flat tire, illness, work. I desperately wanted to believe him. Years went by without any contact whatsoever.

I graduated from high school at sixteen with a full scholarship to college. It was heaven. I could read philosophy without interruption: no meals to cook, no house to clean, no younger siblings to get ready for school. For all practical purposes, I had no family.

My scholarship paid for tuition, board, and half my meals. I was an old hand at scrimping and could live on air and library books if I had to. Still, in my junior year, I managed to run out of meal coupons a full two weeks before the end of the first semester. I swallowed my pride and called my father to ask for a loan.

By this time, my father and his second wife had two children. The older, a precocious three-year-old, answered the phone. She politely asked who was calling, and I told her my name. "Oh, I know you," she said. "You're one of those kids from Port Washington. My mommy hates you."

After a brief silence, my father got on the phone, clearly chagrined but acting

as though nothing had happened. I was reeling, having never before been hated by someone who barely knew me. I got off the phone as quickly as I could, without asking for the loan. I used my last few dollars to buy some vitamins and starved until the next semester's meal coupons arrived.

Eventually I got a letter from my father's wife. She did not apologize. Instead, she agonized over the financial and emotional hardships she had endured. My alcoholic father was unable to hold down a job, and she'd depleted her personal savings and sold her piano to pay his child support.

It wasn't until years later, after my own divorce and the financial burdens it brought, that I had any sympathy for her circumstances. I have since found compassion for my stepmother and have tried to respect her need to keep her stepchildren from upsetting her concept of a family. I will never, however, understand why she felt it necessary to hate me.

Name Withheld

WHEN VIKI AND I MARRIED, WE'D both been single for many years and had each raised children with no support from our former spouses. Between the two of us, we had seven kids, ages seven to eleven. Viki's hundred-year-old grandmother Bunny came to live with us, too. We joked that, with her longevity, Bunny would still be with us when the last kid went out the door. She could help us wave goodbye.

Viki and I pooled our resources and bought a huge house. The kids had plenty of room. They loved us and loved each other, but puberty and the reality of living with new and different people took their toll, so my wife and I decided to try an experiment: we would stay married, but raise our kids in separate houses.

I'm happy to say it's working. We sold the big house. I moved back into my old house, and my wife got a place in town. Viki and I see each other every day, vacation together, make plans together, and share everything, just like any other married couple.

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Hero Worship	August 1	January 2005
Apologies	September 1	February 2005
Grace	October 1	March 2005
Small Victories	November 1	April 2005
On The Edge	December 1	May 2005
Possessions	January 1	June 2005

Some people say we should have stuck it out. Others are envious of our living situation. But most admire our willingness to do what we feel is best for our kids, and for our relationship.

Our children are almost all out of the home. Bunny turned 108 in January.

*Steve Sheldon
Roseburg, Oregon*

MY FATHER DIED WHEN I WAS TEN, and my mother began seeing Mr. Z. about a year later. My younger brother and sister called him “Uncle Milt,” but I stuck steadfastly to “Mr. Z.,” even after my mother married him.

Mr. Z. had bushy eyebrows and liked to tell jokes and sing Sinatra songs. He brought laughter back into our house. His own four kids lived a mile away with their mother. He would pick them up every Sunday and take all seven of us on an outing: bowling, miniature golf, a movie. My mother, who prized her peace and quiet, stayed home.

When Mr. Z. offered to adopt the three of us, we said yes with little hesitation. I began to call him “Dad” and took his last name, though I kept my father’s last name as my middle name.

My stepfather never catered to his “real” children over us, but my mother continued to favor her own kids. (Her stepchildren, after all, still lived with their mother.) Her job was to look out for us, and she did so fiercely. Even into adulthood, she gave us more time, more support, and better gifts.

A few years ago, my stepsister Soozi had a recurrence of breast cancer. It quickly metastasized to her liver and bones. The prognosis was not good. She’d lost her mother a few years before, and my mother, a breast-cancer survivor herself, took charge of Soozi’s care. She accompanied her to the doctor, enlisted home-health-care nurses, sat with her through chemotherapy, brought her food, made her smoothies, and helped care for her kids.

When Soozi died, my mother wept. After the funeral, a friend approached her and said, “I’m so sorry about your stepdaughter.”

“She was my *daughter*,” said my mother.

*John Unger Zussman
Portola Valley, California*

VIRGINIA’S SON CHRIS WAS SEVEN. HE had seen a succession of men pass through his mother’s life — and her bed. Virginia told me that, if I wanted to be with her, I would do two things: become a vegetarian, and understand that her son came first and that *she* would raise him. I had no problem avoiding meat, but I struggled with the fact that I was not allowed to contribute to parenting Chris.

When Virginia and I got married, she was pregnant with our son Terry, whom we raised in full cooperation. Meanwhile Chris did whatever he wanted, mostly with his mother’s complicity.

I tried to build a relationship with Chris. I took him fishing, joined a parent-child bowling league with him, went to his baseball games, and attended all of his school functions. Over the years I fixed numerous motorbikes, which Chris tore up again almost as soon as I got them running. I put a new clutch in Chris’s truck, which he wrecked several days later.

Chris never openly appreciated anything I did, and his mother never gave me any credit. Our family counseling sessions were so bad we wouldn’t ride in the elevator together afterward. No one could get Chris to take any responsibility. His mom blamed me for not loving him. I accused her of never giving me a chance to be his parent.

Chris ran away from home, dropped out of school, threatened suicide, was hospitalized, got caught using our car to rob convenience stores, and had a party and destroyed much of the house while we were gone. Our house and car insurance were canceled, and we had to refinance our mortgage to pay off the hospital and counseling bills.

Finally Chris got his GED and joined the army. He divorced once, but eventually met a wonderful woman, and they are still married.

A couple of years ago on Father’s Day, Chris bought me a present and told me that he appreciated all the things I had done for him. He called me “Dad.”

He has called me Dad ever since.

Name Withheld

WHEN BOB AND I MARRIED, I HAD an infant son, Kelsey, from a previous

relationship. Bob and I had two more children together, and he legally adopted Kelsey.

Years later, when the kids were all in school, Bob said to me, “You know, Kelsey is the only one of our kids who didn’t get my brown eyes.”

I reminded him that there was a simple explanation: Kelsey’s biological father had blue eyes.

“Oh,” Bob said, startled. “I guess you’re right.”

*Judy Blaisdell
College Station, Texas*

MY PARENTS DIVORCED WHEN I WAS two. When I was four, my father remarried. My mother wouldn’t allow me to go to the wedding.

My new stepmom was the eldest child of a big, loving family, the kind I’d always wanted. I felt guilty for the times when I wanted to be around her family instead of my mother.

When I hit puberty, my stepmother got pregnant, and everything seemed to change. I felt like an outsider. I would hear her whispering with the rest of her family about my mother. I took this personally, withdrew, and began getting into trouble. I felt they hated me, and I returned the feeling.

I escaped my problems through alcohol, drugs, and sex. At sixteen I was strung out and living in an abandoned building in downtown LA. I called my mother and asked for money to buy food, but she said no.

A few days later my stepmom showed up. I don’t know how she found me. I was embarrassed for her to see how I was living. She was so clean and beautiful, and I felt dirty and broken. She didn’t ask any questions, just helped me pack up and brought me home. But first she took me out to lunch. She said I looked like I needed something to eat.

I’m grown up now and have a daughter of my own. I recently learned what all the whispering was about. My mother had stolen my stepmom’s Social Security number and damaged her credit. My stepmom wouldn’t turn her in because of what it might do to me if I found out.

My husband and I are divorced, and one day my daughter said to me, “I don’t

want another daddy.” Having a stepfamily is a difficult subject to understand when you are six. I tried to explain to her that her daddy will forever be her daddy, but that if I get married, she will have one more person in her life who loves her.

*P.C.
Ketchum, Idaho*

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, MY MOM lived three blocks away with her new husband and their two kids. My stepfather didn’t want to raise me, so I lived with my mom’s parents. Our two households got together for birthdays and holidays, and during the summers I’d play with my half sister and half brother. But really I just wanted to be with my mom.

Sometimes my mom would call to say that she was on her way to see me, and I should wait for her out front. I’d hurry to the porch or the curb. Those spur-of-the-moment visits were always triggered by a fight she’d had with my stepfather. She’d swoop in, collect me, and drive around our small town, making angry plans: She was going to divorce him. We’d move to Arizona and buy a little house, just the two of us.

Eventually she’d calm down, and the drive would end. She’d drop me off at the curb and honk so that my grandparents would know I was home. I’d stand and watch her drive away.

I was about ten when I realized that, for my mom, being with me was really about not being with my stepfather.

Forty years have passed since then, and I live a thousand miles from my mom and her family. She and I take turns calling each other on Sunday mornings, and every three years or so I visit her. She still talks about leaving him, except now it’s mostly about why she never did.

At fifty, I’m not waiting around anymore for my mom to show up. I understand that she’s not coming.

*J.H.
Rocky Hill, Connecticut*

THOUGH I GREW UP CALLING MY STEP-father by his first name, as was the fashion in our California hippie subculture, to me he was always my dad.

Bill and I worked together on our rough patch of land in the backwoods

of Mendocino County: gardening, building fences, chopping wood. He taught me there was nothing I couldn’t do. Though I was a girl, I felt a special bond with him, like the one fathers and sons are supposed to have.

When I came out as a lesbian at sixteen, my whole family was supportive, but Bill made me feel it was something special. He told me that he’d had sex with men when he was younger. It was another bond between us.

This bond lasted until my midtwenties, when I learned that Bill had raped his oldest daughter when she was in her early teens, years before he had married my mother. That same year I found out that Bill had a degenerative neurological disease. The disease made him a different person: fearful, forgetful, shaky. His illness, together with the knowledge that he had raped his own child, made him a stranger to me.

Around the time that Bill got sick, I was coming to terms with my own kinkier desires. I finally felt able to act on fantasies I’d had for years, of being the tough but loving “daddy” and making my “girl” submit to the punishment and stimulation I knew she secretly desired. Though this was safe sexual play between consenting adults, and though I had the support of my friends in the lesbian s/m community, I was still tormented by the fear that I was playing out my desire to become Bill, to seize his power. I hated myself even more than I hated him.

Before Bill died, I confronted him about the rape, and he seemed genuinely full of regret, but it didn’t satisfy me. It was the weak, dying Bill who expressed regret, not the strong, living Bill who had done this terrible thing.

It’s been years now since Bill’s death. Lately I’ve taken up yoga. Bill also practiced yoga, so I’ve had a hard time accepting the practice for myself. As I struggle to stay in a headstand, I picture him in our living room by the wood stove, up on his head and elbows, legs in a lotus position, laughing with joy at his ability.

I don’t play “daddy” anymore with my lovers — not because I think there’s anything wrong with it, but because I don’t like clinging to the fleeting sense

of power it gave me. Instead I’ve come to crave the power I feel emanating from my muscles, my heart, my bones when I practice yoga. This power comes from within, and I can access it without anyone else’s help. It has enabled me to love Bill again, and to accept him for who he was.

Name Withheld

SAM AND I HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER for just two weeks when we secretly moved in together. Sam was still married to Cathy, but he told me the marriage was over.

One night, Cathy came over to confront Sam. She had their five-year-old son Edward with her. When she knocked on the door, Sam told me to hide in the bedroom closet. She had threatened to kill herself if she found out he had a lover.

From my hiding place, I heard them shouting at each other in the living room. While they yelled, little Edward explored the small apartment. He opened the door of the closet where I was hiding. I whispered hello and asked him to please be quiet. After crouching with me for a few minutes in silence, he left.

The argument went on for a long time. I was forced to pee in a shoe box lined with dry-cleaning bags. I was angry and embarrassed, and afraid that Edward might reveal my presence.

I should have left Sam, but he assured me that he loved me. He divorced Cathy, and we got married and had a daughter. Two years after her birth, Sam left me, too.

I’ve stayed in touch with my stepson Edward through the years. I was always the one to send him birthday and Christmas presents when his father was too busy to remember. But Edward and I have never discussed how we first met, in the closet.

Name Withheld

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