



# Life in the Middle

## Parents' tug-of-war battle claims woman's childhood

By Matthew Waite  
Senior Reporter

**Author's note: The following are excerpts from a letter Jen wrote on March 2 about her feelings on divorce.**

"People always ask what it's like to be in a divorce where the parents hate each other ...

"It's like being the flag in a tug o' war game. Your mom is at one end and your dad is at the other. Both will do anything to win the prize.

"They both pull as hard as they can, but no one ever wins.

"What they never realize is that as I grow older, the flag gets to be a smaller size and a smaller part of the game. Eventually the flag won't matter because no one ever wins."

For 16 of Jen's 18 years on this earth, she has lived with divorce.

A senior in an Omaha high school who is planning to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln next fall, Jen is still caught in the middle of her parents' divorce.

"My mom and my dad still to this day do not get along," she said.

Jen's life until grade school was spent going back and forth, spending every other weekend at her dad's home and the rest of the time at her mother's, she said.

Visits to her dad's would start on Friday night, unless he had a date, Jen said, in which case he'd pick her up on Saturday morning.

"We'd go over to his apartment and just goof off," she said. "We'd go around and do all the fun weekend things that you'd never get to with Mom, like go to Fun-Plex.

"Mom didn't like it if we went anywhere out of the vicinity of Omaha," she said. "We had to stay there or she got really mad."

Despite a divorce settlement that gave her father no visitation rights, her mother allowed Jen to visit him. Jen said her mother would try to use that against her.

"Since I grew up and I knew him, she couldn't really stop me from seeing him, because then I would get mad at her and it would be even more messy than it was," Jen said.

Jen said she never was able to spend a week with her dad during the summer. On breaks from school, she would only be allowed to spend a day with him, she said.

"We took one vacation once," Jen said. "I was in fifth grade ... it was a weekend-type thing.

"We never did tell Mom about that," she said.

When she got home, her mother would ask her about what they did that weekend and about her dad's life.

Jen said her father had changed since the divorce. Although her father had hit her before, it was not out of anger, she said. It was for disciplinary reasons.

"Now when he loses his temper, he just takes deep breaths and counts," Jen said.

There has always been tension between her and her mother, Jen said, which has translated into their not getting along.

Jen decided to move to Wisconsin to live with her dad before starting her freshman year of high school.

When she told her mother about her decision, the result was not good, she said.

"That was basically two weeks of straight yelling

and battling," Jen said. "She always thought that my dad had bribed me or brainwashed me.

"I was at the age where if we went to court I could basically decide which parent I would go with, and my mother knew that," she said.

Jen's mother never took the decision to court, and her father had legal papers drawn up to get around the original divorce settlement.

Jen said her mother was still bitter about her choice to live with her father, who has since moved back to Omaha. She said her mom failed to understand her reasons for leaving.

"She never really understood ... and I still don't think she understands that part of the reason I came to live with my dad was just to get to know him," she said. "Most of the reason was just to get away from her."

Jen went to visit her mother in the winter of her freshman year in high school. After constant fighting, Jen decided she was not going back.

Three years later, Jen and her mother are trying to rebuild their lost relationship.

Jen's mother is upset that Jen has decided to attend school in Nebraska and not in Ohio, where the mother now lives. Jen's mother wants her to make up for the years they lost, Jen said.

"She's always bugging me about 'was it worth it to destroy a family,'" she said.

and the kids are such a different age than me, I'm not really part of the family, even though they say I am.

When Jen and her stepmother began their relationship, they started it as best friends. After the kids came, her stepmother started to take a more motherlike stance with Jen, which caused fights, she said.

"That's what we fight about now ... what I'm going to take from her and what is she going to give to me and the borderline between mom and friend," Jen said.

Lynn White, a sociology professor at UNL, said Jen was not alone.

Most problems involved with the introduction of a stepparent occur when the child is an adolescent, White said. The problems come with the addition of one more authority figure in the house.

"When children are adolescents, there's a lot of difficulty for the children to cope with," she said. "You have a whole issue of adolescent rebellion magnified."

If the stepparent is introduced when the child is young, White said, typically the relationship works out — especially between a stepfather and a boy.

When a mother divorces, White said, a daughter and mother usually form a stronger relationship, while a mother and son's relationship is not so strong.

She said when the mother remarried, typically the relationship between the daughter and the mother was strained. The daughter has to share the mother's affection with the new husband.

White said Jen was lucky with the relationship she had with her father.

"A substantial percentage of parents without custody of the child just drift away," she said.

White said divorce affected kids in two different, overrepresented ways.

"People go in both directions," she said. "Some go out and repeat their parents' mistakes;

some avoid them."

The repeaters are more common than the kids who avoid the problems, White said.

The children of divorce also may have some other problems.

"The children of divorce are more likely to get divorced themselves," she said.

Jen said her experiences with divorce had left her cautious and unsure about her future with marriage.

"I see myself getting married at a very, very later age when I am very, very sure about the person I am getting married to," she said.

When she looks at other lasting marriages, Jen said she thought there was something wrong that was hidden — that the marriage wouldn't work out.

"I don't have the belief that a marriage will last forever anymore," she said. "I definitely have the belief that if you get married, you should wait a terribly long time before you have kids to make sure you are going to be okay."

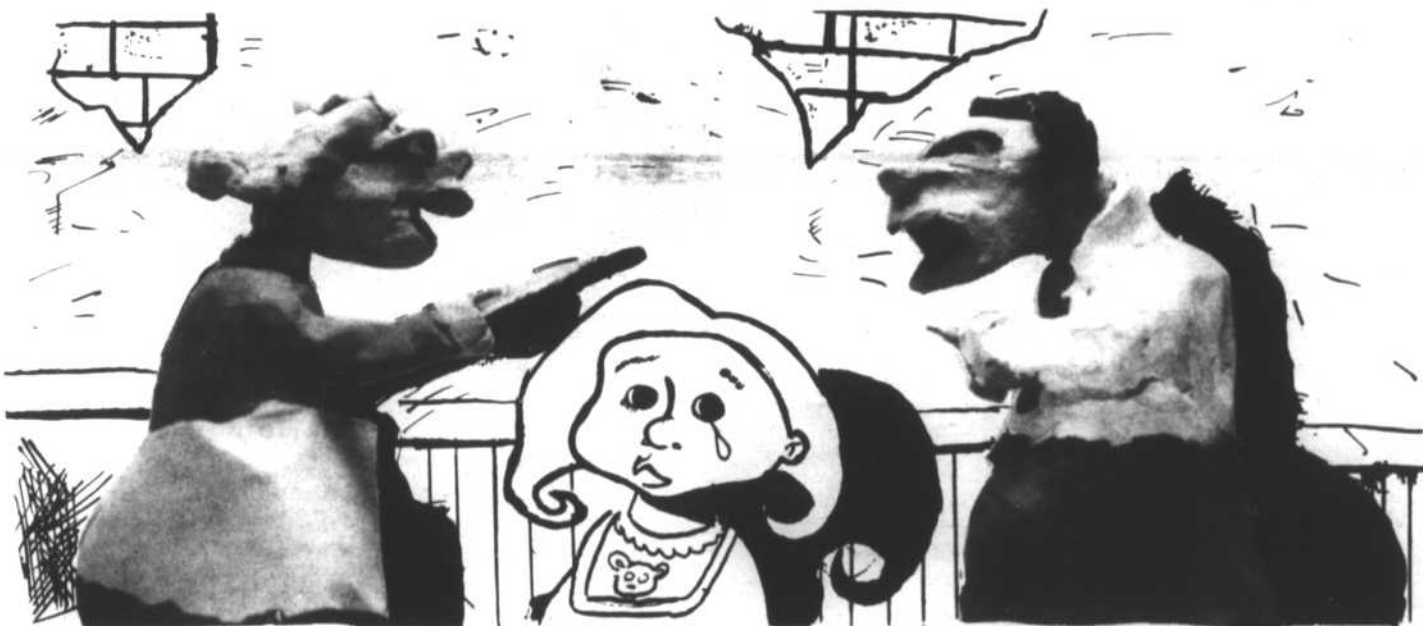
Jen said her parents' mistakes scared her.

"I'm scared to get married," Jen said. "I'm scared that I'll believe that it will stick around forever, and I'll have kids, and I'll stick them through (my experience) again."

"It seems like the only reason people have unhappy divorces is because of kids," she said.

Jen said she wouldn't be good at being married because she had not learned from her parents' example of marriage.

"I think that what a lot of people need is to learn from example," she said.



"I don't think we'll ever understand the same thing, because she knows a totally different guy than I do," Jen said. "And she doesn't understand why I like the guy she hates."

Jen's family problems didn't stop with her real parents.

When her mother remarried two years after her parents divorced, her mom's new husband became "dad."

She said that as she grew up, she and her stepfather got along — but they don't anymore.

"I really resent the fact that he was pushed on me as my real dad," she said. "They really wanted me to take his name ... and I said no."

Her stepfather is also intimidating and mean, Jen said.

"He was a major contributor to the screaming and yelling during visits," she said. "He and I basically stay away from each other when I go to visit."

Jen said she didn't feel like she was at home when she visited her mother.

"We just don't have a family there," Jen said. "There was one when I was a little girl, but there was always tension because there was this choice between which father."

Jen's biological father remarried three years ago and has had two kids with his new wife. This family — with which she lives now — is really not a family either, Jen said.

"It's trying," she said. "It's more of a happy environment, but since they've had these two younger kids

Illustration by James Mehling