



Readers Write

CHOOSING SIDES

MY PARENTS GOT DIVORCED WHEN I was five years old, but they maintained an amicable relationship until I was fourteen. By then my father had remarried, and I was living with him. The dysfunction in his new marriage took its toll. In a single year I went from honor student to drug addict and criminal.

My parents entered into a grueling battle for custody of me. My father claimed that nothing unusual had been going on in his house and that I was just a spoiled child in need of discipline, but the judge wasn't fooled, and he gave full custody to my mother. My parents didn't speak for twenty years.

On top of all their other differences,

my father is a longtime Republican and my mother a diehard Democrat. During the 2008 primaries I discovered that my father didn't like Republican candidate John McCain. He started talking more and more positively about Democrat Barack Obama. Maybe, I thought, after all these years, my parents might finally agree on something.

Then Hillary Clinton lost the Democratic nomination to Obama, and my mother just couldn't get over it. In the general election my conservative father voted for Obama, and my liberal mother voted for McCain.

J.H.

San Francisco, California

AUNT EILEEN USED TO JINGLE. SHE wore dangling earrings and so many bracelets that I could hear her coming from another room. She'd call me "my Steven" and plant a big kiss on me, leaving her bright red lipstick on my cheek.

Eileen was unlike any other grown-up in my life. Her voice would fill a room. (My mother, her sister, spoke in muted whispers.) She wore vivid colors. (My mother wouldn't allow such hues in her house, let alone on her body.) She brought my siblings and me frivolous, noisy gifts for Christmas. She spoke her mind and dyed her hair red — and not subtle red, but a red as loud as her clicking heels.

One year my parents cut off all con-

tact with Aunt Eileen. They often did this to family and friends: if someone upset or offended them, that person no longer existed as far as my parents were concerned. Eileen lived barely twelve miles away, but she might as well have been across an ocean.

I went along with this charade, pretending that my favorite aunt, the aunt who brought fun and excitement and laughter to our home, was no more, until finally, when I was grown and visiting my parents at Christmas, it dawned on me that I didn't have to take my parents' side. I could choose to have Eileen in my life.

I went to my aunt's rent-controlled New York City high-rise, found her apartment, and knocked.

She called from inside, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Steven."

Long pause. "Steven who?"

"Eileen, it's me, *Steven*, your nephew."

She swung the door wide, and there she was, twelve years older, hair just as red, wearing a housedress, pink slippers, and bright red lipstick. As she grabbed me and held me, I breathed her familiar scent: Dial soap and Chanel No. 5. Then she planted a red-lipstick kiss on my face.

Steven B.

Portland, Oregon

MY MOTHER ALWAYS MADE EXCUSES

for my father's drinking and brutality toward my four younger brothers and me. She did a marvelous job of hiding the horrors in our household from neighbors and friends.

As an adult I began attending meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics, and I became aware of the confusion, fear, and anger I'd buried all those years. I figured that my brothers, too, must have been living with submerged emotions, so I wrote a four-page letter and sent a copy to each of them. One by one their calls came in, and we shared memories of our father's violence. Some of my brothers said they planned to seek a therapist's help. One even drove more than three hundred miles to attend a therapy session with me. It seemed as if this hidden darkness in our family could finally be brought to light.

Then one of my brothers passed my letter on to our mother. I'm sure his in-

tentions were good, but the outcome was not. Our mother subjected all of my brothers to lengthy phone conversations regarding my accusations. She wept, ducked criticism, and manipulated them with guilt and shame. Over the next few months all four brothers rejected my point of view, and me. (One even called me "sick.") They'd decided that our childhood "wasn't that bad," that I was focusing too much on the negatives, that our family was "normal," and that therapy would be a waste of time and money. My mother never called me to discuss my childhood memories.

Fifteen years have passed since I sent that letter, and my parents and brothers remain estranged from me. I never wanted to be divisive. But I broke the rule: I talked about it.

J.R.

Canton, Massachusetts

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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.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary one-year subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. Please include your e-mail address and phone number. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Borrowing	August 1	February 2010
Walking Home	September 1	March 2010
The Beach	October 1	April 2010
Sugar	November 1	May 2010
Taking Chances	December 1	June 2010
Pretending	January 1	July 2010