

Joint Custody

It's three in the afternoon and I'm driving home alone, except for my dog Keira. That's why I got the dog, so that I would never be alone. Rick comes and goes on his business trips. And Jamie comes and goes, too, from his father's house to mine, back and forth every few days.

Most of the time, Jamie doesn't seem to mind this back and forth. I had worried so much about how he'd deal with having two homes, but maybe it's easier for him because it started when he was only three years old. He doesn't remember anything else. He doesn't have any memories of me living in that house with his father.

I had worried, too, that neither house would feel like home, that neither would be referred to as "home," but only as "Mom's house" or "Dad's house." But he calls them both "home;" he also calls them "your house" and "Dad's house," too.

Home. What a loaded word. What a big and important concept, one most of us rarely consider. Most of us have just one place we call home. Think of it: to have two places to call home. Two bedrooms, two beds, two addresses and phone numbers. How does that feel? Is it expanding or splitting?

When Jamie is older, perhaps having two homes will be harder. When his things and his friends are more important than they are now, he might have a harder time going back and forth. Years ago, when his father and I were still together, I had a conversation with a student who had just split from her husband, putting her two daughters in Jamie's position of having two homes. She said it was traumatic for them, having to live out of a suitcase, always wanting something that was at the other house, forgetting homework, favourite clothes, all the bits and pieces that make up one's home scattered along the roadside from Mom's house to Dad's house.

I did not want that for my son. But here I am, and there Jamie is at his father's, and now her story comes back to me so clearly, all the chaos and resentments that children should not have to bear. So I vow to let Jamie have two of everything, to drive to his father's any time of day or night to get what was left behind. I keep lists, I leave messages for his Dad several times a week reminding him of soccer practice, of homework, of what kind of medicine to buy for Jamie's cough. It's a lot of extra work, but I would have it no other way. It's the least I can do for my son.

"I want to do the best that I can for him," I say to Andy when we are having some discussion about, say, whether or not to sign him up for a summer camp. "I want to make decisions in his best interests, not in ours."

And sometimes Andy will come back with the zinger, "We're not doing what's best for him, because we're not together. If you wanted what was best for him, you would have chosen differently. But you didn't. This is not the way I would raise my son. It's screwed up."

That's his attitude. That I messed things up, and so anything we do from here on in is just some poor second to what should have been. So if Jamie misses summer camp because we both want to spend time with him, or if Jamie has to go to the YMCA on school mornings at 7:00am so that Andy can have him on school nights, well, then, that's just reality.

But I don't believe it has to be this way. I think joint custody requires that the parents try even harder to make things work out for their children, that they have to be even more vigilant about sorting out their desires from their children's. I often feel that Andy isn't making decisions in Jamie's best interests, but in his own. I know he needs Jamie, needs to spend time with him; I know that without him he is lonely. I know it because I feel the same way. But to deny Jamie the simple childhood delights of summer camp or going to a friend's house because of his parents' needs feels just plain wrong.

It's just so damn hard. It's hard to figure out, it's hard to think about, it's hard to explain to someone who has not had to deal with joint custody. It's hard for me to be friends with many of the other Moms; I often feel like they are either judging or pitying me, pitying my son. And I don't want that. It's no surprise that three of my closest women friends are divorced with children.

Jamie had his end-of-the-school-year class picnic a few days ago. I went, carrying my requisite two dozen sandwiches. It was five hours long, but for me it was even longer. All around me were happy families, mothers who got to have their lovely little first graders with them every single night. Mothers whose children called only one place home, whose children were just there every day and night, expected, taken for granted. Every night the mothers tucked them in without thinking "Oh, how wonderful, my child will be here tomorrow night, too." Every night they tucked them in without having to think, "Oh, no, my child will go to his father's tomorrow. Tonight is the last night I'll have him here for a few days." That thought brings a feeling that makes you want to sit and watch your child sleep, to wake him up and keep him up all night, even if

tomorrow is a school day. When I say “I love you, Jamie, more than anything,” it feels huge, as if I’m going to burst, and I have to hold back the other part of the thought: “I wish you could be with me always. I can’t stand the thought of you not being here tomorrow night.”

Having my son only half the time brings out a different intensity of mother love. It is fierce and deep, but it is also dark. When he is with me, there’s an added intensity like the sharp brilliance of sunlight after weeks of gray skies, because I am aware every single minute that he is not always with me, that this moment is so precious, so full, simply because he is here.

It’s dark, too, because there’s a looming thunderhead of dread, knowing this time together won’t last. Right after he was born, I found in a parenting book a pie chart that showed the span of a human life. The slice of pie that represented a person’s childhood was so small. So small. I remember talking with my sister, happy mother of four, about the precious early years, and we agreed that the more time we could spend with our babies, the better. Now I think of that chart with dismay, knowing that thin slice is cut in two.

All I can do is make the most of our time together. All I can do is make it as full as possible. What I’m doing is trying to raise a child in half the time, so every moment is vital. I never get baby-sitters; when he is with me, I do Jamie things. He may miss having baby-sitters. The few times we’ve had one, he has loved it. It’s the opposite of the usual story, “I don’t want to stay with the babysitter.”

“While you’re at your dad’s this weekend, I’ll get all my work done, so we can play when you come back,” I always tell him, reassuring him that he won’t miss anything here while he’s gone. I’m careful about what I do when he’s not here. I spend most of it working—writing and grading papers. I won’t do anything that he might find fun, from planting the garden and changing the frog’s tank to going to the bank that gives out suckers. I don’t want him to feel that things are happening here without him. I would just shut down, go into stasis, if I could. I would live half a life.

No. I must be a model for him of living life fully. This was a main reason I left my marriage; this is why I thought it would be better for all of us. I must model a fulfilled life. Even when he’s not with me, I’m parenting. So I do my work, I take the dog for long runs and steep hikes, I go see grown-up movies.

Lately when he goes, I find myself reading parenting books and magazines, thinking about certain instances with him, of how I could have done it better. In a way, this is torture, because I sit there and realize how to parent better and then I can’t do it until he gets back. Or I realize how I screwed up with him, and I can’t apologize or try again. Once I did some reading in a child’s self-esteem book and realized that I needed to respect his right to choose his own friends, and not make judgments about them to him. Another time I recognized a pattern of getting impatient with him instead of letting him figure things out himself. The reflection time is good, I suppose; it just leaves me feeling so bereft.

If I only get him half the time, I ought to be a really good parent. I ought to be more patient and understanding and open. I don't have the excuse of never having time to myself or of just getting exhausted from parenting. I have plenty of time to myself, plenty of breaks from his wonderful presence.

A good friend of mine also has joint custody of her son, but she has had him most of the time because the father is not very involved. She kept telling me how lucky I was to have time for myself; I kept telling her how lucky she was to have her boy with her so much. Recently the father has started keeping her son half the time, and she told me, "You're right. It is hard. I was lucky."

He's only gone one night this time, so it shouldn't be bad. But it always is. It's been three years since we started doing this; you'd think I'd have come to grips with it by now. But every time he goes to his Dad, it feels like I've been hollowed out, like I'm just the sloughed off skin of a molting snake, or the husk of the corn. I could blow away in the slightest breeze. I am not.

At least it's only one night this time. I know he's fine without me for one night. Sometimes, when it's more than a couple of nights away, he'll ask me during our good-night call, in such a small voice that it feels like it's coming from my own womb, "When am I going to see you again?" And it makes me want to reach through the phone and pull him to me, to go to him right away. It makes me feel like the world's worst mother.

He goes to his father's and I don't know who I am. I am his mother. But how can I be, if I am here and he is there? What kind of a mother am I?

Last summer I worked on a story with a photographer who shares his two sons with his ex-wife. The boys, teenagers, spend two weeks with one parent, two with the other. He likes it that way, says it's better than going back and forth more often.

"When they arrive, it takes me a week to remember how to be a Dad, and then I have a week where I'm really good at it. And then when they leave, it takes me a week to remember who I am besides a Dad."

That's it. That's the feeling of loss. It's a loss of self as much as anything. I don't have periods of transition when Jamie returns; I am Mom immediately. I never stop being Mom, even when he's gone a week. I only have periods of transition when he's gone.

The feeling of loss is like the empty nest syndrome, over and over and over. And with a six-year-old, not an 18-year-old. Over and over to feel that loss, that cutting off of the right arm, that energy drain and heart break.

Sometimes I wander about the house and find myself in his room. Sometimes I just sit and stare out the window. Sometimes I just cry. It hasn't gotten easier, even in three years. I keep hoping that it's all temporary, and if I can just get through this weekend without Jamie, then he'll be with me forever. It keeps my life in a kind of limbo, so that I only know what's happening a few days ahead.

The night before last, he was supposed to go to his Dad's, but I was feeling blue and Rick was out of town, so I asked if I could keep him, and Andy agreed.

I knew even as I asked that I shouldn't need Jamie like that, but I did, I really did.

It was a Godsend. We went to our favorite trail, and I ran with the dog while Jamie biked alongside us. The sun shone high in the sky, and the slightest breeze ruffled the treetops. It was one of those times where Jamie and Keira and I were all perfectly synchronous, just enjoying each other's company and the lovely summer day. And that night, Jamie slept with me, and I stared at him long after he'd gone to sleep, stared at that beautiful little boy face, and I could have stayed up all night just looking at him, I would have been happy had that night lasted forever, just me and him and Keira here, together, in our home.