

MY TURN

# MY LONG-DISTANCE LIFE

At the age of 5, I discovered what all children of divorce know: you're always missing somebody

BY NICK SHEFF

I WAS BORN IN BERKELEY, WHERE I lived in a small house in the hills surrounded by firs and redwoods. My mom, my dad and me. As early as I can remember, there was arguing. When I was 4, my parents decided that they could no longer live together.

That same year, my mom moved to Los Angeles, and a therapist was hired to decide where I would live. My dad called her my worry doctor. Playing with a dollhouse in her office, I showed her the mother's room on one side and the father's room on the other. When she asked me about the little boy's room, I told her he didn't know where he would sleep.

Though I was very young, I accepted my parents' separation and divorce and somehow knew it wasn't my fault. Yet I was intensely afraid. Not only was my mom more than 500 miles away, but she had a new husband. My dad had a new girlfriend, and my custody was unresolved. Everyone said I'd spend time with both parents, but I wanted to know where I would live.

The therapist finally decided I'd stay with my dad during the school year and visit my mom on long holidays and for the summers. I began flying between two cities and two different lives. I've probably earned enough miles for a round-trip ticket to Mars. Some people love to fly, but I dreaded the trips.

For the first year, one of my parents would accompany me on the flights. At 6, I started traveling on my own. I would pack my toys and clothes in a Hello Kitty backpack and say goodbye to my parent at the gate. The flight attendant would lead me onto the plane.

When I was 7, the woman sitting next to me on the plane tried to convert me to Christianity. A few years later I was on a flight with such bad turbulence that the luggage compartments opened and the man behind me threw up. When I was 12 and on my way to L.A. for Christmas, a lady refused to check her bag and shoved a flight attendant. We couldn't take off for two hours; the police came and dragged her off, to the cheering of other passengers. But flying was just part of what made long-distance joint custody so difficult.

I remember the last day of school in sixth grade. All my friends made plans to go to the beach together—all my friends,



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but not me. I couldn't join them because I had to fly to L.A. It wasn't that I didn't want to see my mom and stepdad. I just didn't want to leave my friends. As the school year came to a close, I began to shut down. I hated saying goodbye for the summer. It was easier to put up a wall, to pretend I didn't care. My dad drove to school with my packed bags. My friends went off together and I headed to the airport.

Arriving in L.A., I was excited to see my mom and stepdad. It had been almost three months since my last visit. But it took a while to adjust. Each set of parents had different rules, values and concerns.

I am 16 now and I still travel back and forth, but it's mostly up to me to decide when. I've chosen to spend more time with my friends at the expense of visits with my mom. When I do go to L.A., it's like my stepdad put it: I have a cameo role in their lives. I say my lines and I'm off. It's painful.

What's the toll of this arrangement? I'm always missing somebody. When I'm in northern California, I miss my mom and stepdad. But when I'm in L.A., I miss hanging out with my friends, my other set of parents and little brother and sister. After all those back-and-forth flights, I've learned not to get too emotionally attached. I have to protect myself.

Many of my friends' parents are divorced. The ones whose mom and dad live near each other get to see both their parents more. These kids can go to school plays and dances on the weekends, and see

their friends when they want. But others have custody arrangements like mine. One friend whose dad moved to New Hampshire sees him at Christmas and for one month during the summer. My girlfriend's dad lives in Alaska. They know what I know: it's not fair.

No child should be subjected to the hardship of long-distance joint custody. To prevent it, maybe there should be an addition to the marriage vows: Do you promise to have and to hold, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live? And if you ever have children and wind up divorced, do you promise to stay within the same geographical area as your kids? Actually, since people often break those vows, maybe it should be a law: if you have children, you must stay near them. Or how about some common sense? If you move away from your children, you have to do the traveling to see them.

In two years I'll go to college. I'll be living away from both homes, which will present new problems, such as where I will spend holidays. Whatever happens, I'll continue to build my relationships with both my parents, my siblings and my friends.

Before I have children of my own, I'll use my experiences to help make good decisions about whom I choose to marry. However, if I do get a divorce, I will put my children's needs first. I will stay near them no matter what happens.

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