



**“I Had a
Stepmother
From Hell”**



Nancy Garren* was 9 years old when her father remarried. But instead of being embraced by her new stepmom, Nancy became the target of her abuse and the outcast of the family.

As told to Dina Roth Port

I was 7 when my mother died of breast cancer and my father became the center of my world. Two years later, when my dad remarried, I was excited to have a new maternal figure to look up to. I had no idea that my life was about to become a living hell. Despite the emotional abuse I endured, I always held on to the hope that things would get better. I just had no idea how long I'd have to suffer before they did.

A Family Tragedy

I was born in a quiet suburb, the only child of two parents who adored me. But two years later, my family was turned upside down when my mother was diagnosed with cancer. For the next five years, she was in and out of hospitals while my father, who was a financial consultant, and nearby relatives took care of me. When my mom passed away, I was devastated. Now my father and I had only each other.

My father mourned for a year before he thought about dating again, but then he met a real estate agent named Ellen and fell in love. She was 29, a few years younger than he was, and had never been married before. I liked her right away. She was funny and pretty, and most important, she was nice to me. Six months later, they got married and Ellen moved into our house. I was looking forward to having her as part of our family.

As Ellen settled in, she really tried to get to know me. She'd quit her job, so we spent a lot of time together—she would tell me jokes, take me to the movies, and show me lots of affection. But a year later, when I entered third grade, she started treating me differently. At first, she just insisted I clean my room and put my clothes in the hamper. I did what Ellen said because I wanted to be a good kid.

But soon after, when I was 10, Ellen and my father had a baby girl, my half sister. Around the same time, my dad's job became much more demanding—he would put in 14-hour days at the office and was away on business a few days a week—so Ellen was the only parent I had around on a regular basis. Once the baby came along, she began to treat me like a servant. She started making me do *all* the

*Names have been changed.



“I started to feel dad played with

had homework to do. I thought about my mom every day, just wishing that I had her back. I also wished I could just disappear. Without me, they were a perfect family.

The Abuse Worsens

It seemed like Ellen was always angry with me. If she and my father fought, the next day she'd say, "Nancy, it was all your fault." She continued to call me "useless" and if she didn't have a reason to yell, she'd scream about something I did a week earlier. I'm not sure if she had real psychological problems or if she simply resented my presence so much she could not stop being mean to me.

This verbal abuse was so constant from the time I was 10 to 15 that I began to believe what Ellen was saying: Maybe *I* was nothing. Slowly, my self-esteem was shredded to pieces. My grades slipped, and I lost all of my friends. I became withdrawn and depressed. If I cried, Ellen would say, "Why are you crying? You'd better stop or I'll *give* you something to cry about." (Though she never hit me, I was scared of her.) So I'd go to my room and bawl into my pillow. I felt so unloved.

Rescued From Hell

I didn't tell anyone about the situation, because I always thought it was a private family issue. And no one seemed to notice, not even my father. I don't know whether he ignored it or if it somehow didn't sink in, but he never did anything to protect me from Ellen. I just endured the abuse until one night in the middle of my freshman year of high school, when I was 15. My aunt Claire (my father's sister) was over for dinner and saw Ellen scream at me for accidentally dropping a napkin. After the meal, my aunt followed me into my room and suggested I live with her. She didn't ask questions. While I wasn't happy about leaving my dad and sisters, I couldn't wait to get away from Ellen. Aunt Claire took care of the arrangements—I don't know what discussions she had with my father and

chores in the house. Every day, I'd set the table, rinse the dishes, run the dishwasher, do the laundry, and empty the trash. Also, a few times a week, I had to bring the garbage to the curb before 7 A.M., vacuum and dust every room, mop the kitchen floor, and wash the windows. If I didn't do every chore perfectly, she'd yell at me so loudly, I was worried the neighbors would hear. She also attacked me personally by calling me "worthless," "nothing," and even "a fucking piece of trash," although I don't recall exactly what would prompt her to say such things. She didn't seem to need a reason. Whenever this happened, I would cry and run to my room to get away from her. I was terrified.

This went on day after day. Maybe having a newborn in the house was stressing her out. Maybe she was frustrated by my father's absence and I was a constant reminder that he'd had a romantic life be-

fore she came along, though she never said anything negative about my mother. Once, I tried to tell my father about what was going on, but he didn't believe me, probably because Ellen never yelled or called me names when he was around.

When she wasn't yelling, Ellen just ignored me. She and my dad had two more daughters within the next three years, so they got all of her love. They were adorable babies and I loved them too, but she was so busy dressing them, feeding them, and playing with them that she had no time for me. I started to feel like an outsider in my own family. Almost every night, Ellen sent me away from the table after dinner. She'd say, "Nancy, go to your room," even on the rare occasions when my father was around—the two of them would play with the babies for the rest of the night while I sat alone upstairs. I don't know what my dad was thinking...maybe she told him I

20% of 18- to 32-year-olds have a stepparent

SOURCE: ANDREW J. CHERLIN, PH.D., PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY AT THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY AND AUTHOR OF *MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE*

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Ellen—but a few days later, I moved into her house, 15 minutes away, with her and my cousin, Josh, who was around my age. (My uncle had died a few years earlier.)

When I'd come home from school, my aunt would say, "Nancy's home! Come sit, have a snack, tell me about your day." After dinner, we'd hang out, share stories, and laugh. Within a few months, I started coming out of my shell. I began to see a therapist and I joined my school's field hockey team, which forced me to become more social. At the end of my sophomore year, I was 16 and more like my old self... I'd made new friends, my grades had improved, and I was even in the school play.

I stayed with my aunt until I graduated from high school and left for college. During that time, no one ever asked why I lived at her house; many of my friends had their own alternative living arrangements. Meanwhile, I saw my father and Ellen only for occasional dinners, and none of us talked about why I had left. If my father ever demanded that I come back, my aunt never told me. At any rate, all I cared about was that the abuse was over.

Making Amends

After I graduated from college, my life was great—I dated a lot and had amazing friends and a good job—but there was still a void. I was 22, so it had been seven years since I'd left home, and I was tired of being angry with Ellen. I'd never forget how she'd treated me, but I was ready to forgive her.

That fall, I went to my parents' house one evening when my father wasn't around and explained to Ellen how hurt I'd been by the way she had treated me as a child. She started crying and admitted that she'd been in therapy and working on her anger-management issues since I'd left, and she said she also wanted a relationship with me. We talked and cried for hours. Though she never explained why she'd been so horrible to me, she did apologize.

At first, we'd call each other every once in a while, but there were many uncomfortable silences. However, we both kept

making an effort, and amazingly, after several years, we now have a fairly loving relationship. We go shopping together, meet for lunch once a month, and talk on the phone a few times a week, sometimes for hours. We don't agree all the time, but even when we fight, we still respect each other. As for my father, I never blamed him for the way Ellen had treated me because he was never really around.

Still, it's scary to think that if my aunt hadn't intervened when she did, I might have become one of those people who suffer the long-term effects of trauma. Today, at 32, I have a very active social life, a marketing job I love, and a wonderful boyfriend, Michael, whom I've been dating for a year and a half. Because we're talking about getting married, I wanted to

share everything with him, including my past. I had never told anyone but therapists about what Ellen did to me, but when I did, Michael held me and told me he'd always be there for me. We never discussed it further because he understands that it was just an awful part of my childhood that I've gotten over. It's not who I am.

Best of all, my family is tighter than ever. My sisters are in college and we get together every chance we get. My father is thrilled that Ellen and I are getting along so well, and since he retired recently, I feel like I have him back after all these years. I wouldn't say I lived happily ever after, because nothing's perfect. But I'm certainly happier than I've ever been, and I'm proud that I've come so far. I think my mom would be too. ■

The Stepmom-Daughter Dilemma

There's a reason Cinderella rings so true.

● After a divorce or the death of a mother, daughters often take on a nurturing role and become the center of their dad's attention, so when another woman appears on the scene, a natural rivalry can develop, explains Florence Kaslow, Ph.D., founding president of the International Family Therapy Association and coauthor of *Painful Partings*.

● In cases of divorce, girls tend to become especially close with and supportive of their biological mothers during the separation and single period that follows, so they're more likely to feel they're being disloyal by having a relationship with the stepmother.

● Because females are usually more expressive of their emotions, their initial encounters with a stepmother can be more volatile, says Barry G. Ginsberg, Ph.D., a psychologist in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and author of *Relationship Enhancement Family Therapy*. But that connection also provides an opportunity for them to bond in ways that a stepson and stepmother might not be able to.