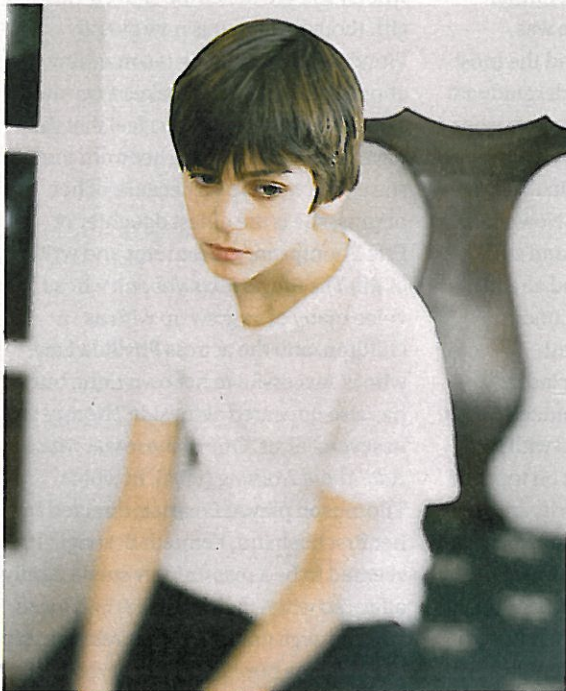


SOME STEPMOTHERS DO 'AVE 'EM

There were three people in SARAH RAYNER's relationship from the off – she, the boyfriend and his sulky, taciturn young son. Could anything placate him?

My first meeting with my stepson-to-be did not go well. Seb was nine and used to it being just he and his dad, Tom. So when we went to get in his dad's car Seb immediately bounced into the passenger seat – which is where I was used to sitting when I was with Tom, too.

'Er, no, I'd like to sit there, please,'



I could sense his narrow-eyed suspicion. He poked fun at me, occasionally was downright rude

I said. Which then upset Seb. Tom, seeing this, was so keen to make it OK that *he* got out, insisted I drive and climbed into the back, leaving Seb in the front. Not the right precedent, but easy to see how it happened.

Getting involved with someone who already has a child is rarely, if ever, painless. And having one to stay every weekend was a challenge. While I like children, I'd got to 44 without having any, and was used to my own space.

Football boots on the stairs, his bed left unmade, the settings on my computer changed... When Seb first came to stay I found it exasperating; still do. But such issues arise in every family; what made our encounters more fraught is that the love that cushions parent/child relations doesn't come automatically to a step-parent. I'd fallen for Tom,

not Seb. And Seb had not chosen me at all.

Until my arrival Seb had never known his father have a girlfriend. His mother and Tom had parted when Seb was tiny, so since he could remember it had been only them. No wonder I could sense his narrow-eyed suspicion from the off. He poked fun at me, occasionally seemed downright rude – nuances that Tom, with his fond-father perspective, often failed to see. And watching Seb cling to his dad to bid him farewell, though he could barely grunt goodbye to me, it was hard not to sense hurt.

From Cinderella onwards, the perils of step-parenting are well

documented, and I know what it's like to feel ousted, as my parents both remarried in my teens. But it's one thing to be able to rationalise in hindsight, another to be equable when sparks are flying. I didn't always manage it.

A few months after Tom and I met we spent the day out with Seb. Afterwards Tom dropped me at my home and sped off with Seb to spend the night at his house. But as the front door gave way without my unlocking it I realised I'd

been burgled. My bedroom was the worst: clothes pulled out of drawers, jewellery yanked from boxes; everything, everywhere.

The first person I wanted, inevitably, was Tom. Yet when I rang, his mobile went straight to voicemail – he was driving, of course. It seemed an age before he called back and by then I was in a real state. I wanted him to come back and comfort me. But he had Seb and they were 40 miles away.

'I can't leave him,' he explained. Seb's mother was out. I asked if he might bring Seb, aware that wasn't the solution: at this point Seb had only met me twice so we hardly knew each other and it was past his bedtime already. Anyway, being comforted by Tom with a strange child in tow was not the same as having Tom to myself.

In the end a girl friend came round; I saw Tom the next day. He still feels bad about that evening, but he could not have done anything different.

These days most tensions are behind us. As time has passed my fondness for Seb, who is now 11, has grown. I'm very proud of him. But if I had to say what's helped most it would be the acquisition of a four-legged friend for Seb, called Thor. It came about after another triangular negotiation in the car.

'I'm moving in with Sarah,' Tom said, apprehensive.

Silence while Seb took it in. Tom feared the worst. Perhaps he'd sulk, say he hated me, cry. But no.

'Fine.' Another pause. 'Can I have a cat, then?'

'Um. We'll have to ask Sarah.' 'So it's all right by you?' he asked me. 'Er,' I said.

Seb sat back, sure. 'Sarah'll be fine. She likes cats. She's got two already.'

Hence Thor. Seb adores him, as do I. It's made my space his, too. And the triangle has shifted, as now three cats battle it out, vying for supremacy. ●