

# MailOnline

## Where there's a will...there's a war: Why does the death of a parent so often trigger vicious, lifelong family feuds?

By [Keren Smedley](#)

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Arriving for a family Christmas a few years ago, we were stunned to be greeted by my mother-in-law brandishing a packet of coloured stickers.

'Have a look around the house and pop a sticker on anything you'd like to have when we're no longer around,' she announced breezily.

All four children would be visiting over the festive season, and each would be given a different-coloured set of stickers.



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### Sibling rivalry: The death of a parent can spark a return to patterns learned during childhood

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The rules were clear: if a sticker was already on your chosen item, you had to try to negotiate. If you couldn't agree, the parents would decide later. It all sounded very civilised.

However, the best laid plans soon degenerated. Over the next few days I watched in amazement as my husband and his siblings started to play out old family patterns.

The eldest, my husband, became Mr Sensible and demanded everyone take it all very seriously 'for Mum and Dad's sake'. His younger brother refused to co-operate and the two of them rowed.

Number three tried to mediate between her elder brothers and asked them to be nice, as it was Christmas, while the youngest played the joker and moved everyone's stickers round.

The whole exercise went nowhere and simply left the siblings feeling bemused and irritated. My mother-in-law, Joyce, is still alive and now 87.

Her husband Charles died five years ago, leaving everything to her and no one is sure whether she's ever made a decision about what to do with her possessions and estate, or whether the stickers will still be there, with everything still unresolved, when she dies. And no one wants to ask, either.

But, however bizarre it may have seemed, I know that my mother-in-law was acting with the best of motives. She was desperate to save her children the heartache she'd suffered.

A few years earlier, her 98-year-old mother had died, leaving everything to Joyce and her brother and sister. They wanted to sell it all and split the money, while my mother-in-law wanted to keep mementoes of her childhood.

They took a vote and she lost. My poor mother-in-law ended up sitting for four days at the auction rooms, buying back precious family items. She vowed this wasn't going to happen to her children.

Sadly, as I know from my job as a counsellor, when both parents die it can leave us feeling rudderless. Old childhood resentments often spring to the surface and we don't always curb our behaviour.



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#### Parents feel the need to set their affairs in order as they get older

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Some people seem to have expectations about their parents' will and find it very difficult to manage their feelings if these aren't met. Others have seen their inheritance as a way to solve their financial problems or as a boost to their pension - and feel very anxious and disappointed if this doesn't happen.

We're all encouraged to write a will and to agree executors. It's intended to make life much easier for all concerned. But it doesn't always work out like that. Just ask social worker Ann Jones.

When her parents retired, they decided to live apart. To tidy up any loose ends, they made separate wills. They told Ann, 58, and her two siblings that they were dividing everything equally between the three of them. Each would receive £25,000 in cash - as well as a third of the value of their parents' property.

At that point, their mother bought a house in Birmingham on her own, and Ann's younger sister, Carol, moved in with her mother because she worked locally as a secretary.

Everything was fine until six years later when it emerged that Ann's mother had put her house into Carol's name, flouting the earlier agreement to share it with Ann and her brother. Devastated, Ann drove down to confront her mother. Her sister also happened to be at home, and inevitably sparks flew.

Ann shouted at her sister, accusing her of taking more than her fair share. Her mother argued that Carol needed the house more than Ann, who already had a home. Shaking with fury, Ann left. For several years, there was no contact between the sisters, and only a cold birthday and Christmas card each year from her mother.

'What made me so upset was that I'm the eldest and I'm always seen as the coper,' says Ann. 'But I'd struggled for years bringing up my daughter, working overtime just to pay my mortgage. It seemed so unfair.'

But that wasn't the end of it. When Ann's father died in 1996, she and his solicitor were the executors of his will. The family met and Ann read the will to the others. He had been true to his word and everything was divided three ways.

Yet a few weeks later, Ann received a letter from her mother's solicitor. She was challenging the will. As she wasn't legally separated or divorced, she claimed that she was entitled to all the proceeds of her husband's estate.

Ann and her brother James took legal advice and were told their mother would probably win. Reluctantly, Ann decided not to get involved in a costly court case but asked to take the £25,000 in cash that she had been promised - something her mother finally agreed to.

Yet she finds it impossible to understand and forgive her mother and sister. She says: 'I try not to feel angry, but I feel betrayed by my mother and hurt that my sister didn't back me up.'



Sandra Lyon 57, an estate agent from Leeds, found herself in exactly the opposite position when her mother died six years ago. But the effect has been equally traumatic.

Sandra inherited £50,000 more than her sister, Becky, a businesswoman and mother of three. 'I'm single, so Mum seemed to think that I needed more money,' she explains.

Not surprisingly Becky, 54, who lives in York with her husband, daughter and teenage twin boys, was terribly upset. 'She just

felt that this proved Mum loved me best - which she'd always suspected,' says Sandra.

'Besides, with three children, money had often been tight for her. Of course, I was delighted to get this financial cushion, but I felt embarrassed and worried about upsetting Becky. We never discussed it, but she made snide comments whenever we met, and talked incessantly about her financial worries.

'I hated falling out with Becky. Although we had very different lifestyles, we got on well and enjoyed each other's company. She and her children are the only family I have.'

Finally, in late 2006 - three years after the will was enacted - Sandra could bear it no longer. She remortgaged her flat and gave the extra money to her sister. But both sisters remain unhappy.

Sandra now has money worries as the recession has taken a toll on her business. And she's resentful because she feels Becky wasn't sufficiently grateful.

I met Sandra last year when she felt she was in danger of falling out with her sister for good, and she sought professional help from me. She's trying to cope with any residual bitterness, and plans to talk to Becky to try to find a resolution.

But there is something about rows over parental legacies that drives a wedge between siblings like nothing else - and drags us all back to those childhood feelings of resentment we so often feel towards brothers and sisters when we're growing up.

I meet so many people through my work and elsewhere who are struggling with the pain of what they see as unreasonable wills. As adults, we should be able to accept that life is unfair, but an unjust will can spark so much rage.

And, of course, the issue can never be fully resolved because the person who has hurt us is dead.

Marion Gold, a 62-year-old housewife from Torquay, is in just such a position. When her mother died 18 months ago, she said in her will that her second husband - her children's stepfather - could live in the marital home for up to three years.

She wanted to give her husband time to find a smaller place to live, but then wanted the property to be sold, splitting the proceeds between Marion and her brother Michael.

But Michael was furious because he wanted his money immediately. He stormed round to his mother's home and ordered his stepfather to pack up and leave. When Marion arrived by chance, a terrible row ensued.

'I was shellshocked,' says Marion. 'But telling him to calm down was like a red rag to a bull. Michael said Mum had always preferred him, and - just to make things worse - that he had always hated my husband, Neville. I was desperately hurt and shocked.'

Marion and Michael haven't spoken since, and a settlement was only agreed this year when Marion took a loan to the equivalent of half the value of her mother's flat and bought out Michael.

By the time Marion came to see me, she felt she could no longer cope. Her marriage was floundering because of the pressure of her intense feelings. It had affected her health and she'd put on three stone over the strain of it all.

'It's all so sad and pointless. I love my brother and his family. As we don't have any children of our own, we were going to leave everything to them anyway. But this has soured everything.'

To my mind, Marion's situation is based on sibling rivalry - which has never been acknowledged or discussed - that has erupted in a row over money. Sometimes, the rows can begin even before the person leaving the will dies.

Sam Hall, a 57-year-old who runs his own garden business near Milton Keynes, thought he was being sensible when he suggested talking about the future with his sister Rosalind.

'I've seen several friends either squabble over their inheritance or lose a lot of money in inheritance tax,' he says.

'I don't have a pension, so it's really important to me that family money isn't wasted.'

So Sam was delighted when his 85-year-old widower father sat him and his sister down to talk about his will.

Sam felt this was the moment to discuss with Rosalind how they should manage their father's affairs so he was well looked after while still protecting their inheritance.

He understood from friends that there were things you could do, such as transferring their father's house to their name or setting up a trust to protect his money from the taxman.

Sam suggested they sought legal help, as he knew they would need advice and that his friend's information might not be 100 per cent correct.

'But Rosalind saw red. She accused me of being vile and unfeeling, greedy and self-absorbed. How could I be thinking of myself at a time like this?

'Until then, our relationship had always been good. But she hasn't spoken to me since.'

Rosalind undoubtedly feels let down by Sam and disappointed by him. This rift is causing their father major distress, because all he wants is for his children to get on with each other. Now Sam is at his wits' end.

'I was looking after all our interests, and she misunderstood me. Now I just want to get it back to how it was.'

It's an upsetting story - and a warning to us all. My own three children are in their late 20s and early 30s. I hope it's a long time before I die, but I've thought long and hard about my will.

Do I divide everything equally or is it an opportunity to redress other balances, such as one child doing better professionally or financially than another in life?

Having seen so much pain and heartache in other families, I think there's only one safe option: I'm going to divide everything by three. And there won't be any stickers on any furniture in my house.

- *Keren Smedley is agony aunt for Woman's Weekly and runs Experience Matters [www.experiencematters.org.uk](http://www.experiencematters.org.uk), 020 8347 6260. The names of the families in this article have been changed.*

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I've already told my children that there is no such thing as an inheritance. I am the one who has worked for everything and it is mine to decide what happens to it after I die. I have also said that if I decide to sell everything up and travel the world then (not that I intend to) then I am not spending there inheritance as it is my money. How I decide what happens to what I have has nothing to do with any of them and they must accept it. Any arguments and I will be back to haunt them. Guess what - they agreed with me.

- IB, Oldbury, 19/10/2009 10:29

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Why does anyone feel entitled to anything?

These are not 'your' belongings or money.

They are your parents. Your parents own all of it. They do not have to give you a single penny.

They're not looking after it for you, it is not yours!

- Kaynie, Peterborough, 19/10/2009 10:16

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I have several siblings, one of whom is the clear favourite of my mother. I fully expect the favourite to benefit more from any will of my mum's, but I suspect my dad would divide everything equally, so it depends who dies first.

When they die I will be fine if I don't receive anything because I'm not counting on it. I see things like this as poisonous and am content with what I have because I've worked for it. Life is way too short to fall out with family over money.

Personally I live my life without expecting anything more from my parents - they've done enough. I am not waiting for them to die so I can get my hands on their money. I'd rather they stayed alive. It would hurt to think they might love one more than another, but I've prepared myself for that possibility so hopefully I'll cope when the time comes. I may be pleasantly surprised but at least I won't be horribly shocked.

- Ensee, UK, 19/10/2009 10:13

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Just on thing for parents to consider...stop having favourites! Leave it equally and as cleanly as possible and appoint an outside executor.

For the `children' who consider taking the house in their names.If the parent is taken into care the council can demand the money even before 7 years if they think it has been done to avoid paying. It will not escape the taxman either! Remember it is THEIRS not yours and if it is their only asset while they are alive it is not up to children to decide.The elderly these days have a habit of not dying soon enough so remember that!

If I asked my sons to put stickers on everything they would think I'd lost the plot!They will be OK its the girlfriends I worry about causing trouble!

- Jen, York, 19/10/2009 09:24

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Why? Because of a sick culture that promotes the idea that the world, the government, the parents... somebody, everybody owes me.

- Frank, York, 19/10/2009 09:14

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Whatever you do, don't use your will "to redress other balances, such as one child doing better professionally or financially than another." You are guaranteeing that your children will never speak to one another again. I know this from experience.

- Ann, Virginia, USA, 19/10/2009 03:47

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