

Breaking Apart: A Memoir of Divorce

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From Chapter One

As a fantasy, divorce has a lot to recommend it. A good divorce fantasy can feel like an open window in a life otherwise shuttered in on itself. It can comfort a heart stinging from marital strife. It can be intensely private and perfectly controlled, unlike reality, which may be spinning apart. A good divorce fantasy can take up a lot of time.

During the twelve years I was married, I spent many hours fantasizing about divorce. At first it was just a whisper of an idea, held guiltily for a moment and then dismissed, but as the years passed it became something of an obsession. Whenever my marriage made me unhappy, which was often, I escaped into the world of divorce in my head.

It was a place where women were free and women could choose, where women decided everything from the mood of their day to what to watch on TV or where the family would go on vacation. It was a place where I didn't have to compromise with a difficult spouse. It was a place where I could make my children infinitely happy, a halcyon world of simple pleasures and contended days. I knew it wouldn't be an easy life—money would be tight and I would have to learn how to mow the lawn—but I imagined the inevitable hardships as lessons that would somehow make us all stronger and bind me closer to my two little boys. With middle-class parents who were still alive and willing to help, I didn't have to worry about ending up in a homeless shelter.

This fantasizing was the perfect antidote to a marriage that had become a struggle for power over the smallest of choices. The problem with my life, as I saw it then, was my husband, and I imagined divorce as a process that would remove him but change little else—a sort of neutron bomb that eliminated men but left the rest of the world intact. When my husband went on business trips I played at being divorced, reveling in the freedom his absence afforded and the peace that would descend on our little world when he was gone. It would be so simple, so I thought, so pleasant. There would be less yelling. The boys and I would stay in the house and I would get my parents to help me fix the things my husband never got around to fixing. I would get a nice student to live in the basement apartment and help out with baby-sitting in exchange for lower rent, so I could get an occasional break from the kids. I could rearrange rooms to my liking, perhaps get a dog. If the mortgage got too oppressive I would rent out the attic as well, maybe to another single mother. We could sit together in the kitchen at night, soul sisters chatting about our kids and conspiring about men. Compared to the cold war of my marriage, it sounded pretty wonderful.

This story is about a divorce. It's about a descent, an excruciating choice, and a recovery. It's about rebuilding my life so that my children can live within a structure that gives them strength and support and the courage to thrive. But it is also about the dissolution of a marriage, and that is the hardest part. Even today, seven years after Ron and I separated, seven years of working together to find the strands back so we could trust each other again, the death of my marriage is still the hardest part. And make no mistake--divorce is a death. It kills off the dreams of our youth, those innocent beliefs that your marriage can weather sickness as it can weather health, that life will be kind and fair, that the joys will be shared and the vicissitudes bring you closer. I can't even imagine now what it would be like to live through my middle age still believing those things, still having them be true for me. I know that some marriages manage to hold on to those beliefs even as they are squeezed and burnished by experience, because I can see them burning like gold at the core; and I know I will never have that. I left my innocence behind, that still September day when I walked out the door of my house. Left it behind with the wedding presents and the Christmas ornaments and the memories and all the familiar corners of my life....