

ON

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DIVORCE

Portraits and voices of separation
A photographic project by Harry Borden

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INTRODUCTION

1.

Everyone wants to talk about weddings (especially the table plans and the speeches); few can bear to consider divorce. Like death, divorce happens somewhere far offstage, an unmentionable and fear-inducing rebuke to all that we would want to believe of ourselves and the dangers we face. Those who go through divorce typically have a double burden to bear: the turmoil of the event itself and, no less profoundly, a blanket societal embarrassment about its meaning. The revelation of an impending divorce tends to generate near-funereal silence and mumbled, quasi-censorious 'I'm so sorrys.' Because love is the meaning of modern existence, what could there possibly be to say to those who – perhaps with a joint mortgage and two children in tow – have seen no option but to break their vows?

Yet to those who know them from up close, divorces are simultaneously the most appalling and, at moments, the most creative, idealistic, rejuvenating, thought-provoking and plain mesmerising events they will ever go through. Pretty much any other drama will forever pale in comparison. Years after, divorce will still loom as the defining indentation and inflection point in their lives. No story of divorce, properly told, can ever be unengaging or banal. These are the moments in which we catch the human animal in all its complexity, turmoil, folly and beauty.

Insofar as we have narratives of divorce, they tend to be fictional ones: novels and films do the lion's share of the telling. Therefore, there may be a particular role for divorce as seen through the lens of the harder, more concrete medium of documentary photography, a medium that can – with urgent literalness – collar us emotionally, as

if to say, ‘This truly does happen to people like you and me: ordinary types, neither exceptionally beautiful nor ugly, sane nor mad, good nor evil – alive right now, in a street much like yours.’

The faces and voices that follow are a mirror that can help to correct some of what we think we know of divorce. Stock images of divorcees tend to skew in stereotyped directions: we picture reprobates and sinners, cads and bounders, mid-life adulterers and abandoned paragons. We can be quick to drain the humanity from those who offend (what can still count as) our dominant moral code. The portraits that follow – captured over a two-year period by the photographer Harry Borden (himself divorced) and spanning cultural, ethnic, class and age lines across the United Kingdom – pull us in a different direction: towards compassion and identification, curiosity and self-reflection, challenge and empathy.

Few of us are without some relationship to divorce: we may be the children, parents or grandparents of divorcees, the colleagues or friends; this may be what we went through a decade ago or what lies ahead of us in the 2030s; it might be what we are just concluding – at this very moment and in intense turmoil – or something that we will need to set in motion in the coming days. Divorcees are, like all of us, only grown-up children, stumbling in the dark, trying to make sense of their choices, beset by blind impulses, illuminated by occasional grace, and human – all too human. One of the best things we can do in the face of our difficulties is to turn pain into art – of a sort that others can refer to, at moments of particular isolation and befuddlement, to recover their poise and sense of community. This documentary project insists that divorce should never be thought of as shameful, morally simple, abstract or even necessarily tragic. It is as much a part of who we are as love.

2.

To understand why divorce exists, we have no option but to return, of course, to the reasons for marriage. The old motives – the ones that held firm across the globe for most of the history of humanity – tend to no longer apply. We rarely marry to please our parents, to appease the gods, to satisfy a dynastic claim or to unite our strip of land with a neighbour’s plough or an ox any more. We marry – to wield a consequential and fateful term – ‘for love’.

Quite what this should mean takes us back even further, to the pleasures and hopes of early childhood. Babies who are loved cannot in any way spell out the grounds for their delight, but their entire adulthoods will be shaped by their experience of luxuriant care. Someone is profoundly delighted that they exist. The person keeps planting warm, reassuring kisses on their brow. They feed them soft, interesting foods cut into manageable portions. They worry about the sunlight that might be hurting their eyes. They hold them in soft arms. They bathe them in warm water. They hold them up and smile broadly and beatifically. They satisfy their emotional and bodily needs, attenuate their fears and give them constant reasons to feel content in their own skin.

At the heart of what we crave in adult love is a return to some of these early feelings. It is no coincidence that lovers at the height of joy should so regularly turn and call their partners ‘baby’. We may not, as adults, want exactly the same treatment, but we crave the essence of what a happy infant enjoys. We want our cries to stir others’ care and worry. We want to know that we matter primordially to someone else – and that they are sure to come when we weep and panic in the night. We want to feel we can delight them when we smile. We may receive money and acclaim from strangers, but unless

we benefit from this kind of close-up care, nothing will ever quite feel meaningful or right.

It may seem as though 'love' was invented by film or chocolate box companies, but it has far more tenacious roots in our personalities than that. We are built to be thrilled by someone who takes an interest in our concerns, who enquires into the details of our days, whose hands can lie softly on our worry-knotted foreheads and who can pull us away from our tendencies to melodrama and exaggeration.

Long before there was ever any thought of divorce, the baby in us had some very powerful longings to know that they mattered.

3.

Unfortunately, few of us know how to love. After all, no one ever teaches us. At school, we are expected to excel at trigonometry, the twelve times table and the relationship between France and England during the Hundred Years' War, but no one ever enquires how sound we might be around the topic of offering affection or regulating the moods and pains of another. We tend to assume that love is a natural reflex, like sneezing, rather than a skill that might in some ways need to be learnt, like playing the violin or landing an airliner in the dark in a forty-mile-an-hour crosswind.

We head out into the adult world without any detailed impression of the gravity of what emotional life will ask of us. We assume that it must be enough to have an impressive career, a pleasant personality or a svelte appearance.

We start to make costly errors. We don't realise that we aren't in fact very good at listening and that every time someone makes a realistic remark about our behaviour, we respond in a defensive manner that can end up sinking the spirits of anyone who cares

about us. We don't notice our rigidity and fear around accepting warmth. We have no awareness of how we might be using work, our phones or our hobbies to deny opportunities for intimacy. We assume that we might be relatively easy to live with and that any fault must lie entirely with our exes, who we speedily and gleefully dismiss as 'toxic' or 'narcissistic', much to the approbation of certain friends who are more interested in kindness than truth.

Our responses are conditioned by early childhoods which we may have left radically unexplored. Like baby ducklings, we are imprinted without any awareness of the scripts we're following. We blindly look out for people who are going to frustrate us, we make a beeline for inappropriate types and we are hidden masters at spoiling kindness and sound intentions. We exercise a relentless appetite for suffering and a submerged compulsion towards meanness. We don't notice our distinctive manner around sex, the particularities of our routines or our secret reserves of anger and vengeance towards a parent or caregiver that we may be projecting onto innocent adult suitors.

Our capacities end up sharply at odds with our hopes. We are as enthusiastic about the idea of love as we are unpractised at its nurture and safe and kindly exchange.

4.

We are also, much to our cost, extremely impatient. We simply cannot bear that we may need to continue to be on our own for a few more months or years or even decades before a compatible partner appears. We hallucinate an answer that may not be remotely there. We fail to exercise a semblance of the due diligence that we would expend on buying a house or a pair of socks. We don't send ourselves

or our prospective partners to a psychologist for a battery of tests, six months of examinations or an MBA-style course in the mechanics of love. We fall into a manic hurry to be legally recognised, fed perhaps by a background anxiety about having made an erratic choice. We decide to get married after two weeks and our friends and families declare us 'romantic' (one of the most dangerous words in the lexicon) rather than in flight from open-minded thoughtful exploration. We spend months planning a wedding and minutes wondering about a marriage's real chances of success.

Society gives us little help with our frenzy. It conspires to render life for the single particularly bereft and isolating. It leaves us thinking that, given our age, there really can be no alternative but to join all the others with their weekend ceremonies. No one tells us quite loudly enough that the best – and perhaps only – assurance of a healthy marriage is a bold indifference to spending the rest of our lives by ourselves.

5.

Once a divorce has occurred, we often ask at what point it 'began'. What we can bet is that there is almost always a large gap between the moment when divorce is spoken about and when the fuel for it started to accumulate. Its origins may lie with certain initially minute fissures that will have lain ignored, possibly for decades.

Historians know all about the challenges of chronological pinpointing. It is common to ask when a cataclysmic event like, for example, the French Revolution began. A traditional response is to point to the spring of 1789, when one of the orders of the Estates General took an oath to remain in session until a constitution had been agreed on, or a few weeks later when a group of Parisians

stormed the Bastille prison. But a more sophisticated and instructive approach locates the beginning significantly earlier: with the bad harvests of the previous ten years, with the loss of royal prestige following military defeats in North America in the 1760s or with the rise of a new philosophy in the middle of the century that stressed the idea of citizens' rights. At the time, these incidents didn't seem particularly decisive; they didn't immediately lead to major social change or reveal their solemn nature, but they slowly yet powerfully put the country on course for the upheavals of 1789: they moved the country into a revolution-ready state.

Likewise, divorces tend to begin long before the moment when one party sits the other down at the kitchen table and declares that they have had enough. They begin after certain conversations that didn't go well in a bathroom three summers previously or after a sulk in a taxi home five years before.

A timeline of the true causes of divorce might look like this:

Unending busyness: It was a Sunday morning, our beloved had been occupied for months with a big project and we'd been very understanding. Now it was over and we were looking forward to some closeness and a trip to a café. But there was suddenly something new that they needed to look at on their phone. We glanced over at their face lit up by the glow of the screen; their eyes looked cold, determined and resolutely elsewhere. Or else they hatched a sudden, firm plan to reorganise the kitchen cupboards just when at last we might have had some quiet time together in the park.

Neglect: We were away on an exhausting trip and, in a break between meetings, we leapt at the chance to call them. They picked up, but the television continued on in the background. They had even forgotten

we'd had to give a speech and it felt a little humiliating having to remind them and hearing their lacklustre 'great' in response.

Shaming: We were with some new friends – people we didn't know too well and wanted to make a good impression on. Our partner was looking to amuse them and, having cast around for options, opted to tell everyone a story about how we once showed the wrong slides in a presentation at work. They know how to tell a good story and there was a lot of laughter.

Entitlement: Without discussing it, they arranged that we'd both go and have lunch with their parents. It wasn't so much that we minded going, it was the fact that they didn't feel the need to ask us if we minded and if the timing was convenient. On another occasion, without even mentioning it, they bought a new kettle and got rid of the old one; it was as if we had no say at all. Sometimes they'd just tell us what to do – 'take the bins out', 'pick up some mineral water at the shop', 'put on different shoes' – without adding 'please' or 'would you mind' or 'it would be lovely if ...'. Just a few words would have made a very significant difference.

Flirting: We were at a party with them and we saw them across the room: they were bending towards this person, saying something; they were laughing charmingly; they put their hand on the back of the other person's chair. Later they said it had been a very boring conversation.

One too many arguments: It wasn't the basic fact of having disagreements, it was the sheer number of them – and their unending, repetitive nature. One that sticks in the memory was when we were

at the seaside and things should have been happy for once – and yet they chose once again to ramp up the tension about a Thai takeaway that had been ordered. We remember arguing and, at the same time, one part of our mind disassociating, looking down upon the two of us standing on the pier with cross faces and wondering 'Why?'

Lack of tenderness: We were walking in the street together near the antiques market and we reached out to hold their hand, but they failed to notice; another time, they were doing something at the kitchen table and we put an arm round their shoulders and they said sharply, 'not now'. In bed, we're always the one to turn towards them and kiss them goodnight; they respond, but they never, ever initiate. This rankles more than it seems normal or possible to say.

Erotic disengagement: There was a sexual idea we'd been getting interested in but we felt awkward about mentioning it to them. We tried to give a few hints, but they didn't give us the impression they were curious or encourage us to expand. Instead, they gave us the sense that it would be a lot more convenient if we just kept whatever it was that tickled us to ourselves.

Individually, none of these things may be very dramatic. Some little version of one or another of them may be happening pretty much every day for every couple. And it's not all one-way: both parties are probably doing some of these things quite regularly, without particularly noticing or meaning to.

Yet a careful historian of divorce might point to any one of these as the moment at which – in a true sense – a split began: a feeling was implanted deep in someone's mind (perhaps beyond the range of their conscious awareness) that there was something utterly

critical missing in their relationship and that they could not endure its lack forever.

It is common, when a divorce is called for, to become an inquisitorial prosecutor: to seize a phone and ask the 'cheat' or the 'deserter' in detail where they have been; to read through their emails and parse every receipt. But such assiduousness is a little late, a little misdirected and rather too self-serving. The divorce didn't begin with any dirty texts or lunch appointments; it began on a sunny, innocent afternoon many years before, when there was still a lot of goodwill, when a hand was proffered and the partner was perhaps fatefully careless about how they received it. That might be a rather more painful account of our relationship and its troubles than we are ready to contemplate for now, but it may also be a more accurate and, ultimately, more useful one.

6.

How might we spot a couple headed for divorce – even if, or especially if, that couple might be us?

Having arguments does not, in itself, say very much about the likelihood of a relationship disintegrating. What matters is how arguments are interpreted, conducted and resolved. The fragile unions aren't necessarily the ones in which people shout, insist that this is finally it, call the other a ninny and slam the door; they are the ones in which emotional disconnection and rupture are not correctly identified, examined and repaired.

A number of qualities are required to ensure that a couple know how to successfully navigate conflict and discord. There is, first and foremost, the need for each party to be able to pinpoint sources of discomfort in themselves early and accurately: to know how to

recognise what they are unhappy about and what they need in order to flourish in the couple. This is not necessarily as obvious as one might imagine. It can take time and psychological insight to know that it was actually the missing phone call or the request to move the date of the holiday that was really the source of anger.

Then there is the equally vital quality of feeling that each has the right to speak; that they aren't duty-bound to be 'good' and not cause trouble; that it is acceptable to say when they are miserable and when something – however small it might appear – is troubling them; that it is better to spoil a few evenings than ruin a marriage.

It can help to have a sanguine assessment of how human relationships tend to go: to accept that a bit of disappointment and some friction belong to the necessary ingredients of good-enough love, that it isn't a disaster to be cross at points and seemingly convinced that this should be the end.

A subsidiary talent is the skill of knowing *how* to speak up. It might not be exactly at the moment the problem appears; diplomatic skills matter. We might need to wait until some of the surface tension has dissipated; perhaps the next morning can do just as well. We need a background confidence in order to not blurt out every objection in a panicked diatribe or shout a wounded feeling across the room when the other is themselves too upset to hear it. We need to know how to formulate our complaints into a convincing, perhaps even comedically framed point that has a chance of winning over its target.

It matters in all this that we feel both attached to the partner and, at the same time, have an active impression that we could walk away from them were matters to ever truly escalate. Feeling that we have options, do not therefore have to cling to the other and instead deserve good treatment ensures that our voice can be measured and that the status quo will remain manageable.

None of these factors tend to be present in those unfortunate couples who do not just argue but lack the gift of arguing well. A range of inner obstacles prevents them from dealing effectively with their emotional disconnection and anger:

Over-optimism about relationships: Paradoxically, fragile couples tend to be very hopeful about love. They associate happiness with conflict-free unions. They do not expect, once they have found the person they unwisely see as The One, to ever need to squabble, storm out of a room or feel unhappy for the afternoon. When trouble emerges, as it inevitably does, they do not greet it as a sign that love is progressing as it should, but rather as alarming evidence that their relationship may be illegitimate and fundamentally flawed. Their hopes tire them for the patient tasks of diplomatic negotiation and routine maintenance.

Out of touch with pain: Fragile couples tend not to be good detectives of their own sufferings. They may be both unhappy and yet unsure as to the actual causes of their dissatisfactions; they know that something is wrong in their union, but they can't easily trace the catalysts. They can't zero in on the fact that it was the lack of trust in them around money that rankles or that it has been the other partner's behaviour towards a demanding youngest child that has been hurting. They lash out in vague or inaccurate directions, their attacks either unfairly general or unconvincingly specific.

Shame: A shamed person has fundamental doubts about their right to exist: somewhere in the past, they have been imbued with an impression that they do not matter very much, that their feelings should be ignored, that their happiness is not a priority and that

their words do not count. Once they are in a couple, shamed people hurt like anyone else, but their capacity to turn their hurt into something another person can understand, and be touched by, is recklessly weak. Shamed people will sulk rather than speak, hide rather than divulge, feel secretly wretched rather than candidly complain. It is frequently very late – far too late – by the time shamed people finally let their lovers know more about the nature of their desperation.

Excessive anxiety: Complaining well requires an impression that not everything depends on the complaint being heard perfectly. Were the lesson to go wrong, were the other to prove intransigent, we could survive and take our love elsewhere. Not everything is at stake in an argument. The other hasn't ruined our life. We therefore don't need to scream, hector, insist or nag. We can deliver a complaint with some of the nonchalance of a calm teacher who wants an audience to learn but can bear it if they don't; we could always say what we have on our mind tomorrow, or the next day.

Excessive pride: It takes an inner dignity not to mind too much about having to level complaints about things that could sound laughably 'small' or that leave us open to being described as petty or needy. With too much pride and fear, it can become unbearable to admit that we have been upset since lunch because our partner didn't take our hand on a walk, or that we wish so much that they would be readier to hug us last thing at night. We have to feel quite grown up inside not to be offended by our own more childlike appetites for reassurance and comfort. It is an achievement to know how to be strong about our vulnerability. We may have said, rather too many times, from behind a slammed door, in a defensive tone, 'No, nothing is wrong

whatsoever. Go away,' when secretly longing to be comforted and understood like a weepy, upset child.

Hopelessness about dialogue: Fragile couples often come together with few positive childhood memories of conversations working out: early role models may have simply screamed and then despaired of one another. Those in fragile couples may have never witnessed disagreements eventually morphing into mutual understanding and sympathy. They would deeply love to be understood, but they can bring precious few resources to the task of making themselves so.

None of these factors mean that there will have to be a divorce, but they are generators of the states of emotional disconnection that contribute to an all-important divorce-ready state. Outwardly, things may be seemingly well. A couple may have an interesting social life, lovely children, a new apartment. But a more judicious analysis will reveal an unexpected degree of risk: in the circumstances, whatever it may seem later, a separation won't be just an idle self-indulgence or a momentary piece of selfishness. It will be the result of identifiable long-term resentments that a couple, otherwise blessed and committed, lacked the inner resources and courage to investigate.

7.

One of the standard things we might hear, when someone explains to us why they left their partner, is: 'We hadn't had sex for years.' This plea picks up on the basic notion that a key sign of the health and viability of any marriage lies in the frequency of sexual contact between its participants. The end of sex must therefore legitimately and necessarily signal the end of love.

But if we lift the lid on what sex actually means, we might conclude something a little different. Suppose we ask the bizarre-sounding question: why do we actually want sex? The ordinary answer is that we want it for pleasure and excitement. But this might not, in fact, be very accurate about our true aspirations. There are lots of sources of pleasure. A less familiar but deeper answer may be that really, via sex, we are seeking proof of affection and enthusiasm. When we're rebuffed sexually, the pain isn't just that we won't be having physical intimacy with a person; it's that we are being given a sense that they don't particularly like us. The sting is to our sense of lovability rather than just to our nerve endings.

So we could say that, under the surface of bitterness about sex, it's never just how much sex is going on that matters, but how much affection, tenderness, interest and warmth is being demonstrated. Sex is operating as a proxy measure, but it's not in itself the thing that truly counts. We could easily imagine having a lot of sex without love – and suffering. Or being loved deeply but, for whatever reason, not having much sex – and being content.

This helps us put a more accurate finger on when a lack of sex should realistically become a matter for dissent or a parting of ways. Insofar as an absence of sex is independent of any shortfall in love, we might stay. Insofar as it is further evidence of a decline and absence of love, we could be following the logic of the heart to leave.

8.

The world often explains the cooling of desire that takes place in many couples as a sheer and inevitable result of exposure. It is, they say, typical to sexually neglect a person who is always around. But the

true reasons seem more complicated, more psychologically rich and, in their own way, a lot more hopeful.

If we stop desiring, it is seldom because we are bored or because it is 'normal' to take someone for granted; it is chiefly only because we are, at some level, *furious*. Anger creeps into love and destroys admiration. We cease to delight in our partner because we unknowingly grow entangled in various forms of unprocessed annoyance. We can't look at them with longing because, somewhere deep inside, we are inhibited by trace memories of certain let-downs, large and small, of which they have been guilty without having been informed. Perhaps they caused us immense difficulties around a work crisis – and never apologised. Maybe they flirted with a friend of ours – and left us feeling tricked and unsure. They may have booked a holiday without asking us – and then insisted that they'd done nothing wrong.

Every infraction was not, on its own, necessarily particularly serious, but taken cumulatively, a succession of minor disappointments can acquire a terrible capacity to dampen and ultimately destroy ardour. Yet it is not the simple fact of being let down that counts very much – the true problem is created when there hasn't been an opportunity to process our disappointment. Irritation is only toxic when it hasn't been extensively and thoughtfully aired.

Perhaps we tried to explain what was wrong but we got nowhere. Our partner lost their temper and we gave up. Or, more subtly, we might have felt unentitled to make a fuss over so-called 'small things' and therefore stayed silent, even though, in our depths, the small things mattered immensely to us. With great unfairness to our partner, we may have forgotten to admit to our own sensitivities even as we developed a steady burden of resentment against their unknowing offences.

What follows from buried anger is something that can be mistaken for disinterest, but is, in substance, very different. We no longer want to celebrate their birthday, we withhold sexual attention, we don't look up when they walk into a room ... This could seem like the normal impact of time and proximity, but it is not. It is evidence of cold fury. We do our anger an honour, and can start to dismantle its deleterious impacts, when we recognise the full impact of unexamined frustration on our emotions. We never simply 'go off' people; we only ever get very angry with them. And then forget we are so.

To refind our instinctive enthusiasm for our partner, we need to accurately locate our suppressed distress. We have to allow ourselves to be legitimately upset about certain things that have saddened us and properly raise them – for as long as we need to – in a way that lets us feel acknowledged and valued. Because anger inflicts an ever-increasing toll the longer it is left unaddressed, a good couple should allow for regular occasions when each person can – without encountering opposition – ask the other to listen to incidents, large or small, in which they felt let down of late. There might be an evening a week left free for this form of 'processing'. The mission should be bluntly known to both parties: *an opportunity to pick up on areas in which we feel let down* – not, one should add, in the name of killing love, but of ensuring its ongoing buoyancy. It goes without saying that we might not immediately see why a given thing should matter so much to our partner, but that isn't the point. The objective of the exercise should never be to listen to complaints that seem utterly relatable to us; it should be to let our partner know that we care that these are problems in their minds.

To ensure that our desire never suffers, this kind of hygienic ritual might be placed at the centre of every relationship. If couples too often ignore the requirement, it is because they operate under an

unfair burden of bravery: they are far more susceptible than they let themselves think. They assume that it cannot be sane to get ‘upset’ so often, to experience so much hurt, to be so easily ruffled. They can’t summon the courage to make a complaint about things that they don’t even admit to themselves have caused a sting – and so stay silent until it is no longer possible for them to feel. Wiser couples know that nothing should ever be too small to cover at length – for what is ultimately at stake in a marathon conversation about a single word or a miniscule event in the hallway can be the fate of the entire relationship. These lovers are, in this sense, likewise parents who, when a child is sorrowful, are patient enough to enter into the imaginative realm of the child and take the time to find out just how upsetting it was that the felt-tip pen smudged the top of the drawing of the daffodil or that their teddy bear, Nounou, didn’t get to eat ‘lunch’ at nursery. In a similar spirit, it might not be silly at all to devote three and a quarter hours to understanding why a partner became silently and immensely upset by the way we said the word ‘ready’ to them at breakfast the day before or how it felt to them when we were a touch slow at laughing along with a mildly unfunny story they shared at dinner with our aunt about a train and a suitcase. The gratitude that will flow from such an effort to understand them will be amply repaid the next time we feel abandoned because they forgot to put the lid back on the olives or omitted a second ‘x’ at the end of an email.

To complain in love is a noble and honourable skill very far removed from the category of whininess with which it is sometimes confused. The irony of well-targeted and quickly raised complaints is that their function is entirely positive. Honesty is a love-preserving mechanism that keeps alive all that is impressive and delightful about our partner in our eyes. By regularly voicing our small sorrows and

minor irritations, we are scraping the barnacles off the keel of our relationship and thereby ensuring that we will sail on with continued joy and admiration into an authentic and unresentful future.

9.

The world does not think especially well of an urge, in love, to try to alter our partners. We can expect a good deal of sympathy for complaining, at the end of a relationship, that our ex didn’t accept us for ‘who we truly were.’ There can be few more damning remarks to make of someone than, ‘They tried to change me.’ We equate true love with a wholehearted compliance to our natures as these presently stand.

The longing is wholly understandable – and yet entirely unreasonable. Viewed dispassionately, none of us should ever insist on remaining exactly as we are given the amount of folly, immaturity, blindness and egoism that are in all our characters. Universally, we should be graciously willing to be nudged – with kindness and compassion – to become someone slightly different.

Some of us can, on a good day, bear to take this awkward truth on board. We can stand that someone else might have noticed an excess or a lack in a part of our make-up; we do not have to immediately accuse them of ingratitude or meanness for finding fault with us. We don’t have to be perfect in their eyes to remain tolerable in our own.

But divorce rates are so high in part because listeners are so few. Wherever there is a break up, we can be close to certain that – somewhere along the line – there will have been a doomed attempt by one person, usually over many years, in both calmer and noisier ways, to change another. Someone will have wanted their partner to

be more open or more restrained, more creative or less chaotic, better at disciplining the children or less impatient and authoritarian, and will have said so on the plane to the foreign city, in the kitchen in the early hours or in bed on a scratchy Saturday morning. And – to the despair of the complaining party – these sincere attempts at reform will have ended in considerable bitterness and anger. Someone will have half-listened to the request and replied, ‘The problems aren’t all mine,’ ‘What about you?’, ‘Get off my case’ or ‘Why can’t you love me as I am?!’

More than any other factor, it is closed-off defensiveness that erodes trust and funds lawyers’ offices. There is almost no limit to the problems we can put up with so long as a partner remains somewhat willing to listen to our complaints and promises that they will do their best to change where and as they can. ‘I hear you ...’ must be the single most romantic sentence that could ever pass a partner’s lips. ‘I’m going to try to become someone different’ has a magical capacity to throw the most strident break-up into reverse.

A melancholy aspect of any split is a confrontation with the idea of how difficult it is to change anyone. People do, of course, change, but almost never quite when and as we would want them to. They change when we no longer really care, or when we’re not looking or when we’ve chosen something else to feel desperate about. Or after we have died. This fixity undermines any faith in the power of language, dialogue and logic. We could put together the most impressive and rigorous arguments as to why this or that path would be preferable, we might try humour and charm, a hotel by the seaside or dinner in a revolving rooftop restaurant, but fine prose and delicately couched proposals will be nothing when they come into contact with our brains’ calcified architecture. We might develop an eloquence greater than Tolstoy’s and a way of presenting our case

more seductive than Montaigne’s or Plato’s and yet still be powerless before a lover who looks at us with boredom and puzzlement and responds, ‘Well that’s how you choose to see it; it’s not really how it seems to me.’

These partners are not merely being obtuse. We may simply have the wrong picture of change in mind. We might naively imagine it to be akin to some basic physical movement, like raising a glass of water or crossing a room. We fail to assess the sheer arduousness of psychological evolution. It might be as difficult for someone to start to show more affection when we return home from work or to be a bit less patronising towards us in front of the children as it would be to ask them to learn Mandarin on command or climb a Himalayan peak in their bedroom slippers. ‘Why can’t you just ...’ is an eminently plausible aspiration and, at the same time, a psychologically entirely childlike one too. We forget, in our impatience, that it may have taken twenty-five years to mould a partner into who they are today; their way of speaking and reacting, though it can appear light and optional, may in its essence be as solid as concrete, the fruit of long, complicated and definitive fashioning at the hands of parents and circumstances far outside of our purview.

Every divorce, beneath the surface, will contain a failure of change. We wanted them to evolve and they didn’t. We put it nicely and they didn’t care. We should not be indefinitely surprised at this. We might have judged it an easy business to become a little bit more emotionally open or a touch more confident with strangers, but in the end, such things may be immeasurably harder than to dissolve one’s assets, traumatise one’s offspring, sell a house, buy two more properties, relocate the children to another part of the country, split a pension, sell a business, find another partner and remake one’s life. There might be nothing harder, rarer or more beautiful than to be

able to listen to a complaint from someone who cares deeply for us, to see the pain and longing in their eyes and to do our best to work out, without pride or irritation, how to become someone slightly different in the name of love.

10.

As the inevitability of divorce starts to become apparent, there is likely to arise – in the minds of one or both parties – a thought as hopeful as it is energising and enchanting. Perhaps, despite all the discord and pain, all the late-night discussions and fraught negotiations, the divorce does not – after all – need to be a nightmare. Because they have known each other so long, because there are children, because there is still a residue of great affection and loyalty between the couple, perhaps they will be able to pull off something that ‘the others’ – blunter, more stupid and coarser types – seem never to manage. They will not be like everyone else, they will honour their love *by remaining friends*. They will be kind, they will resist the lure of hatred, they will not squabble over money or bicker over who gets the sofa or the wine. Not for them the typical vulgar acrimony and name-calling of lesser beings. They may have failed at love, but they will not fail at divorce.

But then something surprising is likely to start happening. The couple will realise that their studious attempts at friendliness are proving quietly crushing. Those warm hellos, those joint appearances at dinners, those family weekends away, those polite enquiries about work, all threaten to dishonour the nature of the cataclysm that has undeniably befallen them: two people who, at the start, aimed at something grand, intimate, passionate and authentic have decided to die apart. To be a civilised good friend does not do

justice to what the relationship tried to be. It can be kinder, truer and more real to hurl insults and stick pins in voodoo dolls than to lapse into tepid ‘niceness’, that final insult we reserve for those who don’t properly matter to us.

Furthermore, kindness is in danger of keeping us stuck in an eternal no man’s land. If we do truly get on as well as we are saying, if it’s still possible to chat and go on holiday together as though nothing has happened, why is divorce even on the agenda? Why would we take the trouble to legally untangle ourselves from someone with whom we love to watch television or discuss the progress of the plants in the garden? Then again, as we also recognise, we have been betrayed, we do want to call an end to this fraught and collapsed union, we do need to go through with the break, because the emotional impasse is sizeable and our misery beyond doubt.

Given such dilemmas, it is extremely helpful that lawyers should exist. Lawyers do kindly and civilised divorcing couples an immense service: that of shaking them from their sentimentality and blind generosity and allowing them at last to hate – and therefore, to be free of one another. Without these aggravators of conflict, couples might be forever orbiting one another, never able to let go, drawn back together by the gravitational pull of familiarity and loyalty. But with lawyers to hand, whatever the initial vows, couples are guaranteed to receive a superlative education in how to despise and make a fresh start.

The fees will be so enormous that it won’t be possible to read an invoice without cursing the name of the person who made them necessary. Thanks to lawyers’ guile, we will start to feel passionately attached to issues we had no idea we cared about. It will suddenly seem immensely important that we hold on to the car or don’t have to surrender the photo albums. There will be cathartic struggles over

who gets to spend Christmas where and what should be done with the shares from Mum and Dad. The children's entire inheritance will be spent in one gleefully catastrophic month of arguing over who keeps the television. Lawyers will ensure that their clients will always be appropriately incensed, that goodwill will be constantly ignored and that areas of conflict will be meticulously stoked.

It won't be possible, when the lawyers are done, to stand in the same room as one's ex without shuddering and loathing. This is the person who tried to separate us from our blender or tried to leave us without a beach hut or pension. There truly can be no hope of reconciliation now. We won't be going on holiday with them again; we won't be making a joint appearance at a friend's 40th any time soon. We hate them and wouldn't be sad if they died. Legal processes are to separations what weddings are to marriages: ceremonial, overly expensive rituals that bind us to our wishes and concretise our intentions.

It sounds miserable, but it is not. Lawyers do us an enormous favour. Over the course of a split, they will have cost us everything – but they will have drawn us back from one gigantic troubling possibility: that of becoming fond of one another again ... when perhaps we really shouldn't. They will have helped to convince us of what might otherwise always have been in doubt: that we did a difficult but ultimately very necessary thing.

11.

Those who go through a divorce routinely report that the event was so seismic, a part of them died in the process. They are no longer the people they once were. A new version of themselves – more sober, older, deeper – was forged in the white heat of the separation.

What are the ways in which a divorced person qualifies as a distinctive kind of being? What does divorcing do to our souls?

Grief: First and foremost, divorce makes us sad, probably sadder than we will ever have been. The person we imagined we would be closing our days with has gone, and it feels like a death. Someone who was as much a part of 'reality' as the sun and the trees has forever disappeared, and we lose our balance. If this can happen, the most solid-seeming parts of life can no longer be relied upon. Such thoughts lie heavy on us; it can be hard to get through a light-hearted sentence without being pulled back for another pass across the landscape of misery. We might cry 'for no reason at all' at the many haphazard moments when the contrast between what existed then and what is present now come to the fore. We remember the holidays we took at this time of year; a smell carries us back to a perfume they wore or a dish they cooked; we wonder what they might be doing now, at 5.30 p.m. on a Sunday, when we would so often lie in their arms and look for reassurance for the week ahead.

Suspicion: That our trust in love and human nature should have been so badly violated renders us intensely suspicious of anyone else who crosses our path, promising us a better outcome. Our very attraction to them makes us prone, after we have let ourselves believe in them for a while, to moments of violent rejection: how dare they promise us something that may not work out? What impudence for them to expect us to believe in what they say.

We may not be very easy propositions. We're not doing it on purpose, but we are covered in scars. We leave dates early. We cancel arrangements at the last minute. We end certain promising new relationships very quickly. We both want love and are terrified of it.

We darkly suspect the worst at every moment. When is the axe going to fall? When will we discover another affair? When are they going to start to be stubborn and unreasonable? We lose faith in the entire species: can anyone be trusted? Does affection ever last? Has a sane human ever been born?

We would so like to fall in love again, but we also know that to undergo the pain we went through would be more than we can remotely envisage. We would rather be on our own until eternity than be torn apart again. We are almost pleased when a suitor loses interest or calls for more space. We have loved too much to dare to suffer again.

Friends: We will have profoundly shocked many in our social circle. The divorce won't have felt like our business alone; it will have been experienced as a challenge, a rebuke or a violation to all those couples we got to know together and who helped us to define our sense of normality. Their ongoing togetherness casts doubt on our choice; our break-up asks questions of their marriages. The reasons for the awkwardness are real: both sides are in a struggle to work out what is normal or good. No one who is married is without some thought, however fleeting, that they should be apart. No one who has divorced is without a comparable inkling that they might have stayed together. Both parties are struggling to remember what they want and how they should live.

Growth: Marriages allow us to atrophy in the direction of our partner's strength. They are brilliant at taxes, so we stop filing our returns ourselves. They're great at cooking, so we stop doing much in the kitchen. They're brilliant at making money, so we let our professional skills lapse. We forget the most basic of things. We don't know how

bus passes work any more. We have no idea how to turn up the heating. We'd be far too shy to make a speech at a dinner.

Divorce will let us have none of this. We have to become – with some urgency – competent across all areas. This isn't the time or place for fragility or regression. There are potentially children to look after and a small business to run. So divorce finds us on the floor in the garage changing a tyre, back in the office in a suit doing a presentation or in the kitchen wearing an apron preparing the children's tea – unfamiliar routines that bear the imprint of the departed partner's strengths.

For the first time in a while, we have the sensation of being whole adults once again. We can no longer be baby-fied by 'Mummy' or 'Daddy'. It is terrifying, but energising, too. There is a real sense of achievement when we finally work out how to open the tin of tuna or calculate the month's expenses. If we can succeed at all these until-recently insuperable tasks, then so much more could be possible for us.

Lessons in bravery: We may have spent our life hitherto as people-pleasers. But now, perhaps, we did something a little shocking and, in our small community at least, revolutionary. We dared to trust our instincts. We took our emotions seriously. We put our own happiness first. We learnt to be selfish, at last.

If we have children, we will undoubtedly have set them back in various ways. We'll have made them wonder if they deserve to exist when those who created them can no longer bear each other's presence. But we'll also, along the way, have gifted them something very precious: an example of how good and meek people can, when it becomes necessary, change their lives in the name of greater freedom and possibility. The divorce will have been a lesson in how to not

always submit; we'll have empowered our children to know, thirty years from now, that if they were ever to end up in unjustified misery, they too could gird themselves and leave. Or be left – and survive.

Authenticity: One of the big goals of life – in which divorce can play a central contributing part – is to try to align what is going on for us on the outside with who we are on the inside. The alignment tends to start off very askew. Our school friends don't really understand what we love and we are too scared to tell them. We pick up a job for money without probing too much into how well matched it is with our genuine interests. We might get into a relationship with someone who can't sympathise with our passions.

But if our lives go moderately well, we can hope – with time – to correct at least some of these misalignments. We can learn to tell people what we like and who we are. We can stop smiling when we don't find anything funny. We can start to earn money in ways we respect. We can stop seeing people who our families or universities pushed us together with arbitrarily – and find our own tribe.

However difficult it is, divorce may be – when we look back on it – a critical step in this process of learning to become who we are. We might, when younger, simply not have known how, or have dared, to be with someone who could sympathise with and encourage our most authentic tendencies. We may have to divorce to stop betraying ourselves.

12.

What separates divorcing couples from married couples is ultimately the degree to which they believe in happiness. Despite the gloominess to which they condemn themselves to dwell in for a time, divorcees

are passionate visionaries when it comes to happiness. They truly believe that the purpose of life is to attempt to be happy – rather than to try to maintain their financial security or please the neighbours.

Those who get divorced aren't the most miserably married. They are those with the greatest belief that misery can be overcome. Those who remain in couples may do so not because they love one another particularly, but because they don't much believe that two people can bring each other profound satisfaction. They stay together because they suspect that all the hullabaloo wouldn't in the end do very much for them; because they don't believe in love.

You have to have a lot of faith in humanity to call up the lawyers. You have to be a robust idealist to split apart a gloomy family. Divorce constitutes the ultimate triumph of hope over experience. But, if we were to make no more than a minimal case for the act, we might say that, even if we do not end up much happier afterwards, divorce will at least have helped us to make a change in the sort of topics and issues we will suffer over. We won't have to complain for another thirty-five years about this or that matter that has wracked us incessantly since the wedding. We'll be able to find something else to regret and something fresh to fantasise about. Divorce will give us the immense opportunity to be unhappy in new, and perhaps more interesting and more challenging, ways. And that might – just at a minimum – be all the rationale we ever need to explore the act or to reconcile ourselves with humour and compassion to its initially daunting presence.

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JONATHAN AND HILARY

JONATHAN: I was with Hilary for eleven years. It was a tender and very happy relationship. But I happened to meet Angie – and I simply fell in love.

Breaking up was the hardest thing, it was terrible. I felt so guilty. I was brought up to be honest and reliable, but I betrayed her badly, and that's hard.

I'm really pleased that Hilary moved on and found somebody else and is happy. But what I'm most pleased about is that we remain good friends – I think there's a depth of affection there that will never go. If you love somebody and have a deep bond with them, it's forever.

HILARY: I never stopped loving Jonathan. But I realised eventually that he had fallen in love with someone else, so it was just not going to work with us being together. With time, I realised that even though I missed him, he hadn't died. So, there was no reason why I couldn't carry on seeing him! There are no rules for these things. Every divorce is as unique as the people involved in it!



ZARAH

They split up right after I was born so I can't ever remember them being together. They strongly dislike each other now. The insults don't stop. It's strange that I'm the product of two people who more or less can't be in the same room together. And yet here I am: one whole person out of these two angry halves.

I envy other people. How easy it is for them. They don't have to think 'Oh it's my birthday. Do I want to spend it with this parent or that one and whose moods do I have to manage this time?'

My mum is very talkative. We go deeply into things. My dad, not so much. We go out a lot but we don't talk. Mostly he's very jokey with me. He has lots of nicknames for me, like 'Zazillah' and 'chicken doo doo face'.

They both used to say a lot of awful things about one another. Now, neither says anything, but one argument can send everything into orbit. I hope to do things very differently.