

PROCESS

It was raining as I drove to my lawyer's house to sign my divorce papers. His house is on the corner of Coolidge Avenue, and every time I turn the corner, onto his street, I think the same thought...that I can never remember what the history books say about Calvin Coolidge, what kind of president he was. I do recall that his wife was named Grace. Such a pretty name: Grace Coolidge, all elegant and cool and graceful, qualities that I would not have ascribed to myself during this divorce process. Disheveled is more like it, or maybe dis-levelled. I pulled up to the curb. The purple lilac bushes on the corner were soaking up the rain, reminding me of the lilacs that hold court over the back fences along the alley behind my house. The purpose of alleys is lilacs as far as I am concerned.

Signing my divorce papers... how did I ever get to this point? Where did it all begin? The ending, that is. Was it when I decided, finally, to let go of trying? Was that before the year of marriage counseling? Was there a specific moment when the pronouns changed: when *our* children became *my* children? Was there a specific moment when I lost myself completely? Whose fault was it that I sank into a marital swamp that I could not pull myself out of? Does it need to be anyone's fault? Our lives had become unmanageable, and I had tried to take care of everything I possibly could to prevent the crash. But the crash had happened anyway.

Jess, our oldest child was in his first year of college, far away, and his younger sisters, Lissa, 16, and Lyric 10, were missing him with a grief I hardly knew what to do with. Such timing. I had ached for all of us: my husband, myself, and of course for our children.

I remember thinking that I needed a process that would respect our marriage, and its dissolution. A process that would not be judgmental or adversarial or use words like "broken"--that would honor what we were and would be as a family, with the least emotional fall out to each member. And I found it. Worn out, wasted, and without ego, I had washed up on the shores of the Collaborative Law Institute. And now, these many months later, I was finally signing my divorce papers.

My lawyer just celebrated his 75th birthday. He greeted me at the door in slippers, his white hair flopping over his eyes as he bent to pick up newspapers lodged in the screen door. Taking my shoes off at the door, I noticed the meditation mat in its usual spot, underneath his couch, and books stacked on every surface, as always. What's he reading now? I wondered, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, and an even thicker book, Esalen, caught my eye first. My lawyer works off a stack of fourteen books at a time, he's told me. War and Peace was another one on the stack, I noted, -- the irony not entirely lost on me. I can never see that book without thinking of these words from Tolstoy: *"We imagine that when we are thrown out of our usual ruts, all is lost, but it is only then that what is new and good begins. While there is life there is happiness. There is much much before us. I say this to you."*

My lawyer had set up a table in the living room, with bottled water and a stack of documents. A nearby lamp cast a circle of light on the official looking papers. We sat down and then he got back up to track down a pen. I settled back in my chair. Images of the divorce process flashed through my mind as though from a slide show, or I guess the more present day image would be a power point presentation:

- My husband sitting across from me, in our very first meeting with the lawyers, his head in his hands: "How did we get here?" he asks.
- Pulling into the huge parking lot by that tall building with the remarkably green roof, guided there step by step, as if coming in for a landing, by my husband's lawyer giving me directions via cell phone. The entrance to the offices, the waiting area, open and beautiful, windows everywhere allowing light from all directions, calm, quiet, order, and beauty. Feeling nervous... taking a deep breath, while waiting for our meeting to begin, soaking in the stillness, the light.
- My husband and I in our first "four-way" meeting with our lawyers, he looking drawn and way too thin, not fully understanding, or trusting, that this was not going to be an adversarial process, glancing at his watch, while closing his laptop computer, his body shot with fatigue and agitation: "Are we about done here?" His words staccato. Me trying not to feel that it was my responsibility to calm him, trying, instead, to let my husband's lawyer take care of him, and feeling like he could ... feeling alone and lonely, as usual with this man, my husband, yet feeling strength from the other two men here, the lawyers. I am not even noticing that, I am the lone female in this group. They feel like OUR lawyers. My lawyer speaking quietly to my husband and seeing his face register relief.

- The second meeting, one week after the first, I am speaking as clearly as I can about money, the subject that is so agitating for my husband that it may as well spark a neon light flashing DANGER: DO NOT WALK THIS WAY. How can I navigate here? Me tipping my head sideways trying to make eye contact with him as, again, he snaps his computer shut. He has not made eye contact with me for a long time, a long, long time, years. In subsequent meetings, a financial expert from the collaborative offices joined our meetings, presenting a detailed picture of our finances, present and future, bringing clarity, giving us a way to plan and make decisions.
- Another four-way meeting months into the process. I have been home all week with youngest daughter, Lyric, who has been sick and missing school. I am fatigued beyond measure. When my husband starts to implode, I move into rescue mode, trying to calm him. Or am I trying to calm myself? The meeting has taken every last ounce of my ability to think. I drop my head into my hands. My lawyer and my husband's lawyer guide the conversation through this difficult part... I ask my husband to take the two girls this evening, just for dinner. "Oh!" he says, "You would not believe the day I have had!" I DO believe the day he has had. Does he believe the days I have? Tears sting my throat. My husband's lawyer asks if I am okay. My lawyer suggests a break.
- The following week's meeting. I am crying right there in the hard office chair in the room with the big oval table, water

glasses and papers everywhere. Things disintegrate. I announce that I am giving full custody of our very spirited and very adorable youngest daughter, Lyric, to my husband. Both lawyers suggest a break. We all stand; then my lawyer says he has a joke. He proceeds to tell a joke about two convicts shackled to a high wall along an abyss, ankles, wrists bound to the wall, no hope, no escape and one convict turns to the other and says: "Okay, here's my plan..."

- A month later, sitting in the office of the Collaborative Divorce Law coach, next to my lawyer's office, sun shining through the south-facing windows, learning ways to ground myself in the meetings, ideas about what to do when I feel agitated or caretaking of my husband, how to turn things over to my lawyer when I am flooded with feelings, or unable to think, getting a sense of who else I am, besides a divorcing person.

My lawyer returned to the living room, sat back down and handed me a pen, a serious looking pen very fitting for the occasion. I sifted through the papers and then, in spite of my best intentions, signed in the wrong place. Calmly, he got up again to make more copies. I shifted sideways in my chair, heard the hum of the refrigerator kick in and the rain's steady patter against the windows. I was saving my soul with the dissolution of my marriage. I was restoring sanity to my home and my life and the lives of my children. Finding words to explain that to three children of varying needs and developmental stages had challenged me: "I don't speak divorce very well," I wanted to tell them.

I remember my husband and I sitting with our youngest child,

Lyric, on her bed, her so blond hair wisping over her cheeks, explaining that Daddy would have a different house now, and that we, she and her sister, rather, and her brother when he was home, would go back and forth between the houses, but that we are still and always will be a family. My husband and I had exchanged glances above her head as she said brightly: "Well, at least you're not getting a divorce or anything!"

And I remember that it was hard for me to watch our three children walk down the hall to the child specialist's office; I had wondered what was on their minds and if they would say what was on their minds to this person. Lyric had bounded out of the session ahead of her siblings to tell me that Lissa had cried in the meeting, which sparked an image of Lissa insisting on leaving the house one cold midnight, telling me she couldn't stay, that a friend's mother was picking her up, making me realize that the stress of the marriage was felt by the kids... certainly by Lissa.

And then how helpful it was really, my husband and I sitting in a meeting with the child specialist, learning what the kids wanted us to know, where they feel safe, who they worry about, what was important to them as their parents separated.

The kids were my first concern, of course, but then, the roof fell in... the real roof, on what was now my house. I had been warned about house maintenance expenses, and that the house was too expensive for me to support, and that the best time for me to sell was two years ago. But then sometimes all three kids were home, the college ones and the youngest, and that meant the house was full right up to that roof. Besides, I was wedded to the house. That was the relationship that offered me solace, comfort, containment, safety. And didn't every house require maintenance? I had said,

-- even houses that were not 80 years old? The house seemed to contain all that I needed, as had my marriage, but then both had so much brokenness that needed so much attending to, and my husband had not seemed to be available to attend to either, the marriage or the house..

The roofers trooped in, laid a complicated architecture of scaffolding over the red clay tile perimeter of the roof and replaced the flat roof. The roof had collapsed through the attic tearing down the study ceiling beneath, bringing clouds of insulation and dust with it. The sheet rock people put a huge piece of sheetrock over the gaping hole in the study ceiling and said they would be back. That's what they all say. We know this. The people who specialize in cleaning Oriental rugs said they had to charge extra to get all the attic insulation out of my Grandmother's ancient Caucasian rug which had been on the floor directly under the ceiling collapse. The rug expert told me the rug was very old and very valuable and very frail and should be displayed on a wall and never, ever walked on. I did not tell him that I had once just washed that rug in the washing machine.

During all of that, the roofers noticed the chimney was crumbling. That in fact the entire chimney needed rebuilding, the estimate totalling more than the entire roof replacement. It seemed whenever I asked for an estimate, for whatever it was, I always got surprised, and not in a good way.

I am so proud of myself for getting divorced! If my ex-husband or his family or my kids ever heard that it might sound... I'm not even sure how it might sound to them, really... It feels right, though, to say it. I feel like I have just stepped into my truth. The roof? The chimney? I would be alone, anyway, to deal with all of that. I was on my own in that marriage. And it is just so much more honest to be legally on my own, to name it, live it, right out here,

with the sun shining all over that brand new roof, and my Grandmother's rug that is so valuable and so worn that it should be displayed on a wall, right beneath my bare feet.

The Collaborative Divorce process saw us through this family reformulation in a way that left each and every one of intact and our relationships intact as well. Another slide: my husband and I talking on the phone, just last week, laughing, together, about the fact that Lyric had ordered a turtle on line... "Only Lyric," we both said.

So as I sat there in my lawyer's living room, that rainy day, signing the papers, I took in a deep breath. I put the cap back on the pen, and handed it to my lawyer. He told me he had enjoyed working with me and I told him I had always appreciated his presence beside me. All of this is true, but our words didn't seem enough as we looked at one another, so I leaned over and hugged him and he hugged me right back. Then I stepped out into that merciful precipitation which spattered all over the folder of divorce papers. And I remembered again Tolstoy's words:

We imagine that when we are thrown out of our usual ruts, all is lost, but it is only then that what is new and good begins. While there is life there is happiness. There is much much before us. I say this to you.