

INTRODUCTION

NOT EVERY writer finds inspiration for a new book in a dentist's office on a sweltering summer day. I was a nervous wreck waiting for what I knew would be the bad news that I needed an implant, and so I thought I'd divert myself by reading magazines. There wasn't much on the table and most of it—about hot rods, golf, raising babies—was old and tattered, but at the bottom of the pile I spied what I thought was the best of a bad lot, the magazine for oldsters sponsored by AARP (American Association of Retired Persons).

The cover was like all its others, featuring a photo of a woman who didn't look old enough to be on it (Cybill Shepherd this time), but it was the blurb for one of the articles that caught my attention: "The New Divorce: Why More Women Than Ever Are Calling It Quits (and Why Men Don't See It Coming)."¹ This was certainly intriguing, because my own divorce happened after forty-three years of marriage, and in the years since I had been told countless stories (whether I wanted to hear them or not) by men and women who had been married a very long time but who had, for whatever the reason, decided to live the next stage of their lives as a single.

Some gave the usual reasons: "He traded me in for a trophy wife younger than our daughter" or "We had nothing in common anymore" or "I couldn't take his [fill in the blank—gambling, drinking, womanizing]." But I also heard a lot of stories from men and women who I thought lived comfortable, contented lives in financially secure marriages and who said that they didn't care what the future might hold, that they divorced because they could not go on living the same old life in the same old rut

xii INTRODUCTION

with the same old boring person. I heard a lot of remarks that all came down to one word: freedom. Women—especially those women who had jobs outside the home—were tired of taking care of husband, house, and children. Men who divorced told me they, too, were tired of the same old daily grind of working to support wives who did not “appreciate” them and children who did not “respect” them. Another remark I heard often from both was “It’s my time and if I don’t take it now, I never will.”

So I was naturally intrigued when I saw that the magazine’s story was about a survey that AARP had commissioned of 1,147 people aged forty to seventy-nine, all of whom divorced between their forties and sixties. The reporter called it “groundbreaking” because it put the lie to the usual assumptions, that men leave and women seldom find love and/or companionship ever again. The study found that women initiated the divorce more often than men, and if they wanted new love or companionship, they were usually able, eventually, to find it.

The article corresponded in large part to the stories I had been hearing from friends, associates in publishing and academe, and acquaintances everywhere from Paris to Zurich to Sydney, where the research for my biographies took me. People rushed to tell me their stories while I kept mostly silent, probably because I am a curious anomaly: a biographer who writes the intimate details of other people’s lives and tells few of her own. To cover my reticence, I joked, asking if there was something in the drinking water that was making late divorce the worldwide phenomenon it seemed to be.

Some of the stories I heard fell into the same patterns as those in the AARP survey, but most had original and interesting twists. I knew several couples in their eighties who divorced after sixty years of marriage. I knew women who celebrated their fifty-year golden anniversaries by announcing that they would be divorcing within the coming year. One woman had been married for fifty-three years, had never worked outside her home, had no clear idea of how she would survive financially, and had just undergone an organ transplant. She told me, “I don’t know how many years I have left, I just know I don’t want to live them with him!” Her ex-husband said he “didn’t know what hit him” when she walked out because he always thought “everything was just fine. We never fought, we never raised our voices.” And I knew high-level businessmen approaching retirement who told me they were “frightened” into divorcing because, even though their wives fulfilled every lifestyle-supporting role they

needed, from giving exquisite dinner parties to entertaining clients to raising the children alone so they could concentrate on work, there was no intimacy between them in their showcase “McMansion” homes. One of these men said he “could not stand the loneliness any longer,” especially now that he and his wife would be together “24/7.”

I thought about these stories in the dentist’s office. Yes, I did need an implant, and we did set up the necessary appointments, but the dentist was puzzled that I seemed more interested in telling him I needed to filch his AARP magazine and beat a hasty exit than in his description of the dire procedures that awaited me. All I could think of was how fast could I get out of his chair and onto the phone with my agent in New York. I had barely begun to explore with her the possibility of turning the intriguing stories I had been hearing into a book when she burst in excitedly to tell me about the “late divorces” that were almost an epidemic among the “chattering classes,” as the publishing and writing communities are called. We talked about the writer whose wife of thirty-seven years grew tired of washing his socks—yes, washing his socks, not typing his pages—and left him to fend for himself in a Brooklyn loft while she went to Cape Cod “to find herself” and write her own book, “a self-help for other women who call it quits.” There was the very rich “lady poet” (she styled herself that way) whose husband of twenty-nine years (and a figure of respect in his own right but in a different line of work) got tired of holding her two tiny dogs at readings in obscure storefront locations, especially after they became old and incontinent. He left her to go and live in a studio apartment in a poorer part of Manhattan, where he watched television sports and drank beer from the bottle in solitary splendor at the end of his busy workday.

That evening, the agent who represents me in Europe phoned and in the course of conversation I told her about this book about late-life divorce I intended to write. She called the phenomenon “the European epidemic” and surprised me by saying that it was rampant in France and Germany. Germany, perhaps, I replied, but France? Didn’t husbands and wives just go their separate ways, as all the movies and books portrayed French marriage, and didn’t they stay married just to keep the money in the family? No longer, the agent said. European divorce statistics are fast catching up to those in the rest of the world. Even China was jumping on the bandwagon.

In the spring and summer of 2005 I had a chance to see for myself

xiv INTRODUCTION

how common late-life divorce was becoming when I went to Australia and New Zealand to lecture, participate in writers' festivals, and be a writer-in-residence at a Sydney university. People everywhere asked what my new book would be, and when I told them, so many came forward to tell me their stories that I realized it was truly a worldwide phenomenon.

But how, I wondered, would I tell these many different stories? As I am neither a sociologist nor a cultural anthropologist, I knew from the beginning that the book would not be a statistical survey or a scientific treatise. What I thought the book needed to be, and what I wanted it to be, and what it has become, is a collection of stories told to me by husbands and wives who chose to end long marriages, as well as the stories of adult children of late-life divorce, who told me how their parents' breakups affected them. My main objective was to let real people talk so that others might find in their stories something helpful—utility (guidance on how to divorce if they believed they had no other option), information (about the financial reality they would have to face after divorce, for example), or comfort (ways to live a satisfying life as a single after many years of being part of a couple).

I set out to collect as many stories as people wanted to tell me and to let them fall naturally into whatever categories or patterns they assumed. The AARP survey had 1,147 respondents, and initially I was hoping to amass about one tenth that number, or approximately 150 case histories. I began to interview in October 2004, and to my amazement, by the time I finished writing in early 2006, I had interviewed 126 men, 184 women, and 84 adult children. I continued to interview people until the writing was finished, for I learned something new with every interview and I wanted to incorporate everything I thought would be useful, helpful, and informative for those already divorced or for those contemplating it.

I found my subjects by word of mouth, as people learned that I was writing this book and one person told another, who had a friend, who told another friend, and so on. When I tried to describe my research methods, my sociologist friends told me I was using the well-respected technique of "snowball sampling," in which information accretes to a point where it can be interpreted to give legitimate findings. Almost two thirds of my interviewees found *me* and volunteered to talk. In general, women were more open and eager, whereas men were not only hesitant about being interviewed, they were also more guarded and circumspect about what they

wanted to tell me. Whenever possible, I tried to interview both parties to the divorce, but frequently—with about a third of the ex-couples—one or the other was so angry and bitter that he or she would threaten me with the dire things that would happen if I dared to contact the ex-spouse. I honored the request and did not initiate contact, but if the ex got in touch with me, then I conducted an interview. All the while I was interviewing, I kept remembering what a man in Switzerland told me when his wife ended their thirty-seven-year marriage: “There are five truths in my divorce: mine, my wife’s, and our three children’s.” That was why I thought it was so important to get all sides of the story whenever I could, and why I also interviewed the adult children of divorced parents. It was interesting to me to explore just how the parental divorce affected the adult children’s relationships and their attitudes toward marriage.

My respondents include straight, gay, and lesbian couples. They came from many social classes, from (to use some simplistic terms here) “high society,” business elites (CEOs), and high-level politicians, to the stable managerial and working classes, to those I call the working poor, who hold service jobs or irregular employment. I also talked to divorce lawyers, mediators, and judges who specialize in what is euphemistically known as “family law.” To my regret, my study population is mostly white: I had too few Hispanic and African and Asian American respondents to relate their stories as being representative of a larger group.

Most of my interviews were conducted by telephone because my respondents lived throughout the world and the time and money needed for travel precluded face-to-face conversations. Initially I was disappointed that I would not have in-person interviews with everyone, but overall, when I compared personal interviews with those on the telephone, I found that the phone provided exactly the right degree of separation and the perfect buffer between people who were often hurt, angry, or confused and the stranger at the other end to whom they were confiding such intimate details of their lives.

I asked all the respondents the usual questions about how long the marriage had lasted and what role each partner played within it. Then I let them tell me how and why they came to believe divorce was their only option. I also asked about life after divorce and whether or not it had turned out to be what they hoped for. In general, my findings supported the AARP survey in that the greater percentage of divorces among the long-

xvi INTRODUCTION

married are initiated by women. Most of them stressed the positive and told me they were “pleased,” “satisfied,” or “downright happy” with their lives. The men, many of whom called themselves “the dumped,” “the duped,” or “the abandoned,” are for the most part learning “to adjust,” “to accommodate,” “to get along.”

One man who coped better than most is the eighty-three-year-old whose wife of fifty-three years tossed him out. Calling her the “dumper” and himself the “dumpee,” he decided that, having had a woman look after him all his life, he needed to find a new one. He remembered how the cruises he had taken as a married man were filled with single women, all seemingly on the lookout for a new man. It took three cruises, all of which “exhausted” him (he said euphemistically), until he found “a good-looking sixty-year-old who doesn’t mind doing my laundry.” His ex-wife says she is happy for him, as she fills her days with part-time volunteer work, plays bridge with friends, and dances in the evening with men her age whom she meets in church groups and at senior centers. What she likes best about her single life is that she has male companionship when she wants it but at the end of the evening she goes home to her own bed and they depart for theirs. “I’ll never pick up a man’s socks again,” she vows.

Divorce is different for the rich and famous. Here I found the largest categories of men who initiated divorce and women who are sad and sometimes angry because their husbands have left them for “trophy wives.” A Jungian analyst told me she describes these men as afflicted with “CEO-itis.” All their lives they have been taken care of by wives, secretaries, and various assistants who fulfill their every need and desire. They are imbued with a sense of entitlement, that they can have and should be given everything they want and as soon as they want it. An English man described himself as a “serial marryer,” who likes his wives in their twenties and wants to dump them as soon as they reach thirty because “they get broody and want babies.” That, he said, would interrupt their concentration on him. Another told me to think of a man like himself (chief financial officer of an international corporation) in a way that his several wives had never accepted, as a “prize stud bull.” It was his “obligation to service as many cows” as he could.

Throughout the book, I have used two different forms to tell the stories. One is the composite, in which I create a fictional person to stand for the cluster of persons whose stories are so similar that one can almost

stand for them all. The second is the case study, where one couple's experience either provides a blueprint for what causes a marriage to end or else is so unusual that it needs to be told separately. Because I promised everyone who talked to me confidentiality, I have disguised their identities by changing their names and sometimes their professions and places of residence. All the information contained in this book is the truth as they told it to me, but I have created fictional personae to protect their privacy.

I don't know how many answers I've provided to the question of why there is so much late divorce throughout the world, but I have certainly raised a lot of questions. There are the obvious reasons, such as the fact that people are living longer and healthier lives and many have more disposable income. It is only natural that they change and even more natural that they don't always change at the same time as their spouse: he may be ready for retirement and she may be deeply involved with a career or hobby; she may want to move to a retirement community and he might not want to leave the old neighborhood. One or the other becomes bored or disenchanted with the old, wrinkled person sitting across the dinner table and might want someone new and exciting.

Margaret Mead thought every woman needs three husbands: one for youthful sex, one for security as she raises her children, and one for the joyful companionship of old age. Perhaps this is what people want today and why so much divorce is happening. The feminist revolution that started in the 1970s got women out of the kitchen and into the workforce, where they learned to be self-sufficient and discovered that they liked it. There are still many women today who are financially dependent on the man they married a long time ago, but it is surprising how many of them are willing to risk the uncertainty of life on their own just to get away from the "control" (another big word often cited in divorces) their husbands exerted.

I use the phrase "social earthquake" to describe what is happening today. It was coined by the revered American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton to describe a sensational adultery scandal of her time that led to a late-nineteenth-century divorce, and it remains resonant here in the twenty-first. Our contemporaries have tried to name the phenomenon; British writer Margaret Drabble deems life after divorce "the Third Age." Drabble's heroine thinks, in the novel *The Seven Sisters*, "Our dependents have died or matured. For good or ill, we are free."

xviii INTRODUCTION

A woman in New Zealand put it more bluntly when she told a newspaper interviewer that she looked at her husband one day after her children had left home and thought, “I don’t want to be here, I don’t need you, and I really don’t like you.”

Could that be the simplest and most direct answer to all the questions about late-life divorce? We need to find out, and I hope this book will be a good way to get the dialogue going.