

CHAPTER ONE

THE LOVE

REFLECTION: POORLY MARRIED

The waiting room at our therapist's office was weirdly familiar. Eight years earlier, David and I held our wedding rehearsal dinner in the identical building next door. Built in the early 1900s at Fort Missoula, Officers Row is a beautiful centerpiece of large, white, two-story homes with grand front porches, all circling the open grassy commons. The place where we started our marriage would now become the place we would end our marriage.

I held my breath as I pushed open the building's oversized solid wood door, dreading what was yet to come. The low September sun cut through the tall double-pane windows, illuminating the dust in the air, dancing its way through the waiting room. The soft rounded divots in the parquet floor reminded me that I wasn't the first wounded person to walk down this hallway. I exhaled.

David was already seated in a chair in the waiting room. Of course he was early—he's always early. I'm always running late, making everyone around me absolutely crazy, stressed, and irritated. We've known each other for more than two decades—the same habits still persist; this is who we are.

When our therapist ushered us in, I settled on the right side of the small grey sofa as David took the wingback chair to my right. We were side by side, but not together. Esther seated herself in her usual rocking chair, which appeared to have been pulled right out of a hobbit's house. An intricate weave of willow branches created a throne of wisdom in which she sat. Her wisp of

gray hair was always swept up into a perfectly symmetrical bun, which sat perfectly on top of her head.

She had a Mary Poppins mystique around town. She seems like a nice old lady who sits in a rocking chair and nods her head. But watch out, she is going to shake you up—and do it with a teaspoon of sugar. You won't know what hit you. Yes, that's pretty much what happened. She was finally the therapist who wouldn't just ask us, "How do you feel about that?" She really challenged us to take a good look at our marriage and get to some hard truths. She didn't let us get away with truthiness.

"So," she began, her voice steady and kind as we settled into our seventh month with her, "did you both have a chance to complete the worksheet assignment from last session?"

We both nodded.

"Great," she said. "Who would like to start?"

I looked over at David, but he just stared straight ahead at Esther.

"Um, I'll go first," I began. "I've been working through a lot of this past trauma stuff with my own therapist for a couple of decades. I think I can approach it with an open mind and open heart."

Esther nodded. I spoke aloud, reviewing my worksheet, sharing personal observations and past stories about my unhealthy patterns and how they tie into my trauma experiences and triggers. I felt safe in the space we created and was pining for a shared breakthrough, a moment of new discovery, a thread that could sew us back together.

"David?" Esther prompted. "What did you discover as you did the assignment?"

David shifted his position, crossing his arms. "I don't feel comfortable discussing it here."

My eyebrows lifted and my face most certainly had the are-you-kidding-me expression.

His jaw hardened and he began to spin his wedding ring, a telltale sign that something difficult was about to go down. "I don't need you to tell me about me," he snapped. "And I certainly don't need to lay it all out here. I don't feel safe doing any of this with her in the room," gesturing my way. It's always interesting when one person starts to refer to the other person as if they aren't present in the conversation, as if they don't deserve to be spoken to directly.

"Not with me in the room?" I asked, "Isn't that the point?"

"We all know where this is headed," he said firmly. I could figuratively see the dead end. "This isn't helpful. None of this is helpful." And he began to stuff his assignment back into his shoulder bag as he prepared to leave.

Esther quietly watched our exchange, rocking slowly, hands held in her lap. She didn't jump in to referee; she simply let us duke it out for a bit until we both fell silent.

"Well, how would you like to proceed?" she said simply. Which is just about the dirtiest trick in the therapist playbook.

"What do you mean?" I asked, panic rising in my chest.

At our very first couples' session, she asked us a very direct question: "Why are we here, and when will we know we are done?"

I honestly don't remember what David's response was seven months ago, or if he even had one. I suspect I jumped in first, "We are here to decide if we are staying married or getting divorced. We will be done when we know the answer to that question. Either way, we'll have a forever relationship, so we need to protect the future of our family."

A few months into our time with Esther, she made a stark observation about us: "It seems the two of you are poorly married," her words carried no judgment, just a clinical observation. I had never heard that phrase before, poorly married, but it immediately rang true. In some weird way, it felt like a diagnosis. "Yes that's it, we have Poorly Married Syndrome. There is a cure, it's called divorce." It was as if she'd handed us a permission slip to be more logical and less emotional about the whole situation. This wasn't about good people or bad people, this was about are we good or bad together?

It felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. David turned his head and stared out the window. I looked at Esther, waiting for her to say more, to offer some final piece of wisdom or hope. But she simply sat there ... rocking, calm, present.

"So, that's it?" I finally asked. "We're ... done?"

"That's for you to decide," she replied. "But I can't help you further if you don't feel safe enough to engage in the process. I think my work here is done."

She actually said it: "My work here is done." And I don't resent her for it. I think it's a wise decision for therapists to break up with clients that cannot, or will not, make progress. It's an ethical decision and kind to be clear with the couple—to release them. She stated her work was done, but now what were we going to do about it?

David said nothing as we walked out, down the creaking wooden steps of the building's stately porch and into the parking lot. He walked to his car, as I walked to mine. Silence. I put my hand on the steering wheel and was blinded by the pain of looking at my wedding ring. I removed it, placed it in the little coin holder between the car's front seats, and burst into tears.

A NEW NARRATIVE

Divorce is not a weapon; it is a tool. A tool for transformation. A tool to help reconstruct a family that lives in one home, into a family that lives in two homes. Still they're a family, forever.

As I faced the looming truth that my marriage was coming to an end, the last thing I wanted was to become another statistic in America's \$13.1 billion divorce industry, where legal professionals profit from conflict and families are treated as collateral damage.¹ Yet everywhere I looked, the message was clear: I was doomed to either stay miserable in my marriage or traumatize my family through divorce.

Why take a bad marriage, spending thousands of dollars, and sometimes years, battling it out in court only to make it all worse? It's senseless. If you simply want it to worsen, stay in your bad marriage. If you want it to get really bad, hire a couple of lawyers who are financially incentivized by ongoing conflict, and let them hijack your family and drain your kids' college funds. Not to mention the long-term damage and trauma that is left in the wake of parents who once shared a love story and still have to find a peaceful way to co-parent. What a terrible idea!

The popular narrative tells us divorce equals failure—that it negates the love that was shared and destroys the family unit forever. But what if we're looking at it all wrong? What if ending a relationship doesn't have to mean ending the family? What if divorce, handled thoughtfully, could improve family dynamics? Isn't that the point of divorce, to make things better?

¹ Diment, Dmitry. (2025). Family Law & Divorce Lawyers in the US—market research report (2015–2030). Ibisworld (June). https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/industry/family-law-divorce-lawyers/4814/?utm_source (Accessed November 24, 2025).

LOOKING FOR A SIGN

At home, my marriage had me tied up in knots of confusion and conflict. We were stuck. I was stuck. There was so much I loved about our family and the life we created, but David and I had numerous incompatibilities, which created constant conflict in our home. I wrestled with what to do, my mental health suffered, and my grace as a parent was evaporating. Desperate for clarity, I asked the universe for a sign—any sign—telling me to stay or go.

Did I really want to blow up my family's life, rupture the very foundation of the commitment we'd built over the years, just for what? A temporary escape from my deep unhappiness? The possibility of meeting someone better? A life filled with greater ease and joy?

I couldn't see past the options in front of me: a contentious and frustrating marriage, or a divorce pitting my husband and me against each other with our beloved children caught in the middle. I didn't want to be destroyed by my creeping depression, but I wasn't sure I could live with myself if I broke up our family.

My husband was a kind man and a good father. We made a good parental team. Maybe our struggles were normal married struggles, and they would get better with time when the kids were older and required less from us. *Just give it time*, I told myself.

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

I love Love. Most people do. Many watch rom-coms, download dating apps, and, when they find a partner, they relish the experience of being part of a couple and the wonder that is their partner. And why wouldn't they? Love is lovely.

Despite my desire for love, I had all but given up on finding “the one” before I met my husband. At 31, I was O-V-E-R the dating scene: the disappointing options, my own bad choices, the single life, and the invisible label deeming me “too old” for the dating market. I wanted consistency. I wanted love. I wanted a family.

There were partners throughout my twenties, but none of them were quite right, and many were unhealthy relationships. I had finally found a great therapist to help me reflect and work through some bad habits of my dating life. However, the right partner for me was still elusive at best.

So, I settled into the single-woman storyline instead. I had a decent job and some career momentum. I bought my first house, a tiny 1940s home in my hometown. When my name appeared in the phone book next to my new landline number, I was so thrilled that I ripped out the page and hung it on my fridge. My name, in the phone book! Surely, this was proof that I was finally a grown-up. Deep down, however, I wanted that holy grail of secure adult love: I wanted a marriage partner.

Per our Wednesday ritual, I sat in the window seat at our usual bistro with my usual group of girlfriends. It was a crisp bluebird day in October. Out of nowhere, Rhonda began needling me about my solo relationship status.

“McNenny, why are you still single?” Rhonda asked, playfully accusatory, as if I was boycotting the possibility of being swept off my feet. “I know someone who’s interested in you.”

“Oh really?” I replied, trying to play it cool. “Tell me more.”

“Well, he’s a musician ...” she said, quickly adding, “but he’s got a real job, with health benefits!”

“Well, that’s a good start,” I laughed.

“He’s a nice guy,” she continued, “emotionally mature, talented, active, respected in the community.” She punctuated this statement by spearing a few lettuce leaves. “And you already know each other,” she added with a wink.

“Huh,” I mused. “Doesn’t sound like anyone I know. If I did, I’d probably be dating him already.” I took a sip of my drink, careful not to get my hopes up in front of my friends and dreading the possibility of another heartbreak.

“His name is David,” she said. She offered up his last name too, and I immediately got butterflies. “He remembers you too, and was wondering if you were single.”

I did know this musician with a real job. It had been a few summers since I had interacted with him, which I remembered being pleasant enough. But there were no sparks of romance then, and I was dating someone else at the time. Now, there was a plot twist: we were both single at the same time. I was so flattered that he remembered me. He was a man-about-town and a great catch.

“So, can I give him your number?” Rhonda asked, already tapping away on her phone.

“I don’t think you need to go that far. If we’re supposed to meet and connect, fate will bring us together.”

“Fate, shmate! I think you would make a great couple, and I should give him your number.” Rhonda proclaimed.

“Whatever you say,” I waved a hand at her comment. “We both know you’re going to do whatever you want anyway.” And she did.

Before I’d emptied the last moving box into my new home, my phone rang. I shimmied my way through misplaced furniture and located my landline phone tucked in the corner of the living room behind an overflowing laundry basket and a plant that needed hospice care. I grabbed the phone’s yellow handle and tried to untwist its cord as I answered.

“Hello?”

“Oh, hi Karen, it’s David. Rhonda gave me your number.”

Over the course of a couple of weeks, we shared late night phone calls that continued long past our bedtime. He was easy to talk to, interesting, and interested in me. It quickly became clear we were both smitten and wanted to meet up. I didn’t want to commit to an actual date, however,

those stakes seemed too high for my tender heart. I was so scared of getting my hopes up and having them dashed, again. So, I invited him to join me at a casual dance performance at the university.

“That sounds great. When shall I pick you up?” David enquired.

“I will be coming from a work gig out of town, so I will just meet you there.” This was the perfect solution to my preferred transportation strategy—separate—in case I needed to make a swift escape after the show.

We met in the window-filled lobby of the theater. He was taller than I had remembered at 6'2". We weren't strangers, but we weren't friends, either. Friendly, yes. After negotiating the odd moment of indecision—do we wave, shake hands, hug (we hugged, not too awkward)—we made our way into the performance space. As the concert progressed, he sidled up closer to me until our biceps gently made contact, sending a welcome warmth and excitement through my body.

Stay cool Karen. Remember what your therapist said, go slow. Don't jump into intimacy. Build a friendship. Do your homework. Get to know each other. Don't write the story before you know the story. Don't project your every wish and dream onto this poor innocent bystander. Definitely too soon to start thinking about baby names.

That subtle connection between our biceps also transmitted a message to the side of our knees, which relaxed just enough to lean into a suspended dance of support as we sat closer and closer to each other. It was nice. After the concert, David invited me out for a nightcap. We agreed to go sit by the fire at the cozy lounge down the street.

“Great, I'll meet you there,” I said, holding my boundary of independence.

“We can go together. I have room in my car,” he persisted. No one wants to feel rejected on the first date, especially me. In solidarity, I relinquished my staunch independence for a hot minute and let him wiggle his way into my heart, as I wiggled into the front seat of his car.

We sat across from each other at a table for two, close to the fire, excited to be connecting, laughing, and telling stories. Basically, getting swept off

our feet. It felt easy and exciting. All the love drugs started to work their blinding biological magic.

After a couple of hours of rich and interesting conversation, we started to gather our coats. In one long breath of courage I blurted out, “I really like you, and I want you to know I have the urge to kiss you, but I am not going to kiss you goodnight because my therapist advised that I take things slow; and I wanted you to know, so you don’t feel rejected because I do like you and I would like to see you again.”

“Ha, that’s very thoughtful. I would like to kiss you, too, Karen. But no rush. I totally respect that boundary and I am a patient man.” Damn, he’s such a heart-wiggler.

The next morning, I awoke with a glow of hope, comforted by the lace of fall frost knitting together a world that felt so frayed just 24 hours ago. The yellow phone rings, jolting me and the hospice plant back into the moment.

“Good morning.” His voice is rich with round tones, and it comforts me. “How did you sleep?”

“Oh hi. Sleep was a little distracted. But in a good way.” Cheeks stretched across my face in full smile mode, still a little fatigued from all the smiling I had done the night before.

“Yeah, me too. It was nice to reconnect and catch up. Hey, I don’t want to slow down your day; I know you have a lot of unpacking you need to do. I just wanted to say thanks for a really great night and that I left a little something outside your front door. Hope you don’t mind; I couldn’t help myself.”

As I opened the front door, a small paper bag tipped over onto the threshold and rested on my big toe. I knew, even before I picked it up, what he had been doing after we said goodnight. As I grabbed the bag, the thin square shape left no question in my mind: I had just received a mix tape (well the modern version, a CD). But the concept and commitment of a curated mix of music, chosen especially for one person, stands the test of time and change in technology. This was a big deal and a pure expression of his love.

A MIX TAPE

A Mix for Karen from David 11/24/02:

1. Let Us Go Laughing—Bruce Cockburn
2. Just Keep Me Moving—k.d. Lang
3. Big Sky Country—Chris Whitley
4. These Days in an Open Book—Nancy Griffith
5. Diggin Me—Martin Sexton
6. Good Thing—Patty Larkin
7. Urge For Going—Joni Mitchell
8. Reasons Why—Nickel Creek
9. Transcendent Blues—Steve Earle
10. Every Little Thing (He) Does Is Magic—Shawn Colvin
11. Follow Through—David Hedges
12. Drawn to the River—Sarah McLachlan
13. Stay—Alison Krauss
14. The Trumpet Vine—Kate Wolf
15. Light House—James Taylor
16. Morning Side—John Gorka

We continued our courtship with long walks and indulged in even longer conversations. We enjoyed the pulsating social scene that is born into a mountain town with too many extroverts living in the same valley. We strolled through First Friday Gallery Nights, rubbing elbows with the local who's who and making a "soft announcement" about our budding romance. Admittedly, we both enjoyed seeing everyone, and being seen by everyone.

Oh, now tell me, how did you two meet?

I didn't realize you knew each other.

Oh wow—it's about time you two met.

This totally makes sense, the two of you.

All the things two smitten, middle-aged, slightly eager, totally romanced, hijacked adults want to hear from their community. *Yes, go forth and procreate. You have the perceived approval and support of your community* (which evidently mattered to us). In a series of grown-up slumber parties, we began to enjoy my little home together. We didn't spend any time at his apartment, which gave me pause. But he was also in the middle of a move, so I dismissed my uneasiness as circumstantial.

When I finally had the courage to bring up the subject, I was met with levity. "If you came to my apartment right now, you would probably stop dating me." We both laughed it off, and I continued to see only what I wanted to see.

We carried on with the intoxicating experience of falling in love. Here was a handsome, artistic, loving man who also wanted the same joy-filled marriage I did, complete with children. We aligned with the future goals that mattered—marriage, kids, community—and we both had steady work to support those goals. He was nine years older than me, never married, and just as eager to exit the dating market as I was. The surge of oxytocin in my brain was matched only by the dancing eggs in my ovaries. We were both so enamored with each other, the only logical next step, after dating for five months, was to get engaged.

We were married four months later, in the same location as our first date—the theater.

We created a meaningful and beautiful wedding day for ourselves and our community. Our guests might have paused to wonder, "Are we going to a musical production or a wedding ceremony?" There was a set designer, a lighting designer, and a musical director. The ceremony included a West African drum procession, jazz trio, string quartet, 16-voice choir, 18-piece big band, and an accordion.

After the ceremony was complete, the guests followed the West African drum procession out of the theater, through the lobby, and out onto the theater's main veranda where a vintage BMW R90/6 was sitting. One of

David's treasures. We bounded out of the atrium doors into a love bath of friends and family. After our getaway on the motorcycle, we met all of our guests downtown in the ballroom of the historic Florence Hotel, complete with a big band to dance the night away. Our matchmaker, Rhonda, sang *At Last*, made famous by Etta James, for our first dance.

LOFTY EXPECTATIONS

I had married the man of my dreams, nine months after our first blind date; it might have been my first mistake. Additionally, it has nothing to do with who David is or isn't. It's the trap we all fall into, when we place our expectations on others. It often leads to disappointment and resentment. How can I ever be angry with David for being exactly who he is? It isn't a question of good vs. bad. It's a question of compatibility.

Dreams aren't based in reality, and it's hard to get a grasp on reality in just nine months. In retrospect, I feel like I had bought the "house" without doing the home inspection: *the curb appeal is so charming, good bones, lots of potential. Who doesn't love a fixer-upper?* We appeared to be a compatible couple, even to ourselves, but not in the ways that would matter long term.

We took a month-long honeymoon through Tahiti, New Zealand, and Mexico, and returned home to start a family. Anya was born 16 months after our wedding day. With the arrival of our daughter, we fell in love all over again: with each other and with the beautiful, tiny human we had created together. It was glorious. Eighteen months later, our son Dwyer was born—another perfect little addition to our perfect little family. We went from a blind date to family of four in 2.5 years. However, it didn't take long before we began to experience the dissonance between our public-facing selves as a couple about town, and our private life as co-parents, lovers, and roommates. They were not in the same world.

The voice of my therapist quietly echoed in the distance: *Go slow, Karen. Don't start with intimacy. Build a friendship. Do your homework. Get to know each other.*

When I was pregnant with Anya, David and I started cycling through marriage counselors. The incompatibilities that I had chosen to ignore or not fully examine during our courtship, were now coming into full view. Our fraught conversations around money, taxes, the state of the garage, how to spend our free time, household chores, and date night (with or without sex), simply could not be ignored any longer.

And for the love of God, why can't that man sensibly and strategically load a dishwasher, so there are no dishes left in the sink to face in the morning! Why, I ask you? When I snapped, I became a dishwasher rearranger, and I knew we were in trouble. Reloading someone else's dishwasher is the first, subtle, sneaky sign of contempt.

According to the Gottman Institute, a researched-based organization dedicated to discovering what makes couples succeed or fail, contempt is the #1 predictor of divorce. Contempt carries with it a poison that seeps into personal interactions. It can take many forms, including hostile humor and sarcasm, mockery, name-calling, and mimicking. Dr. Gottman says, "Contempt is sulfuric acid for love. It is the most poisonous of all relationship killers."²

We'd start sessions with one therapist, stick with them for a while, and then stop, only to restart six months later with different therapists. Rinse and repeat. We did this numerous times, with three different therapists, over the course of our short-lived marriage.

The further along we went in our counseling cycle, the more concerned I became. It seemed David and I would always need help with our marriage. Being together simply took an increased effort from both of us to keep the marriage humming harmoniously. Shouldn't there be some intrinsic ease with a partner that you love deeply?

² Lisitsa, Ellie. (2014). The trouble with contempt. The Gottman Institute (March 5, 2014). Updated March 4, 2024. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-trouble-with-contempt/>.

What was the alternative? I would mull over questions like, *What if we separated? Could I support myself? Where would we all live? Would we doom our kids to a childhood full of trauma? Would lawyers destroy any remaining dignity we had?* I was deeply discouraged by the state of our marriage, but I feared the repercussions of divorce more.

We both read numerous books on how to save a marriage, including *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman, *Boundaries in Marriage* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How to Save Your Marriage* by Sarah Mitchell, to name a few. We really took to heart the effort of saving our marriage. That's what couples do; they fight for their marriage. And yet, deep down, I think we were both looking for some kind of off-ramp. But neither of us would admit it, so we both kept putting in the effort, heading down a one-way road leading to divorce.

In our case, our marriage wasn't always horrible. That's the torment of a good-enough marriage, and the reason why so many of us stay too long; it's just not black and white.

BEND IN THE ROAD

As we approached our eighth wedding anniversary, I was scheduled to speak at a conference in Bend, Oregon. Since it was July, David and I decided to add a family vacation onto my work trip. (Because nothing says “fun” quite like being in a failing marriage and being trapped in a minivan for eight days with two kids under the age of six.) We stuffed the van with camping gear, and more snacks than any human should be allowed to eat on one road trip, and headed for the Oregon Coast.

Our first stop was the Perkins Restaurant off I-90 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. As I slid open the minivan's side door, a pool noodle and bag of Cheez-Its tumbled out.

“Get your shoes on, kids. We all have to wear shoes in the restaurant.”

"I don't have shoes," Anya declared.

"Yes, I know, that's why I want you to find them and get them on your feet, so we can get into the restaurant, so that we can order food, so we can eat and can get back on the road before it gets dark," answered my impatient, irritated, and hangry voice.

"Mama, I don't have shoes *here*."

I paused and considered her response, hollering across the van to David.

"David, did you put shoes in the car for Anya? Was she wearing shoes when she got in the van?"

"No, and, I don't know," came his response. This time, I let my impatient, irritated, hangry silence convey my message of disappointment and irritation.

So goes the beginning of all family vacations, and the slow erosion of marriages everywhere; an emergency trip to Walgreens must be made to grab all the things you forgot to bring. In this case, we went in search of a new pair of flip-flops and a sense of humor.

The trip could, we hoped, give us a break from our detrimental home-life habits, and instead offer a new perspective on our future. Maybe it would be an opportunity to rekindle the spark we had pre-kids, premarriage. The kids sleeping in the minivan's back seat gave us time to talk and process. We were so deep into our conversation that we missed our exit in central Washington and didn't notice for another hour. Once we realized what we had done, we turned things around. Laughing at ourselves, we wondered if it was a sign that our marriage was equally off course, as we grasped for hope in the mondaine. It was a welcome relief from the standard blame game we were beginning to master.

After the conference in Bend, we did the standard vacationer loop: Crater Lake, Newport Beach, the Oregon Coast Aquarium, and the mighty Redwoods in Northern California. Our first night out we made it to our coastal campsite with plenty of daylight to spare. We took a family walk on the beach before popping up the camper. It was dramatic: rocky cliffs, a roaring sea, dense forest undergrowth, and towering

trees. I felt a kind of peace despite the difficult conversations we had on the drive from Bend. The setting seemed fitting: rough, worn, and ever-changing.

We tucked the kids into bed on their side of the pop-up camper before settling in on the opposite side. I scooted closer to David under the blankets, seeking the familiar warmth and comfort of his presence. I pressed up against his back, taking the role of the big spoon. We may have had some tense moments on the drive, but I saw a glimmer of hope too. Maybe this trip really was a chance to start fresh. Maybe we *could* rediscover the connection we'd been missing. Our earlier discussions made me hopeful for our future together. If we were headed toward reconciliation, I couldn't wait to start. I reached out to caress David's arm.

"Hey," I whispered.

David made no move to invite me closer, but I pressed on. I wanted to break through the invisible barrier between us. Just one moment of us coming together could be the catalyst for the bliss-filled marriage we wanted, right? I nestled in closer, resting my head on his shoulder like I had countless times before.

"I miss this," his shoulder supporting my head and my right arm draped across his chest, palm resting on his heart.

I tilted my face up, seeking David's lips for a kiss, craving intimacy and connection. But he turned his head slightly, and my lips grazed his stubbly cheek instead.

"Karen," he sighed, gently pushing me back. "I can't do this right now. It's too hard."

The sting of rejection flooded the corners of my eyes. I felt my stomach drop. I thought we were connecting and making progress. The kids were having a great time. Why couldn't we?

"Okay, I get it," I said. "It's fine." I swallowed the lump in my throat. I gave a sort of pat on his arm and rolled back over to my side. He was right—intimacy was too confusing for both of us right now.

As David's breathing slowed into the rhythm of sleep beside me, I felt wide awake. How were we so far away from one another? I thought this trip—the conversations, the healthy debates—was what we needed. I hungered for clarity—the ambiguity of whether we could mend wounds (and how long it might take) tortured me.

After a few more minutes lying there, I slipped out of bed. I picked up a headlamp and one of the save-your-marriage books I'd brought with us, and I stepped out into the cool night air. Before I turned on the headlamp, I noted the absolute darkness of the night. Clouds hid the moon and stars.

I shuffled over to the still-warm coals of the dwindling campfire, added a few logs, and pulled up my camp chair. Looking at the book in my hands, I made a promise to myself to read it cover to cover—in one sitting. I wanted the secrets to a healed marriage, and dammit, I wanted them *tonight*.

I stayed up until my eyes hurt and my butt went numb. I stayed up until the first rays of morning peeked over the trees. I stayed up until I flipped the very last page. As it turns out, I stayed up for nothing. There was no lightning bolt of clarity, only more questions. No book could tell us if our marriage was worth keeping on life support, or if we should release the marriage and save the family. I snuck back into the camper and climbed into bed, turning away from David.

Back in earshot of David's leveled breathing, I knew three things: I knew I married a good man. I knew I loved the children we created together. And I knew the divide between us was growing daily and becoming intolerable. I certainly didn't see how to end it without leaving a trail of destruction in my wake.

THE PINNACLE OF SUCCESS

Humans are wired for love (or, more dryly, “connection”), and we need connection to survive. From the moment we are born, we seek out the security and comfort of close relationships. As children, we form attachments

to caregivers. As we grow, this innate desire for bonding often matures into close friendships and, often, a yearning for intimate, romantic partnerships. People date to find a companion who not only understands and accepts them but also challenges them to grow. The goal of these partnerships, for many, is to build a life together—to weather life’s storms and celebrate its triumphs hand-in-hand. It’s comforting to share lives with other people, especially loved ones.

Beyond personal comforts, most cultures often tout that it’s better to be coupled than uncoupled—to be coupled at all costs. There is no shortage of studies showing that being coupled is better for a person’s mental health, social health, and wallets. And although Western culture applauds staunchly independent individuals, the dominant culture still deems long-term romantic partnerships, especially marriage, as the crowning achievement in a person’s life. It’s unsurprising, then, that most young people (71% in one survey) still think they’ll end up marrying.³

In all the happy stories I’ve consumed in my life, couples end up *together*. The epitome of character happiness—the signal to the audience of “happily ever after”—is achieved when a character gets married. Not when they kiss a new partner, not when they move in together, not even when they’ve successfully navigated “meeting the parents”—the wedding is the marker of the happily ever after, not the marriage that follows.

Even when a person has a great career, a fulfilling social circle, and plenty of therapy under their belts, they still long for a partner. And there are great aspects to having a partner. Life is generally cheaper (shared cost of living), they have a companion to lean on when life gets tough, and often they experience a quality of expansion from exposure to new activities, friends, music, food, and so forth. “Multiply life by the power of two,” as one song goes.⁴

³ Brown, Adrienne. (2022). High school seniors’ expectations to marry, 2020. Bowling Green State University. <https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/brown-high-school-seniors-expectation-to-marry-2020-fp-22-04.html>.

⁴ Indigo Girls (1994). Power of Two. Track 5 on *Swamp Ophelia*. Epic, CD.

Marriage feels like the pinnacle of success for any couple. It signals to others “she has made it” or “he has settled down.” There is a finality to marriage (“until death do us part”), and a safety in being more firmly tied to one another. There’s a promise of staying, even when the going gets tough. And, if you choose the right person (fingers crossed), the “tough going” will be more manageable together.

I believed in the common knowledge surrounding relationships and marriage. I had few reasons to doubt it. When David and I got married, I thought I knew all I needed to know. I’d seen my parents’ marriage and learned from it, mostly what I didn’t want in a marriage. I’d seen friends’ marriages and asked them for their keys to success. I read books on how to be in a successful relationship. I went to therapy—for years—on my own to be a better partner. All of it taught me to believe the love David and I shared meant we could make it through anything together.

HOLD THE MAYO

Intimate relationships are more complicated than most people admit. All the romantic movies, books, TV shows, and articles online don’t show the ugly parts of relationships, unless the struggles make the ending more satisfying. But anyone who’s been in a relationship knows the hard parts don’t always lead to richer, deeper connections. When those complicated moments rear their heads in a relationship, many don’t know how to handle them. There is no standard course in school for interpersonal communication, let alone communication with an intimate partner. And while there are plenty of resources on saving a relationship, how to be a better partner, and recovering from a bad relationship, there aren’t many guides for how to make an elegant exit.

I was recently asked about the common mistake of staying too long in a dying marriage, which can lead to irreversible damage to the family unit

and co-parent relationship. A marriage can often be like a jar of mayo with little flecks of mold growing at the edges. You look in the jar, scoop off the sprouts of fungus, and put it back in the fridge. To the naked eye, most of that jar is still good mayo. You can ignore the mold for a little bit, but it inevitably grows back. What's left in the jar has already started to go bad—it's tainted. But you can't just throw away the entire jar, can you?

Mayo aside, divorce typically looks like a terrible option. According to common wisdom, leaving a partnership can be even worse than sticking it out and will certainly scar your children for life. Extended families split down battle lines. Friends try to understand both partners but often end up choosing sides. Acquaintances rubberneck and try to unearth every little detail of why it ended and whose fault it was. The love story, which once looked so promising, has a tragic ending. Marriage is exalted as the pinnacle of relationship success. And if marriage is the ultimate success, then divorce is the ultimate failure.

I didn't want to fail. I couldn't bear to have the father of my children become my enemy, as we faced off in a divorce over the kids and our belongings. Divorce meant legal fees—big ones—and drawing battle lines. Divorce meant yelling at each other across conference tables with lawyers watching. It also meant having to tell our children. And the one that gutted me the most, it meant forfeiting 50% of my bedtime snuggles and morning dance parties with my kids. Half! How could I possibly relinquish half of their childhood in the name of divorce? I couldn't begin to imagine this reality.

NO GOOD OPTION

All the books I could find on divorce pitched a heartbreaking, family-severing narrative that I couldn't—wouldn't—participate in. My options seemed to be, stay and grow increasingly miserable, or leave and blow up my life. Either way, I was going to feel awful! I was doomed to live unhappy in a marriage or

leave and cause unhappiness for others. This loop kept me in my marriage, and it's why I fought so hard to save it.

However, the misguided societal advice and expectations about marriage and divorce—or, more broadly, relationships and breakups—keep couples together well past their expiration date. People who can't reconcile stay together in loveless marriages. Some couples take out their misery on others—their kids, their family members, employees, and friends. Some take it out on themselves, devolving into a lackluster or angry version of themselves. Some transition to being no more than roommates, leading separate lives while living in the same home.

Some begin to seek imposed reasons to end the relationship (e.g. affairs, betrayal, abuse, and addiction)—a rupture that can justify the end of the relationship to the imaginary judge and jury in our heads. Yet, thinking there is no alternative to staying in a bad marriage or going through a destructive divorce is a toxic binary, and it ruins lives.

On the darkest of days, I began to see death as a better ending than divorce. I saw it as less complicated, less expensive, and less drawn out. If just one of us could stumble into some fiery tragedy, the marital suffering would end. Truly, who thinks like this? As it turns out, it's more common than I thought. As a divorce consultant, over the years, I have heard many variations of this dark prayer. How is it that the divorce machine has become so broken, that people would rather die than walk through the hot coals of the court system?

Short of a fatal accident, my other option was to take things into my own hands. I imagined the location: an especially tight and curvy section of Highway 200, at the top of Rogers Pass. I would simply swerve on the ice, hoping the minivan would topple over the guardrail, killing me instantly and painlessly, as I plummeted into the deep valley in a fiery implosion. At least this way, there would be insurance money for David and the kids to claim, if it was deemed an accident. I felt confident I could make it look like one.

That fantasy stayed with me for longer than I'm comfortable admitting. It spun around in my head as a viable exit strategy. It wasn't that my marriage was abusive or destructive. Divorce was what I feared, not my husband. In the moment, death looked like a better option than the typical divorce outcome of becoming enemies with the father of my children. I was horrified by my thoughts, but also desperate to avoid the inevitable destruction of divorce.

However, as I walked with my longtime friend, Cynthia, on a warm summer night, I found my turning point.

As I lamented about the hardships at home, Cynthia stopped, looked at me intently, and asked, "Hey, are you thinking about a plan?"

"What?" I replied. "No, I don't have a plan. That's the problem. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to stay, and I don't know how to leave. I am living in a prison of indecision and paralysis. It is a daily torment!"

Cynthia looked me in the eye and clarified, "No, not *that* kind of plan."

The realization hit me. Fiery explosions, icy roads, an accident. I *did* have a plan. I felt the color drain from my face.

"You need to call your therapist first thing tomorrow," she replied. It felt like a warning.

I was in relationship purgatory, but I wasn't stuck between a good place or a bad place—both options in front of me looked terrible. Had I known of a middle path (one with less destruction, despair, and debt), I might've decided sooner. I might've been able to exit without doing more harm. But as it was, I had stayed too long, and we all suffered the consequences. In the absence of a clearly marked exit, I acted like a kamikaze pilot with no other option but to dive bomb, ensuring a fiery ending.

After too many months of dark thoughts, what I really needed was a new option. I wanted a way out that didn't involve destroying my life, or the lives of my children or David. I didn't want to choose between a bad marriage or a worse divorce. That is no choice at all.