



Mark Patinkin

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Mark Patinkin: People divorce, but it's never just that simple

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Four months later, I still remember the cold. The temperature was in the teens. It had been that way for weeks, and the ice patches on the streets of downtown Providence were hard as iron. I left behind a coat, thinking it wouldn't be easy to check it at Family Court. As I walked from the parking lot at 9 a.m., I put my hands in my suit jacket pockets and hunched into myself. They say the weather at times mirrors the spirit. Indeed.

Some things are too hard to write about when you are close to them. It is only now I can bring myself to revisit that February day.

There was a long line out the courthouse door. As I waited, I looked across the river to the historic homes on the East Side. To the south, they were moving the highways to create a changed city — the old still there, as it would always be, and yet on the brink of new beginnings.

They handle divorces on the fifth floor. I had been here before as a journalist, writing about how, after years of shared lives, it comes down to a division of assets — who gets the dishes, who the children. No one expects to find themselves on this floor, but if the statistics are correct, for half of married people, it is a matter of time.

The hallway was crowded and many folks looked strained. There are few parts of life with deeper emotion. The process is full of heartache. If only he'd done this . . . or she that. But beneath it all, the explanation is usually simple. People change. That's all.

I found my lawyer, and my wife found hers, and soon, the four of us were sitting in a small meeting space outside our courtroom. It was like the end of any business negotiation. Paperwork was passed back and forth, the agreements signed, and then I was on the witness stand.

Matter called, ready nominal, and it began.

My lawyer stood. My role would be perfunctory. When a divorce is uncontested, the final hearing is simply about the facts.

“You were married on May 10, 1986, in Massachusetts. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” I said, and said no more. But I thought back to that day. We had wanted to be married outdoors, and chose a country inn, under a tree in spring bloom. I liked the symbol of that. I was 33 and she 29. I had been slow to the altar, but one day, a man finds his partner, and he's ready. Divorce often makes people look back on their choice as a mistake, but that's seldom true. Over the years, most people live more than one life. At the time, it was the perfect union.

“Have you been continuously domiciled in and a resident of the State of Rhode Island for at least one year . . . ?”

“Yes.” And I thought: Oh, much more than 12 months. It was 23 years ago that I brought a new wife to the starter house I'd purchased in Providence for \$46,000. It's where I had been single, enjoying a young man's freedom. Not long after the wedding, I found myself on my own in Paris researching a book, and had an open night. Those had always been great times for me — being unattached and somewhere exotic. I had dinner at a small restaurant, browsed a bookstore, and later, stood on a bridge over the Seine in the shadow of Notre Dame. That's when it struck me that something was missing. I no longer enjoyed being alone. She had become part of me.

In time, I realized she even changed how I thought when I sat down to do my work. “You write for the one you love,” Hemingway once said, and I had now begun to do that.

The magistrate looked on. The power to make this official was his. I was impressed to see sympathy on his face. Despite his years at this, he had not forgotten that it's always a sad moment.

“And you have three children together?” asked my lawyer.

“Correct,” I said. And again I said no more. But I wanted to tell the judge how good we were as parents and partners. Yes, your honor, three children, the first a little girl — a girlie girl — and you should have seen me, a guy's guy lost in a house of pink things, sitting patiently as she put bows in my hair. Then came our first son, though we had trouble conceiving him to a point we felt it might not happen. But one afternoon, as I stood outdoors, my wife came from the house and looked me in the eye as only a wife does with a husband, and she told me it had happened; she was pregnant. A few years later we had the youngest, another son, the only one mentioned by name here in the courtroom, because he is still a minor. If two children are a small family, three make for a big one, and there began the richest years as my wife and I went from a man-to-man to a zone defense.

Suddenly, today, they are 22, 18 and 16, all on the brink of a life on their own. Though the two of us often said we hoped they'd never fly too far.

Correct. We had three children together. And we always will.

Soon it was my wife's turn, and after she was done, we both sat with respective counsel at the plaintiff's and defendant's tables. We listened as the magistrate made it official . . . a growing apart by the parties . . . different goals . . . cannot be reconciled . . . the court is satisfied.

And then it was over, the lawyers disappearing into the hallway in search of their next cases. We found ourselves leaving the building together, just the two of us.

It would be untrue to say this has been an easy year. Even in the best of divorces, there are hard times and resentments.

But right then, on the sidewalk outside the courthouse, we seemed to both find a moment of peace in this end of things. She thanked me, and I her. Separately, we walked toward our cars.

I felt I needed to somehow mark this, so I decided to take a detour. I drove to the two houses where we were together as a family. I paused by each address, and tried to feel what we once had.

Quickly, I continued on. I had a new home now, and a new life. It was time to begin it.