



The Truth About Divorce

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by Cheryl Scruggs

When the going gets tough in marriage, many people take what they believe is the easy way out, assuming that the answer to finding true joy and happiness is separating from one's spouse, finding someone new, or divorcing.

When pain, hurt, discord, selfishness or unhappiness make their way into one's heart, many convince themselves that divorce will free them. Yet exactly the opposite is true. Let's look at the false freedom we think we will obtain by walking away from an unfulfilling marriage.

What does divorce really look like?

If they can just get through the court dates and all the paperwork, the spouse who wants out thinks it will be incredibly liberating. We fail to recognize the ramifications of divorce until we experience it. For a while, it may seem pleasant or enjoyable to be away from the spouse that "made you miserable." But speaking from experience, divorce is awful!

We had what you might call a "model" divorce. We shared the kids well, rarely fought and maintained a friendship "for the girls' sake" during our divorced years.

And it was still awful! Our lives never felt settled. Why? God never intended for our marriage to end or our family to be broken.

" 'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel." (Malachi 2:16)

How does divorce affect you?

For Jeff and me, a sense of unsettledness permeated our post-divorce lives, which were often characterized by a lack of order or stability. We found it hard to rest. There were constant reminders of how fractured our family was: birthdays; sports and school activities; when the kids got sick; or simply being around intact families.

Parents splitting custody have the constant challenge of working out visitation while balancing the emotions of children. Our girls often mentioned not feeling settled or relaxed, because the next location change was constantly in the back of their minds.

The following excerpt from our book, *I Do Again*, describes the state of my heart the day our divorce was final:

August 21, 1992. The worst day of my life.

Ten years after walking down the aisle as a young, hope-filled bride, I walked into a courtroom to claim a different kind of hope: liberation from my awful marriage. This was the day I'd obtain the freedom to be with my new love, the *soul mate* I thought I'd finally found. Today I'd hold in my hands the piece of paper I'd been coveting, the ticket to a whole new and *much better* life. I stood in front of the judge and told him I wanted a divorce.

Earlier that morning, the alarm had gone off and I lay in bed for a moment, groggy with sleep. *Something's happening today*. What is it? I tried to clear the fog from my brain and then my heart gave a little lurch as I remembered. Today's the day!

I waited for the excitement to kick in. You're free today, Cheryl! You've been waiting for this for so long! But I felt heavy and unable to move. What is *wrong* with me?

The morning passed in a haze as I readied Brittany and Lauren for preschool and got the three of us out the door. I tried to ignore the dull ache in my stomach. Breakfast was out of the question and it was all I could do to sip a cup of coffee.

After dropping off the girls, I sat in traffic on my way to the Collin County Courthouse in McKinney, Texas. With a few moments to think, I tried talking some sense into myself. *Buck up, girl! This is what you wanted... the day you've been waiting for! You're finally going to be happy.*

For the tiniest moment, I glimpsed a truth I didn't want to see, through a crack in the strong façade I'd built around myself. What if I was making a mistake? What if the warnings from my traitorous stomach were trying to tell me something?

No.

I won't go there. I'm almost to the courthouse -- I'm about to get what I wanted. I've always worked so hard, and getting what I want has never come easily. Right now, what I want is freedom and by gosh, I am going to get it. I can't allow any negative thoughts to distract me.

The cold institutional hallway of the courthouse gave me shivers as I stood waiting for an elevator. Although the hustle and bustle of people surrounded me, I had never felt more alone. But I had on a classy suit and stylish heels and my patented smile, and I maintained my composure like a pro. Nobody would know I had the least bit of emotion in me, while in reality the feelings swirled about my head and heart and I just wanted to go back home, pull the covers up and pretend my life did not exist.

I met my attorney at the door of the courtroom.

"Good morning." His voice was low and smooth, all business. His eyebrow raised. "Today's the day."

I nodded, uncharacteristically mute.

I don't remember what happened next. I suppose there were other cases before the judge, other lives being turned upside down. All I know for sure is that my internal battle was raging and I fought to keep it quiet, to disregard it altogether, and make sure the cool detached expression remained plastered to my face.

Finally it was my turn, and I stood trembling visibly next to my lawyer, facing the judge. Words were spoken, questions were asked. Did I want a divorce? Yes.

But at the moment, I couldn't remember why.

The judge wanted to know why my husband wasn't there. How could I tell him that Jeff had not wanted the divorce? That he'd fought against it? Through tears and hurt he'd pleaded with me to change my mind. He prayed for reconciliation. He hoped for another chance. He yearned for my heart to soften. But he lost.

At that instant standing in the courtroom, I felt like the most horrible person. I wanted to turn to the strangers around me and let them know I was a good person. I really was. I loved being a wife and wanted to be a good one. I absolutely loved being a mom. Yet I could not go on in the emptiness... or in the dreadful lack of intimacy. I was dedicated and loyal, trustworthy and sweet. But I could not see any other way out of the excruciating pain I had felt for years. I had worked it out in my mind, and saw no other option but to escape and start over. I knew I would have a label now, even in Jeff's mind, of being an adulterer and a mean person. But the truth was I was broken and hurting. How do I tell everyone this when my actions seemed to say the opposite?

"Jeff needed to work today," I told the judge, who nodded. I don't think he believed it for a second.

Jeff was at the office, all right. I stood in front of the bench, wondering what was running through his mind as he sat at his desk attempting to work. Would he cry? Was he angry? How was he dealing with the fact his marriage and family were being ripped apart? How did he feel knowing he would soon officially be a single, divorced dad?

And what right had I to be worried about any of that? I was the cause of it. It was a little late for me to be worried about Jeff's feelings.

"*Divorce granted.*" The gavel went down with an authoritative thud. Was it my imagination or did the judge look a little sad? Perhaps disappointed. I wondered what it must be like to preside over the dissolution of families all day long. That word—dissolution—so cold and impersonal. I think the judge knew better. I think he knew he was seeing devastation... wreckage... sorrow... and there was nothing he could do but bang his gavel.

The sound of that gavel nearly did me in. My hand went to my chest as I felt my heart explode into a kind of palpitation I'd never felt before. The urge to throw up became overwhelming and it took every ounce of

willpower to steady myself and walk to the rear of the courtroom.

My echoing footsteps seemed to pound in my head as I walked down the dreary hallway. Next to me, my attorney was oblivious, moving quickly as always, focused on his dinner plans or his next case. He stopped when we reached the front entrance to the courthouse. At the top of the steps he offered his hand.

"Congratulations," he said, offering up a satisfied *I-just-won-a-case* smile.

"Mmm hmm..." I shook his hand, but could not muster up a response.

Congratulations. Did I deserve that? Did he? Something told me the answer was no. But this was what I'd wanted, fought for, worked toward. And here it was.

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