

Minus a Marriage

*Diary of a mending
(not broken) family*



By Melinda Ellis

November 1984

My husband drove away today. We are separating; he is going to Utah and our three children and I will stay temporarily at my parents' home in Boise.

We are separating because we've been separate emotionally and mentally for a long time. We only make our separation physical now.

It is difficult to accept defeat. I was married according to the mandates of a conservative, family-centered religion. I found a mate that possessed all the "right" qualifications: a dedication to our religion and a desire for family life. We followed all the "right" premarital procedures. We received engagement counseling, we took compatibility tests. We carefully discussed our needs and desires for our married life.

Unfortunately, soon after the wedding serious problems in our relationship began to surface. I felt trapped. But I had made a firm commitment, there would be no divorce for me! Convinced the power of love would eventually change our relationship, I stayed with my husband for six years. Over time, I saw that we were all paying a huge cost for my "loving" determination; we were developing more and more problems and we had less and less ability to pretend that everything would be OK.

My husband is an angry man who has abused the children and me mentally, emotionally and physically. It is our big secret, one we never discuss, even with ourselves. We have maintained a fragile facade of being the happy, nuclear family.

Last month, I briefly left my husband at home with the children and returned to find bruise marks on my new baby daughter's abdomen. Something snapped in me. The reality of how anger and fear had shaped my children's lives could no longer be ignored. No, I cannot, will not, allow another child to live in this environment of pretense and pain. I must take responsibility for myself and them. I cannot look into their eyes and see the pain and walk away denying what I see. Perhaps the greatest act of love I will do in this life is to take the steps I am taking now.

December 1984

He has asked me to file for divorce, since the legalities are easier and quicker in Idaho than in Utah. It seems rather soon, but in the month he has been gone it has been so restful and calm. I know divorce is our only choice and cannot imagine living with him again. He calls and his voice is that cold one that has always frightened me so much. "Please file for divorce *immediately*." In a brave act of defiance, I wait to file until after Christmas.

The baby was up crying all night, I could not soothe her. She kept my parents awake, too. They have been amazingly patient, supportive and loving despite great costs to them in time, money and privacy. I cannot imagine surviving without them right now.

This separation is not easy. I have no job, no car, and three young children to provide for. I feel acute sadness as I nurse my baby daughter, knowing that the weaning time comes soon for us. This winter feels especially harsh and cold as I give up the warm external comforts I knew in my previous life as wife and homemaker.

January 1985

It's the new year of our new lives.

I'm enrolled in a job search course. I haven't worked in a paid position for many years and am not sure I have any marketable skills. I do have a college degree, but in my premarriage dream world I never saw myself working in a career. I was going to be one really super and creative stay-at-home mom with the traditional husband who would provide for me. Someday, I thought, I would be a volunteer in the arts.

Now, facing the requirements of the real world and to provide for my children, I enter the career world that I shunned as "beneath" me.

There are other painful lessons to learn. The first day of class I had to confront the full emotional costs of leaving my children. As I sat listening to the instructor talk about taking risks and leaving the protection of home and family, I heard a baby begin to scream in the nursery down the hall. It is my daughter. The instructor catches my eye, acknowledges my and the

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baby's distress and I expect to be excused. Instead, the instructor says something about facing the reality that I cannot meet my children's needs during the day in deference to my employer. I get the message; I cannot leave to go comfort my child.

My eyes start to tear. I feel a strong maternal response to run and comfort her. My baby refuses to be placated by the nursery workers. For several hours she and I cry together, loudly and silently. At lunch, when I break away to be with her, she is sleeping from the exhaustion of her crying.

I must work, however. I have been on welfare the past few months and cannot live on this aid — welfare officials tell you that up front. They give you 40 percent of the essential needs (rent, food, utilities) and will subtract from that 40 percent any additional income you receive that would help you meet the other 60 percent of your needs. It is a Catch-22 that I cannot wait to get out of.

March 1985

Our family became one of the divorce statistics this month. It was surprisingly quick and easy; the court experience was not too painful. The children and I pay a cost for the ease of the divorce, however — the child support assigned is incredibly low. We are now a poverty statistic as well.

Some great and astonishing news: I got a job! I am an activity coordinator for about 100 elderly individuals in a nursing home. I have the opportunity to use all my creative and dramatic energies with a cap-

tive audience!

This job challenges my doom and gloom projections for my own life. My troubles don't seem so grim compared to those in the wide circle around me. I am young and strong. There is time and strength to grow. I love working in a job where I can give and do things for people that bring cheer to them, even for a few moments.

Another giant step forward? My parents are going to assist me in purchasing a car! I can't believe how good it feels to make these advances toward independence. I am becoming less incapable and dependent.

April 1985

We have moved to a place of our own! It is a luxury to have our own space. Some nights after the children are asleep, I dance by myself in my own celebration of the physical and emotional spaciousness of our home. The kids seem exultant as well. It is amazing to see them laugh and play. And the wonder in the emergence of their personalities! They are children I have never known. Our deep-frozen feelings are thawing like the warming weather. A rejuvenating and joyful spring is upon us all.

August 1985

My ex-husband came to visit the children. He and I spoke carefully around each other and minimized contact as much as possible. I limited the visits with the kids because I wasn't sure how he would treat them. Would he hurt them to punish



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me? He appeared very controlled and careful, and no angry incidents occurred. The children were happy to see him but seemed relieved when he left. I was, too.

October 1985

I have been thinking about the stigmas attached to being a "divorcee" and "single parent." Some people seem so unable to accept me as a divorced person. It makes me angry, except when I remember myself, as a smug wife, looking down on divorced women.

Divorced people, especially divorced women, threaten some people's rigid concepts of family. I used to think women who divorced their husbands had some deep character weakness that would not allow them to preserve their marriages or their families. This stereotype of the weak and dangerous divorcee destroying America is wrong. And the sad part is that people punish children and single parents with these flawed and prejudicial beliefs. From governmental decisions right down to the neighbor next door, the policy seems to be, "You made your bed, now lie in it." But the truth is simple — most women divorce because they want to improve the quality of their and their children's lives. These are often acts of courage, sacrifice and love.

I am not comfortable with the labels "single" or "divorcee." Mostly, I am a mother. I work hard for my family, love my children, and have a strong sense of values that I want to teach them. My children inspire and motivate me, they

challenge me to be the best I can be as they depend so much on me.

November 1985

We've moved. We are living now in a subsidized apartment that will provide help with rent and utilities. It was hard to leave our other apartment, but I could not afford to remain there. I earn a decent salary, but I remain way below the poverty line. How do other single parents with less income manage? Economically, single parents are in such a squeeze — day-care and other child-related costs are huge. I never realized how much staying home with the kids contributed to the financial well-being of my marriage.

September 1986

It has been another great year. I received advanced training at work and was promoted to director of the activity department. I have also sought counseling and now understand much more about myself and my problems. I now have greater confidence and assertiveness in my relationships, even in my interactions with my former husband. Our home remains a peaceful place.

September 1987

The children and I continue to make strides. I'm less surprised by that now. My ex-husband, in Los Angeles now, also seems to be growing, maturing. He fre-

quently sends the kids cassette tapes and letters. They know who their dad is and that he cares for them. I am no longer afraid of him or intimidated by his behavior.

I am taking a couple of courses at Boise State, as I have chosen to direct myself to a new career that will provide for my family better. I plan to quit my job and go to school full time next semester if it all works out financially.

Sometimes when I encounter the disappointing silence of acquaintances, I want to make a big sign and hang it around my neck that says, "Look, it was really a miserable marriage. I'm not a failure for getting a divorce. My husband and I had to leave a very harmful and hurtful relationship that was killing each of us. I don't need your disdain (or approval) but I could use your understanding and friendship."

September 1988

I am in my second semester as a full-time student! School, work and family responsibilities are trying and stressful, but I feel proud of my independence and accomplishments. I am very happy. My children are growing like all children do today — too fast — but they are generally well-behaved and well-adjusted. We talk easily, laugh, and have great times. My oldest wrote recently in an essay for school that he knows that no matter what happens, his mom, brother and sister will always love him. I felt so happy when I read this because this is the truth that I have most wanted to communicate.

I was at the Laundromat the other day and I spoke with a couple of women who are also single parents. We discussed how hard it is to manage finances and a household alone, to see that the children make it to school, Scout meetings, dance or piano lessons. I asked them if they thought it would be easier if they were still married.

Then with a look, an understanding passed between us; we know that our struggles have been worth it. □

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