Heartworks: Feminist Encounters with the Gendered Selves of Young Divorcées

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Compelled by personal connections to women in my life experiencing the gendered complexities of divorce, this study explores how young, divorced women (in their 20s and 30s), without children, were influenced by different gendered ideologies—including femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism—along with other social, cultural, and relational contexts and pressures, all of which can be variously experienced, reproduced, and resisted within leisure. Aligning feminist theory with narrative inquiry, I conducted one-to-one interviews and group interviews with 12 young, divorced women. I represented the findings using Creative Analytic Practice through a variety of literary forms, including monologues, social media posts, and researcher field notes. The findings elucidate women's experiences within a framework I conceptualize as the *Heartworks*, which details the heart-work of women's divorce processes and the feminist research praxis it fosters. Collectively, the findings highlight the challenges women faced as they navigated the "shattering" of their married selves and engaged in "re-creating" distinct post-divorce selves against the sociocultural backdrop of gendered ideologies. This research expands current conceptualizations of identity, grief, transition, and transformation. It also adds complexity to our thinking about women's relationships as a shifting cultural nexus where leisure contexts both confine and expand notions of femininity and love. As a feminist social justice project, this research exposes the marginalization and stigmatization faced by young, divorced women and shares new understandings of their complex, lived experiences, including possibilities for resisting and re-creating limiting narratives of women's divorce through counter-narratives of (re)claimed agency, solidarity, and empowerment.

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"Love letters" to my village...

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Dedication

To you, Mom, the most inspiring feminist, divorcée, and person in my life. Your endless love, support, and belief in me make everything possible.

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1.0 Introduction

Standing at the podium in the opulent hotel ballroom, I look out at over 100 guests gathered for my best friend Lydia's wedding. People clap loudly after the bride and groom's impressive ballroom dance performance (three minutes of a perfectly orchestrated first dance, following months of weekly lessons). As the bride and groom make their way back to the head table and sit down, the guests slowly shift their attention to where I stand, decked out in my plum purple and lime green satin bridesmaid dress (the kind you likely never wear again). Unfolding the crisp paper that holds my speech typed in large font, I try to summon that elusive wedding speech tone of casual friendliness and natural humour:

> I would like to start by thanking everyone for being here today to celebrate Lydia and Nathan.[1] It is clear that they are surrounded by much love. I am thrilled to be here as Lydia's maid of honour.
>
> ...
>
> Lydia truly is the best friend a gal could ask for! I know that she will be the best partner a guy could ask for, as I'm sure Nathan agrees. I have had the privilege of watching their relationship grow and deepen. While I have only known Nathan for a few years, I have no doubt that Lydia has found her McDreamy! Somehow, Lydia and Nathan already seem to know what matters most. They can really be themselves and they bring out the best in each other!
>
> Lydia and Nathan also share a love of dogs, although they may differ in their preferred size of dog. They say that dogs have a kind of sixth sense or intuition about knowing a truly good person. It's no surprise then that Lydia's dog, Grace, has loved Nathan from the start. The only advice I would offer for a happy marriage is some I came upon recently after Lydia and I were chatting about how dogs really know how to love.
>
> So here it is, some canine-inspired tips for a happy marriage:
>
> - Protect each other
> - Appreciate the little things
> - Play and be silly
> - Snuggle
> - Love unconditionally
> - Oh ... and use those puppy dog eyes with caution
>
> And now without further ado, I raise my glass to Lydia and Nathan...I wish you both a lifetime of unconditional love!

[1] My friend chose these pseudonyms. Other pseudonyms are used throughout for family members.

A little teary-eyed, Lydia makes her way to the podium for her own speech:

> Thank you to all of you sharing this day with us. I know for the majority of you it has meant making huge efforts in rearranging your personal lives as well as arranging travel and accommodation and we really do appreciate that.
>
> ...
>
> I'd also like to thank some very special people while I am up here.
>
> Dad, as a single parent, I know that raising a daughter was hard for you . . . But I also know that I am the woman I am today because you raised me to be thoughtful, caring, and strong. Thank you for all your advice, your love and your help . . .
>
> Steve and Joan . . . I know I am becoming part of a great family because you have always made me feel welcome in your home and treated me like your daughter. I am grateful to be gaining such wonderful in-laws. I love you both.
>
> Bronwen, my matron of honour, and my person. In the last nearly six years that we have known each other, you have been a true friend to me, listening to both tears and hysterical laughter—often together . . . You are a one-in-a-million friend. I love you, Bronwen.
>
> And my three other bridesmaids; you ladies all look so beautiful. You are amazing people and I am more proud of you than you know.
>
> ...
>
> Nathan, you are my knight in a faded *ThunderCat*s t-shirt. You have been with me through thick and thin, and everything in between. You are steadfast. You are loving. You are compassionate, and you are just the right amount of geeky. When I'm with you, I know I can be me and that you will embrace and accept me. I'm not afraid of telling you when you're wrong and when I'm right and I'm not afraid to sit in silence with you as we read like an old married couple.
>
> It's a cliché to say you're my other half, but you really are. You force me to see things differently and grow; and at the same time, you love me for who I am today. When we started dating, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it hasn't and it won't. You are genuine and for that reason, I know I can trust you with my life and my heart. Being with you has made me a happier person. For the rest of my life, I will do everything I can to make you as happy as you make me.
>
> With that, I would like to turn you over to my husband, for what may possibly be the only time he can ever have the last word without it being, "Yes, dear, you're right."

I smile at my friend's touching and cheeky speech as she inches over to make room for Nathan to join her at the podium for his own speech. As I lean forward in my seat, my elbow knocks over the little name card at my place setting and I carefully set it back up to stand at attention with the other 108 paper name cards scattered throughout the room. The cards are all in the shape of tiny plum or lime chairs, which Lydia and I and the other bridesmaids stayed up late into the night to finish (you've got to love those DIY touches). As Nathan settles into the podium, I wonder what kind of speech he will give. I know he insisted on "winging it" even after Lydia urged him for weeks to write his wedding speech. He clears his throat and launches into his impromptu speech:

> To my groomsmen, much of our adventures together are, of course, classified, but needless to say, I am lucky to have the three best friends a guy could have. I'm the first one of us to tie the knot, and I'm hoping our guy nights can continue. After all, I still have to beat that last level of *Counterstrike*.
>
> Natalie, as my twin sister, you drive me crazy, but I love you. I know I tease you, but that's what a brother does. I remember the time I told you I knew I was the favourite because Mom and Dad told me so just to poke at you. Don't worry, one day you'll come close to being the favourite. Thanks for all the times you did my chores for me before Mom and Dad came home—sorry, Mom and Dad, but I think there's a statute of limitations on grounding.
>
> Mom and Dad, what can I say? You are the best parents any son could ask for. You have always been there for me and encouraged me in everything I did, even when I had the odds stacked against me. Like, when I wanted to try out for the junior hockey team as the smallest and most uncoordinated kid. Your marriage is the best example I could have for a strong and lasting marriage. I love you both!
>
> To all our guests, thank you so much for being here, and a special thank you to Fernando, our ballroom dance instructor—you helped us give our guests one hell of a performance, which is saying a lot for someone with two left feet.
>
> And on that note, let's get this party started!

Nathan glances quickly around the room, making sure he has not forgotten anyone. From my seat at the head table a few feet from the podium, I hear him snidely remark to Lydia, "How's that for not having anything written down?" I watch her face carefully. She gives him a quick smile but says nothing about how hurt I know she must be that her new husband did not mention her at all in his speech. As Nathan starts to head back to his seat, he passes his sister, who spins around in her chair to face him and whispers in a forceful tone, "Uhh, you forgot YOUR WIFE!" Nathan looks momentarily stunned and then hurries back to the podium. He looks out at the guests and casually declares, "I'm already a bad husband!" in an effort to lighten the heavy mood that is practically palpable in the room. He continues, "To my lovely wife, Lydia you are . . ."

Nathan goes on at some length about his feelings for Lydia, but his words seem sheepish, flustered, and awkward; marred by his initial oversight.

Lydia leans over to me, with a half-hearted smile, and whispers, "I was hoping the worst thing to happen today would be our sinking wedding cake."

~

A little over a year after she tossed the bouquet, it was very clear that Lydia had not, in fact, "found her McDreamy" as I now regretted so surely asserting in my wedding speech, referencing the handsome male lead of Grey's Anatomy*—the show Lydia and I watched together every Thursday night and caught up on the week's events over our usual Starbucks snack of fudge bars and caramel apple cider. As it turned out, Nathan was not to be Lydia's McDreamy or her "knight in shining* ThunderCats *t-shirt," as she too had so confidently believed. Instead, Lydia knew that her marriage was over when they ended their nine months of counselling. A year and four months into their marriage, my newly-wed friend decided she couldn't be married anymore. She began the difficult process of separating herself from her husband and the life they had together. She and Nathan officially separated when they closed their joint bank account and divided their few shared assets when Lydia moved out of their apartment. I remember how strange it was when I came to help her move. Nathan had left their apartment for the afternoon so he wouldn't be there when she moved. He said he didn't care what she took that they had acquired together and to just take half of it (other than their big screen TV and the vacuum cleaner his parents insisted he keep because it was a gift from HIS family, never mind the fact that Nathan had never used it or any vacuum cleaner for that matter). So, the two of us hurried around the apartment, packing up Lydia's own belongings, most of which were books she'd accumulated as an English major. Once her own stuff was boxed up, she tried to decide whether she should take or leave a myriad of shared household items, like the fancy mixing stand they'd received as a wedding gift or the wicker storage shelf his parents bought them for their first and only Christmas together as husband and wife. A year and seven months after Lydia moved out—having waited longer than the one year required for a legal separation—Lydia and Nathan officially filed for divorce. Lydia called me on that day:*

Lydia: Hey, are you busy? I've had a weird day.

Bronwen: I'm not busy. What's up?

Lydia: Nathan and I went to the divorce court today. Actually, my day was more like, went to work, walked the dogs, had a sandwich, got a divorce—you know, the usual.

Bronwen: Whoa, I knew you were going soon, but I didn't realize it was today. That must have been really hard. Do you feel like you finally have some closure?

Lydia: I thought I would feel that way, but I don't. At least not yet. Nathan was his typical self; he hadn't even finished filling in his paperwork, had lost some of the forms, and didn't bring a pen. It's a good thing I brought an extra copy of it all for him. He's had months to fill out some basic paperwork, and he still couldn't get it together. I sent it all to him, with instructions, with e-mail reminders. It's the same old thing. Even right up to the end, it's like I need to be his mother.

Bronwen: That's so frustrating! He always does this kind of thing. Hopefully, this is the last time you have to deal with it. It should be.

Lydia: It was such a weird experience. At the court, after you give them your paperwork, you pull out a little number from this machine and wait your turn to be processed.

Bronwen: Really? They have numbers? It's like a divorce deli.

Lydia: Hah, yeah, pretty much. We had to wait for almost two hours, just sitting beside each other on this hard, wooden bench. Let's just say the small talk ran out real fast. The whole time, he kept teasing me and making little jabs at me, like nothing had changed. Can you believe he asked me if I wanted to get something to eat after? Like, sure, Nathan, let's go on a little date after signing our divorce papers. Like, really?

Bronwen: He's still trying to find ways to spend time with you. He's been doing that since you stopped agreeing to the whole dog 'custody-sharing' arrangement. I'm so glad you stopped that. I don't think he's fully realized what's happening.

Lydia: I know, I just can't stop feeling guilty. Even today, even after everything, a part of me still thought, "Maybe we can make it work." I don't know how, maybe a different marriage counsellor? Maybe if I could just get over some things and not expect as much? I feel like I've failed, you know? Our vows said, "Until death do us part..."; not "Until about a year do us part..." But maybe I still could have done more to save our marriage.

Bronwen: You've been down this road. It doesn't lead anywhere good. You have done *everything* you can. You deserve more; you deserve to be truly happy, and you're not happy with Nathan.

Lydia: Do I? Do I really deserve to be happy? And what does "happy" even look like anyway? I mean, he's a good guy. He didn't abuse me and my family loves him. They still get him Christmas presents and we're not even together! So what if I'm not happy? Being unhappy isn't a good enough reason to end a marriage, is it?

Bronwen: Lydia, you deserve to be happy! That's the bottom line, or at least it should be. I wish you would believe me on this.

Lydia: I guess I do, but it's just that everywhere I look, I see happy people, and I thought I knew how to be happy, too but clearly I don't. I deleted my Facebook account on Wednesday because I just couldn't handle seeing one more wedding photo or baby announcement on my newsfeed.

Bronwen: I was wondering why I couldn't find your Facebook page when I went to post something on your wall a couple of days ago. I think taking a break from Facebook is a good idea. Social media is such a hotbed of expectations. The other day, my uncle actually posted on my wall, "When are you and your hubby having kids? lol" I see him like once a year and he has the nerve to ask me that, in general, and on Facebook. I can't stand those kind of intrusions!

Lydia: Tell me about it! My aunt commented on my one-year wedding anniversary status by saying, "I couldn't be more proud of you." It's like she was saying this is the only thing I am proud of you for—getting married. Never mind living on my own after school, being the first person in my family to earn a university degree, starting my teaching career—apparently all of that pales in comparison to having a wedding anniversary for a woman.

Bronwen: It's so true. It's like people can't function unless everyone around them fits into these neat expectations: Married, check; children, check...

Lydia: I know, but I still want those things. I feel like I have to start everything all over again. I'm worried that I blew my one chance for them with Nathan. I mean, who's to say I can find someone or something better? At least I knew what to expect with Nathan; he was familiar and I knew he would never leave me. And I didn't have to worry about money. It's not like I was with him because he has a good job, but it was nice to have that financial security, you know? Now, I have to be conscious of every single thing I buy just to be able to afford my tiny apartment. More than that though, I worry that with someone else, well, what if there's something fundamentally wrong with me? What if I just can't make any relationship work? I mean, my parents are divorced, and now, I'm divorcing. Maybe I never had a chance. Although Nathan's parents have been together for like 25 years or something, and that didn't seem to help him. But, still, I think there's a real possibility that there's something wrong with me. Sorry, I'm rambling.

Bronwen: You're not rambling and there's nothing wrong with you. I know things feel overwhelming right now, but they're going to get better. Maybe that sounds too optimistic or naive, but you definitely don't have to figure anything major out right now. Today was a big step. I know I've said this before, but I'm really proud of you. These past three years have been really difficult but think of all you've done: you got your own apartment; you spent months in China teaching English; you travelled; you started a new relationship. And now, you can officially move on with your life.

Lydia: Yeah, I hope so. When they finally called our number, I thought, "In a few minutes, I'll be free."

~

My research was inspired by Lydia. Her experience with divorce (and its lingering aftermath) led me to think of a number of acquaintances who are also young women, without children, and recently divorced. Compelled by these personal connections and the evident silence around young women's experiences of divorce, I began to see this experience as "subjugated knowledge" that demands to be explored (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). This research took up this call. I aimed to honour and illuminate the complex experiences of young, divorced women against the ideological, social, and cultural contexts in which they navigate experiences. I turn now to an introductory overview of the context and scope of my research.

1.1 Research Context and Scope

Over three decades ago, the "divorce revolution" was heralded (Weitzman, 1985). This "revolution" emerged on the heels of changing divorce laws—specifically, the "no-fault" divorce—that made divorce much more accessible and resulted in the highest divorce rates to date (Bradford, 1997; Eichler, 2012; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). In her provocative book, Weitzman (1985) first coined the "divorce revolution" and focused on how the surge in divorce had devastating socioeconomic consequences for two groups of women in particular: mothers with young children; and older stay-at-home wives without job skills. Other scholars have situated the "divorce revolution" in a broader context, affecting many more individuals than those that were the focus of Weitzman's research. In particular, beyond changing divorce laws, marriage and divorce have undergone profound changes since the 1960s, with at least four major sociocultural shifts: deferment of marriage and declining marriage rates; increasing prevalence of less committed relationships, especially cohabitation; postponement of parenthood and low fertility rates; and high and increasing rates of partnership dissolution (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Furthermore, coinciding with the second wave women's movement, rising divorce rates have

been associated with the increase in women's employment and income over the last several decades (Cook et al., 2013; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010), which has enabled wives' greater economic independence and increased possibilities to leave marriages in which they might otherwise have remained due to economic necessity (Ruggles, 1997; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000). While this significant shift in women's employment challenges Weitzman's largely uniform view of divorced women's economic disadvantages, the confluence of social, legal, and economic changes surrounding divorce from as early as the mid-1960s has undoubtedly "transformed the institution of marriage and the perception and reality of divorce" (Weitzman, 1985, p. xviii).

While the "divorce revolution" is clearly complex, an overview of existing research on women and divorce reveals several dominant approaches and emphases that leave important gaps. Firstly, as discussed above, there is an emphasis on examining the economic factors of women and divorce, specifically how divorce affects women's economic situation and how women's employment influences divorce (cf. Cooke et al., 2013; Dewilde, 2009; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Smock, 1994; van Damne & Uunk, 2009; Weitzman, 1985). Secondly, there is a focus on divorce research in relation to women with children (using the term "parental divorce"), detailing the challenges of single-motherhood (cf. Avison, 1997; Smith, 1997) and divorce's effects on children (cf. Barber & Eccles, 1992; Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Additionally, there is a preponderance of divorce research from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s (Ahrons, 2007) due, in large part, to the changing no-fault divorce laws around this time (Bradford, 1997; Eichler, 2012). More contemporary divorce research focuses on singular and specific areas related to divorce, including a continued emphasis on economic impacts (Dewilde, 2009; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; van Damne & Uunk, 2009) as

well as more recent research interests, such as cohabitation (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012). Lastly, the vast majority of research on women and divorce (and divorce more broadly) involves American research and quantitative data from large, national surveys (Cook et al., 2013). Thus, there is a lack of both recent and Canadian divorce research, generally, and specifically, research on young, divorced women, without children, particularly using a qualitative research approach that focuses on divorce as a whole, complex experience.

These combined research gaps have resulted in a paucity of current research on the lived experiences of young women—in their 20s and 30s—without children, experiencing divorce. Significantly, this group of women have distinct individual and cultural influences compared to women in their 40s and 50s (or older), with children, experiencing divorce. For instance, the current cultural environment of young women includes powerful gendered ideologies of femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism, which promote self-worth and self-definition through women's heterosexual relationships leading to eventual marriage and motherhood (Cobb, 2011; DePaulo, 2006; Lazar, 2002; Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). Accordingly, divorce for young women without children represents a significant departure from these deeply gendered cultural norms of couplehood and motherhood. As with other groups of individuals who divert from hegemonic ideologies, young women experiencing divorce report feeling alone, marginalized, and stigmatized (Lunau, 2011; Rothchild, 2010). Although young women experiencing divorce may feel very alone, they are among many young women in similar circumstances. This prevalence is suggested given the fairly recent emergence of the "starter marriage" phenomenon (a first marriage lasting five years or less and ending without children) (Paul, 2002). Furthermore, there are several risk factors for divorce that are more likely for younger people, including cohabitation, younger age at first marriage, less education, and financial instability

(Smock, 2000). Moreover, while women are more likely to campaign for marriage (Lunau, 2011), they also legally initiate 70% of divorces (Miller, 2014; Terry & Roberts, 2024). However, when women initiate divorce, they experience distinct guilt compared to men given that gender-differentiated socialization leads women to emphasize social attachments, empathy, and the personal needs and desires of others over their own (Bem, 1975, 1981; Helgeson, 1994; Mahalik et al., 2005), all of which are confronted in initiating a divorce (Baum, 2007).

While there may be unique challenges for young women experiencing divorce, this transition may also be an opportunity for women to rebuild their lives in ways that assert their own identities and potentially resist some of the stultifying ideologies young women encounter. For instance, there is a growing movement of women "celebrating divorce" in their 20s and 30s with divorce parties (Bielski, 2014), "trash the dress" photo shoots (Caputa, 2014), divorce tattoos (Counter, 2014), and online support groups and blogs—all confirming the presence of this "untapped and often misunderstood community" (Caputa, 2014, back cover). Clearly, there is a fascinating nexus of cultural ideologies shaping the individual experiences of divorce for young women without children.

As with other ideologies, those affecting young, divorced women are often reproduced, maintained, and resisted within leisure contexts (Shaw, 2001). However, despite significant leisure connections, the leisure literature has largely ignored women's experiences of divorce generally, with the exception of limited research on parental divorce. Furthermore, to my knowledge, no leisure research to date has specifically explored young women's experiences of divorce to usefully highlight its connections to family, relationships, and popular culture, among other valuable considerations. As such, in addition to addressing the research gaps that exist

within the general divorce literature, my research adds a leisure perspective to exploring young women's experiences of divorce.

With this in mind, the purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of young women (in their 20s and 30s), without children, who are divorced. More specifically, this study sought to explore how this group of women were influenced by different gendered ideologies reflecting social, cultural, relational, and personal contexts and pressures. To unpack the complexity of these experiences, this study was framed by conceptual and disciplinary frameworks, which further focused the research: namely, critical feminist theory (a macro "theory"); theories on transitions and grief ("micro" theories); and a leisure perspective (a disciplinary framework)—all of which were informed by the research as a feminist social justice project that aimed to expose the marginalization and stigmatization faced by young, divorced women and to illuminate new understandings of their complex, lived experiences.

Ultimately, it is my hope that this research speaks to a timely and socially relevant "new divorce revolution" (Caputa, 2014), that, despite its prevalence, remains as "subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). By breaking the silence around young women's experiences of divorce, this research contributes to empowering participants by having their perspectives heard, valued, and shared with others (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Parry & Johnson, 2022). This research also contributes more broadly to social justice by offering potentially transformative accounts that render women's marginalized experiences more visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Parry, 2014) as they negotiate the complexities of their gendered selves within the "shattering" and "re-creating" processes of divorce as young women.

2.0 Literature Review

In this chapter, I contextualize my research exploring the complex experiences of young, divorced women without children. I begin by providing an overview of divorce generally, including divorce rates, risk factors, and situating divorce research within its socio-political climate. I then turn to an overview of research on the gendered experiences of divorce, focusing on three areas: economic, social, and psychological. Following this, I begin to develop a conceptual framework for understanding women's lived experiences of divorce as a life transition, drawing on a transitions theory perspective and three gendered ideologies that particularly affect divorced women. In the last major section of this chapter, I consider leisure perspectives to assert their relevance to understanding young women's experiences of divorce. Finally, I position this research as a response to significant research gaps across several bodies of literature.

2.1 Overview of Divorce

There is a vast body of literature on divorce generally, detailing historical trends, factors that increase and decrease the risk of divorce, and impacts of divorce from various perspectives, including social and economic. To contextualize divorce, however, there must first be an understanding of its counterpart, marriage. Marriage remains one of the most important social institutions in organizing the lives of individuals (Crossman, 2024; Eichler, 2012). For centuries in the Western world, marriage has been pivotal in organizing and controlling life course transitions, individual identities, intimate relationships, living arrangements, childbearing, and childrearing (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). Historically, marriage and family life were highly gendered, with gendered relationships supported religiously, socially, and legally (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Since the 1960s, marriage and divorce have undergone profound

changes, characterized by at least four major shifts: deferment of marriage and declining marriage rates; increasing prevalence of less committed relationships, especially cohabitation; postponement of parenthood and low fertility rates; and high and increasing rates of partnership dissolution (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Below, I further contextualize a broad understanding of divorce, and its changes over time, before focusing on an overview of research on the gendered experience of divorce.

2.1.1 Divorce Rates

Most people have heard the ominous statistic that fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Examining the accuracy of this statement, however, is somewhat more complex given the relative variability of documented divorce rates depending on factors such as data sources, time periods, locations, and legal situations. One of the most significant factors influencing divorce rates in the twentieth century was changes to how divorce could be legally obtained. Before the late 1960s, almost all countries that allowed divorce required proof from one spouse that the other had committed a "fault or offense against the marriage," which were "grounds" for divorce and the only way to legally end a marriage (Bradford, 1997, p. 610). Within the fault divorce system, grounds for a divorce needed to be raised and proven by at least one spouse (although both spouses could also raise grounds), and included desertion, abandonment, cruelty, and adultery (Bradford, 1997). Between the late 1960s and mid-1980s in the United States and Canada (and elsewhere), the fault divorce system was replaced by a "no-fault" divorce system based only on "marital breakdown" defined as living apart for at least one year, committing adultery, and/or physically or mentally mistreating the other spouse (Eichler, 2012). The "no-fault" divorce made getting a divorce much more accessible for couples seeking to do so, which was reflected in hugely increased divorce rates.

In an American context, divorce rates steadily rose over the last 60 years (Teachman, 2010), with a peak in divorces between 1960 and 1980 ("no-fault" divorce was adopted by all fifty states between 1969 and 1985) when divorce rates more than doubled (Bradford, 1997; Lunau, 2011). In Canada, following the first major changes in the Canadian divorce law in 1968, there was a significant increase in divorces (from 54.8 divorces per 100,000 population in 1968 to 124.2 in 1969) (Eichler, 2012). The increase continued with a second major peak in the late 1980s when the revised *Divorce Act* took effect in 1986, which proclaimed a "no-fault" divorce (Eichler, 2012).

Since the 1980s, however, the divorce rate in the United States has declined (Amato, 2010) and stabilized (Teachman, 2010). A decade ago, the divorce rate was estimated as being between 42-45%[2] of all marriages ending in divorce (Stanton, 2015). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—which tracks the rates of marriage and divorce nationally as well as by state—as of 2024, the nationwide divorce rate was around 42% (Terry & Roberts, 2025). In Canada, there has been a similar pattern of decline (from the initial increase during the 1960s-1980s) and stabilization of divorce rates. Currently, four in 10 (or, specifically 41%) of the Canadian couples who married in 2008 are projected to be divorced by 2035, a rate which has been relatively stable (Lunau, 2011; Vanier Institute, 2013). According to Statistics Canada, the most current national census (from 2020) still reflects that about 40% of marriages end in divorce (Merchant, 2022).

[2] This format represents the measure most scholars use (and which is most widely used generally) to reflect the "divorce rate" as a *cohort measure rate*, which is an educated projection calculated by examining a particular cohort—a large group of individuals marrying within a particular time period—relative to general life-tables to provide a broader picture of the overall marital lifetime expectation (Stanton, 2015). There are, however, three other measures of a divorce rate: crude divorce rate (number of divorces per 1000 people annually, or age-adjusted for people fifteen and older); percent ever divorced (percentage of ever-divorced adults in a population); and refined divorce rate (annual number of divorces per 1000 married women) (Stanton, 2015).

These divorce rates since the 1960s can be further situated within a broader picture over the last 150 years, which provides an understanding of some common claims about divorce rates generally. Using American statistics, family economists Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) affirm that the divorce rate over the last 150 years has risen (while the marriage rate has varied around a relatively stable mean). Within this overall rise, there have been peaks and declines influenced by various social and economic factors: from 1860 to about 1930, there was a steady level of divorces; a decline during the Depression (1930s); a rise following World War II (post-1945); unusually low divorce in the 1950s and early 1960s; exceptionally high divorce rates in the 1970s, reaching a peak in 1981 (as discussed above); and then a decline in the divorce rate over the next quarter-century (1980-2005) with the divorce rate in 2005 at its lowest level since 1970 (falling from a peak of 22.8 divorces per 1000 married couples in 1979 to 16.7 in 2005) (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Notably, while the divorce rates have been declining since the 1980s, and are at their lowest (as of 2005), so too have marriage rates (the number of people entering marriage as a proportion of the population) declined and reached their lowest point in recorded history (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Thus, the common (and often sensationalized) popular media claim that "the divorce rate is going up" (Miller, 2014) is accurate only insofar as this represents an overall trend over the last century and a half and not that the divorce rate is currently rising or that it has been in the last three decades (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). As discussed above, the other common claim about divorce rates is that "half of all marriages end in divorce," which was roughly true only for a specific cohort of marriages—those that occurred in the 1970s (48% of which had ended within 25 years)—but not for marriages in subsequent decades (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007, p. 30).

In summary, gaining an accurate portrait of divorce rates, both past and current, can be complex since they are influenced by a number of social, economic, and legal factors (such as fault and no-fault divorce systems) (Bradford, 1997; Eichler, 2012; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Moreover, divorce rates are often variably measured and interpreted (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Stanton, 2015; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2011). While divorce rates over the last 150 years have risen overall, they have declined since the 1980s (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007) and have stabilized for more than a decade to a rate of about 4 in 10 marriages ending in divorce in both the United States and Canada (Lunau, 2011; Merchant, 2022; Stanton, 2015; Terry & Roberts, 2025; Vanier Institute, 2013). Understanding and conceptualizing divorce generally, however, must extend beyond its rate, or prevalence since 40% of marriages ending is indeed prevalent (albeit less so than the infamous 50%). The following section will provide an overview of some of the main factors—or "risk factors"—implicated in divorce.

2.1.2 Risk Factors for Divorce

Before reviewing the "risk factors" of divorce, I want to preface this section by acknowledging and problematizing the pervasive language of "risk" used within much of the divorce literature, including the literature discussed below. In its simplest terms, *risk* is "the possibility of something bad happening" (Cambridge University Press, 2025, para.1). More specifically, risk involves uncertainty about the effects or implications of an activity as it relates to something that is valued, such as health, wealth, property or the environment (Society for Risk Analysis, 2018). Entire sub-fields are devoted to understanding, assessing, managing, and mitigating risks within various contexts, including financial risk management (Christoffersen, 2004) and health and safety risk assessment (Li, Chau, & Feng, 2019). It is clear that making people aware of "risks" invokes a certain fear of the potential for something "bad" to happen and

an attendant “warning” to take specific “precautions” to “lower the risk” or even to potentially eliminate it altogether. In this vein, the common description and discussion of the “risk factors” of divorce brings with it the linguistic baggage of fear, uncertainty, and the desire to appropriately “manage” this risk to avoid the “bad outcome” of *divorce*, much as one would take steps to avoid the “risk of a heart failure” from high blood pressure (Mantovani et al., 2022), for instance.

However, I contend that uncritically following this trail of the “risk factors” of divorce reinscribes the longstanding stigma of divorce as (unilaterally) “bad,” and thus, if it actually occurs, as it did for the women in this research and so many others, it brings with it all the typical accompaniments of “something bad,” including shame, guilt, a sense of failure, isolation, and marginalization as, indeed, the literature below and the findings of this research confirm (cf. Caputa, 2014; Jerabek et al., 2014; Kim, 2024; Lenz, 2023; Lunau, 2011; Rothchild, 2010). Critically, this research resists and challenges the problematic notion that women’s divorce is only, or ultimately, “something bad.” Instead, this research expands our personal and collective understandings of young women’s divorce (and divorce, more broadly) as also and variously “something....” empowering, liberatory, and a catalyst for re-creating a life of *value* on one’s own terms.

In the following sections, I outline select literature that speaks to the “risk factors” of divorce to situate a sociocultural overview of some of the existing divorce research but also, crucially, to provide an overview of the scholarly focus of divorce—both mirroring and further constructing broader thinking about divorce—to *de*construct the patriarchal social structures that underlie these purposeful narratives of “risk.” This acknowledgement and problematization follow the imperative of feminist research to expose, interrogate, and deconstruct the patriarchal

status quo—including the language used to uphold it—to create new social structures based on gender equity (Parry, 2019; Snyder-Hall, 2010; Valtchanov & Parry, in press).

2.1.2.1 Women's Employment?

One of the most discussed factors contributing to the increase in divorce rates (over the last 150 years) has been the increase in women's employment. In Western countries, the post-World War II increase in married women's labour force participation has been frequently correlated with an increase in divorce rates (Cooke et al., 2013). This connection (some say causation) has been reported on a macro level, but also on an individual level, with the contention that employed wives in many countries are more likely to divorce than wives who are not in the labour force (Rogers, 2004).

There are several explanations and competing arguments surrounding the connection between wives' employment and divorce. One influential explanation for this connection was Becker's (1981) argument that the specialization of a gendered division of labour in nuclear families increased the benefits of marriage and its stability. According to this specialization model, employed women do not benefit from a gendered division of labour in marriage given the model's stipulation that benefits of specialization diminish when both partners are employed. Thus, since employed women are both less likely to marry and more likely to leave marriages, and since more women are employed (post-war), Becker attributes women's employment as a causal factor in increased divorce rates (Becker, 1981).

Becker's now-dated model has been contested by a number of sociologists, including Cooke and Gash (2010) who contend that dual-earner couples are more stable than single-earner households in what they called the "flexibility hypothesis" where the flexibility of having two household earners (and assumably, shared household labour, although this is not specified)

counters the “risky strategy” of Becker’s specialization model. That is, with the specialization model, the productive or reproductive household work of the nuclear family dominant in Western marriages would be halted if one spouse is unable to perform their specialty, such as if they become ill or disabled. Whereas, with the flexibility hypothesis of a dual-earner household, this same risk of specialization does not apply and, as such, contributes to more stable marriages (Cook & Gash, 2010).

Others acknowledge that the dependence created within the specialization model, where wives were financially dependent on husbands, encouraged young women to pursue further education and employment to reduce their dependence (Blossfeld & Muller, 2002). The “economic opportunity hypothesis” directly contests the specialization model, asserting that women’s employment does not intrinsically destabilize marriage in general, but rather, provides women with the resources to leave unsatisfactory marriages (Ruggles, 1997). A large-scale test of the competing views supported the economic opportunity hypothesis, suggesting that at the individual level, women’s employment does not destabilize happy marriages, but does increase the risk of divorce in unhappy marriages (Schoen et al., 2002). The most recent research suggests the risk of divorce associated with wives’ employment is reduced and even reversed within countries with greater policy support for employment equality and more equitable divisions of unpaid labour between women and men (Cooke et al., 2013). These findings highlight the importance of the socio-political context in considering gender equality (or lack thereof) and divorce risk.

2.1.2.2 Cohabitation

Another factor that is commonly discussed in the literature as a divorce risk factor is cohabitation. There is the persistent idea that people who live together before marriage—

cohabitation—should fare better in marriage than those who do not live together until after marriage because cohabitation would provide a 'test' of a relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). While this seems to make sense, decades of research showing the contrary have largely puzzled researchers whose studies overwhelmingly indicated that cohabitation before marriage was, in fact, associated with poorer stability and happiness in marriage: the "cohabitation effect" (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006, p. 499). These findings even extend to couples who cohabit before engagement, where they too are at greater risk for marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Kline et al., 2004). Stanley, Rhoades and Markman (2006) explain this cohabitation effect occurs for many couples because they "slide" into cohabitation (which typically happens quickly), without deliberately making decisions around their compatibility and intentions as a couple. Couples then become caught in what they call the "inertia of cohabitation," where constraints for leaving the relationship increase (such as financial commitments and a lack of awareness of relationship alternatives), but the dedication to the relationship does not necessarily increase. This "sliding versus deciding" explanation for the cohabitation effect suggests that "some couples who otherwise would not have married end up married because of the inertia of cohabitation . . . especially where a transition such as cohabitation increases inertia to remain in a relationship regardless of quality or fit" (Stanley et al., 2006. p. 499). This risk factor of cohabitation (without deliberately "deciding" about the relationship) is significant given that an increase in cohabitation is one of the most notable shifts in family demographics over the past century (Smock, 2000), with an estimated 50-60% of couples living together before marriage in the United States (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Despite this new norm of premarital cohabitation, however, the risk of marital distress and divorce has not subsided (Kamp Dush et al., 2003).

2.1.2.3 Education Level

While the general trend is that fewer couples are getting married (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007), highly educated people are moving in a "more marriage-minded direction" (Lunau, 2011). This is perhaps surprising given that highly educated people are typically considered more "socially liberal," however, they are embracing a more traditional idea of marriage and are increasingly divorce-averse, at least in an American context (Lunau, 2011). This trend is reflected in the last two decade's declining divorce rate among couples with post-secondary education compared to couples with lower levels of education whose divorce rates have remained constant (following the overall trend discussed above) (Amato, 2010). If both spouses in a couple have a post-secondary education, their tendency to have a higher income is suggested as a contributing factor for their lower divorce risk since education level is considered a reliable indicator of socioeconomic status (SES) and thus a predictor of stress within a marriage (with lower relative stress for couples with higher education and SES) (Smith, 2013). Couples' similar education level (e.g., both have post-secondary education) is also connected to the theory of homogamous relationships—"like attracts like"—wherein two people with similar SES are also likely to have similar interests and expectations and, as such, good marital compatibility (Smith, 2013). Although this logic would also apply to couples who both have low SES, it is proposed that it is the *combination* of the theory of homogamous relationships and the lower level of stress resulting from a higher income that helps to explain how higher education serves as a protective factor against divorce, and conversely, how a lower level of education is considered a risk factor for divorce.

2.1.2.4 Age at Marriage

Lastly, another risk factor for divorce is a younger age at marriage. Specifically, individuals (and couples) who marry before the age of 25 are considered at risk for marital dissolution (Lunau, 2011). Individuals who marry in their teens or early 20s have a divorce risk that is almost double that of newlyweds between the ages of 25 and 29 (with people marrying in their mid-30s or later having an even lower risk of divorce—by 43%) (Eichler, 2012). Fortunately, couples are waiting longer to get married (Lesthaeghe, 2010), which has contributed to the declining divorce rate. The average age for both Canadian men and women entering (a first) marriage has been slowly rising over the last several decades: in 1950, the average age for men was 28.5 years and 25.9 years for women; in 2008, the average for men was 31.6 years and 29.6 years for women (Eichler, 2012). In the United States, there has been a similar pattern of rising age at first marriage, particularly for women, although the average ages for both men and women are somewhat lower than in Canada. Looking even further back, in 1890, the average age of marriage for American men was 26 years and 27 years in 2004—a remarkably minimal increase over more than a century (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). For American women, the average age in 1890 was 22 years and 26 years in 2004 (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). This trend not only reflects that there has been a rising age of marriage, but also a narrower age gap between men and women (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

While there are certainly other risk factors for divorce that are not discussed here, I have reviewed four of the more common and influential risk factors discussed in the divorce literature: women's employment; cohabitation; education level, and age at marriage. Notably, younger individuals are more likely to directly have three of these risk factors—cohabitation, less education, and younger age at first marriage—with a fourth risk factor of financial instability that

is more likely for younger individuals related to less education and less employment (Smock, 2000). By extension, the increased likelihood of these risk factors for young women suggests there are several larger factors operating to destabilize their marriages and incite their divorces. Before turning to a consideration of the effects of these divorces in the following major section, an overview of the gendered experience of divorce, I provide a contextualization of American divorce research, which represents the majority of the research to be discussed in this chapter.

2.1.3 Situating American Divorce Research within its Socio-Political Climate

A selective review of Canadian research on divorce is incorporated above and subsequently, where possible, however, the preponderance of North American divorce research is American (this research gap, among others, is discussed at the end of the chapter). For many general trends and insights, this research is still valuable and relevant within a Canadian context, but the following brief discussion offers an important contextualization of a broad socio-political climate that is situated specifically in an American context.

As discussed, divorce rates surged in the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, and with this surge came a significant interest in divorce, including its causes and its aftermath, securing a place for divorce in the mainstream and on research agendas (Ahrons, 2007). During this distinct time of high divorce rates, heated public debates circulated around conservatives' concerns that the (then) recent "no-fault" divorce legislation "challenged cherished societal values about individual rights . . . . [and] threatened traditional beliefs about the permanence of marriage and the interdependence of family and marriage" (Ahrons, 2007, p. 3). These concerns about divorce's effects on the family, particularly divorced families with children, led to a proliferation of studies exploring the process of divorce, the dynamics of ex-spouse relationships (specifically related to parenting), and the effects of divorce on children (Ahrons, 2007).

While the centrality of marriage in people's lives has diminished in the last several decades—along with an increased emphasis on equality, tolerance, and freedom to choose different lifestyles—this shift has coincided with a conservative backlash promoting marriage, family relationships, and conformity to earlier patterns of behaviour, including the importance and permanence of marriage (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This backlash has been particularly evident in the United States, making issues about marriage and family life key topics in the "culture wars" being waged in American politics (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, p. 1011). This resurgence of a conservative political climate focusing on marriage promotion in the United States has meant that government research funding on divorce is no longer encouraged (Adams & Coltrane, 2007) and helps to explain the marked decrease in divorce research. Indeed, research on divorce is "tightly interwoven with our personal values and religious beliefs [such] that discussion on the complex realities of divorce and its aftermath becomes submerged in polarized debates" (Ahrons, 2007, p. 4).

Notably, Americans express more conservative attitudes about divorce than adults in other Western countries, including Canada, Australia, and several European and Nordic countries (Cooke et al., 2013). Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) make similar distinctions in asserting that "marriage appears to be more central and cherished in the United States than in many other countries" (p. 39). Furthermore, while the centrality of marriage for (many) Americans is connected to more conservative attitudes about divorce, as their divorce rate (42-45%) indicates, they are still willing to exit marriages. However, their remarriage rates are higher than in most other industrialized countries (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). In this sense, Americans' high rates of both marriage and remarriage affirm their centrality of marriage generally, or across the lifespan, rather than necessarily within a single marriage.

This recognition has intensified in very recent years given the right-wing proposal to "turn back the clock on American divorce laws" by eliminating no-fault divorce, which the newly minted Republican Vice Presidential nominee at the time (now, of course, the Vice President) called, "one of the great tricks . . . the sexual revolution [or, second-wave feminism] pulled on the American populace" (Lefkovitz, 2024, para.1). This proposal for a return to the antiquated "fault divorce" legal system aligns with the right-wing's efforts to "maintain a biblically based . . . definition of marriage and family" (Wendling, 2025, para. 32). This conservative vision of re-creating the "golden age of marriage" (before no-fault divorce) does not, unsurprisingly, include divorce (except in the case of state-determined "faults," some of which were limited to only adultery, for instance, or otherwise prohibitive to legally prove, especially for women) (Lefkovitz, 2024). Significantly, the prospect of restoring fault divorce would be *far* from "golden" for women, in particular, as it would harken back to a "marital regime . . . that, for decades, trapped women in abusive marriages [and] held women to higher expectations than their husbands" (Lefkovitz, 2024, para. 18).

This American socio-political climate requires that American divorce research be contextualized within this particular conservatism and marriage centrality (now, more so than perhaps any other time within the past five decades).[3] Additionally, research outside of the United States needs to be explored to generate research and theories that may uniquely function outside of the American context (Cooke et al., 2013). The current research responds to this call by exploring the experiences of young, divorced women *in Canada*. With a broad understanding of divorce in general, including its rates and "risk" factors, I turn now to providing an overview of the gendered experiences of divorce.

[3] Each U.S. state adopted the no-fault divorce legal system at varying times, from 1969 to as late as 2010.

2.2 Overview of Research on Gendered Experiences of Divorce

An overview of the existing literature on the gendered experiences of divorce can be broadly considered within three areas that each affect divorced women: economic, social, and psychological. This overview is necessarily selective but aims to highlight a breadth of literature, incorporating both classic and current research. This breadth should be contextualized, however, in the recognition that there is a preponderance of divorce research from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s due to changing no-fault divorce laws, with a subsequent drop in divorce research, as discussed above (Ahrons, 2007). Furthermore, the scope of this overview includes divorced women of all ages since the majority of research on divorced women (and divorce generally) represents all ages. However, given my research focus on young, divorced women, I have distinguished research which does specify women's ages (or situates them as relatively younger or older). Lastly, while much of the research overviewed here includes divorced women who are mothers (within multi-age samples), I am not specifically focusing on "parental divorce" or the experiences of divorced (single) mothers, since this research is already emphasized within existing literature and lies outside the scope of the current research on divorced women without children. I begin by considering the economic experiences of divorced women.

2.2.1 Economic Experiences

One of the main areas frequently examined in the effects of divorce is how economic resources are impacted, including income, assets, and employment (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1998). Indeed, the economic consequences of divorce have been the topic of many publications in recent years (cf. Cook et al., 2013; Dewilde, 2009; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; van Damne & Uunk, 2009). This economic focus has been persistent not only recently, but at least since the 1980s. Weitzman's (1985) *Divorce Revolution* firmly asserted that the no-fault

divorce law and ‘equal’ treatment of husbands and wives regarding economic settlements had created a “new poor”—mothers with young children and older stay-at-home wives without job skills. She provocatively contended that women experienced a 73% decline in their standard of living following divorce (while husbands’ standard of living increased by an average of 42%), which led to often devastating socioeconomic consequences for women (and their children) (Weitzman, 1985). Several studies discussed below expand on the economic consequences of divorce for women, beginning with income.

2.2.1.1 Income

While Weitzman’s (1985) research represented a broad marital sample (all ages), Smock’s (1994) longitudinal research from a similar time period (1979-1988) specifically examined the economic consequences of divorce for young men and women. Her research examined marital status and income variables over time using data from the National (American) Longitudinal Survey of Youth in which participants were aged 14-21 at the beginning of the survey, 1979, and aged 23-30 at the end of the survey, in 1988. Smock (1994) also considered race and ethnicity in her research, specifically, white, black, and Hispanic adults. Smock (1994) sought to determine whether young adults followed the same pattern commonly assumed for broader samples: that men fare better economically than women following divorce, as proposed by Weitzman(1985), for instance, among others. Indications that young adults, particularly young women, may be distinct from a broader group of divorced adults were suggested by research showing that young and less educated women are the most economically vulnerable group among divorced women (Meyer, 1993).

This distinction of greater economic vulnerability, however, is combined with potentially more moderate gender inequities given that young women were more likely to be employed

during marriage (Moen, 1992), compared to the "older homemakers," for instance, that Weitzman (1985) included in her research. Smock (1994) found that even among young adults, separation and divorce have far greater economic consequences for women than men, with the post-divorce personal incomes of women as a percentage of men's ranging from 75% (for white adults) to 85% and 88% (for black and Hispanic adults respectively). These percentages, however, must be contextualized within the economic disparities of minorities, wherein, within this representative sample, white men's per capita incomes were the highest, followed by Hispanic men, and black men. Thus, while all racial and ethnic groups of women experienced substantial economic decreases, black women were the most economically disadvantaged (compared to white and Hispanic women).

It is important to recognize that women's economic disadvantage after divorce is directly or indirectly related to their responsibilities for their children since care for children affects women's employment (both pre- and post-divorce) (Smock, 1994). Notably, young women without children fare about as well as men economically following divorce (Smock, 1994). As such, women's economic disadvantage does not necessarily extend to all women; it is mothers who are at a distinct economic disadvantage, and this continues to be the case even decades after Smock's (1994) research from the 1980s (e.g., Dewilde, 2009).

2.2.1.2 Employment

More recent research supports women's persistent economic disadvantage following divorce, with women experiencing a substantial income decline (van Damne & Uunk, 2009). Due to this income decline, many divorced women have greater financial stress and more limited financial resources (compared to men) (Dewilde, 2009) and often need to depend on social welfare and experience increased poverty risks (Dewilde, 2002). Increased economic

vulnerability for women after divorce generally leads to women's increased employment following divorce, although there have been some inconsistent findings suggesting there may be a decrease in women's employment (in the United Kingdom), or no change in divorced women's employment (in Canada) (van Damne & Uunk, 2009). In their study exploring changes in women's employment after divorce in thirteen European Union countries, van Damne and Uunk (2009) found that, overall, women only modestly changed their employment after divorce (the increase in employment following divorce was only 9%). However, even if women are in paid employment after divorce, this does not necessarily alleviate their economic disadvantage compared to men. This persistent economic disadvantage is demonstrated in Symoens et al.'s (2014) recent study finding that among divorced women and men, approximately as many women as men were in paid employment, but that, notably, while women were more often highly educated, they were still at more risk of poverty following divorce.

An overview of some of the literature on the economic consequences of divorce for women provides a sense of divorced women's economic disadvantages, which can include significant income decline. While these economic disadvantages persistently affect many divorced women, some important distinctions have emerged in terms of age, race and ethnicity, and significantly, whether divorced women are mothers or not. These distinctions point to diversity within gendered experiences of divorce.

2.2.2 Social Experiences

A second area affecting divorced women involves social experiences, including women's relationships (or lack thereof) with friends, family, and new partners. A persistent focus within existing literature in this area highlights the loneliness of divorced women. This topic has been explored in both older and more recent research, demonstrating the centrality of considering

women's social experiences following divorce. This focus is undoubtedly connected to gender differentiated socialization that leads women to emphasize social attachments (Baum, 2007), as well as to the reproduction of this expectation through gendered ideologies (which will be discussed later in this chapter).

In terms of older research, all of the older women in Wallerstein's (1986) study were moderately or severely lonely. Notably, this loneliness was not associated with social isolation since a significant number of the women had women friends and were involved in community and work activities. However, these social connections did not seem to alleviate their loneliness and suffering. As with older women, younger women (divorced in their 20s and 30s) also experienced loneliness, which persisted ten years after divorce for young women who did not re-marry or who re-married, but then re-divorced again, given that there were more remarriages and subsequent divorces among younger women (Wallerstein, 1986). Again, as with older women, the (single) younger women who reported loneliness did not find this loneliness to be alleviated despite a range of social and extended family connections and supports. As Wallerstein (1986) concluded, "lasting loneliness among women who do not remarry represented one of the grave consequences of divorce" (p. 75).

Wallerstein's (1986) finding of divorced women's persistent loneliness despite significant social networks may, in part, be explained by Dykstra and Fokkema's (2007) more recent study of divorced individuals (women and men) that distinguished 'loneliness' into social and emotional loneliness, whereby social loneliness involves deficits in support networks (including friends and family) and emotional loneliness is associated with the absence of an intimate partner. With this distinction, an interesting gender pattern emerged that speaks to women's particular experience of loneliness: Divorced women experience more emotional

loneliness and divorced men experience more social loneliness. Focusing on divorced women, Dykstra and Fokkema (2007) suggest that they experienced less social loneliness since women had larger and more varied social networks before their marriages ended, they lost fewer contacts following their divorce, and they were better able to build new networks following divorce. However, while divorced women in Dykstra and Fokkema's (2007) study did not experience as much social loneliness, they did experience greater emotional loneliness, particularly if they attached great importance to having a partner (partner-centeredness). The social importance of a close partner compared to other forms of social relationships is further highlighted in other research which argues that while friends and relatives can function as confidants, the intimacy of a partner relationship promotes a unique form of social support that is more powerful than support provided by others (Brown, 2000). Thus, while divorced women often continue to have significant social relationships with friends, family, and community, the loss of a spouse through divorce has distinct and difficult repercussions for women's sense of (emotional) loneliness.

Exploring a similarly nuanced understanding of women's social experiences following divorce, LaPierre's (2012) study considered two types of social integration (or disintegration) for divorced women: primary integration, which involves relationships with family, friends, and neighbours; and secondary integration, which involves social ties in organised groups. The two types of social integration typically provide different forms of support resources, with primary integration providing access to emotional and instrumental support, while secondary integration often provides networking and informational support. LaPierre (2012) found that divorced women specifically experienced a secondary integration disadvantage, meaning that their social ties with organised groups declined following divorce.

Lastly, another study explored the intersection of private loneliness and public belonging following the "aftermath" of divorce. Gorman's (2012) study also represents a notable departure from the preponderance of quantitative divorce research mentioned earlier, as she uses an autoethnographic narrative style to explore her own sense of isolation as an older divorced woman within urban landscapes and public places. Specifically, she describes the duality that can exist for divorced women in feeling they need to portray an "appropriate . . . public demeanor" that belies the "authenticity" of their own private loneliness (p. 843). Further, Gorman shares her particular discomfort as a divorced woman in certain urban spaces, including neighbourhoods in her city populated by young professionals, where she must confront young couples who "pledge unending devotion to another of their tribe in stunningly excessive pageantry" (p. 844). As a woman walking alone through these public spaces, she becomes aware of how her attempt at "the most sacred challenge of all—the love of another human being" went "hopelessly awry" and she accepts that she "will never love again" (p. 844). Her loneliness, however, is tempered by the comfort she feels within her own neighbourhood, where she enjoys walks with her dog and encounters with neighbours and friendly strangers.

While this research speaks to some of the social challenges experienced by divorced women, other research demonstrates possibilities for new relationships, specifically with intimate partners. For instance, while Wallerstein's (1986) research highlighted the persistent loneliness of both older and younger women, it also demonstrated that younger divorced women seem to be more able to rebuild intimate adult relationships and to re-establish social stability following divorce. More recent research has insisted that finding a new partner after divorce can be considered the most effective coping strategy, particularly when a new partner can contribute to financial security, which contributes to well-being (Symoens et al., 2014). Symoens et al.'s

(2014) study confirms that having a new partner seems to make an important difference in the mental health of women after divorce. Compared to single divorced women, women who live together with a new partner (either cohabiting or remarried) are significantly more satisfied with life, report higher levels of self-esteem, and feel less depressed. Interestingly, this positive effect occurs even in post-divorce relationships with high conflict. As Symoens et al. (2014) suggest, "It seems that partner relationships, despite their increasing instability, currently remain at the core of . . . women's identity" (p. 229).

This centrality of relationships for women, and particularly intimate relationships, clearly has important implications for divorced women, many of whom experience persistent loneliness, often despite social connections with friends, family, and community. Research spanning the mid-1980s to just a couple of years ago has highlighted some interesting distinctions within divorced women's social experiences that provide a more complex sense of the types of relationships that may be affected by divorce and the resulting kinds of social integration and/or loneliness, including some women's interest in new intimate relationships, which can be both challenging and rewarding. This recognition of both challenges and opportunities is discussed below, in terms of divorced women's psychological experiences.

2.2.3 Psychological Experiences

2.2.3.1 Challenges

A great deal of research confirms that married individuals (both women and men) have better psychological health compared to non-married individuals (including divorced, never married, widowed, and cohabiting individuals) (Williams, 2009). While both women and men enjoy this mental health advantage, studies suggest that this advantage is greater for women,

specifically for depressive symptoms, and that, conversely, divorce has a greater impact on women's persistent depressive symptoms (Bracke, 2000).

Given that mental health is closely connected to, and influenced by, a person's sense of self, or self-esteem, the connection between marital status and self-esteem is significant. Specifically, research demonstrates that whereas obtaining and maintaining a marital relationship can have a positive influence on a person's sense of self-worth, or self-esteem, losing a marital partner can contribute to negative self-appraisals (LaPierre, 2012). Unsurprisingly, then, divorced women's self-esteem is negatively affected and even persists into relationships following divorce (LaPierre, 2012). Women's lowered self-esteem may be distinctly connected to individual perceptions of the social stigma associated with divorce (Marcussen, 2005).

In addition to the psychological challenges of depression and low self-esteem, divorced women also report feeling persistent anger and anxiety following divorce. Wallerstein's (1986) longitudinal study explored divorced women's experiences ten years after their divorce, providing comparisons between women in different age groups. This particular sample of divorced women were mostly white, middle-class American women (from California) who divorced in 1970 or 1971. Overall, older women (women who were at least 40 when they divorced) fared worse psychologically than younger women (women who divorced in their 20s and 30s). About half of the older women, those who did not initiate the divorce, continued to feel "angered after having worked hard to fulfill the requirements of being a devoted wife and mother" and then having their (ex-)husbands seek divorces, often in order to pursue other relationships, usually with younger women (p. 72). Compared to younger divorced women, older women also experienced greater and more widespread anxiety among other psychological symptoms, including half of them being clinically depressed. This anxiety and depression were

often related to financial stress and persistent loneliness (as mentioned above). For women of all ages, anger associated with their divorce could persist over ten years after divorce, and even into remarriage (Wallerstein, 1986). This persistent anger was especially prevalent, however, for women who had been married for an extended time and who had not resolved anger rooted in a sense of outrage, exploitation, rejection, humiliation and/or betrayal.

Thus, divorce can present significant psychological challenges for (some) women, including depression, low self-esteem, anger, and anxiety, some of which are remarkably persistent (even ten years following divorce). Crucially, however, divorce can also provide psychological opportunities for women.

2.2.3.2 Opportunities

Just as divorce clearly challenges women psychologically, often influencing their sense of self and well-being, research also demonstrates that women's divorces can provide distinct psychological opportunities. One such opportunity is highlighted in a particularly interesting study by King and Raspin (2004) who studied divorced women who had experienced lengthy marriages (an average of 22 years). King and Raspin (2004) asked women at two time points (two years apart) to write narrative descriptions of their best possible future selves (based on their goals, hopes, and dreams) before their divorce (retrospectively)—called "lost selves"—and after their divorce, their "found selves." These narratives were then associated with women's subjective well-being and ego, or personality, development. Unsurprisingly, they found that thinking about one's lost possible self was associated with lowered well-being and thinking about one's current best possible self was associated with higher well-being. Interestingly, however, their research also points to the "wisdom of waiting to explore one's lost selves" given their finding that women's introspections on their divorce promoted personal growth (or,

personality development) only when sufficient time had passed to provide some distance and perspective (p. 625). They conclude that divorced women's re-visioning of their life— both as "lost" and "found" selves—has important implications for well-being and personality development and provides insights on investing in the present ("found selves"), but also on how and when to look back on "lost selves." King and Raspin (2004) insist that "a larger understanding of our place in the world requires a more expansive view that allows for legitimate loss, an awareness of what might have been, and the capacity to reinvest and risk loss once again" (p. 627).

Psychological, or personal, growth was also demonstrated among the young women in Wallerstein's (1986) study that were in their 20s and 30s when they divorced. Ten years after their divorce, many had experienced psychological growth that reflected resiliency and recovery and spoke to how women drew on new resources within themselves. Specifically, many of these women had greater self-esteem, often associated with career successes, which translated into more confidence in social relationships. Also notable was women's greater ability to acknowledge their emotional needs and directly express their thoughts and feelings. Lastly, in sharp contrast to how the women were (psychologically) at the time of their original separation and in the first few years afterwards, ten years later, women's outlook was "keenly realistic and unsentimental in its appraisal of self and the world" (p. 75). This demonstrates that for some women, divorce can yield a more honed sense of reality, a clearer self-concept, and better judgment (Wallerstein, 1986).

Further supporting the claim that divorce can present opportunities for women's self-development, Baum, Rahav, and Sharon (2005) found that divorced women comparing their present situation to that before their divorce reported improvements in how they viewed

themselves, and their self-concept. Specifically, women in the study felt more independent, more in control of their lives, and more responsible for themselves. They also felt greater self-esteem and more competence. These changes were seen by the women as being very important and satisfying (Baum, Rahav, & Sharon, 2005).

Women's positive self-developments following divorce are uniquely being embraced in a growing movement of women "celebrating divorce," particularly younger women in their 20s and 30s. These celebrations take several interesting, and often highly social or visible, forms, including divorce parties (Bielski, 2014), divorce tattoos (Counter, 2014), and online support groups, blogs, and other social media venues (Caputa, 2014). These ways in which some women are celebrating their divorces, and the implications for notions of self, will be explored further in the next section.

An overview of some of the existing literature on the gendered experiences of divorce suggests that divorced women are impacted economically, socially, and psychologically, in ways that can provide both challenges and opportunities. All of these areas are intimately connected to divorced women's sense of self, which is also shaped by powerful gendered ideologies. In this next section, I discuss four such gendered ideologies as part of a conceptual framework for exploring women's lived experiences of divorce as a life transition.

2.3 Understanding Women's Lived Experiences of Divorce as a Life Transition

When a marriage ends with divorce, there is a profound personal and social disruption and transition (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991). For women, this transition distinctly challenges their sense of self given our cultural emphasis on women in relationships (Lazar, 2002). To explore an understanding of women's lived experiences of divorce as a life transition, this section will (re)consider the reviewed literature (with some additions) within a conceptual framework of

three gendered ideologies that affect divorced women, which are further conceptualized within the stages of separation, liminality, and reentry of a transitions theory perspective.[4]

2.3.1 Gendered Ideologies

Ideologies are sets of beliefs, perceptions, and representations that people draw upon to understand their world (Shaw, 2001). As such, they impact both private beliefs and public actions by influencing how individuals view their world and the behaviours consistent with those views. Critically, ideologies are not neutral or fixed, but instead represent socially constructed, and thereby shifting, notions that impose a particular "vision of social reality" (Stewart et al., 2008, p. 362). This ideological vision furthers the well-being of some groups over others according to dominant social relations and can function to hide contradictions and normalize power inequities (Shaw, 2001). The social reality that is imposed on women, generally, is conveyed within dominant gendered ideologies, which dictate appropriate and desirable behaviours. I will discuss three such gendered ideologies that particularly affect divorced women.[5]

2.3.1.1 Ideology of Femininity

The ideology of femininity prescribes culturally appropriate ways of being a woman. I will briefly outline some of the characteristics within the ideology of (North American) femininity, broadly speaking, to locate this gendered ideology and its implications within the lived experiences of divorced women. Stets and Burke (2000) provide an overview of sociological and psychological research in the last several decades on femininity (and

[4] I should note here that while a transitions theory perspective provided a relevant and useful framework for my literature review, another "micro" theory frames much of the Discussion given its more particular (rather than general) usefulness to the findings that emerged (see Chapter Six).

[5] This introduction to ideologies is adapted from a discussion on ideologies in Valtchanov, Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy (2016) (p. 53).

masculinity), which provides insights on what characteristics and behaviours are culturally considered ‘feminine,’ or how women should act: expressive, emotional, warm, submissive, passive, cooperative, affectionate, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, caring and helpful to others, not independent, emotionally vulnerable, and relationship-oriented. These traits and behaviours characterize “appropriate” femininity.

In reviewing this work initially, what struck me (and saddened me) was the relative persistence of characteristics and behaviours prescribed within normative, or hegemonic, femininity throughout *many decades* of both sociological and psychological research. Actually, the literature they review on measurements and conceptions of femininity spans a period of seventy years, from the late 1920s to the late 1990s. While there are certainly changes to cultural understandings of femininity throughout that time, there remain remarkably consistent (or, tenacious,) overall traits they identify as characterizing “appropriate” femininity: expressive, emotional, warm, submissive, passive, cooperative, affectionate, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, caring and helpful to others, not independent, emotionally vulnerable, and relationship-oriented (Stets & Burke, 2000). In thinking about the larger themes or expectations reflected by these individual characteristics, three areas were apparent to me. The first is an assumption about women’s internal experiences as dominated by emotions (i.e., “emotional” and “emotionally vulnerable”), consistent with the presumed binary opposition of “reason-emotion” for men and women, respectively (Čufar, 2023). The second broader theme of these feminine characteristics reflects expectations of what women should or should not do with their internal experiences, of both their emotions and their thoughts. These are prescriptions for women’s display or concealment of their experiences, broadly (i.e., “expressive” and “submissive”). The third area I noticed, and the one that encompassed the largest number of enduring traits, pertained to how

women are expected to interact with others (i.e., “cooperative,” “affectionate,” “gentle,” “warm,” and “sensitive to the needs of others”). Given that Stets and Burke’s (2000) review only reflected research on femininity up until the late 1990s, I wondered if more recent research continued to confirm these same broad traits or whether there had been notable shifts in conceptualizing normative femininity in the over three decades since the 1990s.

One extensive series of studies in the 1990s served to inform the approach of more recent studies, specifically through efforts to address criticisms of earlier measurements and conceptualizations of femininity (and masculinity, or gender divergence, more broadly) (Helgeson, 1994). For instance, two particular areas of criticism about existing conceptualizations, such as the classic Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem 1974, 1981), concerned a reliance on individuals’ assessment of the social desirability of pre-determined traits for hypothetical males and females, rather than individuals’ definitions of their own masculinity and femininity, along with criticism of the failure of existing instruments to capture the multidimensional nature of masculinity and femininity since most scales only reflected “expressive/communal” orientations for femininity and “instrumental/agentic” orientations for masculinity (Helgeson, 1994; Kachel, 2016).

With this in mind, Helgeson (1994) developed “prototypical” features of femininity and masculinity related to three dimensions: personality, appearance, and interests. She also used two age cohorts (college students and their parents), in contrast to the typical single-age cohort used in most studies (usually only college students) to capture any generational differences in representing “everyday conceptions of masculinity and femininity” (p. 654). Ultimately, Helgeson’s (1994) scale development and validation, and her subsequent research using this distinct conceptualization, yielded eight dimensions (each comprised of specific items or

features) of femininity: “Good person” (e.g., caring, helpful, intelligent, responsible, not selfish); “Attractive in style and manner” (e.g., wears makeup, dates men, elegant); Not aggressive (e.g., passive, shy, cries easily, women friends); “Gentle” (e.g., gentle, sensitive, delicate, romantic); “Social” (e.g., talkative, flirts, socializes); “Neat” (e.g., well dressed, poised, good manners); “Family oriented” (e.g., likes kids, loving, traditional); and “Artistic/expressive” (e.g., likes art, creative, emotional) (pp. 672-673). Through these (multi-)dimensions, Helgeson (1994) sought to bring more clarity to the concept of femininity (and masculinity), given its reputation as being “among the muddiest in the literature” (p. 679).

While I appreciated Helgeson’s (1994) explicit efforts to clarify these ‘muddy’ concepts and to address the “criticism[,] controversy . . . [and] confusion” of previous conceptualizations of gender (pp. 654-656), it struck me (again, as with Stets and Burke’s [2000] review,) that many of the (then) ‘newly’-identified features of femininity *remained identical* to those of past conceptualizations. Namely, features Helgeson (1994) identified for femininity, such as being caring, helpful, not selfish, passive, shy, gentle, sensitive, expressive, and emotional, are all traits that were also identified within Stets and Burke’s (2000) seventy-year overview of gender conceptualization and/or of Bem’s BSRI (1974, 1981), which Helgeson (and others) heavily critiqued. Furthermore, in addition to the BSRI, specifically, the features and overarching dimensions of femininity that Helgeson (1994) developed were also “almost identical” to conceptualizations of femininity across eight other studies throughout the 1970s and ’80s, which variously named or described femininity as defined by “Emotional Expressiveness,” “Nurturance,” “Expressive-Communal,” “Interpersonal Sensitivity,” “Personal Warmth,” and “Expressive” (Choi & Fuqua, 2003, p. 882). It seems the adage ‘a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’ is also true for how “femininity” is variously named.

A little over a decade after Helgeson's (1994) development of the "prototypical" multidimensional conceptualization (and measurement) of femininity, Mahalik et al. (2005) developed the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI). Through an extensive process of reviewing the literature on traditional feminine norms (specifically in the U.S.) and conducting focus groups with both women and men, eight feminine norms were identified (each with a continuum of conformity and nonconformity). Subsequent research was then conducted using the CFNI with over 700 women[6] participants to confirm its relevance and usefulness. The eight feminine norms reflected messages given to women about "how women are supposed to act, think, and feel, as well as what benefits and costs women experience when they either endorse or reject these messages" (Mahalik et al., 2005, p. 419). The resulting norms of femininity were defined as the following imperatives: "Develop friendly and supportive relationships with others" (with its 'subscale' more succinctly called "Nice in relationships"); "Pursue a thin body ideal" ("Thinness"); "Refrain from calling attention to one's talents or abilities" ("Modesty"); "Maintain the home" ("Domestic"); "Take care and be with children" ("Care for children"); "Invest self in romantic relationship" ("Romantic relationship"); "Keep sexual intimacy contained within one committed relationship" ("Sexual fidelity"); and "Commit resources to maintaining and improving physical appearance" ("Invest in appearance") (Mahalik et al., 2005, p. 424). While some of these feminine norms are very consistent with those identified in previous relationship-oriented (or "communal") conceptualizations of femininity, such as the norm of women being "nice in relationships" and "care for children." Notably, an

[6] The focus on (conformity/non-conformity of) femininity for *women*, specifically (both in terms of the instrument construction and participation in subsequent studies using it), differs from other gender divergence research whose participants are both women and men, as well as some research specifically including trans and other non-binary individuals (e.g., Yarrow et al., 2023). Bem's (1974, 1981) BSRI, for example, has been widely used with diverse populations. Notably, Bem's (1974) BSRI was actually "designed to facilitate research on psychological androgyny" (Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p. 39).

earlier articulation of feminine norms (initially twelve before they were refined to the final eight) also included imperatives for women to "be relational" and "put others first" (Mahalik et al., 2005, p. 419). Other norms within the CFNI, however, diverge from previous scales with, for instance, the emphasis on feminine "commitments" to restricting the size of their body and their sexuality. With respect to sexuality, expectations for women's heterosexual marriages, specifically, are made clear in Malik et al.'s (2005) rather peripheral discussion of a scale construction conundrum wherein they initially identified a broad cluster of messages that "women are expected to be heterosexual" that was "so global" it could not be "easily clustered . . . [because] it fit under several more specific clusters" that were earlier iterations of norms that women should "be married," "rely on men", "be physically attractive-ornamental," "be virginal," and "be sexy" (p. 419). Curiously, however, instead of explicitly incorporating this "global" heterosexual imperative into their survey, they instead "eliminated these types of [not easily clustered] items from consideration" (p. 419).[7]

Despite the development of newer and, arguably, more nuanced gender scales, such as those discussed above, as of the early 2000s, Bem's (1974) classic BSRI that pioneered the development of subsequent gender scales was still the "most widely used measure of masculinity and femininity" (Choi & Fuqua, 2002, p. 884) and even more pervasively, it was "the most widely used measure in all areas of gender research" (Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p. 40). Notably, this pervasive measure "remains unchanged" beyond later iterations that condensed the

[7] I recognize the constraints of constructing a quantitative measurement, such as the CNFI, where each 'factor' must be reliably distinct from others. It is these very constraints, however, that reveal, for me, the clash I have felt before between the understandings I gained from my undergraduate training in (post-positivist) psychology and my graduate training in qualitative research within interpretivist and critical epistemologies (among others). It is a strange paradox within this epistemological clash that an experience (in this case, the imperative of women's heterosexuality) would be "eliminated from consideration" because it is so pervasive and, thus, not neatly categorized. Needless to say, I am glad that within my own research, global (and less global), "messy," and otherwise complex experiences can be well considered.

instrument and removed “feminine” and “masculine” as items under their corresponding constructs (Bem, 1979, 1981; Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p. 42; Kachel, 2016) Interestingly, in her 1998 autobiography, Bem disclosed that “she was not adequately prepared to develop this instrument and has been shocked by how popular it became” (Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p.39). This begs the question, then, of whether conceptualizations of femininity have shifted in the two-and-a-half decades since the early 2000s.

I wondered if researchers are still widely using the BSRI. Indeed, they are (cf. Morgan et al., 2024). Further, Fortuna, Klobassa, and Sedlacek (2019) conducted a re-assessment of the current validity of the BSRI and determined that it is *still* a widely used measure of gender role perceptions. In fact, from 2016 to 2019, there were over 1500 citations of the scale in scholarly articles (Fortuna et al., 2019). Incidentally, this time frame corresponds with my teaching of a fourth-year undergraduate seminar in gender and leisure (in 2016 and 2019), which I began with a group brainstorming activity with the intention of gathering and discussing the class’s collective knowledge about masculine and feminine characteristics (and their associated gender roles). I asked students to generate three lists: “male/masculine characteristics”; “female/feminine characteristics”; and “characteristics for both, or that we’re unsure of which list to put them under.” The first time I led this exercise, I was surprised to glean so directly that the current generation of undergraduate students (most of whom were in their early twenties and some of whom were even majoring in women’s studies) had strikingly similar conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity to the undergraduate students Bem (1974) consulted in developing the BSRI over four decades earlier (see Appendix A for a picture of the lists I wrote on the board, as generated by the class, for the first gender and leisure seminar I taught in 2016). I then asked students to take the BSRI for themselves, further confirming its enduring resonance, generally

speaking (albeit with some notable confusion about more outdated terms, such as "yielding," and women students' fervent dismissal of some feminine traits, like "childlike").

There are some recent studies, however, that point to shifts in contemporary expectations for women. For instance, research on implicit gender stereotypes demonstrates that women are increasingly associated with "stereotypically male attributes," like competitiveness and dominance, given women's increased employment since earlier gender scales were developed (Ebert et al., 2014, p. 369). Despite some expanded attribute associations, women are also still being perceived in more traditionally feminine ways, such as sensitive and supportive (Ebert et al., 2014). This suggests that while there is, encouragingly, some expansion of the characteristics associated with femininity, these additional (previously only masculine-identified) traits do not replace those that still endure as cultural indicators of femininity.

The question of "What is femininity?" is at least as old as Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *Second Sex* (Dahl, 2012), and systemic attempts to measure femininity date as far back as 1936 (Helgeson, 1994). Given this history, there are certainly many ways of conceptualizing the cultural expectations of being a woman. Yet, despite variations in these conceptualizations, there is a remarkable persistence of many of the hegemonic norms of femininity that converge broadly around women as emotionally expressive and relationship-oriented.

2.3.1.2 Ideology of Coupledom

Another powerful ideology that exerts its influence on individuals generally—women and men—is the ideology of coupledom, which emphasizes the social value of being in a couple and connects a person's social and cultural worth to their relationship status (Cobb, 2011). This ideology affirms couplehood as the normative relationship status and directs individuals' efforts to be in a couple not only to be "normal" but also as an important source of happiness and

fulfillment (Cobb, 2011; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). As such, the ideology of coupledom socially privileges couplehood generally, and marriage particularly, as the ideal status within North America.

While the ideology of coupledom affects both women and men, it particularly affects women, given that it is in many ways inextricable from the ideology of femininity. Within the ideology of femininity, as noted above, many of the conceptions (constructions) of femininity are related to women in relationships since femininity is viewed as being warm, affectionate, cooperative, not independent, sensitive to the needs of others, and relationship-oriented (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within the ideology of coupledom for women, as Lazar (2002) insists, "love and personal relationships are set up as the absolute, *all-consuming* priority in women's lives" (p. 112, original emphasis). Specifically, the imperative for women's couplehood is within heterosexual relationships and follows what Lazar calls a "heterosexual sociality" that is compulsory for women and exists within expected stages of singlehood, couplehood, marriage, and parenthood (Lazar, 2002). These stages promote an acute consciousness of *other-centeredness* focused on women's devotedness to men—boyfriends and husbands—(and subsequently to children), which Lazar (2002) asserts as central to women's own self-identity.

Crucially, the social privileging of couplehood, especially for women, means that those who are not coupled, including divorced women (who are not in a subsequent relationship), face stigmatization since they are outside the normative relationship status of couplehood. Recognizing the power of couplehood and the prevalence of single individuals, DePaulo (2006) coined the term *singlism* to represent a twenty-first-century phenomenon that she believes has not previously been labelled or explored. As DePaulo (2006) explains, singlism is the "stigmatizing of people who are single—whether divorced, widowed, or ever single" (p. 2). She

argues that this stigmatization affects the everyday lives of singles, often manifesting in the minutiae of life, and thereby, frequently going unnoticed and persisting. For instance, in McKeown's (2015b) recent research on single women and dating, singlism manifested in a number of subtle, persistent ways for participants. These manifestations of singlism included the judgments women faced for being single at family gatherings and holidays, exclusions from social outings with coupled friends, invasive questions in the workplace, and others' attempts to "fix" their singlehood by offering unsolicited advice. These findings demonstrate some of the ways single, adult women can encounter marginalization and stigmatization due to their single status specifically because they "do not fit into the traditional notion of womanhood" (p. 162)—a notion that includes the expectation to be in a romantic relationship as compelled by the ideology of coupledom.

2.3.1.3 Ideology of Pronatalism

A third ideology that is also relevant to the experiences of divorced women is the ideology of pronatalism. A pronatalist ideology links women's and men's social roles to biological parenthood. As with the ideology of coupledom, pronatalism impacts both women and men, but it impacts women more strongly (Parry, 2005). As Parry (2005) articulates, a pronatalist ideology shapes "society's interpretation of women's and men's social roles regarding parenthood . . . [and] is particularly harmful to women because it perpetuates the belief that women's *primary* social role is motherhood" (p. 338, original emphasis). The particular influence of a pronatalist ideology on women is connected to biological timelines—"the idea that a woman's 'clock is ticking'"—which impacts women's experiences of relationships and family-planning within a limited window of opportunity to have biological children (Bogle, 2008, p. 175). Thus, for young, divorced women without children (particularly those in their 30s), a

pronatalist ideology likely exerts an important influence on their choices about (subsequent) relationships and parenthood in connection to being able to have biological children. I consider these three gendered ideologies—femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism—as they influence women's experiences of divorce as a transition, whose conceptualization I briefly discuss below.

2.3.2 Divorce as a Transition

Divorce is often considered a transition (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991). As Catron and Chiriboga (1991) describe, "the word transition is frequently used as a synonym for role change but actually refers to a much broader condition of personal and social disruption" (p. 98). The concept of transitions, generally, and transitions theories more specifically, have been used to examine "normative" transitions throughout the life course, such as parenthood and retirement (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990), as well as "unexpected" transitions, such as divorce (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991). Within their longitudinal study of divorce using a transitions perspective, Catron and Chiriboga (1991) delineate three stages of the process of divorce: separation, transition or liminality, and reentry. Briefly, during the separation stage, they identify that the particular demand or transitional task is to "let go of the former way of life" and the task within the liminal stage is to "learn the skills and behaviors appropriate to the new way of life," which are then implemented in the last stage of reentry (into society with a new way of life) (p. 100). They focus on the first two stages since research has suggested that they are the most critical phases of the divorce transition, but they also recognize that individuals "experience and work through all three stages of a transition simultaneously" (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991, p. 107). Re-examining some of the literature, I now consider women's experiences of divorce as a life transition broadly conceptualized within the 'stages' of "separation" and "liminality and reentry" with the former encompassing more challenging experiences related to "let[ing] go of the former

way of life" and the latter exploring some of women's developments and triumphs as they transition into "a new way of life."

2.3.2.1 Separation Experiences

2.3.2.1.1 Stigma of Divorce and Sense of Failure.

Women experiencing divorce overwhelmingly report feeling alone, marginalized, and stigmatized (Rothchild, 2010). Our North American society is focused on maintaining or "fixing" relationships, as evidenced by a booming marital self-help book industry and marriage counselling services. However, as Lunau (2011) emphasized, "The flip side of the societal push to work on relationships is that when marriage becomes a project to be constantly improved, divorce if it happens, feels like a complete failure" (para. 15). This sense of failure, and its associated stigma, is pervasive within women's descriptions of their experience of divorce. For instance, in the memoir on her divorce, Thomas (2011) articulated the stigma of divorce she felt, "You're basically wearing the scarlet letter" (as cited in Lunau, 2011). Similarly, reflecting on her awkward efforts to begin dating again after her divorce, Caputa (2014) described, "Being divorced can sometimes feel like there is a great big red stamp on your forehead that says *Baggage*" (p. 38).

The sense of failure that often accompanies divorce for women in particular is clear in Kahn's (1990) recognition of an apparently common psychological 'disorder' referred to rather strikingly as "the ex-wife syndrome." Kahn (1990) suggests this syndrome prevents women from developing an identity that is separate from their ex-spouse specifically due to the distinct sense of failure that divorced women experience "because women are more likely to see marriage and the home as a source of identity, and to feel responsible for making it happy, when it fails, a woman not only loses that identity but also sees herself as a failure" (p. 86). This is echoed in

Chandler's (1991) contention that the formation of a new identity for divorced women is challenging because women's goals have, at least historically, been equated with marriage, so divorced women uniquely encounter "the difficulties of forging a new identity and of making sense of a world which disparages women who are alone" (p. 68). These challenges clearly speak to the influence of the ideology of coupledom.

Wallerstein's (1986) study on divorced women ten years after their divorce provides some further insights into women's sense of self according to the variations of gendered ideologies they experience depending on their age. As discussed above, older women (women who were at least 40 when they divorced) fared worse psychologically than younger women (women who divorced in their 20s and 30s). This difference can be connected to the operation of more traditional gendered ideologies on older women, which more closely parallel the ideology of femininity reviewed above. Comparatively, more liberal gendered ideologies are more likely to be experienced by younger women since women of different age cohorts are socialized differently about women's roles (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). Ten years after their divorce, many of the older women had a number of significant achievements, such as career successes, but they were unhappy (and, in fact, half were clinically depressed) distinctly because "they had not aspired to that which they had achieved . . . [since] their primary wish was to be married and to maintain a stable family life" (Wallerstein, 1986, p. 73). Thus, the ideology of coupledom privileging marriage and an "intact" family meant that achievements outside of these imperatives, such as independence and competence, amounted to "considerably less than the dreams associated with the marriage that was lost" (p. 74). Indeed, the transition from being married women to divorced women (even ten years later), particularly for older women with more traditional gendered ideologies, resulted in a more limited sense of self ("ego

constriction"), a withdrawal of emotional investment in the world and other people, a narrowing of interests, and a lowering of expectations (Wallerstein, 1986).

While some divorced women struggle with the distress associated with their disrupted family life, other divorced women, especially younger women without children, grapple with the disruption of their plans to start a family. Given the paucity of academic research on young women's experiences of divorce, Caputa's (2014) book of personal experiences and interviews with young "divorcées" and other experts offers some insights into the connections between young, divorced women without children and the powerful ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism. This connection was intimately experienced by Caputa when she came to appreciate the difference between her husband (of less than a year) agreeing to have children with her and truly wanting to have children: "I learned I should never have married a man who agreed to have kids with me. I needed a partner who could not wait to be a father" (p. 14). Her young husband's later refusal to have children soon shifted to a clearer perspective for her that ultimately ended their marriage: "[My husband] told me he never wanted to have children. This was my deal-breaker. Nothing else was worth working on if he could never give me the thing I wanted most in the world: motherhood" (p. 17). Following the decision to divorce, Caputa expressed how she felt in terms that clearly evoke the power and pain of the ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism and the sense of stigma and failure that occur when their fulfillment seems out of reach:

> No twenty-something woman actually pictures herself divorced when all her friends are becoming brides and birthing babies. At that point, my own biological clock had sped up to the point that the hands were about to go flying off! The idea of starting over conjured worries about being too old to get pregnant by the time I picked up the pieces. I suffered

> insomnia-induced anxiety attacks and even hid in my bedroom during my first post-divorce holiday to avoid the embarrassment of facing my extended family (p. x) . . . . I was a member of an underground society of women who had failed ourselves, our families, and our dreams of happily-ever-after. Or so it seems when it first happens. (p. 23)

Pronatalism clearly influences divorced women's conceptualizations of an "acceptable" path to motherhood. However, it is also important to recognize the ways in which women are challenging the reality of that old playground song: "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes *baby in a baby carriage..." A growing number of single women (who are divorced or never married) are seeking out motherhood on their own. Specifically, an increasing number of single women are using sperm banks to conceive (Egan, 2006) or are adopting children (Bird, 2015; Hakala, 2016). These women are joining an expanding population of "single mothers by choice" to create the families they desire, rejecting the notion of marriage as a prerequisite (Egan, 2006). This is clear based on the steadily rising membership of an American-based international organization for women who have chosen to become parents without a partner, Single Mothers by Choice (SMC), whose founder explains, "It is no longer taboo to have a child without a partner, so more women are separating motherhood from marriage and at an increasingly younger age" (the average age of SMC's mothers is 35 years, but there is an increase in women in their early 30s) (para. 7). Despite these more contemporary social shifts, the persistence of ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism means that pursuing single motherhood is often still met with societal suspicion and prejudice (Hakala, 2016; O'Connell, 2007), including some adoption agencies that will not adopt to single parents or who give preference to nuclear families over single parents (Bird, 2015; Hakala, 2016).

For many divorced women, both younger and older, one of the central challenges of the separation stage within their transition of divorce is a keen sense of stigma and failure, which are often strongly connected to the limiting gendered ideologies of femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism.

2.3.2.1.2 Guilt.

Considering the distinct sense of failure and stigma associated with divorce for women, it is notable that women legally initiate divorce more often than men (Hewitt, 2009), with specifically two-thirds of divorces being initiated by women (Miller, 2014). Generally, research has shown that spouses who initiate divorce report better post-divorce adjustment (Wang & Amato, 2000). However, Baum (2007) has suggested that this finding does not consider significant gender differences. Namely, Baum's (2007) research has demonstrated that when women initiate divorce, they experience distinct guilt compared to men given that, as Baum explains, gender-differentiated socialization leads women to emphasize social attachments, empathy, and the personal needs and desires of others over their own, all of which are confronted in initiating a divorce. Baum's explanation of the gender disparity of guilt reiterates, nearly verbatim, several characteristics within both the ideologies of femininity and coupledom.

2.3.2.1.3 Loneliness and New Relationship Conflicts.

While the femininity ideology emphasizes women's relationships with others generally, the central relationship that is promoted within this ideology and that of coupledom is women's relationship to men, specifically to one man as a boyfriend and then husband (Lazar, 2002). The salience of women's connection to a (male) partner within the femininity and coupledom ideologies is revealed in Wallerstein's (1986) finding that even ten years after their divorce, both older and younger women (who were single) suffered from moderate to severe loneliness despite

significant connections and supports within social networks with extended family, friends, work, and community.

Within the divorce process, Emery and Dillon (1994) assert that one of the main tasks is the renegotiation of relationships and a redefinition of boundaries. However, this task is challenged by a lack of "normative expectations" surrounding divorce, including no rituals signalling the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. Even when divorced women do develop new relationships, and despite having greater mental health than single divorced women, women in post-divorce relationships are still negatively impacted by conflicts in their new relationships, particularly women in post-divorce cohabiting relationships (Symoens et al., 2014). Since this effect is greater for women than it is for men, Symoens et al. (2014) indicate that this supports gender theories' assertion that women experience greater distress from relationship conflict since they are more "sensitive to the quality of intimate relationships and to the insecurity related to conflict in cohabiting relationships" (p. 230). This view is consistent with other studies that found that women's well-being is more influenced by relationship conflict and lack of relationship commitment (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Thus, several significant themes of women's lived experiences of divorce can be identified within Catron and Chiriboga's (1991) conceptualization of the first stage of divorce within a transitions perspective: separation or "letting go of the former way of life." These experiences include divorced women's feelings of failure, stigma, guilt, loneliness, and challenges with new intimate relationships. It is clear from these experiences that the gendered ideologies of femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism are affecting divorced women and adversely influencing their sense of self.

These gendered ideologies are powerfully operating together in their insistence on particular constructions of "appropriate" gender. These constructions are focused on women's *other-centredness* (Lazar, 2002), or relationship orientation (Stets & Burke, 2000), which is personally and socially disrupted through divorce. Describing the loss that occurs in divorce (for women and men generally), Sclater (1999) contends that "when marriage breaks down there is a loss not only of a partner, but also of self" (p. 86). This loss takes on heightened implications for divorced women's sense of self-given gendered ideologies, particularly that of coupledom, that distinctly promote women's self-worth and self-definition through heterosexual relationships (Lazar, 2002). Indeed, these ideologies are maintained through both the external and internal "policing" (Salih, 2002) that divorced women experience in departing from these ideologies. The stigma and discomfort of others, including friends and family, serve as external sanctions, while women internalize the social marginalization of being a divorced woman through their personal sense of failure, guilt, and loneliness. Divorced women's sense of self, including notions of their gender and identity, is deeply affected by the process and transition of divorce as a marked departure from the expectations of influential gendered ideologies.

2.3.2.2 Liminal and Reentry Experiences

While powerful gendered ideologies can negatively affect divorced women, particularly their transitioning sense of self, these ideologies can also be challenged or subverted. Sometimes, even not subscribing as firmly to such ideologies can mean their impact is lessened. For instance, Brown and Manela's (1978) early research into how the gender role attitudes women held affected them during their divorce found that women who held non-traditional gender role attitudes (or whose attitudes became more non-traditional during the process of divorce), experienced less distress, more well-being and personal growth, higher self-esteem, and a greater

sense of personal effectiveness than women who held traditional gender role attitudes. This suggests that women who did not endorse traditional gender role attitudes (which can be viewed as a component of the femininity ideology) had a greater sense of self than divorced women who were more "constrained" in their expression, or performance, of their gender identity (Salih, 2002).

2.3.2.2.1 Self-Revisions.

While most research assumes that changes in personality development over time are unusual in adult samples (Cohn, 1998), research on life changes, or transitions, points to adults engaging in an active struggle to make sense of a transition through the process of accommodation that occurs within personality development (King & Raspin, 2004). Accommodation requires a person to construct a new framework to accommodate an experience that does not fit their existing framework (Block, 1982). For adults experiencing a transition, such as divorced women, this process changes their personality development, and, in fact, can enhance it over time (King & Raspin, 2004). Further countering the presumed stability of adult personality development (e.g., Cohn, 1998), King and Raspin (2004) contend that "a lifetime may be viewed as a process of actively discovering one's "true" wants and needs . . . [and] the content of a person's life dreams is subject to revision" (p. 627).

For divorced women in particular, some can indeed make active "revisions" to their sense of self following divorce. The young, divorced women in Wallerstein's (1986) study ten years post-divorce countered the dependence and passivity of the ideology of femininity by drawing on new resources within themselves to "transcend the depreciated images associated with the failed marriage and the husband's demeaning of them"—an impetus they used to pursue new goals and achievements (p. 75). Given the emphasis on self-definition through relationships for women

(within the ideologies of femininity and coupledom), it is particularly significant, and indeed subversive, whereas men are more likely to construct a post-divorce identity through a new romantic relationship (an externalized response), women are more likely to "cite changes in themselves and the experience of independence as the basis for a new identity" (Colburn et al., 1992, p. 105). This is also reflected in Baum et al.'s (2005) finding of divorced women reporting that their divorce had prompted opportunities for a more positive sense of self, whereby they felt more competent and independent.

2.3.2.2.2 Celebrating Divorce.

Further demonstrating that women's experiences of divorce can be positive opportunities for re-inventing themselves, there is a growing movement of young women in their 20s and 30s who are "celebrating divorce" through highly visible forms of resistance to gendered ideologies (Caputa, 2014). These forms of resistance include two particular trends, the divorce tattoo and the divorce party, discussed below.

Parry (2005) argues that despite the power of dominant ideologies, "women have personal agency and actively determine how they will respond to ideologies" (p. 338). They can respond to the ideologies that confront them by resisting the gendered expectations and behaviours they promote, and their underlying power inequities (Shaw, 2001). One way this resistance occurs for some divorced women is through the growing trend of women getting divorce tattoos. Investigating this trend, Coulter (2014) interviewed tattoo parlour owners, who explained that women seeking divorce tattoos are declaring, "I don't care what anyone thinks about it anymore. I've always wanted a tattoo and I'm getting it" (para. 3). Examples of women's divorce tattoos include: a floating balloon, with its string a chain of words that reads, "Sometimes you need to let things go"; an anchor with the caption "I refuse to sink"; and a line

of cursive writing on the wrist that proclaims, “I am not afraid to walk this world alone” (para. 3). As one tattoo artist described, “There’s a sense of taking your body back, and sometimes the pain itself is a relief” (para. 3). This reclamation of self is articulated in one young woman’s divorce tattoo, whose inscription (“Live Life Laughing”) serves as her new mantra and a visual reminder that, as she insists, “no one is ever gonna hold power over [me] ever again” (Coulter, 2014, para. 4).

Another trend, the divorce party, is challenging the social stigma of divorce (Lunau, 2011) and divorce’s lack of social rituals, which help individuals to move from one defined position, or ending, to another position, or beginning (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991; Emery & Dillon, 1994). The divorce party is especially being embraced by young women in their 20s and 30s who are divorcing and who want to celebrate the end of a marriage (or, at least the formal paper-signing that marks a divorce), often surrounded by the people who supported them (Bielski, 2014; Caputa, 2014). These divorce parties can be intimate affairs with a close group of friends or much more elaborate “freedom fests” involving trashing their wedding dresses, ordering divorce cakes, and even requesting divorce registries to help recuperate belongings they lost in their divorces (Bielski, 2014). Whatever their form, divorce parties for young women can be viewed as a reclamation of public ritual as a way of “celebrating the future and looking forward” (Bielski, 2014, para. 15).

Divorced women’s experiences within the “liminal” and “reentry” stages of transition indeed speak to re-creating a “new way of life” (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991). Their experiences of self-development and celebration both illuminate how divorced women can challenge and resist gendered ideologies. Within women’s self-development(s), for instance, they cite changes in themselves as the basis for revised identities, rather than seeking externalized or relationship

responses (Colburn et al., 1992) as the ideologies of femininity and coupledom compel. Divorced women are not only personally resisting limiting gendered ideologies, through such individual acts as getting a divorce tattoo, but they are also publicly and collectively enacting resistance through divorce parties (Caputa, 2014) that refuse the social stigma of divorce and subvert it as a celebration rather than a source of shame. Subverting the "scarlet letter" branded by society (Lunau, 2011) as a policing of divorced women's social unacceptability, women indelibly inscribe themselves with their own declarations: "Sometimes you need to let things go."

To begin to understand women's lived experiences of divorce as a life transition, I have explored some of the existing literature using a conceptual framework of particular gendered ideologies that affect divorced women—ideologies of femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism—along with a transitions perspective that situates women's experiences within the fluid stages of separation, liminality, and reentry. In the final section of this chapter, I add another important set of perspectives within the conceptual framework of my research: leisure perspectives.

2.4 Leisure Perspectives

Divorce is not a singular occurrence or an isolated experience. It is a process (Hanson et al., 1998) and a transition (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991), and one which is crucially situated within a confluence of other contexts. If we could trace the beginnings and evolutions of divorce within its full context and its many influences, these would include the family of origin (where we first learn about relationships) (Lunau, 2011; Weigel et al., 2003); the media and other powerful social institutions (that convey potent messages about love, romance, relationships, and families, among others) (cf. Galician, 2004); experiences of dating and marriage (which are also always situated within personal and cultural contexts) (cf. McKeown, 2015b; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), and then…divorce. As we have seen with the overview and gendered

experiences of divorce discussed above, divorce, too, is part of a complex set of sociocultural experiences, activities, and practices.

When considered in this broader context, women's experiences of divorce are closely connected to leisure. Indeed, as Shaw et al. (1989) contend, "leisure is a product of the interaction between personal experience and situational/social influences" (as cited in Edginton, Coles, & McClelland, 2003, p. 11). In this sense, leisure, broadly defined, lies at the nexus of personal and cultural experiences. Moreover, focusing on the intersections of gender and leisure suggests that "leisure is a phenomenon that is not easily separable from other aspects of women's daily lives" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 19). These interconnections between gender and leisure necessarily problematize the perceptions of leisure (only) as a context for individual choice and freedom, and remind us that since leisure both shapes, and is shaped by, social practices, it can be "sites for the production and reproduction of power relations that discipline individuals' gendered behaviors" (Berbary, 2013a, p. 163). Conversely, because leisure is a cultural activity or phenomenon wherein dominant ideologies are perpetuated, it can also be used to resist these ideologies and their underlying power relations (Shaw, 2001). Thus, a leisure perspective is useful to understand how leisure may be connected to young women's experiences of divorce. With this in mind, this section examines research on divorce in the field of leisure, leisure and relationships, and leisure's connections to young women "celebrating divorce."

2.4.1 Research on Divorce in the Field of Leisure

To gain a sense of what research exists within the field of leisure studies on divorce generally, and potentially on my topic of divorce specifically, I surveyed two of the top leisure journals: the American journal *Leisure Sciences*; and the European journal *Leisure Studies*. Within these two journals, I had access to all articles from 1977-2016 for *Leisure Sciences* and

from 1985-2016 for *Leisure Studies*. In this scope, I searched for any articles where "divorce" was ever mentioned (not necessarily a keyword or title), which resulted in a combined 85 articles (39 for *Leisure Sciences* and 46 for *Leisure Studies*). I reviewed each of these articles, either by their title (if this clearly indicated how divorce was addressed in the article), their abstract, or, more commonly, by searching for where "divorce" was mentioned in the article to determine its context. The only articles with divorce and its implications as the focus were articles on parental divorce, which is consistent with divorce research generally. These articles variously explored the impact of divorce on families and their leisure, such as non-resident fathers' leisure with their children (Jenkins, 2009), and the contributions of family leisure to family functioning among single-parent families (Hornberger, Zabriskie, & Freeman, 2010).

Other types of articles that mention divorce, although not as their focus, included research where some of the participants were identified as being divorced, either simply as a demographic variable within quantitative research or as a description of participants within qualitative research. For instance, for the latter, Parry's (2007) study exploring dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors included three participants who were divorced (all participants' ages ranged from their mid-40s to early 60s). Interestingly, one participant in this study included divorced women in her description of the breadth of sexual identities and marital statuses of the women on her dragon boat racing team in her recognition of women's diversity within their shared experience of breast cancer: "Our membership includes women of all ages and ethnocultural groups. We also have gay women, straight women, married women, single women, and divorced women. The one thing we all have in common is breast cancer..." (Parry, 2007, p. 63). This brief inclusion of divorced women (among "others") subtly counters the ideology of coupledom.

Other types of leisure articles mentioning divorce are more miscellaneous and mention divorce (in any context) only briefly. These include several articles where "divorce" is used as a verb, such as "Ultimately, leisure cannot be divorced from society" (indeed!) (Henderson, 2010, p. 396). Other articles that briefly mention divorce in some context include: a short discussion of technology use for communication between romantic partners, including partners following a divorce (Sharaievska & Stodolska, 2015); divorce as a type of life transition (among others) that transforms individuals' leisure (Lyu & Oh, 2015); attitudes of divorce as a component of "socio-moral attitudes" within a measure for "postmaterialist dimensions" (along with views on heterosexuality and abortion) (Aguila et al., 2008); and Calley Jones' (2010) autoethnographic account of a witch camp, where she is a "witness to a divorce ritual more loving than some weddings" (p. 278).

Among the 85 leisure articles reviewed, only three offered some insights I felt were relevant to my topic, although none were specifically focused on women's experiences of divorce (young women or otherwise). The first article explored single women's experiences of eating out alone while on holiday, focusing on "midlife singlehood" (women aged 35-55 years) (Heimtun, 2010). About half of the 32 participants were either divorced or widowed (no distinction was made between these two categories in terms of numbers). One of the study's main findings was that while eating out alone, many women experienced fears of loneliness and marginalization. Heimtun (2010) indicated that "many of the single women pinpoint public eating places such as restaurants, diners, and cafés as the holiday spaces where they feel the most uncomfortable and lonely" (p. 181). This was the case for one divorced woman (50 years old) who expressed, "You feel really alone when you're the only one by yourself at a restaurant and there are just couples and families around you" (p. 182). Another divorced woman (38 years old)

similarly spoke of the "hetero-reality permeating eating places" within particular cities that prompt "feelings of marginality and social exclusion" since the spaces are designed to accommodate "the needs of couples with children" (p. 186). Although not discussed in this article in these terms, these experiences clearly point to the ideology of coupledom, which functions to marginalize single women—some of whom were divorced—particularly in public places that promote social gatherings.

The second article is Roster's (2009) study with women motorcycle riders as a form of "girl power" through participation in "macho recreation." A number of participants (aged 23-53 years) included divorced women. In her finding of "empowerment through reconstructing self-identity," Roster highlighted the importance of leisure within major life transitions, including divorce: "In many cases, women's interest in motorcycling was spurred by a major life transition event such as divorce or death of a loved one. Feelings of self-renewal and confidence associated with riding seemed to fortify these women's inner strength and helped them to regain control over their lives following a significant self-altering experience" (p. 451). As one participant described, "My husband rode a motorcycle and I used to ride with him, it was something we both enjoyed. When I was 28, we divorced and I didn't ride again for a long time. When I finally picked it back up again, after my divorce, it was like reclaiming part of me I'd lost, a part of me I gave up, and it felt so good" (p. 451). For another participant, also a young, divorced woman (aged 33 years), "buying a Harley [motorcycle] was a release of pent-up emotions that enabled her to take back control over her life" (p. 451). These insights demonstrate how leisure can play a therapeutic and empowering role in women's self-identity reconstruction following a major life transition, including divorce.

Lastly, the third leisure article that speaks in some way to women's experiences of divorce is another article on the therapeutic, or healing, power of leisure. Kraus' (2014) article *Becoming a Belly Dancer: Gender, the Life Course and the Beginnings of a Serious Leisure Career* found that some of the participants, all women belly dancers, first became involved in belly dance when their romantic relationships changed (either starting or ending), including one divorced woman. In her own words, this woman shared the impact of belly dancing on her life after divorce:

> I went through a very, very, very bad divorce. I was really sad all the time, and I didn't even realize I was sad. Then I saw a feature article in the Sunday paper on belly dancing. That was it. I marched right up there . . . I found the freedom in the movement and the music. It's just so beautiful to me that it gave me an inner peace . . . I didn't need a man to make me happy. (p. 575)

As with Roster's (2009) research, part of Kraus' (2014) research highlights the important role that leisure can play in helping divorced women develop a new sense of self, one that includes freedom, inner peace, and happiness.

Reviewing leisure research spanning almost the last four decades revealed a stark lack of research specifically on leisure and divorce, with the exception of parental divorce. A more recent review of the leisure literature since 2016 yielded one new study by Ridgeway (2024), which focused on the nature-based leisure of five migrant divorced women in Hong Kong, three of whom were not parents (experiencing parental divorce). However, the context of divorce in Hong Kong would notably involve sociocultural distinctions from a North American or European context. This paucity of leisure research mirrors the trend of divorce research generally, which has largely ignored the experiences of young, divorced women. Several

insights, however, from leisure research with various groups of women (single women on holiday, women motorcyclists, and women belly dancers) include some divorced women and demonstrate how leisure contexts for these women can be both marginalizing and empowering.

2.4.2 Leisure and Relationships

While research on divorce is conspicuously missing from the leisure literature (other than parental divorce), it has certainly explored leisure and relationships, generally. Much of this research, however, has focused on family relationships and how they shape leisure experiences. The family relationships that are typically considered are married couples (Harrington, 2006) or parents and children (cf. Shannon & Shaw, 2008).

Outside of family relationships within the leisure literature, some research has examined (non-marital) heterosexual romantic relationships. For instance, Herridge, Shaw, and Mannell (2003) studied the leisure experiences of women in a dating couple and found that leisure time as a couple was satisfying for women, but that it also limited their non-couple leisure. As Samdahl (2013) described in her discussion of women, gender, and leisure constraints, the young women in this study prioritized spending leisure time with their boyfriends, which constrained their opportunities to spend leisure time alone or with family and friends. In this sense, "the ideology of romantic love" (or, in other words, the ideology of coupledom) emphasized "how a romantic relationship should become the center of a woman's life . . . [which] displaced other sources of pleasure that had been important to these women" (Samdahl, 2013, p. 115). Additionally, dating relationships were more recently explored—and problematized—in McKeown's feminist research on singlehood, dating, and leisure (McKeown, 2015a, 2015b).

Another body of leisure literature has highlighted the importance of women's (platonic) relationships with other women. These relationships include mothers' relationships with other

mothers (cf. Mulcahy et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2013; Valtchanov et al., 2014, 2016), women's relationships with other women who are experiencing similar challenges, such as breast cancer (Parry, 2007) and depression (Fullagar, 2008), young women's relationships within a sorority (Berbary, 2013a), and women's friendships (cf. Hey, 1997; Hutchinson, 2013; Green, 1998). Much of this research points to women's relationships with other women as a crucial form of connection and support, providing such benefits as emotional support (in the form of listening, caring, and encouraging), informational support (such as sharing relevant knowledge and resources), and appraisal support (which encourages and motivates enduring and resolving challenges) (Parry et al., 2013; Valtchanov et al., 2014). Furthermore, women's friendships can facilitate resistance to limiting gendered ideologies by providing supportive environments where "identities can be variously practised, appropriated, resisted and negotiated" (Fullagar, 2008; Hey, 1997, p. 30). In this sense, there can be playful, yet critical, considerations of "the way things are supposed to be and the way things are" (Green, 1998, p. 181), often with respect to gendered expectations.

While the leisure literature's examination of leisure and relationships has mainly focused on the family relationships of married couples and parents and children, there has been some research on dating relationships, which reveals constraining influences of couplehood for women. Leisure research on women's relationships with other women offers important insights that extend to young, divorced women's own relationships with women friends and family, which may provide distinct sources of support and opportunities for resistance. Other opportunities for resistance through leisure are discussed below, focusing on a particular, recent cultural activity being embraced by young, divorced women who are "celebrating divorce."

2.4.3 "Celebrating Divorce": Connections to Leisure

As discussed, there is a growing movement of young, divorced women who are "celebrating divorce," often in highly visible or public ways to counter the lack of rituals associated with divorce that exist for other major life transitions (Emery & Dillon, 1994), especially those that affirm ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism, such as weddings and baby showers. Within the leisure literature, the importance of traditions, rituals, and ceremonies has been established as ways to socially delineate beginnings and endings, for instance, such as marriage or death (cf. Lyons, 2013). The social importance of celebrations is also recognized, wherein leisure is the context for social celebrations that are rituals of social solidarity (Kelly, 1987). Accordingly, Lyons (2013) further describes that ceremonies and rituals facilitate "the processes of community creation and alliance building . . . . [They are] empowering, transformative, and [bring] people together in a way like no other social situation can" (p. 639). For divorced women, these ceremonies and rituals are missing within widely recognized practices, and so, they are creating their own. One such form of (subversive) celebration is emerging for young, divorced women: "trash the dress" photo shoots.

Caputa (2014) explains that wedding dress trashing originated as a form of post-wedding photography for newlyweds, with couples running into the ocean together in their bridal wear, for instance, or throwing cupcakes on each other. Some divorced women, however, are subverting this "cute" and "romantic" post-wedding practice. As Caputa asserts, "As young divorcées, we're taking the art of wedding dress destruction to a whole other level by trashing the dress and everything it represents. We're metamorphosing an ugly and often shameful social status into a beautiful, celebratory moment" (p. 104). For the participants in Caputa's research—divorced women in their 20s and 30s—this involved women physically transforming their

wedding dresses as symbols of what they are renouncing from their marriages, and as a way to mark their new beginnings. One participant, for instance, shared the purposeful and symbolic choices she made about her trash the dress photo session:

> I ripped [my dress] apart just like [my ex-husband] did to my heart. Then, I spray-painted it black and pink, as my ex was a trade spray painter and I thought it was appropriate! I then rubbed grease from my car on it, as my dream dress was sacrificed because my ex bought a car that cut into my wedding budget. Finally, I burned it, along with a photo of my ex from our honeymoon . . . The best part was seeing that sucker go up in flames! It was as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders . . . it was all about me moving forward in my life and having fun getting there! (p. 106)

Another participant held her trash the dress photo shoot in two locations: the first location symbolizing an idyllic wedding setting, a meadow; and then she moved to her second location, the back of a dump truck, to capture what she was dumping from her life. Like the first participant, this woman trashed her dress in very destructive, even violent, ways—using it as a conduit for releasing her anger in a transformative way: "I picked up slimy globs of mud and threw it down on my white, beaded dress. I proceeded to rip it, put sticks through it, and stubbed a cigarette butt out on it" (p. 107)—all behaviours which clearly resist the gentleness and passivity of the ideology of femininity. For this participant, the wedding dress was never a cherished item (as it once was for some women); her mother had picked it out and she had never liked it. It made her "miserable and [she was] very glad to get rid of that thing" (p. 107). As she insisted, "trashing the dress was the most liberating, empowering feeling in the world" (p. 106). While some "trash the dress" photo shoots are done with only the woman and a photographer, others are more social events, such as being part of a divorce party celebration. However,

whether the photo shoots themselves are more private or public, the photos that result from them, not to mention the experience itself, are often shared with friends, family, and on social media as some women's way of refusing to hide their divorce.

As Shaw (2001) contends, leisure can be an important avenue for resisting gendered ideologies, for creating a sense of personal or collective empowerment, and even for bringing about positive social change by challenging gendered power relations. This "fun," yet meaningful, post-divorce leisure practice certainly demonstrates divorced women's resistance to the ideologies of femininity and coupledom in their refusal to demurely hide and wallow in their "shameful social status." Instead, they actively create a "beautiful disaster"—perhaps an apt description of the now blurred dualities of their wedding, marriage, and divorce. Women not only resisted these gendered ideologies by the very act of their dress trashing but also in their resistance to their photographer's efforts to direct and stage the kind of trash the dress photos *they* wanted the women to perform. Both participants described above had photographers who urged the women to "look angry." As one woman explained, "The photographer kept telling me to look angry and I told him I wasn't angry . . . I didn't feel much. It was fun and sexy!" (p. 105). This woman affirmed the feelings she had (and did not have) and the kind of light-hearted experience she was embracing. The other participant's photographer instructed, "Sit down in the meadow and looked pissed off" to which she retorted that she was not, in fact, "pissed off," but was "happily divorced" (p. 106).

In the spirit of "trash the dress"—women in their 20s and 30s surviving and celebrating their divorces—Caputa (2014) recognized the need to "form a pack" of other divorced women so that she and others did not feel alone. Specifically, Caputa described her initial search for connection and the frustrations she encountered: "When my marriage first ended, I couldn't find

any divorce books to which I could relate. There were books from therapists filled with marriage-saving strategies and books with stories from suddenly single mothers who spent decades as wives . . . I discovered there was no literary representation for younger women who have courageously decided to end their marriages" (p. x). So, Caputa channelled her journalistic background and began writing articles and blogs to share her experiences as a young, divorced woman. One of these blogs, "Why Women in their 20s Get Hitched When They Should Have Ditched," was published in *The Huffington Post* and named one of the top 12 Blog Posts that Sparked Debate in 2011. The attention garnered by this blog prompted a flood of hundreds of e-mails from other young, divorced women seeking connection and compelled Caputa to facilitate these connections through a website (www.trashthedressonline.com), a private Facebook support group, and hosting local meet-ups, all of which provided insights for her recent (2014) book: *Trash the Dress: Stories of Celebrating Divorce in your 20s*.

Lastly, another trend within the emergent culture of young, divorced women is the flipside of wedding consumerism for women: divorce consumerism. The roles and complexities of gender, consumption and capitalism are evident in both the interconnected spheres of wedding and divorce culture. Certainly, it is clear that a pervasive wedding culture produces the bridal role as a consumer identity (Boden, 2003) with a host of wedding market accoutrements, including wedding attire, jewelry, photography, food, flowers, and travel—the cumulative costs of which continue to rise with the average American wedding costing $28 000 (in 2007) (Tombaugh, 2009). While capitalism and consumption within wedding culture represent the "before" of divorce, its "after" may be equally influenced by capitalistic pursuits to fulfill a different construction of idealized femininity than the gendered labour required within a bridal role (Tombaugh, 2009). Even a brief perusal of the website for young, divorced women—

trashthedress.com[8]—problematically reveals how even while divorced women may be "celebrating their divorce"—and thereby resisting gendered ideologies—they may do so in ways that also reproduce gendered ideologies, especially with their imperative for women's time, energy, and money to be directed towards their appearance and its associated consumerism (cf. Kilbourne, 1999; Wolf, 1990/2002). For instance, this particular website contains ample articles and resources for young, divorced women seeking beauty products, divorce parties, rings, tattoos, products for celebrating the "divorce-aversary" (featuring suggestions such as miniature coffins for wedding rings and divorce registries), and decorating accessories for the "divorcette pad" (such as "girly home decor" for the divorced woman looking to "decorate [her] digs the way [she's] always dreamed and [her ex-husband] always schemed against") (Sperenza, n.d.). These complexities around young, divorced women's consumerism may be uniquely elucidated and complicated by leisure studies' insights on gender roles and consumptive leisure (cf. Bhatti & Church, 2000; Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Cook, 2006; Foley, Holzman, & Wearing, 2007).

Leisure connections are also evident (yet, previously unexplored) in terms of young, divorced women's desire to connect with similar others to share experiences and receive support, which speaks to the field of leisure's recognition of the importance of social connections and support, especially for stressful and challenging experiences or transitions (cf. Glover & Parry, 2008; Green, 1998; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Parry, 2007; Parry et al., 2013). Young, divorced women's online connections also highlight the contemporary possibilities of digital leisure, or "mediated leisure," through online communities and social networking sites (Parry & Penny Light, 2014; Spracklen, 2015; Valtchanov et al., 2016). Lastly, feminist leisure research has

[8] At the original time of writing this literature review, Joelle Caputa, author of *Trash the Dress*, also had a website, trashthedress.com, but she has since shifted to a broader media platform (under her remarried surname): joellesperenza.com, which still includes archives of her *Trash the Dress* content.

more recently considered women's sexuality (cf. McKeown, 2015b; Parry & Penny Light, 2014), which will surely be part of young women's experiences as they negotiate their lives following a divorce. These considerations from a leisure perspective offer valuable insights for understanding the complexities of young women's experiences of divorce, yet, to date, they have not been directly explored in leisure research. My research aimed to address this gap and several other significant research gaps, discussed below.

2.5 Research Gaps

I have reviewed several bodies of literature that inform young women's experiences of divorce: divorce literature generally; research on the gendered experiences of divorce; and leisure perspectives. The literature on divorce, in general, reveals two significant research gaps that my research addressed: a lack of Canadian divorce research, given the preponderance of American divorce research (Cook et al., 2013); and a lack of recent research on divorce, given the focus (and funding) of divorce research from the 1970s-1980s (Adams & Coltrane, 2007; Ahrons, 2007). These gaps are significant since divorce is fundamentally situated within geo-socio-political contexts. The realities and complexities of divorce (for anyone) in America during the 1970s-1980s will certainly have been distinct in many ways from those that exist for Canadians, for instance, in the twenty-first century.

Examining the literature on the gendered experiences of divorce demonstrates two additional research gaps, which were especially pertinent to my research. First, the vast majority of divorce research, generally, and particularly divorce research which includes, or focuses on, women's experiences, has investigated parental divorce—that is, divorce between spouses with children. This focus extends from concerns about divorce's effects on the family, particularly divorced families with children (Ahrons, 2007), and the implications for single mothers (cf.

Avison, 1997; Weitzman, 1985). While understanding these particular divorce experiences is undoubtedly important, this focus has largely ignored the experiences of divorced women without children, especially young, divorced women in their 20s and 30s. This group of divorced women is recognized as a growing and significant group (cf. Caputa, 2014; Jerabek et al., 2014; Lenz; 2024; Paul, 2002), whose experiences are shaped by gendered ideologies, among other influences, in ways that are distinct from other groups of divorced women, such as women in their 40s and older with children (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004).

The second major research gap that is clear in reviewing the literature on the gendered experiences of divorce is a notable lack of research on the holistic, or lived, experiences of women. Existing research typically focuses on, and isolates, one element of divorce for women, such as how women are economically affected by divorce (cf. Cooke et al., 2013; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Weitzman, 1985). Furthermore, divorce research (generally and on women specifically) is almost exclusively quantitative, using surveys, psychological scales, or national census databases. My research addressed these gaps by focusing on young, divorced women without children, using a feminist qualitative research approach, broadly, that explored women's lived experiences, integrating the many facets and complexities of these experiences.

Lastly, to my knowledge, there has been only one very recent study within the leisure literature that has specifically explored the experiences of divorced women,[9] outside the context of parental divorce (which has also typically only focused on family dynamics rather than the experiences of women). Indeed, in her recent research on divorced migrant women in Hong Kong, Ridgway (2024) also noted this important research gap that "female divorcées . . . are largely missing from the conversation . . . within the leisure scholarship" (p. 435). As such,

[9] This study involved five women, two of whom were mothers (and whose divorces were thus parental divorces), and the women were in their late 30s to early forties.

adding a leisure perspective to my research contributes valuable insights to leisure research, including the connections between leisure and gender, and the possibilities of leisure as a site of both gender reproduction and resistance; leisure and relationships, particularly the often supportive role of women friendships; leisure's connections to media and popular culture; and more recent considerations of women's sexuality and digital leisure, for instance. My research sought to integrate and further develop these leisure perspectives to illuminate the experiences of young, divorced women, without children, as an "untapped" and often "misunderstood" community.

3.0 Theory and Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical and methodological influences informing my approach to research. I begin by broadly contextualizing feminist research, emphasizing the principles that guided my research specifically as a feminist project. Acknowledging the plurality of feminisms (Tong, 2014), I then situate my own particular engagement with feminism as the conceptual and theoretical framework for this research. Subsequently, I outline my methodological choice of narrative inquiry and its relevance to this study. Finally, I identify the purpose and research questions that framed my research.

3.1 Engaging in Feminist Research

There is no one theory, methodology, or method of feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Instead, there are multiple approaches to engaging in feminist research, which are diverse, dynamic, and thought-provoking (Olesen, 2011). Moreover, feminist thought and research are inherently interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interlocking (Tong, 2014). While feminism and feminist research is necessarily multiple, it is unified through an overarching vision, which is informed by several key principles. First, feminism is "fundamentally about transforming patriarchal culture and society" (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p. 256), with the patriarchy encompassing the social and cultural rules that privilege men over women (Henderson et al., 1996). Specifically, feminism—and its theories and research—"exposes and analyzes a patriarchal system of domination and oppression and seeks social justice through action-based frameworks that help create a society based on gender equity" (Parry, 2014, p. 351; Snyder-Hall, 2010). In a leisure context particularly, there is the important recognition within gender and leisure scholarship that "women's leisure is often a reflection of their oppression in patriarchy" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 8).

Second, feminists share a focus of exploring the ways in which gender and power influence understandings and constructions of women's lives (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). These explorations challenge more traditional ways of knowing and knowledge building, which have often ignored the perspectives of women and placed women's experiences outside the purview of "legitimate" inquiry (Harding, 2012; Hawkesworth, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminist research, however, has both an epistemological and methodological imperative that seeks to "recognize the importance of women's lived experiences with the goal of unearthing subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). As such, research participants are seen as the experts of their own experiences (DeVault & Gross, 2012) and the importance of building knowledge by listening to these perspectives is emphasized.

Third, research from a feminist perspective involves connecting research with activism. Accordingly, when feminist research joins with social justice research, it aims to envision and create a just society for all people (women *and* men) by understanding the factors that perpetuate social injustices and providing strategies for change (Parry, 2014; Valtchanov, 2022). Through all of these principles, feminist research compels particular practices within research, including attentiveness to power dynamics, positionality, and reflexivity (Hawkesworth, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Moreover, within feminist research, there is a close interplay between all components of the research process, including theory, methodology, and methods (Bromley, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012). I explore each of these below as they relate to my research on the "subjugated knowledge" and experiences of young, divorced women.

3.2. Theory

3.2.1 My Feminism

During the first year of my doctoral studies, I was fortunate enough to participate in the foundational seminar of my department (REC 700), which explores the philosophy of science, broadly, and encourages students to recognize and appreciate the breadth of understanding, co-creating, and representing knowledge, as well as to situate ourselves as researchers contributing to particular forms knowledge. Individually and with colleagues, I have since reflected upon and written about the impact of this seminar on my graduate journey (Berbary, Valtchanov, Torabian, Gao, Miller, & Briscoe, 2018). To situate my particular feminist approach to this research (and all of my research), I share, below, excerpts from the final paper I wrote for this seminar, fortuitously led by my supervisor, Diana Parry. As discussed above, I am a feminist, broadly, and a feminist researcher, specifically. I situate my engagement with feminism broadly as a *critical theory feminist*, as distinct, in some ways, from other feminisms, such as post-structural feminism. Below, I articulate my particular philosophical stance towards research, considering ontology, epistemology, methodology, and inquiry aims. I do so following Crotty's (1998) insistence on researcher transparency about our philosophical approach to knowledge because "we need to lay [our] process out for the scrutiny of the observer; we need to defend that process as a form of human inquiry that should be taken seriously" (p. 13).

First, I acknowledge that a philosophical underpinning of research begins at the most fundamental level, with an ontological view, concerning the nature of reality (Creswell, 2009). For me, there are *multiple realities*, which as critical theory asserts (feminist critical theory as well as critical theory, broadly), are shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values, among others, that form over time through interactions of privilege and oppression based on these multiple social locations (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

Second, from one's ontology follows a consideration of the nature of knowledge, or epistemology, that involves the possibilities and scope of knowledge (Crotty, 1998). I embrace a *feminist epistemology*, which recognizes the importance of lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Within a feminist epistemology, "knowledge and truth are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational" (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 9). Within my feminist epistemology, I specifically accept a constructionist epistemology, where meanings exist in and through our engagement with the realities of our world and are constructed by different people in different ways (Crotty, 1998). Thus, far from seeking knowledge as a disengaged researcher, where objectivity legitimates claims to knowledge within a postpositivist paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), a feminist epistemology encourages engagement with participants and recognizes emotions and values as critical lenses to gaining knowledge (Dupuis, 1999; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Having situated a view on the nature of reality and knowledge, a philosophical stance on research may then consider how inquiry should proceed, or one's methodological approach (Schwandt, 2007). Following my feminist epistemology, I connect broadly with a *dialogic methodology*, where inquiry is focused on the exchange of dialogue, such as through interviews (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Congruent with a feminist epistemology recognizing participants as the experts of their own experiences (DeVault & Gross, 2012), a dialogic methodology allows participants to explain their own experiences and their meanings, particularly when the researcher is attentive to feminist principles of power dynamics, positionality, and reflexivity, (Hesse-Biber, 2012). I also appreciate Dupuis' (1999) articulation of a 'reflexive methodology' that compels researchers to be aware of their human selves, emotions and personal experiences in research.

All of these foundations within my philosophical approach to research crucially inform my inquiry aims. For me, as bell hooks (1994) contends, research should be rooted in a "transformative politics and practice" (as cited in Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 3). This is closely connected to a politics of hope, where "knowledge produced can change existing oppressive structures and remove oppression through empowerment" (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 103). These possibilities of empowerment can occur on an individual and on a more collective level.

Furthermore, my inquiry aims involve questioning commonly held values and assumptions (Crotty, 1998) challenging dominant ideologies and knowledge that excludes (Hesse-Biber, 2012). As Hesse-Biber (2012) maintains, this can occur through feminists posing "new questions that place women's lives and those of "other" marginalized groups at the center of social inquiry" (p. 3). As such, "Feminist research *disrupts* traditional ways of knowing to create rich new meanings" (p. 3, emphasis in original). For me, espousing a feminist approach to research significantly involves the notion of praxis, which dissolves the distinction between theory and practice (Barker, 2006) and insists on emancipatory knowledge for social change (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

In clearly articulating the philosophical underpinnings of my feminist approach to research—including my ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions—I sought to bring my particular research values and assumptions to the fore, for my own reflexivity and that of others who engage with my research. I turn now to an overview of a particular feminist theory—that of *feminist intersectionality*—which offers an additional and crucial lens, beyond what I articulated above more broadly.

3.2.2 Feminist Intersectionality

In response to early feminist theories (such as liberal feminism), which often ignored crucial differences between groups of women, such as race and ethnicity, feminist researchers were faced with the challenge of "how to theorize difference without losing the analytic force of gender analysis" (Raey, 2007, p. 606). This challenge required new theoretical frameworks, which recognized that "identities or subjectivities are relational and multiple, enduring but fluid, more important in some contexts than others but always present" (Freysinger et al., 2013, p. 69). Intersectionality is one feminist theory that takes up this challenge. Specifically, intersectionality describes the notion that "people live in multiple, layered identities and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege" (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007, p. 629). This critical theory focuses on how social divisions are constructed and interconnected, such that "categories are not additive but interactive and mutually constructed" (Oleson, 2011, p. 134). The layered identities considered are numerous, including gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity. While this theory focuses on incorporating an understanding of individuals' multiple identities and their impacts on experiences, the distinctions and complexities of identities, both individually and as they are mutually constructed, require researchers to be clear and explicit about which identities are being considered (Warner, 2008). Moreover, scholars working with intersectionality recognize that attending to *all* possible identities simultaneously is unmanageable given the inter-categorical complexity that arises across analytical categories (Collins, 2008). Despite such challenges in intersectional analyses, this theory is ultimately useful in "revealing the complexities and multidimensionality of experience" (Dill et al., 2007, p. 629).

With this in mind, I see particular possibilities for knowledge contributions informed by feminist intersectionality in my own research context in at least a few important ways. First,

there is a significant lack of divorce research generally, including research that focuses on women, which either acknowledges or considers how women with various identities may experience divorce differently. For instance, in one notable exception, Smock's (1994) research on the economic impacts of divorce for both women and men found that while all racial and ethnic groups of women experienced substantial economic decreases, black women were the most economically disadvantaged, compared to white and Hispanic women (see chapter two for more discussion). The intersections of gender, race and ethnicity, and class (or socioeconomic status), among others, are especially meaningful to explore within my own research as they relate to young, divorced women's employment and income. Indeed, employment (in)equity has been identified as a prominent and ongoing issue within feminist movements (over time and currently) (Bromley, 2012). Notably, intersectionality has expanded feminist analyses of capitalism towards theory-building and social change (Bromley, 2012)—an area that connects to my own research, namely, within the emergent consumer culture of young, divorced women (see Chapter Two). In particular, considering the intersections of gender, race and ethnicity, and class attuned me to asking questions within my research such as, "How do women with low socio-economic status (initially or following divorce) experience divorce differently (and/or similarly) than women who are more economically advantaged, even after divorcing?"; and "How do race and ethnicity influence women's experiences of inclusion and/or exclusion within the consumer culture of young, divorced women?"

Thus, feminist intersectionality provided an additional theoretical lens, beyond critical feminism/feminist theory to explore the intersectionalities of young, divorced women's multiple identities, including race and ethnicity, among others—with gender and age (women in their 20s and 30s) as the shared identities framing this research within the context of divorce. This focus

recognizes the plurality and inclusivity within feminism (Parry & Fullagar, 2013) in that individuals struggle within power structures that inform their constructions of identities and experiences. However, it also acknowledges that "individual struggles with these things are not in isolation from others struggling with similar issues" (Bromley, 2012, p. 145). Feminist intersectionality enables this broadened consideration of "similar issues"—and different issues—that are simply between young, divorced women (with only gender and age as identities of focus) to consider the "complex and even contradictory positions" (Bromley, 2012, p. 145) of young, divorced women's *other* identities.

3.2.3 Personal Relevance

My engagements with feminism, broadly, and with particular feminist theories (namely, critical and intersectional) as I have outlined above, exemplify Bromley's (2012) assertion that "feminism is not simply a theory, it is a politics, and it shapes how we understand the world in which we live" (p. 45). As such, Bromley (2012) invites researchers to find ourselves and our experiences in theories—or conceptual frameworks, more generally—and use them to elucidate our own perspectives and insights along with those shared by participants. Furthermore, in an effort to be transparent about the role of my human self and emotions in research, as Dupuis (1999) encourages within her reflexive methodology, I share, below, why it resonates with me to "make feminism my own," with the plurality of feminisms (Bromley, 2012, p. 145). I have long identified as a feminist (I was the six-year-old kid marching proudly beside my mom in "Take Back the Night"...). While I have a good sense of the many feminisms (thanks to an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies and my continued learning in graduate school), I have never wholly identified with a certain 'type' of feminism/feminist. Elements of most feminisms and their attendant theories resonate with me, including liberal, radical, cultural, and post-

structural feminisms. But other elements of each do not resonate with me. Moreover, theoretically, I see (and have variously used) different theories as valuable lenses in multiple research contexts. The task of 'choosing a theory' for my dissertation research led me to more directly confront my discomfort with using only one theory to inform my research. As such, the plurality, inclusivity, and self-determination of more contemporary feminist orientations (Parry & Fullagar, 2013) are particularly congruent with my own hopes for a feminist approach that embraces "challenging boundaries and defying categories" (Bromley, 2012, p. 145). This approach is consistent with Johnson's (2014) recognition of the value of what he calls "theoretical transgression" (or, elsewhere, "theoretical promiscuity"), which advocates "taking what is useful from different theoretical frameworks and putting it to use in others" (p. 395). These "transgressions," however, and those I use within my own research, are not situated within inconsistent or contradictory epistemologies or paradigms, but rather, encourage us "to "know" beyond our most comfortable theoretical homes and be willing to tread outside of those boundaries and take up thinking in different and more critical ways" (p. 395). This approach to purposefully combining theories, or perspectives more broadly, has certainly been used by others and variously conceptualized, including *bricolage* (Derrida, 1967), *assemblage* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987), *diffraction* (Barad, 2014), and *polyvocality*[10] (Chandler & Munday, 2011), each with their own distinctions and epistemic traditions. Through this "transgressive" approach, I tread outside the boundaries of a singular theory to embrace the usefulness of multiple relevant theories, including broader theories such as critical feminist theory and feminist intersectionality as well as more specific theories, such as transitions theory.

[10] This approach involves methodological, specifically representational, plurality rather than the conceptual or theoretical plurality of the other terms.

In addition to aligning with "theoretical promiscuity," my personal engagement with feminism is also topically relevant in the feminist research tendency to use personal narratives (Bromley, 2012; Parry & Fullagar, 2013) as a way of embracing a "sense of independence, individuality, creativity, [and] the desire to subvert and resist systems of oppression" (Bromley, 2012, p. 148). Within this context, personal narratives are seen as "empowering because they place individuals at the center of production, as authorities in their own lives" (p. 148). Thus, my feminist orientation is an apt conceptual framework to support my methodological use of narrative inquiry, which I turn to next.

3.3 Methodology

The ubiquity of stories and the burgeoning recognition of their value in research have fueled the "narrative turn" in nearly every social science discipline over the last several decades (Riessman, 2002). The narrative inquiry methodology fundamentally values stories as "a primary means by which we organize human experience and make it meaningful" (Daly, 2007, p. 109). My own appreciation of the power of stories compelled my interest in this methodology. Below, I will provide an overview of narrative inquiry, including some key terms and concepts, analytic lenses, and methodological issues. I will then situate its topical relevance for exploring young women's experiences of divorce.

3.3.1 Overview of Narrative Inquiry

3.3.1.1 Key Terms and Concepts

A consideration of several key terms within narrative inquiry will help situate the diverse possibilities within this methodology. First, while the term *narrative* itself has been commonly used by qualitative researchers to refer to data from open-ended questions (Polkinghorne, 1995), Chase (2005) specifies that within narrative inquiry, narrative has a more particular meaning.

She identifies a narrative as either oral or written, which can cover three scopes or types of stories: 1) a short story about a particular event; 2) an extended story about an important part of a person's life; or 3) a story of a person's entire life, from birth to the present. Regardless of their scope, narratives can be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a conversation (Chase, 2005), although some of these contexts may better facilitate certain kinds of narratives. Two other terms refer to the specific types of narratives mentioned. A *life story* is the second type of narrative, which describes either a particular period or event in a person's life, such as their marriage or the birth of a child, or a certain topic or experience throughout a person's life, such as how their relationships have developed over time (Berbary, 2014). This type of narrative may focus on an epiphanic event (Denzin, 1989) or a turning point in a person's life (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Instead of the term life story, some narrative researchers prefer the term *personal narrative* to indicate a compelling narration about a particular topic (Riessman, 2002). Personal narrative may also be used to refer generally to narratives from diaries, letters, and autobiographical stories (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The third type of narrative, covering all (or most) of a person's life, is typically captured in the term *life history* (Chase, 2005). My research explored the personal narratives of young, divorced women, focusing on the "extended story" of the experiences surrounding their divorce, including its contextualization before, during, and after to recognize divorce as a process, a transition, and potentially a "turning point."

Several other terms, or concepts, are important across narrative types: co-construction, re-storying, meta-narrative, and counter-narratives. Berbary (2014) provides a useful overview of these four concepts. *Co-construction* is described as the notion that "each story is always a co-construction because who we are telling the story to will influence how we tell it" (p. 17). For

instance, how someone recounts an event to their boss and how they share it with their best friend will likely mean the 'same story' will be somewhat different for each of these specific audiences based on the narrator's different relationships with them. This co-construction means that narrative researchers are themselves part of a narrator/participant's story since the story the narrator tells will be influenced by the researcher (Berbary, 2014).

The concept of *re-storying* concerns both the way a story is told and also how the researcher represents this story to an audience (Berbary, 2014). Focusing on the first meaning, re-storying involves various elements of storytelling generally and how these elements may change as stories are told and re-told. This concept becomes clearer in thinking of a story that you or someone you know has told many times. Each time the story is re-told, or re-storied, new details may be added or emphasized, voices throughout the story may be heightened or honed (maybe the narrator gets clever with accents to delineate different characters), and the timing, speed, and ordering of the story may become more practiced. As Berbary (2014) explains of re-storying, a story becomes "re-packaged in order to be more "useful" to the listener—it, therefore, is a re-storied co-construction that is meant to tell the story that is most useful to the audience" (p. 18). Re-storying does not only apply to stories that have been told many times; it also includes stories that may be elicited for the first time, and thus, are re-storied (from the original) for the first time (Berbary, 2014).

A *meta-narrative* is another significant concept within narrative inquiry. It refers to the humanist idea that there is a story or overarching explanation of human progress from the beginning of humanity to the present (Berbary, 2014). Meta-narratives are comprised of "multiple "common cultural" narratives that help to "word the world" and construct certain ways of being, thinking, and acting" (Berbary, 2014, p. 18). Because meta-narratives are based on

"common cultural" narratives, they explain the world according to the status quo, and as such, often ignore the voices of non-dominant groups (Berbary, 2014).

The inclusion of voices from non-dominant groups ignored or subsumed in meta-narratives is reflected in *counter-narratives*, which offer new or alternative ways of thinking about and understanding the lives of those who have been silenced or excluded from dominant narratives (Berbary, 2014). Synthesizing the relationships between these four concepts within narrative inquiry and the usefulness of this methodology for social change, Berbary (2014) succinctly articulates that narrative inquiry "is concerned with the ways that *co-constructions* of narratives and the *re-storying* of narratives, specifically *counter-narratives*, can contribute to critique, change, and expansion of the taken-for-granted truths found within the "*meta-narrative*" of human progression" (p. 17). I discuss these concepts in relation to my own research in my articulation below of narrative inquiry's topical relevance. First, however, I provide an overview of narrative inquiry itself, beginning with a brief consideration of some of the influences that have informed contemporary narrative inquiry and its analytic lenses.

3.3.1.2 Analytic Lenses

Regardless of the particular forms of narratives, they are the central focus of narrative inquiry, which Chase (2005) has identified as a particular type (or sub-type) of qualitative inquiry. Specifically, narrative inquiry is "characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (p. 651). Contemporary narrative inquiry has been influenced by a broad history of narrative research beginning in the early twentieth century in fields such as sociology, anthropology, and sociolinguistics (Chase, 2005). In addition to these disciplinary influences, an

interest in life histories and personal narratives was invigorated by social movements of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, including the civil rights movement and the second-wave women's movement (Chase, 2005). Within the women's movement, the Personal Narratives Group (1989), for instance, critiqued the androcentric assumptions of social science and focused on the lives and activities of women by treating women's personal narratives as "essential primary documents for feminist research" (p. 4). The women's movement's focus on personal narratives also challenged conventional assumptions about research subjects, relationships, and methods. These challenges resisted the idea of narratives as useful simply for gathering information about individuals' lives and, instead, viewed women not as objects of research, but rather, as subjects who could articulate the subjective meanings they assigned to the events and conditions of their lives (Chase, 2005).

Such influences are reflected in the five analytic lenses, or approaches, of contemporary narrative inquiry outlined by Chase (2005). These lenses can be considered distinct, but they are also significantly interconnected. The first analytic lens views *narrative as a particular form of discourse*. As discourse, narratives are a retrospective act of meaning-making as "a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (Chase, 2005, p. 656). Crucially, however, narratives are not simply a chronology of events over time, but they are recounted by a narrator from their point of view and, as such, also express feelings, thoughts, and interpretations which convey not only the 'what' of the narrative, but why it is worth telling. Josselson (2011) refers to this as a "layering of voices" within a narrative, which encompasses the told (narrative content) and the telling (narrative structure). Indeed, as Chase (2005) contends, "a central tenet of the narrative turn is that speakers construct events through

narrative rather than simply refer to events . . . how individuals narrate experience is as important to the meanings they communicate as what they say" (p. 656). Thus, in contrast to scientific discourses, for instance, narratives highlight the distinctness, or particularities, of actions and events for individuals, rather than their common aspects (Polkinghorne, 1995). This is not to say that narratives do not become connected to broader social contexts, but that each narrative highlights particularity, and following the narrative turn, the notion and (post-positivist) goal of generalizability to a certain population is rejected (Chase, 2005; Josselson, 2011).

This lens of *narrative as a particular form of discourse* will inform my research through an attentiveness to the particularities of divorced women's stories and experiences, rather than focusing only, or primarily, on their commonalities. In addition, this lens will be useful in considering both what stories women share, and why these stories are important to them, as well as how women construct and express their stories. This lens particularly informs feminist intersectionality in its recognition of diversity (Daly, 2007), which ultimately values the multiplicity of individuals as a central component (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007).

The second analytic lens of narrative inquiry views *narrative as social action*. As Chase (2005) explains, "When someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience and reality" (p. 657). Within this lens, there is attention to what is referred to as *voice*, which involves what the narrator communicates, how this is communicated, and the subject positions, or social locations, from which the narrator speaks (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Through a narrator's telling, and given their particular voice, they create or produce versions of self, reality, and experience (Chase, 2005). This self-construction through narrative is conceptualized in two different ways in Sparkes and Smith's (2008) forms of narrative inquiry as *narrative constructivism* or *narrative constructionism*, which each have a different focus. With

narrative constructivism, the focus of narratives is primarily on the individual (as suggested by constructivism, rather than the broader focus of constructionism). With this approach, "emphasis is often given to personal experience and the active engagement of the individual person in the process of self-construction" (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 297). In contrast, the focus of narratives within narrative constructionism "is not on cognitive scripts or the inner realm of individuals but on narratives as a vehicle through which our world, lives, and selves are articulated and the way in which such narratives function within social relationships" (p. 298). This approach, then, is more consistent with the view of narrative as social action since it shifts the emphasis from the "individuated, psychologized image of the person" to a perspective that highlights narrative as a "form of social action and a relational, socio-cultural phenomenon" (p. 298) where narrators construct themselves from the "scripts" within their socio-cultural environment.

This lens of *narrative as social action* informed my own research particularly as it connected to divorced women's counter-narratives (which will be discussed in greater detail below, in my discussion of this methodology's topical usefulness). These counter-narratives can facilitate the construction and sharing of new stories within the existing cultural meta-narratives that influence (and construct) divorced women's experiences. As Gilbert and Gubar (2000) vividly asserted, "women will starve in silence . . . until new stories are created that confer upon them the power of naming themselves and controlling their world" (p. 391). Indeed, the voices of non-dominant groups that are ignored or subsumed within meta-narratives—including young, divorced women—are specifically included within counter-narratives. These counter-narratives can disrupt the repetitions of dominant stories (and the meta-narratives they reinforce) by offering stories that provide alternatives—new ways of thinking and understanding—based on the lives of those who are often silenced or marginalized from dominant narratives (Berbary,

2014). Recognizing narratives as a form of social action affirms the productive and potentially transformative possibilities of divorced women's own stories that enable them to break the silences that marginalize them, which can contribute to social justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Parry, 2014)—certainly my hope for this research.

The third analytic lens compels narrative researchers to consider *stories as both enabled and constrained* by various social resources and conditions, including "the possibilities for self and reality construction that are intelligible within the narrator's community, local setting, organizational and social memberships, and cultural and historical location" (Chase, 2005, p. 657). This approach acknowledges that while every narrative is particular, across narratives, there may be similarities and differences that elucidate "patterns in the storied selves, subjectivities, and realities that narrators create during particular times and in particular places" (p. 657). In this sense, as Daly (2007) described, narratives "are provisional constructions that constitute reality" (p. 110).

This third lens of *stories as both enabled and constrained* informed my research, particularly in recognizing the complexity within a feminist orientation (Parry & Fullagar, 2013). This lens specifically attuned me to the complexity within divorced women's stories in considering how gendered ideologies can be simultaneously reproduced and resisted. This tension is usefully embraced, for instance, within McKeown's (2015a) feminist narrative (autoethnographic) research on single, young women's dating experiences, beginning with her own candid experiences. Indeed, recognizing how divorced women's stories were both enabled and constrained—and how they engaged in both reproductive and resistant acts—provided a valuable focus within my research to explore and unpack complexities.

A fourth analytic lens emphasizes *narratives as socially situated interactive performances*, produced in particular settings, for a particular audience, and for particular purposes (Chase, 2005). Josselson (2011) adds that in addition to narratives being constructed for specific audiences and purposes, they also generate a particular point of view. In this sense, narratives are flexible, changing, and influenced by interactions with the audience, such that narratives are a co-production between narrator and listener, reflecting the concept of co-construction (Berbary, 2014). With this recognition, narrative researchers shift the focus away from the 'validity' or accuracy of a story and instead emphasize the functions of the narrative in social life, that is, how the story impacts various levels of co-producers: the narrator, the audience, and society more broadly (Daly, 2007).

This lens of *narratives as socially situated interactive performances* informed my research by highlighting, and working with and through, my choice of methods, in particular, which I describe in detail below in my discussion of reflexive, dyadic interviews and interactive, group interviews. Both of these methodological choices emphasize co-construction and interactivity between me, as the researcher, and participants, as narrators (Ellis, 2004). In the context of my research, the particular social situatedness of each participant also connects to feminist intersectionality's attention to each individual's layered and multiple identities and social locations (Dill et al., 2007).

Lastly, a fifth analytic lens turns the view to *narrative researchers themselves as narrators*. Like many contemporary qualitative researchers, narrative researchers consider their own role in developing interpretations and representing the narratives they study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As narrators, researchers explore the meaning of the narratives of others and in so doing, "develop their own voice(s) as they construct others' voices and realities" and as they

"write or perform their work for particular audiences" (Chase, 2005, p. 657). This analytic lens opens up complex issues related to voice, interpretive authority, and representation, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section exploring a couple of methodological issues within narrative inquiry.

This fifth analytic lens of *narrative researchers themselves as narrators* informed my research through an awareness of the importance of my own reflexivity throughout the research process. While reflexivity is often a significant part of feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2012), I specifically incorporated it into my own research in at least three concrete ways (which I also describe in further detail in my discussion of methods). First, ongoing memo writing enabled me to document my thoughts, initial interpretations, and tensions, among other considerations, as the research process unfolded (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009; Charmaz, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Second, my use of reflexive, dyadic interviews encouraged my reflexivity through sharing my own experiences with participants and openly reflecting on the experiences participants shared within the interviews (Ellis, 2004). Third, my interpretation and representation of the research findings included sharing interpretive authority with participants by inviting their feedback and further insights (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012) as well as representing findings using creative analytic practice with its specific attention to making clear the reflexivity of the researcher (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In these ways, I worked to acknowledge and share how I, too, am a narrator, along with participants, wherein this research was influenced by my own multiple (and shifting) positionalities and the interpretations they compelled. I turn now to a consideration of several methodological issues within narrative inquiry.

3.3.1.3 Methodological Issues

3.3.1.3.1 Research Relationship.

While all narrative researchers (and, indeed, most qualitative researchers, among others) pay particular attention to the research relationship, those whose narratives are based on in-depth interviews aim to transform the interviewer-interviewee relationship into a narrator and listener relationship (Chase, 2005). This involves a shift from more conventional interview questions, which are typically sociological, and encourage interviewees to generalize and compare their experiences, to inviting interviewees to become narrators in sharing their stories. Chase (2005) describes this shift in this way: "To think of an interviewee as a narrator is to make a conceptual shift away from the idea that interviewees have answers to researchers' questions and toward the idea that interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own" (p. 660). This shift and its challenges are situated within what Gubrium and Holstein (2002) call our "interview society" where we "believe that interviews generate useful information about lived experience and its meanings" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 633). While this can certainly be true of interviews, this can be impeded when individuals assume (often accurately) that researchers are interested in what is general rather than particular about experiences (Weiss, 1994). Furthermore, Gubrium and Holstein (2002) critique the notion of an interview facilitating the sharing of a narrator's "own" voice, which they suggest implies that narrators' stories are not socially mediated. Chase (2005), however, contends that interview-based narrative researchers are not interested in interviewees as narrators because they view their voices as unmediated, but rather, they are interested in narrators' particular experiences, specifically as they interpret and understand them.

In my research, this consideration was reflected in initially describing and framing the interview process (both for the individual and group interviews described in my methods in the next chapter) so that it was clear to participants that I was inviting their *stories*—whichever ones they were comfortable sharing and found meaningful—rather than seeking any particular *answers* to set questions. By clarifying this contrast initially, and throughout the interviews, I fostered a narrative research relationship that encouraged participants to share their distinct stories, instead of feeling they needed to fit their experiences into generalities of other divorced women, broadly, or of the divorced women that were part of their group interview.

3.3.1.3.2 Researchers' Voices and Narrative Strategies.

While narratives are told by narrators, in their voices, the voice of the narrative researcher is also part of the research (as indicated in the fifth analytic lens). How the researcher's voice is incorporated into the research concerns issues of voice, interpretive authority, and representation (Chase, 2005). Chase (2005) suggests there is a continuum of researcher voices within narrative inquiry, which can be authoritative, supportive, or interactive. With an authoritative researcher voice, or narrative strategy, researchers separate their voices from the voices of narrators through an authoritative interpretive voice (Chase, 2005). With this voice, researchers attend to *how* and *what* questions in interpreting narratives and focus on elucidating narrative processes, such as narrators' use of cultural discourses for making sense of their experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). This voice may be seen as the "academic" voice. While some have criticized this approach as privileging the researcher's interpretations at the expense of the narrator (Denzin, 1997), others view this narrative strategy as "making visible and audible taken-for-granted practices, processes, and structural and cultural features of our everyday social world" (Chase, 2005, p. 664). It should be noted that while this approach contains explicit researcher

interpretations, with the combined presentation of extensive material in narrators' own words, readers are able to develop their own alternative interpretations (Riessman, 2002).

Another way in which narrative researchers' voices can be incorporated into the research is what Chase (2005) calls the "supportive voice," where the narrator's voice is the most emphasized. This narrative strategy is characteristic of Latin American *testimonios*, wherein researchers may write a short preface or introduction, for instance, but then present the uninterrupted stories of the narrator(s) and may even name the narrator as the author (Chase, 2005). Anthropological oral histories may also use this approach as do many performance narratives that highlight the narrator(s) voices to specifically engage the audience and performers (Chase, 2005). Researchers using this supportive strategy assert that "there is a time and there is a place . . . for highlighting narrators' voices and for moving temporarily to the margins the ways in which researchers (along with a host of social, cultural, and historical circumstances) have already conditioned those voices" (Chase, 2005, pp. 665-666).

Lastly, a third narrative strategy of how and where the researcher's voice appears in the research is an interactive voice that "displays the complex interaction – the intersubjectivity – between researchers' and narrators' voices . . . [whereby] researchers examine *their* voices – their subject positions, social locations, interpretations, and personal experiences – through the refracted medium of narrators' voices" (Chase, 2005, p. 666). This narrative strategy is often used with narrative ethnographies and some autoethnographies. Within these narratives, researchers make themselves vulnerable in the text and often include lengthy discussions of their feelings, thoughts, research relationships and interpretive decisions and tensions (Chase, 2005). These researchers attempt to disrupt the myth of the invisible author (Tierney, 2002).

Consideration of the research relationship and the various researcher voices or strategies recognizes the important interactional nature of narrative inquiry.

In my own research, I used a blend of these three narrative strategies, with different forms of representations. Through exploring narrative inquiry's concepts, analytic lenses, and a couple of methodological issues, this methodology clearly aligned well with my own research. In the following section, I specifically articulate this alignment with my research exploring young women's experiences of divorce.

3.3.2 Methodological Relevance for My Research

3.3.2.1 Counter-narratives of Divorced Women

I believe that narrative inquiry is particularly useful in exploring young women's experiences of divorce. First, and perhaps most saliently, since narrative inquiry is "a useful methodology for constructing and illuminating counter-stories" (Berbary, 2014, p. 18), I see this methodology facilitating the construction and sharing of important counter-narratives from divorced women. As I have discussed in chapter two, young, divorced women are an "untapped and often misunderstood community" (Caputa, 2014, back cover)—their experiences remain largely "subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, divorced women are often adversely affected by powerful gendered ideologies. These ideologies are part of a meta-narrative that ignores and subsumes the voices (Berbary, 2014) and stories of divorced women given their departure from the dominant narratives of femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism. As a result, divorced women report experiencing loneliness, depression, guilt, shame, and a sense of failure (see Chapter Two). The experience of divorce often silences women, making them feel paradoxically that they are branded with "a scarlet letter on [their] chest" and that "*nobody* is

ever going to know," as one divorced woman expressed (Paul, 2002, p. 164, original emphasis). However, these struggles faced by divorced women are crucially not "the whole story."

Divorced women can resist and subvert dominant gendered ideologies and the narratives they inform and construct. Along with the challenges of divorce, there can *also* be the development of a more positive sense of self, independence, confidence, new connections, and even celebration (see Chapter Two). Accordingly, the complexity of narratives "provides a window to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses [and ideologies] which we tend to take for granted as stable monolithic forces" (Chase, 2005, p. 659). This disruption of the stability of dominant ideologies—in this case, gendered ideologies affecting divorced women— certainly embraces the aim of much feminist research to deconstruct cultural "texts" to "open [them] up" and engage with both the presences and absences within them (*what are divorced women saying and* not *saying?*) (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 76). Inviting counter-narratives is also reflective of feminist research generally and has been encouraged since early feminist research groups, such as the Personal Narratives Group (1989), and by many others subsequently. Within feminist research, counter-narratives compel critical questions, including: "How do interactional, social, cultural, and historical conditions mediate women's stories? In what ways are women's voices muted, multiple, and/or contradictory? Under what conditions do women develop "counternarratives" as they narrate their lives?" (Chase, 2005, p. 655). Thus, through narrative inquiry, the counter-narratives of young, divorced women can be encouraged, constructed, and illuminated in all their multiplicity and complexity.

3.3.2.2 Lived Experiences of Divorced Women

In addition to facilitating counter-narratives from the non-dominant group of young, divorced women, narrative inquiry is also a useful methodology for my topic because it uniquely

reflects women's *lived experiences* of divorce. The term "lived experience" frequently used by qualitative researchers is a complex concept with various meanings and uses, however, it typically refers to *immediate* experience in contrast to conceptual knowledge and interpretation (Wertz et al., 2011). Moreover, as Wertz et al. (2011) further describe, "the concept of *lived* experience, in contrast to the abstractions of experience in theory . . . and measurement . . . has included . . . above all, meaningfulness in the context of the person's larger life" (p. 12). Narrative inquiry is particularly useful for reflecting lived experiences since narratives lend themselves more to the expression of complexity than do more abstract forms (Gamson, 2002). Narrative inquiry also supports the research of lived experiences in viewing participants as narrators who tell their stories in their own voices, which convey not only "what happened" but also, significantly, the emotions, thoughts, and meanings connected to experiences for "the one who lives them" (Chase, 2005, p. 651). By holding *together* thoughts, feelings, and interpretations within a narrative, the dominant binary of rational/emotional is challenged. As Daly (2007) asserts, "narrative bridges the emotional and the rational" specifically through narrative inquiry's "emphasis on lived, embodied experience and the nuances of private life" (p. 108). Indeed, narrative researchers often "treat narratives *as* lived experience" (Chase, 2005, p. 658, original emphasis). Research on the *lived experiences* of young, divorced women, as facilitated by narrative inquiry, is especially needed considering my review of the existing research on divorced women, which revealed research using predominantly quantitative data from large, national surveys (typically American). While certainly valuable, this postpositivist, quantitative research does not facilitate an exploration of women's lived experiences and, as such, this remains a significant research gap, which I address with a narrative inquiry methodology.

3.3.2.3 "Revised Identities" of Divorced Women in Transition

While narrative inquiry is a particularly useful methodology for studying divorced women, and specifically their lived experiences, it is also a useful methodology for studying divorced women's lived experiences of divorce *as a life transition*. This usefulness is demonstrated in narratives as a form of "constructing selves" (within specific cultural and discursive contexts) (Chase, 2005, p. 658), where such constructions through narratives embody a person's identity that both develops and changes over time (McAdams, 1997). As I explored in chapter two, the transition of divorce prompted women to "revise" their identities. These self-revisions in response to transition(s) are exemplified in Josselson's (1996) longitudinal narrative inquiry research on how women revised their stories and their lives as they experienced transitions in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. In a notable exception to divorce research on women, Caputa's (2014) collection of stories from women in their 20s and 30s who experienced divorce demonstrates young women's revised selves as they moved through the transition of divorce from stories/selves of turmoil (e.g., "emotion sickness") to stories of new lives and new selves (e.g., "happily ever after divorce"). Thus, narrative inquiry is a useful methodology for exploring the "revised identities" (Josselson, 1996) compelled by the profound personal and social disruption of a transition (Catron & Chiriboga, 1991), such as divorce.

In summary, using narrative inquiry to specifically explore young, Canadian women's lived experiences of divorce collectively addresses several significant research gaps that reflect a paucity of current, Canadian, holistic, and qualitative divorce research, generally, and particularly for young, divorced women without children. As discussed in Chapter Two, these research gaps are situated within divorce research that is typically based on American research (Cook et al., 2013) from the 1970s-1980s (Ahrons, 2007) derived from national census databases

(using quantitative analyses) that has delineated particular, rather than holistic, experiences of divorce, such as economic impacts. Lastly, this research sought to address a lack of leisure research on this topic by drawing upon, and furthering, feminist leisure scholars' insights on leisure as a distinct and often revelatory social-cultural nexus where gendered ideologies and their power relations are reproduced and resisted (Shaw, 2001). I turn now to outlining the specific purpose and research questions that informed my study.

3.4 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of young women (in their 20s and 30s), without children, who were divorced. More specifically, this study sought to explore how this group of women were influenced by different gendered ideologies—including femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism—along with other social, cultural, relational, and personal contexts and pressures. In addition, these explorations were framed by several conceptual and disciplinary frameworks, which further focussed the research: namely, a feminist framework, as outlined(a macro "theory"); and a leisure perspective (a disciplinary framework)—all of which were fundamentally informed by the research as a feminist social justice project that aimed to expose the marginalization and stigmatization faced by young, divorced women and to illuminate new understandings of their complex, lived experiences.

3.5 Research Questions

I explored three central research questions within this research project:

1) What gendered ideologies do young, divorced women experience?

2) How are these gendered ideologies experienced, circulated, reproduced, and maintained?

3) How do young, divorced women negotiate and resist these gendered ideologies?

All three of these main research questions explored and integrated all elements of consideration discussed in the purpose statement above, rather than attempting to separate experiences according to various categorizations, such as divorced women's "leisure experiences" or divorced women's "experiences of transition." The interview guide (see Appendix D), however, elaborates on the specific questions used to connect these broader, conceptual research questions with the more particular experiential questions participants' narratives explored.

4.0 Methods

In this chapter, I outline the methods I used within my research project. Specifically, I discuss the two complementary interview methods I selected for this study: reflexive, dyadic interviews; and interactive group interviews. I then describe my recruitment of participants, 'data' collection, analysis and interpretation, and the representation of my findings.

4.1 Reflexive, Dyadic Interviews

One way of accessing subjugated knowledge is by speaking with people who have experienced marginalization, which has been the broad approach of much feminist qualitative research committed to hearing and representing the perspectives of participants, often with powerfully liberatory impacts (DeVault & Gross, 2007). While "open-ended interviewing" is commonly described in certain feminist methods texts (e.g., DeVault & Gross, 2007), it is important to be clear that there are many types of interviews, each with a specific purpose and alignment with specific methodologies (Berbary, 2014). One broad type of interview is an in-depth interview, which is consistent with a narrative inquiry approach (McCormack, 2004). In-depth interviews are useful when data collection seeks to gain rich data about a particular experience of a participant's life (McKeown, 2015b). Thus, I determined that in-depth interviewing, generally, was a relevant method for exploring the experiences of young, divorced women. Below, I discuss several broad guidelines that informed the in-depth interviews I conducted. I then further specify a type of in-depth interview I used in my research.

With in-depth interviews, particularly within feminist research, interviewers express interest (rather than remaining detached), invite participants to reflect, and encourage them to articulate their own meanings (Charmaz, 2006). DeVault and Gross (2007) suggest that researchers should openly share with participants the concerns that inspire and animate the

research “so that the conversation can unfold as a collaborative moment of making knowledge” (p. 181). To encourage this collaborative production of knowledge, active listening is essential. Active listening involves being fully engaged not only in taking in information but allowing that information to “affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable and take you on unexpected detours” (Gordon, 1997, p. 40). DeVault and Gross (2012) propose what they call “radical, active listening,” whereby the researcher is fully engaged with the participant and pays particular attention to gaps and silences that may reflect meanings beyond explicit speech. Thus, I want to take an approach to interviewing that is conversational, where the interview enables both the interviewer and interviewee to share their experiences, which can build rapport and create a space of co-creating knowledge to disrupt the traditional power dynamics between researcher and participant (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

To facilitate this aim, I used a type of in-depth interview referred to as reflexive, dyadic interviews (Ellis, 2004). This type of interview is based on conversations between the researcher and participant, where the researcher plays an active role by sharing reactions, thoughts, and feelings (Ellis, 2004). Researchers are encouraged to share their own experiences and reasons for pursuing the research to provide additional context and awareness for the participants. Within this encouragement for the researcher to play an active role and share their own experiences, I was mindful that while I did not share the experience of being a divorced woman, I openly shared my reasons for conducting this research (see chapter one) as well as experiences I did share with participants, such as being affected in particular ways by gendered ideologies. While recognizing the importance of this reciprocity, Ellis (2004) makes clear that the focus remains on the participant’s experiences and knowledge; the researcher’s experiences are used to offer insights about the topic for the participant’s consideration and to encourage engagement

throughout the interview. Additionally, the researcher sharing their own reflections and responses as the participants share their experiences distinguishes reflexive interviews from active interviews, which are similar in other ways, including their conversational nature and mutual sharing of experiences between the researcher and participant (Ellis, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). That is, with reflexive interviews, the researcher's role not only involves sharing their own experiences with the participant but also reflecting on the experiences the participant shares within the interview (rather than reserving these reflections only for personal memos or later interpretations). This method particularly resonated with my own approach to conversations and relationships, generally, where I have found that candidly sharing my own experiences and reflecting on the experiences shared with me by others allows me to gain a deeper understanding of others' experiences and perspectives and to be mutually involved in reflecting on our own positionalities.

4.2 Interactive, Small Group Interviews

Given that so much of how we come to understand the world and express this understanding occurs through our interactions with others (cf. Howarth, 2001; May, 1993), the methodological choice to bring people together to discuss their experiences around a shared topic or phenomenon is one that can be particularly useful. Specifically, within feminist research, a group interview can often provide distinct insights into the subjugated knowledge of marginalized individuals, whereby their stories coalesce to form a "collective project of ideological critique" akin to early consciousness-raising groups (DeVault & Gross, 2012, pp. 210-211). As such, group interviews, broadly speaking, worked well to explore the experiences of young, divorced women who are marginalized. Recognizing the complexity of these (and other) experiences, facilitating polyvocality (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012) and experience-

sharing in multiple contexts is a significant consideration of research methods. This consideration often lends itself to combining both one-on-one interviews (as with the method described above) and group interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Moreover, bringing multiple voices together in a group context can encourage lively conversations, which highlight group dynamics and norms, whereby group interviews "may produce *different* perspectives on the *same* issues" than those produced within individual interviews (May, 1993, p. 95, original emphasis). Thus, both one-on-one interviews and group interviews can be complementary (Hesse-Biber, 2007). In my own research context, I felt group interviews worked well with reflexive, dyadic interviews to explore the experiences of young, divorced women in this study.

One specific approach to group interviews is described by Ellis (2004), who differentiates this type of group interview from focus groups. With focus groups, the researcher typically moderates, or leads, the discussion, proposing a series of questions to direct the course of the group interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Conversely, interactive group interviews enable all group members to play the roles of the researcher and participant by engaging in questions and discussions that arise in conversations as directed by the particular interests and experiences of the group (Ellis, 2004). This interactive approach helps to reduce, or shift, the researcher-participant hierarchy, which has been a central concern within feminist research aimed at "deconstructing power relations within the research context" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 180). This is often achieved when researchers "cultivate collaboration and emphasize reflexivity"—processes I facilitated through my two interview methods individually and collectively (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 180). This approach (and its combination with reflexive, dyadic interviews) is one way of effectively "tapping into lived experience" in that it encourages "researchers and participants to work to eliminate hierarchies of knowledge

construction . . . [so that] marginalized knowers are able to name themselves, speak for themselves, and construct a better understanding of the structures and forces that influence their experience" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 180).

Within interactive group interviews, part of the focus is on building relationships, as each group member shares their story in a conversational setting. As stories are shared, they affect and influence other stories that are then told in such a way that stories interact and unfold together (Ellis, 2004). This interactive method allows women to explore, develop, and challenge contradictory accounts as well as recognize similarities through "making experience hearable and subjecting it to systematic analysis" (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 210). Edwards and Holland (2013) similarly describe how agreements between group members can provide an elaborated and clarified perspective on shared views. Disagreements or contradictions can also be equally useful as participants may provide further explanations of their views, demonstrating complexity within even "shared" experiences, such as being young, divorced women. This collective critical process typically only occurs, however, when participants feel comfortable with one another and with the group interview process, which requires an attentiveness to group dynamics on the part of the researcher (Bromley, 2012). As such, interactive group interviews work best with small groups of 3-5 members, preferably with members who know each other and have already established trust and reciprocity (Ellis, 2004). Within this context, group interviews, such as interactive group interviews, "can serve a social support or empowerment function," particularly for marginalized or stigmatized participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 39). Empowering participants within a group interview setting can "create the conditions for the emergence of a critical consciousness directed towards social change" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 39). In particular, such contexts devoted exclusively to women have fueled personal empowerment and

collective resistance to gendered social norms and behaviours (Green, 1998). This personal and collective empowerment was, indeed, experienced within my interactive group interviews, as many of my participants shared (see, for instance, the Findings *Epilogue*).

Thus, I believe my methodological choices of reflexive, dyadic interviews and interactive, small group interviews worked well together to explore the complexities of young women's experiences of divorce.

4.3 Participant Recruitment

I recruited participants for my research through the use of purposeful sampling, which is used to collect rich data to facilitate insights and deeper understandings of a particular experience or phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Specifically, I employed an adapted form of purposeful sampling that included both criterion-based sampling and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Given that I wanted to focus on the experiences of a specific group of women, I initially ensured that all participants met the "predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 2002, p. 238). I should note that the names for these recruitment approaches, two kinds of "sampling," are consistent with, and informed by, a post-positivist approach to research, which is clearly not congruent with my own feminist qualitative approach. However, the actual practices within these approaches (labels aside) were relevant to my research. Moreover, other feminist qualitative research has used these approaches, as they are named and described (cf. McKeown, 2015b; Parry et al., 2013). I discuss below how both recruitment practices were specifically incorporated into my research.

For my study, I aimed to recruit between 12-15 participants. The "criterion of importance" in my research was that participants self-identified as women, were between the ages of 20-39, did not have children, and had experienced a divorce. For the first four criteria, I provided a rationale in chapter two for the potential distinctness of experiences related to these

characteristics: their connection to particular gendered ideologies that affect young, divorced women without children compared to other groups of women, generally, and to other groups of divorced women. Following the importance of intersectionality within feminist research, generally (Bromley, 2012), as long as the criteria above were met, the study was open to women from any other positionalities, or identities (than those specified within the criteria above), including race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and class, among others.

Within these criteria and this purposeful sampling approach, I recruited participants from three main sources: my own friendship and acquaintance networks; the extended networks of friends and acquaintances; and broader university and community networks. For the first source—my own friendship and acquaintance networks—I contacted several friends and acquaintances by e-mail, sending each potential participant an information letter that will also serve as a recruitment letter. The letter described the study in further detail, explaining what participation in the study would entail, and encouraged the women to contact me either by phone or e-mail if they we interested in participating (see Appendix B). Given that these women were friends or acquaintances, contacting them via e-mail about their interest in the study, rather than over the phone or in person, (hopefully) allowed them to decide whether or not to participate, particularly if they decided not to participate. From this approach, I recruited two participants. One was a woman I met in an undergraduate seminar and we remained acquaintances (and, incidentally, she attended my own wedding as the “plus one” of a single friend). The other participant was a friend I have known since we were both involved with the Women’s Centre during our undergrad. I also attended her wedding to her second husband.

Additionally, in speaking about my research with people I knew, such as friends and colleagues, and in posting a recruitment message on my personal Facebook page (as approved by

the university ethics committee), several individuals indicated that they personally knew women who met my criteria and offered to send them the information letter about my study for them to connect with me if they were interested in hearing more about my study and/or in participating. Through this approach, I recruited four additional participants. One of these participants was a fellow doctoral colleague in my department, but not someone I knew well given that we were in different cohorts (and classes) and had different research areas.

I also circulated a recruitment notice through the university's graduate listserv, through which I recruited an additional three participants.

Lastly, I contacted the organizers of various relevant online and community groups and asked them if they would consider relaying the information letter for my study to their members. For instance, I searched the Meetup.com website for existing groups in Ontario that might pertain to young, divorced women and found several, including divorce support groups such as *Life Beyond Marriage* (in Milton), *Dundas Separation and Divorce Support* (in Dundas/Hamilton), and *Moving Beyond Separation and Divorce* (in Toronto). I also reached out to the organizers of more general Meetup support groups for women, such as *Happy Healthy Women* (in Kitchener). Lastly, I contacted a Toronto-based "divorce coach" through her website as well as the organizer of a divorce support group advertised on a local church sign. Most organizers responded and many agreed to share the information letter for my research with their members. However, I did not recruit any participants through these approaches.

Finally, I recruited an additional three participants through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) with existing participants before and during the interviews. I did this by asking each confirmed participant whether they would be comfortable and willing to extend the information about the study to any additional friends or acquaintances (that met the criteria) within each of

their own social networks. If they were willing to do so, I asked them to send each potential new participant the information and recruitment letter with my contact information. Through these approaches, I recruited a total of twelve participants.

4.4 'Data' Collection

The data for this study was collected over a one-and-a-half-year period, between May 2019 and November 2020. I was seeking three to five women for each group given that interactive, small-group interviews have been shown to work best with this range of participants (Ellis, 2004). Thus, once three participants had confirmed their willingness to participate in the interviews, I scheduled a date and time that worked for all three women, and myself, using a Doodle poll to assist with finding common availability. Participants took part in both the interactive, small-group interview and then the reflexive, dyadic interview. Over the one-and-a-half-year period, there was an ongoing process of continued recruitment, conducting group interviews once another three participants were confirmed, followed by individual interviews for each participant. This process continued until four groups of three participants—twelve participants in total—had taken part in the research.

4.4.1 Interview Location, Setup, and Dynamics

At the outset of my data collection, it was important to me to conduct the interviews in person since I felt that face-to-face conversations facilitated more engagement and interactions than other mediums for interviews, such as the phone or online. However, my data collection period coincided with (and was extended by) the COVID-19 pandemic, so it was necessary to conduct all of the interviews online (using the Zoom platform) for the fourth, and last, group of participants.

For the in-person interviews, I carefully considered a location that would be both private and comfortable for participants. After searching various locations on campus and in the community, I decided on a large room on campus that was designated as a kind of student or staff lounge and meeting space that could be booked for private gatherings. The space had large windows (facing a roof space so the room was light-filled yet still private), comfortable chairs and couches facing one another in a living-room-like arrangement with a small coffee table, and large plants in the corners. Several women commented that the space was inviting, private, and comfortable. For each group interview, I also brought snacks and beverages for participants to enjoy, such as muffins, juice, and water. My choice to include food as part of the interviews followed my own sense that sharing food can be a source of connection and comfort for people, a sense that is, unsurprisingly, demonstrated in research on social eating facilitating social bonding (Dunbar, 2017). I hoped that my choice of space and the food provided would contribute to creating a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere in which women would feel as comfortable as possible sharing vulnerable narratives.

When I first met with women for the interactive group interviews, I explained the interview process, generally, including that throughout the interview process, they could determine their level of participation at any point, such as not answering any questions with which they were uncomfortable, or even choosing to end their participation entirely for any reason. Once I explained the interview process, I collected their written consent to participate in both types of interviews (See Appendix C). I also asked for, and received, participants' consent to audio-record the interviews. In addition, I used a semi-structured interview guide, which I referred to for both types of interviews (see Appendix D). As Patton (2002) describes, developing an interview guide allows the interviewer "to build a conversation within a particular

subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus of a particular subject that has been predetermined" (p. 343). I used the same guide for both types of interviews to see what insights and information emerged within both interview contexts, especially since different contexts can produce different perspectives on the same issues (May, 1993). The interview guide within both contexts was used as a departure point to begin conversations, if necessary, rather than a series of questions that needed to be addressed. This flexible approach enabled me to remain open to how each interview process unfolded to allow for more interactive and collaborative co-constructions of knowledge between myself and the participants (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012).

In particular, the interview guide developed followed Berbary's (2008) approach, which encouraged participants to "Tell me about" their experiences and allowed participants to lead the interview according to topics that were meaningful for them. These emergent topics were further explored together through a series of probes, or questions, around the topics. This approach was consistent with narrative inquiry's emphasis on broad questions that invite personal narratives (Chase, 2005), and specifically the approach of asking participants to "Tell me about…" (Trahar, 2009).

As mentioned, I first conducted the interactive, small group interviews (a total of four separate groups), which each had three participants. Of the twelve participants, only two knew each other (before the group interview). One of the participants had suggested her friend (through snowball sampling), who then decided to join the study. They requested to be part of the same interview group and also requested not to be in a group with other university employees given the sensitive nature of their experiences, which they did not want to share with others they might potentially encounter in their workplace. I gladly accommodated both requests. My

intention with conducting the group interviews first was two-fold. First, I felt that a group environment would be better suited for my own rapport-building with women since group contexts may be more comfortable, familiar, and conversational, particularly among women who know one another. In contrast, there may be a different comfort level and rapport-building with one-to-one interviews since the researcher must more actively work to disrupt the expectations of our "interview society" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) and research power hierarchies (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Second, beginning with the group interviews allowed the women to think about the conversations that arose among the group of women to pursue further discussions with me during the one-to-one, reflexive, dyadic interviews. I was also able to do the same by drawing on observations and reflections from the group interviews and following up on them with each woman one-on-one so that they could continue conversations begun in the group interview and start new ones using the group interview conversations as a departure point. Edwards and Holland (2013) similarly suggest that conducting group interviews before individual interviews (when used in conjunction) can be a useful order for "generating ideas about the participants . . . since their interaction can give insight into participants' worldview, the language they use and their values and beliefs about a particular topic or issue" (p. 37). This follow-up process (from group to individual interviews) was especially meaningful for exploring women's collective and individual experiences of the meta-narratives of divorced women, shaped by gendered ideologies, and then to provide a space, particularly within the one-to-one interviews, for women to share possible counter-narratives. Logistically, conducting the group interviews first also allowed me to connect with each woman following the interview to arrange the details for the individual interview.

Additionally, I invited each of the participants to bring a meaningful item with them to the group interview, such as a photograph, book, song, or memento, that spook to their experiences of divorce (at any point in the process). These items were particularly used to encourage conversations in the small group interviews. This addition was an extension of the photo-elicitation method that often complements interview research by using photographs as prompts to encourage a conversation between the participant and the researcher (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009; Harper, 2002), or in this case, between multiple participants and the researcher, with the extension of other items as possibilities.

Before each interview began, I explained the details of the study, the interview process, and the types of questions I would ask the women participating. To set the context for an interactive interview, I invited women to share their experiences freely and to respond to those shared by others in a conversational manner (rather than waiting for me to direct the conversation, for instance). This approach was consistent with my feminist research aims to deconstruct hierarchies of knowledge and research power dynamics by co-constructing knowledge with participants "as active, knowing subjects" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 180). Before we began, I also reminded participants to be respectful of the perspectives shared by others so that we could maintain a safe space for all participants to share their stories and experiences. This respectful space was particularly important since many of the topics and experiences shared involved personal, difficult, and/or sensitive issues, some of which participants may not have openly discussed before with others. Given that three of the participants were my friends, acquaintances, or colleagues, and had interacted with me as such, I reminded them that although I hoped the interview would be conversational, this was a research project and to remain aware of this throughout the interview process. With the three participants

who were known to me, I also emailed them before the group interview to ask if they were comfortable with me disclosing to the group that we knew each other, and in what capacity, to be transparent with the other group members. All three participants were comfortable with this disclosure, so I mentioned my personal connection to each of these three participants at the start of the group interview in which they participated. Furthermore, I checked in with participants throughout the group interview process to ensure that they were comfortable, if they required a break, and to respond to any questions or concerns that arose. I also emphasized the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of participants by asking the women not to discuss any of the personal information shared within the group interviews (outside of both interview contexts).

At the end of each group interview, I scheduled a date and time to conduct the reflexive, dyadic interview with each of the women. The in-person interviews took place in the same location as the group interview, which worked for all participants, although I did offer the alternative to meet in another location of their choice. Similar to the procedures I used for the interactive, group interviews, I again described the study, the interview process, and the types of questions. I also again reminded the women that they could choose not to respond to questions that they are not comfortable with, or to otherwise decide when and how they would like to participate.

As I detail in the Epilogue of my findings, these interviews were an incredible experience for myself as the researcher and for many of the participants, as they candidly shared with me when I specifically asked each of them how the interview process had felt for them, particularly in the group setting. Many participants were so eager to share their stories with supportive others that three of the four groups expressed that they wanted to share their full stories over multiple group interviews, rather than the one I had anticipated for each group. One group met three

separate times as a group and another group met twice. Group interviews (in a single session) ranged from about one hour and 40 minutes to three hours. Individual interviews ranged from about 45 minutes to three hours.

In meeting with women a second time, either as a group or individually, there was also an opportunity for me to show up as my full human self in the research (Dupuis, 1999) by bringing items, for instance, that I felt would be useful or meaningful to participants. For example, I learned from one participant that she had a young daughter, so before we met again individually, I asked her if she could use any hand-me-down clothes from my own daughters. She eagerly accepted, so I brought several bags of children's clothes, which I was all too happy to pass along. In another instance, one participant mentioned when I put out the food I had brought that she was vegan, so she would need to pass on the (non-vegan) muffins. The next time we met, I ensured there were some tasty vegan treats for her to enjoy. In another instance throughout the research, I learned that one of the participants had started a boutique "love notes" postcard business, which I loved, so I purchased twelve postcards from her to later share as personal thank you notes for each participant. She appreciated me supporting her small business and I appreciated receiving and being able to share her lovely postcards. I share these small details because they speak to some of the ways I intuitively engaged with the relationship-building that can occur within supportive research spaces (among other spaces, of course). Overall, along with the twelve individual interviews, there was a total of 19 interviews conducted, which were collectively over forty hours.

4.5 Process for Analysis and Interpretation

4.5.1 Analysis

I initially sought a specific analytic process with which to engage so I familiarized myself with some of the common approaches for "qualitative analysis," namely content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory, and interpretive phenomenological analysis (Wertz et al., 2011). Of these approaches, narrative analysis and discourse analysis seemed like they would both be a good fit for my research, broadly, and my research aims, in particular. I was also familiar with a broad thematic approach, which I had used for my master's thesis and other research projects. At this stage, following the advice of a colleague who had recently finished his dissertation, I decided to reach out to my committee members, with Diana's encouragement, to seek their input and guidance on my analysis. I was heartened by their encouraging and liberating responses. Corey Johnson urged me to "play and explore" with different analytical approaches but to ultimately "do what feels right," so long as I articulated what I had done. This encouragement aligns with Roy's (2012) similar acknowledgment of the "playfulness" and "feeling around" she recommends within feminist research, broadly, to embrace complexities and tensions. Diana encouraged me to potentially develop my own analysis, which felt exciting (albeit somewhat daunting). And Lisbeth Berbary (who was part of my committee initially before her sabbatical) assured me that, from her perspective, I did not need to follow or even "name" anyone else's analysis 'procedure'; I just needed to clearly outline whatever process I use or develop and the specific "moves" I make. She also offered these excellent considerations, "The important questions for me are not what your analysis is going to be, or what procedure you'll choose, but rather, what work do you want this project to "do" in the world and how do you move towards that?" She further reminded me of engaging

with theory in my analysis and recommended reading *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). With this affirming guidance in mind, I decided that I would develop an analysis process that, indeed, "feels right" to me by following a similar approach to embracing Johnson's (2014) "theoretical transgression" that reconciled my tensions around "picking *a* theory." That is, I would intentionally draw on and incorporate resonant elements of existing analytic processes (identifying them as such), as well as my own distinct engagements and "moves." Below, I outline in detail my analysis process and its rationales, as my committee requested, but also to respond to Maynard's (2009) acknowledgment that there is "a need for feminists to articulate more fully the way in which their analyses of data proceed" (p. 143).

4.5.1.1 Immersion Phase

Recognizing that my analysis was an ongoing, iterative, and evolving process, it 'began' with a process similar to what Charmaz (2014) identified as an *immersion phase*, which she specifies to include the following elements: interviewing with an analytical mind, transcribing my data, conducting member checking, and immersing into the data through repeated reading, and initial coding. The above description of 'steps' and the language used by Charmaz (2014), as with others, requires pause and expanded consideration, particularly as they relate to my own particular process, but more so in how I conceptualize and engage with these analytical steps, or "moves," as a feminist researcher.

First, in terms of "interviewing with an analytical mind," I certainly did this throughout my interviews through my attentiveness to how participants were discussing gender and gendered ideologies, maintaining a focus on their centrality within my research questions. However, my approach to conducting the interviews with an "analytical mind" was also crucially married with (pun intended?) my attention to feminist research principles, including power

dynamics, positionality, and reflexivity (Hesse-Biber, 2012), my engagement with "radical, active listening" (Devault & Gross, 2012), and overall care for participants, which underlies social justice research, more broadly (Johnson & Parry, 2022).

Second, "transcribing data" was, indeed, immersive, as Charmaz (2014) identified within this immersion phase. However, the degree to which it was immersive and the impetus that motivated this level of immersion are not reflected in a somewhat perfunctory inclusion of "transcribing data" in a list of other analytical steps. Specifically, "transcribing data" was a distinctly personal and feminist endeavour for me. Firstly, I resist the term "data" itself, given its origins within positivism or empiricism and its associated values and implications (Markham, 2013). More so, I resist this term as a conceptualization of knowledge as merely being information "extracted" from participants (Bhattacharya, 2023). Bhattacharya (2023) discusses this significant shift in thinking about knowledge within research and the decisions and language she centers in her own decolonial feminist research, wherein she intentionally disrupts the expectations of the researcher/researched relationship to denounce "relegating participants to the status of data repositories and positioning researchers as data extractors" (p. 123). With this in mind—and enacting a fundamental principle of feminist research, as discussed in Chapter Three—I view participants as the experts of their experiences (DeVault & Gross, 2012) and not myself, the researcher, as the expert. This recognition and praxis critically disrupts the "interview society" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) that positions researchers (among others) as 'automatic' experts. This shifts the inherent power dynamics within interviews to be less hierarchical and more equalitarian, consistent with a feminist research approach (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Additionally, since I value a relational approach to research, the feminist praxis I engage involves *co-constructing* knowledge *with* participants throughout the interviews (and beyond, at

times). Accordingly, instead of the term "data" (with all its implications), I prefer simply, but meaningfully, to refer to "the interviews" or similar to signal the *process* within which knowledge was co-constructed, rather than the *outcome*, as implied with the term "data." Certainly, other feminist scholars have also problematized research language, including "data," by "interrogating voice, language, and meaning," for instance, and by choosing different, intentional language, such as "performative accounts," instead of "data," or "interview data" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023, p. viii).

The shift in valuing the research process over its outcome also aligns with social justice research, generally (Johnson & Parry, 2022). To this end, I took *very* seriously this *co-*construction of knowledge within the interviews and the relationships with women fostered therein, with the privileges and *responsibilities* I felt were inextricable. So, after *a year and a half* of being as fully engaged as I could be with participants throughout this co-construction of knowledge that would entirely inform and shape this research, it was time to consider and begin the process of transcription for the over forty hours (41 hours and 40 minutes, to be specific) of interview audio files into verbatim transcripts. As I considered transcription, I had two immediate concerns. First and foremost were my concerns that the interactivity, complexity, and overall richness that the women in this research and I had experienced firsthand (see Findings Epilogue) might be "lost in translation," so to speak. This is a concern for any form of translation, across ("trans"), for instance, languages, cultures, disciplines, and, in this case, across the forms of audio (recorded interviews) and text (transcripts). As such, I felt that "accuracy" was important, recognizing again the disparity between this more postpositivist term and my broader meaning. Ideally, I wanted the interviews to be transcribed as close to "verbatim" as possible and, additionally, to include bracketed descriptions for non-verbal elements of the

interviews, such as silences, sounds expressing surprise or concern, and other occurrences not captured by words. This recognition is congruent with Devault and Gross' (2012) encouragement for feminist researchers to pay attention to gaps and silences, for instance, that may reflect meanings beyond explicit speech.

Given my hopes and expectations that arose from my consideration of "accuracy," my second concern was time—borne mainly from the world-altering realities of the pandemic. In the initial planning of this research, I intended to transcribe the interviews myself. I had done so before with other research projects and knew it was an excellent way to re-immerse myself in the interviews. However, it was the start of the pandemic (albeit at a time when no one could have predicted it would prominently last *years*). I was juggling the competing demands of trying to keep moving forward with my dissertation *and* having two three-year-olds who were suddenly not in daycare and at home with me *all the time* (this is, of course, a whole other "story," as it was for many parents with young children). Given this reality, with Diana's encouragement, I shifted my original intention of transcribing the interviews myself to seeking professional transcription. I first emailed each of my participants to ask for their (written) permission to use a professional transcription service, and every participant agreed. I then sought recommendations from colleagues and committee members who had used professional transcription services. With their recommendations, I considered two different services: Transcribe Me (transcribeme.com) and Rev (rev.com). I should note that this was a couple of years before the now much refined and more widespread availability and capacity of automatic speech recognition transcription applications, like Otter.ai (Russell et al., 2024). Each of these two professional transcription services offered a range of options for turnaround time, degree of accuracy, and (human) transcriptionists or "machine-generated/automated" (using earlier AI language models), with

associated ranges of cost. After considering these options, I decided to use the Rev service. Because "accuracy" (and beyond) was so important to me, I chose the service option with the highest level of accuracy available ("99% accuracy guarantee") from (human) transcriptionists, which included time stamps and speaker identification (for which I provided separate information that connected a specific portion of each group audio file with the name of the speaker for the transcriptionists' reference throughout). I uploaded my nineteen audio files (through their secure and encrypted platform) and paid over $3200 (notably, despite a limited graduate student income, and with a higher cost given that the fees were in USD). About twelve hours later (!), I had full transcriptions for all nineteen of my interviews (I did not require this fast turnaround time by any means, but such was the process for the option I chose).

After receiving the transcripts, I then needed to prepare them to be sent to each participant for their verification and feedback, or "member checking" (Charmaz, 2014), which required me to remove the content of other participant speakers in all of the group interviews, as per my ethics approval. This began as a time-consuming and strangely abstracted "partial perspective" (Haraway, 2013), with the rationale from the Office of Research Ethics (ORE) that to maintain confidentiality, each participant should only have written access to their own interview content and not the content of other participants. Accordingly, I started reviewing the transcripts to prepare separate documents for each participant, with the words of other participants removed from their group interview(s). However, in reviewing the group interview transcripts to remove other participants' content, I realized that the interviews had *not* been very accurately transcribed. Specifically, it was readily apparent to me that throughout the transcriptions, there were two major issues. First, speakers were often incorrectly identified (that is, content was attributed to the wrong participants). Second, significant portions of the content

were inaccurate, particularly with speakers whose first language was not English (three participants), and with content where multiple speakers were talking at a time, or interjecting, which occurred often with the speaking dynamics of the group interviews. These transcription inaccuracies were also present in the individual interviews (although usually to a lesser degree than in the group interviews).

I contacted the transcription service about the inaccuracies I had noticed, particularly given their much-touted "99% guarantee." They offered to re-transcribe all of my audio files. While I did appreciate this offer (and the transcriptionist labour involved), realistically, however, to verify the re-transcribed documents, as I would feel compelled to do given my experience so far, I would still need to (at least selectively) review each transcript to know if they were more accurate a second time. I felt uncomfortable with not trusting that the resulting transcripts were (or would be a second time) accurate enough to confidently send them to each of my participants for their close review and verification, given that they had each entrusted me with their sensitive and deeply personal narratives. Moreover, participants' trust in my handling of their narratives and the relationships fostered in sharing them, as discussed, meant that the translations of their narratives (the transcriptions) needed to, indeed, be "handled with care."

After grappling with my disappointment with the inaccurate transcriptions, particularly given the financial cost and the limited options for remedying these 'inaccuracies' through the transcription service, I decided to re-do them all myself. This way, I could be sure the transcripts met my expectations for accuracy, and all this entailed. Namely, I could be confident in the "trustworthiness" of the written basis that would inform my subsequent analysis. I could also be confident in sending transcriptions to participants, which would continue to (hopefully) uphold their trust in me. Thus, for all nineteen interviews, I carefully listened to (pausing and replaying

countless times) and re-transcribed, as necessary. I edited the existing transcripts I had received by correcting, refining, and adding the bracketed descriptions noted above, where applicable. At the height of the pandemic, with my own time and space constraints, the re-transcription process took me *eight months* to complete. Thus, "transcribing the data" was, as with "interviewing with an analytical mind," much more than its typical perfunctory mention within the "immersive" process of my early analysis.

Thirdly, the "member checking" (Charmaz, 2014) that followed the (re-)transcription of the interviews became much more than another 'step' to proceed through, specifically within my personal feminist approach to this research. Beginning in late 2020, I began sending participants their individual and group interviews via email. Notably, this was the first 'formal' connection point with participants since the interviews about a year earlier. Informally, however, after the interviews, some participants reached out and connected with me on Facebook or Instagram, for instance. One participant, who was pregnant during the interviews, even emailed me to share baby pictures when her son was born!

In my email to participants to share their transcripts, I was mindful of their own (likely constrained) time and energy, in general, and exacerbated, likely, within the pandemic. As such, I emphasized that there was "no pressure at all to review the transcripts if you would prefer not to or don't have the time." But I noted, "I wanted to send them along if you want to review them and make any changes." I specified, "If you do have a chance to review your transcripts, please feel free to make any factual corrections (names, places, etc.) or add anything to clarify or expand your comments." I also reminded participants that I would be changing all names (for themselves and others they discuss) before sharing the findings. Lastly, I reiterated my ongoing willingness to answer any questions they might have about their transcripts or "anything else." I

also let them know that I would next be in touch to share my initial analyses and findings and to invite their feedback at that point.

All participants responded that they had received their transcripts. Most participants reviewed them and provided factual corrections, and expanded or clarified certain points, as expected within conventional "member checking" (Charmaz, 2014). Beyond corrections and clarifications, one participant asked that a portion of her individual interview be redacted from the analysis and findings. In particular, in her individual interview, she focused on her first marriage and divorce. However, she also discussed her second marriage and very recent separation and the challenging issues with that relationship, including her second husband's severe mental illness. This particular discussion, due in part to its recency, perhaps, was particularly upsetting for her when she began discussing it, and she asked that we focus the rest of our discussion on her first marriage and divorce. I also connected with her via email after her interview to remind her of the support resources that were available to her. These supports (such as counselling services for students, which she was) had been mentioned in the participant information letter but I wanted to be sure to remind her of them given that she was visibly upset during parts of her interview (but had indicated she still wanted to continue when I asked if she would like to take a break or stop entirely).

This "member checking" methodological 'step' was also one that, for some women, became more than that: it was another opportunity for *care and connection* (Johnson & Parry, 2022) and *relationship-building* between the participants and me. For instance, for some participants, sharing their transcripts with them not only allowed them to make "corrections" or add clarifications, but it also provided a *re-connection to the selves and experiences* expressed and represented in these written documents. For many women, this was a valuable experience

and not necessarily one I (or they?) had anticipated. For example, in her response email, one participant shared, “It was so fun reading [my transcripts]. I got to reflect more on your comments and reactions. I was [even] laughing; it was entertaining. Thanks for sending [them]!” Another participant expressed, “This was very much a well-needed read for me. A year later, some things about me have stayed the same, and others have changed. It was nice to have a snap-shot of myself at a time when I was very self-confident and strong-minded.” One participant acknowledged that she “didn’t read through the group interviews because without the other parts, [they] really made no sense” which was certainly understandable (and a concern I shared while removing others’ dialogue). In terms of her individual interview, she noted that she intentionally “carved out some time to read” because, as she said, “I know it will be emotional.” She then explained that she specifically chose not to make any changes upon reviewing her individual interview because it represented a particular version of herself that she did not want to ‘revise.’ As she insisted, “I don’t want to change anything. I told my story as I saw it at that time in my life and if we met today, my story would be different again. I was in a very different place emotionally and mentally two years ago and I don’t want to change that. For me to add anything today would take away from [the me] in 2019. And *she needs to tell her story*” (my emphasis). This participant’s observation keenly speaks to the narrative inquiry analytic lens emphasizing *narratives as socially situated interactive performances* produced in particular settings (in this case, the individual interview at a specific point in time) and for a particular audience (myself) (Chase, 2005). Finally, another participant did not feel she needed to review her transcripts because, as said, “I trust your transcripts.” This trust affirmed my choice of re-transcription to ensure the transcripts were, indeed, trustworthy.

Lastly, this “member checking” ‘step’ also extended beyond this when participants shared parts of themselves and their lives with me during our communications, which were re-initiated by sending their transcripts to them. For instance, during the individual interview with one participant, she mentioned that she was completing her master’s thesis at the time. I asked her about it and expressed interest in reading it when she was done. When we re-connected about the transcripts, she proudly shared her completed thesis with me. I read parts of her thesis (as time permitted) and responded with my appreciation for her sharing her work with me, which was a deeply personal autoethnography. I also asked her if I could share it with someone I knew who I thought would particularly appreciate it, and she was delighted to know that her thesis might inspire others. I expressed my gratitude for some of the “amazing” insights I had learned from what I had read, and my eagerness to read more when I had more time. She said she really appreciated my “kind words.” Another participant replied and shared that since we last connected during the interviews, her sister had tragically passed away, and she felt “utterly broken” until she “got some help.” I expressed how very sorry I was to hear of her loss and how devastating it must be. Although we did not know each other well (this was not a participant I knew before the interviews), I still decided to ask her if there was anything I could do for her in her time of grief. I thought perhaps I could offer some form of instrumental support, for instance, since she indicated she had taken a leave from her graduate studies and was just then returning. I also knew from our interview together that she lived in the university’s graduate student housing, as I did, too, at that time so I knew we were physically close if she needed anything that I could provide.

Several participants also expressed their encouragement for me to keep moving forward with this research. They empathized with the challenges of the pandemic and shared their

(motivating!) eagerness to read my dissertation upon completion. For instance, one participant said, "I'm delighted to hear you're working on this and imagine it's been a very intense year for you with little ones!" Other women who were also parenting young children during the pandemic offered their solidarity as we discussed some of our mutual challenges over email. For example, one participant offered this generous (and much-needed) affirmation, "I'll be thinking of you and know you're not alone either! This motherhood thing is certainly testing us all in deep ways! I hope "pandemic fine" turns into "fantastic" soon—for all of us." Many participants were eager to help me: "If you need anything else from me, please reach out." One woman added to her offer to help, "Or if you just need coffee with a friend, I'm here!" Given that we had only met in the context of the interviews and our subsequent email communications, I was so touched to be considered a friend. For me, these mutual relationships, even friendships, that developed between the women and me are at the very *heart* of this research (and the kind of caring feminist research I want to continue doing). Thus, as it is hopefully clear, I did engage with the *immersion phase* Charmaz (2014) outlines but, significantly, these particular immersive analytical "moves" became much more moving for participants and for myself as the researcher.

4.5.1.2 Conceptual Phase

Following the immersion phase, Charmaz (2014) describes a *conceptual phase* that involves focused coding, to use her language, among other strategies. While the particular approach to coding that Charmaz (2014) specifies did not resonate with me, I appreciated her distinction, broadly, of an analysis 'phase' focused on theoretical and conceptual sorting and definition. With this in mind, I returned to the transcripts and began carefully re-reading them. Specifically, I read a small section at a time, usually about half a page to a page. I then stopped, reflected on, and determined what the section was *broadly* about. That is, I considered what it demonstrated, captured, or discussed and gave it a broad *descriptive* label, initially (such as

“Support from others” and “Psychological impacts on self”). I recognize that the term “label” could also be “code.” However, as with the term “data,” the association with a postpositivist epistemology does not align with my own approach, as discussed. Linguistically, at least, “label” seems less rigid than “code” (although “label” has its own notoriety, too).

I continued re-reading small sections of the interviews and labelling these sections by using the “Comment” tool in Word’s “Review” function, which usefully highlights the text attached to a comment. I also copied only the labels into another document to keep track of them separately from the interview transcripts, adding new labels as I identified them in the transcripts. Once I had completed this process for the individual interviews for one group, and had a sense of some recurring, distinct, and overall labels (or broad categories), I created another document that connected the labels/categories and the specific instances within them. For each ‘instance,’ I copied and pasted the whole small section from the transcript, including the participant’s (name and) words as well as my own dialogue, as it occurred, to preserve the full context of the instance as an example of the label/category. I continued this analysis process for all of the interviews, moving between, and adding to, the three documents (the original transcript, the label/category document, and the label/category and instances document). For the label/category and instances document, each instance was separated with double dashes to delineate them.

As I moved through the analysis of the interviews, more specific facets of the broad labels, and accompanying instances, became apparent. I began adding *sub-parts*, or sub-headings, to the broadest labels (for instance, for the broad label of “Support from others,” I distinguished “Support from family” and “Support from women friends”). Over time, I also began further distinguishing (and labelling) *facets within the sub-parts* (such as for the sub-part

of “Support from women friends,” I identified “Support from other single women friends” and “Support from partnered women friends”). I should note that if instances exemplified more than one label/category (or sub-, or ‘sub-sub’-parts), I included it in both (or more).

Once I had completed this process for all nineteen interviews, I started another document to *condense* and *refine* what had become an *extremely* long (and unwieldy) document. To do so, I removed my own words from the dialogue and condensed women’s words (where I or others had interjected) with ellipses.

After condensing the text as such, I then closely re-read all instances—across all participants and interviews—within a label/category (at the broadest level first) and highlighted words and phrases that stood out to me for various reasons, such as being powerful, surprising, interesting, confusing, or phrases that had been said before. This close, *focused* ‘highlighting’ occurred visually through bolding words or sentences, and actual highlighting within the Word function.

4.5.1.3 ‘Thinking with Theory’

At this stage, with my focused analysis of the condensed and categorized interviews, I began intentionally moving my descriptive analysis toward more conceptual or theoretical analysis. To support this “move,” I reviewed Jackson and Mazzei’s (2023) *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research* (as Lisbeth had suggested). Some of the insights that resonated with me included the explicit encouragement to shift the language (and the ”different image of thought” accompanying it) from “analysis” itself, including the conventional focus therein on “research questions,” to what Jackson and Mazzei (2023) called “becoming-questions” that provoke a theoretical “encounter” (p. viii). Specifically, they suggest that “thinking with theory” (or what they call “plugging in”) involves thinking with *particular* “conceptual aspects of *life*” and with the conceptual aspects of particular theories and theorists, which “activate a circuit to see what

sparks, jolts, and puts thought into motion . . . to ask what new territories and symbioses might be established" (pp. 2-3, original emphasis). Thus, for Jackson and Mazzei (2023), thinking with theory is an "encounter" that incites new ("unthought") *connections*, for which they variously offer the figurations of thresholds, connectives, multiplicities, reorientations, reconfigurations, and even zigzags. Moreover, the movements and connections they emphasize in the practice of 'thinking with theory' approaches concepts and their vocabularies as "transformative . . . new contours and orientations" that "glimmer and glow to unsettle and reconfigure thought" (pp. 7-8).

With this in mind, I re-engaged intently with my foundational theory, *critical*[11] *feminist theory*. I sought to reorient myself with its concepts and "vocabularies" to re-encounter my interviews by thinking with and through new connectives/connections. My reorientation involved re-centering concepts of *gender*, *patriarchy*, and *ideology*, for instance. In particular, I reoriented my thinking to the central role of ideology within critical theory frameworks, including (critical) feminist theory. Through "scrutinising normative ideologies," a critical theory framework "identifies ideology as a primary means of remedying social inequalities" (Hoskin & Blair, 2021, pp. 1-2). As such, I reoriented and expanded my understandings of (and ways of *thinking with*) the nuances of the three (normative) gendered ideologies I situated as relevant within this research: femininity; coupledom; and pronatalism. Femininity is, arguably, the most nuanced and variable of these three ideologies. Additionally, I contend that femininity is foundational to coupledom and pronatalism, as experienced by women. That is, these two family- and relationship-oriented ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism are ideological

[11] While feminist theory is inherently critical, I specify this term here to situate the feminist theory with which I engage throughout this research as aligning most closely with feminist theory as a critical theory, epistemologically (Weir, 2021), as distinct from other particular feminist theories, of which there are, of course, many (e.g., poststructural feminist theory, trans feminist theory, black feminist theory).

extensions of this one overarching ideology: normative (or hegemonic) femininity. This focus on gendered ideologies purposefully aligned with my three central research questions, which also needed to be centered in my analysis: 1) What gendered ideologies do young, divorced women experience?; 2) How are these gendered ideologies experienced, circulated, reproduced, and maintained?; and 3) How do young, divorced women negotiate and resist these gendered ideologies?

To attune myself to these questions within the interviews, and to bring a comprehensive level of "scrutiny" to femininity, in particular, I sought to expand my awareness of the nuances and articulations of femininity beyond what I situated initially in my literature review in Chapter Two, which focused on a particular overview of femininity (albeit still a fairly comprehensive one with research across decades and disciplines) (Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus, after additional research on femininity, I expanded my literature review to include how three others have variously conceptualized this ideology; namely, Bem (1974, 1981), Helgeson (1994), and Mahalik et al. (2005). Additionally, I summarized some of the similarities and differences within these articulations of femininity (see Appendix E) so that I could more readily 'think with' these conceptualizations in mind. I could 're-view' (or see again/anew) my interviews using these particular "lenses" to scrutinize the ideology of femininity as a critical tool to produce knowledge that may begin to dislodge the grip of femininity in its constrictive forms.

Thus, with my deepened and reoriented ideological "lenses," I re-viewed my interviews, highlighting and commenting on (within the refined document) my "encounters" with femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism, specifically. In so doing, I also paid particular attention to meaningful *language* that 'spoke' to how I saw the gendered ideologies showing up or manifesting within the women's experiences. For instance, I highlighted women's language

around anger, both as explicitly identified (e.g., “I was so angry”) and more implicitly (“He was an asshole”; or even ‘silences’ or a ‘loss’ of words). This analytic focus on language aligns broadly with *discourse analysis* (recognizing that there are many particular forms of discourse analysis, including critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, among others) (McMullen, 2011). In this stage, I also paid particular attention to meaningful *narrative analysis* elements, drawing on the five “analytic lenses” outlined (and discussed above) by Chase (2005). I also considered other narrative analysis “connectives” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023), such as a focus on both the content and structure of narratives, or “the told” and “the telling” (Josselson, 2011). Further, considering elements of narrative analysis also attuned my focus to the voices and layering of voices (and identities) within each narrative as well as “their interaction and the continuities, ambiguities, and disjunctions expressed” (Josselson, 2011, p. 227).

Finally, I re-read (and re-“encountered,” to use Jackson and Mazzei’s language) this now categorized, condensed, focused, and theoretically highlighted document, and added comments (again, using the “Comment” function in Word) about specific parts to document further connections and observations, including my personal reactions, similar to “memos” (Charmaz, 2014); literature connections; questions; ideas for types of representations, which I had been thinking about throughout the research process (i.e., if something a participant said gave me an idea); and other analytic notes. Following this, I wrote a conceptual description for each broad label/category that sought to define, distinguish, and connect each of these broadest parts to the whole, consistent with the notion of the *hermeneutic circle*, recognizing the interdependence of understanding the meanings of the whole and the parts (Schwandt, 2007).

Throughout the entire process of my research (not only during my analysis), I continually reflected on, and grappled with, the big “move” I knew I would eventually need to make: from

analysis to representation. For me, this "move" was also, and always, thought about analytically as I considered *for years* how all these parts I had carefully analyzed, as I described above, could be reflected and represented as a whole. I documented my representational reflections and ideas whenever they arose (and I remembered to do so, admittedly) in notes I made on my computer, voice notes (which were transcribed using Otter.ai, long after my interview transcriptions), and mostly, with handwritten notes that I kept piled on my desk (and sorted occasionally). In some ways, I felt I was almost *always* thinking about my research (while I multitasked the rest of my life, of course). For instance, every article I read (academic, news, or otherwise) was considered in relation to my research, and I had a system of emailing myself every article I felt could contribute to my research in some way using "Diss" in the subject line for easy search and retrieval later. Similarly, for the main social media platform I use regularly (Facebook), whenever I saw a post (or article, image, meme, etc.) I felt related to my research, I "saved the post" in the "Divorce research" file I created.

Lastly, my relationships with other graduate students, and the many discussions we had, facilitated an invaluable form of (informal) "analysis" as we engaged in critical (and supportive) dialogue about each of our research projects (see Acknowledgements). In these ways, my ever-present thinking about/with my evolving research seemed to be what Jackson and Mazzei (2023) articulated in their assertion that "becoming-questions . . . emerged in the middle of reading, sensing, writing, thinking, discussing . . . and living life . . . [they] took hold when we followed where thought took itself . . . sprouting in the middle of everyday doings" (p. 8). In the middle of one such "everyday doing," sprouted the beginning of what would become my representation.

4.6 Representation of Findings

Since learning about creative analytic practice (CAP) in my early graduate education, I have been intrigued by, and drawn to, this approach as a way to reflect and appreciate that lived experiences are, indeed, complex to interpret and represent (Schwandt, 2001). So intrigued was I by CAP that for the final course of my doctoral program, a colleague and I even asked Lisbeth to facilitate a reading course entirely on CAP to delve more deeply into its possibilities. So, for a term, the three of us explored CAP and my colleague and I re-represented parts of our master's thesis findings using CAP (I created a series of letters to friends and family "back home" from the immigrant adolescent participants of my MA study). As Parry and Johnson (2007) explain, "the goals of CAP are to reflect experiences in ways that represent their personal and social meanings rather than simplifying and reducing to generalize . . . These meanings stem from the social spaces and cultural contexts of those people being researched" (p. 120). They call for leisure research that contextualizes and embraces the complexity with which it is experienced and lived. To reflect this complexity of lived experiences, CAP encompasses many forms and genres of creative practices and representations, including autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama, layered texts, comedy, and performance pieces, among many others (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). These creative practices are "meant to draw the reader into the research in a way that connects theory, findings, and emotion together with the intent of inspiring social change" (Berbary & Richmond, 2011, p. 200). Moreover, the criteria by which CAP may be judged also elucidate its possibilities: it seeks to make a substantive contribution to understanding an element of social life through a representation with aesthetic merit that "opens up the text and invite[s] interpretive responses," while making clear the reflexivity of the researcher and the impact of the research to affect the audience emotionally and intellectually in ways that generate new

questions and action (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). With this in mind, I sought to represent my findings using CAP for effectively "telling the story that needs to be told" (Berbary, 2013b, p. 9). Further, I was inspired by Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) notion of writing as a method of inquiry, which views writing as a process, context, and product—a shifted view of traditional academic writing that energizes creative analytic practices. For a long time, however, the question remained for me as to what *particular* representational form would illuminate my findings.

Following the often-invoked grad student mantra of "trust the process," I trusted that this would become clear to me at some point. I was further reassured by Jackson and Mazzei's (2023) own version of this mantra, assuaging readers that the particular forms or "encounters" of thinking with theory are "revealed along the way, in bits and pieces that function contingently to produce the work" (p. 5). As I documented in my many notes, mentioned above, "bits and pieces" were, indeed, revealed to me along the way. For instance, several discussions in the interviews themselves sparked representational ideas for me, such as representing the findings as a self-help manual given participants' overall discussion of feeling like there simply was not any reliable source of guidance for navigating their divorces, and how, as one participant said, they wished there had been something like a *Divorce for Dummies* when they were going through their divorce. Women's discussions of their various engagements with social media, as well as the complexity and pervasiveness of social media currently, provided the inspiration for potentially representing my findings as social media posts. At the time, I was only personally on Facebook, but I knew, of course, about some of the other popular social media platforms (at that time), so I joined Twitter and Instagram solely to orient myself to their specific aesthetic, norms, and mechanics to potentially create mock posts for these platforms. While these representational

forms felt interesting and relevant to my findings, they somehow did not feel like *the* representational form I was seeking.

4.6.1 ‘The Vagina Monologues’

At some point, my trust in the “process” wavered and I was beginning to question how realistic it really was that I would find this representational “match” (because this very research was replete with reasons to doubt this kind of fairy tale thinking...). I considered whether I should just proceed with one of the decent ideas I already had. But then, my research fairy godmother must have been waiting in the wings because I found the creative form I had been looking for and I knew right away that it was “the one.” As it happens, I cannot remember when or how the idea came to me (I wish I could recall my “eureka” moment, but alas...) but I thought of the initial idea at some point between when the interviews ended, in late 2020, and early 2023, when I wrote a memo about the first time I shared my representation idea out loud with someone (incidentally, an acquaintance I ran into at Starbucks). I do vividly remember the two experiences though that informed my idea (I promise I will just “get to it, already” in the next paragraph...).

In 2004, during my first year of undergrad at Western University, I saw *The Vagina Monologues* for the first time (for those who are unfamiliar, I describe the play at the beginning of the Findings). Over twenty years later, I still remember the powerful feelings I had while experiencing the intensity and intimacy of the performances (you don’t simply watch *The Vagina Monologues*, you experience them, at least for me). Three years later, as the co-coordinator of the University of Waterloo’s Women’s Centre, I, and a dedicated group of women, facilitated the staging of *The Vagina Monologues* for the first time at this university. I was not one of the performers (that was way too far outside my comfort zone at that point) but I was actively

involved in the logistics of organizing the event, which would be a one-time performance on Valentine's Day, "V-Day," to gather together to share in the powerful performance and to raise awareness and funds in response to violence against women and girls—playing our small part within the global V-Day movement (vday.org).

Ironically, part of the logistics of organizing this performance was navigating an attempt to block it entirely from being staged at all. This attempt was spearheaded by an openly misogynistic student vice-president (internal) for the university's Federation of Students (FEDS) (UW Daily Bulletin, 2007). Within the FEDS executives, The VP (internal) oversees the functioning of all undergraduate student services and clubs, including the Women's Centre, which was sponsoring this event. This VP (internal) did, in fact, initially block the performance (and its advertisement) on the grounds that its premise (and existence?) was so offensive to him personally that he was sure it must be a "Human Rights violation," legally speaking! As a logical person (albeit also an angry one, at the time), I knew that he had no actual legal grounds for his decision and his attempt at a legal defence of it. He was, of course, only interested in the rights of *certain* humans, at the expense of the rights of others, a selectivity the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms does not uphold, by its very design, of course (Government of Canada, 2024). Additionally, as a student Arts councillor at the time, I also knew the organizational structure of student government and its elected body of accountability and oversight, the Board of Directors. So along with the other Women's Centre co-ordinator and the two co-directors of *The Vagina Monologues*, we brought the "dispute" to the Board of Directors[12] and they overruled the VP's decision (and he subsequently had a big "tantrum" and

[12] It struck me then how few people decided the fate of this important performance and what it stands for. We were fortunate that the Federation of Students' Board of Directors at that time were reasonable people, generally, and specifically, people who recognized and supported women's rights, broadly speaking. Of course, if the VP

announced his resignation from his position[13]) (UW Daily Bulletin, 2007). So, the show could go on! This second time when I experienced *The Vagina Monologues*, the performers were all friends and fellow members of the Women's Centre, and we had fought to have the right to share the truths of this powerful play. That night, on the stage and in the audience, there was a palpable energy of support, community-building, and fierce resistance to the very forces that had threatened to silence this play on that day, and more so, to silence and oppress women and girls around the world—the very impetus of the play's creation and the V-Day movement it inspired.

And so, recalling the now deeply-stored and embodied memories of my own two experiences with *The Vagina Monologues*, and knowing *so many* others have had their own similar (yet personal) powerful experiences with this "political theatre piece," I knew this was the representational form that most resonated with my hopes for this research. So emerged *The Divorcée Monologues...*

(internal) had had his way, and the "way" of others, too, undoubtedly (given the vocal minority supporting his attempt to block the performance), then February 14, 2008 would have been a different V-Day on our campus.

Compelled by this experience and recognizing the importance of representation at the highest level of student government, the following year, I campaigned for, and with the tremendous support of my friends and peers, won, a seat for the FEDS Board of Directors (BOD) (Imprint, 2008). At the time, I was an elected Arts councillor, and I recall a fellow councillor congratulating me on my win by saying, "Now you have a seat at the big boys' table!" I have never forgotten that comment from seventeen years ago, but it encapsulated for me the necessity of expanding who gets a seat at the "table" (that one, and many others, of course). And, indeed, that year (2008), of the five-member Board of Directors, I was the only non-"big boy." I am heartened to see that UW's student government structure and representation at all levels, including the Board of Directors is a much bigger "table" (there are now *thirteen* members of the FEDS BOD), with diverse representation (including six women) (WUSA, 2024).

[13] When the VP (internal) had his decision to block the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* overruled by the Board of Directors, I remember he stormed out of the room where several of us had been waiting for the Board's decision (to know if we could proceed with our V-Day planning or not), as he left the room, he angrily yelled at the group of women (the VM co-directors, the other Women's Centre co-ordinator, and I), "You ruined everything!" And it seems we did, unapologetically, at least for him. Recalling that moment now, in the words of 'my GF T.S.,' we "had a marvelous time ruining everything!" (Swift, 2020d) (a song which is, incidentally, about "a middle-class divorcée," who is the "the maddest . . . most shameless . . . [and] loudest" woman her town had ever seen). And because the "ripples" of our lives are delightfully wide, sometimes, my own daughter loves this lyric and frequently sings it loudly, which always makes me smile.

4.6.2 Creating 'The Divorcée Monologues'

4.6.2.1 Composite Characters

My initial intention, and step, in creating *The Divorcée Monologues* was to distinguish and develop *composite characters,* whose monologues would be composed of narratives from several participants. I was inspired to use this composite character approach by both McKeown's (2015b) and Berbary's (2008) use of composite characters in the CAP representations they created for their dissertations. I considered different dimensions in which I could broadly group my participants that would reflect meaningful broad similarities and differences. I briefly considered women's *length of time* since their separations as a potential way to distinguish several composite characters, since I had observed that this factor (which varied from 2-12 years) seemed to coincide, perhaps unsurprisingly, with respective experiences, such as subsequent relationships, opportunities for reflection and perspective, and the intensity (or not) of ongoing challenges related to their divorces, for instance (as an aside, exploring the notion/factor of time in women's divorce journeys would be a worthwhile endeavour for future research). I then considered another dimension of women's experiences, which felt more relevant and meaningful, particularly as it related to my research questions and gendered ideologies: women's current (at the time of the interviews) relationship/dating and parental 'status.' As such, I distinguished the following five categories (each with 2-3 participants) for (at least) five composite characters: 1) Single, not dating, no children; 2) Single, dating, no children; 3) In a serious relationship (cohabiting), with children/pregnant; 4) In a serious relationship, no children; and 5) With a child (not from marriage with ex). As with most categorizations, there were a few participants and broad experiences that did not quite 'fit,' including one participant who fit within two different categories. Within these five categories, one participant fit in two of the five categories, and one participant did not fit in any of them, as specified. I was not overly

concerned about these 'incongruities,' however. Following McKeown's (2013b) own approach to shaping "multiple characters in *messy* ways . . . to avoid reducing women's experiences [and, instead,] embrace the complexity of their experiences" (p. 69, my emphasis). I decided I would start with these five categories (for five characters) but I had others in mind as well, thinking about feminist intersectionality, in particular, including another category and composite character for (the three) participants who were not born in Canada (and who, in addition to their nationalities, also had different ethnicities and first languages, than most other participants).

4.6.2.2 Composite Monologues

I started five new documents, one for each category specified above. I then went to the categorized, condensed, focused, and theoretically highlighted document, described above, and copied and pasted all of the 'instances' within this document (still with the category labels, highlights, comments, and descriptions associated with, and contextualizing, each instance) for each participant into one of the five new composite character documents (I did this process twice for the one participant that fit into two categories, and decided to broaden the scope,[14] as I had originally conceived it, of one of the categories to include the one participant that was formerly not included).

Once I had these five documents with all their associated material, starting with one at a time, I re-read the material and, intentionally taking a broad view (considering, for instance, the broadest level of labels), I asked myself this central question about each composite character and the experiences they had shared: *"What stories need to be told?"*. I felt this question helped me to get to 'the heart' of what most needed to be represented, particularly emphasizing the counter-

[14] Specifically, only one participant was remarried, so I re-considered the category/composite for "in a serious relationship, with no children" and broadened it to include remarriage as a 'serious relationship,' which, interestingly, did not occur to me originally since I was conceptualizing a "serious relationship" as a serious *dating* relationship.

narratives (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004) and following the advice for effectively using CAP, specifically (Berbary, 2013b). Through this consideration, I identified about ten "stories that needed to be told" for each of the five composite characters, whom I had also given a pseudonym at this stage. With the focal stories, then, I began combining the relevant texts and parts of narratives, across similar participant experiences, within the composite scope. I included participants' exact words in regular font and used an ellipsis to distinguish sections of text that were originally separated (either because they were from a different participant or were from different parts of a participant's interview, for instance). I very minimally added square brackets around words or phrases I added to descriptively anonymize people (e.g., "[my ex]" in place of the actual name mentioned), change the verb tense, add conjunctions (e.g., "and," "but"), and provide a descriptive context that was not otherwise provided with participants' words. I conceived of the ten or so focal stories ("that needed to be told") as being akin to vignettes that together would comprise the "monologue" for that character. I then titled each composited vignette using a compelling direct quote from the narrative that I felt captured the overall spirit of the vignette.

For instance, below, is an excerpt from the composite character representing the category of being "in a serious relationship, with no children" (which had three participants). This vignette was composited from two participants (some vignettes for a composite character were created from either two or three of the total participants within the composite category). As determined by considering the combination of interview 'instance' category labels, theoretical highlighting, and analytic comments, for instance, the focus of the vignette was, broadly, on 'women resisting femininity expectations to create the life *they* wanted' (in this focus, you can see both the descriptive and theoretical influences):

"Just be selfish right now"

> Things were working out [in my marriage] until they stopped working out. I was spending a lot of time [doing things] I really wanted to do, [like] spending lots of time with my girlfriends. [My husband] started being jealous of me spending time with my friends [and] of the fact that when he [came] home from work, there [was] no dinner waiting for him. And I [was] like, "I'm not really that kind of woman." It's just not me. Like, he either married me or somebody else, right? [As this continued,] I didn't want to be around him. I was starting to be disappointed with the way he was treating me. And he thought there was no end to marriage, you know, we're just going to always try. But I was young and I was like, "I think I need another beginning. I'm really done with this." And I said, "I'm not happy. I can't do this anymore. I want a divorce." [And when I said it,] I felt relief. I felt happy. And my family supported me. My dad was like, "You married too young anyway. Get out of this, start a new life, alone."
>
> [So I did!] I think a lot of the life I have now and that I've created are . . . because of my divorce. Because it really inspired me, or eventually inspired me, to take control and really be honest with myself about the things that I like and how I like to spend my time and be selfish. I remember a couple of my friends being like, "Just be selfish right now." And I was like, "Okay, that sounds fantastic. I don't need to worry about anything.". . . [It was] permission almost. And I think through that time, I really know what I like in my life, even if it's as [simple as] how I want my house to be decorated or how I want to dress or spend my time or eat. [So] splitting with [my ex] . . . really let me meet myself.

After creating the vignettes (for the overall monologue) for each composite character, I arranged them in broad sequential temporal order, drawing on an element of (some forms of) narrative analysis (Josselson, 2011). That is, I started with vignettes that spoke to the earliest experiences represented, such as during the beginning of women's marriages (when "things were working out," in most cases) and ended the monologues with vignettes from the most recent time represented, usually women's lives at the point of the interviews. Different composite characters' monologues 'began' and 'ended' at different points in time, potentially (depending on the particular "stories that needed to be told"), but all monologues covered a variety of times throughout women's overall narratives, and, of course, a range of experiences. I repeated this process and created vignette/monologue representations for half of the participants initially. I framed this initial (74-page) representation with a description and contextualization of *The*

Vagina Monologues and situated my *Divorcée Monologues* as having been inspired by them (rather than intending to be a replication of their exact form, for instance). I further structured the piece by making a separate "act" for each composite character and introduced that character at the start of their act (combining the demographics and other information from the 2-3 participants represented by the composite character). I then sent this first version to Diana for her feedback.

Diana provided some truly excellent points to consider before moving forward, which ultimately led to a significant shift in approach for me. She first asked me to think more about my framing from *The Vagina Monologues*, with the idea that, as they were in my first draft, they did not really feel like *The Vagina Monologues* in their structure, among other factors. Specifically, the acts were all very *similar in structure* (like the vignette shown above, albeit with different lengths, and with some "acts" being longer than others). As Diana shared of her own recollection of seeing *The Vagina Monologues* many years ago, "As I recall, *The Vagina Monologues* are not acts, but episodic overviews of a particular aspect of Ensler's encounters/history with vaginas (e.g., I was Twelve, Hair, I Was There in the Room). They are short(ish), punchy, and don't follow a similar structure or length. They each have a unique voice, feel, and approach to convey an overall message about the vagina. The acts, as they currently stand, are more uniform in their structure. They have a different voice, but the approach and message feel similar. To me, they read like long vignettes . . . Your findings can be vignettes or anything you want them to be. My only pause is that you intentionally framed the findings as similar to *The Vagina Monologues* so I wanted to circle back on this stylistic point before getting too much deeper with suggestions." I considered this feedback and then we met to discuss it, and possible next directions.

This meeting provided crucial insight and collaborative development. Specifically, Diana suggested that given the similar structure of the monologues in my draft, I could consider diversifying their structure, so that they not only "told the stories that needed to be told"—that is, *what* needs to be said—but also *how to say it*. Beyond this, Diana noted that for some of the vignettes, the reader might get lost in the details, rather than getting to the 'heart of things' sooner and more clearly. With this in mind, she asked me to think about not necessarily what '10 or so' stories were important for each composite character, but instead, to widen my consideration to decide what key themes (5-10) I want to show/represent, overall, and to build my vignettes (or whatever form or name I choose) around those. In particular, Diana offered this critical paradigm shift for me to ponder (as I later wrote as meeting notes and reflections), "Pare back and *"look for the moments that sing"*—the "stop me in my tracks" moments—and *center these* (e.g., a vignette could be around one key sentence). Then, see "what cuttings are on the floor" and write about these (part of the appeal of the VM is the "shock and awe" of them)." Further, she also helped me to confront and think through some of my own resistances within this creative process, which was certainly new for me (I was used to academic writing and CAP is not this!). Namely, she keenly nudged me to let go of my (previously unexamined) lingering notions of 'truth' by 'safely' sticking close to a similar structure to the original narratives (mainly as they were recounted to me). As Diana pointed out, "Right now, you kind of have one foot in and one foot out." She ended this pivotal meeting by urging me to really embrace the creative process this work deserves (nay, demands), "Let it flow through you"; give yourself "licence" or "permission" to create freely; to say what needs to be said in the ways it needs to be said."

This meeting with Diana, and the feedback I took to heart, was a turning point for me. I even recognized it as such in the moment. I knew that I could decide to take the much easier road

to finish my Findings by largely doing more of the same for the other half of the participants whose experiences I still needed to represent. I could proceed with some minor adjustments, such as "smoothing out" the existing composites and emphasizing the meanings rather than all the details. I also knew that I could choose to do something radically different, and equally unfamiliar and uncomfortable, than I had ever done before. I knew this latter choice would be much harder and take much longer than the first one, and that I did need to think about finishing at some point, hopefully sooner rather than later. After all, at that point (November 2023), I was already *10 years* into my doctorate (mostly as the outcome of the demands of largely solo parenting neurodivergent twins, generally, and then through a pandemic...). At this fork in the road in my research journey, I felt admittedly daunted, uncertain, and frustrated, among other feelings. I was frustrated at myself (not Diana) that I had thought, unknowingly, I suppose, that the draft I shared (and had felt relieved and great about creating) was "on track." And that with the well-honed process and writing "groove" I had established, I could readily create the rest, as such, for the other half of my participants. Then, I could keep moving forward!

Writing this now, while I clearly remember these feelings of uncertainty and frustration, I knew, without a doubt, that whatever choice I made in how to proceed, Diana would support me. But I also knew that I was accountable to myself and to my participants, and even though I went through the motions of considering both choices (the 'plight' of being a "Type A" person), I knew as soon as I honestly considered Diana's feedback that she was absolutely right. And I had enough of a glimmer of sensing what my representations could be if I put "both feet in," so I took the leap! I wrote this new mantra on a sticky note and put it on my desk (combined with some of Diana's words and the "memoing" and other reflections I had done):

Get all in! Let go of (self-imposed and other-imposed) ideas about what research should look like (like parameters of consistency, thoroughness, quantity etc.). Don't feel I need to stick closely to the narratives I heard or focus on what 'happened' and the details around it. Part of the analysis is to identify what is most meaningful and compelling and *write something new* to showcase that. "Look for the moments that sing!"

4.6.2.3 Individual and Collective Monologues

The first thing I did for my new approach was to actually read *The Vagina Monologues*. Previously, I had created the vignettes/monologues having only seen them performed. So I purchased the 20th anniversary edition and read it thoroughly. Unsurprisingly, actually reading the text that informed the play was eye-opening in a similar way to experiencing the play, but also in distinct ways. For one, there are more monologues and other content in the book than those that are performed. Being able to read and re-read the monologues was immensely valuable in informing my awareness of *The Vagina Monologues* as a particular creative form. To distinguish and reflect upon its different representational forms, such as prose or memory snapshots, I created a *'Catalogue' of Representational Forms in 'The Vagina Monologues'* (see Appendix F). Using this 'catalogue' as a guide and inspiration, I returned to the vignettes I had created and within each one, I searched intentionally for "the moments that sing." Once I found one, I then asked myself how I could best show this moment that sings. That is, what particular literary or creative form (from my 'catalogue' or elsewhere) aligns with, and amplifies, the content and its meaning? For instance, the first such "moment" I located was one participant's exclamation that her husband suddenly announcing that he wanted a divorce was, for her, as if he had "thrown a grenade" at her feet, and her "world imploded." So, I decided to use the war imagery, and expand it, to trace some of her experiences from the "implosion" point to the point where she returned home to her family. I wrote it as a poem, using short phrases, that moved

along briskly. I felt free to tell the "story that needed to be told" weaving her own words (I denoted through italics) and lots of my own, too, to shape the poem (see "Fallen Solider" in Chapter Five). As soon as I wrote this one representation (my first one with this approach), I sparked the "circuitry" of this process (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). What followed was a continual process of first identifying the "moments that sing" and then reflecting on what literary or creative form would illuminate it. For example, in re-visiting one participant's vivid description of how she felt around her family after deciding to get divorced, particularly within the intense stigma of her South Asian culture, I identified this phrase "I was like a dead body" as the "moment that sings," or in this case, haunts. I decided to represent this "moment" as a eulogy to align with the powerful connections to what amounted to 'death by divorce' that she had drawn. I should note that with this particular representation, and a couple more I created from this participant's experiences, I was keenly and uncomfortably aware that within this participant's South Asian culture, the gendered ideologies at play were distinct from the ones with which I am familiar within a North American context, broadly. I was concerned that it would not be enough to simply read about the "honour codes," for instance, women in India (the participant's home country) were expected to uphold to signify their family's respect and status in society, as my participant had described (cf. Awwad, 2002; King, 2008). To seek some degree of understanding, thus, beyond what I felt I could glean from my own research, I asked a colleague of mine, Jasmine Nijjar, who identifies as a second-generation South Asian woman, if she would consider having coffee with me and sharing any insights she felt comfortable providing (as they related to the experiences of my participant). She generously agreed and her insights affirmed and expanded my understandings and representations of this particular participant's experiences. My recognition of the particular partiality (Harraway, 2013) of my positionality as a white Canadian

woman, for instance, prompted me to expand my understandings (albeit necessarily still limited) by seeking the experiences of a person who shared (in only some ways, of course) the particular "partial perspective" of a participant whose sociocultural context was very different from my own. This kind of *intentional collaborative dialogue* was also part of my analysis, thus, and the representations that it informed.

Early in this new process, I decided I no longer wanted to have composite characters, but instead, wanted to represent each participant's own "moments that sing." When overlapping "moments" were clear, however, I created collective monologues to show different facets of a similar experience, such as women's experiences with domestic violence (see "Survivors" in Findings) or online dating post-divorce (see "Plenty of Fish"). Thus, the rest of this creative representational journey proceeded in this way and culminated in the Findings that appear here.

As I was creating these (new) monologues, a two-part broad structure occurred to me (which I detail more in the Discussion): *Shattering* (experiences, broadly, of women's lives 'falling apart'); and *Re-Creating* (women's experiences of re-assembling their lives in new ways). Thus, women's monologues, across all participants, were eventually situated within this structure (distinguished within two "Parts"). I also moved away from identifying my overall representation as a play, with acts, and other theatrical structures, and, again with Diana's apt suggestion, leaning into it being its own creative form.

As I re-visited all of my interview material and created these monologues, I noticed there were some themes, or threads, that ran throughout many of the narratives but which were not necessarily part of the "moments that sing" that I represented as monologues. So, I decided to create a whole type of representational form to illuminate certain themes that were mainly not included, or emphasized, in the monologues. Namely, women's experiences with sexuality, grief,

and therapy/healing. I was also seeking a way to represent and share the meaningful objects women had brought to the group interviews. I returned to my earlier overall representational idea of social media posts and this became a third part of my findings.

Lastly, I knew I also wanted to include the incredible experiences women (and I) shared within the group interviews, in the transformative moments that blurred content and method. So, I included a representation of some of these experiences in a third form, loosely depicted as researcher 'field notes' and included these as an Epilogue.

When I had created these findings as described, I eagerly shared them with participants and invited their feedback. As with the "member checking" described above for the interview transcripts, this was far more than mere checking, for 'accuracy' or similar. Instead, it reflected my desire to share interpretive authority over the findings from the study with my participants so that "the research can be useful and meaningful to participants and the larger society" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 180). As such, I shared my findings with each of the women who participated in the study and invited their feedback, opinions, and further insights. They all acknowledged receiving the findings and many provided encouraging and affirming feedback (see Conclusion for some examples). Additionally, including participants in the interpretation and representation process helps challenge the power imbalances between researcher and research participants (Hesse-Biber, 2007), which is particularly encouraged within feminist social justice research.

4.6.3 Evaluation

Finally, for evaluating CAP, including my own within this research, I follow Richardson's (2003) five criteria and questions to consider for each criterion:

1. Substantive contribution. To be successful, how does the text contribute to understandings of social life?

2. Aesthetic merit. Has the author successfully invited the reader to imagine different interpretations of the text? In addition, did the author of the text write the text in an artistically engaging way that captivated the reader's attention throughout in a way that is not boring?

3. Reflexivity. Is the author transparent about how her/his own subjectivities influenced the interpretation of the data and the creation of the text? How does the researcher choose to share her/his own reflexive voice in the text process? Does the author provide justification for this choice and address ethical issues connected with the creation of the text?

4. Impact. What is the emotional and physical impact of the text on the reader? Does the text encourage the reader to ask new questions about the topic presented? Does the text inspire the reader to write and try out new research approaches?

5. Expression of reality. In addition to contributing to our understandings of social life, Richardson noted the reader must question whether the text is presenting those understandings in a way that captures a credible and embodied sense of lived experience.

Further to a consideration of these five criteria in evaluating the CAP representations of my findings, I add two more. First, Mulcahy's (2022) suggestion for *evocative inquiry* evaluation resonates with my hopes for my findings (and my research overall). She focuses on the impact of the work on the *reader(s)*, specifically in evoking the reader to feel, think, change, reflect, act, and move into "new and different positions and perspectives" (p. 163).

Second, extending Mulcahy's (2022) focus on how the work affects the reader, I add to this an evaluative consideration of how the work affects the people who informed it—the *participants*. As I was creating the representations of my findings, the women at the heart of these findings were always at the forefront of my mind and I felt a deep sense of responsibility to represent what they had shared with me in a way that honoured them and their narratives. Receiving their feedback on this effort was among the most meaningful and affirming parts of the research process for me. I share some of the highlights of their feedback—of their evaluations—in the Epilogue of my findings and my conclusions. Using these various considerations, I hope the readers of my CAP findings may ultimately shift their perspectives and understandings about young, divorced women, and, perhaps, be moved to act in "new and different" ways in their own corners of the world.

5.0 Findings

The following findings illuminate the "stories that need to be told" for the twelve young, divorced women in this research. They are represented within *three* distinct forms: a two-part series of monologues; social media posts; and researcher 'field notes.' The monologues comprise compelling parts of women's divorce narratives, or "counter-stories." The social media posts focus on several thematic 'threads,' beginning with women's meaningful objects (see Chapter Four). Lastly, the Epilogue, with field notes, speaks to the experience and impact of the group interviews and their 'ripples.' Collectively, these findings are a "love letter" to readers.

[15]The Divorcée Monologues

In 1996, Eve Ensler[16] wrote and performed *The Vagina Monologues*, an episodic play that intimately explores experiences such as sex, relationships, and violence—subjugated knowledge—through the eyes of diverse women.[17] Since its premiere, *The Vagina Monologues* has become a global movement of V-Day "Vagina Warriors" working to end violence against women through inciting dialogue and action.[18] Specifically, "growing from a singular play to a vast global movement of survivors, artists and activists, V-Day works at the intersection of art and activism to shatter taboos, create space for women and the most marginalized, and initiate community-led culture and system change."[19] This inspiring and compelling play has had a worldwide impact and has been called the "most important piece of political theatre of the last decade."[20]

The Divorcée Monologues, below, endeavours to similarly break silences and center the voices of women sharing intimate episodes of their experiences with divorce as young women (indicated in *italics*[21]). Just as Ensler wrote her play to "celebrate the vagina,"[22] this piece[23] was written to celebrate the complexities of the 'divorcée,' a once-pejorated term that women have reclaimed (much like 'vagina' and its colloquialisms). When you hear these women's voices, hear your neighbour, your friend, yourself...

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[15] I have chosen not to include the heading and sub-heading numbers, as indicated in the Table of Contents, for the contents of this chapter since I feel it detracts from, or takes the reader out of, the aesthetic and experience.

[16] Since publishing her memoir *The Apology* in 2019, Eve Ensler is now known as V, which she claims as her "freedom name," distancing herself from the prescribed paternal identity of the father who abused her (Ensler, n.d). Since "Eve Ensler" is the name under which she wrote *The Vagina Monologues*, I have maintained this name in the introduction. V also continues to identify herself as "formerly Eve Ensler readily."

[17] (Ensler, 1998/2018)

[18] (V-Day, n.d.)

[19] (V-Day, n.d., para. 1)

[20] (Isherwood, 2006)

[21] Specifically, participants' direct quotes appear in italics throughout the findings. Regular (non-italicized) text denotes my words that contextualize or expand participants' words.

[22] (Ensler, 1998/2018)

[23] See Chapter Four for my discussion of why I am not calling my form of CAP a "play."

The Divorcées

Laura

Laura is a thirty-year-old white Canadian woman. She has an undergraduate degree and is currently an administrative assistant for an insurance company and a personal support worker. Laura lived overseas, in England, for ten years, three of which she was married to her ex-husband before he unexpectedly initiated their separation two years ago. Her divorce is not yet finalized. Laura is a self-described geek (for Star Wars, Harry Potter, Batman...), enjoys video games, long hikes, and more recently joined a board game group called "Introverts Anonymous."

Melissa

Melissa is a thirty-five-year-old bi-racial South Asian and white woman born in Canada. She holds a bachelor's degree and is an insurance claims adjuster. She and her ex-husband were together for eleven years and were married for three and a half of those years. Melissa discovered that her ex-husband had multiple secret affairs for years during their marriage and separated from him just over two years ago. Their divorce was finalized nearly a year ago. Melissa has been dancing since she was a kid and continues to dance competitively and teach. She also loves to travel (she even used to be a travel agent).

Rayna

Rayna is a thirty-seven-year-old white Bulgarian-Canadian, who immigrated to Canada fifteen years ago, just after she got married in Bulgaria. She was married for three years and then initiated her separation because she felt she and her ex-husband were no longer compatible. It has been twelve years since her divorce was finalized. She recently finished a master's degree and is looking for employment. She lives with her partner of four years. Rayna has an interest in interior design and loves hosting or attending social gatherings with friends.

Ava

Ava is a thirty-four-year-old Canadian woman with mixed racial and ethnic identities as Indigenous, Eastern and Western European. She and her ex-husband were together for twelve years, five of which they were married. Ava initiated their separation five years ago due to their incompatibility and a lack of support. They have been divorced for about three years. She has a college diploma. Ava has been in a serious long-term relationship since her separation. She and her current, common-law partner have a toddler together and also co-parent her two stepsons. She is currently living on a military base and is a stay-at-home parent to her daughter and two stepsons. Ava is Pagan and actively includes its traditions in her household. She also hosts an online meet up group to support military spouses.

Akhila

Akhila is a twenty-nine-year-old South Asian Muslim woman. She was in an arranged marriage in India for a year with a very controlling ex-husband who was, as it turned out, completely uninterested in marriage so she initiated their divorce. She has been divorced for two years and is currently an international student in Canada pursuing her second master's degree. Akhila enjoys spending time with her family and friends, especially while celebrating religious festivals.

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn is a thirty-five-year-old white Canadian woman. She was married for three years. Her ex-husband became a perpetrator of domestic violence. Kaitlyn initiated their separation and they have been divorced for about two years. She holds a bachelor's degree, is pursuing a real estate license, and runs a not-for-profit organization. She is a solo parent to her young daughter from a subsequent partner. Kaitlyn is passionate about animal welfare and embraces a vegan lifestyle. She and her daughter share their home with a whole host of animals, including chickens, goats, cats, a pig, and a dog.

Kaleigh

Kaleigh is a thirty-year-old Caucasian Canadian woman. She has a college diploma and is an event planner. She and her ex-husband were together for ten years and were married for three and a half years. Kaleigh's husband had substance abuse issues and cheated on her. She initiated their separation about two years ago and their divorce was finalized about a year ago. She is currently in a serious relationship and is living with her partner. Kaleigh loves travelling, playing volleyball, and going for long walks. She regularly practices yoga. She also really values spending time alone, listening to music, reading a book, or just sitting and drinking a glass of wine.

Julia

Julia is a thirty-five-year-old Caucasian Canadian woman. She has a bachelor's degree and is an event manager. She and her ex-husband were together for five and a half years and were married for four months. Julia initiated their separation two years ago when she realized their irreconcilable incompatibility. Her divorce was finalized just over a year ago. She is currently in a serious relationship and is pregnant with their first child together. Julia is very social and loves spending time with people doing any number of fun activities, from visiting local festivals to cottaging. Her favourite movie is The Wedding Planner*, which inspired her to become an event planner. She also enjoys playing baseball and cooking (she even used to write a weekly food blog).*

Rhiannon

Rhiannon is a thirty-seven-year-old Caucasian Canadian woman. She has a bachelor's degree and worked as a geologist before returning to school to pursue her master's degree, which she is currently completing. She and her ex-partner were in a common-law marriage for three years and owned a house together. Rhiannon had a tumultuous relationship that involved her ex-partner's alcoholism and abuse. She initiated their separation about two and a half years ago and is still awaiting the legal division of their assets. She is currently single, not dating, and living on her own. Rhiannon loves adventurous outdoor activities, like kayaking, camping, skiing and hiking. She recently joined a Toastmasters club to hone her public speaking.

Alison

Alison is a thirty-five-year-old Caucasian woman. She has a Ph.D. and is a university professor. She and her ex-husband married in their early twenties and were married for ten years before Alison moved to the United States to pursue her Ph.D. and her husband initiated their separation shortly thereafter. She returned to Canada and re-married about five years after her separation. She and her spouse have now been married for about three years. Alison enjoys reading fiction, spending time with family and friends, and having spirited conversations.

Cassandra

Cassandra is a thirty-two-year-old Caucasian woman. She has a bachelor's degree and is an advertising manager. She and her ex-husband were together for seven years and were married for three of those years. Cassandra initiated their separation three years ago due to her husband's mental instability, alcoholism, and abuse. She is currently in a serious relationship and is pregnant with their first child. Cassandra is very passionate about music—from attending concerts to listening to her favourite records with friends and geeking out over music from all backgrounds. She is a fur mom of three dogs and a cat.

Maylin

Maylin is a thirty-five-year-old East Asian woman. She is studying in Canada as an international student from China. She just completed her PhD and is currently looking for post-graduate employment. She and her ex-husband were together for seven years, three years of which they were a common-law couple. Her husband initiated their separation nine years ago. Maylin is currently single and is not dating. Maylin enjoys biking, swimming, hiking, and watching movies.

Part One: Shattering

I've been creating this **heartwork** my whole life
This vase
This vessel
For all my hopes and dreams
Each brush stroke added another layer
To the woman I became
To the girlfriend I became
To the wife I became
Isn't it stunning?

I wrapped my masterpiece in a white veil
And put it on display for all to see
Everyone gasped and beamed

I brought it home and put it in my proudest spot
It was moved
Jostled
And re-positioned
A thousand times

It didn't look the same anymore
It was tarnished
Neglected
The flowers I placed in it to spruce it up
Withered
But I still loved it

Small cracks appeared
But I painted over them

It was still fine

Not shiny anymore

But fine

The cracks grew

Multiplied

Deepened

No glue or paint

Could restore it

One ordinary Tuesday

In the middle of the kitchen

My heartwork

Began **shattering**

Before my eyes

As if in slow-motion

I scrambled to pick up the pieces

To save them

To hide them

To stick them back together

I reached my breaking point

I broke up

Broke down

Broke open...

Fallen Soldier

They say, "Love is a battlefield"

Well, I lost the war

My ex pulled the pin on a grenade and threw it at my feet

Boom

My world imploded

That's what my divorce was for me

My *D-Day*[24]

I had to stay in my bunker until the rubble was cleared

I had to quit work

There's no place for a fallen soldier

They don't give you a Purple Heart

I had to wait for my passport to come back from the visa office

I had just applied for my second spouse visa

To stay in this country that was my home for years

Now it was obliterated

We were obliterated

I was stuck in that bunker *24 hours a day for a month*

I didn't go outside

except to *have a cigarette*

a little power boost and then come back in

My life went up in smoke

I stopped taking care of myself

I ate one meal a day

[24] Significantly, for this piece, and this research broadly, *D-Day* was the day of a pivotal military operation (the day in World War II when Allied forces invaded northern France by way of beach landings in Normandy, securing a path to victory for the Allies). However, *D-Day* also refers to "the day on which an important operation is to begin or a change to take effect), or simply, "a day when something important will happen" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-a).

I drank a big bottle of rum a week

I showered maybe once a week

I turned into a complete recluse

I was shell-shocked

The Detonator was in the bunker with me

Once my ally, now my enemy

It was my Doomsday

Now, every day was my 'end of days'

But he came and went as he pleased

As civilians do

Our living room was behind enemy lines

There was no living there or in any other room

Just survival

There were landmines everywhere

Another argument

A sheepish glance

Silence

Divided territory

When the rubble cleared,

They shipped me home

I cried the entire nine-hour flight

A full-on panic attack

Stuck in a tube flying

I got off the plane and collapsed

My family barely recognized me

My sister was in tears

I looked like a homeless person

My skin was terrible

I was ashen

My hair was like when you find an animal with mange

My nails were long

I was turning into a barnacle

My parents almost took me to the hospital

"You need to get checked out; there's stuff wrong with you"

Didn't they know I had been through a war

and lost?

These are my war wounds

When you wear your heart on your sleeve

It's the first to go

Boom

My family got me home

I needed a chemical bath

I had a shower,

cut my nails,

shaved

pulled shrapnel from my arms

I can't hold on to anyone

My sister combed my hair

It was down to my tailbone

I guess GI Jane went the other way with her hair

But she was still an active-duty soldier

I wasn't interested in making myself pretty

Fallen soldiers aren't pretty

(Laura)

Recovery Position

After my ex and I separated, *I moved back in* with my parents. *My room was ready when I got home*. It was like stepping into some kind of time capsule from my teens. The weird thing is that I hadn't lived at home for over a decade and in that time my parents had done what most empty nesters do: turn their kids' old rooms into a craft or exercise room. Except my parents had no interest in staying fit or making macrame owls so my old room had become a storage room where my mom's extensive seasonal décor patiently waited for their time to emerge and shine.

But when I returned home, all the nutcrackers and Easter baskets and such were gone and replaced with a motley assortment of the contents of my teenage room that were somehow preserved and resurrected. So I came home as a thirty-year-old divorcée and flopped onto my faded yellow bedspread, surrounded by dog-eared posters of The Back Street Boys and Jonathan Taylor Thomas that my mom had put back on the walls! Laying there on my old twin bed, staring up at the ceiling as I used to do in many a brooding adolescent moment, I thought to myself, "Yeah, this is about right." My life hadn't just stopped in its tracks so that all my careful plans weren't moving forward; I was actually going backwards in some kind of cosmic farce. I half expected Samantha Jameson, the "mean girl" of childhood, to walk through my doorway and yell, "Crop tops aren't for fatsos!" I preferred the term *big girl*, not that she cared about my preferences.

Maybe my mom re-created my old room because she was hoping we could just rewind time and start over. If I got a re-do, I guess I could stand to have been a little less obsessed with the Tiger Beat poster boys of my 90s youth (don't tell 14-year-old me that I said this). Or, you know, maybe I could have avoided everything I did leading up to my ex saying we were over...

So there I was, back at home, in my old room, replaying every mistake I'd ever made in the last ten years with my ex. Like my brain was a wound-up cassette tape ribbon and I just kept jabbing my pencil into the middle and winding it back over and over. My parents *didn't charge rent*. *They were just like, "Figure your shit out and then we'll help you any way we can." They didn't ask questions; they just let me back in, which with all their faults, that's one of the best things that they've ever done for me.*

Back home, with no real responsibilities—no job, no husband, no social life—*alcohol and smoking basically took over*. *I have a longstanding habit* with both of my poisons of choice. *I've been smoking since I was 14 years old* when *co-workers would buy me cigarettes if I did their work for them. It was a good exchange.* When I was older, *working in a stressful job at a care home, smoking was a way to disconnect from that. It was very much a stress reliever in my normal life and in my work life, because when you come back* from having a cigarette*, not only do you have that nicotine fix, which is an automatic calm, you also have had time to remove yourself from the situation physically.*

Before my separation, *I was never a heavy drinker; I was a very social drinker. I'm Canadian, so I can knock back a few beers. When I was living in England and Ireland, people would be like, "Where are you from?" They would immediately assume America, and I'd be like,*

"No, I'm Canadian." Then they'd be like, "Let me buy you a pint!" So I didn't have to pay for alcohol a lot of times.

I went from being just a social drinker, where I would *drink for happiness*, to where I would *drink to pass out because I didn't want to feel anymore. I would drink to the point of blackout with the alcohol my parents had in the house. On weekends, my mom would just give me recipes to make for the week for her. She would just let me cook and drink and cry. I needed to do something. I needed to be productive. I needed to feel like I was helping. I had such a guilt complex when I came back. I felt like I was a burden.*

So I just cooked, drank, smoked, and cried for the first month I was home. *I didn't leave my house. I just didn't want to have to deal with people's questions*. Then, after a while, my *mom said, "You have to get out of the house. You know, you can't just sit around and smoke and drink your life away. Get out of the house."*

So I did. *My best friend* insisted*, "It's my birthday! I want you to come out. We're just going bowling in town. Come over to my place, we'll have pre-drinks, we'll go to the bowling alley and we can have drinks there, too. It will be a bunch of people you know." So I took alcohol over, we pre-drank at her place, went to the bowling alley, and drank some more. There were a bunch of people who hadn't seen me in like ten years and they didn't recognize me* because I'd been a "*big girl*" pretty much my whole life but with the months of mostly smoking and drinking, I'd withered away and my old acquaintances were like, "*Holy crap*; you're so pretty now." The "now" tacked on is the kicker; a real backhanded compliment. Move over Weight Watchers (or is it Noom now?), the "Divorcée Diet" will do wonders for your figure! You just need to replace actual food with rum and coke and at least a pack of smokes a day. And no cheating with any healthy stuff or you can say goodbye to those pounds just melting off.

So for my first time *being social* since my separation, I *got wasted*. When it was time to leave, *my friends basically pushed me in the direction of my house. I walked home and face planted in the front yard and fell asleep. The next morning, my mom looked in my room and I wasn't there, and then she realized, 'Oh, she's on the front yard.'* My front yard happens to be *on the main drag of my hometown.* My mom came out, still in her silk pyjamas, and *kind of kicked me and was like, "Get in the house." So I did, and I said, "I'm so sorry. I couldn't make it. I just fell asleep."* My parents were actually relieved: *"At least you got home. You were safe. You didn't drive." There were pluses, but they were like, "Next time, don't drink so much!"* I offered a sheepish *"Aye aye, captain"* in agreement with a requisite goofball salute. *So my parents equated the birthday party with the drinking.*

Then there were more and more social events that were happening where alcohol was making me make poor decisions. I would drink and drink and drink and then I would somehow manage to get home. If it was in town, I would let loose even more because I knew I could just walk home. My hometown is a big place for stag and does to happen. There are a lot of festivals and stuff as well. So there were a lot of events and I would go out. I would go out and then drink and drink and drink and drink. Then I would come home and blackout in my bedroom or vomit in my sleep.

It was dangerous. I'm first aid trained, and I would make sure I was in the recovery position. I would at least have that much consciousness to put myself in the recovery position to fall asleep on the floor. I knew how to position my body before I passed out so that I didn't choke on my own vomit but there was no "recovery position" for my heartache so I just kept choking on my own sadness. There's no recovery from that. *I was doing damage to myself, but I was making sure I wasn't harming anybody else. Literally, the only person I was hurting was myself. When I hit rock-bottom was when I almost killed myself because I didn't know why I was breathing anymore.*

My family doesn't understand the depth of that hole because they never saw it. I hid that very well. It wasn't like I was chugging a beer every morning and driving to wherever; it was very much that when I drank, I drank to excess. I had the ability to lie and say, "Oh, that party was such a rager." All these social events gave me an out. It was an easy way to lie. An easy way to hide my pain and my problems was to be out and be social and be fun, but at the same time, I was pounding back drinks to the point of blackout. I completely blacked out on a few occasions. It was an easy way to forget my problems for a while. It was fun to be that drunk. It wasn't fun for the next week after that but it was fun to be the idiot, to be someone that I wasn't, to just completely be able to change myself, using chemicals. Jack Daniels and I had so much fun. At least I think we did; I can't quite remember and that was the point.

(Laura)

Insider/Outsider

Here's the thing I found out about people who have been through what I have:

People who have been hurt

It doesn't even have to be a relationship

Anyone whose *life has changed in some drastic way*

Know that ***the life you had previously is completely***

Shattered

You now have a different understanding of life

Of death

Of marriage

Of kids

Of all those things and more

People who *haven't experienced this*

Still have those rose-coloured glasses on

They're still inside this "bubble"

Where they think that everything is

Sparkly and nice

And nothing bad is ever going to happen to them

When you've been pushed outside that bubble

You have a different understanding of what life is like

The people who are still inside the bubble

There is no way they can understand

They *can get close*

But not touch anymore

Once you're on the outside of that bubble

It's such a big disconnect

One of my friends just got married recently

Another is on her first kid

Their lives are in different places

They don't have time to support me

I've known these people for over ten years

Our friendships *just disintegrated*

It's *fine*

They're not in a position to give advice

I don't want to know about how they're happily

Sitting in their four-bedroom house

With their husband and their kid

It's such a disconnect

If someone who hasn't gone through a divorce

Says their advice to you

You might as well just watch a YouTube video

For self-help

From *anybody telling you whatever*

But I didn't know this at first

I was finding out how you determine

What is a good friend

How did those friendships change

I was taking support from everybody

Good or bad

I just needed somebody to tell me

It was okay

To pat me and say

"You're breathing; you're okay"

I was realizing they were just saying things

To tell me what I wanted to hear

I'm the first of my friends to get married

And also to get divorced

So they were all *still inside the bubble*

"Did you try marriage therapy?"

"Did you *try everything...*

...Getting a dog?

...Getting a house?

...Going through IVF?

...Going on holiday?"

"Why didn't you try harder?"

"Divorce is giving up on marriage"

"You kind of gave up, didn't you?"

(Laura)

+ Opposites –

They say *opposites* attract: + –

So *I was looking for someone who was opposite to me*

And I found him

+ *I was wild*

– *He was stable*

+ *I was social*

– *He was introverted*

+ I was *a bar star*

– *He was a homebody*

+ *I was a cat person*

– *He was a dog person*

+ I wanted to spend money on *travel*

– He wanted to *save money* and stay *home*

We were so different

But that's *appealing*, right?

Relationships should be give-and-take

He gave refusals and I took *concessions*

– We stayed *home* together

– Ate *dinners in front of the TV*

– Didn't talk much

– Then went to separate floors

– *We got a dog*

– We conducted our *fights through email*

We were so different

I knew something wasn't right

I talked to my dad, my rock

He said, "Don't give up on this relationship*"*

What my dad said, I listened to, and followed

"My dad knows best"

Our differences *will work themselves out*

This is what happens in a relationship

I guess

+ *I loved my wedding*

+ *It was everything I wanted it to be*

– *He was the groom...*

+ *...but this was my wedding*

+ *I had the time of my life...*

– *...but the whole night, I didn't spend any time with him*

+ *It was perfect*

– *Just not* with *the perfect person*

We got married on New Year's Eve

New year, new you

I made resolutions

+ To *connect* more and

– *Concede* less

A month later...

I was staring at the little + on a pregnancy *stick*

Never had a positive

Been so negative for me

I looked at my husband

– *And my heart dropped*

I knew *I should not be feeling this way*

– *About a pregnancy*

– *And about my partner*

+ *I tried to reframe my thoughts*

– *It just wasn't happening*

The pregnancy made me realize
– The relationship wasn't right
– I decided to end both

I told my dad my *decision*
+ One of the first times I made a choice
+ For me
Not for *external validation*
+ "This is my life choice"
+ "This is what I want"
+ "This is what's right"

I thought my dad would always have my back
I thought it was going to be okay
Because I've got all this evidence...

Instead, *my dad sent me a text to say,*
– "You're going to lose a husband and a dad"
He essentially said,
– "I don't want to be your dad anymore"
That was the last message I got from him
– Before terminating my pregnancy

+ When *I chose what was right for me—*
Terminating my pregnancy
Ending my marriage—
There *was the biggest fallout:*
– I lost my support
– People judged me
– My dad walked away
– I was told I was selfish

– Then came the shame

– So much shame

– And so much guilt

– I couldn't get out of bed

– My body felt like cement

– I couldn't do anything

– Dark thoughts crept in

– I didn't know where to turn

– This is my life now...

I'm not a scientist, but I would say

Actually, opposites don't always attract[25]

(Julia)

[25] A new study revealed that the fundamental principle of basic physics that "opposite charges attract and like charges repel" (para. 1) is, actually, not always true; some like-charged particles can attract (University of Oxford, 2024). It appears that even long-held scientific principles are open to revision.

The Other Woman

I found a *job* in a *very remote place* where *I could start* as *a program manager*
rather than *starting from* a *very basic position* in a major city.
But my husband was still *a student* at a university in the city
So we had a *long-distance* relationship
It was always me visiting him
Each one-way *trip* took *five days* of *travelling—*
Three days on the train and two days on the bus—
to get to him.

I did this *ten times*
I felt really tired of this travelling.
I told him *it wasn't fair* to *me that*
It was always me visiting him.
He said *he wasn't willing to* visit me
because *he really needed to focus on his studies*,
and *he experienced a lot of stress in* his *work.*

While I was away working, *he met another girl*,
who was *also* an *intern*, like him, in his lab.
They started *doing a lot of things together,*
like having *lunch together*
and going out *drinking together*.
I started *calling him so frequently*
because I was curious about what he was doing.

I would often ask him,
"Do you have something with this *girl?"*
"Are you two in a *relationship*?"
He felt I should not be doing so.
He felt I should trust him.
I didn't trust him.

I started to have these experiences where
the more *I worried about* what my husband was doing
with the girl,
the more I started to see and hear
about cheating and about being *betrayed*
in songs and *movies.*
It's like *when you're wearing a Coach bag*
and you notice a lot of people wearing
a Coach bag.

Sometimes, I think people's minds are crazy.
Am I crazy?

One night, when I called him,
I noticed that the girl was staying at his place.
I could hear her in the background.
He told me *he felt our long-distance relationship was really hard.*
He proposed we take *a "break."*
I told him I was coming home immediately.
He asked me not to come.
I bought a plane ticket *and flew directly* home.

When I was home, I could see that *someone* else
was in his room.
There were women's sweaters in a heap on the floor;
makeup on the dresser;
and (ironically), a well-worn
copy of Eat, Pray, Love, translated into Mandarin
on the nightstand.
My husband was not one to read women's memoirs.
He stuck to *science journals* and online news.

I confronted him and he admitted:
He had finally found another person who was also
in biology, so *they shared more common language*,
and she *could also help him* in the *lab*, *assisting him in his experiments.*
So, *he* decided that this *girl was the right girl* for *him*;
not me.
He helped me to understand
his needs and his difficulties.

He wanted a lab partner first
and a romantic partner second.
With her, he had both.

In China, usually, *only those* who are
engaged or married live together.
But I found out the *frustrating fact*
that my husband and the girl *lived together*
when I was away at *work.*

The girl was five years younger than me,
It seems *she was quite open,*
so they lived together
even though they obviously weren't engaged or married.

They were together instantly and quickly.
Though *we are in the same culture, in China,*
I think she was just more open than me.
She was *more* of the *'new' style;*
I was *more* of the *'old' style.*
Maybe I was too restrained.

After he told me the truth
about his relationship with this

other woman,
he proposed we separate.

He was *my first relationship.*
We were together for a long time.
I thought we would be together permanently,
like our parents.
But our seven-year relationship *ended.*
They are together now.
Me and him cannot go back anymore.
He taught me that relationships are fragile.

I think I only have myself to blame though:
I was so *afraid of things happening* between my husband
and this girl; *I was so suspicious*;
I kept saying to him that I thought *he had something*
with this girl, that I think
I created
a *self-fulfilling* prophecy.

If I had *done better in the very beginning—*
if *I did* not put these *ideas in his mind that*
he might have something with this girl—
then it might have been better;
things might not have *happened*
towards that direction.

If I had done better,
maybe I wouldn't have been
heartbroken.

He chose her,
the younger woman.

I was abandoned.

Now, I just have our *wedding photos*,
and the ghosts of our marriage
that *haunted me* in my *nightmares*
for two years.

(Maylin)

Good Wife

When my husband and I were first married, *I tried making love to him and that is when he actually got so angry that he punched me in my stomach* so hard that *I fell* over. *Then, he took all my good nightdresses that I* had bought to *seduce* him, and *he tore them and burned them.* He stood beside a smouldering pile of satin and silk in the middle of our kitchen and eerily whispered to me matter-of-factly, *"You're not going to wear these from now on." After* that, *I stop trying anything* intimate. *I fear even going near him*. He burned away the lacy shreds of this marriage ever being a happy one.

When all this is happening between us, *his mother*—a walking trope of the overbearing *Indian mothe*r—starts bemoaning, *"Oh I want a baby." I tell her* outright, *"Your son has not even touched me, and you want a baby?"* She insists, *"No, no, no, my son is perfectly fine. The problem is with you."* Here's a little tip, if you want your daughter-in-law to give you a grandchild, don't piss her off.

Since *my mother-in-law is not getting what she wants*, a grandchild, and she's decided that I'm the *problem*, she does what any mature adult would do: she calls my mother. It's her warped tattle tale, chastising me for my 'naughty' barrenness. My mother-in-law shares with my mother what she imagines is her big truth bomb, *"Because of office stress, your daughter's not able to get pregnant." And my mother thinks that* that must be the *case because I've not told her anything about my sexual relationship* (or complete lack thereof) *with my husband*.

I'm still conspicuously missing from this conversation about my uterus. *My mother asks my mother-in-law what she would like her to do and my mother-in-law says, "Take her to the doctor."* But *she doesn't allow me to go to the doctor of my choice; only the doctor of her choice.* So off the *three* of us go on our merry way—*my mother, my mother-in-law*, and I—*to the doctor*. At the first visit, I was *given some tests to do*, which *I did*. This is the only involvement I have: peeing on a stick and having my blood pressure taken. *The doctor first* advises*, "Let her have a stress-free life. Let her be relaxed and see how it goes."* The doctor doesn't speak to me directly, only to my mother and mother-in-law. I can't be trusted with these deliberations and suggestions of how to get me pregnant. I'm merely the vessel. I just get to sit awkwardly in a sterile office, in a scratchy paper gown that never ties up well enough, pondering my potentially sterile womb.

After the doctor's visit, *my mother-in-law* suggests to me (yes, actually to me), *"Why don't you stay at your home?"* as in *my old home*, with my parents, *"because you're very close to the office so there's no travel stress and you save time. I'm okay if my son stays at your place for two months."* How generous of her to allow me to move out of her home, and back to my parents' home, with her son in tow.

So I move back to my parents' house and my husband moves in with us, *to give it a try for two months*. Yolo? *We are living in the house and we are also working in the office* because my father gave my husband a job at his company (although he actually *does nothing*; he just *avoids work* and does *his own things*). *My father is watching us in the office. My mother is watching us at home*. And *they* both come to *understand* what is happening (and not happening) between my husband and me. *They figure out that he is really not taking care of their daughter the way a husband should. They see it. They understand. So my mother confronts me, "What's*

happening? Let's leave the medical treatment aside*, do you even have a sexual relationship? I don't see any love between you two. What is going on?"*

I assure her, *"Everything is fine. Just chill. No worries."* I project my best 'easy breezy' attitude. All I'm missing is some kind of tropical drink to complete my nonchalance (except I don't drink). If I tell her what's really going on, *she'll get worried.* And *I still had a teeny bit of hope that he will change; that things will change one day.* I decide to take things into my own hands. Desperate times call for desperate measures. My first plan is to go 'back to basics' in my efforts to be *a good wife*. Now, if you've seen the show The Good Wife, you might think I'd channel Alicia's no-nonsense attitude to supporting her wayward political husband while simultaneously crushing her legal cases. You'd be right about the no-nonsense approach (although I'm crushing the business world instead of the legal one): *I take out an encyclopedia and turn it to the uterus page* that outlines *the reproductive system*. So there I am, in my parents' living room (in a well-timed moment of them being out of the house), walls adorned with my own baby pictures, propping open our dusty encyclopedia from the bygone days of not looking everything up on the internet. I assume my best teacher voice and *explain* to my 29-year-old husband with a master's degree the highlights of a *sixth-grade* health *class*: *what is supposed to happen to have a kid*. He gives me a perfunctory *"hmm hmm"* while he stares with his *head down looking at his phone*.

Plan B: Get even more desperate. *I fall at his feet and literally cry*, *"Just talk to me!* Tell me *what's wrong*. *Do you even like me a bit? If you don't like me or you like someone else, or you're having an affair, or whatever it is, just tell me anything! Your behaviour towards me is really weird*. *I just want a reason for* why you're *behaving like* this. *I need a reason! Why did I wait for two years to get this shit?" I try everything, but there's no reaction; no response at all. He's just checking his phone, watching videos on* his phone, with *his earphones on*, *ignoring me completely.*

During this time, I also try everything in my power to change my body to be ready to conceive (if the occasion ever arises). *The doctor told me to eat raw veggies and fruits*. So for *two months, I eat only tomatoes, cucumbers, and boiled eggs*. *I lose about 20 pounds* with this *diet*. Now, *I'm a* self-proclaimed *foodie. I love food! I love to cook. I love to eat*, but *for two whole months*, *I was restricted to the cheapest veggies and fruits* to *diet for these people*: the *doctor* and my *mother-in-law*.

For *five months*, *I was under* medical *observation* for *my menstrual cycle. I undergo fertility treatments. Reports are generated. Now, the doctor is completely* sure that I am *"perfectly normal."* And yet, here I am: still not pregnant. Still not a *good wife*.

Plan C: Ask for *the doctor's help*. I have to be resourceful about speaking to the doctor privately *because during every doctor's visit, my mother-in-law sits inside the clinic and doesn't want to leave.* She's like a vulture, hovering over every word, scavenging for proof of my abnormality and her vindication. During one visit, *I somehow manage to get the doctor's personal WhatsApp number from the attendant.* I won't get into the ethics of her giving me his personal number, but she must have seen the desperation in my eyes. So *I text the doctor* and tell him, *"I want to meet you personally and not with my mother-in-law."* When we're finally alone,

I tell him, "This is my sexual life. How do you expect me to have a baby? I've tried everything and nothing works." I tell him *I don't know what to do* and I need his *help*. *So the doctor calls my mother-in-law and tells* her, *"This girl seems normal. Bring your son* to me. *We want to check* him.*"*

So my husband reluctantly goes to the doctor (welcome to the party). I don't hear anything from anyone for a long time: no updates, no results, no recommendations. It's a sharp contrast to the barrage of medical information I'm expected to provide and process and from which I am "*advised*" to drastically adjust my 'lifestyle' accordingly. I only overhear my mother-in-law telling my father, *"Your daughter has to get pregnant. She's getting old day by day." I was* an admittedly ancient *27-year-old at that time*.

So at this point, my mother-in-law knows from the doctor that I'm *"perfectly normal."* But still, she *blames me* for not getting pregnant. Around this time, *random people* started *coming up to me* as *I'm walking in the streets*, saying, *"Do you know you can try so and so remedies? You can do this and this. Use this herb and that herb. Then, you can get pregnant."* There's nothing quite like the totally unsolicited advice of complete strangers suggesting some kind of voodoo "*remedies*" for a personal issue you never shared with them. I felt like I was losing my mind like somehow my not being pregnant had caused such a rift in the time and space continuum that strangers were compelled to advise so that everything could return to how it should be. I finally confide my confusion to *a relative of mine*, *"Why am I hearing this? What's happening?"* She tells me, rather casually, *"Your mother-in-law is telling everyone that you cannot give birth."* I feel completely betrayed that my mother-in-law would *spread* such a malicious *rumour* and that my own relatives would say nothing until I cornered them directly. The complicity runs deep.

I'm fed up with people talking about me, around me, and over me. I, again, take things into my own hands and start digging around on our home computer to see if I can find out any information since no one is openly sharing anything with me. I'm shocked to find my husband's medical reports, dated mere days after his doctor's appointment from months ago. The doctor sent it to my husband and my mother-in-law, who is a *friend of hers*. I'm 'curiously' missing from the email thread.

As *I look through* my husband's *medical report*, I know I am opening Pandora's box. At the top of the report, it reads:

Male fertility assessment: *Impotent*

***Low sperm count*: *~50* (expected range: *40-400*). Of these sperm, about *45% are dead*, *25% are sluggish*, and *15%* are *active, motile, but slow*.**

Additional risks*: Type One *diabetic

Recommendations: *Injection* to *boost* the *15% actively motile, but slow, sperm*. *Reduce weight* by *starting to work out and eating healthy.*

I stare at the screen, re-reading the report, for what feels like forever, trying to process what I've learned; what was kept from me. My husband is *impotent*. My husband is also *diabetic*.

I have too much to say, but I resign only to ask my husband if he will be returning to the doctor. He says that he has an appointment next week. I nod and say, "Okay, I'm coming with you." He seems surprised and mumbles, "My mother won't want you to come." I take a deep breath and assert myself, "Whether she does or doesn't want me to come doesn't matter. We are the ones trying to have a baby. Your mother isn't involved in that equation. Besides, your mother has guilted *my father* into paying for *all* these *medical expenses*. You should be the one *taking care* of these *expenses*. You may want to re-read the Koran to remind yourself of your duties as a husband: *everything is supposed to be taken care of* financially *by the husband;* and *it's the duty of the husband to make the girl pregnant*. So, yeah, I'll be at your next doctor's appointment so I know what is happening." Then, I walk away, smirking to myself.

The next week, my husband, my mother-in-law, and I all go to the second doctor's appointment for my husband. When my mother-in-law suggests I stay home, I say, "I have seen the medical report you *hid from me* and my father is paying for this appointment." I saw her eyes widen like saucers, and she sheepishly says, "Okay, if you want to come, you can." None of this is what I want. It never has been.

At the appointment, the doctor gives my husband *one test and one injection*. When we *go home*, he says to me and his mother the most direct statement I've ever heard him make: *"That is all I'm contributing for the baby. I'm not going to do any kind of treatment on myself."*

I practically starve myself for *two months*, am *tested* regularly, have my *cycle* monitored for *five months*, take *folic acid tablets* that upset my stomach, and endure endless badgering from my *mother-in-law* that I *"need to get pregnant."* But after only *one test* and *one injection* to *boost* his slow swimmers, my *impotent* husband is apparently done *"contributing for the baby."*

My mother-in-law ignores that her son *refuses to go to the doctor* again. *She calls my mother* and proposes that *my father* should pay for *other expensive* fertility *treatments*. She *puts the ball in my father's court.* My mother says she'll talk to my father. I tell my father, *"No, you're not spending anymore! Either he takes care of his medical bills or we're not going to get involved. I can adopt a baby. I can be happy* with that*."* Somehow, *even at that point, I try to save my marriage.* I tell my husband about my willingness to adopt, *"Okay, so let's not have a baby. I don't mind but I want to be a mother. Let's adopt. At least then I can become a mother and get that love and I can be with my baby."* But a lot of *Indian parents are kind of against adoption. I don't know why. My in-laws don't want to support adoption.* And, of course, my mother-in-law is the pipeline through which all of our decisions flow. Another dead end.

Plan D: Have my dad talk to my husband about how to get me pregnant. If you've ever wondered what the most awkward, last-ditch effort could be, it's this. In the *two months* my husband and I lived at my parents' house, *my father figured out we were not intimate with each other and starts talking to and questioning my* husband about this because, you know, *my dad* is a *male* and it's a *male topic*. My dad asks my husband point blank, *"Do you have any problems? You can ask me. I'm like your father. I'll advise you* on *everything. I'll guide you."* And if you've

ever wondered what could make a guy run for the hills the fastest it would be his father-in-law offering to give him sex advice. Sure enough, my husband *starts feeling awkward* and *doesn't want to have the conversation with my dad*. *He wants to avoid my dad in the office and at the house. He stops coming to my* parents' *house*, where we're still supposed to be living together. *He goes back to his own place*, *his old* home and *my new home*.

I don't see my husband again for nearly a month, our holy month of *Ramadan*. He doesn't want to live or celebrate the festival at my parents' house and when I ask my mother-in-law if I should join them at their house, she tells me, *"You don't have to come. We're happy without you."* So in this holy time, *a time for forgiveness, she's still stubborn.* I call my husband and question him, *"I just had a conversation with your mom* and she said not to come to your house. *What do you want to do?* Do you want to come back here to *stay with me and celebrate the festival together*, *or do you want to* keep living apart and *celebrate it separately?"* He tells me, unsurprisingly, *"Do what my mother says. If she's decided that you shouldn't come to our house, it's decided."* I mean, *culturally, it is the tradition that the daughter-in-law celebrates at her mother-in-law's place. That is the expectation. That's what* our *society thinks. So if I'm celebrating a festival in my mother-in-law's place, in society, it indicates that I'm a happy married woman. And I want to go there because I still want to pretend that we are a good couple, we are a good family; we're good. But I've been told not to come there* by my mother-in-law and her parrot son.

That was the last straw for me. It's funny, you never know what the last straw will be. You would think my camel's back would have broken a long time ago with all the straws heaped on for two miserable years. But, no, my stubborn camel kept limping along looking for a drop of water. It became crystal clear to me, finally, that this whole marriage was a farce and I didn't want any part of it anymore. I tell *my husband*, *"If you don't want to celebrate such an important event with me, then there's no point in living even a day with you."*

My final plan: Come clean and call it quits. *I call my father* and, at last, I tell him the *truth*, *"My husband doesn't want to celebrate Eid with me. He doesn't know anything about the duties or rights of a husband or a wife. He's not giving me anything. I've tried every single step* to change things.*"*

The next day at the office, my father is in the *conference room* after a meeting has ended. I walk over to my husband's desk and gesture towards the conference room, *"Come in. I want to talk."* When we're both in the room, I interrogate him once and for all, *"What do you want? Do you want to live with me or not?"* He takes the coward's way out and says, *"No, I want to go with my mother's choice."* Mommy dearest strikes her final blow, from afar. I take in his statement for a moment and, again, I feel clear and resolved. I declare, *"Okay, then I want this to end. I want a divorce."* He replies simply, *"Okay." That's his reaction. There is no emotion, nothing.*

My father is still *sitting there in the room*, taking this all in. *I can see my father's eyes turning red, dead red. Then, he stands* suddenly and addresses my husband, *"Do you even know the meaning of divorce?"* He answers my father bluntly, *"That's okay, I can leave her* [he doesn't even say my name]. *I don't mind."* It's like he's replying to someone asking if he wants to take

an umbrella before he leaves: “That’s okay. I can leave without one. I don’t mind the rain.” I turn to face him again, this man who has caused me so much anguish for *two* long *years*, this man for whom *I gave up everything*, and I command him, for once, *“Just get out! Get out of my sight.” And he just walks off*, and out of my life. My father and I wait for the storm to come—*what society is going to think*—without an umbrella.

(Akhila)

Eulogy for a Bold Young Woman

Akhila was a bright light in this world. We gather here today to remember her light and to grieve together that it was taken from us after only twenty-seven years.

To know Akhila was to know that she was fiercely devoted to her Islamic faith and her family. She was incredibly hard-working, *independent*, and intelligent. Those are not normally qualities used to describe women in our culture, although they are true for many; just unrecognized. But Akhila wanted to create a life for herself that was different than the life that was possible for her mother and grandmothers and all the women before them. She deeply valued education and excelled in her studies at all levels, including becoming *the first engineer in her family* and then earning her *master's in business administration*. She combined her dedication and expertise in her two successful careers, first as *a schoolteacher*, and then as a valued associate at her *father's company*. At work, she did not shy away from assuming a leadership role. As a co-worker told me, "Her *voice was very loud*, and she used it to *speak up*!" In the last year, she worked for her family's business, she *accomplished* so much and *achieved* so many *targets*. *The company's clients were so happy with her performance that they called her father* and said to him, *"I want your daughter to meet my daughter, and I want them to become friends. I want your daughter to inspire my daughter." Her father felt proud of her as an entrepreneur and a businessperson*. That was the kind of person Akhila was: she inspired others to be better versions of themselves! This was remarkably the case in our society that still values women most for their roles in the home: It's *standard* that women in India are *told they can't work after marriage*. Defying this deeply entrenched view, even fathers wanted their daughters to be more like Akhila; to know that they could participate in, and be successful at, work outside the home if they so chose.

Even as she pursued her careers, Akhila never wavered in supporting her family, *whatever it took* for her. As a case in point—and a testament to her work ethic and selflessness—every day, she would *get up at four in the morning to cook for almost three hours*, preparing *breakfast, lunch, and dinner* for her whole household, *before going to the office*.

She then devoted herself to the husband her father *arranged* for her. She *gave up everything* for her marriage: her childhood home, her family, her job, and even her country when she moved with her husband to *Kuwait* for *six months* so he could further his career there. This brilliant woman was told that as a married woman, she had to *stay at home*; she was *not allowed to work*. She was just expected to *cook, sit, and dress up like a doll to look pretty*. Didn't they know Akhila was too vibrant to be anyone's "*dolly*"—the *nickname* they *called* her instead of her own?

But even though *she sacrificed all her happiness and everything to make the marriage work*, even though she *put her heart and soul* into it, somehow it was not enough for her husband and his family. She was endlessly *patient*, *tolerant*, *flexible*, and *hopeful*. She *even tried to change herself to become what he wanted her to be*, but despite all this, her husband *didn't take care of her* or show any *interest in her*. He *didn't even look at her or talk to her*! He *restricted her food*, refused to *take her to a doctor* when she had a *medical emergency*, *punched her*, and *burned her clothes*. She told me she was afraid *he might kill her in anger*.

But that wasn't how Akhila died. She was spared the violent death so many women do not escape.

When things became unbearable, Akhila returned to India. She knew she was unwell but she suffered in silence because she understood the ramifications of her affliction. *Seven years back*, she had watched her own aunt, her *mother's sister*, suffer similarly from this "*curse*." Akhila saw firsthand how the *superstitious belief in our culture* made people fear that her affliction was contagious; how she was *shunned* (*all of us were told, "Don't visit her house"*); and how she became *totally isolated*, *living separate* from everyone. Her *three daughters* were even *taken from her* and she was left *alone* with *no financial support.* Akhila had also observed that her uncle had the same affliction but his life was not at all affected in the same way as her aunt's had been. Once her uncle recovered and *got settled*, he moved on with his life as if nothing had happened; he didn't have the *black mark* branding him forever. After all, *it's a black mark on the girl*. So Akhila knew very well what happened to women with this affliction. She also knew that this *superstitious* belief was not limited to her family but was widespread in her *religious and cultural community*.

When Akhila could stay silent no longer, this once outspoken young woman, she eventually faced her own curse she had to bear. Her immediate family took swift measures to ensure that this information was not *leaked* because they *were worried about how she would be treated by her other family members*. They were particularly vigilant so others, outside the family, did not perceive the whole family as *cursed* since they knew, *"society thinks that if one girl from the family* is affected, *others may also* be affected*"* and then, no one would want to be *involved* with her family in any way.

Her family called her "*bold*" and worried her boldness might spread to other young women in the family. They were *very concerned about what others would say and what others would think*. They might think, 'If Akhila's *so forward and bold, what if her sister or her cousins might also be like that?*'

So Akhila tried valiantly to shield her family, particularly her father, from the impact of her curse. She knew that *tradition is very important and girls are* an embodiment of *respect for a house*. She *wanted to save* her family's *honour and respect* and she *tried everything she could* to do so, but her curse was bigger than all her efforts. She worried about how she could *reduce the guilt for her father*. She worried *his health might be affected*. So she *decided* to wear a *niqab*, covering her entire body, except for her eyes, so that she could be as outwardly faithful as possible to counter her curse as much as she could. Shrouded in the darkness of the niqab she wore and of the *depression* she felt, she still did everything she was supposed to do: she went *to the office*; *cooked* meals for others; and did what she could *to make sure her parents felt that she was okay*. She put on a brave face but *cried herself to sleep every single night*. She *never showed her tears to her parents*.

Despite all her efforts to quell her parents' worries, she heard them ask each other in urgent whispers, *"Who will be supporting her after us? What's going to happen to her? Is she going to live alone? How is society going to treat her? Is she going to become mentally unstable?"*

The heavy toll of all this extinguished Akhila's once-bright light.

As I stand here before you today, speaking in this way (in the third person), I know you are all perplexed, thinking, "Has she lost her mind?" Well, I guess in some ways I have.

Of course, *I* am Akhila, and I am standing and speaking, still physically alive.

But this is my **eulogy** to the life—*my life*—you said *was over*. You think *I'm like a dead body*.

You think *I've spoiled my life* with my "affliction": my divorce.

All you see of me now is *a black mark*, *a curse*. I've been handed *a bad conduct certificate*; the first and last I've ever received.

I wake each day to find you all *mourning* my **death by divorce**.

My death notice has been pronounced: talaq, talaq, talaq.[26]

I'm turning in my unmarked grave, the one I live in now, buried in your shame.

And I can never rest in peace.

(Akhila)

[26] "Talaq" is an Islamic word for divorce. According to the Triple Talaq Law, a man can divorce his wife by pronouncing "talaq, talaq, talaq" three times. In 2017, India's parliament approved a bill outlawing the centuries-old right of a man to instantly divorce his wife (Safi, 2017).

Family Planning

Having a family was very important to me.
Before my husband and I *were married,*
I had that conversation, as one should,
and he just went, "Oh yeah, of course."
But *eight years into* our relationship,
and he still had no interest in actually having kids.
I have fertility issues because of a hormone disorder,
so *I was hitting menopause* early.
I told him, *"It's now or never."*
He said*, "You're a modern woman.*
You shouldn't want kids*."*
I insisted, *"I know what I want and I'm telling you."*

But *I thought if I'd put this much time and effort*
into this relationship*,*
I didn't foresee another relationship moving any quicker.
I didn't have time to waste on somebody else.
I'm invested in this.
It's either this or I'm not going to have kids.

Then, *he* finally admitted,
"I just thought you'd let wanting kids *go."*
That was the straw that broke the camel's back...

(Ava)

My ex *and I were planning to have kids.*
Since I met him, he always wanted to have kids.
But he *wanted to have kids a lot earlier than I did:*
He was *25 and I was 23.*
We were just engaged.
I was young,
so I was absolutely not interested in that.

I wanted to wait until I was in my late 20s or early *30*s.
I also *wanted us to be more financially stable.*

(Kaleigh)

Once I was married, I thought,
*"*Okay, *I've started my career,*
I've gotten married,
and now, *I'm supposed to have kids."*
To some people, not having kids once you're married
is an example of not having your shit together.
My *perfectionism played on me a lot:*
I wanted people to think I had my *shit together*
and *I didn't want to let people down.*

(Julia)

I followed this *narrative with my husband:*
you get the job,
you get your nice house,
then *come kids.*
That's the *cultural imperative*, right?
So when *we bought the nice,*
big, five-bedroom house
and we moved in there,
I looked at those bedrooms as,
"We're going to have kids...
and it's going to be fun and great."

(Kaitlyn)

I didn't have a firm idea that,
"I want to be this many years old when I have children,"
but because I was an international spouse,
my husband and I had *a mutual agreement*
about *how our life was going to be*
for the next 10 years

to get through the rocky part of citizenship.
So there was a mutual pause on having kids.
The game plan we had since we started dating
was to wait until I got *citizenship in the UK.*
Then, we would *move to Canada*
to raise children
because my *support system* was *there.*
As we got closer to that time,
he was getting nervous
about having to move to Canada.

Instead of sharing that with me
at any point in the almost ten years
leading up to that,
he just ended our marriage.

He divorced me
because he thought
I was going to drag him away
from his family
and take him to Canada
like the big, bad bitch I am...
because I said I didn't want
to *raise children* without a *support system.*

(Laura)

My *ingrained thought process*
was *that women and men get married,*
they buy a house together,
and then they have kids.
My *thinking* was *that's how it has to be*.

At a party my ex and I attended once, *someone said,*

"Well, women can have a profession and raise children."

I remember later *having the conversation with* my ex

and he said, "Well, if we have kids...

I'm not going to stay home to raise them...

What about my six figures?"

And I just *said, "What about my six figures?"*

(Rhiannon)

When I was married, I was planning on having children.

But *I really tossed between* thinking,

"Is this something I want?

Is this something I want with this person?

Or is it something that I feel like I need to do?"

I struggled with that a lot.

My ex and I *had a lot of conversations about having children*

because once *you're married, that's kind of the next step.*

(Melissa)

Tick Tock

While married...

I found out I was pregnant.
I stared at the pregnancy *stick*
and my heart dropped.
The pregnancy made me realize
the relationship with my husband *wasn't right.*
I decided to end both.

(Julia)

I was thinking about leaving my marriage,
and my mom *made a comment to me*
about staying and having kids
and leaving 10 years down the road.
I don't think she realized the gravity of that statement.
It was the worst advice.
I was at a point where I was numb,
and this is the advice I got from my mom.
I just said, *"This is so not helpful in any way.*
I'm not going to last 10 years."
I know *it's a much bigger thing* than just my mom:
it's her generation, it's her time, it's gender.
It made me realize she really does want grandchildren.
Apparently, hypothetical grandchildren
are more important than her actual daughter's sanity.
She would condemn me to a decade more of misery
to be a grandma.

(Melissa)

My husband and I *kind of had discussions*
about having kids
but nothing ever happened.

I did go for fertility testing
and they told me I had a low egg count.
He refused to go for testing at all.
So we never really got anywhere with that.

(Kaitlyn)

I realized *I did not want to have kids with* my ex
'cause he's a child.

(Kaleigh)

I was basically my ex's *mother:*
I was cooking for him
and *making sure the house was taken care of.*
If he had told me *the idea of having kids terrified him*,
he knew I would leave,
because *having a family was very important to me*.
Then, he'd lose *somebody looking after him*.
But I wanted to be a *mother* to *actual children*,
not him, a man-child husband.

(Ava)

I realized that I didn't want to have children with my husband.
The life where we didn't have kids
was a lot more attractive to me
because I knew my friends who had kids
and the loving, supporting friends
they were to each other.
I didn't have that.
I knew that if we had kids,
I would be doing everything on my own
because I couldn't rely on him to do anything.
I often felt like he was a child himself.

(Melissa)

In the last *year* of my marriage,
I felt like a babysitter to my husband.

I was starting to feel like my marriage *was over,*
and *before I left,*
I remember thinking, "I might not have children."
The biological concern
is a real concern for *women.*
That's unique to women getting divorced
because men have more time.

When things were ending,
I had to accept that,
"If I leave my marriage...
I might not have children."
But I knew without a doubt*,*
"I'm not having children in this relationship
because I can't bring a child into this situation."
I accepted that.

(Cassandra)

After separating...

I *had that feeling* that *the clock* was *ticking*.
It's the original Ti(c)kTo(c)k...

(Julia)

All my friends have had kids.
They *are actually all having vasectomies now.*
So I'm in a very different phase of my life than all of them.
And it really hit me that I may not have a family.
It was always something that I wanted.
My life has not gone as planned at all.
I thought I would still *be married*
and would *have kids.*
But *now, I'm in this spot where there's a real possibility*
that won't happen.

By the time I'm in a serious enough relationship
to consider having a child,
I may not be able to.
I don't know.
No one knows their fertility
until you try.
I've only recently
come to the acceptance
that I may not have kids.
I may not be with someone
and this might be the rest of my life.

I'm extremely grateful
that I don't have children with my ex.
But it doesn't make it easier
because I still don't have kids...

I have always felt slightly on the outside
of my group of friends.
I mean, they have supported me
but I've always kind of felt I don't have this connection
that everyone else does
and I think a big part of that is that
I don't have kids and they all do.
At *35, I'm at a point now where I may not have kids.*
That's a very hard piece to swallow.
I don't know why exactly*,*
maybe because *it's this societal ideal;*
that's what you're supposed to do.

(Melissa)

I struggled with the radical departure
from a certain path I thought I was on,
and *one* of those *was having kids,*
which had been *imminent for* my ex *and I.*
I'm so thankful though *that I don't have a child with him.*
When we separated, one of the things he accused me of
was that he said I never wanted to have kids with him
and that I was constantly pushing it off.
Maybe I was without *being conscious of the reasons why.*

Now, even though my ex and I *don't have kids together,*
our lives are still very entwined
because we grew up with the same group of friends
and all of my best friends are married to his best friends.
So we see each other at like a baby's birth or kids' birthdays.
So our friends' kids bring us together still.
There's a potential to see him every few months.
It's not an ideal situation...

(Kaleigh)

All my friends who know me and know my ex
all think separating was a good thing because,
as *they* reminded me,
it is better that I found out earlier
rather *than finding it later when we would have kids.*
But *I love kids...*

(Maylin)

I was in my *early thirties* when I *divorced.*
And I remember having that sense of
'I need to start thinking about how I feel
about the fact that I'm not going to have kids'
because that's how it registered for me.
So I was sort of having a pre-grief kind of thing

where I was working through it and I was just like,
'Okay, this is it.'
And I was pretty much okay with that,
but I also kind of felt like,
"I think I would be a good mom..."

(Kaitlyn)

I went out with a guy who was a couple of years older than me.
I think he was 38.
He actually told me if he was going to have kids,
I was too old,
and he would need to pick someone much younger.
He said this to my face.

(Melissa)

I've accepted that *I'm not having kids.*
I'm disappointed that thoughts still pop into my head:
"Oh when I have kids..."
"I'm saving this for my children..."
"When I teach my children this..."
"This is how I'm going to raise my child...."
But then *I'm like,*
"Oh, wait a second,
I'm not going to have children."

(Rhiannon)

My parents were upset at me
because they just threw a wedding
a few *months* before
and now it was all over,
and *they wanted to have a grandchild.*

(Julia)

My mom really does want grandchildren.
All her hopes were in me
because *she knows my sister and her husband*

are not having children.
She's never come out and said it directly
but I definitely get the impression
she's disappointed that she's not a grandma.
But *I was not planning on being divorced at 32.*
She's made a couple of quips here and there
about me *having kids*
or *comments about wanting grandchildren*
and I'm like, "I am sorry...
but *they're not going to materialize out of nowhere.*
I have no idea if I will have children or not."

The double rub is not only that it's *heartbreaking*
for me not to have children,
and such a disappointment to my mother,
but the very fact that I didn't have kids in my marriage
seems to give people permission to dismiss the pain of
my divorce because *I feel like if there aren't kids involved,*
people don't care that you're getting divorced.
They don't think it's hard.
It's not a big deal because, you know,
"at least you didn't have kids..."

(Melissa)

Fixer Upper

Making moves

I had *a girls' night* out with some people from work. They knew I was a homebody so it was a big deal that I finally agreed to go out with them. They got me *all dolled up* with the *fake eyelashes and all the rest of it*. I still had my *braces* on and *I felt really awkward about* them and about *being in this little, tiny dress*. *My boss spotted a man across the bar*, a *total stranger*, and *grabbed me by the hand and pulled us together*. She declared, *"You guys would look so good together!"* She knows prime real estate when she sees it, I guess; she is a *cosmetic doctor* after all. Before I knew what was happening, my boss had pushed me in front of *this super handsome, perfectly dressed man* who *looked like he was* straight *out of* GQ Magazine. *He was* show home *beautiful*. And like some kind of movie fairytale, which had never even been my thing, *I instantly* thought, *"He's the one!"*

This *beautiful man treated me with the same intensity* as *I was putting out*. There were *huge sparks*. On *our first date*, we had *lots of great conversation* and *eye contact*. *Everything about him seemed perfect. There wasn't one part of his life that didn't seem put together and organized.* He had a *good job.* He *could do all sorts of projects.* Even *his car was clean. He took me to really nice restaurants and we had candle-lit dinners. We also went on nature hikes.* He was the *perfect balance* of romantic and outdoorsy. *We seemed to have similar dreams. He* was *Prince Charming* incarnate. *He was the first person* I dated where *I felt like suddenly no one else mattered*. *Our relationship moved fairly quickly*. After a whirlwind few months of dating, *we decided to take the next step.*

Moving in together

I owned my own home so he moved in with me. I couldn't wait to start building our dreams together. But *very soon after he moved in*, *he became a completely different person*. He became *very mean*, *very distant* and detached. It was like a reverse flip; my show home started falling into disrepair. *But he was good for the good moments. He bought me flowers* and *gifts.* So I just decorated my doubts. *Other times, he'd be so frugal or I was in trouble for spending money,* my own money. *He* became *very controlling*. But we were still shiny and new so I figured there was no point dwelling on future renovations.

The dark room

He spent most of his time in the *spare bedroom with the lights off*. *Sometimes, he would be watching TV and sometimes he wouldn't be*. *He was just being kind of weird.* He continued *doing his weirdness in the dark spare bedroom.* When he was gone one day, I *looked at* his *computer* he had left in the room. *I checked his* search *history* and it was all *porn*. That's what he was doing in that *dark room* all this time. This discovery demolished my *trust* in him. *Intimacy was very hard for me*; *to actually let down my walls and let someone in*. I had let him into my house and into my heart only to find out he was entertaining all these unwelcome guests in my spare room. I told him *I knew*. I told him that *I found it really hurtful*. *He got very angry and defensive*. *It became an obsession for me to check* his search history. The fact that he knew how

upset it made me and that he didn't stop and continued to *hide it* from me made me *feel like he was cheating on me*. *It made me feel sick*. It also made me feel *very envious of the body types that he was looking at and compare myself*. He tried to assure me by telling me, *"I love your body. You look like a porn star."* But his assurances felt empty since he continued to *watch* actual *porn stars*. When I shared how I felt with some girlfriends, they just *said, "Oh, calm down. It's not a big deal. Everybody does it."* For me though *it felt like a deep violation of trust, respect, and intimacy. It was going elsewhere.* But in the midst of all this though, *there were very good times*. Those good times were more lodged in my mind than the others.

The gaslights are on

Your mind gets tricked by these ups and downs. It's like an addictive cycle. I started to doubt my own perceptions. I was going off my hinges. I thought, *"It must be me. Maybe that didn't really happen that way at all."* Like the time *we went on a trip to Europe* together after dating for a couple of months. *He had packed too much stuff in his suitcase*, *it was over the weight limit*. In this *little European airport*, *they told us we couldn't get on the plane* with that heavy of a suitcase. He started *taking shoes out of his bag* but then added a large bunch *of bananas* he had bought at the airport. I suggested, *"Instead of throwing out your shoes, why don't you just eat the bananas or throw them out and I'll put some of your shoes in my bag?" He blew up* and started *yelling* at me in the middle of this *little airport*. People were walking by us, shaking their heads. It was *the first* time *I actually felt afraid of him. He didn't touch me but I felt really small.* It was *like I was somehow this idiot, even though* he was the one *trying to pack bananas in his bag*, which you can't even take on a plane. It was *the weirdest situation*. It was like for a moment, the lights were on but no one was home. Then, *enough time* would *go by and nothing really seemed as bad as it did in* those *moments. I went forward with* our *relationship because when he was great, he was perfect. I was so proud to be out with him. I beamed, "Look, this is my boyfriend."*

We bought a house

After a few months of living together, *he didn't want to* keep *living in* my *house with me because it was my house, which made him feel like less of a man. He wanted us to buy a house and move, so we started looking at houses.* We moved out of the city to a small surrounding town and *bought a nice, big house*. We were moving up. *I was* actually *the one who put the down payment on the house*, *but his name was on the* house, too. *I got him to sign a cohabitation agreement* as a kind of *prenup for people who* aren't married and *are just living together*. *My lawyer told me privately, "I'm so glad you're getting him to sign this. I don't trust this guy."* I had begun to notice that he started to *speak about my inheritance* money from my mother *like it was his money*, too. *He* would *often* talk about *what things we should do with "our" money*, so I felt a cohabitation agreement was a good call. *It was a huge fight* to get him to sign it, but he did.

Sweeping things under the rug

So we had this *nice, big house*. *It was a five-bedroom house for two people*. *He* didn't want *anyone to come and visit*, so we weren't even entertaining friends in this big house. There was no housewarming, only a chilly reception to my efforts to make our house more homey. I

wanted a dog so he bought two *fancy-looking dogs*. *Everything he did* kind of felt like *it was for show* like we were just playing house. *I couldn't* even *clean* that big house very well *so I was always getting in trouble for that. There were so many things that got swept under the rug. He was happy because it had a big backyard. We had a couple of weeks of being kind of happy in this house.*

He painted our house with more of his true colours

Our fights began to escalate a lot again. *That showed* me *more of his true colours*. I realized that since we had moved out of the city, *I was in a place where I didn't know anybody*. We *didn't* even *know the neighbours*. *He started to become more physical with his arguments*. *He would shove* me and *shake me*. *His words became a little bit more cruel*. *Everything I did, I was an idiot, I was stupid*. *We wouldn't talk, and then we would talk, and then we'd make up, and then we'd fight.* But I never really reached some yet unknown threshold where I wanted to pack it all in. *I* still *knew this one beautiful side of him* and *I held onto this hope* that *things would be better.*

He was that dark room

He started *trying to ruin parts of my day*. *If I had just put clothes in the dryer, he would take them out and not tell me.* It wasn't even that he had to put his own clothes in the dryer, and just couldn't wait, he *just* did it *for the sake of it* to mess with me. *So I'd go down* to the laundry room *and my clothes would still be soaking wet*. *Or, if we were watching a movie and eating pizza or something* in the living room and we *both left our plates there*, *he would* later *take only his plate to the kitchen*. *He would put my plate in my closet*. *I wouldn't know that it was in there until the next time I opened my closet and I would find a few dishes* with old food on them *or a few things that didn't belong in my closet, but they belonged to me or I had used them.* I started to feel like I was living in a madhouse. When I told a few friends that these kinds of things were happening, they weren't sure what to make of it, *"Well, that's weird. Why would he do that? Is it kind of weird but is it anything to get upset about though?"* I asserted, *"It is something to get upset about when this kind of stuff is happening to you all the time and your things are moving around the house and someone's yelling at you* all the time." *It was just very subtle, bizarre behaviour. I knew something was not right with him.* He was increasingly unstable and my hopes for us were slowly crumbling. *That dark room* of the first house we lived in together *always came back to me. It almost felt like he was that dark room.*

The cracks were starting to show

I was starting to not be okay at work because of these things happening at home. I felt I had to share with my co-workers some of *these weird things that he started to do because I would show up for work and it would be obvious that I wasn't doing well*: *I was late, I was very dishevelled, my clothes were messy* or *I was not dressed properly*. My co-workers *were all saying, "He's psycho. You got to get out of there." My boss* constructed a plan to help me. Since she's *a doctor*, she *gave me a prescription for Ativan, an anti-anxiety medication. I had never taken anything like that before,* but *she* advised*, "Take this. You'll be able to handle anything he throws at you much better."*

Quiet neighbourhood...too quiet

I took an Ativan when I got home that day, after *my boss* prescribed them, and I had *an unexpected, bizarre reaction where I ended up basically suicidal. He was yelling at me from the bottom of the stairs about something,* and *as I was being yelled at, I just wanted to pull my hair out. I just couldn't handle* it anymore. The bottle of *pills was sitting there and I just took them all. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital* alone, *with no shoes*. *I had my stomach pumped. The doctors didn't seem to care. I called him to come and pick me up and he rudely said, "Fine, I'll be there."* When he came, I asked him how I got to the hospital. He told me *I was wandering around in the backyard, messed up on all this medication,* so *he put me in the car, took me to the hospital, and left me there.* He gave me the *silent treatment for a week straight* after the Ativan incident. I felt like I had the rug pulled out from under me. The *silent treatment was one of his favourite things*. It made me *feel as if I was not worthy* of even being *acknowledged* or *spoken to*; like I was *subhuman*. *It was horrifying to be in that position because everything becomes so internal.* There's a reason prisons use solitary confinement as a particularly severe punishment. But *life went on* and *we continued*.

Final move

We moved one more time, to our third house together. It was a fresh start...again. There was still a lot to unpack, but it felt like we were starting over and *everything was better* for a while. *We were holding hands* and *buying cantaloupes*. *Grocery shopping was a big thing for us*. *He* even *went vegan for me*. We had some *wonderful experiences*, like *going to the CNE* together and *walking all over the city*, *showing him the places I went to growing up.* I could finally take shelter in some normalcy and contentment.

I had just gotten *a new job* and *needed to leave earlier to get there*. The night before *my first day of the new* job, *I had left a bowl of rice on the counter*. *He must have put it in the sink with the rice still in it and some water got in the bowl. I came downstairs* in the morning, already rushed to leave, and he was *swearing about this bowl of rice*. *I was getting my shoes on* and I noticed him *go out the back door with* the bowl. *I go outside ready to start my car* and I see that *he has thrown this wet rice all over my car. It's all over the windshield, all over the hood, it's everywhere. I ran inside to get a towel or something*, my brain spinning, *"What is happening? Why is this his reaction?" I come back outside and he's hosing off my car saying, "You're so fucking stupid. You wouldn't even think to hose off your car."* I knew our fresh start was over, the ghosts in the attic (or, the dark room) came back to haunt me, *but I allowed it to keep happening*. *I started to escalate my responses, too. I started yelling back and getting louder and more angry. He would* just *get a smirk on his face* the more I reacted. He was immovable; I couldn't rattle him.

Homeless

We had *moved* to a *house in the middle of nowhere*. *There were no neighbours*, except *way across the fields*. *I had rented a truck* for a work event and had loaded *a bunch* of *containers* with *merchandise* for the event. *Something about this bothered him*. *I was in the house, upstairs, and I looked out the window. There he was, taking the containers of stuff out of my truck and just*

launching them on the ground. He yanked out *one container after the other, basically emptying everything.* All these items that *I don't even own*, that I am supposed to sell, *are strewn all over the place,* on the ground *in the dirt.* I thought, *"No one ever believes me that this bizarre stuff happens." So I started recording him* on my phone. Then, *like out of a horror movie*, *he turned, looked up, and he saw me. He knew what I was doing. He started walking towards the house* with a *super straight back*. *I thought, "Oh my God, he's coming up here."* But I didn't have time to react. *He came running up the stairs, grabbed me, and slammed me on the ground. He dragged me down the stairs, dragged me back outside, and slammed me on the flagstone pathway. This is all being recorded. It's all just noise at that point* as *I was clinging to the phone. He eventually* pried *the phone out of my hands*. *I realized* then that *I don't have anyone here. No one would ever hear me. He had my cell phone. It's the most terrifying situation of my life.*

He eventually got tired of yelling at me and holding me on the ground. He went and got our dogs, got in his truck, and drove away. I lay on the ground surveying our property. My house arrest was over. He had finally crossed the threshold. The huge sparks we once had caught fire and burned everything to the ground. I laid there *for a few minutes*, then *an adrenaline rush* kicked in, *so I got in my truck and drove to a payphone to call the police.*

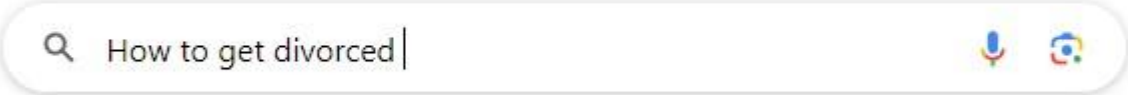
I didn't get to go home that night or for another week after that when *the police escorted me back to the house* and gave me *five minutes to go into the house and get the things I wanted*. *My husband sat on the porch petting our dogs* while I scrambled to grab my worldly possessions. *In those five panic moments,* I thought, *"What is important to me?"* and *grabbed one of my grandma's Royal Doulton* figurines. She had helped my *single mom* to *raise me* and was a *strong feminist* figure in my childhood. Maybe her figurine will become an heirloom reminder of the life I want in my next house, which will notably be missing a certain dangerously handsome fixture.

What should have happened though *is that he should not have been allowed to go back to the house. It should have been me that was allowed to go home. But it felt like I was in a different country or in the 1950s* with the way the police handled things: *I was not listened to, I was not important, I was just a silly, silly girl.*

I didn't get to go home. He got *to stay in that house for* another *five months*. *I didn't have anywhere to go*; I was *homeless*. *I had to couch-surf* and *stay with friends.* I'm still deconstructing our relationship—sorting through the rubble after the fire—so that someday, I can build something new.

(Kaitlyn)

An Abridged History of My Divorce in Google Searches



Oh, the age of the internet! Let me tell you about the beauty and naivete of having knowledge at your fingertips. I don't like not knowing things I feel I should know: 'Where is the best place to buy dance shoes for my next recital?' Let me look it up! 'What does "fold in the eggs" really mean in a soufflé recipe?' Let me look it up! 'Why is my dog's nose making a weird whistling sound?' Let me look it up! You get the idea. Any basic knowledge gap I have ever had could usually be resolved with a quick Google search. And, I mean, I'm a university-educated professional; I know how to scrutinize sources to suss out reputable ones. It's not like I'm getting advice from the random blog of some chick named Neveah ("That's 'Heaven' backwards") or something.

When it became clear to me that my husband and I *were over*, I figured I could rely on my digital bestie, Google, for any answers I would need about the process that lay before me. My ex and I *initially agreed that the two of us would try to put together a separation agreement without involving a lawyer. I have no idea what I'm doing! So I'm googling, "How do you do your own separation agreement?"* and *"How to get divorced."*

I learned pretty quickly (and not from Google!) that the key part of a "separation agreement" is the "agreement." My ex and I were not in agreement about almost anything, except that we would both stay in our house together initially because it seemed to make the most sense logistically. I wanted to *stay in the house until I could find a place to go*. *My parents offered to let me move back in, but I really didn't want to live with my parents*. *I knew my parents would drive me insane*. I also *needed a fresh start* and this was *my opportunity to be on my own*. But until I could find my own place, *we both stayed in the house together*. *He refused to leave the master bedroom, so I stayed in the guest room, which is above the garage. He would purposely go out and come home at like three o'clock in the morning. I would wake up* every time he did this either from the noise of *the garage door* opening or from him roaring into the garage with his souped-up *Mustang*, which was a sticking point during our marriage but during our separation, became this obnoxious reminder of his screwed-up priorities (he once *went to a car* show *while I sat in a doctor's office in excruciating pain with shingles*). Needless to say, *when we tried to work through a separation agreement ourselves, those initial conversations were not good. We were in very different head spaces. I wasn't looking at the emotions. I was looking at it strictly from a financial, from a possessions, side of things: "What are we going to do about this? What are we going to do about* that?" *My ex was more emotional than I was and this caused a lot of fights.*

If there was ever an Olympic event of fighting (you know, with words), I'm sure we would have won. Ironically, during our marriage, we did actual fighting. We took a *weekly bootcamp* class and *sparred* against each other in *boxing*. *There is something to be said for being*

able to punch your husband. That is the best thing you can do in a marriage. But during our separation, we had almost daily verbal sparring matches, and with the *stupid fights* we had, no one really won. *I wasn't being unreasonable* either *but he fought me over everything! I remember we got into a huge fight about cayenne pepper. This is one of my favourite fights. I was packing up the kitchen and I was just packing all the spices and he* balked*, "You're going to leave me with nothing? What am I supposed to cook with?"* I replied, half in disbelief like I was explaining something very basic to a toddler, *"A. You don't cook. And B. Go to the grocery store. A bag of cayenne pepper is like a dollar." I was like, "Seriously? This? Okay, you keep the cayenne pepper. I'll go buy some fresh stuff." You win this one. He was so afraid I was going to take more than my half of everything,* even *things that really made no difference. But it was the principle.* I couldn't reason with my ex anymore. He just *got very angry and he got very nasty. So the three months I stayed in the house was absolute hell. Those three months of living in the house with him were far worse than even when I felt my worst in our marriage. He wanted to make my life miserable.* And he did. *That three-month period was a living hell.*

I have a number of friends who are lawyers. I met one of my lawyer *friends*, Alyssa, *through work, actually*. We were working on a *charity event* together. She asked one of her friends, Sarah, another lawyer, to help us, too. Sarah is *a family lawyer*. Alyssa *knew I was going through this* separation and when we first started organizing this charity event together, she offered, *"If you need a lawyer, Sarah is a really awesome lawyer and she's a nice person."* I thanked her for the recommendation, but told her, *"We're trying to do this without a lawyer."*

At some point, while we were organizing *this charity event that we were doing*, *I was supposed to be meeting the two of them and we were supposed to be getting stuff for the event. That morning, as I'm trying to get myself ready to go*, my ex *tells me that he had called the police* last night *and told them that I threatened his life and that he was trying to have me arrested!* I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I didn't know how to react. *I wasn't even home* that night. *I was out for dinner with two of my girlfriends.* The first thing I do is send one of them a text to share what my ex just said to me and I added, *"Just so you know, you're my alibi."* Let me tell you that's not a text you expect to send. I mean, I guess being an alibi is less involved than helping a friend "bury a body"—the tongue-in-cheek (hopefully) benchmark of a friend who would do 'anything' for you!

I was so upset. Things definitely started unravelling for me at that point. It was the first time in our separation period where I thought to myself, 'This is seriously messed up!' I mean, we *fought about stupid things*, like the *cayenne pepper* and also whether *I was going to take too much lined paper from old binders we had from university*. So those kinds of things made me question where my ex's head was at, but this death threat thing was a whole other level. Later, it occurred to me that *if you call in a death threat*, the police *take that seriously*. *They show up at your house. They did not show up at my house. They never followed up with me*, *so I don't think*

my ex *actually did. But that's a pretty serious accusation to even tell someone that's what you're considering doing or that's something you've done. I was so angry*. I asked him, futilely, *"Why are you making this harder than it needs to be?"*

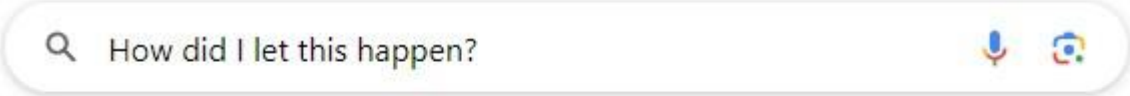
So because I'd had this crazy, upsetting morning, *I was really late meeting* Alyssa and Sarah. *I got there and* Alyssa *was like, "What is going on?" So I told her. Then the two of them sat down with me and* Sarah said, *"You need a lawyer. At this point, you need a lawyer if this is where he's going with this*." *She'd never met him. All she knew was what I had told her.* She said, *"He's a sociopath." In the eleven years I was with him, that never crossed my mind. Then I was like, "No, he's not. Wait, what? What does that actually mean?" We talked about it a little bit and then I* realized *I was oblivious to it.* My friends *were probably oblivious to it as well. It took an outside person* to recognize it and point it out. When I got home*, I literally started googling at two in the morning.* I went down the rabbit hole of *researching, 'What is a sociopath? How to talk to a sociopath, how to negotiate with a sociopath, how to break up with a sociopath.'* I wanted to know *everything I could find about how to deal with this personality and this person* my ex *had become.*

As it usually did, my googling proved useful. Armed with my sociopath research, *I could get ahead of what my ex was thinking and I knew how he was going to try to manipulate me. I became very careful with what I said and how I said it because I didn't want it to be misinterpreted or I didn't want it to come back and bite me somehow. I became a lot more savvy with how I was speaking to him and what I was saying to him and the information I gave him.* I felt like a secret agent—I had deciphered valuable information that the enemy didn't know I had and I could use that to my advantage.

We were still living in the house together, so it was very difficult but *a shift had definitely happened. It was very eye-opening. I suddenly saw this person in a very different light. Through that lens*, I realized, *"This is not the man I was in love with. This is not my husband anymore. This is a totally different, very manipulative, person."* I faced the naivete I realized I had about the person my ex was and that we could work through the separation on our own. I knew I needed to call in reinforcements.

I got a lawyer and I told my ex, "We're not doing this on our own*" because when I realized how manipulative he really was, I* knew*, "This is not going to go well."* So *once I got a lawyer, he got a lawyer and then* the process *became a lot more pain-free. I highly recommend getting a lawyer. I've referred my lawyer.* I've said to other women, *"She's great, use her! Here's her card."*[27] *I'm her personal PR.*

[27] Mock business card (but also...what if there were feminist divorce lawyers for women?! Maybe there are...)



There are some questions that Google can't answer (I still tried...). These are the hard ones. Instead, my mind demands them of me, over and over, like a self-punishing glitch in my own mental search engine: *How did I miss* that my ex is a sociopath? *How did I miss this and how did my family miss this? How is he so good at lying and manipulating me? How did I let myself think and feel these things about this person for so long? I felt very victimized. I felt very stupid. I started second-guessing myself and getting in my own head: "How did I let this happen? I was so blind!"* It was like my brain kept displaying one of those flashing computer "Error" messages with the broken robot obnoxiously dancing around. I had to try to understand the "error" of my ways; *how I let this happen*. *I started going back over situations*—dragging myself through my faulty search engine again—and looking back, I started *putting two and two together*: *"Oh, that's what was actually going on. Well, that makes more sense now!"*

My search for answers to some of these questions was fruitful in some ways, but sometimes knowledge alone is not enough. Knowledge (or, at least, more knowledge than I had before) could not erase my guilt. *I carried a lot of guilt*. *I brought this man into my family. He even owed my parents money. I felt a lot of responsibility for him.*

My fervent mental search for how *I* could let this happen also led me to find that others had let me down and I started asking how *they* could let this happen. *As I'm going through my separation and divorce, people start coming out of the woodwork; they love to give you their opinions on what they actually think of your spouse*. Some of my closest friends and family shared red flags they noticed before we were even married and offered them to me like a juicy secret when we separated. *They thought that I wanted them to hate my ex,* they seemed glad that they could now join my ex-bashing bandwagon, that *it's validating*. But it wasn't validating, it was baffling and upsetting. I retaliated, *"Okay, so if you knew he was this horrible person that I was marrying, why didn't you say something!? Why are you waiting until now to tell me this?"* I felt betrayed by their silences. Didn't they understand the repercussions of not saying something to me earlier, of not warning me before it was too late? *I'm not just going through a breakup; I'm going through a divorce. This is a legal proceeding. This is financial. This is very expensive. This is emotional. This is not just me dumping a boyfriend. This is very serious. There are huge ties here.* I think it's time to clear my search history and reboot my system.

(Melissa)

Breakup/Breakout

It's a regular *Wednesday*. I'm just home from work. I make myself a big mug of masala chai tea, almost the last of my stash from my grandmother's trip back to India. *I'm going through my Facebook messages looking for* the link to a video of my dance practice that a friend made and shared with me. I had asked her to take a video of me during our class yesterday so I could check my timing on a new routine. I have trouble finding the message she told me she sent, so I start opening different tabs and click on one I hadn't noticed before on the left-hand side of the messages window. I open it and see that one of the messages is still in bolded text; *I hadn't opened it yet*. That's strange. I'm normally pretty prompt to see my messages and reply. I notice from the date above the message that it was sent to me *two years before*. I also notice that the sender isn't a Facebook friend—I don't recognize her name at all—and realize that her message probably went into this separate folder *because we're not friends*. All my friends' messages appear in my main messages thread. *I didn't know this was a thing.* Before I even open the message, I have a distinctly sick feeling in my gut, *"What is this?" I open the message.* It's only one line: *"Hey, I've been sleeping with your husband."*

I drop the mug of tea I'm holding. It's one of my favourite mugs, a cheeky Indigo purchase that says, "Reading is sexy." I'm only vaguely aware that it shatters on my coffee table and the dark chai tea splashes onto the white area rug below. "Why do we have a white rug?" I wonder for the first time. I make no effort to clean anything up. My eyes are glued to my phone screen. There's a second message from the same sender, probably *because I didn't respond to the first one*. It's below the one I just read and was sent a year before that one, three years ago now. The second one reads, *"Your husband's a total dog. I've been sleeping with him for months. I broke it off with him. He's afraid I'm going to tell you. I said I didn't care."* I sit there, stunned, re-reading *these crazy messages*. This woman had spilled the beans and I had spilled my tea. I had no interest in cleaning up either mess. All *I felt* was immense *relief*: *I have my out.*

A month ago, *I doubled the* antidepressant *meds I was on*. *I had been diagnosed with depression after I got married. That should have been a red flag.* The meds weren't enough. My depression was consuming me. *I didn't care what I looked like. I didn't care to get out of bed in the morning* unless I had to for work. *I didn't care what I felt like. I was so unhappy. It was absolutely terrifying. I knew I needed to do something.* In the fog of my depression, one thought remained clear to me, mercifully, *"This marriage is killing me; I can't stay in this marriage." But my husband is extremely controlling, manipulative, and vindictive.* I knew *I couldn't just say* to him, *"Hey, guess what? We're done!"* I knew *I had to have a plan to leave.* I couldn't fathom what that plan could be. So when I opened those two fateful Facebook messages and *felt relief*, that came from thinking, *"Oh, thank God. I have the trump card. I can get out of this."*

Not only had I been given this unexpected trump card but the situation was *working in my favour* even more so because I was also given time without him there to plan my exit: *I found this out on a Wednesday and my husband was leaving for a work trip on the Saturday. I didn't say anything for the three days before he left. I kept it together.* I knew *I had to do some digging. I wanted to make sure I had all my ducks in a row. He was going to be gone for four days* so *I knew this was my opportunity to plan my exit.* Until *he left*, *I pretended* everything was normal. *I*

dropped him off at the airport *carpool lot* and chirped, *"Have a great time, Babe. Love you. Bye. Safe flight. Text me when you get there."* I'm still waiting for my Oscar nomination for my convincing role.

He left Saturday night. I emailed my boss and said I would need *Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday off work* for an "urgent family matter." *I ransacked the house Sunday and Monday looking for things. I knew there was more. I started digging. I connected with the woman who had messaged me on Facebook.* I discovered that *I couldn't* actually *send her a message* at first *on Facebook* because *she had been blocked* on my account. So I realized that *my husband had gone on my phone or computer at some point and had blocked her so that I couldn't see her messages and she couldn't message me.* He didn't realize that she already had, luckily for me, before he blocked her. *So I unblocked her* and finally replied to her a message: *"This is really crazy. I know you sent me these two years ago. I don't know if you remember this. I just want to confirm we're talking about the same person first of all before I go on this crazy accusation."*

This woman replied to me soon after I messaged her. She didn't hold back, *"Oh yeah, I've been to your house. I've had sex in your shower, in your bed, on your couch. I've had sex all over your house."* She described details she could only know if what she said was true: she knew that our sheets are marine blue, that our shower faucet is finicky, and that there are an inordinate amount of pictures of our dog throughout the house...This woman is not my enemy (the time for that is long past); she is my ally. I'm grateful for her information, *"Thank you for sharing that,"* I reply, as causally as if she had shared her favourite cookie recipe. But I need to know more, *"How did you meet? When did you meet?"*

She confided, "We *met online*, on an *online dating* app. I *was a student*, in my *third year of university*. He told me he was *30*. At the time, I lived in a small town and *he would pick* me *up* on his way back from working in *Toronto and bring me back to* your *house*. I knew he was married. I saw your wedding pictures on the wall. I remember liking your wedding dress. I asked where you were once and he said you were at work since it was always during the day and *he knew what hours* you *would be gone* so I didn't have to worry about us getting caught. I wasn't worried."

As I read her account, it was like she was telling me the story of my own life—with my house as the setting and my husband as a main character—except the version I knew, and had told myself, had pages ripped out. The tear lines had been so clean that I hadn't noticed they were missing, except for a vague feeling that something was missing from my life, generally. It turns out I had been reading the censored version and I didn't even know it. Now, this woman was starting to glue the missing pages back in for me, revealing some of the redactions, and I was re-reading my story in its uncensored form. And then the plot thickened and she told me something *that really terrified me.*

"Oh, yeah," she added, *"you need to go get yourself tested because we never used a condom. And I know he was sleeping with other people and never used a condom."* Suddenly, I was very afraid. I couldn't even process that there were also "other people"; not just her, but others. She knew it, he knew it, and I was in the dark. Now, I'm being blinded by this stark truth.

But the revelation she offered that really shook me wasn't that my husband was a serial adulterer, but that his being so exposed not only me to any number of nefarious STIs you're warned about in health class but also exposed the person *I* had been sleeping with for the past *ten months*. That's my own plot twist.

In the depths of unhappiness in my marriage, *I met someone*. *This was someone I had been working with for a year and we realized we had feelings for each other, really strong feelings for each other. It kind of just morphed and it just happened*. I realized that this person is *my soulmate*. You're not supposed to meet your soulmate while you're both married to other people. But the universe didn't care. *I can remember the day I realized I wasn't in love with my husband anymore because I was so crazy in love with this person that I wasn't supposed to be in love with* and now, *this is karma; my life is coming full circle.* I already *have so much guilt and shame* about *having an affair*. *Sometimes, I look at my life* and think, *"What have I done?!"* I know *I've done this to myself* and *I can't look myself in the mirror*. I can only wonder, *"How did I do this? How did I get to this point?"* I wonder if my husband can look at himself in the mirror. He seems to spend a lot of time in front of it, so I think he's doing fine.

I went to the doctor the next day, in the midst of my four-day digging expedition. *I looked like death but, thankfully, I did not have anything.* It's *probably because* my husband and I so *rarely had sex*. *He didn't want to have sex with me*, apparently just with random women he met online. *So that worked in my favour.*

I continued to *ransack the house* while he was away. *I started finding little things that he had hidden away.* I found a half-empty perfume bottle that wasn't mine, two crumpled photos of women I didn't recognize, a red thong that definitely wasn't mine, and a receipt for a necklace (he's never given me jewellery, except for my engagement and weddings rings). He had *also left his computer.* He had his work laptop with him, but he left his personal computer and *forgot his email was open so I just went into* it and started *looking for dirt*, thinking, *"I'm just going to look* to see *what's in here?"* I mean, he had already tampered with my Facebook account. I found some *saved emails* where he was making arrangements to hook up with women as early as *six months after we started dating*. *So he had been cheating on me for ten years with multiple women over multiple years!*

I printed everything, the whole *paper trail* and put it all in a condemning *file folder*. Once I had everything together, *I told my mom and my sister* a very selective version of my new uncensored story, of what I had uncovered. My husband was coming home that evening. I wanted to *have people who knew* what was about to *happen*, so I told them, *"Just so you know, I'm ending my marriage tonight."* I know my husband is a volatile person and his *world* was about to *come crashing down*. *I am bringing him down*.

I picked him up from the carpool lot and, *again*, *I played the good wife*, *"How was your trip, Babe?"* When we got home, *I said, "Okay, I'm going to ask you, 'Have you cheated on me in our marriage'"* He looked me dead in the eye and replied, *"No. Never"* I didn't waver, *"I'm going to ask you one more time. You sure? Have you ever cheated on me in our marriage?"* He insisted, *"No. What?"*

I picked up the folder and pulled out *a picture* of the woman from *Facebook*. *I found her on LinkedIn and printed her picture.* I showed it to him and asked, *"Okay, who's this?"* I felt like a detective conducting an interrogation, casually pulling out damning photographic evidence, and asking the perp questions whose answers I already knew. I just continued *pulling out different things for some of these different women that he had been with. He had nothing to say!* I ended the interrogation with, *"You don't even need to admit it at this point. We're done. We are separating."*

So that's it, *the craziest breakup story*. But it turns out that my breakup was really a breakout, with freedom *on the other side*. But that's a whole other story...

(Melissa)

Jagged Cruelty

When I was fourteen, I discovered Alanis Morissette's album "Jagged Little Pill." It instantly became my gospel. It still is. The album's title is from a lyric in the first verse of the song "You Learn": "Swallow it down (what a jagged little pill)" that reflects Morissette's insight that going through something difficult has a lesson, or payoff, that you might realize in retrospect, but it might not be right away.[28]

The word "jagged" always struck me because it means that something has points or zigzags, like the jagged edge of a saw—it's not just a smooth sharpness; its sharpness is formed from points that go both up and down. It's this specifically uneven, irregular quality that cuts the deepest, and snags without letting go.[29]

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Our first getaway together,

he had a couple of drinks and,

all of a sudden,

he just turned into a different person.

It was like a Jekyll and Hyde kind of moment:

something went off in him

and he stormed out of the restaurant we were in,

started walking back towards our Airbnb,

kicking people's garbage in the streets and screaming.

It was just really, really over the top.

I was so caught off guard and pretty shaken up.

I'd never dealt with anything like that.

I attributed it to the alcohol, maybe dehydration, and the fact that we were on vacation...

He apologized.

I just thought, 'I don't know what happened, but I don't foresee this being an issue.

It's never been an issue before in the *eight months* we've been dating*.'*

So eventually, I forgave him

and then, like many stories,

this escalated over time.

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[28] (Melis, 2019)
[29] (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-b)

As Alanis says, **“You live, you learn”**[30]

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

He got a little erratic.

We had some more *tumultuous moments.*

I said, “Something needs to change.”

He was taking responsibility.

He had gone to the doctor and talked to them.

He was on some medication.

There was a plan in place and he was following it.

Things seemed to get better for a while.

We moved in together.

“You love, you learn”

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

He proposed to me on a canoe trip.

I had questions in my gut

that I needed answered about his behaviour.

I shouldn’t have said yes at that point in time.

But I thought, “Oh, it’s a big moment. It’s normal to be nervous.

It’d be irresponsible if I wasn’t having questions because it’s a big step.”

So I said, “Yes.”

And we went camping.

As we were pitching the tent,

he had a volatile moment again,

because he couldn’t find a peg.

I remember thinking, “Okay, I have concerns.”

Then again, everything was fine for quite some time.

“You choose, you learn”

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

[30] This bolded quotation and subsequent ones throughout this piece are from the lyrics of Alanis Morissette’s song “You Learn” from her *Jagged Little Pill* album (Morissette, 1995).

Six months before we got married,
he lost it one night.
He cracked open a beer and had a few sips of it.
He started *screaming and yelling.*
I don't even remember what started it.
I don't think I did anything wrong,
but I remember being so scared.
I was cowering in our closet and shaking,
and he kept screaming and screaming.
He stormed outside, and I thought,
"Okay, he's leaving. He's going to cool down."
He started knocking on the window to get my attention.
I think he was trying to say, "I'm going to leave for a bit."
But I was in a completely different room of the house.
The window broke.
He was hitting it with enough force to break it.

The neighbour called the police
and the police showed up at my door.
I've never dealt with police in my life, ever, for any reason.
We were both working with a lot of very public people
so *the idea of* a *public persona for me was more than just my neighbours.*
It was my job.
It was his job.
It *was mortifying for me that this would get out*
and we would lose everything.

The cop was horrible.
He was the worst cop in the history of time.
He just kept interrogating me,
demanding, *"Where is he? Where is he?"*

I kept saying, *"I don't know."*

"I'm really uncomfortable right now.

I'd like to just go back inside."

The cop ignored me.

As that was happening, he was coming home.

So the officer jumped in his cruiser and took off

and never checked on me again.

This really alarms me, as a woman, how the situation was dealt with.

Because the cop knew, *a hundred percent,* this was potentially a domestic violence situation.

He interrogated me.

Ignored my discomfort.

Took off to *take in* my fiancé.

No one came back to tell me what was going on.

No one checked in on me.

I was there for hours.

I called his parents and told them everything.

They had to go bail him out.

When I called the police station, they told me,

"He can't come home indefinitely

because there's a no-contact order against him.

You're not allowed to be together."

I never asked for a no-contact order.

It took at least four months for him to come home.

He wasn't high-risk, so he wasn't a high priority for the court system.

Even once he had completed the steps to come home,

the courts had everything tied up and they kept rescheduling the date.

So I was left with all the finances for four months.

I was left with everything and no one.

To this day, I never told my parents.

They assigned me a victims' protection advocate

and she would call me and want *to meet to see how I was doing.*
And I just thought, *"The part that's bugging me is the system.*
I am not a victim; don't label me as a victim.
I know what he did was wrong,
but it wasn't like he broke a window on me.
He broke a window."
And the legal system needlessly *tore* our *family apart.*
There were much more constructive things that could have happened.
But *this situation* was *horribly dealt with.*

So a number of things were very eye-opening for me.
I understood that he had a much more serious issue
than what I originally thought.
But I felt like the worst that I was being treated was coming from a system
that was meant to protect me, which was really, really awful.
So that was pretty horrific.
"You scream, you learn"
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
When he finally came home,
I said, "We have six months till our wedding.
And I need to decide if that wedding is happening.
There are things that need to change."
We had a lot down on the wedding already.
I had not told my parents
because I knew if I did, they would insist,
"You can't go through with this."
But *he was in counselling,*
he was taking meds,
and eventually, things were a lot better.
We didn't have an argument from the time he came home
until the time the wedding happened.

“You laugh, you learn”

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Our wedding rolled around,

and it was the most fun wedding.

It was so great,

except for the fact that I realized,

the night of my wedding,

that I had made a horrible mistake.

He lost composure with me as the night got later

because he had way too much to drink,

which I’d warned *him to be very careful about*

given everything that had gone on.

We had a big fight on our wedding night

in the limo on the way to the hotel.

In the morning, I woke up and thought,

“I'm married. What do I do now?”

I decided, *“I’ll give marriage a shot.”*

“I might be in over my head,

but I feel like I need to see this through.”

Life progressed.

“You ask, you learn”

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Life was pretty good for the first year or so.

Then, *it started creeping in again.*

Slowly, things started to go off the tracks.

It was a lack of control of his emotions—

with these *explosive outbursts—*

and me not knowing how to handle feeling scared

in my own home

and feeling alone.

Not a lot of people knew because when *you open up,*

people just say, *"You should leave."*
But it's not always that simple.
There's a lot of gray area.
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Then, it wasn't just anger anymore,
It was a lot of impulsive behaviour.
It was a lot of lying.
I found out he had shoplifted on a trip *to New York*
and lied to me about it.
I lost a close *friend* over that because I took
my husband's side.
I found out he stole a lot of other *things* another time
and had missed a court date.
He kept all of this from me.
The wife in me thought,
"This is different than the other stuff;
it's not something that affects me directly.
He needs some serious help
and it would be wrong of me to leave when someone needs serious help."
I became *more of* a *babysitter* than a *partner.*
I told him, "There's a lot of concerns and I can't live this way anymore.
But *I will stay if you're getting help."*
He never did.
"You cry, you learn"
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Then, *it was financial infidelity.*
Bills were bouncing.
I was going into debt bailing him out
even though *he made twice what I did.*
I had taken over all of our finances,
but I didn't know he was going to loan sharks

so his money was being garnished.
Because I was paying all the bills
and bailing him out,
I couldn't meet my own basic *self-care* needs,
like getting my teeth cleaned or my eyes checked.
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
He started to get really, really angry.
I knew I felt *unsafe.*
I knew our *relationship wasn't healthy* anymore;
it was *toxic* even.
I could admit that to myself.
But I wasn't sure if it was *something that was maybe abusive.*
He'd never physically hurt me.
I just felt *scared.*

Our values were differing.
The *respect* he had for *me* before
just sort of went by the wayside.
Eventually, he said, "This is me. Take it or leave it.
I'm not changing."
At that point, our marriage was as good as over.
I knew it was over in my heart.
I swallowed the jagged little pill.
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
As I was trying to make a plan to leave,
He got very, very angry.
He was *breaking things around the house.*
He was *yelling at me.*
He punched a hole into our bathroom door.
Drinking had become a problem.

We had an argument before *a friend's wedding*
because he couldn't find his hair gel.
He raised his shoe to throw it at *me.*
Something came over me and I said,
"Don't even think about it!"
We got in the car and went to the wedding.
By all intents and purposes, we seemed okay,
but we were not.

The night of the wedding, he sent me a text that said,
"I want to crack your skull"
and there was a skull icon with it.
I was so in shock.
I deleted it right away.
I wish I had screenshot-ed the text.
That was the first time he had been so *explicit.*
It was terrifying.
I said, "Pardon me?"
He said, "Oh, it's just a joke. Relax."
I said, "That's not funny ever."
That was it for me.
I knew, "I'm not safe here. I need out of here fast."

"You bleed, you learn"

I started immediately making plans to leave.
I thought, "If I report this, then I'm going to be connected to this guy
even longer because of all this legal system BS.
And I just don't want any connection to him.
I just want out."

He drove me to work.

We had another *argument on the way there.*
I said, "This is over. I can't have this life anymore."
His response was, "Don't come home. You're not safe here."

While *he* was at *work, my boss and my brother came with me*
to my house and I grabbed *a suitcase of sweaters,*
one possession from a cousin who passed away,
Alanis Morissette's "Jagged Little Pill"
because I needed it real bad at that point,
and my cat.
When you really get down to it,
nothing else mattered in that moment,
except for my safety and my cat's safety
and being out of there.

Even after I left,
he would drunk *call me sometimes*
300 times a night.
and threaten often,
"I'm going to burn everything,
all your *stuff."*
I didn't *just block him*
because I felt I had *to appease him*
until our divorce was finalized
so *things didn't get really ugly.*
He still had power over me.
"You pray, you learn"
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
We could have moved the divorce along faster
because I could have claimed cruelty—
one of the few criteria for waiving the standard

one-year separation period before filing for divorce.
But that would have meant lawyers and all that.
So I didn't.
"You lose, you learn"
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
Exactly a year to the day after *we separated,*
we went to the court to file together.
A divorce *system where you have to go together*
is a little weird, I think.
It's like, "You couldn't make your marriage work,
so let's see how you handle joint paperwork,
coordinating a meeting time, paying fees,
and other stressful logistics."
The court *clerk told us to come back another day*
because he had folded his *documents*
and she felt that *wasn't how you should "respect legal documents,"*
which *was ridiculous.*
He said, "How about I let the adult hold the documents."
So I brought them *in a folder and we came back again.*
We were going through the forms
and he saw the part that said,
"cruelty or infidelity?"
that *I left blank.*
He looked at me and said,
"Why didn't you claim cruelty?
I was cruel."
I said, "Because I feel like we've been through enough."
"You grieve, you learn"
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
That jagged little pill now "feels so good swimming in [my] stomach."
"You live, you learn." (Cassandra)

Divorce is a Dirty Word

They don't see her
in all her glory.
She's still glorious,
maybe even more than before
D-Day.

They try to tarnish the radiance
that is her birthright.
They storm her quiet shore
and launch missiles
she doesn't see coming:

"She's damaged goods."
"She's broken."
"There's something wrong with her*."*
Boom, boom, boom
"She couldn't keep her husband happy."
"She wasn't a good enough wife."
"She couldn't keep the marriage together."
Boom, boom, boom

She can't take cover.
She's too exposed,
walking around *cursed*
with *bad luck*,
a *black mark*
that won't wash off.
Divorce is a dirty word.

Just when she catches her breath,
fresh bullets aim straight for her heart:
"She's *a failure."*

*"*She *lost her mind."*
"She's *selfish.*"

Then, the final blows, a familiar volley:
"She *must have been a cheating whore.*"
"She's *a slut.*"
"She's a bitch."
"It's no wonder she was *abandoned.*"

You might think *that's a very old way*
of thinking about marriage.
You might think that kind of war on women
is from a bygone era.
But *it's* still *very prevalent.*
It's still *very current.*

Just like old photographs,
we're still living in black and white.
They think if you're not with somebody,
you're not happy.
The norm is *white picket fences,*
not black sheep.
They want you to *portray that nuclear family*,
not to go nuclear on the whole charade.

A divorcée living by herself in an apartment
can't possibly be *happy*.
She must have missed the debrief.
So they sit in their *four-bedroom house*,
sitting pretty with that rock on their finger,
with *a fish already* caught.
And they offer *Hallmark* platitudes
To cover her bullet holes.

(Cassandra, Melissa, Kaleigh, Julia, Rhiannon, Alison,
Laura, Akhila, Kaitlyn, Rayna, Maylin, Ava)

Feeling Blue

Memory: June 1990, Seven years old

My mom tells me that today is a very important day for our country. I ask her if that's why there are so many people with signs in the streets. There are more people crowded around the National Palace of Culture than I'd ever seen in my life.[31] When I was walking around yesterday, one woman even handed me her sign and said I could keep it. I like the bold blue[32] lettering that says, "The Party House Must be Given to the People."[33] I asked my dad which house was the "party house" and said I wanted to go, wherever it was. I wondered if it was Nadezhda's[34] house since she always has the best birthday parties. My dad just smiled and walked off. He does that a lot when I ask questions. My mom said that we have had a Communist regime, whatever that means, for 45 long years,[35] and that today is the first time in 59 years[36] that there is a free election and Bulgarians can decide for ourselves who will lead our country and how we will live. I don't really understand what that means but all the grown-ups around me are really happy and I have a cool sign now that Dad said I can keep in my bedroom as a decoration. I have my favourite party dress ready, too—the one with the blue ruffles—for whenever this "house party" happens. The grown-ups seem to think blue is a good colour now and red is a bad one. Although my grandmother came over to our house wearing a red dress and that made Mom upset.[37] I don't know why they care so much about colours, but I like blue anyway.

Memory: Fourteen years old

My dad sits me down. He tells me *I'm mature enough* now to know *the story of my mother's experience with her ex-husband*. *I was pretty young when my mother died*—just *eleven—so she never talked to me about that experience*. My dad tells me that my mother *got married to somebody else* before she met him. I can't believe my mother was ever with someone other than my dad! *But* this man *had a problem with alcohol and as soon as my mother found out, basically at the first slap on the face*, about *six months into the marriage*, *she quickly realized it wasn't for her and she just left*. I feel proud to hear how strong she was and that she didn't put up with that. I didn't know that about her. *Later,* she and *my father got married and I*

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[31] About 100,000 protestors converged on the National Palace of Culture, where vote monitoring occurred for the election, hoping for victory for the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) (Williams, 1990).

[32] Blue was the colour of the opposition party (UDF) to the red communist party during the 1990 Bulgarian election (Williams, 1990).

[33] Anti-communist protest signs had messages like, "The Party House Must be Given to the People" (Harden, 1990, para. 11).

[34] This name is a nod to Nadezhda Neynsky (formerly Mihaylova), who was the Foreign Minister between 1997 and 2001. She was the youngest woman Foreign Minister in the history of post-communist Eastern Europe and was instrumental in the success of Bulgaria's transition to a democratic government (under leader Ivan Kostov). She later became the first woman leader of the Democratic Party in Bulgaria (Ravanona, 2017).

[35] The communist opposition's signs read "45 year is enough" (Williams, 1990, para. 23).

[36] In June 1990, the first free elections since 1931 were held in Bulgaria (Nohlen & Stöver, 2010).

[37] Most of Bulgaria's pensioners voted for the status quo, which was the Bulgarian Socialist Party, newly re-named from the former Bulgarian Communist Party, because they were afraid of the unknown with a democratic party (Williams, 1990).

came along. So I hear about my mother's short first marriage and her divorce *from my dad's point of view*. *I also hear* about it *from my grandmother*. I know my mother has left me *inheritance money* for when I'm older but knowing this feels like another kind of inheritance from her. My friends' mothers give them CDs and lipstick and they feel grown up. My mother gives me the idea *of divorce as a fail-safe*: if a marriage doesn't work out, *you can just leave and divorce. It's easy. It's no problem*. I feel grown up knowing this information. I'm pretty sure none of my friends know it.

Memory: Twenty years old

My father is sponsoring me to immigrate to Canada! It will take some time before it actually happens because there's all this paperwork and waiting for everything to be processed, but it's happening! *My father* has been in Canada for a while now since he *was struggling with his business and money in Bulgaria*, and *he knew people who lived* in Canada and they *encouraged him* to come. They told *him that it's relatively easy to get a job in Canada and to make a good amount of money to live well*, *so financially* it made sense for him *to move* there. I was so excited when *he gave me the opportunity to sponsor me*. *I said, "Yes!"* right away *because I just want to see a different world; to open my horizons.* The only time I've ever even left Bulgaria was just a year ago when *I went to Turkey for two days. That was my adventure*. I know I'm not the only Bulgarian who *hasn't had the chance to travel a lot*. I mean *up until the early nineties*, Bulgarians *were not allowed to travel* at all *because of Communism*. Even *afterwards, when the Soviet regime ended, people didn't have the* financial *means to travel. I definitely didn't until I was 19*, and that was just *to Turkey for two days*! So *suddenly* having *the opportunity to come to Canada* is like, *"Yes, please get me out of here! I just want to see another world."*

Memory: Twenty-one years old

I find out I'm *pregnant just before I leave for Canada*. *My boyfriend*, Hristo, *and I have been dating for roughly a year*. I feel *so far away from having children and settling*. *I want to live first!* I mean, *not that having children doesn't mean living, but* when you don't have children, *you feel more free to explore; you don't feel tied down. Children seem to me like* they would *tie me down to the household.* I already know I'm not like a lot of Bulgarian women. Most of my friends are already married. I mean *women get married really young in Bulgaria*. That's just what usually happens. *It's very traditional. Men expect the women will stay home and take care of the children and cook. I have always been kind of rebellious against that*. *I'll do what I want and I don't want to be a housewife, not that there's anything wrong with it*. It's just not for me. So when I find out I'm pregnant, it's like these two forces collide: *having a child would tie me down* and I just want to be *free to explore*. I decide to *get an abortion*. I just *feel too young and I don't know what I want from my life. Also, my father is sponsoring me and I don't understand how it legally works* if I were to *come* to Canada *pregnant*. *So I think it's better to not have that burden at the moment.* This feels like a big *thing* though that Hristo and I *experience together as a couple*. *He was supportive of whatever I decided*. I think *he would have probably been happier if I had decided to keep it* because *that's actually what he wants: he wants a family*. *But I am in* such *a big shift moving from Bulgaria to Canada, thousands of kilometres away*. *I don't know*

where I'm going or what I'll do yet. *Dealing with all this big uncertainty would definitely be harder* if I was *pregnant*, too. My whole life so far has had such limited *horizons*. I finally have a chance to fly free in Canada. I can't cut my own wings now!

Memory: Twenty-two years old

Hristo and I have been in Canada for a while now. We'd only been *dating* for a little over a *year*, but *we fast-forwarded a bit* to get *married* in Bulgaria *so that we could be together in Canada.* I came to Canada first because my sponsorship was already all arranged through my father. *Soon after* Hristo *joined me in Canada, he wanted to move things forward and wanted to buy a house*. *I wasn't really ready* for that, but I agreed. *I pitched in quite a lot of money—$30 000 I inherited from my mother—for the house down payment.* Things are *working out* well for us. *We like to travel together*. We've already done a few *road trips* and *we have visas for the States. Socially, we are really good* together. We *go out with friends and go to parties at other people's houses or we host parties at our house*. *We're very good at entertaining people or attending other people's parties.* It's a lot of fun! Hristo is *just really kind* and I'm glad we're figuring out life in Canada together. He has a job *as a contractor* and I just started a *college* program in *interior design*! *I really want to do well in college. I want to prove myself!*

Memory: Twenty-three years old

School is *really intense*. *It's full-time, seven courses, with lots of projects. It's very hands-on* with *lots of things to develop* because *it's interior design*. I just *really want to do well*. Having *English* as my second language *is holding me back, so I have to spend extra time to perform really well.* I can't just *put in two hours of studying here and there. It's a full day* of work; *it's a lot! I spend lots of time with two of my girlfriends* from *college*, *to work on projects at their house and the college.* Hristo *has started being jealous of me spending time with my friends* and *of the fact that when he comes home from work, there's no dinner waiting for him*. I told him, *"I'm not really that kind of woman." It's just not me!* I mean *he either married me or somebody else*. I never made it a secret *that I'm not the stay-at-home woman, getting all the meals ready*. He just doesn't seem to get it though. *He keeps commenting, "Oh, there's no dinner?" and "Where are you?"* He keeps asking me the same questions, "*Why are you staying* at your friend's house *again?" and "Why aren't you spending more time with me?" I understand that he wants to spend more time with his wife*, but he *doesn't* seem to *understand where I want my priority to be at this time*. *I am developing my career. I need to put* in *that time*. *I want him to be understanding of that. He wants me to understand that he wants a wife at home. So things are kind of not meeting* in that respect. I mean the whole *reason I came to Canada* was to broaden *my horizons*. *I'm going to school. I'm learning better English.* I have *English-speaking friends*, so I'm *not just communicating with other Bulgarians.* I find that *a lot of different ethnicities that come here* tend to *kind of stay in the same group, being comfortable with the same beliefs, and speaking the same* native *language. I want the opposite*; I don't want to stay the same, *I want to expand!* But this isn't what Hristo wants. *He prefers to stay in Bulgarian company*. I can feel myself *diverging from him* more and more these days. The more I expand, *the more I* seem to *separate myself from my husband.*

Memory: Twenty-four years old

Hristo has *changed all of a sudden*. *He's not being so kind anymore*. *He's not being understanding*. He's just *being jealous and blaming me for things, pointing fingers at me* for this or that. He's constantly complaining to me, *"You're not home"* and *"You're not doing this."* Yesterday, he yelled at me, *"You burned the milk."* It was a *big scandal for burning the milk* and stupid *stuff like that*. *I don't want to spend time at home at this point*. *I'm approaching finishing school*, but *I don't want to be around him*, so I'm just *going out with friends*. *I want to do other things*. I'm *withdrawing* from him. I think I've *just slowly stopped loving him. I didn't know how to communicate* all this *with him.* He must have realized on his own that *things have stopped working*, so today *he asked* me, *"What's going on? What's happening here?"* I was surprised that *he was the one who came* out and addressed this so directly. I think he knew that things *weren't working out* but *he doesn't really understand* that *it's because I'm disappointed with the way he is treating me.* I know *he thinks there's no end to marriage*, that *we're just going to always try*. But *once he started this conversation, I just exploded, "I'm not happy! I can't do this anymore. I think I need another beginning. I'm really done with this. I want a divorce."* It's like these words exploded from my subconscious, fully formed. I hadn't even thought beforehand that I wanted a divorce. All this happened without even thinking. *I never processed what I was doing until that moment when I said I want a divorce.* Maybe my mother whispered into the recesses of my mind, "Remember my story, when I *realized* my first marriage *was not for me*, *I left*. You can, too, moito malko kotencet [my little kitten]."[38] I notice the scarf I'm wearing has silky swirls of red and blue and I grin because Soviet red is the colour of accepting what we know, and not trying to change anything, but blue is the colour of opposition and freedom.[39] I'm feeling blue and have never *felt* more *happy.*

(Rayna)

[38] "moito malko kotencet" is a Bulgarian term of endearment, usually for children, meaning "my little kitten."

[39] Blue was the colour of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), which was a union of several political organizations in opposition to the communist government. This organization later transformed into the United Democratic Forces, and then into the Blue Coalition (Detrez, 2014).

I Could Have Had a Child

Before we got married,
I got pregnant.
I wanted to expand my horizons,
not my responsibilities.

I was far so away from having children
and settling.
I wanted to live first,
to *feel free to explore.*

Children would *tie me down*
to the household.
I know *men expect women*
will stay home and take care of the children.
But *I don't want to be a housewife.*
I'm not really that kind of woman.

I was in a big shift,
with *all this big uncertainty.*

I got an abortion.

I felt I was too young.
I didn't know what I wanted from my life.

My boyfriend (and then, husband)
supported whatever I decided.
He would have been happier if I kept it.
He wanted a family.
I wanted my life.

I was changing.
He changed, too.
Now, we're divorced.

Not having a child
made it easier to get divorced.

If we had a child, I would have felt
I was *compromising the life of the child.*
I was happy about my decision.

Parts of regret have crept in,
later in my life.
I'm already in my late thirties
and I don't have a child.
When I *do the math,*
If I kept it,
my child would be 16 years old.
I was 21 then; I'm *37 now*.

My niece just turned 17.
She's her own person.
She can live her own life.
Now, I think *it wouldn't have been so bad.*

Back then, it seemed like such a scary decision
to keep a child when I was 21.
Now, it doesn't seem scary.
It almost seems silly.
I could have had a child.

Before, *I was young.*
I was selfish.
It was about me.
I just wanted my life.

Now, there are so many uncertainties,
not having a child *is practical.*
I can't *support a child right now.*
But I could *have had a 16-year-old...*
They *would be* their *own person.*
They *would live* their *own life.*

(Rayna)

"All You Need is Love" and Other BS

I was a nerdy girl in high school. I was *interested in computer science* before it was cool. *I was the only girl in the robotics club*, which was just fine with me. Most girls annoyed me. In grade twelve, when *I was seventeen*, *a friend* of mine (one of the girls I didn't find annoying) *set* me *up* with a friend of hers, Jared, who was *also kind of a nerd*. *So that's kind of how* Jared and I started *hanging out* and then started *dating*.

I'm an all-in kind of girl, for better or worse, and *I went all in* with this *new relationship and I made everything he was into fit into my whole world. I had a falling out with some* of my *friends that I was normally hanging out with* and *shifted* to a *group of friends that were all* Jared's *friends*. *I remember feeling isolated and lonely and I couldn't figure out why*. *I just kind of kept on keeping on* though because I preferred *hanging out with* Jared *and his friends* instead of *having to be home to deal with a whole bunch of shit going on with my family at the time.*

After *three years* of dating each other, Jared and I *moved into an apartment together*. *He was in university* and I was in my *second year of college*. Once *we moved in together, my parents, especially my mom, were expecting* things. I hadn't even finished unpacking yet when she asked me bluntly, *"Okay, so you're living together, is he going to propose? What's on the table here?" That expectation* was amplified by the fact that *we had* already *been together* for *three years when we moved in.* Not only did my parents' expectations ramp up when we moved in together, *but that's when things started going downhill* between us *because our expectations of each other were so far off. Every time we tried to fix it*, Jared *would make promises that he didn't have any intention of keeping. Then, I'd address these issues and he'd say, "Well, I'm not going to do that." So we'd have these discussions and nothing would ever change.*

We were both in *school at that point*. *He was* in a *co-op* program though, so his work and school were combined. I had to work and go to school separately. *He was* also *making more money than I was making*, *but he still wanted me to pay for half of everything*. He also insisted *that we have one bank account.* My parents deposited my tuition into this shared account. *He spent my* entire *tuition and still wanted me to pay for half of everything. I ended up quitting school because he spent my tuition*. *I didn't tell my parents this happened* because *I didn't want them to be as mad at him as I was because I was so invested in making* our relationship *work.* So *my parents didn't know what happened.* They just knew that I quit school and started *working* full-time, which I did to *try to keep up* with everything, including *paying that* tuition *money back* to *my parents because my brother was going to school.*

So Jared had all these financial expectations of me and basically screwed my post-secondary education plans. My expectations of him were that *I wanted to spend time with him* at *home* when I finished work. It was a low bar, really. *But whenever he was* home, he would have *his friends* over and *would order pizza or take-out that we couldn't afford*. My other expectation was that, very occasionally, I would ask him to do something important for me that I couldn't do myself because I was working so much. *I remember* one *Sunday*, *I* really *needed my asthma*

prescription filled and *by the time I got home from work, the pharmacy would be closed*, so *I told him, "Look, I need this stuff done. I don't have any other time to do it. Can you please do it for me because you're home all day?"* Well, *I walked in the door* after working a long shift and asked, *"Babe, did you do it?" and no, he had not. He was on* his *damn Nintendo the entire time.* I had asked him to get my *critical, life-saving medicine* for me but *he didn't care*, so he *didn't do it. He said he was sorry*, but as I admonished him, *"Sorry is not going to do anything if I have an asthma attack right now."*

But I kept going in our relationship because I had *this mistaken idea that if you have love, everything else can be worked out.* I didn't grow up in the Beatles era, but somehow this notion that "All you need is love" still permeates our cultural subconscious. Maybe it's enough if you have the kind of love story that John Lennon and Yoko Ono had, I guess. But at least for the rest of us, *there's a whole bunch of things* that matter *other* than love. *There's compatibility and just what you want in life that needs to be worked out. To some extent, I remember having those conversations with* Jared *and it seemed like it was lining up because of what he would say,* but *at one point, he flat-out told me that he didn't like having those conversations, so he told me what I wanted to hear to shut me up.* I didn't know any of this at the time, so I followed the next logical step: I started *planning our wedding.*

Jared *proposed when we had been* dating for *about five years*. *We were engaged for two years since you have to kind of plan that far ahead when you're planning a wedding in a big city because everything is booked up.* As I said before, *I'm an all-in kind of girl*. So I went all-in planning our wedding for two years. I was up to my eyeballs in vendor considerations, flower arrangements, colour schemes, and DIY everything, or in this case, Do-It-Myself. Except I had the added bonus of my fiancé pretending not to care about any wedding details, but actually caring very much, and not communicating that. *I would ask, "Oh, what do you think of this?"* and he'd wave it off, *"I don't care, whatever you want."* But *he did care*; *he just didn't want to tell me he cared because I guess his mother told him that he didn't get a say in it because she was very much of the view that "It's the bride's day. The groom doesn't get an opinion" bullshit.* Whereas I kept saying to him, *"I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't care about your opinion and obviously you have one, so please let me know what it is."* Instead of actually communicating with me, *he fought me every step of the way with everything*. So I was *stressed out planning a wedding* but I thought, *'When the wedding is done, then that stress will be gone, and everything will be better.'* Spoiler alert: *It wasn't.*

I'm Pagan so we had a *Pagan wedding*, including *a hand-fasting*. *With the hand fasting, one of the big symbolisms of it is you have a cord and you're literally tying a knot and tying two hands together as part of the marriage ceremony. Then, that cord is often cut. Some people do shadow boxes and whatnot and put them on the wall. Depending on the people, the different colours often mean things. I happened to just do colours that went with our wedding colours.* Jared *wasn't Pagan, so for him, it was kind of a, "Okay, whatever" thing added to our ceremony.*

About *three years* after we were *married*, we were at a Thanksgiving dinner with Jared's family and his *grandmother* and I were casually chitchatting, when she commented, "I've always liked your Jewish star necklace. What do you call it again?" I must have looked like I was having some kind of stroke because I didn't speak for like two whole minutes, I was so confused. His grandmother must have interpreted my silence as offence, so she quickly added, "Sorry, I just thought *it was a Jewish custom*. I don't know much about it." Fortunately, someone announced that the turkey was being carved and to gather around the table, so we were both saved from any further conversation. When we got home, I interrogated Jared, "*Remember* when *we first started dating* and I told you I was Pagan and said *you should probably talk to your parents about it*? I'm guessing from a conversation I had with your grandmother tonight that you never did." He merely shook his head. So we were married *for three years when I realized that* Jared had cared so little to discuss anything to do with me with his family over the past eight years that *they all thought I was Jewish*—despite that *his entire family had been to our Pagan wedding—because I occasionally wear a star* necklace! It's a Pagan star with *five points, not* the *six* points of the Star of David, but *they just assumed it was a Jewish custom they didn't know anything about.* This wasn't the first or last instance of unravelling the betrayals and deceptions of my marriage.

Little did I know then that it would take me five years to untie the knot that had fasted us together on our wedding day. That rope became a noose that strangled me slowly. He just left me hanging. But we never know when we walk up to the altar, we may leave by way of the gallows.

(Ava)

Modern Woman

I come from a line of divorcées. *My* maternal *grandmother got a divorce in the 60s* or *70s* when there was *definitely* more *stigma around it*. This became a defining *traumatic event* for my *mom*. She used it to diminish *anything* that *I was upset* about. *She* would *always come back to her experience with* her mother's, *my grandmother's*, *divorce* as if to say, *"Well, I had to deal with this, so you don't have it as bad."* As you might imagine, *I had a lot of issues with her growing up and even as an adult* with *the conflicts we've had* and her *not exactly being the most emotionally intelligent person.*

My paternal grandmother also got divorced. *She was mentally ill and Native and ended up a ward of the state when my dad was in grade four*. *My grandfather held the flame for my grandmother to return for decades* but *she never did*. He eventually remarried *because the kids needed a mother figure but his heart wasn't in it. He loved my grandmother well after she died, too.* Their relationship always seemed so tragic to me. It's the stuff of movies, except they didn't get a happy ending. Now, what strikes me about it is the truism I somehow didn't grasp until very late in my own marriage: *Love's not enough*! So much for learning from our history.

My own parents probably should have gotten divorced, but because both of their parents divorced, they both *stubbornly stayed* together because they *didn't want* their marriage *to fail* like their parents' marriages had. If their marriage failed, then *they* would *be failures*. That's how they saw it. So their *relationship wasn't the healthiest*. *I think* they hung on *partly because* of their shared legacies of divorce.

Now, *if you had asked me* if *I* saw divorce as failure, *I would never have said it* but *I definitely internalized it*, except only for myself. *So if somebody else is divorced, I wouldn't care, but mine would be a failure. Because of that fear of failure*, in my own marriage, *I put up with more shit than anybody would have faulted me for. I kept on trying to make it work. It was definitely one-sided. It was always me being stubborn and trying to make it work.* So I guess I inherited that stubbornness from my parents.

I might have just kept on trying to make my marriage work well past its expiration date were it not for an eventual moment of clarity I was mercifully granted. But I have to rewind things a bit before that moment can make sense to you:

One of the things that was a big argument between my ex and I *was* about *us having kids*. *He* did *not like to plan ahead*. *He did* not *like to think of the future because it made him think about getting old and dying. So the idea of having kids and being a real adult terrified him, but he didn't actually say that because then I'd go away and I was basically his mother. I was cooking for him, making sure the house was taken care of as best as I could, and he'd lose that.* He'd lose *somebody looking after him.* So while the rest of us adults found ways to face our own mortality, he must have thought he'd found a loophole by avoiding the whole thing and essentially remaining a child. Of course, I didn't put this together at the time, but I'm sure it factored in somewhere when I later insisted, *"Dude, you need therapy!"*

But I digress...Essentially, *having a family was very important to me*. *I had already told him* this *before we were married*. *I had that conversation, as one should, and he just kind of went, "Oh yeah, of course."* Unfortunately for me, apart from his reticence, having a family was more complicated *because I have fertility issues*. *When I was twenty-one, I first* learned *that I have a hormone disorder. I was told* then *by my specialists*, "*If you want some* kids, it should be *sooner rather than later." So it was like eight years into* my relationship with my ex *and he still had no interest* in having kids.

I kept on trying to tell him what my fertility issues meant. *I'd tell him, "Okay, I'm having these fertility issues. Do you want to come to the clinic with me* because *you're not hearing it from me?" Then he'd just say, "Oh, I worked with this woman and she had a baby in her mid-thirties, no problem."* I couldn't fathom how he was using this kind of *bad logic*. I'd retort, *"But I'm not that woman! What does that have to do with anything? What does that have to do with what I'm trying to tell you?"* I tried changing my approach. *I'd suggest, "Okay, well I guess we're going to give up on this whole natural kid thing and we'll just do adoption."* But *he was dead set against adoption.*

Another warped tactic he tried was using his conception (pun intended) of the "modern woman" against me. *I remember him trying to* dissuade me once by saying, *"Well, you're a modern woman; you shouldn't want kids."* He had this smug look when he said it like he'd finally poked a fatal hole in my argument, but I just retaliated, *"I know what I want, and I'm telling you.* That's being a modern woman." There's something so infuriating about having my husband try to mansplain what being a "modern woman" entails to me, an actual "modern woman." Although, I wouldn't use that term because I'm not an ad from the 50s in a *Good Housekeeping* magazine or something.

I still held out hope though that "soon" we could start a family. I even tried to rationalize his reluctance at one point, thinking, *"I want kids eventually,* but *he's* just *not ready* yet. I can wait." Then, as time went on, that shifted to me pleading with him, *"It's now or never! I'm hitting menopause. You need to make a call."* Panic was starting to set in for me. My biological clock wasn't just ticking, it was on its last battery.

I remember telling my one friend that *if I'd put this much time and effort into* this relationship, *I didn't foresee another relationship moving any quicker.* Since *I was already hitting menopause, I didn't have time to waste on somebody else. So* I figured, *'I'm invested in this. It's either this or I'm not going to have kids.'* But, as I said before, my ex *doesn't like planning for the future because it makes him feel old and reminds him that he's going to die. That's a direct quote. So anything involving kids or growing up or making plans* was beginning to feel like *it was not going to happen.* I was just starting to come to grips with this reality when I got my moment of clarity:

We were in the midst of yet another argument about having kids, probably our millionth one, when instead of just dismissing everything I was saying, as he usually did, he made a careless admission: *"I just thought you'd let it go."* That was *the straw that broke the camel's back* for me. I was normally pretty restrained in our arguments. I'd had lots of practice. But not

that time. I screamed at him, *"No, no!" Of all the things I put up with* in our relationship *that was the one thing* I could not give up. *I knew* my child *needed to exist.* I finally realized *it wasn't going to happen with him.* I didn't realize this until *we had been married for just about four years*, which was eight years together in total. He had led me on for eight years. It was the ultimate betrayal. That was the last day I held out hope of having a child with my husband.

(Ava)

Home Front

I ran away and married a sailor
But it wasn't the life of freedom and romance
Movies had led me to believe
Imagine that?

Living on a military *base*
Is like a time warp
Back into *old-school values*

As a *military spouse*,
You're supposed to
"Support your man no matter what"
That's the motto
You're in charge of the home front
They're the ones being shot at overseas
So don't rock the boat at home

Divorce means *you failed your husband*
That's what the *old-timers' wives*
Teach the new ones
To keep those *old-school values*
It doesn't matter if the *home front*
Is just a front

It's hard to be deployed
And *it's hard having your spouse gone*
But the old wives' club
Insist, *"You're just at home...*
...He's off fighting a war...
...What do you mean you can't handle it?"

"You know what you signed up for"
They argue
But *you don't know until*
You're in the middle of it

I didn't know why
The other *wives*
Didn't include me in anything
Until someone saw my confusion
And whispered,

“It’s *because* you’re *a divorcée*”

I had rocked the boat
And they wouldn’t throw me a life raft

(Ava)

Attrition

I'm a geologist. I used to *work* in *mine sites.* At one point, *the chief geologist* of the *company* I worked for *sent me* to a particularly remote *site* and told me *there were no other geologists there so I would be my own boss* and *make all the decisions.* So I got to make all the decisions about rocks but I wasn't allowed to make decisions for myself. I was *the only female on site, so they assigned me a truck* and told me *I wasn't allowed to walk around by myself.* All the men there could, *but I wasn't* even *allowed to walk from my accommodations to the kitchen by myself. I had to drive. Because of the bears. Obviously, I'm a helpless female. So that was a pretty shitty thing to do to a woman.* It was some kind of misplaced chivalry shit, but really, it just restricted me needlessly. I mean, at the time, *I had been training for* a *triathlon, so it would have been nice to go running and get some exercise.*

It was wintertime then *and was like 30 below* where I was, *so I had to warm up* the *truck*, but at one point, *the battery was dead*. *So I walked,* brazenly (given my apparent helplessness)*, to the mechanic's office* on the *site* and *the head mechanic said,* "We'll get the other mechanic, Tom, *to jump your battery." I automatically envisioned this 40-year-old guy with a couple of kids. Then, the head mechanic* said, *"Oh, speak of the devil, here's* Tom now." *In walked this super cute guy, with these huge broad shoulders and these baby blue eyes. He's in this little mechanic's outfit. And he was so cute. I* told myself, *"Be professional. Come on."*

We ended up forming a friendship. He even *came to visit me* after I went home*,* which impressed me because our homes were in different provinces. Then, we'd head back to our camp work again *and anytime that we had time off together, we spent it together. We spent as much time together as possible. We* both loved *doing fun stuff outdoors.* Although *he was more of an ATV person, whereas I was more of a hiker. He was a power boater and I was a paddler. He was a snowmobiler and I was a skier. But he still loved the outdoors. Eventually, he sold his house and moved in with me.*

After we *moved in* together, the *turmoil* started. We stopped doing fun things together. It was always me suggesting activities that we used to enjoy doing together, like, *"Oh, did you want to go for a walk?"* and him giving an excuse for not wanting to, *"No, I'm too tired."* Or, he would say he would and then change his mind: *"Let's go camping*," I'd say, and he'd promise, "Yes, let's go tomorrow afternoon,*"* but then later, *"No, I don't want to do it anymore."* Instead of spending time together, he started going to *the bar all the time.* But this was in between going off to *work rotations* and we were working at *different* mining *sites* at that point. So we would both go off to work for a couple of weeks, and then we were home together for a couple of weeks, *so there was always this honeymoon stage at the beginning, and then just when I started to notice this pattern,* we would leave for work again. This cycle continued.

Three years later, a very good friend of mine said she had to sell her house. I had already decided a while before that *this* was my dream *house I was going to buy. It was part of my five-year plan,* but I wasn't expecting her to need to sell it so soon. *So I asked* Tom *if he wanted to buy the house with me. Less than four weeks later, we were* homeowners *together.*

Sometimes, when you tell someone your story, as I'm telling you part of mine now, it hits you that what might seem like a mundane detail to the listener—like a couple buying a house together—is actually this pivotal moment that you could only know if you heard the whole story (or lived through it...). Well, I'm stopping us here for a moment, because it's my story, and well, the moment Tom and I bought that house together was, indeed, a pivotal moment. *It was the worst decision of my life to have bought that house with him.* Spoiler alert: Buying my dream house became a living nightmare. We'll get to that...

Shortly after we bought the house, Tom was *on hiatus from his job because* his mining site was so *remote that there was too much snow to plow. I was working two jobs* at the time, *a full-time and a part-time* job. *I found out he was going to the bar again every day, while I was working.* When *I had to take time off for shoulder surgery, that's when I noticed patterns of behaviour and truly realized he was an alcoholic,* like *his dad. I confronted him* about his *drinking and things went downhill from there.*

I hadn't been able to find work since my shoulder surgery recovery. Eventually, after almost a year, my medical EI ran out. I was trying to start my own consulting business, and that didn't go so well. So Tom *had all the money. He would call it our money, but then when it came down to spending it, it was his money. And so he probably spent maybe $2,000 a month at the bar.* At the same time, *I had to ask, beg and remind him to pay the hydro bill because the bills were in my name and I was starting to get overdue bills and that didn't sit well with me. I still had lots of credit, so I was spending everything on my credit card. Anything we could put on the credit card was on the credit card just because I couldn't pay cash. I* had *paid cash for the mortgage* so I was tapped out.

I was trying to find work anywhere I could, but he was blocking me at every turn. Like, *there was a cashier job that came up at the local grocery store. And he said, "No, I don't want you working there."* I knew he said that *because it would embarrass him because "we're a professional couple." He didn't want to be embarrassed.* Another time, *this one guy* was looking for *help limbing trees, and I used to work in forestry,* so *I mentioned it to* Tom *and he* dismissed it completely, *"Working all day with a dude* in a forest? *No." I didn't realize a lot of our relationship had turned into me asking for permission for money and spending time with other people. So it just turned into this total power thing. I didn't know that he was financially abusive.* And in this continual power struggle, I slowly *gave away my power*, one piece of independence at a time. *I spent all my time doing house and garden maintenance* on our *huge house and huge property.* When I did venture out occasionally, like to a *ladies' poker night* in our new town, *I wasn't able to build deep relationships with the new people I was meeting* because *I wanted to shield the new friends I was making from* Tom *and his personality.* So I became very *isolated* and my world got very small.

After every tumultuous time with Tom, *I* always ended up *apologizing* to him. Somehow, *it was my fault.* I would just look at his *cute face, and those baby blue eyes, and those big strong shoulders* that *just hugged me so nice,* and *I fell for it*; I fell for him blaming me for everything. *I used to have a really strong, healthy, sense of self,* but *I started losing who I was. He was* so

charismatic and irresistible. And he smelled so great. I would do anything to get back in his good graces.

He was drinking all the time by *then, and when our arguments turned, he would chase me around the house and frighten me. The first time it happened,* I was still recovering from *my shoulder surgery* and *I just couldn't understand why you would chase an injured woman around the house. I was terrified.* He had gone from being this *super protective perfect gentleman prince* when I first had my shoulder surgery to, weeks later, this *monstrous* man. After that, the *prince* never came back, as it were. Instead, I learned to stay one step ahead. *I kept a to-go bag in my car so that I could hop in my car and leave for the night* if I needed to. *Then, he started threatening* my *physical safety. We lived atop a cliff, and he threatened to drag me over the cliff by my hair.* That threat is forever forged in my mind. *So I learned to swim. I went to the pool every day while he was at work so I could* practice *swimming the two kilometres across the channel to a beach* if he did throw me into the water below the cliff. *I made sure that I could* survive *all of his threats.*

There were the obvious forms of abuse, at least in retrospect, but he *was* also *strategically and subtly abusive. It was definitely a verbal thing that wore me down. It was through attrition. I thought I was crazy. I actually went to the doctor's worried that I was crazy. I discovered the term "gaslighting" after* the fact. But at the time, *it was hard to* notice that anything was really wrong *because it sneaks in so subtle. Everything was so absolutely subtle that if I were to say individual things, it's like, "What's so bad about that?" But when it's multiple times a day, every day, day after day, it starts wearing you down. There were little things that he would say that were just really detrimental to self-esteem.* Like, one time, *he told me, "Nobody* here *likes you because you use big words and you make people feel stupid." So I tried so hard to make sure to not use big words, to simplify my language, to not sound like a know-it-all; just to really keep all of that tucked in.* When I think about that now, I can see *that was one more gaslighting thing and I don't think that was true* of other people's perception of me. I believed it at the time though *so I kept everything to myself.* In actuality, *I think* Tom *had a problem with my education.* I had a university degree and he didn't. He was clever enough. He could easily be an engineer, *he just didn't have the discipline for a degree. I think my intelligence and my education made him angry.* I think that now, but I didn't realize it at the time. Hindsight...and all that. *When I looked back at how much I had lost of myself in such a short period of time, how much of my power I had given away, it was devastating.* My whole perception of reality became totally distorted. I think that's what people who haven't been in this kind of situation don't get when they say things like, "Why didn't you just leave?" I couldn't see the *screaming red flags* because I was keeping my head down. When people shake their heads because they don't understand how a smart woman couldn't "see the signs" and "just leave," I want to shake them and tell them that when you feel like a scared injured creature, you can't think clearly and rationally; you can't make decisions easily; you're paralyzed and you just want to hide and survive. But I don't say this to them. That seems a bit much to say to well-meaning acquaintances.

And so it was that in the midst of all this, *I didn't think it was wrong for him to threaten me and chase me around the house. I thought it was on me. I had absolutely no idea that it was wrong. I did know that there was *something* up with him,* but *I didn't know that I was in an abusive relationship. I had absolutely no idea at the time that all of this was going on.* Then, serendipitously, *I had* a *glorious month away when I was up in the tundra doing fieldwork, and I was around two respectful men. That's when I realized, "Oh my god, I thought I was afraid of the dark!"* But *nope, it was something else in there that I was afraid of*—someone else, really. *All this fear was in there and I didn't know where it was coming from. It was definitely that gaslighting that crumbled everything to my foundation. It felt like a big, heavy, wet wool blanket had been tossed over me, over my burning bonfire of self, and all that was left was this tiny center of an ember. That gaslighting was just so destructive, in such a slow way, like that drop of water that drops onto a stone but over millennia, it's going to wear a hole in there.* As a geologist, *I should have known* that rock foundations are like people's foundations: they are formed with pressure and time, and that's also what can slowly erode them.

But I couldn't see exactly what Tom *was doing for a really long time because he was super clever,* not to mention *he was so cute and handsome.* Damn, his baby blues! *I* also *did not have a support system.* I literally lived on an *island,* so *I was physically isolated. It was so awful because I knew better, but I was trapped. I didn't have a job. All my money was wrapped up in that house.* Remember when I said *buying that house with* Tom *was the worst decision of my life?*

It wasn't until a friend showed me a tape measure that I thought, "I can't keep living like this!" My friend *said, "How* long *do you think you are going to last?" I said, "I don't know. My grandpa died at 72." So he opened up this tape measure to 72 inches and he said, "Okay, find your age in inches." I was right in the middle of that tape measure. And he said, "Okay, you have lived half your life. How are you going to live the second half?"* It was like that wool blanket was suddenly lifted and I knew I had to leave.

So I developed two strategies. The first *strategy was to find an amicable way to sell the house. So I had to put on that happy face. And I had to act and pretend like everything was okay every single day.* My second strategy was to go to grad school. *That was my exit strategy. I applied for graduate school in November and I got in.* But I still *had to wait a very long time to leave,* until *September* when school started.

In the meantime, an older *friend* of mine *paid for* me to see *a lawyer and* he *said, "When you leave, you take everything you want out of that house." And that's kind of when it hit me. It wasn't really until I left that lawyer's office, that I knew that it was a hundred percent totally, completely over. And so I spent the busiest week of my life sorting through all of my stuff* and *deciding what to bring* with me. My friend *took me to a new bank,* where you *get $300* when *you sign up for a new bank account. She literally hired the moving truck and hired her friends to help me pack up all of my stuff within one week and move* while Tom was working.

I hopped on a plane in September to start grad school in another province. Tom texted me while I was waiting for *the plane*, *"Where are you?"* and I never responded.

A friend later told me he frequently laments about me leaving him while he's out drinking and *talks about how much he misses me. I don't think it's me,* Rhiannon*, he misses* though; *I think it's the wife he misses* and *this vision of an accomplished woman on his arm.*

It's ironic because our relationship started in a place where restrictions were imposed on me because I am a woman and men were worried I would encounter a bear in the remote wilderness and be helpless to defend myself. But that remote place is where I met my ex, who made me feel helpless against him for the longest time. Knowing what I know now, I'm sure of my answer to the recent viral internet question of whether women would "choose a bear or a man" to encounter alone in the wilderness. I can tell you unequivocally, like most women it seems, I would choose the bear!

(Rhiannon)

[40]

[40] As feminist media platform, *The Meteor* (n.d.), notes: "ICYMI: in a viral trend, women on TikTok are saying they'd rather be left alone in the woods with a bear than a random man. And when women ask their male partners the same question about leaving their daughters alone in the woods, many men are also choosing the bear."

Red Flags

My ex and I *met at a bar.*
That probably should have been a ***red flag.***
At the time*, we just really liked to drink* and *have fun together.*
I grew out of it and he didn't.
He became an *alcoholic,* like his *father*...
He started doing serious drugs
I didn't know about.
I see now that his *addiction issues*
were part of his *mental health history*.

(Kaleigh)

We were talking about having kids.
I had gone off the pill and said,
"Okay, let's start trying."
Apparently, he didn't get the memo
that the guy has to be there to have sex
if you want to get pregnant.
My ex *never wanted to have sex with me.*
This wasn't even odd to him,
but *I was mentally keeping a tally.*
It was a ***red flag.***
I mean, *what hot-blooded man doesn't have sex*
for seven months without it bothering him?
I just kept thinking, *"We've got to move this forward;*
we've got to start a family*."*
This is the track we're on.
This is where it's supposed to go.
All our friends were married and we were
the last ones and I was like,
"This is what everybody does.
This is what you're supposed to do."

There were a couple of instances where
I thought he was cheating on me
and we worked through it.
I got past it and we moved on.
Looking back, there were a lot of ***red flags****.*

(Melissa)

I'm a very social person.
I love going out, talking, and connecting.
But *in our relationship, we would come home*
and have dinner in front of the TV.
Then, he would go and play video games
and I would watch TV upstairs.
That was the extent of our relationship.
So it was a big ***red flag*** *piece of him*
that we weren't very compatible.

(Julia)

Early on in our relationship,
I could see some things in my ex
that raised ***red flags****,*
but I was still really, really drawn to him.
So we decided to *buy* a *house together.*
I went away to work for three weeks
and he said *he had arranged everything*
for us to buy our house as soon as I got back.
I got back and we went to the bank.
The bank manager said*,*
"You can't buy this house without insurance."
So it's Friday night, five o'clock,
and we're trying to find a place that sells insurance.
You think you're protected if there's a crisis

and he can take care of the situation.
It was the other way around.
I should have known.
There were so many screaming, ***red flags****.*
But he's irresistible and he smelled so great.

Later, when we had been together for quite a while,
I discovered he had gone through a divorce before
but it wasn't until I asked, that he mentioned this,
so that should have been another ***red flag****.*
I'm sad that I didn't listen to my gut instincts.
I didn't want to listen...

(Rhiannon)

The original thought I had about divorce
came years before any actual action happened.
I *thought* about divorce *over a year before*
I even suggested marriage counselling the first time.
There were all these things that were very gradual
and internal.
Looking back, *I'm like,*
"Ah, that was a ***red flag****."*

(Ava)

When you're busy waving the white flag
of peace and surrender,
You can't always see the red flags flying.
There's just a pinkish swath obscuring your view.

Survivors

Restriction

My husband's family told me to quit my job before the wedding.

So I quit my job and had no income.

My husband tells me, *"Because you're not the breadwinner, you don't get the bread."*

That was his logic.

He starts cutting down my food.

"Since you're not earning, you get to eat one piece of *bread only...*

...this lower *quality of rice, and no meat at all."*

I start crying, "What the hell?"

He starts *buying two different types of rice:*

One was the cheapest quality

The other was a high-quality basmati brown rice

He demands, *"This* (high-quality one)*, you cook for me...*

...and this (low-quality one)*, you cook for yourself"*

Then, he brings fish.

I say, *"You said this fish is for one week but it's just seven slices."*

He replies, *"It's just for me. I bought a slide a day."*

I ask, *"What about me?"*

He reiterates what I hoped wouldn't be true,

"You don't get any *non-vegetarian* food *because you're not earning."*

He goes inside the kitchen and checks the bread package.

He interrogates me, in front of *my neighbour* who is visiting me,

"Why are there two slices less? I saw twelve slices before and now, there are just ten."

(I ate the bread for breakfast. It's all I had.)

I couldn't believe it, *"What?! You're counting slices?"*

My neighbour is shocked.

I was trying to pretend that we were a dignified couple.

My neighbour tells her husband what she hears.

Her husband comes to me and asks,

"Is he stopping you from eating? What's going on?"
I tell him this is what is happening.
He comes to the kitchen.
He sees the two qualities of rice and bread.
He gets angry and insists, *"This is totally wrong!"*
He wants to call my parents to tell them this is happening
and I need help.
But *I won't give him* my parents' *number.*
So he has no access to my parents,
who are living in another country.

I have my duty as a daughter.
I've been brought up to maintain respect
for their decision.
They chose the guy for me.
So I try to be happy.
For my mother and father,
I make it look like everything is perfect.
I tell my neighbours,
"Let it be. He'll change in a while."
I start searching for a job.
I don't want to depend on him.

(Akhila)

Warning Signs

He blew up
Yelling at me
In the middle of the *airport*
About *bananas*
It was *the first* time
I felt afraid of him

I felt really small

Fights escalated
I was always in trouble
He shoved me
He shook me
His words became more cruel:
I was an idiot
I was fucking stupid

He was a *gentleman for show*
A maniac behind the scenes
I never knew what would *piss him off*
I just wanted to pull my hair out

More *yelling*
Or the deafening quiet
Of his *silent treatment*
Days with him
Not acknowledging me
Not speaking to me
This *abusive* silence
Was one of his favourite things
It makes you feel
Not worthy
Not even *human*

It was horrifying

He ruined my days
For the sake of it

With a *smirk on his face*
Whenever I *reacted*

Everyone warned me
"He's a psycho. Get out!"
But I just *swept so many things*
Under the rug
And I kept saying "Yes"

The worst fight we ever had:
He grabbed me
Slammed me to the ground
Dragged me down the stairs
Slammed me on the flagstone
Held me on the ground
No one could *hear me*
In the middle of nowhere

It was terrifying

The police treated me like
I was just a silly girl
It felt like it was the 1950s
And I was the problem
The hysterical one
I felt really small

(Kaitlyn)

Jekyll and Hyde

He was *like Jekyll and Hyde*
Erratic
Fine

Volatile
I never knew what would set him off...
A misplaced *tent peg*,
Missing *hair gel...*

He screamed and yelled,
punched a hole in our door,
threw things,
broke a window...
I cowered and shook in our closet
I was *so scared*

The police got involved
and made everything worse
The system labelled me as a victim,
assigned me an advocate
But ignored what I actually wanted

Things got back on track
then *started to go off the tracks* again
More *explosive outbursts*
and feeling scared in my own home
and alone

Then, *lying,*
stealing,
financial infidelity,
missed court dates

Maybe this relationship is abusive

Finally, a *terrifying text:*

"I want to crack your skull" 💀

And a sobering admission,

"Don't come home. You're not safe here"

(Cassandra)

Fucking Asshole

After we separated,

he got really mean.

He was a fucking asshole.

He couldn't manage his emotions.

He would come to my parents' house

in the mornings before work

and yell at me.

He called me 10 to 15 times a day

to yell at me and call me names.

He would see my bright red car

and *show up places* where I was.

Like, *my parents'* house *at 6:30 in the morning*,

and friends' houses when I was there.

I parked in different places to go *to yoga*

because I didn't want him to know I was there.

I was concerned he would come to my *work.*

I had to work with the police to set parameters.

He was losing touch with reality.

I was worried about living alone when I moved out.

There were safety concerns.

I was worried my ex *would know where I moved.*

I chose a place where *someone would hear me if I screamed.*

I still resent him for *making me feel unsafe,*
physically and mentally.
I still have a hard time with that.

(Kaleigh)

Gaslight

He never laid a hand on me...
He *had all the money.*
I had to ask, beg, and remind him
to pay our bills
that *were in my name.*

I needed his *permission* to *work*
and *to spend time with other people.*
I gave away my power.

I was always *apologizing* to him.
It was always *my fault.*
I was doing something wrong.
I just couldn't do anything good enough.
Like most women,
shame and *guilt really work on me,*
probably because our mothers
ingrained that into us.
I felt really hopeless.

He directed his explosive anger at me.
He chased me around the house.
He frightened me.
I became *afraid of the dark.*
He threatened
to drag me over the cliff by my hair.
The women's shelter was full.

I didn't tell my family.
I was ashamed.

He told me nobody likes me.
I thought *I wasn't good enough.*
He wore down my self-esteem
day after day.
I thought I was crazy.
I was trapped.
His *gaslighting*
burned away my sense of *self*
leaving only a *tiny ember.*
But he never laid a hand on me...

(Rhiannon)

How NOT to Help a Young Woman Going Through a Divorce

1. Ignore the veracity and effects of her depression

When people are depressed, you get some people asking, or implying, such gems as, "Have you tried cheering up?". *That is absolutely my mother. My mom* wanted me to watch this episode of *The Social, which is the Canadian version of The View in the States. It's the same kind of dynamic of four to six women* gabbing about different topics. *One of the episodes was on depression, and they had a happiness consultant, which is a job; she gets paid to be a happiness consultant. She came on the show, and my mom had PVRed it so that she could get me to watch it because she doesn't know how to connect. It's difficult when someone's in pain and you don't know what to do. So she called me out of my bedroom, called me out of my cave, and said, "Can you just sit and watch this?" It was a three-minute clip, and the happiness consultant said, "If you're depressed, in order to try to maintain your happiness, allow yourself to be sad for 30 minutes a day."*

I just got up and walked away because I didn't want to have that argument with my mom. I didn't want to make her feel like she'd done something wrong because she hadn't. I just didn't have the energy to explain what depression was to somebody who's never been depressed and who doesn't see depression as a mental illness. She's not really attuned to that. I just stood up and walked out of the room. Later, my mom asked, "Well, what did you think?" and I just said, "That might work for some," and went back to my cave.

(Laura)

2. Insist she needs another relationship ASAP (and try to set it up for her)

People are trying to put me into marriage again! Apparently, the lesson from my first doomed marriage was to try harder for a second one. My father already spent *four years searching for a groom for me*. He met every item on *my father's checklist*: *educated*, *working in a very good firm*, worldly (*he was in the US for years*), and came from an *educated family*. My *parents* assured me, *"This is a guy who's nice."* I trusted that *whatever my parents chose should be good* since *whatever my parents did for me, since childhood, I got the best*. But then, by my father's own account, his choice of husband *spoiled my life*.

So why is he *searching for a guy for me again*? He says, "*You know what? We found a guy. It seems he's also interested."* Blah, blah, blah. *I tell my mother straight* up, *"I'm not marrying a divorced man. In fact, I'm not marrying for now at all. Tell that to my father." If I go into marriage again, it will be my choice, not theirs. But I'm not interested in marriage at all now. I'm in angry mode now* that my family is doing this.

(Akhila)

3. Trivialize her divorce as the inevitable outcome of getting married "too young"

There is a stigma when a woman gets divorced, especially when she is *young, with no kids, and wasn't married for very long*. *There's a lot of judgment around, "Oh, well, she didn't try very hard" or "She gave up."* This kind of judgement seems to go hand in hand with people thinking and saying, *"She got married too young; she didn't take it seriously."* It's like these arbitrary conceptions of a divorced woman's youth, effort, and length of marriage are all muddled up and used as dismissive and easy rationalizations for her divorce by people who have no idea.

The reality for me is that I didn't actually "rush into" my marriage at all. My ex and I *were together for seven years before we got married. I was 29 when I got married. I wasn't super young. We had been together a long time. We had established a life together. We were done school. We had bought a home. We were living together. All these things made sense. I was* actually *the last to get married in my group of friends.* So no, getting married *wasn't rushed* for me.

To those who say women who get divorced young "*didn't take it seriously*," for me, *that wasn't the case* at all. *I don't think anyone goes into a marriage expecting to get divorced. I certainly didn't. I waited a long time, probably two years, before I actually left.* Two miserable years! *My sister is the only person who actually sort of acknowledged how much work it was for me and the work I put in.* And, I mean, in terms of whether I put in "enough work" to justify "giving up," well, let's see: we went to couple's *counselling* and it *was one of the worst experiences of my life*; *the counsellor basically said everything was my fault*; my marriage literally made me clinically *depressed*; and that was all before I realized I was married to an actual *sociopath* and discovered *he had been cheating on me for TEN YEARS*. Is that enough "work"?

So, when I hear this bullshit about rushing into marriage, getting married too young, not trying very hard to make it work, giving up too easily, and not taking my marriage seriously enough, it's like, "NO to all of it! Your metrics don't measure up. But thanks for weighing in, Karen!"

(Melissa)

4. Don't encourage her to seek legal advice

When I think back, I feel like I should have sought some advice or gotten a lawyer or something. I was young so *I just thought* my ex and I *would do* our divorce *without lawyers*. *When we discussed it, we both agreed* to *get a divorce*, so I thought that was the only part that mattered. But I ended up getting totally *shafted in terms of* our shared *property.* My ex did *not recognize anything that I ever contributed* by *just being part of his life and him being a part of my life. We contributed to each other's lives—to each other's development personally and professionally—and so in that aspect, for me, it seemed fair to equally divide everything. My ex didn't see it that way.* So even though *I had pitched in $30 000* of my *inheritance* money from

my *mother* for the *down payment* of our house, *my name* was *not on the house* because that's what *our realtor* at the time *advised because I was a student*. *That was a bad move!*

I didn't really understand my rights at all. I did not understand that when people get divorced, they usually split their assets. My ex *tried to scare me* into *believing that he had the right to keep everything*. *There was no option for me to claim* any part of our house *unless I hired a lawyer and I sued him because the house was in his name and I had no idea how to go about it. I didn't know what to do and I just said, "Fuck it! Since I don't know what to do*, I'll *just screw it all* and *get out." There was no legal advice at all.* So I ended up with *nothing* after we separated. Getting even something, *financially*, from my divorce sure would have been helpful since *I graduated* shortly after we separated and was hit by the *2008 recession* when *no one was hiring*. Now, I've just finished *a master's* degree and it's a *pandemic*, so *I always* seem to *pick* the worst *moments to graduate* and start *looking for a job*. I've since learned that *the financial part of things is always a big thing.* If I had sought legal advice when I was separating and had received even some division of our assets, I might not have as much of the *financial stress* I have now. No one, not my family or friends, ever said to me, "Maybe you should check with a lawyer."

(Rayna)

5. Make assumptions about why her marriage ended

From the outside, it looked like I suddenly *left my marriage* and *ran away* with another man. *I did leave* my husband and *moved across the country* to live with an old boyfriend. That's the Coles notes version, of course. But *people didn't know what was going on in my marriage*. They didn't see the *red flags*. Hell, I didn't see them myself for the longest time. They didn't know how *horribly unhappy* I was in my marriage, that I had tried everything to *make it work* for *eight years*, and that I had *thought* about divorce for *years before any actual action*. When I finally picked up and left, literally, *some of my extended family had no idea what was going on other than I disappeared to Halifax. They hadn't bothered to ask me what was going on. Some of them didn't know for almost two years that I was even divorced. So there were a lot of horrible assumptions that got made because I hadn't bothered to inform them. I didn't think I needed to. My* own *grandmother* who, incidentally, *also had a divorce*, was the most vocal. She *is practically a Victorian old lady*, you know, *very old-fashioned*, and she *made assumptions about how and why* my divorce *happened. Since I'm the one that "ran away," I must have been a "cheating whore." I just let people stew in their own assumptions. I only really talked to the family that cared to check in and see how I was actually doing.*

A lot of my friend group at that point were his friends more than my friends. They had only heard his side of the story and only cared about his side. The majority of the group still thinks I lost my mind and left my ex. Like most of my extended family, they also *didn't understand what happened* and *weren't interested in* actually *talking to me* about *my side* of what happened. Instead, they assumed I was crazy, *picked sides* with my ex, and openly *ostracized* me. The only time any of them *came over to talk to me turned into* an interrogation—*"How could you ever do this to him?"*—or to *uninvite* me *to their wedding* for an added touch. So *I lost close to 50 friends*, who now *hate me* and *won't talk to me at all.* But, you know what they say when you "ass-u-me"...

(Ava)

6. Gossip about how unfortunate it is that her husband left her

People sometimes try to project their assumptions onto me about my divorce and the life I have now. One of the worst offenders I've encountered is this *rather overbearing older woman in this small town that I live in now. She took it upon herself to say that my husband left me*. *I found out some of these things she was saying about me, in an effort to get me help* with some outdoor work I needed done. She *knows everybody* in town so she said she would *reach out* for me, but what she was saying to people was essentially, *"This poor girl, her husband left her and she's out there* in her house in the country *all by herself."* I hadn't told her any details about my situation except that I was divorced (when she nosily asked, "Where's your husband, dear?" upon noticing I lived alone). Yet, she assumed he left me and began circulating that knowledge widely in our small town.

When I found out that's what she was saying, it made my head want to explode. I found it very offensive. *It made me so mad because,* as I told her*, "He didn't leave me! He would have been happy to keep being who he was for the rest of his life. I left him."* More accurately, *we left each other*, but if anyone left anyone, *I left him* since I was the main *catalyst* in initiating our divorce. I'm generally a *shy* person, so *a lot of times I didn't say anything but lately, I've become a lot more assertive with her*. I've insisted, *"No, don't say that about me because it's not true. It's not accurate and I don't want people to have the wrong idea about who I am."* So *she has tried to create this version of me that I don't recognize*. *I think she thinks that dialogue is better* in terms of her thinking people will be more willing to help me if they feel sorry for me, I guess. But *that is not what I want*, so I have pushed back. *I don't need the 'woe is me, I got left by my husband'* narrative and its associated pity. *I need the 'she went through some shit and now look what she's doing.' I put my foot down and told her directly, "I left a bad relationship. It's not poor me! It's none of that. I stood up for myself and now I'm not in that relationship. And I'm doing just fine out here, but I do need to find someone who might be able to help me fix my lawnmower;* those are *totally separate things."* My ex-husband tried to construct this whole view of who I was, this *stupid idiot* basically, so when I catch others constructing their own *version of me*, that *is not me*, I'm going to correct them. And one of those corrections is that *I am not some pathetic lady who was left!*

(Kaitlyn)

7. Offer sweeping generalizations about her marriage, divorce, and subsequent relationships

I think people have a hard time comprehending a young woman being divorced, certainly in all the complexities that really entails, so they try to make sense of it and offer reassurances based on these sweeping generalizations. I guess that's the cognitive utility of stereotypes and such; they offer simple schemas to organize otherwise varied and complicated groups of people (or so I remember learning in my social psych 101 class).[41] I was on the receiving end of several of these generalizations and they *made my blood boil*.

[41] *My* actual social psychology textbook: *Exploring Social Psychology* (Baron, Byrne, & Watson, 1995)

The first one is that since I'm divorced, my marriage *was a mistake*. This is implied, generally speaking, when *people say, "failed marriage."* It's also more directly conveyed when *people have asked* me*, "Do you regret [your marriage]? It was obviously a huge mistake."* When I hear this, I think, *'Okay, so ten years is a really long time to be a mistake.' I cannot just accept writing that whole thing off as a mistake. I can't do that.* My ex and I *grew up together, in our formative years; I can't just write it off as a mistake.* Also, *if* my whole marriage *was a mistake*, as people like to think, *then I'm an idiot*. *So there's that, too, and I refuse to* take that on.

Similarly, just because my marriage ended, and the end was obviously unhappy, it doesn't mean my whole marriage was unhappy. It's just not that black and white. For sure, *my marriage wasn't happy near the end.* I would say the *last two years* of it were *unhappy*. And about the first *six months of* my *separation* were *unhappy*, if we're labelling big periods of *linear* time as only being either "happy" or "unhappy" (which isn't accurate either, of course). This line of misguided logic extends from this pervasive idea that people, especially women, who are married are happy. But being married and being happy *are not synonymous*. And the reverse isn't true either, again, as a sweeping generalization. When I eventually started dating again, I brought the person I was seeing to my family celebration for *my birthday* and I remember my *aunt* saying to me, *"It's so nice to see you happy again. You were happy and then you weren't and now you are"*—like my happiness was some kind of switch that was either "on" or "off" depending on if I was in a relationship. I was actually shocked at first by the unquestioned simplicity and assumptions of her well-meaning comment. I actually said to her, *"Oh, just so you know, I was still happy.* My boyfriend is *great but he is not the reason for my happiness." I wanted to be very explicit about that. I am not just happy because I have a partner again. I was happy on my own* before him. I continued clarifying this for her, *"I'm really happy to be with* my boyfriend. *However, I was happy when I was single as well." It didn't take a man to make me happy. I really resist that and resent that.*

So I resisted and challenged several related generalizations, or broad labels, of my marriage: as being wholly a *mistake*; as entirely *unhappy*; and conversely, of re-partnering as an automatic indication of my *happiness*. In the same vein, I challenged this idea that not only was my marriage not "all bad," but neither was my divorce. All these ways of people putting *my* experiences *all together* in some *kind of umbrella* categorization *really doesn't work for me. Obviously, I wasn't thrilled about getting divorced and that whole situation was challenging, but there was a lot of power that came from* my divorce *for me*. *I was able to get myself out of this really horrible situation and* that *makes me feel resilient.* I *handled myself in a way that I'm proud of; I acted with integrity* (in the face of my ex not doing the same). Also, *splitting* up *with* my ex *really let me kind of meet myself. I never thought that would happen.* I didn't think it needed to happen. *I thought that I knew myself, but looking back on that person that I was,* I can see now *that I was very out of touch with who I was.* So in a way, my divorce gave me myself back. Now, I am *way more in tune with myself.*

When I was in *college*, I would write up little summary notes after each lecture with big takeaways in the form of an equation to show how concepts were related to each other. Like, for my psych course, I remember writing "correlation ≠ causation" and circling it excessively since the prof kept repeating it. Maybe I should make a summary sheet of some divorce takeaways and hand them out to people as a helpful PSA. I would include:

Divorce ≠ Marriage as mistake

Divorce ≠ Marriage as all unhappy

Married ≠ Happy

Single ≠ Unhappy

Divorce ≠ All bad

(Kaleigh)

8. Be her rock her whole life and then withdraw all support when she initiates divorce

My dad was always my rock. He was a huge influence in my life. I listened to everything he said and what my dad said, I kind of followed. When my ex and I were *dating*, we *broke up at the beginning of our relationship for about a week because I knew something wasn't right.* I talked to my dad and he told me, *"He's responsible, he takes care of you, he's good with money, he's mature. There's a lot that I see in him. Don't give up on this."* And while *my dad obviously didn't force me* to get back together with him, *it was ultimately my choice*, *I listened to my dad* because I thought, *'My dad knows best. I'll get back into this relationship.' I just thought, 'Okay, I guess this is just what happens in a relationship.'*

On my wedding day, *right before I walked down the aisle, I was having a really difficult time. My dad came to me and he* asked, *"Do you want to do this? You don't have to go through with this."* But *there was no part of me that was ready to walk away because that's too embarrassing.* It was ironic though because when I wanted to leave the relationship before, when the stakes were so much lower, my dad *said, "I think you should stay."*

Four months after the wedding, *when I did decide to walk away* from my husband, *my dad decided to walk away* from me. *My dad sent me a text to say, "You're going to lose a husband and a dad." So my dad, my rock, essentially said to me, "I don't want to be your dad anymore." That was the last message I got from him for seven months. He didn't speak to me for seven months.* Again, ironically, *my parents are divorced* so it's not like I was even the first person in our immediate family to get divorced.

So I lost a lot of my support post separation even though ending my marriage *was one of the first times I was making a choice for myself as opposed to looking for that external validation from my support group as to the decisions that I'm making in life. Then,* I made *the biggest decision* for myself—to get divorced—*and no one supported it.*

(Julia)

9. When she reaches out for support and safety, make her feel hopeless

I was *terrified* in my own home. *It was so awful, but I felt trapped.* I didn't have a job because I was recovering from *shoulder surgery* so I couldn't do my usual work as a mining *geologist*. And my husband didn't want me to do any "unprofessional" jobs either in the meantime. Like, *there was a cashier job that came up at the local grocery store and he said, "No, I don't want you working there."* He didn't want that *because it would embarrass him, because we're a "professional couple." All my money was wrapped up in* the *house* I bought with

him. *It was the worst decision of my life to have bought that house with him.* So I couldn't work and I didn't have access to *our joint bank account*. I finally realized he was *financially abusive* as well as physically and emotionally abusive. *I was* also *physically isolated*; I lived on an *island* where you needed a *ferry* to get on or off. And *I did not have a support system.* So I was dealing with some hard odds.

I wanted to get out, but I knew I needed help. A friend suggested I should *"talk to a lawyer"* and I know she was well-meaning, but as I told her, "*It'll never work.* My husband *is impossible. I'm only allowed five or six hours of free lawyer time. And if he has a good lawyer who knows I'm on free lawyer time, he'll just eat it up. And then, I'll be having to represent myself in a divorce situation."* So, in reality, I knew that *"talking to a lawyer"* was not as easy as it might seem.

When I finally realized the situation that I was in, and how bad it really was, I knew I needed to get physically out of my house—so I didn't have to worry about my husband *dragging me over the cliff we lived atop*, as *he threatened—I had called the women's shelter.* But *because there are no children involved (thank god!)* and *because there are no broken bones or bruises, I kept going on the bottom of the list. So I had been on their waitlist for nine or ten months, and still nothing came of it.* I felt like I wasn't the right kind of "in need" or that I wasn't "unsafe enough" to warrant help. So *because there's so much demand for women's services, they are focusing on women and children, before they focus on single women.* I understand that there are resource limitations, but this coupling of "women and children" *makes me angry* because it *reinforces the undervaluing of your person*hood.

Then, when I did eventually get to talk to a paralegal before I got to speak to one of the family lawyers, they made the legal situation sound extremely hopeless. They said, *"It all depends on what the judge's mood was that day, whether or not you get any money back from your house."*

Now, here I am *almost two years* out from my separation, and my ex and his lawyer have used *underhanded, nasty trickery and lies* to *outfox the legal system* and *stall* this legal process. *Things are moving much slower than I could have ever imagined.* It has been *enormously* difficult for me to bear the emotional and financial burdens of this prolonged legal process of divorce. *I find it quite unfair how the legal system still favours men, from my perspective.* It has *cost* me *a year and a half worth of wages to finalize*, which I needed to borrow from my *mom's line of credit*. And every time there's a new barrier in this legal process, like a document my ex refuses to sign or send, *it's like instant anxiety level 10. It just stops me in my tracks* and all *the discontent* and *unsettled inner peace* I felt with my ex *just comes rushing back*. *Last year, I had an "examination for discovery" where* my ex and I had to *put everything on the table and* I had *extreme anxiety*, *to the point that it was making me sick. I was supposed to do all of this work for my thesis and I just couldn't.* So I *had to take a whole semester off* from my grad program because it was so overwhelming to be dealing with this legal process. *I definitely feel* legally *outplayed, outmaneuvered, and outsmarted.* All of this keeping me from truly moving on with my life. *Everything just kind of feels suspended. I don't feel like I have freedom* until this is *all settled* and *done.*

So these social support structures that you hope you never need to use—to flee from your marriage and your home—they exist, but they're not always accessible. And reaching out for help, you know, from lawyers and a shelter, and not receiving the help you need when you need it just reinforces the feeling of being *trapped* and *hopeless.* It felt like literal wedlock—I was locked into a marriage and a house and I couldn't find the key to leave. When I hear people say things like, "Why didn't she just leave?" when they learn about a domestic violence situation, I just shake my head because it's never that simple. Maybe she tried to leave, and help wasn't available. Or, maybe, she didn't even realize she needed help. Before *I finally realized* what was going on, *I didn't think it was wrong for* my husband *to threaten me and chase me around the house. I thought it was on me. I had absolutely no idea that it was wrong. I didn't know that I was in an abusive relationship. I had absolutely no idea, at the time, that all of this was going on.* So I thought my husband's anger was my fault, and *I thought I was crazy*. *I actually went to the doctor's worried that I was crazy.* I wish realizing you need help and then reaching out for it was the easy, happy ending you hope for, but that's not always the case. It sure wasn't for me.

(Rhiannon)

10. Suggest that her divorce is proof that women can either be invested in a marriage OR her dreams (and by extension, a failed marriage means she chose her career over her relationship)

I moved to the *States* to pursue my *PhD*. The intention was that my husband would *follow* when he had finished a few *things* in Canada. But *within a few months, I started getting odd photos he sent me of this blonde in bikinis that he had some relationship with. She made him baked goods and this sort of stuff. Then, one Sunday night, he Skyped me and ended our marriage on Skype*; *he* told me he *wanted a divorce. I don't think many people have done that! In the old days,* before Skype, *he would've at least had to pay the long-distance bill to call me,* but *he didn't even have to do that.*

Even though I was *surprised* that he *wanted a divorce,* I had *emotionally checked out of the marriage* a while ago, and one of the big catalysts for that was his increasingly dismissive and *disparaging* remarks and *put-downs devaluing my work, which is a part of me.* That wasn't always the case with him, but as he completed his education and moved up in the *high-tech* sector, he adopted this view that *other forms of knowledge production* and such weren't as valuable, so he would say things to me like, *"What you're doing is silly, do a real thing."* When I would essentially defend myself and what I choose to do, he would say things like, *"Maybe you're not smart enough to respond to this."* I didn't have *the language at the moment to identify* those kinds of tactics as *the verbal and emotional abuse* I later realized they were. I did know it was *emotionally fraught having a partner trying to devalue your work,* but at some point, I realized it was even more than that for me. *I thought, "My work is central to who I am, and I* value that, and I love my work." I think when I realized this inseparability was the first time I started *untangling what was really me and what that sort of abusive personality* of my husband *was telling me I was* and *my value.*

I continued this *untangling* as a newly separated woman starting my PhD when I started becoming aware of these often-subtle messages around me that highlighted this tension between women pursuing their own dreams and desires, particularly within graduate studies, in my case, and the apparent toll or tradeoff on relationships. For instance, one not-so-subtle message was

that *I actually had an advisor give our whole* grad *program a talk about how most people will be divorced by the end of their studies. It was a guy, of course, who gave that talk, but it's a thing* where there's *clearly a discourse about* choosing your education over a relationship. And that that's a choice that women are making, and men are somehow not making, necessarily. *I've seen that play out where it's the woman's career* that *has become the question* when a marriage is tumultuous or ends.

When some of my colleagues learned that I was divorcing, *someone asked me, "Well, are you going to stay? Are you going to do grad school?" It hadn't even occurred to me that that was an option— that I wouldn't stay—because, at that point, I was so committed to my path.* But when this other *student* asked me that and saw, I think, my surprise, she added, *"This is a really dramatic event, so are you going to stay here* in the program*?"* I think the implication was that it's such a "dramatic event" that I would need support from my family and friends back home or that I would just leave and cry or something. And, actually, even before we separated, my ex was doing some really questionable things, like *sending me photos of this blonde in bikinis that made him baked goods that he had some relationship with.* I said to him, *"If this is the kind of thing you're going to give me, do whatever you want because I'm not going to sit here and cry and be upset." I feel as though I have a strong personality* so these implied ideas that I would just leave my program or cry endlessly were not possibilities that were true for me, and *it never even occurred to me not to stay.* But for someone else, it very well may have. So, for me, that one question—*"Are you going to go back?"*—was *the most interesting point in the whole process* of divorce because it encapsulates this idea that relationships, and specifically marriages, are so central for women that their breakdown could mean that a woman would just leave her plans and her dreams behind because she would be too fragile and devastated to do anything else.

So I think it's important to *frame that there's obviously life after* divorce; *it's not the end of someone's being in the world so they can reconstitute that. And I think there are going to be lots of different challenges and barriers* that come with divorce, *depending on your positionality and your relative privilege, but I think even just* having *the capacity to imagine different futures that don't involve that ex-spouse or them having any bearing on your future is probably one of the most positive kinds of orientations you can try to take. I think* that *future orientation is an important role that divorcing women can enact* for themselves and *others.*

I've been reflecting on these observations for a long time now since I've been separated for *about eight years*. So I've had a fair bit of time to *process* and navigate being a divorced woman and also some of the *challenges* of *being a woman with a PhD.* And it's interesting that these observations—and the limiting beliefs that underly them—continue to strike me in different settings. Like, when the third season of Bridgerton came out and I was binge-watching it, as you do, there was this one scene that stopped me in my tracks. It wasn't any of the steamy sex scenes either, it was the scene between Penelope and her mother as Penelope is grappling with the decision to marry the love of her life, but also not wanting to give up her own passion as the secret writer, Lady Whistledown. In the conversation, Penelope's mother advises her daughter to "cater entirely to your husband, his dreams, his wishes." In response, Penelope demands, "What about my dreams?" which sums up her outrage at the unspoken sacrifice women of her early 1800s Regency era were expected to make when they got married. While this was a weighty question in and of itself, her mother's reply is what really got me, "What

dreams? Ladies do not have dreams. They have husbands." So here I am, eight years post-separation, insisting to any woman who seems to be tussling with this old dilemma that your dreams matter, and they should never be sacrificed for any relationship!

(Alison)

11. Remind her that her value is diminishing the older she gets, so she better re-couple quickly or no one will want her

I was heartbroken when my husband told me he wanted to separate. *For two years*, I was *haunted* by this relationship and its ending, so *I did not look for any other relationship* during that time. Instead of understanding this, or even just not commenting at all, one of my family members, a *male cousin,* decided to kick me while I was down:

My cousin told me that women like me—who are *getting older and do not get married—are just gradually diminished* until we *become nothing*! I'm not sure if he thought he was trying to be helpful and light a fire under me or something to get a move on in finding another relationship. Still, he took issue with me *not looking for a relationship for two years* and *thought I* should *really start to look for a relationship because*, as he said, "*As women get older, your value decreases with*in *our family and* is *then diminished*."

I knew this was *just his feeling* and that it wasn't representative of the rest of my family, but it still made me really worried that he was not the only one thinking that, more broadly. So *I was really worried that* the person I'm *next* in a relationship with *would not accept* me *or* would otherwise *mind* that I'm an 'older woman' since I was *twenty-six* when my husband and I separated. I wasn't ready to pursue another relationship until *two years later* when I was twenty-eight.

It wasn't only my age that had me worried about finding another relationship, thanks to my cousin's comments. I also knew that in Chinese society, *people expect that when you first get married, you should be* a *virgin.* Well, they expect that only for women. Since I was married and now divorced, *I was concerned* about a future relationship *because* I *am* certainly *not* a *virgin* anymore.

So I no longer have youth or virginity, those tenacious determinants of women's value in relationships I'd hoped we'd left in bygone eras. No such luck, I guess. So here I am in the 2020s, a woman with a graduate degree, worried I'm too old and sexually experienced to be desired by another partner after my first partner, my ex-husband, left me for a *younger woman*.

(Maylin)

12. Start dating her ex, don't tell her, and influence friends to un-friend her

My ex and I *were in a very public field. And we were also in a very incestuous field. So everybody knows each other. Everyone knew both of us. We were the power couple.* After we separated, *he started seeing someone that I knew*, *an acquaintance*, *in that industry.* I didn't learn that they were a couple though until later, and *I felt a little betrayed that this was someone that I was an acquaintance with, and they had known my whereabouts on specific occasions and knew that I was trying to keep that private* from my ex *and never mentioned that they were a couple. Had* she *said, "You know what?* We're actually dating…" or *even if* she *had gone home and told*

my ex*, "You need to tell her we're a couple," I would have respected that a lot more* than neither of them telling me directly and, instead, finding out later on from another acquaintance. So *it just felt like a bit of an invasion of* my *privacy* to be at events with me, knowing we were separated, and not disclose that they were a couple. *And I thought, "I understand, you're in a relationship. I get that. But then we're not really friends anymore, right?"*

So when I did eventually find out that this acquaintance of mine was dating my ex, I told her directly, *"I really respect you as a person, but I'm going to remove you as a friend on social media. I need boundaries for myself and for my partner. And I don't like that* my ex *could have access to that part of my life." I don't know that she fully understood that, but that's okay.* I did it for me and for my current partner, so we could have the space and privacy I wanted, and that was previously compromised by her not being upfront with me that she and my ex were now a couple.

I also put up that boundary with her because before I did, and after I learned that she was dating my ex, when we would see each other at various industry events, she would casually talk to me about her new relationship *with my ex*, saying things like, *"It's so nice because I was in a toxic relationship before." And* all I could *think* was*, "Oh my god, run. Run, run, run! You have no idea what you're getting into." I can only hope he's changed, but if he couldn't change for his wife, I really don't think he's going to change for someone else.*

So it was quite odd that she was saying these things to me, and it was awkward and concerning, knowing what I know firsthand about my ex. *I worry for her. I* also *thought that was a peculiar reaction, not to have any jealousy, but to actually just be concerned for someone else was really a moment of like, "Wow, I'm really over him. I've been over him a very long time."*

Also, because I ended up leaving the industry, and my ex actually did, too, *I lost some of my friends* who *turned their backs on me because* my ex *is dating their coworker*, who is still in the industry, out of this sense of weird industry loyalty, I guess, that just feels very high school. So I felt *isolated by some people in my life*, *which is unfortunate and difficult.*

And beyond that *whole story* about my *acquaintance* and my ex *dating*, and *losing friends* indirectly because of that relationship, I also had a hard time navigating other social connections after my separation, specifically on *social media*. In my original industry*, social media was such an important part of what we did*, and even now, in my newer career in *marketing*, it's obviously still really important. So even though this public image and connections have been part of my professional life *for so long*, *I'm a very private person when it comes to personal affairs. I always have been. I don't like people knowing my business. I think that the hardest thing for me to deal with in the whole* separation and divorce *process was* seeing and *hearing things said about me* publicly by my ex and *keeping my story to myself when I knew how much damage that could do to him when he wasn't playing by the same rules.*

I always promised myself I would keep my *pride. I wasn't going to stoop to his level. I wasn't going to be nasty to him. I wasn't going to slander him. There were obviously a million things I could say that were true that would not make him look good, but that was never my goal.* My ex didn't make the same choice. Like, *he posted on Facebook one night, he tagged me and said that I left him for another man,* which is completely untrue. *People saw that. Then he posted*

on my now-fiancé's wall, "Are you fucking my wife?" for everyone to see. So, I mean, he didn't really take the high road. *So I thought, "Okay, all I can do is sit back and try to act as if this is going to make you look worse than it makes me look and say nothing."*

And then, of course, because I was posting very selectively on my own social media and *not posting all this stuff* that was going on with my ex, *I think some people thought, "Well, she does look so happy." And I was happy, but *also* this was going on, and it was just something I didn't feel the world needed to know about.*

(Cassandra)

Turning Points

Once you pull that rip cord—

Once somebody has said they don't want to be with you anymore—

You can't go back

The whole dynamic has changed

It all sounds very nihilistic

But it's true

You just hope your parachute will open

I was just free-falling

Once someone has played the divorce card

You can't go back

It's such a trump card

They can't just put it back

You've seen it; you know it's in their hand

And you don't know when they're going to throw that card down

On the table again

It's like a weird threat over the whole relationship:

'If you piss me off, I'm going to divorce you'

Why are they still with you?

What are their motives?

We both came to the realization

If we're done, we're done

We can't fantasize about anything else

(Laura)

Once I had it pointed out to me that my *husband*

was acting like *a sociopath,*

that was probably the ***turning point*** *for me in the separation.*

This realization was like this fog was lifted

and I saw him in a different light.

It's like that ***turning point*** *in a movie*

and I resolved, *"I need to get out of here as fast as I can."*

(Melissa)

My grandfather is the patriarch of my family.
When I told him I wanted to divorce my husband
He advised,
"Think again about this decision."
He doesn't ask me to "try again";
just to *think again.*
"Once you think again and decide
there's no going back*"*
"Once you step forward
you have to move forward"
"It's a very hard journey in front of you
but *if you're ready to face that*
then you have my full support."

I tell my grandfather, "I don't have to think
I don't need a person like him in my life
I'll be happy without him."
"I've already *tried all means* possible to make this marriage work
I have faced so many difficult things
I don't think there's going to be anything more difficult in the future."
So I step forward
because ***I'm not going back again.***

(Akhila)

My ex and I *were in couples counselling*
at the start of *our separation.*
We were *still trying to work on things*
but he *was really volatile.*
His grip on acceptable behaviour
was fluid at best.
He was just such a fucking asshole.

At some point,
I just resolved,
"I can never be with you again.
That's enough."

(Kaleigh)

I had *a very* ***stark moment***
where I knew, *"I'm done!":*
My husband *agreed to drive me to the airport.*
His friend wanted to catch a flight the same day
so he brought him along.
We drove two and a half hours to the airport
and the entire time, neither he nor his friend spoke to me.
They engaged in misogynistic and racist conversations
I wanted no part of.
They were abrasive in all the ways that you
would stereotype someone as being abrasive.
In that moment*, I thought, "That's it, I'm done here."*

Having a partner trying to devalue your work
is emotionally fraught.
It's hard to *process* your feelings about it,
especially when *subtle gaslighting* takes its toll.
Then, I had a ***transformative moment***
where I thought, "My work is central to who I am, and I value that."
That realization freed me from *worrying about why*
my ex has these feelings.
I just let it all go
"Whatever his hang-ups are, they *are not my problem."*
That *was incredibly liberating* to *work through*
and arrive at my separation.

(Alison)

A friend showed me a tape measure.
He said, "How long *do you think you are going to last?"*
I said, "I don't know. My grandpa died at 72."
So he opened up this tape measure to 72 inches
and he said, "Okay, find your age in inches."
I'm right in the middle of that tape measure.
Then, *he said, "Okay, you have lived half your life…*
…How are you going to live the second half?"
I thought, "I can't keep living like this."
I spent some time thinking and *deciding*
what I wanted to do with the last half of my life.
And I knew it would not be with my husband...

(Rhiannon)

Part Two: Re-creating

I broke open...
I gathered the pieces
of my **heartwork**

I let some of them go
Smoothed the jagged edges
Of the shards I kept

I wept over some pieces
Celebrated others
I shared some
And received new ones

I don’t want the same heartwork
I had before the shattering
I’m not the same artist anymore

I’m doing the heart work
Of grieving
Transitioning
Transforming

I’m **re-creating** something
I never could have imagined
It’s still a work in progress
Do you want to see it?

Sobering Truth

I'm a year sober from Thanksgiving of last year. I have not touched a drop of alcohol since then unless you count the rum ball my mom tricked me into eating; she told me they were peanut butter balls. She's cunning like that.

I gave up alcohol because of my sister. I went from being a closet alcoholic to stopping entirely after one night: *I was out with my sister for her birthday. There was a band that she really liked that was playing in town and I asked her if I could get her and her partner tickets to it for her birthday. I offered to DD for them so they could* have a good time. *My sister said, "Don't worry about DD-ing, we'll find our own way home," because her partner had to work the next day. She's like, "He's not going to drink heavily, but I'll drink with you!" So I bought them tickets and we went, and I started drinking. They were selling moonshine at the event so we were getting into that. My sister stopped drinking earlier in the night, but I didn't know because I wasn't paying any attention to her. I was being chatted up by a guy the whole night. I just stuck with him the whole time. I didn't even look at my sister. She had specifically said to me, "Just don't leave us alone because we don't know your friends. Can you just make sure that you're a good buffer between us and your friends and everything?" because there was a bunch of my friends going*, but she and her partner didn't know anyone other than me. *But I completely neglected her on her birthday and went with this guy. My sister tapped me* and muttered, *"Hey, we're going." I said, "Oh, okay. Did you have a good time?" and she just walked out.*

The next day, I sobered up and realized what had happened and called her crying: "I'm so sorry! I did the one thing you asked me not to do." She answered in her usual pragmatic way, *"Look, you're an adult, I'm not going to judge you for your behaviour, but just so you know, that was kind of shitty, like genuinely shitty." She was that disappointed in me that she accepted my apology but didn't say, "It's okay." She just said, "I accept your apology, but that was shitty. Don't do that again."*

I've done a lot of stupid things over the years and she was always the one to reassure me that it's okay; that we're okay. When I forgot to feed her fish when she went to summer camp for a week, and it died, she forgave me and said it was okay. When I accidentally bleached her favourite cashmere sweater, she forgave me and said it was okay. When I got caught up in my own life and didn't call her back for weeks at a time, she always forgave me and said it was okay. But that night, she didn't say it was okay. And the truth is, it wasn't okay.

I don't want to disappoint that woman ever again, so I gave alcohol up and didn't touch it again. I stopped drinking that day. She has no idea that she's the reason why I stopped drinking. She has no idea that she's the reason that I'm still alive, in regard to the suicide attempt. I've told her how much she means to me, but not to the extent that she saved my life. She's my ride-or-die.

(Laura)

Growing

I was buried in *shame* from my divorce

My best friend planted the first seed

That I could emerge from underground

My best friend listened patiently

He allowed my tears

To water the soil

I cried, cried, cried

After *a month*, he told me not to drown my roots

"Stop doing this"

He asked me, "*Do you want to* stay buried?"

"*Or do you want to become a person*, to grow from this?"

I told him, *"I want to grow into a person"*

"I want to restart my life again"

"So how do I do it?"

"I don't know what to do"

My best friend tossed me a spade

And said, "Start weeding!"

"Pull out the weeds where you want to grow"

"You've let people trample all over your garden"

"Tell people what you want"

"Speak up"

"If you think you deserve something, ask for it"

"Demand it"

"If people don't give it to you, they don't deserve to be in your life"

"Weed *them out*"

So I got to work weeding

I've got weeds in spades:

My family's dishonour

My *father's guilt*

My *mother's anger*

My *grandfather's shame*

The *mosque* leader's deliberations

My own depression

I dig deep but I can't get them out

These weeds are invasive

Their roots intertwine

Cultural rhizomes

Absorbing every last nutrient

Eroding happiness

Contaminating hope

These soil conditions are toxic

I cannot grow here

It's impossible

So, again, my best friend

My trusty gardener

Advised, *"Why don't you* transplant yourself

to some other country?"

You can find another garden

This one's too small

Too gated

For a sunflower like you

I heard the gardens in *Canada* are beautiful

Safe

And *free*

So I decide to transplant myself to Canada

As a student

My only way through those garden gates

I tell my plan to my landlord

My father

He says, *"You're not going anywhere"*

"Don't think stupid things"

He starts searching for ways to keep me in this wretched garden

He tries to find a new landlord for me...again

But I don't want another one

The last one *didn't take care of me* at all

He didn't have a green thumb

Just a thumb he kept me under

I became a shrinking violet

I know I can't grow here

They keep throwing shade

There's just not enough sunlight

So *I study in secret*

My mother supports me

Secretly

She knows what this garden's like

She wants to send me out

She wants something better for me

I carry the seeds of her dreams, too

In my secret garden

A big glossy package arrives in the *mail* one day

After *three long months* of waiting

It's an *admission* ticket to the garden show

I was hoping for *every day*

To transplant myself to *Canada*

To do my second master's

I hand my landlord the package

And say simply,

"Just trust me. Trust my decision"

"I know how to take care of myself"

"I want to grow into a person"

So now, I am growing

A late bloomer

Cultivating a life *on my own terms*

My best friend says to me,

"Some people are growing like a weed,

but you're growing like a sunflower"

(Akhila)

Playing Games

I've played a lot of games
The rules keep changing
And so do the stakes
The jackpot's never the same
They say,
You win some
You lose some

The first game I played was "Old Maid"
*I cared that people might think *I'm* an "old maid"*
People look weirdly at women
that have never been married
or never had kids
They wonder, *"What's wrong with you?"*

But now, *no one will judge me for that*
I already got married
It just *didn't work*
But *someone wanted me once*

All my friends have made their pairs
I'm left with the Old Maid card
But I'm not really the loser
I got married
I got divorced
I've done my part
Now, there's no social pressure

The second game I played was "Go Fish"
Now that's a brutal game
Definitely not child's play
People like to say, *"There's plenty of fish in the sea..."*
Pat pat
Yeah, there's loads of fish in the sea,
But some of them are guppies
Some of them are barracudas
There are terrible fish in the sea

I've made a lot of pairs
With a lot of fish
My friends *make jokes*

At my expense for being easy
But I taught them it was okay
Because *I made myself the butt end of jokes,*
Innuendos and double entendres
If I make fun of me first,
They can't make fun of me
I've been doing this *deflection*
Since the playground games
Of *middle school*

I think I need to learn a new game

My therapist laid the cards on the table
I *have a terrible self-esteem problem*
Without fixing it, I can't ever win
My chips will always be down

I realize
I don't like the cards I keep getting dealt
There are fish that aren't worth your time
I became a card shark
To stack the deck in my favour
To hold my hand close
But my poker face grew weary

I've decided I don't like this game
So I put it down
And stopped playing for keeps

Now, I'm playing Solitaire[42]
I can really see the appeal
Of the single-player game

I've removed the Jokers
I'm stockpiling new moves
Building a foundation
I've learned *you cannot build a house*
Without a foundation
If you don't have one,
Your house of cards *is going to blow over*
You're going to get hurt

[42] This piece incorporates terminology and approaches from the game of Solitaire, including removing the Jokers during setup and using the stockpile and foundation pile (Solitaired, 2025).

You’re going to be left with nothing

Now, my game of life is played
With whatever suits me
I discard the rest
I don’t need no man
I am the queen of my heart

And when I don’t like the rules
I change them

(Rayna and Laura)

Anchor

My mom has a thing for craft fairs. She doesn't actually do any crafts herself but she likes to browse and buy crafts that other people have made. I once briefly took up jewellery-making and mostly dropped it because she started planning a craft fair circuit for my wares, which only ever included two sets of earrings and a necklace that took me about ten hours to make. When I was married, she would invite me to go to craft fairs with her but I was always busy going to *car shows* with my ex. I would come along with him because cars are his thing, and I would try to nod and follow along and get excited about the newest model of whatever high-end cars they were showcasing. Mostly I wished I hadn't gone and had stayed home to *binge-watch* *The Hills*.

Once I was separated though, I started going to craft fairs with my mom. One Saturday, *I was with my mom at a craft fair* and I saw this 'rustic chic' *sign that said, "Refuse to sink" with* a faded *anchor on it. I liked that saying—it just spoke to me*—so *I bought* it *for myself. I have a thing for nautical* stuff (everyone has their 'things'). *I don't know where this came from, but The Little Mermaid was my favourite movie as a child* and while other girls my age were pretending to be princesses, I pretended to be a pirate. I made my family call me by my pirate name, Anne (after the infamous pirate Anne Bonny), fashioned an eye patch out of some old felt, and desperately wanted a pet parrot to complete my ensemble (to no avail!). *I love pirates*. *I think I was a pirate in a past life* (I do have a somewhat "fierce and courageous temper" like Bonny). *I love the ocean, it terrifies me, but I love the ocean. I love mermaids. I love all that sort of nautical theme. It's just a thing I gravitate towards* and that *I've loved since I was a little kid. So when I saw this sign, I* thought, *"This sign is literally a sign!" Ironically, it's hanging above my sink in the kitchen.*

I worked with a woman who was going through a separation and divorce at the same time I was. One day in the office, she came over to my desk and shared, *"This is my new tattoo!"* She showed me a tattoo she said she had before, but *she wanted to change it because she was going through this divorce.* It was a dove, the tattoo she originally had, and beside it she had added an intricate cage with an open door. It looked like the dove had just flown out and was on its way to freedom, flying along her forearm. I thought, *"Oh, this is kind of interesting." It's a very permanent reminder to yourself of whatever a symbol or object means to you. It's with you and it's on you and it's a constant reminder. I had toyed with the idea of a tattoo for years, but I never committed to anything. I didn't know about divorce tattoos, in terms of* being part of *divorce culture*, but when the *person I worked with got her tattoo*, *I got the idea* to get my own tattoo to symbolize what I had learned from my divorce. Once I decided that I wanted a divorce tattoo, I knew exactly what I wanted: *I chose an anchor because of my "Refuse to sink" sign.* I wanted this tattoo as *a reminder to myself that I was a survivor. I was walking out of this divorce a better person. I chose to get better, not bitter. I was much better off without him. I was a better person for it* and *I had learned a lot about myself.*

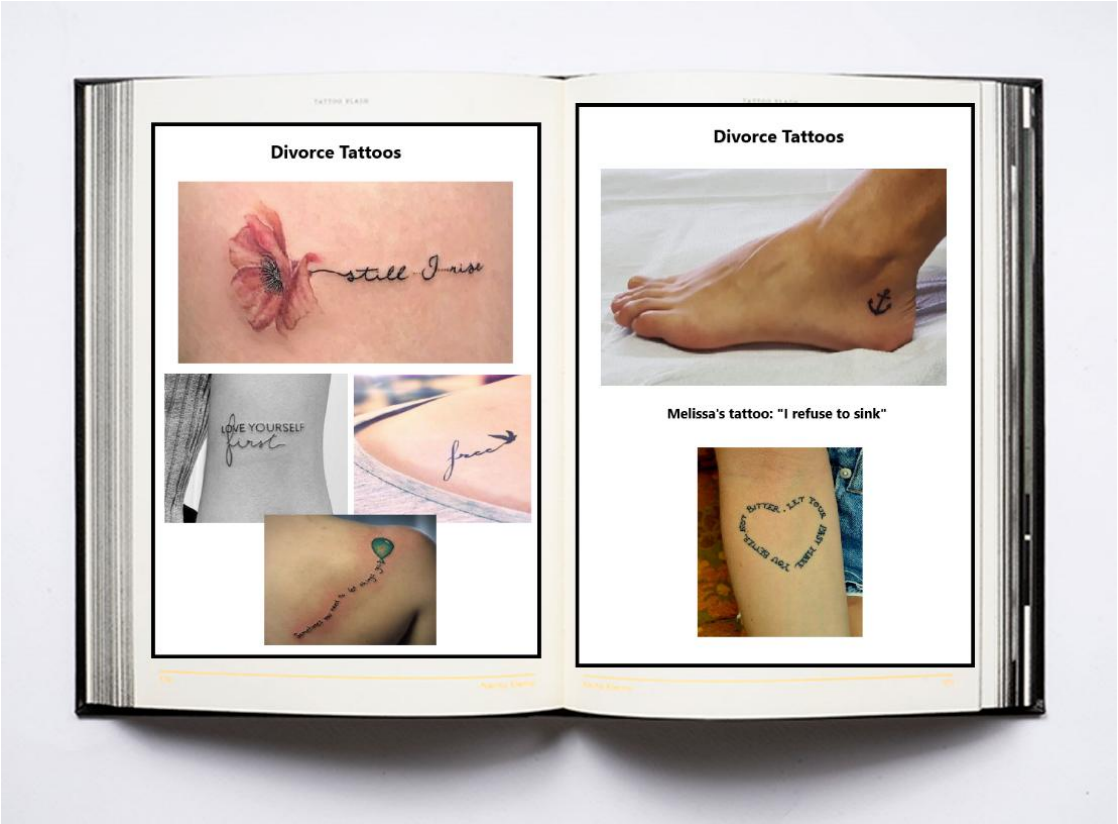
So *I had the idea* for the tattoo I wanted but *it wasn't like* I had just *separated and I went out and got a tattoo; it was thought out*. I got it about *a year* after I separated. The timing was *kind of a fluke*. *My friend said she was going to get her first tattoo*. *She had lost her dad a couple of years before so she was getting a tattoo in honour of her dad*. *This was something* that was

also *very well thought out*, but she *was nervous to go*. When she was telling me, *I said, "Oh, I'm thinking of getting a tattoo as well."* She suggested, *"Why don't you come with me? Maybe we can get them done at the same time?" We were both really nervous* so I thought, *"That's an idea!" So I went and had a consult with the same tattoo artist.* It was this cool little shop with bright purple walls covered in pictures of tattoos people had gotten there. Their counter was covered in stacks of binders containing pictures of more tattoo ideas that were all divided neatly into categories. The organization and content of the binders made me laugh, they were like Marie Kondo meets Kat Von D. I was flipping through one of the binders before my consult appointment and was surprised that there was actually a small section labelled "Divorce tattoos." There was a balloon with the string formed by the words, "Sometimes you need to let things go"; a few variations on birds, cages, flying, and freedom, like the tattoo the woman from work had; and even a couple really vivid ones, like the black outline of a woman with a gun to her head, which is covered in red splatter that becomes a stream of red butterflies—now that's a picture worth a thousand words!

My friend's tattoo was booked for the next day, but the artist *couldn't get me in* at the same time *so I had to wait a week*. *I went* with my friend and *stayed with her while she got hers done.* I held her hand while she alternated between wincing from the pain and smiling at her tattoo taking shape on her skin. *Then,* I had *mine done a week later*, and another *friend came with me*. It was apt that this particular friend was with me because they had really witnessed the impact of my separation and divorce. They had supported me through the lows and now they were supporting me through this high of getting *a divorce tattoo*. While the tattoo artist inked a small black *anchor on my foot*, he asked me what my tattoo was about, especially since *it's my first and only* one. I imagine he asks all his clients the meaning behind their tattoos. The stories he must hear! It occurred to me as I launched into my own explanation that there are a few professions, beyond actual therapists, where I think people can usually let their guards down and really just talk to someone, like hairdressers and taxi drivers. So, I explained to the tattoo artist, *"The anchor has a couple of meanings. One, it reminds me of who anchors me—who's important in my life and who keeps me grounded—which is my sister and a couple of friends. It's also a reminder of what keeps me grounded and that I refuse to sink."* In the middle of this tattoo shop, to someone I didn't know, I continued proclaiming as he nodded reassuringly, *"I wanted something permanent that was a reminder that I will not let my divorce be the end of me. I will not let it bring me down."* I saw him crack a half-smile, and added, *"I know it's kind of ironic because it is an anchor and it's meant to hold you down but I just liked the symbolism of "I refuse to sink" and I'm not going to have this bring me down!"* When he was done, he asked me if he could take a picture of my tattoo[43] to include in the "Divorce tattoos" section of the binder, and I was happy to oblige. *I love my tattoo* and I love the idea that some woman might be flipping through the binder at some point, stumble across the picture of my little anchor tattoo, and know that she is in good company.

(Melissa)

[43] The picture of the anchor on a foot, depicted in the mock album, is an actual photo of Melissa's tattoo.


Divorce Tattoos
still I rise
LOVE YOURSELF
first
Divorce Tattoos
Melissa's tattoo: "I refuse to sink"

Two Wolves

There's this parable, maybe you've heard it before:

A grandmother tells her granddaughter that within oneself, there is a battle between two wolves. For some, one wolf is darkness and despair, and the other one is light and hope. Each person's two wolves are different but they are always opposing and fighting one another. This is our perpetual inner conflict.[44]

I know what my two wolves are. They are **Authority** and **Autonomy**. They have been fighting each other for as long as I can remember.

These are the conversations—the battle of wits—they had about my divorce:

Authority:

After we separated, my ex-husband *tried to pressure me* to accept *that he has the right to keep *everything**[45] rather than *equally dividing everything*, *which is what seemed fair to me*. *He didn't recognize anything that I ever contributed by being part of his life*. When *our realtor advised us not to put my name on the house* we bought together, *because I was a student*, I went along with it. *So I put in $30 000 for the down payment and my name wasn't on the house*. When my ex and I separated, he kept everything. *I was shafted in terms of* our shared *property*. *There was no option for me to claim* any part of our house *unless I hired a lawyer and I sued him because the house was in his name. I had no idea how to go about it*. *I did not understand that* when people get divorced in Canada, they split their assets. *I really didn't understand my rights at all. I didn't know what to do* so I just said, *"Fuck it! Since I don't know what to do,* I'll *just screw it all* and *get out." There was no legal advice at all*. I just deferred to the authority of our realtor, initially, and then, of my ex-husband.

Autonomy:

Why didn't you seek legal advice? How could you not understand this basic right to split assets when you divorce?

Authority:

I think it has *to do with my background*, with *being a woman* who was born and raised *in Bulgaria*. *It is kind of complicated* to understand. First of all, *Bulgaria is a post-Soviet country*. *I was actually born during Communism*, but I mostly *grew up in a post-Soviet country*. *In a way, I always felt like I didn't have any authority* because of the Communism that shaped my country. *So I'm not really fighting for my rights*. I'm just *accepting what comes down on me as the other person's authority, especially a male figure*. So I felt that *my husband had authority over me*. *Even in my previous relationships, I never felt like I had authority over the relationship other*

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[44] This memetic legend usually involves a grandfather and his grandson and is commonly attributed to the Cherokee people in popular retelling (Hawlk, 2016). I have adapted this to be a grandmother and granddaughter to align with the focus on women within this research.

[45] Asterisks are used (here and elsewhere) to denote emphasis, rather than the conventional italicization, since italics indicate participants' direct words throughout the Findings.

than my right to say it's over, but not really in guiding what will happen during the relationship. I just *accepted* that *the other person's decisions were right* and thought, *"If you think that's right, okay, that's what we'll do."* I did *not really take the lead on thinking it over and thinking* about *what *I* think is right or standing up for it and understanding it better*. *I would not take the steps to understand things better. So I just felt like since I'm not informed, then I should let the other person decide because they seem more informed*. *I always come back to* that thinking being about *the authority, the dominance, of the other person*, specifically a *male figure*. I guess that's the patriarchy working as intended!

Autonomy:

But you rebelled against some *traditional* expectations for Bulgaria women, right? You rebelled against Bulgarian *men's expectation that women will stay home and take care of the children and cook.* You asserted, *"I'll do what I want, and I don't want to be a housewife."*

Authority:

You're right, *I was rebellious against* some *expectations*, but *there were still so many other levels that I didn't really think through or realize.*

Autonomy:

What I love most about Canada is that I can see other points of view. *I can be more certain about being a woman and having authority over my own person*; having autonomy. My changed sense of self *is definitely always evolving*. I'm now *very different from* who *I was. When I go back to Bulgaria*, *people* react differently to me, it *seems, especially men, actually*. *I notice this a lot*. *When I go back to Bulgaria, and we have discussions at gatherings, men criticize me a lot.* They say *I've changed too much and that I don't understand them anymore*. I tell them, *"Yes, because now I'm not taking your point of view and I'm not agreeing with you anymore. I'm giving you my opinion and you* are *dismissive of it." Now, I can recognize it*, whereas *before, I wouldn't*; *I would just agree with everyone* to follow *that social pressure to agree* with *what everyone thinks*. In Bulgaria, *even women agree* with *what men think about women*. *I don't think they realize it*. *Now that I'm more removed from that society*, *I feel I have a different perspective on it. People don't really understand it there, neither men nor women, really.* It's hard to see something else when you're in the midst of that reality.

Authority:

But people, places, and things that are different from you are threatening. Differences are bad. Sameness is good. We don't need to change things; they're fine as they are. *Feminism is a dead end.* I mean that's what *a lot of Bulgarians think, especially men.* They don't accept differences *when they discuss public issues, like queer societies or women or feminism.*

Autonomy:

That's a very narrow-minded view.[46] Actually, *feminism has very different layers and different kinds of philosophies within it. So to put it all in one and say, "This is what it is; it's this one thing" is a very male point of view. There are so many feminist ways in which you can look at a problem. It's a lot more inclusive and* is *trying to understand different perspectives rather than trying to narrow it down and box it in.*

Authority:

Okay, but what about the Church? I got married in Bulgaria in a *Greek Orthodox* Church. My husband and I had to be *from the same religion*. *The Greek Orthodox* Church *doesn't give you a divorce. You can't tell the Church, "I'm getting a divorce." The Church doesn't accept that.* So, *according to* our *religion, technically, we're still married*. *That's how it is*. *If I was to marry another Orthodox person and wanted to do it in Bulgaria, it wouldn't happen.* The Church *wouldn't allow me to do it because I already have* a religious matrimony *with somebody else.*

Autonomy:

I don't really care that much about it. *I just left it* as it is. It *doesn't daunt me at all*. *It's the same as when you get baptized, you get a paper that you were baptized in the church,* but *it's not really legally binding.* I have a piece of paper in a drawer somewhere that says I was married according to the *Greek Orthodox religion*, but it doesn't affect me. *I haven't looked into whether there are ways, or reasons,* where the Orthodox Church *would agree* to give you a divorce. *I haven't looked into that because I didn't really want to deal with it. It doesn't matter to me. I'm just not that religious. I started to adopt more of a spiritual approach to life rather than a religious approach. It's more about what I believe in rather than what someone else tells me* to believe, *or the rules of believing. That's probably something that I've developed over time because I'm not in Bulgaria.*

Authority:

During my marriage, my ex *tried to find faults* in me and to *blame* me. He would *say, "You didn't pay for our vacation," and "You didn't pay for our mortgage"* or even, *"I don't know if you were faithful before I came to Canada." He tried to make me feel like I didn't deserve* certain things, or rights, *and I guess he succeeded*. *I struggled with that. I didn't know how to look for my rights or legal advice.* So his *finger-pointing really worked on me.*

Autonomy:

I see my marriage and divorce as a learning experience. I have learned that *the involvement of the two different people in the marriage, or the commitment that every person is ready to have in terms of keeping a good relationship or maintaining that respect or love, it's not something that just happens. I feel I'm learning that there has to be some kind of a balance, equal commitment, and equal desire to participate.* In my current relationship, I'm *learning to*

[46] Some general views of Bulgarian society, broadly speaking, is that it can be quite narrow-minded, perhaps because it is a small country so mentalities tend to be more concentrated, in addition to an unstable political and economic situation in its recent history (Markova & King, 2023).

recognize when my gestures are being taken for granted. I'm trying to pay attention to what those things are that I don't think should be taken for granted and also understand when the other person is doing things that I shouldn't take for granted. I'm not so idealistic anymore as to think you're just going to fall in love with a person and everything will just be amazing because you're in love forever. A relationship is something that you work on. You work to keep the balance in your relationship, to feel appreciated and to give appreciation. I'm a different person than I was *twelve years* ago when I got divorced. *My gut told me that getting divorced was the right decision.* As soon as I made it, which is when I first said it out loud, *I felt relief*. *I felt happy.* My decision to *get a divorce* allowed me to *start a new life*. I don't defer to anyone's authority now. **I* have authority over my own person*hood.

The parable ends with the granddaughter asking her grandmother which of the two fighting wolves wins. She says smugly, "Whichever one you feed."

Well, my Autonomy has been well-fed lately...

(Rayna)

Kidding...Not Kidding

I don't physically want to have children.
I've felt that way since *I was in high school.*
I did consider having biological children when I was *married*
because *my ex-husband wanted kids.*
But *now,* I've returned to my previous resolve
and *I know that I'm never going to have* biological *kids.*
So *I don't have a ticking anything in me.*
I don't feel that pressure.
I don't agree with the mentality
that some women have where they are
forcing a relationship because they want
the "end goal" of having a child.
Or some women *have children because*
they want to make their husbands happy
or because they don't feel fulfilled in life.
I don't think those are good reasons to have a child.
I can be *fulfilled by doing other things.*

If I do decide I want children,
I don't feel compelled to be in a relationship.
You do not need a penis in your life
in order to have a child.
You can adopt, you can get a sperm donor...
I love children
and I would adopt a child in a heartbeat,
but *children are expensive*
so I would want to be *financially responsible*
to *give a kid the life they deserve.*
I can only *support myself right now.*

But *eventually, I will probably adopt.*
There are enough children
who are hurting in the world right now.
I don't want to physically produce one.
I would even go so far as adopting a disabled child
because I have had 13 years of experience
working with disabled humans
and those kids *are the ones that are* often *hurting the most.*

(Laura)

Three weeks after I moved out,
my ex was in a relationship.
He's still with the same woman
and they have a six-month-old together,
which I thought would be really hard for me.
But, actually,
I ended up *feeling like he's her problem*
and that makes me really happy!
He's a child himself
so she can deal with that
and that's fine.

(Kaleigh)

I've gained *the ability to become aware*
of the ingrained thought processes
that were told to me by somebody else;
that I didn't learn for myself:
that women and men get married,
they buy a house together,
and then they have kids.
I really like that this younger generation *of women*
is empowering young women to get out of that mindset:
we don't have to get married,
and live in a house,

and then have children,
and then give up our careers.

(Rhiannon)

I think that for *women at my age,*
in your *late twenties and entering your thirties,*
there is an obvious expectation
that you start having kids soon.
I feel it quite often from
friends, family, and *colleagues.*

Like, *I had a really crazy week and I was really tired,*
and I mentioned that,
and literally four different people
were like, "Do you think you're pregnant?"
I was just like, "Wow, *I can't possibly be tired*
without being pregnant or having kids, right?"
It's crazy.
People *I'm fairly close with*
know that kids are not on my radar.
If my current partner and *I have kids,*
it is at least two years out
before we plan to get pregnant,
so that is three years before we have kids.
So let's just push it way out.
I'm *just resisting that.*

Whenever people ask me if I'm pregnant,
and it happens often enough,
I'll just say,
"Nope, not pregnant and *not trying."*
But some people are persistent.

Like, *one of my girlfriends*
has asked me a couple of times
if I've been pregnant
and I really wanted to shut it down.
So I said, "We are not having kids at this point*,*
and if I got pregnant,
I probably won't keep it,
and probably won't tell you about it."
I almost always address it
because I find it really annoying,
especially if it happens twice from the same person,
then I'll say, "So I'm not trying to get pregnant,
and so just stop asking.
I'm just tired or I don't feel well.
That can all still happen without pregnancy.
You may not know that for some reason.
You may have forgotten,
but it is possible."
I just say it in a super factual way
but then add,
"But it's still not appropriate to ask me about it."

(Kaleigh)

My current partner and I *knew we wanted to have kids.*
We had both been through a divorce.
We were living together.
I remember having a conversation
with my mom
and I was torn*,*
"I don't know. Should I wait on this?
Is this something that I should dive into?"
At the same time,

I was hitting early *menopause.*
My mom said, "Just do it.
If that's what you want to do, just do it.
Don't worry about what everybody else thinks."
So we did
and now we have a *daughter* together.
I knew she *needed to exist.*

(Ava)

Kids are definitely something
that I think about a lot
and if it's going to happen for me.
But I also think a lot about
who I would have children with.

I would be very specific about
what their traits are for parenting
because then you're connected with them
for the rest of your life.
I want someone who is emotionally stable*, grounded.*
I think the equal division of labour is really important,
especially if you're both working.
I want someone who has similar parenting values to me.
And *someone who's interested in creating family traditions with me.*
I will be intentional about things like that.

(Kaleigh)

I have a *different path* now.
I'm not having kids.
Growing up,
that *path didn't feel like a choice.*
So it *is liberating*!
I can't imagine giving up
all of my interests and my goals,

and my pursuits,
for poopy diapers and insolence,
for the next 20 years.
And after having lived with my ex*,*
I really don't want to raise any more children!

(Rhiannon)

It's been *two years* since I separated.
I'm with a new partner now
and we're having a child together.

There's still a lot of guilt I'm carrying
from my divorce.
I think that's part of the reason why
I haven't widely *shared that I'm pregnant,*
like on social media,
because then people would be like,
"Well, wasn't she just married a couple of years ago?
But this is a new guy?
I haven't seen him before."

It's the same *judgment I felt*
about being in a new relationship
after my separation.
I don't know if I should have waited longer
Maybe I didn't *do divorce right*.
Maybe waiting to start a new relationship
would have been a better way to do it.
But you can't go back.
We tried *keeping it more secretive*
but my sister started telling people.
She said it was too much of a burden
to have this secret.

But ultimately, *I feel proud*
about having this child
and being in a committed relationship
with someone that I'm in love with,
and I'm working with in a relationship
as opposed to what I was doing before
with my ex.
I couldn't bring a child into that.
That truth wasn't convenient for anyone,
but it was *my truth.*
And I'm *proud* to be bringing a child into
this relationship now.

(Julia)

I was raised by a single mom,
a *hardcore feminist woman*,
So after my divorce,
I got it in my mind that maybe
I could just intentionally have a baby on my own.
I thought 'I've got to do this on my own;
I'm running out of time. I'm going to do it!'
I signed up for Sperm Bank Canada
and made a profile:
'Hello, I would like some vegan sperm...'

But through *a strange series of events,*
I spent *one weekend* with an ex,
my *tumultuous rebound* after my divorce,
and I *got pregnant.*

He *didn't want anything to do with* the *baby.*
But I did, so I decided *to do this on my own.*
Now, I have a baby *daughter*

and she's *changed my life in a huge,*
beautiful, wonderful way.
But it's a lot of work,
*a *lot* of work!*
She's wild and fiercely independent already.
She's helping me regain my own *independence.*

(Kaitlyn)

I've never been someone that has to be in a relationship.
That's never been a priority of mine,
so when my marriage ended*,*
I didn't feel that looming.
I also felt like I am young enough
that there's a whole life ahead of me.
I was also very aware that if another relationship
was going to happen,
I wanted it to work the next time.
I would rather spend a lifetime happily alone
than be unhappy with someone else.
That's just not a life, right?
Maybe that's because I was never like,
"I absolutely need to have children."

I just felt like what I really wanted
was to be happy.
That was the end game at that point,
when I separated.
It was very important to me to realize,
"A man will not define my happiness."
That's something I've always felt,
but it was something that was
very empowering in that moment

of leaving my marriage,
and moving forward.

After my divorce*, I got the tattoo*
"I'll ride the wave where it takes me"
because you don't know what's going to happen.
and what happened is
pretty mind-blowing:
I met my *soulmate—*
a partner that is loving,
and supportive,
and kind,
and responsible.

We got *engaged*,
moved in together,
and now we're having a child.
It's amazing how quickly
things fell into place
and feel so perfectly meant to be.
I never would have imagined
things to work the way that they have.
I'm a very career-driven person,
so I thought I'd be putting my efforts into that.

It's amazing to think
I'm going to be somebody's mom!
I feel pretty empowered
that I have a little human on the way
that I can raise, whether female or male,
to understand what respect is,

what love should look like,

what support should look like,

and *that you don't need to be in a relationship*

to be a full-functioning, happy person.

I get to teach that to someone now.

Isn't that the ultimate resistance...

(Cassandra)

Night and Day

When I was in high school, my grade ten English teacher gave us a list of books and asked us to choose one of them for a book report. I chose Virginia Woolf's novel Night and Day. I had already read Mrs. Dalloway and A Room of One's Own years before and thought Woolf was such a badass, early 20th-century feminist writer. I couldn't put down Night and Day and read it, perhaps ironically, in one day and part of a night! While it wasn't Woolf's most well-known work, I think it's underrated. I was struck by the contrasting views between the two main characters, who are seemingly worlds apart, but who must confront similar tensions. Ultimately, the contrasts of night and day brought clarity to the complexities of their romantic relationships.[47]

Years later, it occurred to me that I had experienced my own "modern" version of Night and Day, except my contrasts are between the two major relationships of my life: **my relationship with my ex-husband**, and my relationship with my current partner.

We met in high school. We were *both nerds*. *He was the only one with the guts to actually talk to me because I was the only girl in the robotics club.* For my birthday, he made me an adorable tiny robot out of tin foil because we joked that all our friends thought we were building a classic robot during our club meetings, like a Jetsons style robot that would serve us breakfast or something. Instead, we mostly tinkered with circuit boards but I loved his gesture. *He* became *my first serious boyfriend*. *I was fifteen and he was a year older. We* only *dated for a year*. Then, he had the consideration and maturity to *make the hard call to call it off* because *he was going to be joining the military* and he didn't want me to wait for him; *he knew that I wanted to go to college and university.* In this way, I knew he supported what mattered to me at the time. The same year I read Night and Day for my English class, I closed the chapter on my first major relationship.

We met in high school*. We were *both nerds*. A *friend set us up*. He was my second boyfriend. *I was seventeen*. *I made everything he was into fit into my whole world*. *I had a falling out with some friends so* I *shifted* to a *group of friends that were all his friends*. *I felt isolated and lonely.* We dated for *three years* and then *moved in together*. He *spent my tuition money* so I had to *quit school*. *He didn't care* that he squashed my dreams of a post-secondary education. *He didn't care* about me, period. *I felt trapped because everything in my life, financially and all my friends, was tied to* my relationship with him. *I felt hopeless and useless. I felt like it was going to be really hard to break free.

Twelve years later, I re-opened a chapter of my life I thought was closed forever when I reconnected with my first boyfriend and we became friends again. *We both realized independently that we were horribly unhappy and wanted to end our relationships*. *We started openly talking* to each other. *I just broke down and said, "I'm so unhappy. I am contemplating killing myself."* He confided, *"I've not exactly been in the greatest spot either." So we supported each other through that* since we were both *going through* the same thing. When I admitted how

[47] The novel's main plot and themes are discussed in a review by Groff (2019) on the centenary anniversary of its original publication.

unhappy I was, he said frankly, *"Well, if you're considering suicide anyway, how much worse could it get if you just ran away? You need to just come out to Halifax. I'll look after you. It'll be okay."* So then and there, *I booked my ticket to Halifax* and *wrote my parents an email that* basically *said, "Don't freak out but I'm leaving* my husband. *I need to get out of here. I'm moving across the country. Bye"* Needless to say, they did freak out. *People* who *saw it from the outside* just assumed I *left my marriage and ran away with a sailor* since he's in the Navy. I personally love the image of running away with a sailor and wish I'd had the hair to pull off the romantic 1920s hairstyles from those old photographs of women kissing their sailor beaus in a port town somewhere. Anyway, *I* just *let people stew in their assumptions* while I started a new life with my sailor. When I think of my love life, it's *interesting* that *directly before my now ex-partner*, *was my* first *boyfriend*, *who directly after my marriage ended, is now my partner* again, so *it kind of came full circle*. But my two major relationships are, indeed, like night and day!

I was pretty open* with him that *I am Pagan and poly*amorous *and pan*sexual. But *he had certain expectations of how I'd act towards his family. I didn't understand it*. To me, you're either with a person as they are or you're with someone else that fits another mould for you. But *he wanted me to be this thing in a box and not be too weird around his parents*. *He was afraid with the pansexuality that his parents wouldn't accept it* since they're *a little bit redneck and a little bit homophobic.* So my identity as a *pansexual was forcibly closeted during most of my relationship with him because he didn't want to have to explain it to his parents. That was rough and I wasn't cool with it. He did it with the Paganism, too, because it fell into the category of 'don't be too weird' around his parents.* Actually, *they all thought I was Jewish because I wore a star occasionally*. With me being *poly*, *he said he was*, too, but *he was apparently not* and just insisted, *"No, we don't do that"* whenever I brought it up *to explore. I was always trying to do it in an ethical way where he was comfortable, too.* But it didn't make a difference to him. *I think the thing that got me the most was the fact that he had claimed that he was open to those* identities *but then* he actually *wanted me to act like other people.* I asked him indignantly once, *"Well, why don't you just date someone that falls into that category instead of getting me to act it out?"* But *he just was too intimidated or timid or cowardly. On one hand, he would say, "Oh yeah, sure" and then, "No." It's like he had put no actual thought into it at all. Communication* with him *in general just sucked!

We have a very pagan household. I'm allowed to have it without an issue. For me, that means cultivating spirituality that centers on the sacred feminine and our interconnectedness with others and the natural world. Our house is peppered with incense sticks, goddess statues, and other symbols of our rituals and solstice celebrations.[48] *We aren't practicing polyamory but we're both open to it. We both acknowledge that* just in terms of *time management right now, it would not be fair to include anybody else.* Mostly, *we talk openly, value,* and *support* each other. It's refreshingly light.

***I was basically his mother*: *I cooked for him*; *I made sure the house was taken care of*; and I *looked after him*. He strung me along for *eight years* about *having a family*, which *I had told him, before we were married, was very important to me*. I had *waited*, begged,**

[48] These elements of modern paganism, among others, are discussed by Kermani (2013) in her book on pagan family values.

argued*, rationalized, considered *adoption*, and waited some more. He finally admitted that he thought I would *"just let it go."* There was no consideration of any division of labour in our household. It was all me. He couldn't even be bothered to pick up a *life-saving prescription* for me when I once asked him to do that. *He didn't care. Everything always revolved around what he wanted.

We *knew we wanted to have kids*. I was finally with someone who could communicate clearly about their intentions. After *two years together*, I became *pregnant* with our *daughter*, *which was kind of a miracle* given my *fertility issues*. *I've always identified as that kind of nurturing mother type and* now *I'm able to actually do that in a more meaningful way, with actual children,* not a certain man child. *That is a very strong part of my identity that I am able to do* and express in my life now. We have *our toddler* and also his *two kids* from his first marriage. *As difficult as it is* to have children, *it's also very rewarding*. We've been very intentional *because we have both been through a divorce* so *there were certain conversations that we had about what we expected of each other. Not just like the lovey-dovey stuff, but the actual division of housework and things like who's responsible for what to make it work. We really talked that out in a way that I think more people should in general, but unless you've been to counselling in a really shitty relationship, it's a skill that you don't really necessarily pick up. In some ways, we do have that more traditional division of gender roles and the jobs that get lined up. He works* outside the home and I'm a *stay-at-home mom*, but *he still cooks and there's a lot of things that we do together. A lot of people have* asked *me, "How are you happy with that?"* I just explain, *"Well, I actually really like doing things like cooking and baking and being around kids."* And my roles are *definitely valued*. That's the thing I think some people miss about "modern womanhood" —my ex certainly did—it's about having the freedom to truly make your own choices; not about others dictating certain choices for you. Making *the division of labour more* or less *equal was something that we discussed, so it's not even something that was expected* of me *because if I didn't want to cook,* for instance, *he could easily fill it, but I'd be expected to fill in the gap somewhere else.* That's a real partnership, which was unknown to me in darker times.

I revisited my tattered copy of Night and Day, and like an old friend, Virginia (we're on a first-name basis now) reminded me that the contrasts between my two relationships—like night and day—have given me the kind of clarity neither could have granted on its own. Like modernist literature[49] itself, Virginia's sphere of literary influence, my own stories are fragmented rather than formulaic and exist for me as a stream of consciousness punctuated by glimmers of insights, like stars in the night.

(Ava)

[49] (Carter & Friedman, 2013).

The Kid Dilemma

I have never really liked kids. I still don't like kids. Even this morning, I met a friend at a *café* with *a kids' zone at the back of it and all these parents were trying to talk to me while their kids were playing, and I was just* thinking*, "This is horrifying. When is my friend going to get here? I don't care how old your kid is; I don't care* about *any of this stuff." I'm such a jerk.*

But the whole kid thing *was kind of a dichotomy* or *a dilemma* for me because even though *I don't like* kids, I'm also aware that *there's a part of me* that wants to follow *that cultural imperative where it's like kids come as you get the job* and *you get your nice house*. *I followed that narrative with my husband,* except *everything we did seemed* like *it was for show*. *So we bought the nice big house,* but *no one was ever allowed to come over because he wouldn't let anyone come and visit.*

We were in *this big, five-bedroom house* with just the *two* of us and *our fancy-looking dogs*. *It was all stupid. I couldn't* even *clean it so I was always getting in trouble for that. But when we* first *moved in, I looked at those bedrooms* as an indication that *we were going to have kids.* I thought*, "We're going to have kids and it's going to be fun and great."*

But *that never happened*. *We sort of tried. We kind of had discussions about it, but nothing ever happened. I did go for fertility testing and they told me I had a low egg count and then he refused to go for testing at all. So we never really got anywhere with that.*

Then, I got *divorced* in my *early thirties*. *I remember having* this *sense* that *I needed to think* of *how I felt about the fact that I was not going to have kids because that's how it registered for me* when I got divorced. *I was having a pre-grief kind of thing where I was working through it and* coming to terms with that closed door.

I thought *I was pretty much okay with* not having kids *but* that old dilemma resurfaced again and *I* *also* *felt like I think I would be a good mom*. Whenever I had pictured myself as a mom though, *I always saw myself as a single mom because my mom was a single mom*. *I was raised by these two hardcore feminist women, my mom and my grandma. So it never seemed to me that being a single mom was a bad thing or anything to look down upon.* I *could do it.* My mom *did*. Although, *she probably struggled more than she allowed me to recognize*. *And she really was a single* mom: *There was no going to a father's house on the weekends or anything like that.* So my dilemma seemed to work itself out *and I got it in my mind that maybe I could just intentionally have a baby* on my own.

So *that was sort of my* thought *process* about having kids: I don't really like kids, but I think I want to be a mom; it didn't work out to have kids with my husband; my mom did it on her own; I'll do it on my own. *I signed up for Sperm Bank Canada or something* like that and *made a profile: "Hello, I'm a vegan girl, living in a small town, and I would like some vegan sperm."* It was the strangest profile I'd ever made, but I just put it out there, thinking, *'I've got to do this on my own; I'm running out of time. I'm going to do it!' If it happens, it happens.*

Then, *a strange series of events* happened: *My perfect little dog got hit by some farmer driving by in his pickup truck. He brought my dog down the driveway to me. It was shocking for me*. *I buried my dog* and then just stood frozen in my backyard with a shovel in my hand. *My emotional reaction was* to buy *a pack of cigarettes*, even though *I hadn't smoked in almost ten years*, and then to *just drive* as far as I could *because that's what I did* if I was really upset.

I ended up driving to the *house* of the person I dated after my separation, *who I hadn't been with for a very long time. We'd had a very tumultuous relationship*. That *one weekend* together *turned into getting pregnant. I told him and he* was clear about his position*: "I don't want anything to do with* the *baby. I already have a kid. I can't afford to have another kid."* He said to me, *"You're going to have to have an abortion."* I insisted, *"I'm old enough and I'm financially okay and I'm going to do this on my own." I still had the same idea in my mind that I wanted to be a mom*, and now I am.

*I think, for the most part, I'm a good mom. But it's a lot of work, a *lot* of work. It's changed my life in a huge, beautiful, wonderful way, but I'm truly a single mom.* I may not always want to be single though. *I think the hardest part about* considering *re-partnering* at some point is *that in* a *gender-normative society, you get two people* parenting but it *doesn't mean that those two people are actually helping each other or that they're on the same page. My biggest fear is having a different idea of how to raise a child and that's coming into my dating life now and why I may not re-partner in the future because it's not just me* anymore. *So much* of my life now *is about* my daughter *and how I want her to be*. *She's going to grow up to be whoever she is, but I can influence a lot of that. I want her to be a kind and aware little human.* If I choose to bring somebody into our life, *I want them to be on the same page* as me *and that's a lot to ask of someone who is not her father*. *That makes* dating *a little more difficult.*

When I was married, I was told all the time that I was stupid and an idiot and that I couldn't do anything. Now, I'm a single mom raising a 13-month-old. I run my own not-for-profit and *I'm getting my real estate license*. *I* even *plow my own driveway*. *I'm doing all of these things that* my ex *said I couldn't do*, but *I am doing it! It feels* strangely *successful*. My life now definitely isn't what I thought a "successful" life would look like before my divorce, or even before my marriage. *Sometimes, I still get* this feeling that *I'm not getting anywhere in life* and *I feel stuck*. *But when I sit back and actually look at what I have done between then and now, and on my own, I can see* that *there's a lot to be said for what's happening. There's still room for grief and loss and wishing and what ifs and all that kind of stuff, but I can also put the what ifs forward. I think that is what keeps me going.*

I also think a lot about what I'm teaching my daughter but she *is actually teaching *me* a lot,* too. *She's helping me regain my independence because I don't want her to be raised by someone who's always running to someone else for help. I want her to see me tackling things on my own and figuring it out and asking for help when it's necessary. She's wild and fiercely independent already. I still don't really like kids that much* but I *like my own.*

(Kaitlyn)

Plenty of Fish*

(**Barracudas, Vipers, Frogs, Duds, Douchebags, Ghosters, Ass-slappers...*)

*"*Dating apps are *weird because it's like shopping for a human...*but *at the bottom of the barrel."*

KALEIGH AGE: 30

RELATIONSHIP STATUS: DIVORCED

SEEKING:

I am seeking a *stable* man between the ages of 30 and *48* years who *has kids* (I have a young *daughter*). I prefer *tall men* (*over 6'1''*). Finding someone who is a *vegan* (or at least *plant-based*) is *important to me*, but who is not such a *"hippy"* that they aren't also *pro-choice* about *vaccines*. I am also seeking an *intelligent* and *activist*-minded person (someone who is *on board with speaking up and speaking out*, particularly for the protection of animals and the environment). My ideal partner will respect my *independence* and will be invested in *conscious coupling* (*putting in the work* to make a relationship work, *prioritizing* each other, and *creating a partnership in which things get better as a result of being together...).*

DEAL BREAKERS:

I am not interested in someone who would be *financially* dependent on me ((*I don't want* to be *paying for everything* for someone). If you *watch porn* (don't bother *lying* about not watching it if you do...) or have a *foot fetish*, keep it moving.

LAURA AGE: 30

RELATIONSHIP STATUS: DIVORCED

SEEKING:

I am seeking a *geeky somebody to experience life with*, yet who respects that *I like my own space and independence*. *Honest* communication is essential (I'm not here for any *bullshit*), as is *appreciating me and my time*, and *making me laugh* (*I genuinely enjoy laughing and making people laugh; it's one of the best noises!*). I am also looking for a partner who is *open-minded* and who has the kind *of understanding of life* that comes from *having your life change in some drastic way* (if you know, you know).

DEAL BREAKERS:

I am an *independent badass* so I'm not looking for someone who thinks *they're god's gift to women*, and who plays the white *knight*. *I will not be having* biological *children*. If you are only

interested in appearance or *sex*, that's too *shallow* for me. Similarly, I'm not interested in a *casual or polyamorous* relationship. I will not participate in any *"married woman" fetishes or kinks* (that is, I will not *wear my wedding ring* for any *"dirty little secret" cheating on a nonexistent husband facade*). Also, *I do not enjoy stupid people*, as in, an *ignorant or bigoted* person (if you watch *Fox* News, *there's the door*). Finally, and this is a big one, I am not interested in *somebody who is looking for the "love of their life"* (*that* idealized, singular, *selfless, deep, loyal love...it's* too *much pressure and expectation...and it's unrealistic*).

AKHILA AGE: 29

RELATIONSHIP STATUS: DIVORCED

SEEKING:

I am seeking an *educated Muslim* man who *values my time* and is *good to me*. Someone who is grounded, *easy*-going, *trust*worthy, and accountable for their own actions is desirable. My partner must also have honest, *upfront* communication, and be *excited* to socialize with my *friends and family*.

DEAL BREAKERS:

I am *divorced* and I am *not ashamed*, but if you are bothered by the *"black mark",* you're not the right person for me. I'm also not interested in *stupid guys* or guys who are always *"too busy."* I proudly wear a *hijab* and will not be *changing* that about *myself;* it is a symbol of my faith and a reminder to *become a better human.*

MELISSA AGE: 35

RELATIONSHIP STATUS: DIVORCED

SEEKING:

The *right person* for me will be deeply caring (*about your family, your kids, your pets, the environment, yourself, your health*...). I am seeking someone who is *respectful* (including respecting my boundaries) and also open to *constructive criticism. I don't care about job status,* but I am looking for someone who is *happy with* their *job* and financially independent (who *doesn't expect me to support* them financially). The ideal partner must also be able to *handle usual life stresses and must have a car and be able to drive* (*I will not be your chauffeur*).

DEAL BREAKERS:

I will not date *smokers, cat owners* (*I'm very allergic to cats*), or people with *dirty, messy* homes. *Narcissists* or *sociopaths* also need not apply.

Seven Weddings and a Divorce

(Or **"Come Back Stronger Than a 90s Trend"**[50])

I separated in the winter and hibernated in *my pain.* I hunkered down with *red wine and cinnamon buns*, waiting for some kind of thaw. *I* had *moved* back *in with my parents* and was living in their basement. This put me squarely in a doomed reality of the cautionary tale people tell unruly teens: "If you don't get your grades up (or whatever other benchmark of success was used), you'll end up thirty-something and living in your parents' basement." Technically, I was only 28, but that didn't detract much from the sting of where I'd landed. The thing is, those cautionary tales never reveal the truly terrifying kicker: What if you do all the right things and you *still* end up thirty-something and living in your parents' basement? I went from being a "successful young professional" (as my aunt called me), with a husband and a *beautiful house* to becoming the bogeywoman of where you hope your life won't end up. But I had my ways of coping. *My mom would come down to the basement* to check on me and she would find me with *a fork and knife* leaning protectively over a *plastic container* of a *cinnamon bun four*-pack, which *I would eat in one sitting*. She would just give me this look and I would assure her, *"Thanks for coming down. I am alive. I'm thriving. And I don't want to be judged right now."* Even though I was eating these *cinnamon buns* with *thick cream cheese icing* almost daily, that's *literally* all I ate—*I could not eat anything* else— so *I lost so much weight*. *People would tell me how skinny I was. It's the most effective diet I've ever been on—just get really stressed and then don't eat anything! I called it the "divorce diet."* That was my *shitty* winter.

That summer, *my friends all got married.* These are my *close friends* I *grew up with* and have known for the past *fifteen years*. We're from a small town so they also *grew up with* my ex. We were all this close-knit group of friends and *neither of us wanted to step away from* celebrating with *our friends* even though he and I had just separated. *All of my best friends were marrying his best friends. I stood up* as a bridesmaid *in four weddings. I was the maid of honour for one of them.* My ex *was a groomsman in three of them.* I was also a guest at *three other* weddings. *So I had seven weddings* in total *that summer.* My closet looked like I was opening a small bridal boutique with all the bridesmaid dresses I had hanging up in their pastel hues. At least my girlfriends had good taste.

I really threw myself into helping my girlfriends with all their wedding preparations. *I needed to be busy.* I made hundreds of wedding favours for the four weddings where I was a bridesmaid. I had never DIY'd so much in my life! My ex and I had *eloped* so I didn't even do any of that stuff when I got married. *I hosted one of my girlfriend's bridal showers* in our *beautiful home, right before we put it on the market. I wasn't even living there* anymore *but the invitations had gone out* before we separated and *I was not changing the location*. So my ex *left* the house for the afternoon and I showered the bride-to-be with all the love and corny bridal games I could muster.

The very first wedding was really hard. It was the first time I had seen my ex since we separated months earlier. He was laughing and socializing, dressed in the sharp, navy groomsman suit that had hung in our shared closet for months before *I moved out*. Not only was

[50] (Swift, 2020a)

he there, but *his family was there*. His family who had been my family, too, for *ten years*. *I was really, really close with his mom*, especially, and *some of his aunts, too*. When we separated, his *family completely stopped speaking to me*. *The last thing* his *mom said to me was "Can't you just get over it?" She knew he was drinking and she thought that's all it was*. My ex's *dad*, her *husband*, *is a functioning alcoholic* and *it's just accepted in his family*. *I left it to* my ex *to tell* his family *what was going on because I did not think that it was my responsibility to tell them that he had slept with someone and had a drug problem. He didn't tell them.* So *I felt very slighted by* his *family and I was really angry with them*. I decided the best way to handle all this at the wedding was to get *super drunk.* In retrospect, it *wasn't a good coping mechanism*. When I drink, I get extra emotional. I ended up *crying in the bathroom by myself, twice. My friend brought me a bag of makeup so no one knew what was happening.* I transformed myself from tear-stained to fierce while tipsily singing lyrics from Taylor Swift's Vigilante Shit: "Draw the cat eye, sharp enough to kill a man . . . They say looks can kill and I might try."[51] I'd become a devout Swiftie during my separation and her discography of angsty wronged woman ballads were my anthems. I made a mental note to wear waterproof mascara for the next wedding.

Let me say this before you roll your eyes that I'm a "Swiftie," or critique her as an artist, or worse, dismiss her as a person: There is a good reason why Taylor Swift—the artist and the person—was named TIME Magazine's 2023 Person of the Year. She is "the master storyteller of the modern era"[52] and she "deploys the most efficient medium of the day—the pop song—to tell her story."[53] And the stories she tells through her songs—from "the deepest part of herself"—well, it just so happens that they "speak directly into the souls of other people,"[54] including me![55] Her own "master narrative" of redemption speaks to me in a way I didn't know I needed until this moment in my own life (and which, admittedly, might have made me scoff, too, as a former, "version of [my]self"). But like Taylor herself, I'm slowly discovering "new happiness not despite challenges, but because of them."[56]

That summer could easily have been my own version of Cruel Summer,[57] as it was once for my girl, Taylor. After all, in an objectively *crazy*, rapid succession of *seven* weddings, *I celebrated* the start of my friends' marriages in the midst of my own marriage ending. I was reminded of Four Weddings and a Funeral, the rom-com movie my mom and I watched together in the 90s,[58] except my version was seven weddings and a divorce. But that summer wasn't a cruel summer; it was a *cleansing* summer. *I heard seven* couples *say their vows* to each other. I saw seven couples become lost in each other's gaze, sharing their promises to love and support each other in the good times and the hard times (and I said a fervent prayer to the universe that the inevitable hard times of their marriages would be less devastating than those of mine). My

[51] (Swift, 2022)
[52] (Lansky, 2023, para. 10)
[53] (Lansky, 2023, para. 9)
[54] (Lansky, 2023, para. 17)
[55] And me, Bronwen 😉
[56] (Lansky, 2023, para. 5)
[57] (Swift, 2019a)
[58] (Newell, 1994)

best friend, also a recently-converted Swiftie, actually sang these Tay-inspired vows to her husband and I needed another makeup bag, but this time, for happy tears:

> Ladies and gentlemen, will you please stand?[59]. . . I take this magnetic force of a man to be my [husband][60]. . . You are the one I've been waiting for[61]. . . You took the time to memorize me, my fears, my hopes, and dreams. . . I'd like to hang out with you for my whole life[62]. . . All's well that ends well to end up with you.[63]

Listening to all these couples, I realized three things: 1) *I have so much love for* these *people*; 2) *This is so right*; and 3) *I didn't have any of this in my marriage*.

I also realized *in that moment*—that precarious time of limbo—*I really needed to celebrate. So between bachelorette parties, bridal showers, and weddings, I had so many experiences—fourteen*, to be exact—*to get dressed up and look pretty, to go out, and to have so much fun. It was a real part of my healing having all of those opportunities to celebrate*; *to go out and get white girl wasted and just dance my heart out with my friends.* On the dance floor—"dancin' on my own"— I let my sadness and anger reverberate through my body and then I would, indeed, "just shake it off."[64] Drinking and dancing—that tried-and-true combo for letting loose—was what my girlfriends and I used to do in our early 20s. *We really liked to just drink and had so much fun together. That's how I bonded with all of my girlfriends.* I *grew out of that* eventually (although my ex *really never* did). But *in that moment*—28 and separated—*I really needed* that kind of *celebrating*. I needed *a reason to stop focusing on my pain* and "I knew everything would be alright if [I] just [kept] dancing like [I was] 22."[65]

A few months ago when I first separated, I was in a "forever winter"[66] state but, as Tay says, "Long story short, I survived."[67] *That summer*, I witnessed *so much love. It felt positive, healing* and *cleansing.* All the champagne and fruity cocktails I drank washed away the *raw*ness of *my pain*. I vowed to myself to love ME and I don't intend to break this vow! That summer gave me the strength to "step into the daylight and let it go."[68] It's a new era[69] and "You haven't met the new me yet!"[70]

🫶[71]

(Kaleigh)

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[59] (Swift, 2019b)
[60] (Swift, 2019b)
[61] (Swift, 2017)
[62] (Swift, 2021a)
[63] (Swift, 2019b)
[64] (Swift, 2014)
[65] (Swift, 2021b)
[66] (Swift, 2021c)
[67] (Swift, 2020b)
[68] (Swift, 2019c)
[69] Taylor Swift's worldwide concert tour, "The Eras Tour," chronicles the various "eras" of her musical career to date (Swift, 2024)
[70] (Swift, 2020c)
[71] This "Millennial hand heart" or simply the "heart hand" is a gesture Taylor Swift uses often to show love to her fans. As she described, "The heart-hand symbol means something between 'I love you' and 'thank you' . . . that you can deliver without saying a word" (Meltzer, 2011, para. 7).

Good Woman

As a child of the 80s, I think I was still raised with the old traditional married sense: You get married, you buy a house together, you have children, you live together as a family. Maybe you *have the aging parents move in.*

Yet, despite this cultural upbringing, I had another big influence in my early life that was at odds with this traditional sense: *My mom was a progressive woman. She was a sergeant in the Air Force* who *graduated in the second class of female RCMP officers. So when I grew up, I had no idea that there were power struggles between men and women. I didn't know that there was a difference in status. I had absolutely no idea. And my parents were together until I was about eight* and then my mom was a single mom, but I kept in regular contact with my dad. *My mom stayed single for the rest of her life.* She told me *recently that she doesn't ever feel the need to get married again and that her home is going to be *her* home.*

It was only when *I was an adult and I went to university that I started learning that men and women weren't considered equal. It was a bit of a shocker to process. And when I started working in a professional capacity, that's when it really became apparent.*

So I have these early, formative influences that were *ingrained* and that I'm just starting to *unpack* in the last *five years or so. I've done a lot of learning, growing, and living* in that time, basically since the *turmoil* started in my relationship with my ex. I've gained *the ability to become aware of those ingrained thought processes that were told to me by somebody else; that I didn't learn for myself.* For me, that thought process was *that women and men get married, they buy a house together, and then they have kids*. Until these past *five years or so*—very recently, really—*my thinking was that this is how it has to be.*

It might seem strange that an *educated* woman like me, raised by a *progressive mom*, would hold *those beliefs.* But that's the thing, I think, about *ingrained thought processes*—or ideologies, I guess—unless something shakes us up and makes us actively question them, *we* aren't *really aware of those beliefs.*

It's like when you're a kid, you think the way you and your family live is the way others live, too. You just generalize your experiences to others because that's the blueprint you have available to you. Then, maybe you get invited to a sleepover at a friend's house or something and you're gobsmacked with the sudden realization that their family acts and lives differently than yours (and others probably do, too)! And you're temporarily left reeling from the cognitive dissonance of reconciling the differences you've seen with your own eyes: "Wow, Lizzie has to share a room with her sister" (I thought every kid had their own room, like me) or "For a special treat, the Robertsons eat their dessert first" (my mom never wavered from her insistence that dessert could only be eaten if everything else on my plate was gone).

I used to think, too, in my *child-like mind*, *that my grandparents were the only people in the world that lived in an apartment. We would drive to Toronto* and visit them in their apartment and it was somehow lost on me that there were apartment buildings all around the city. *Even when I moved out, when I was 18, I didn't realize that there were so many apartments and that*

people lived in apartments and not every family has a house. I didn't realize that *men and women don't have to get married and have a home together and have children. It's not necessary for everybody.*

When I started to question my beliefs about this *traditional* trajectory, well then, I had to question the roles within *those beliefs*. Like, if marriage, a house, and kids are not the only version of a "good life", well then, maybe my beliefs about what makes a *"good woman"* and a *"good man"* need some *unpacking*, too.

When I hear the term "good woman", that makes me cringe. But when I hear the term "good man", it makes me feel like swimming. So even those beliefs are ingrained in me. There's a physical shift that I'm having when I groan and I'm like, "Ugh, 'good woman'" 'cause I really think that television, movies, even news, helps to make those impressions. Like, a good woman, what is that? Somebody that's barefoot and *pregnant in the kitchen? Is that somebody that lifts up her man?* The *groan* and the *cringe* I viscerally experience when I hear or think of *the term "good woman"* are not because I'm scoffing at it and outright rejecting it. It's because I realized, *sadly*, that my *ingrained belief* is *the 1950s version of what a good woman should be*. You know, the woman who *does her hair all nice so she can vacuum the house when no one's there. The presentation and the domesticity of the 1950s woman.*

It's like I've recently realized I'm carrying this disease I didn't know I had that only started showing symptoms when the toxicity of my marriage became undeniable. When my ex and I were first living together, *I was working away so* much, and when I came home, the place was dirty and I would be upset that he had been home and *couldn't even be bothered* to clean up. So *I would voice my discontent.* But here's the interesting thing I'm now *unpacking* in retrospect about that time: there was a direct clash of my two big early influences—the *traditional* and the *progressive*. I was living a progressive life, by all external accounts: I was *educated*, I earned my own money as the *only female* working in various mine sites, and I had an *adventurous* life...But I had these *traditional* beliefs lurking internally. I remember when *I would voice my discontent* when I came home from being away for work and my ex had left the house dirty, *I* distinctly *regretted my behaviour*. I regretted being discontent (from my dashed expectation that he would clean the house while I was away) and that I had voiced this discontent to him. I regretted being *opinionated* because *I was not* being *a good woman* who *lifts her man up* and doesn't ever complain.

Then, when I was off work for my shoulder surgery and I wasn't contributing financially, I stopped complaining and I stopped voicing my opinion that things around the house weren't being handled around the house *because he was at work, earning the bacon. It was important to me for things to be fair and equal, so I wanted to work very hard doing a lot of housework and keeping up with the gardens and maintenance of our large property. Eventually, it felt like I was working nonstop with housework and nothing was being done because I was doing it all by myself. As soon as I was finished doing one thing,* I would do *the next thing, and the next thing,* and then *it was back to doing that first thing all over again. So I started feeling very underappreciated and resentful.*

Throughout the progress of my ex's *gaslighting,* he convinced me *I wasn't good enough for him* or anyone else. *I lost my power and my sense of self. I thought I was crazy.* I kept thinking *of what I could do to improve my behaviour so that* he *would change* his *response to my behaviour. I kept thinking, "What am I doing wrong to trigger his anger?" I tried so hard to be that gosh darn 1950s woman; to be such a good woman. But as hard as I tried to be a "good woman"* and *a "good housewife", I was never able to do enough. I couldn't understand why he was just not responding the way that I would like. It was a dangerous tool I had that allowed me to continue to think that I was doing something wrong.*

Then, in the midst of feeling *crazy*, *hopeless*, and *terrified*, something *changed*. I was given this *book,* Warrior Goddess Training, and in reading it, *it finally dawned on me that we all have inner power and who we choose to give it to is our own choice. Not only that, but I also started becoming aware of his behaviour.* He made me *think I was doing everything wrong and everything was my fault and I had this huge problem.* But when I started becoming aware of *his* behaviour, I had this epiphany: *"Oh my god, it's not me. It's him*!" Even after that epiphany, it still *took a lot of observation for me to get enough information to feel like I wasn't in the wrong. That helped me find my personal power.* I thought about all the *adventurous, exciting* experiences I had in my twenties, like rock climbing and kayaking in *treacherous* areas, *and I hoped that if I could unbury all those exciting experiences that I had to overcome in previous years, if I could find those again,* I could *stand up for myself. I had all of the benefits of those experiences to stand up for myself and to be confident and not let anybody intimidate me.*

I decided "I can't keep living like this anyway." So I started voicing my opinion again. And my ex *didn't act on his promise to drag me down to the cliff by my hair and throw me off.* But *that's when I started swimming every day, five days a week. I would take the ferry and walk to the pool* and I would practice swimming *two kilometres to make sure I could swim across that channel* under the cliff *if he happened to* follow through with his threat.

Even though I was taking action to protect myself, *I loathed this situation* I was in and *I was ashamed* and *embarrassed,* so *I didn't really tell anyone*. Until *I* finally *told somebody a little bit about what was going on.* She was an *older* friend, a woman in her *late seventies* who *had been through it all,* and she suggested I *go to counselling*. I had *never* done any counselling before but decided to give it a try.

So I started five months of individual counselling, twice a week. I never thought about self-development before that. It was always like intelligence development or *physical development, but it was never, ever emotional development. I think* that *was really to my great detriment. In counselling,* I began to *understand that you can't control anybody else's behaviour. You can't make anybody else change. You can only work on yourself and how you respond to situations.* I started *building healthy self-esteem, building boundaries, and teaching others how to treat* me. *So I started to learn how to treat people and how you shouldn't be treated by others. I was doing huge amounts of personal development. So* it was *a great opportunity for me to learn about all of that and to discover that I really had things right in my twenties, so how can I improve on that?*

I also *realized through counselling* that my ex *wasn't trying at all to be a good man*. When I asked myself what a *"good man"* was to me, and why I *felt like swimming when I heard that term, it's somebody who's kind, thoughtful, and conscientious.* When I thought about what good men I have known in my life, *I remember this amazing friend* I had in *my twenties*. *He was an outdoor recreation instructor who led an outdoor recreation school mostly for women. I was his assistant and we travelled all over the place and had lots of fun, exciting adventures. He's British* and he would often say to me*, "You're a brave lass." He really just reinforced all of these positive qualities that didn't have to do with my looks or the way I dressed. So he was very empowering. And in* the *Toastmasters Club* I recently joined, *there's a man* who *leads our group* and *everything that he says to anybody is just really empowering. So now, my new definition of a good man is someone who's empowering.* My ex *was utterly disempowering*; he was not a good man.

Once I started defining for myself what a good man is—an empowering man—I started noticing empowering women in my life. *I don't think I noticed these empowering women until I was going through divorce. Then,* all *these conversations came out.* I started really talking to some *good friends of mine,* who are *women over the age of 60* and who *have all been divorced. They all have children and they all say the same thing, "Although I love my children more than anything, If I had to go back and do it all over again, I wouldn't have gotten married, and I wouldn't have had children."* So I'm hearing this from *these established, amazing women,* who *have a lot of strength of character and courage and who are all helpful and kind.* It stops me in my tracks to realize that these women didn't have the choices I do now. Because not getting married and not having children *would have been totally frowned upon in the '60s or '70s when they were my age.*

I think our generation has the choice and has the opportunity for choices that they might not have had. I really like how this group of women—our generation of women in their 20s and 30s— *is empowering young women to get out of that mindset that we don't have to get married and live in a house and then have children and then give up our careers.* I feel *so fortunate to be born in this day and age to have the kind of freedom that I have. I want to fully embrace this freedom: The freedom to do what I am passionate about and to accomplish all that I can.* I feel grateful to be continuing my education in *grad school* now and to be physically *in a new space*—far away from my ex—*with new peeps, new friends,* and *a new life. And even though I don't have a clear vision or goals of where I'm going to end up or what I'm going to do in my life, I do know some things and I'm going to keep moving towards those things and allow new things to come to light to explore those new things.* But even if I am in another relationship, *I want to always have my own place to go back to because I'm always most healthy and most happy when I'm living on my own. That's a little piece of personal empowerment—a way to preserve personal power is to have that own space.*

Now that *it's the start of a new, exciting chapter* for me, after leaving my ex, *it's* also *an opportunity for me to retrain how I think of a good woman. I'm resisting those ingrained beliefs* I once held. When I think of that traditional trajectory I once expected: marriage, house, kids, I've done two of them—marriage and a house—and neither has served me well, as it turns out.

When I think about the third piece of that trajectory, having kids, I recognize both the traditional and progressive influences I inherited from my upbringing. I certainly expected to have kids, but I also expected to have a career. When my ex and I were first together, before I learned to keep my opinions to myself, *someone* voiced this same expectation and *said*, *"Well, women can have a profession and raise children." And I remember having the conversation with* my ex, who was my boyfriend at the time, *and he said, "Well, if we have kids, I'm not going to stay home to raise them. What about my six figures?" And I* just glared at him and *said, "What about my six figures?"* That's the woman I was before I lost my confidence.

Now, at *37*, *I'm at an age where* I *can't be as guaranteed to have a healthy pregnancy* or *healthy children anymore. And* I vividly remember a *discussion years ago with a gynecologist telling me, "Watch out after you get to this certain age."* But *I've taken quite a different path from the path that I assumed I would take.* I've had to *come to terms with the disappointment that I'm not having kids.* It was definitely *ingrained in my mindset* that I would have children one day and my thoughts followed suit*: "When I have children..."; "I'm saving this for my children..."; "Well, when I teach my children this, this is what I'm going to* do or say*..."; "This is how I'm going to raise my child...." And still, from time to time, that* kind of *thought still crosses my mind. Like, "Oh, this is how I should bring up this topic with my children"* or *"On their first day of school, this is how I'm going to..."* But then *I'm like, "Oh, wait a second, I'm not going to have children." I'm disappointed that some of those thoughts still pop into my head.*

On the other hand, knowing that I have a *different path*, one that I'm defining on my own, *is liberating because it felt like I didn't have a choice when I was a kid.* I just accepted that having kids *was what was going to happen*. And now, *I can't imagine giving up all of my interests and my goals, and my pursuits, for poopy diapers and insolence, for the next 20 years. And after having lived with* my ex*, I really don't want to raise any more children!*

When I was with my ex, I only had a *tiny ember* of myself left. But I carried that ember and walked through the fire. I just wanted to make it to the other side, to safety, but I didn't know that process would also burn away all the *ingrained beliefs* that didn't serve me; the beliefs that held me back from envisioning a life truly of my own making. I'm still building this vision and plan for my life, *just seeing where it goes*, but I know that one of the ways I want to spend my time is doing *volunteer work* that *contributes to bettering lives.* So *I do a lot of volunteer work for a variety of things, from trail maintenance to coaching Special Olympic athletes, to helping people move forward on their educational goals.*

Looking at my next pursuits in my volunteer work, I may want to be *an advocate for women's empowerment,* particularly for *women in less-than-amicable relationships. I know what they* may be *going through.* I'm interested now in being the kind of "good woman" who helps *women stand together and empower each other.*

(Rhiannon)

The Feminist Manifesto of Divorcées

Surviving

Be gentle with yourself. ♀ *Put on your big girl pants, go get a glass of water, and get your shit together.* ♀ Find the *Thelma* to your *Louise*. ♀ Sometimes you just need to *eat* a *four*-pack of *cinnamon buns in one sitting*, or whatever your *"divorce diet"* of choice happens to be. ♀ Trust that the *emotional intensity* and *urgency* of your divorce will lessen over time. ♀ You're *not a victim*, you're *an independent badass.* ♀ *Take care of yourself.* The hurt *doesn't end when you sign the divorce papers.* ♀ *Seek legal advice.* ♀ *Focus on the present moment.* ♀ Going through a divorce *really tests you to the limit*. Recognize *how strong* you *really* are. You'*ve got this!* ♀ *Take control of who* you *are and what* you *are.* Do *not compromise* on what matters to you. ♀ You're *not crazy*. ♀ *It gets a lot worse before it gets better, but it is so much better on the other side. You just have to live through it.* ♀ *Tell people and just be open about* your divorce; that dispels the shame that feeds on secrecy. ♀ This is *your* *story. Challenge people who try to make it their story. Challenge people that make assumptions* because they *don't know the full picture.* ♀ It's better to *spend a lifetime happily alone than be unhappy with someone else.* ♀ *It gets so much better. It takes time* but *it doesn't hurt for as long as you think it's going to* hurt. ♀ Anger can be clarifying and motivating. Just don't stay in *angry mode* forever. ♀ *Be careful in that year post-divorce of who you connect with. You're more vulnerable than you think you are and time is needed. You need to take care of yourself first.* ♀ *Ask for help. People will support you.* ♀ *Life is so short.* Don't waste your *limited time and energy* in a *relationship that isn't meaningful* (anymore). ♀ *If someone mistreats* you, *walk away*. *Put boundaries up and protect* yourself. That's especially hard for women to do because *we are told our whole life to do be kind to people* and *to do what people ask...We're told that for so long that it's difficult to say no to people to protect yourself.* Do it anyway. ♀ *People genuinely care about you no matter how much your ex does not care about you. Lean on your support system. They're there for a reason.* ♀ *Get* yourself a *great lawyer*, especially if your ex is a *psychopath* or otherwise unreasonable. ♀ *Be intentional about what you share and who you share with. Make sure they have the emotional space for it because you can't take it back.* ♀ It's not your *fault*. ♀ Get yourself *a good lawyer.* ♀ When you *share* openly with others, you give them permission to do the same with you. ♀ *Don't overthink it!* ♀ *Love* yourself. ♀ *You can't control anybody else's behaviour. You can't make anybody else change. You can only work on yourself and how you respond to situations.* That's where your power lies. ♀ Divorce is not *a failure*. ♀ Divorce *is a form of grief*, and healing *takes longer than we think it does. There's no* right *timeline.* ♀ *One day at a time. Don't put so much pressure on yourself to have all the answers because you can't possibly have them.* ♀ Divorce *is not the end of life. It's just the end of one chapter.*

Letting Go

If you're unhappy, acknowledge that and make the changes you need to make; *"ride the wave where it takes you" because when things fall apart, other things are rebuilding and life has a way of working out.* ♀ Your life *is not a reality show.* You're *not here to entertain* people. ♀ *Dance*

your heart out with your friends to stop focusing on your pain. ♀ *Stick to your guns and get people around you that will help you stick to those guns.* ♀ Take any *shame and embarrassment* you have and *release* them: *shoot* them like a *fire arrow into the water and let* them *sail away.* ♀ *Sit and listen long enough* to *hear* what *your heart* is saying to you. *Believe* that *you know what is best for you. Release that fear and take that leap.* ♀ Examine your *ingrained beliefs* about what is expected and possible for you and *retrain how* you *think.* ♀ It takes *intentional untangling to work through what* your divorce *means to you and the personal narrative you develop post-divorce.* ♀ *Build the foundation of who* you are *without your ex,* especially before you *start dating.* ♀ *Don't be* like *a used tissue,* crumpled and discarded. *Be a person who speaks up* for yourself. *Stop compromising.* ♀ *Speak your truth!* ♀ Healing from divorce takes *deep work.* ♀ *Don't regret* your *marriage or divorce*; *see* them *as a learning experience.* ♀ *Love's great* in a relationship, *but it's not enough.* ♀ *Forgive your ex and forgive yourself.* ♀ *A man* should *not define your happiness.* ♀ *The 1950's version of a "good woman"* didn't serve women in the 1950s and it won't serve you (just ask Betty Freidan...). Define the kind of woman you want to be for yourself. ♀ It's *incredibly liberating to not worry about why* your ex *felt* or acted as he did; *it's not* your *problem.* ♀ *Go to counselling. Do the work. Get better, not bitter.* ♀ If you're starting to date post-divorce, *ready yourself for the amount of frogs in the* pond. *You can't keep kissing all of them and expect one to turn into a prince.* ♀ You *can be a good person without* being *in a relationship.* ♀ *Be easy on yourself.* ♀ Put down the *heavy bag* you're *carrying around* trying *to please people* and *not let* them *down.* ♀ *Financial independence for women is absolutely key.* Don't be financially *reliant* on any one person or situation. Be able to financially *take care of yourself.* ♀ *Be who you are.* ♀ *If you're dating post-divorce, be wary of "sparks";* they're mostly *a neurochemical reaction connected to addiction,* not the basis of a lasting relationship. ♀ Find a *support network*, *especially of women who have been through divorce.* ♀ *Picture something that's hurting you right now and look at it with kindness.* ♀ *It's okay to grieve the love you once had. But accept that* your ex *was incapable of giving you the love you needed, whether it was their fault or not. Then, let go of that* and *feel at peace.* ♀ There is no one-size-fits-all *procedure* for healing or *moving on.* You decide.

Thriving

If you put your happiness first, the rest of the pieces fall together. ♀ Find your *thing* and *do* it! ♀ Give yourself *permission to be "selfish"*: *be honest* with yourself *about the things that* you *like and how* you *like to spend* your *time. Meet yourself!* ♀ If you've lost your sense of self, search your *buried experiences* for times when you were YOU and unbury them. ♀ *Re-center* yourself on *what* you *want to do and* your *ambitions.* ♀ *Learn how to validate* your*self*; don't seek it externally from others. ♀ Be *unapologetically who* you are. ♀ *You do you!* ♀ Insist on being *appreciated* and *valued* in any *relationship* you are in. ♀ *Doing the things* you *like* can *distract you from the sadness* and is part of the *healing process. Hike, swim,* spend time with *friends, watch movies*...whatever you *like to do.* And don't be *afraid to* keep doing things you *previously* enjoyed with your *ex.* They don't get to have sole custody of your shared leisure. ♀

Decide for your*self* what you want for your life. ♀ *Value* the *people in* your *life that are there for* you. Non-romantic *relationships matter*. They are your people. *Maybe our life partners are each other!* ♀ *Have a freedom party. Fully embrace that wonderful freedom. Tip a cup of champagne and cheer because it* is *the end of a dark chapter and the start of a new, exciting* chapter. ♀ Be clear about what you want and *expect* in a subsequent relationship; *not just the lovey-dovey stuff.* ♀ *Counselling* is a form of *personal development* and self-care. ♀ Discover *what* you *like in* your *life*: *how* you *want* your *house to be decorated; how* you *want to dress; how* you *want to spend* your *time;* and what you want to *eat.* ♀ *Prioritize your happiness.* ♀ Find ways to *really listen to your body*, whether through *meditation* or physical activity. ♀ Surround yourself with *empowering* people. ♀ Don't compromise on the things that matter to you, for anyone. Your dreams need to *exist.* ♀ *Throw yourself into what makes your heart beat; into what makes you passionate. Do what makes your heart happy!* ♀ You are *good enough* and you *do enough*. Don't let anyone make you feel otherwise. ♀ Whatever *feelings* you have now are *valid* but take it from someone who has *had a little longer perspective* on divorce, *there is life after* divorce! You have the *capacity to imagine different futures that don't involve* your *ex.* You can *reconstitute* and re-invent your life!

All our love,

Cassandra, Melissa, Kaleigh, Julia, Rhiannon, Alison, Laura, Akhila, Kaitlyn, Rayna, Maylin, Ava

(The Divorcées)

Part Three: Social Shares

From monologue to dialogue...

Objects of (Dis)Affection[72]

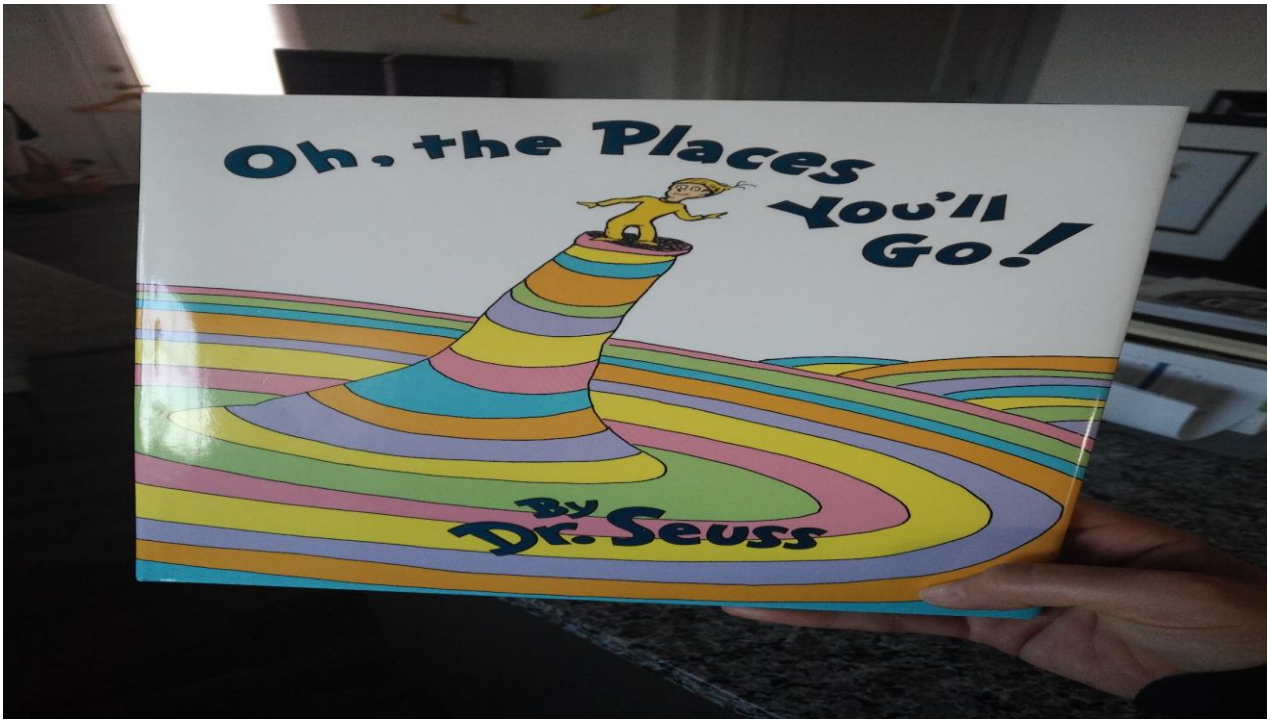
[72] **Instagram** is a photo and video-sharing social networking service. It allows users to upload media that can be edited with filters and be organized by hashtags. Posts can be shared publicly or with preapproved followers. Users can browse other users' content by tags and locations, view trending content, like photos, and follow other users to add their content to a personal feed (Hutchinson, 2019). Instagram is an incredibly popular social media platform with 2 billion monthly active users worldwide last year (Hetler, 2024).

This Instagram representation shows and describes photos or re-creations of participants' meaningful objects, which they brought to the group interviews (see Chapter Four).

I just got rid of a bunch of my wedding stuff four weeks ago. So it took me about two years to be ready to go through and get rid of things from my marriage. *This* picture[73] *is the only thing I have left, which is a really funny normal picture of my ex and I and our dog, in* reindeer antlers*, which I make him wear for like five minutes and it's really normal. It's not a particularly nice picture of either of us. It's probably at eight in the morning, it's at my parents' house. I think I'm 22. I look completely foreign to myself and I don't know why I never took the Winners sticky off. None of this picture really makes sense to me, but it just feels like a real representation of our life. This is probably how we looked on a normal basis. That picture just reminds me that we were happy at one point. I think remembering that and not thinking that my entire relationship was a huge error* was *very helpful in my healing.* I don't think everyone would want a picture of their ex on their IG feed, but I'm at a point now where I don't feel I have to crop him out or anything. Besides, my dog is clearly the most handsome guy in this photo, and in my life (then and now)! 🐶🎅

#WeUsedToBeNormal #NormalIsOverrated #MarriagePurge #Healing #LifeAfterDivorce

julia_retiredbarstar



[73] This picture is a representation of Kaleigh's actual photo, as described, to maintain her anonymity.

After I *terminated* my pregnancy and my husband *and I split*, *I went to live at my mom's for a short period of time and I couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't do anything. It felt like my body was just cement and I was beginning to have some pretty dark thoughts. I didn't know where to turn to and I needed something motivational, something to help me. I remembered my brother used to use this book* when *he* was a university *don to kind of motivate his students, that, you know, hard times happen, and you can get through them.* So *I remembered that* and thought, *'I need to get that book.' So I ran out to the store and I got it. I read it cover to cover like a gazillion times. The kid in the story goes through the darker passages to get to better times and I just kept visualizing that. It was giving me faith and hope that this was going to pass because I couldn't rationalize that at the time. I thought, 'This is now my life. I'm so upset and so down.'* In addition to my divorce, *I had the layered component of having the termination and I was struggling more with that* and with *all the people judging me* and *my dad not talking to me. I couldn't see the light, so I needed the light and that book was my light. I don't read it anymore but I look at it a lot and I'll just remind myself, 'I'm at the back pages of the book, after the stormy days.' And* I know *I'll go back to the stormy days at some point* because *that's life.* 📗 🌞 🌦️

#HardTimes #YouCanGetThroughIt #ThisTooShallPass #FindYourLight #LifeAfterDivorce #AfterTheStorm #Dr.SeussMotivation

C **cassandra_jaggedpearl**

♫ Johnny Nash · I Can See Clearly Now

I put off self-care in a lot of ways for a really long time when I was married. *It was all about* my husband *all the time.* Even when *we went to therapy, it was still about him. He made double what I made, but I was paying all the bills because I had taken over all of our budgeting and payday would roll around and his money would be garnished because he was going to loan sharks,* which *I didn't know* at the time. I just knew that *I was bailing him out a lot, and with that, I didn't have the ability to* pay for any of my own needs, *like,* to *go get my teeth cleaned or* to *go get my eyes checked. I knew my eyes were getting worse but I just put it off forever.*

It wasn't until after my ex and I separated and *I was dating my* current *partner that we went to a comedy show and I* said, *"I can't really see the stage." I knew I should be able to see the stage* from *where we were sitting. So I borrowed* my partner's *glasses and* realized*, "Oh, you're supposed to see their faces"! It dawned on me* then *how badly I needed to get my eyes checked.*

So I went to an optometrist and *found out I had a stigmatism and* in *one of my eyes, I was borderline going blind! The other eye was* trying to *make up for it so it was failing me,* too. *So I got my first pair of glasses,* which *marked the first point where I was like, "Wow, I have actually done something for myself, which I haven't done in years."* Once *I put on my glasses, it was a whole new world.* I remember shortly after I got them, *my partner* and I *were driving away for the weekend* to his *trailer and I* remarked, *"The trees are so beautiful! It's a whole new world, literally." I just couldn't believe how much I had just pushed off* such basic self-care *without realizing* it and remedying that has given me a whole new perspective, quite literally.

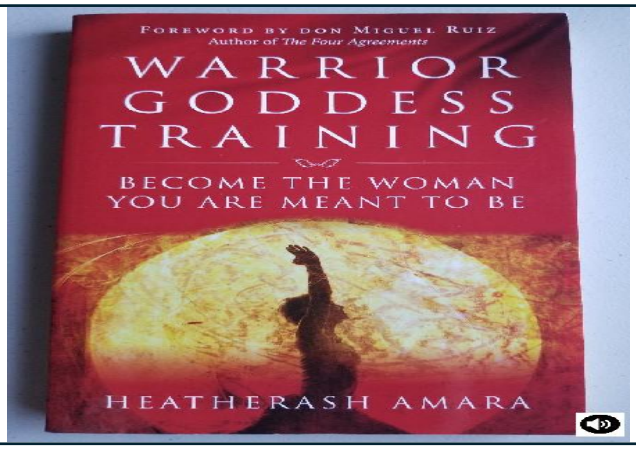
Another reason why my glasses are a meaningful item to represent my divorce process *is what my dad said the first time my parents met* my current partner*. We were talking to my dad about the process of divorce because he divorced quite young,* before he married my mother*,* and, of course, I was *getting a divorce* and my current partner is also *divorced. My dad said to both of us, "Once you go through* a divorce, *your eyes are always wide open." He kept saying, "Don't you feel that way now? Don't you feel your eyes are wide open?"*

So my glasses remind me of my physical perspective—from near-blindness to clear vision—but also of this broader perspective *that once you go through* a divorce*, once you acknowledge who you're meant to be, and what you feel inside, and your empowerment, you will go through life with your eyes wide open. I don't foresee ever ending up again in a situation like* the one I had with my ex *because I would just never tolerate it. I would recognize the signs sooner; I would get out sooner.* 🙈 👓 👁️

#SelfCare #WholeNewWorld #EyesWideOpen #DivorceRecovery #Verklempt

rhiannon_adventurer

♫Helen Reddy • I Am Woman



With my ex, *I became this injured creature that had to acquiesce to everything. I wasn't allowed to voice my opinion.* My ex *told me, "Nobody likes you because you use big words and you make people feel stupid." I didn't think that was true* but *I* still *tried so hard to make sure to not use big words, to simplify my language, to not sound like a know-it-all, and just to keep all of that tucked in.* I tried to *do everything I could so that people would like me.* I also tried *to not express my opinions or my concerns*—to be *the "yes" person—so that I didn't upset* my ex.

I don't know how I ended up getting the original copy of this book, Warrior Goddess Training, but when I read the first couple of chapters, it actually talked about stopping doing things for others. It said that *women are the nurturers, they like to take care of things* and to *keep the harmony* and *peace. The first few chapters that I read were just like, 'Holy crap!'. It completely changed how I was viewing my situation from this injured creature into the woman that I had been and am meant to be. This* book *helped me realize, 'Wait a sec, I do have internal power'. I* even *mentioned this book to a friend who was struggling with something similar.* 📚 ♀️

#YesWoman #Silenced #WhoAmI #NurtureYourself #NewPerspective #GuardYourPower #WarriorGoddessUnlocked #Healing

This is *a blank piece of paper,* which represents the "blank slate" or *the "tabula rasa"* as it's said in Latin. There's actually a couple of meanings of the "tabula rasa." One is from the philosopher John Locke, who argued that *we have nothing in our heads from birth* so everything we know is observed and learned, which was the main idea behind early Empiricism.[74] This *Lockean sense* isn't the one I'm referring to though. The other sense, *the Roman one, is that you can rewrite the wax tablet.* The Romans would *write on a wax tablet* and then *they would heat up the wax tablet so that* they *could rewrite it.*

So as I was working through, and dealing with, my separation *initially, the Roman idea of* the *tabula rasa* really resonated with me *in terms of how can you rewrite, or recollect, your memory in different ways. So, in terms of rewriting,* when my ex and I separated, *I had to decide who and what I was going to be. I also realized that I could decide; I didn't have to be tied to the past. I could rewrite things. I have this whole preoccupation with what it would mean to write myself into existence, in some ways. I became preoccupied with establishing and re-establishing myself. I think that was really liberating in* that *I didn't have to be beholden to the choices I had made* in the past, *but I could turn around and make new and different kinds of choices. I spent a lot of time thinking about that and also* about *all the fears* I had. I mean, I had just moved to the States to start my PhD program and my husband was supposed to follow me there but, instead, he said he wanted a divorce. So I had fears about things *like grad school, tenure track jobs, precarity, where I would work, and where I would live.*

[74] (Shelley, 2006)

To cope with all these unknowns, *I sort of became quite aggressive about* my future planning*: I had my trajectory and* my *five-year plan, and that was* to *finish grad school* and get a *tenure-track job. I applied anywhere* and *ended up working in the United States at an R1 institution and a tenure track job for a year. It was like* the *'top program in the country' kind of thing and* then, *at that point, I was dating the man who would become my* current *spouse. I'd made some decisions at that point about priorities in my career and that kind of thing. I had* decided, *"I'm not going to get in a situation where I'm holding myself back for somebody else." So I moved several states away and did that job for a while. Then, I got a tenure-track job back in Canada. I came back here and* made it clear to the man I was dating, *"If we're going to do this, you're going to follow me." So he eventually did,* and *we're married now.* 🖋️📖

#ReWriteYourLife #BlankSlate #FutureFocus #NotHoldingBack #NewChoices #ReMarriage

I can't believe today is my two-year divorce-aversary. *I told my husband it was over January 31st and February 1st is our official separation date. So Valentine's Day was two weeks later* and *my sister gave me a Valentine's gift, which was this book called* <u>*You Will Go Far*</u>*. I opened it and I'm sitting on my bedroom floor, reading it, and bawling my eyes out because my sister is my best friend. We talk every day. She's my rock. She's my everything. We've always been really, really close. She was so influential in my breakup and she did everything she could for me.* Like, *she and her now fiancé were at my door at 7:00 AM the day I was moving out* of my house with my ex. *She had her best friend and boyfriend come and help me move. She was on top of it. She is my everything. So she gave me this book.*

I still *read it from time to time when I need to. And I pulled it out this morning and this one page really hit home. It says, "Talk about your feelings if they're true, others will know what you're going through." I feel like this is the page that now kind of incorporates this section of my life*

where I can talk about my divorce with people who get it *because,* at the time, *I didn't have people who were going through what I was.* 📚👭❤️

#MySisterIsMyEverything #Support #BookInspo #YouWillGoFar #ShareYourTruth #IYKYK

akhila_have.faith.will.travel

This perfume is the first gift my ex *got me after we got engaged. It was very special* to me, *so whenever I wore it, I thought,* "He picked this gift out for me; he thought of me." But *after nine months of marriage, I came to know that he* actually *didn't* pick it out and *give it to me. It was his mother who bought it and just gave it to me in his name. That's when I stopped using it.*

But I carried this almost-empty *perfume* bottle with me wherever I went. *I travelled* to *around six* or *seven countries* since I got it and *every time, I carried this with me. I just don't want to let it go because it reminds me that my time is really valuable and* that I should think very carefully *before I invest* in *anybody, whatever kind of relationship it is, and before I move on further with* any *relationship.*

When I got divorced, *my grandmother wanted to destroy everything related to* my ex *in my life. She* basically came over, went through all my stuff and insisted*, "No you're not keeping this, you're not keeping this…"* and *she just threw away everything* that was connected to my ex or

our time together. *But* when she tried to throw away this perfume bottle, *then I* said, *"No, I want to keep this!".* So even though, like my grandmother, *I wanted to erase every memory* from my marriage, this is the only physical thing I kept *that reminds me* of my ex, but more so, it reminds me to value my *time and energy*, because *it was just not valued* with my ex, and I'll never let that happen again! 🎁

#TarnishedGift #KnowYourValue #SweetSmellofDivorce

kaitlyn_veganmama

♫ Beyoncé · Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)

My ex and I *went to his* family's *cottage.* The *whole drive up*, we were *not talking.* Or, more accurately, he wasn't talking to me, as he often did to punish me after a disagreement. And we had just had a real doozie of one. *We get to his cottage* and suddenly, *he's acting as if we're totally fine.* His family is there and *everyone's acting the way they always do, "Oh, hi,* Kaitlyn*," you know? And I'm trying to smile along with it as I always did. He wanted to go on a hike so I said, "Okay." So we go on this hike* and *there's a lighthouse at one of the bays there and* beside it, *someone* had *made a chair out of rocks. He tells me, "Oh, sit in that chair, check it out." So I'm sitting there and he's wandering down by the water and he comes back, and he hands me this* very regular-looking *rock;* like there's nothing distinct about it. But *he says, "Look how sparkly this rock is."* So *I'm looking at it* and thinking to myself, *"It's not sparkly* at all. Why is he so into this rock?"

Then, I look up and there he is on one knee, and he goes, "But it's not as sparkly as this rock, is it?" and he shows me *this massive diamond that is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in the world. And he's proposing to me after a week of not talking to me and yelling at me the weekend before, which caused me to take all these pills, and pushing me and shoving me and telling me*

I'm an idiot and all of these other things. And what do I do? I *say "Yes!" Like, "Oh my god! Yay."*

What's interesting is my engagement and wedding *rings ended up getting stolen after we separated.* So *this darn rock is all I have left from that day. The expensive diamond is somewhere out there* (likely *stolen* by the *psycho* rebound boyfriend I had after my ex), *and I've got this lump of whatever from the beach. The fact that I still have it is kind of funny, too. It's not* even *tucked away; it's out* on display *in my house and I don't even know why.* Maybe it's to remind me to trust my perceptions and instincts: My ex tried to convince me that this rock was sparkly, and it clearly wasn't. He also tried to convince me our life together was "sparkly," but I knew it wasn't. I just didn't quite trust myself at the time to call a rock a rock, so to speak. 💍

#Proposal #AllThatSparkles #TheDiamondMadeMeDoIt #TrustYourGut

laura_gamergal
♫ Miley Cyrus · Flowers

This is a little collection of mementos, like the kind you might put in a scrapbook. In general, *I keep everything, like movie tickets, and stubs of things. I am assuming I'm going to scrapbook at some point. I really hope* so, but *it's an expensive hobby.* So *I just keep them and then if I ever have to bring it out,* they are *there.*

So part of my little collection of momentos here is *every single card that I ever got in a bouquet of flowers from him. The flower cards just make me laugh 'cause I hate flowers. I hate getting bouquets. To me, it just seems like a wasted gift because they die.* But my ex *would get the biggest bouquet of flowers* for me, *not because he did anything wrong, or he was trying to apologize for anything. He would just do it* thoughtfully *for anniversaries, Valentine's Day, and birthdays. So in order to be like, "Thanks, husband", I would always keep the cards. I used to keep them in my wallet at all times.* So with *the flower cards,* it was *like, "Okay, I did get a gift out of that bouquet of flowers." Even though the flowers are long gone, then that still exists.*

The other little memento I included is *the train ticket from the day I left England*, after my husband and I separated and I came back to Canada. *When I was looking for a memorable* object, and I found this ticket again, *it was kind of a gut punch. Like, "Why did I keep this from the day I left my husband?"* But I did. Maybe I'll make a divorce scrapbook someday… 💐 🎟️

#MarriageMementos #IActuallyHateFlowers #OneWayTicketToDivorceTown #DivorceScrapbook

My experience with my ex *during the marriage* was *my feeling of being blamed. He was trying to find faults* in me, like he would *say, "You didn't pay for* our *vacation," and "You didn't need to pay for* our *mortgage," and "I don't know if you were faithful before I came to Canada," and "What did you do* when you were *going out with this person or that person?"* He would question or criticize me about so many things, like*, "Why don't you come home earlier from school?"; "Why do you spend so much time with your friends?"; "Why do you have to work on your projects in other houses?"; "Why haven't you cooked dinner?" things like that . . . So* he was *trying to make me feel like I didn't deserve* certain things or rights*, and I guess he succeeded. So I struggled with that.*

Over time, I started to realize what was happening, but then I didn't know how to look for my rights or legal advice. So in that sense, his *finger-pointing really worked on me.* So my meaningful object is a *visualization of my feeling of being blamed* in my marriage: *a picture* of *a*

man pointing his finger at [a woman]. It's not actually a photo of us; it's just a photo I found on the internet to show how I felt.

I've learned from my marriage and divorce that I won't accept this treatment in other relationships. If I were to contrast the finger-pointing image that represents my marriage and divorce with an image of the kind of relationship I want, and deserve, now *it would be something to do with balance, maybe scales; something that visualizes balance.* 👉⚖️

#Blame #FingerPointing #NotMyFault #Balance #ItTakesTwoToTango

M **maylin_take.a.hike**

After my divorce, *I watched the movie* *Call Me By Your Name*. *At the end of the movie, the father tells the son that the son should not feel sadness that* he *cannot be together with his loved one.* Instead, *he should be proud that when they were in that relationship, he was sincerely willing to do whatever* the *other person* was *willing to do* and *that is the most treasured path of life.*

I watched that movie and when I heard the father's words, *I think it* was *a moment of reconciliation with myself that* I could be *proud* that *when I* was *involved* in the *relationship* with my ex-husband, *I was purely in it and I was honest and loyal and passionate in that relationship. I* realized I *don't need to feel* like, *"Oh, I'm abandoned"* or *"Oh, I'm bad luck." As long as I was there* and truly present *in the relationship,* which I feel I was, *then I think that's fine.* So my meaningful object is a picture of the poster for this movie that helped me to reconcile some of my conflicted feelings about my divorce. 🎬😢❤️

#MovieInspo #SelfReconciliation #Healing #Proud #CMBYN

ava_sailor.moonlight

I'm Pagan and one of the pagan rituals that was part of my wedding was *a handfasting. With the handfasting, one of the big symbolisms of it is you have a cord and you're literally tying a knot and tying two hands together as part of the marriage ceremony. Then, that cord is often cut. Some people do shadow boxes and whatnot and put them on the wall. And depending on the people, the different colours* of the cord *often mean things. I happened to just do colours that went with our wedding colours.* My ex *wasn't Pagan, so for him, it was kind of a, "Okay, whatever" thing added to* our ceremony.

When my ex and I were doing *exit therapy* to end our marriage, we had *an awesome therapist* and she suggested doing an *un*-hand*fast*ing for our last session because she remembered me describing the handfasting we did for our wedding. *She wrote the whole* un-fasting script *herself* and even *brought in a rope that she had found. I remember she* said she *had difficulty because she was like, "I don't know where to find these things. Where do you get a rope?" She tried to find one that was fancier but* ended up finding *a piece of rope that I think she got from the hardware store and it happened to have orange in it* because *she knew that was one of our wedding colours originally. It was really a fluorescent* traffic-cone *orange instead of a nice orange,* like the original cord from our wedding, *so we kind of laughed over it.*

But that process was kind of the reverse where we started with bound hands and then we undid it and cut it and then we each got half of it to do whatever we wanted with it. I don't know what my ex *did with his* half, *but I threw mine in a photo box that had the original cord, so I put it in* that *box and then I put that box in a bigger box that has my wedding dress and everything in it.* It was like a stacking doll of marriage memento boxes. So my meaningful object is this piece of fluorescent orange rope from the un-handfasting my ex and I did to unbind ourselves from each other when we got divorced. 🤲🏼🧍‍♀️🧍‍♂️🤚🏼

#Pagan #Handfasting #UntyingTheKnot #ExitTherapy #CutTheCord #LifeAfterDivorce

Dropped Threads [75]

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

Sex with my ex was *not good*. *I hate saying this, but here's a TMI: I didn't orgasm in our relationship* for our first three years together. *I knew sex was a problem in our relationship,* for me at least, *but I also thought, 'This is just what it's supposed to be.'* 🤦🏾‍♀️

#sexuality #marriage

🧵 1/3

43 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

I think we also kind of lie a little bit about our sex life*, too, when you're with friends* if they ask, you just say, *"Yeah, it's going..."* But then, *a friend* of mine must have picked up on my less-than-enthusiastic tone, so she *told me about this book called* *She Comes First*.

🧵 2/3

134 Reply Copy link

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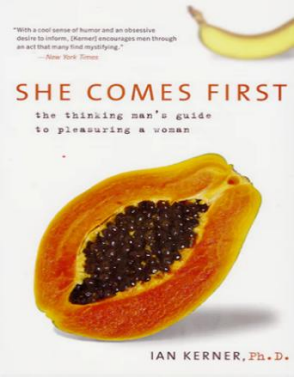
[75] **Twitter** is a social networking site where users broadcast short posts known as tweets. These tweets can contain text, videos, photos or links. In this way, Twitter is also a microblogging service—a combination of blogging and instant messaging—whose purpose is to share short and quick information (like 'chirps from a bird,' hence "tweets"). As of 2024, Twitter had 540 million active users or user accounts worldwide. Notably, in 2022, Twitter underwent a controversial "takeover," becoming a private company, and was renamed "X" (Hetler, 2024).

In this representation, I continue to use Twitter, specifically (and display its aesthetic) since this was the form of the service when I interviewed participants *and* as a small, personal resistance to X's owner given his nefarious (unelected) role in the current American government [see, for instance, TIME's recent issue chronicling "Elon Musk's war on Washington" (Shuster & Bennett, 2025) or, really, any reputable news source at any given point these days...). To this end, I also take some pleasure in **representing the 'threads' of the women's experiences with sexuality** within this (original) platform (although it was not an intentional connection for me at the time of developing this particular representation but now, it is not lost on me that there is an ironic connection between its current left-wing misogynist (Stavrou, 2024) owner and its use, in this context here, as a dialogue between women about the often taboo subject of their/our sexuality). 😘 Furthermore, this representation is now an all-the-more timely 'throwback' to Twitter as "the place where you told the truth to strangers . . . and that wide-openness was reciprocal and gorgeous" (Williams, 2024, para. 1).

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

So I bought it, read it—*it's a great book*—and then *gave* it to my ex *to show him this is how you do it because he didn't know what he was doing. It was not received very well* by him but *after I gave him the book, I did orgasm maybe five times.*



3/3

26 Reply Copy link

Kaleigh
@kaleigh_wine&solitude · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

This *should be taught to men. In high school*, when you get sex ed, they should explain, *"This is how orgasms work."* Someone needs to *just tell them. I don't think they know. I probably* only *had five orgasms in the span of our* ten-year *relationship.*

1/2

105 Reply Copy link

Kaleigh
@kaleigh_wine&solitude · **Follow**

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I just didn't think orgasms were something that would happen for me regularly. I know that it doesn't happen for all women. I just thought, 'Well, that's what it is for me.' I've since found out that that's not the case. It was just my ex and I didn't have the right connection.

🧵 2/2

37 **Reply** **Copy link**

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · **Follow**

Replying to @kaleigh_wine&solitude

Yes, She Comes First should be a mandatory course! 🏫

154 **Reply** **Copy link**

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · **Follow**

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I also did not particularly enjoy sex with my husband. I thought I was the only one! I actually thought that my mediocre experience with sex extended to all sex because I just didn't have a comparison. 🙎🏽‍♀️🙈

🧵 1/5

29 **Reply** **Copy link**

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · **Follow**

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I had extremely strict parents. I'm half East Indian—my dad is from Calcutta and *my mom is from* Canada. *So I had the typical strict Indian father and was not allowed to date in high school.* I met my husband at university when I finally started dating. 🙅🏽‍♀️🚫🇮🇳🇨🇦

🧵 2/5

❤️ **14** Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · **Follow**

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I was never promiscuous before I got married, so *I had no frame of reference for sex because I had only been with my husband* but *I* felt *like, 'This can't be as good as sex gets!' because* the sex I had with my husband *was awful* and infrequent. 😬

🧵 3/5

❤️ **28** Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · **Follow**

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I would talk to friends and I would ask, "Do you *guys only have sex like once a month?" and they* would say *"No!"* So I didn't understand why my husband *didn't want anything to do with me.* 🤔

🧵 4/5

❤️ **12** Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I was also *really questioning* whether *sex* could *be better than* what I experienced. *I was feeling like, 'This can't be it!' or someone has been lying, like, every TV show and every movie is a lie* if the sex I was having was really all there was for all the hype. 🍿📺😒

🧵 5/5

47 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

I should say, even though my ex finally got it together somewhat after I literally gave him a manual, it was never anything to write home about. Even with the improvement, my ex and I *never had crazy, awesome anything* in our *sex life*. 😒

🧵 1/4

15 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

We would fight over sex, mostly about the frequency. *He wanted to have sex three times a week* and I definitely didn't, but I gave in anyway. *It got to a point where I remember I'd have sex and* think, *"Okay, good. I don't have to do it for two days. Thank god."* 🙏🏽

🧵 2/4

44 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

Then, the day would come and I had to prepare myself mentally, *"Okay, it's sex day."* Because I didn't like having sex with my husband, *I loved period week*. *Fuck, I loved period week because it was a full seven days* where *I can't have sex*, or so I thought at the time. 🩸🩸🩸🩸🩸🩸🩸

🧵 3/4

21 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

But *I remember thinking, "Oh, I'm married and that's what's supposed to happen." You hear about that kind of thing happening* in marriage— losing the passion—*so* I just thought, *"This must be my time*—at only *31*—for our chemistry to disappear." 🔥🚫

🧵 4/4

21 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I had the opposite problem where my ex *never wanted to have sex*. That goes against what people think of men wanting sex all the time, *so I started questioning, "Is it me?" At one point, I said to him, "Okay, are you even still attracted to me?"*

🧵 1/4

17 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

His answer was, "Well, you could go to the gym more often." This was a few months after I knew things were really going downhill. I was like, "Well, you're not exactly like a Calvin Klein model." 📷🚫

🧵 2/4

❤️ 28 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

I tried to talk to him about what was going on with the lack of sex in our marriage. *I said, "Okay, let's have a conversation about this. Is there something I'm doing* or *not doing? What's missing here? I don't think this is normal."* 🗣️

🧵 3/4

❤️ 28 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

He would get really embarrassed. I was at a loss and said, *"If you can't talk about this with your wife, how are we going to get through this? And what does that say about our relationship if you can't talk about it with me?"* 🗣️🚫😬

🧵 4/4

❤️ 11 Reply Copy link

Cassandra
@cassandra_jaggedpearl · Follow

For me, there was just a lot of confusion around sex, especially at the end of my marriage *when terrible things were happening. So* during *the last four or five months, I really felt like* my ex *and I were more just roommates.* 😒

🧵 1/3

❤️ 16 Reply Copy link

Cassandra
@cassandra_jaggedpearl · Follow

He would tell me there wasn't enough intimacy. And I would think to myself, "Why the hell would there be?" So there was confusion around my ex still expecting intimacy even though our marriage was falling apart. 😡💔

🧵 2/3

❤️ 27 Reply Copy link

Cassandra
@cassandra_jaggedpearl · Follow

I also felt unsure about what my lack of desire really meant. Like, I thought maybe my desire was just gone in general. *I thought it was me for a long time. And then I realized, "No. I want that with other people. I don't want that with you."* 🔥🚫🔍

🧵 3/3

❤️ 18 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

As I became increasingly unhappy in my marriage, it became clear to me that my ex only gave me his attention when he needed something from me, which was *either* when *he was hungry—because he didn't cook at all—or he wanted sex.* 🧿😒

🧵 1/2

❤️ 38 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

I realized *he wasn't interested in me whatsoever. He just liked the idea of having this perfect exterior marriage.* And, of course, the domestic labour I provided because I was basically like his *mother*, in terms of *cooking* and *taking care of the household*. 🏠

🧵 2/2

❤️ 25 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

Replying to @ava_sailor.moonlight

Seeing you say that you felt like a *mother* to your ex, rather than a partner, makes me think that, you know, I felt that way, too, in some ways. My ex was *like a child*. I mean *his* actual *mother* was still *buying his clothes* for him as an adult before we got together. 👚🏘️

🧵 1/3

❤️ 58 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

Replying to @ava_sailor.moonlight

When we lived together, I was definitely the one *managing our household*. And I think that labour that was all on me was actually a big turn-off for me! My ex wanted to have *sex three times a week* but wouldn't take on his share of our household. 📅🏠🔥🙅‍♀️

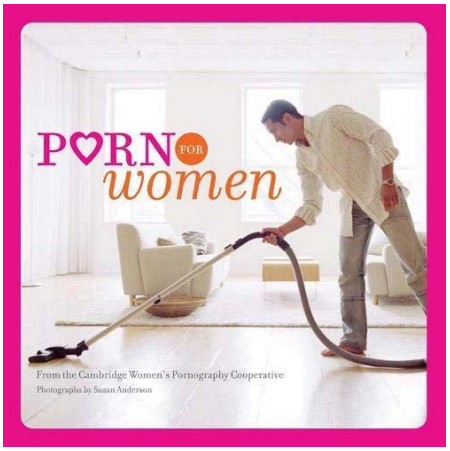
🧵 2/3

67 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

Replying to @ava_sailor.moonlight

So *I* definitely *had these needs and they weren't being met in my relationship with* my ex during our marriage. I guess that's the funny but sad truth of those cards and memes with men like vacuuming that say, "Porn for women..."



Link to book: https://www.indigo.ca/en-ca/porn-for-women-funny-books-for-women-books-for-women-with-pictures/9780811855518.html

🧵 3/3

67 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

Replying to @julia_retiredbarstar

Yeah, my needs were definitely not being met by my ex. I was very upfront with him from the beginning that *I'm pansexual and polyamorous.* He said he was open to that in our relationship, but he actually wasn't, so those identities became *closeted* for me. 🖇️⚧️💜🚫

11 Reply Copy link

Rayna
@rayna_designerdreams · Follow

Replying to @ava_sailor.moonlight

That's very selfish of your ex! 😐

47 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

Replying to @rayna_designerdreams

His selfishness didn't even end with him making me *hide* my sexual identity and relationship preferences. I had *four jobs at one point trying to make* our finances *work,* so I was really exhausted but he was *super disrespectful* of that. 🥳💵

🧵 1/4

26 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

Replying to @rayna_designerdreams

He would actually *wake me up* when *I was asleep because he wanted sex. He wouldn't let me go back to sleep until basically I was like, "Fuck off. Just, okay." When I* later *told my lawyer about that, she wanted to go after him for rape.* 🛌💤⚖️

🧵 2/4

❤️ 14 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

Replying to @rayna_designerdreams

But as a lot of women know, rape—in my case, marital rape—*is such a hard thing to prove and actually get processed, and I just wanted to be done with him at that point. Part of me thinks I should've* though. ⚖️🙅🏽‍♀️

🧵 3/4

❤️ 58 Reply Copy link

Ava
@ava_sailor.moonlight · Follow

Replying to @rayna_designerdreams

The other *part of me* knew *I didn't have it in me at that point. I was already suicidal* and *I didn't think I could handle a long, drawn-out court case over that.* So I just left and didn't even take any *alimony,* which my *lawyer* thought was *crazy.* 😅⚖️🙅🏽‍♀️

🧵 4/4

❤️ 11 Reply Copy link

Rayna
@rayna_designerdreams · Follow

My ex and I separated but were *selling our house, so we lived together for a couple of months. That was one of the hardest periods because we had our bedroom, and he kept wanting to share the bedroom, even though we decided to get divorced.* 🏘️ 🛏️

#sexuality #separation #divorce

🧵 1/2

❤️ **16** Reply Copy link

Rayna
@rayna_designerdreams · Follow

He still wanted to have sex as if divorce was some time in the future, but in the meantime, *I guess* he thought, *"Let's just keep going* as we were before." So he somehow didn't get the memo that when our marriage ended, our sexual relationship ended, too. 🗒️ 🚫

🧵 2/2

❤️ **28** Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Post-marriage, I've had the twenties experience that I didn't have in my actual twenties. *I'm now reclaiming that part of my life because I didn't have* that sexual experimentation in high school or university. *I'm also a lot more confident* now than I was in my twenties.

🧵 1/3

❤️ **115** Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

The second person I ever had sex with was *someone I had crazy strong feelings for and I realized, "Sex with someone else is amazing!" It seriously was. I honestly thought, "I don't think I've had sex before." That connection was just amazing.* 🤯

🧵 2/3

278 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

I also *just* recently *had sex on period week and it is fantastic!* During my marriage, *sex on period week was totally off the table. It didn't even occur to me that sex during* your *period was a thing* for some couples, like *that it was something that you would do.* 🩸🔥

🧵 3/3

121 Reply Copy link

Kaleigh
@kaleigh_wine&solitude · Follow

After my ex and I separated, I forayed into sleeping with someone immediately and I remember it feeling really, really good to know he was really into me and he thought I was really pretty and sexy. And I was like, "Okay, I can do this." 👠💋

🧵 1/2

157 Reply Copy link

Kaleigh
@kaleigh_wine&solitude · Follow

I was fortunate to get that reinforcement immediately and that gave me confidence. I was like, "Wow, this guy is really interested in me and he thinks I'm really sexy. This is so weird." But *I needed that evidence for myself. It was such an empowering thing.* 🔍🔥

🧵 2/2

❤️ 157 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @kaleigh_wine&solitude

I can totally relate to wanting to go back out there and feel sexy and be told you're beautiful. It's validating, especially *if your* ex-*spouse* was *constantly telling you these messages* that undermined your confidence. 🏆💋

🧵 1/2

❤️ 179 Reply Copy link

Melissa
@melissa_dancingqueen · Follow

Replying to @kaleigh_wine&solitude

I think exploring your sexuality after divorce is *about owning who you are and just realizing* you deserve *to feel good about yourself again.* It's like this hilarious divorce *card* I saw on *Instagram* that says, *"Your vagina deserves so much better!"* 🤯🔥❤️

🧵 2/2

❤️ 290 Reply Copy link

Kaleigh
@kaleigh_wine&solitude · Follow

Replying to @melissa_dancingqueen

I started *dating* and *I was very promiscuous and I have absolutely no shame in that. I had so much fun and I didn't really talk about it with people,* except *one girlfriend who's single. She and I would talk and she really helped me normalize that behaviour.* 💋🗣️🙂

117 Reply Copy link

Julia
@julia_retiredbarstar · Follow

I now very much enjoy sex with my current partner. My *eyes were completely opened* with him. I was *like, "Wow, sex can be like this?!" We* also *even do it during period week!* 😲

190 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

Talking about the whole sexuality thing, after I separated, *I was spending almost $3000 a month on divorce fees, while also paying bills for the house* I had with my ex *that I wasn't living in*, while feeding myself. So I really needed *money.* ⚖️🏘️🍲💵

🧵 1/8

15 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

I *ended up entering into something that may change your opinion of me drastically. I have a friend who operates a fetish escort business and she said, "Why don't you try it?"* So I did. 🧖🏾‍♀️👠💋

🧵 2/8

105 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

It was a *fetish company* so *most of my work wasn't actual sex, it was just some bizarre thing that men were into. Like, somebody wanted to look at my feet for an hour* or there was a *guy* who *really enjoyed lingerie*, like *putting them on* himself, *but didn't want his wife to know.* 🦶🩱

🧵 3/8

206 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

A lot of the guys I saw just wanted to *talk about things for an hour* or have me *brush* their *hair. It's* like *another form of therapy. I did meet some people who were not great, but that's just part of it.* But you *make very good money*, like *$3000 a day.* 🗣️🪮💵

🧵 4/8

180 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

I worked with someone who made so much that *she ended up saving over $160 000 in a year. I was there because I had to pay for my life*, but *I knew I wouldn't be there long-term. I* actually *ended up being their number one girl!* ⭐💵

🧵 5/8

112 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

I met some really wonderful people (and *some real weirdos, too*). And I got to *just try things, so it did teach me a lot of things about myself and what I like, what I don't like.*

🧵 6/8

97 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

My experience with the *escort* service *empowered me in a way that I never thought it could. I had this confidence. I looked my very best when I was there. I was in shape. I was able to afford to eat well, take care of myself, go to yoga, buy Starbucks.* 🍗🥤🧘‍♀️

🧵 7/8

260 Reply Copy link

Kaitlyn
@kaitlyn_veganmama · Follow

I haven't done that in *three years* now, but *I have been thinking lately that I need to bring* "Scarlett"—my escort name—*back into my personality a bit.* I could use *that confidence* in my life now. *I wouldn't have had that experience if it weren't for my divorce.* ✨🥹

🧵 8/8

302 Reply Copy link

reddit [76]

Dive Into...Grief

r/divorcées

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Community highlights

u/Kaleigh_wine&solitude · 2 days ago

Grieving the loss of my ex's family and my reputation

There's a lot of grief with divorce *in a really weird way. I was really close with* my ex's *mom. We talked a few times a week.* But when I left my ex, his *family completely stopped speaking to me. So I really grieved the loss of his family* who had been in my life for *ten years*.

I was also grieving the loss of my reputation, at least in some circles. My ex *slept with someone and had a drug problem*, that's largely why I ended our relationship, but *he spun a different story about the divorce*. *He put all of that on me* and *told people that I had an affair.* He told *all of our friends, his whole family,* and even *my family.* But *I made a conscious decision to kind of be quiet about everything and act with integrity. I felt like diluting the story wasn't going to help. I just felt like the people who know me know what's going on. Anyone I still have a relationship with knows that is not how I behave myself and knew what was really happening* but *I was* still *mortified* and *devastated* that my ex was saying this about me.

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[76] **Reddit** is a social news aggregation, content rating, and forum social network. Users (or "Redditors") submit content to the site, such as links, text posts, images, and videos, which are then voted up or down ("upvoted" or "downvoted") by other members and accumulate (or lose) "karma." Posts are organized by subject into user-created boards called "subreddits." Submissions with more upvotes appear towards the top of their subreddit and, if they receive enough upvotes, ultimately on the site's front page. As such, Reddit's former slogan was "the front page of the Internet." It has since rebranded its slogan to be "Dive into anything" to emphasize the deep and engaging nature of discussions on Reddit, where users can "dive into" diverse topics within communities dedicated to just about any particular topic, hobby, or interest (Sale Ahammed Saymon, 2023). As of last year, Reddit has 1.2 billion active users or user accounts worldwide (Hetler, 2024).

In this Reddit representation, we "dive into" participants' experiences of grief during their divorce process.

Melissa_dancingqueen · 23h ago ·

Yeah, *my ex was the exact same way.* But I *know that the truth is going to come out eventually.* So *I'm just making popcorn and sitting back and waiting for that. I'll be sitting here with a smile on my face watching it unfold. Eventually, they're going to realize.*

2 Reply Share ···

u/Julia_retiredbarstar · 3 days ago · ···

Mourning process

I don't regret ending my marriage at all, but there's still a lot of grief for me. It's still painful two years out. I feel like I had to grieve at least three different losses. First, *I felt grief with* my ex's *family. There's a big mourning process because you're ending the relationship with this one person*—your spouse—*but there's this whole group around* them *that you actually have to end it with, too. I didn't think about that in my process. I* just thought, "My husband *and I are ending."*

Then, when all these people stopped talking to me, I was like, "Oh my god. I feel so lonely." That's where the isolation comes from, too; it is losing *your network.* Not only did I lose my ex, and my ex's family, but I also lost the support of my own family.

The biggest fallout happened with my family when I ended my marriage. *They were all worried about how it affected them, like that they were losing* a son- and *brother-in-law* and *a potential grandchild. They were mourning their own losses as opposed to supporting me in my losses. I was told I was selfish because I wanted more support from* my family. So I just feel like *there's a lot of loss in divorce.*

What made all this loss even worse for me was that *because I was the one who made the choice* to end my marriage, *I perceived that I couldn't be mourning the pain. I thought I had to be very discreet and couldn't really talk about the struggles of divorce* I was feeling. As *the instigator*, I didn't feel I had the right to be upset, to grieve, to struggle, to complain, or any of that. This has all just got me thinking w*ouldn't it be nice if everyone could just be nice and respectful,* instead of severing ties completely*?*

Maybe have a going away party. I mean, *there are parties* for other *endings*, *like when you leave a job, or when someone passes away, or when someone graduates.* I am an event planner, maybe I should get on this as a service...

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Melissa_dancingqueen · 1d ago ·

I definitely got that kind of response *from my mom when I told her I was leaving* my husband *and she was devastated that she was losing a son-in-law. My mom was so worried about herself and so devastated about losing her son-in-law that she wasn't even really thinking about me.*

That's when my relationship with my mom really started to suffer and I realized that she wasn't a huge support. She wasn't someone I could go to and talk to. But I did *realize she was grieving this as well. I mean,* my ex *had been in our lives for eleven years. At the same time, I was going through this loss as well with his family and friends. It is very much grieving. It's like a death.*

2 Reply Share ···

u/Melissa_dancingqueen · 3 days ago ...

Sorry for your loss…happy divorce!

Also, speaking of this lack of public acknowledgment of the significance of ending a marriage, you know, as there are with other endings in life, *I follow this author on Instagram, Jamie Maguire,* who *is going through a divorce and one of her friends gave her a card*, like a Hallmark type card, but *for divorce.*

So she posted, *"My friend gave* me *the best happy divorce card: It's this card* that *says, 'Your vagina deserves so much better!'" So I thought that was funny* and also *where did you find this card?* Maybe we could jump on that bandwagon and start a 'niche' line of divorcée greeting cards!

11 1 Share

Add a comment

Sort by: Best Search Comments

Julia_retiredbarstar · 2d ago ·

That's amazing! I want this card!

2 Reply Share ...

Kaleigh_wine&solitude · 3d ago ·

I love that! I'm going to give this card to the next young, divorced woman I encounter so she knows divorce is not only grief...it can be a reclamation and a celebration, too!

I found it online: https://www.astoldbyellie.com/products/divorced-gifts-for-her-your-vagina-deserves-better-break-up-card-divorce-card-break-up-gifts-funny-break-up-card-for-her?srsltid=AfmBOorl-LcOAvf93WHdcNR6l3YPX96JUxg_Sp8U7G0qZs4ZW_84plXW

2 Reply Share ···

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u/Cassandra_jaggedpearl · 3 days ago ···

My family lost their son-in-law and uncle

I knew my separation from my ex *hurt my parents*, as much as they supported me. *Everyone has relationships with that person. They're family, regardless. My nephews struggled with losing their uncle. They had this really strong bond with my ex. He was a really good uncle. When parents separate, you tend to see both parents in a lot of cases, but when aunts and uncles separate, that person is gone forever, right? So it was very final for my nephews. I struggled with not seeing* my ex's *father;* I mean, *he was my father-in-law.*

4 9 Share

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u/Kaitlyn_veganmama · 4 days ago ···

Grief takes as long as it takes

Divorce is certainly *a form* of *grief. It's a loss.* Like other forms of grief, there are degrees of closeness to it, I think. *For some people, it may be like their distant aunt passed away. That's too bad it didn't work out. You might think about them randomly in 20 years.*

For others, even if it was a very bad relationship and a tumultuous ending, there can be very deep, deep work to do regardless. So it goes on longer than we think it does. And that's okay.

I say this from my experience with divorce but I've also had *a huge amount of loss* in my life. *My uncle* and *grandfather* died when I was a kid, *my mom passed away* in my twenties, and my dad died a few years ago. *It's unbelievable, really*, how much *loss* I've had.

One thing that stuck with me from the time in *my childhood* when *my mom's twin brother died of AIDS in* the *90s* was this *cut out from a magazine she had on her bulletin board in her room. And it said, "Grief, like dying, takes as long as it takes." Just plain and simple.*

It didn't make much sense to me then when I was *eight or something,* but I can see *now* that *it is true:* grief *takes as long as it takes and there's no timeline, there's no end date. Only you can know those things.* I think the *residual effects are* potentially *ongoing for the rest of your life.*

In the case of divorce, the grief *doesn't end when you sign that piece of paper and finances are figured out and all of that. You're always going to have dates in your mind, times of year, events, and places that will bring you back to points in history that you had with* your ex.

4 9 Share

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u/Cassandra_jaggedpearl · 5 days ago ...

Stages of grief...shock, denial, acceptance

I only have one person close to me who *has passed away*, *a cousin*, but the grief I felt then, *felt a lot like* the *grief I* felt from my divorce. I remember *the shock* that started the process for me. *Even* though *I was the one leaving, there was still the shock.*

I felt very much *like, "I can't believe this is real. I can't believe this is actually happening." Then,* a couple of days after I physically left the house my ex and I had shared, *there was the shock of, "I can't believe the life that we thought we were building together is over."*

So that was the beginning of my *grief.* And just like *mourning someone* who has died, there are *the stages of grief.* Like, I felt *denial in the sense that the first week or so I was going out with friends and having a good time. I had all this newfound freedom.*

Then, I remember one night I came home late, and my cat was there and I realized I'd left him alone three nights in a row and I had this moment where *I just cried in the kitchen and I thought, "Oh my god, this is real. I'm coming home to an empty apartment."*

I eventually got to a place of *acceptance.* I accepted that my divorce *was a part of my life, but it's not going to define my life. A big part of* me *moving forward was letting go* and *even eventually remembering some of the good times and taking some of the lessons away from it.*

11 1 Share

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u/Alison_tabularasa · 7 days ago ...

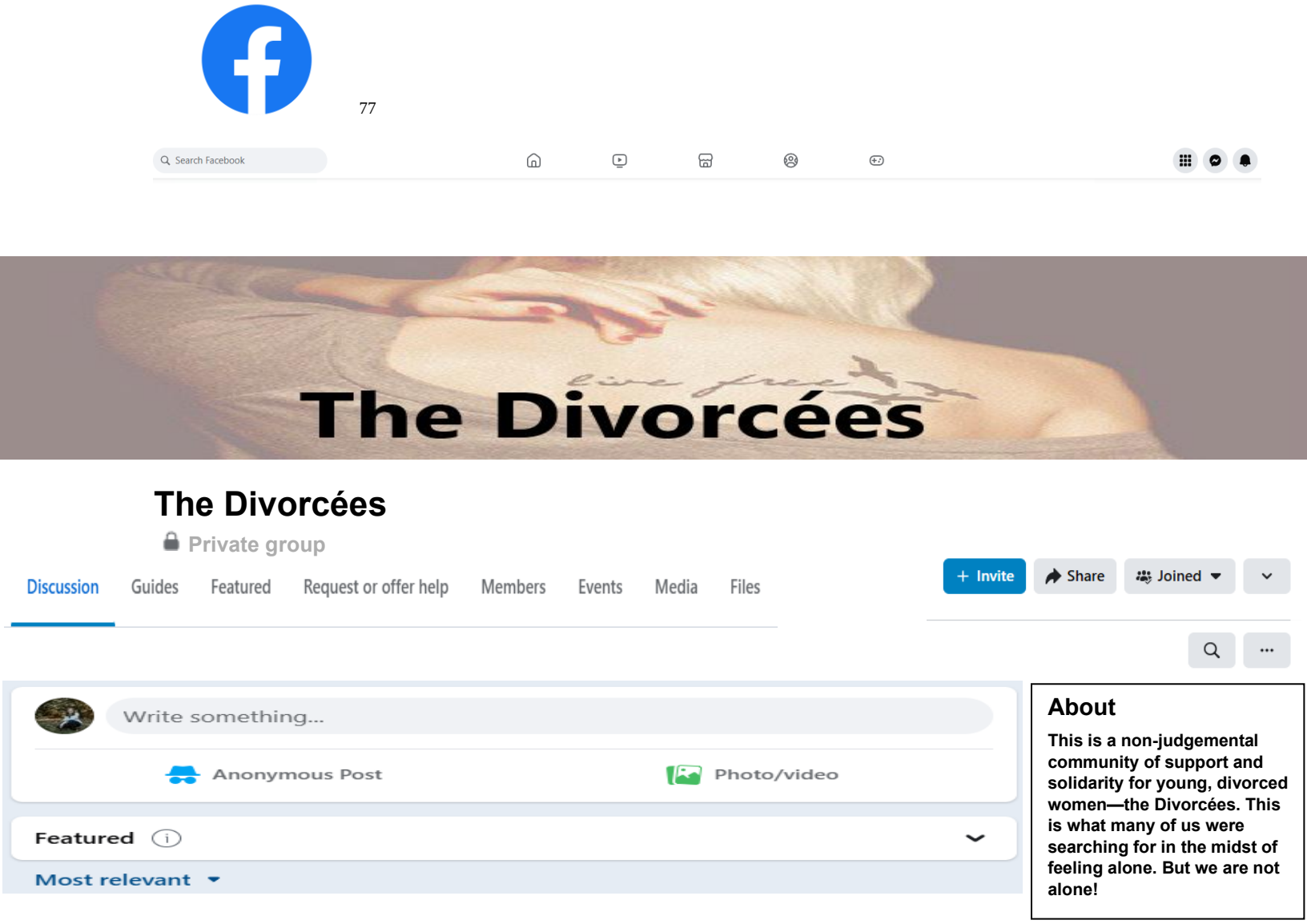
Divorce is a form of death that needs grieving and offers transformation

I was in grad school when I was divorcing, and I was taking a philosophy class about finitude and the question of finality. I told the professor about the divorce and she said, "Yeah, you know it's a form of death so you should grieve it so that you can move on." So she *was a really interesting person to talk to about the philosophical idea of what divorce means for you, your existence,* and your *identity, which transforms into a really kind of pragmatic activity of "I will grieve this and move on." And there are lots of mechanisms for grieving that we don't necessarily talk about in the context of divorce, but they're useful because, in some ways, you are grieving the loss of the person you know, and that person won't be the same person. So I found it a useful activity in acknowledging the feelings of loss and sadness. But then compartmentalizing them so they don't consume my whole life. But I'm going to give myself this moment to grieve and then kind of think about "Now where do I go?"*

I think that shift is important in the process*. Because when you're grieving, I think part of what you're often kind of coached to do is to sort of reflect, process the loss, but then also look at the future, so* you *don't get stuck* thinking *that's your whole life. I found that thinking* about grieving was also *particularly useful* as a way to *acknowledge that that person won't even be there; it gives you something to say, "That person I knew is gone; they're not coming back." I think some of the more extended preoccupations with exes become* that *you're thinking about that person as they were in the marriage and they're not there anymore. So the idea of them—their finality as the person you knew—lets you detach from whoever that person is now.* So *when I saw* my ex *a number of years later, I wasn't really meeting the same person* I knew. That person is gone now and *I was meeting somebody else.* And it's a *two-part* view because *whoever I was in that marriage died, too. I'm no longer that person once I go through these sorts of transformative experiences. So even though I'll have aspects of my identity and characteristics intact, it would be pretty difficult, I think, to go through a marriage and divorce and not be different than you were.*

4 9 Share

~~Doom~~Hopescrolling



[77] **Facebook** is a social networking site which allows users to connect with people online. It allows users to share pictures, music, videos, and articles, as well as their own thoughts and opinions with however many people they like. Users send "friend requests" to people with whom they would like to connect. Once accepted, the two profiles are connected with both users able to see whatever the other person posts. "Facebookers" can post almost anything to their "timeline", a snapshot of what is happening in their social circle at any given time. People with profiles list information about themselves and many users post lots of information which is easily accessible to their friends and others. Users can also "like" pages which interest them (There are both personal pages and group pages (Webwise, n.d.). As of last year, Facebook was the most popular social media site in the world, with over three billion active users (Hetler, 2024).

For this final social media representation, we take a 'scroll' through some of participants' experiences with healing, broadly, focusing on the role of therapy, in particular.

Laura

a day ago

Let's talk about therapy. *Therapy has greatly helped* me. And I feel like it's something most of us have done, either as a continuation or for the first time, like me, after separating. But I think the kind of rupture that divorce causes definitely requires some guidance to find a way forward...

I had never been to therapy. Even after my divorce, when my life was objectively in shambles, I still resisted going to therapy. *I thought of therapy like going to a psychic; you have to believe it for it to work. So if you're going to a psychic, you're going there believing that that human's going to read those sticks and tell you your future. So if you're going to a therapist, they're going to tell you some hard stuff and you better be ready to believe it. So I put it off, put it off, put it off, because I was like, "No, I'm not there yet." I wasn't ready to open that baggage. I wasn't ready to do that stuff yet. I was trying to figure it out myself. I'm one of those people who will literally walk through fire because they want to be able to do it themselves. So, I tried and tried to just deal with and feel emotions and sit and cry for hours and hours and try and meditate and that kind of crap.* Then, *I got assaulted on one of my Bumble dates and that was rock bottom again, where I was like, "I let someone do that to me." So I went to therapy. That was the push to get me to go to therapy because I hadn't done any* therapy *previously.*

Therapy helped me build a foundation that I didn't have previously. I started building that foundation and understanding that I'm perfectly fine being a single woman. That kind of understanding of building a life that does not need a man or a woman or anybody to complete it. So that's what I did. I started putting together my little foundation and making sure that I had gotten rid of a lot of friendships that weren't actually supportive*. I bolstered the ones that did stay by my side and now they're my support system. So, therapy helped me with basically reshaping my whole life so that now I don't need a relationship. I would like one, I don't need it. I'm perfectly fine and awesome by myself. So going through therapy has given me more self-confidence. It's helped me develop myself and my self-worth to be able to find somebody that genuinely deserves me.*

When I started going to therapy, one of the first things my therapist said to me was, "You have a terrible self-esteem problem." It was very much like, "Yep. I do. I need help. I'm here. That's why I'm paying you this money, is to help me." Like, *I know it's not the fairy godmother, bippity boppity boo, but at the same time,* I *was like, "You've got to help me figure out how to build that because I'm sick of not being able to do it, not understanding how to do it, not being able to talk to people about how to do it. I need you to tell me how to do this. Where to get self-esteem? Where to find your self-worth,* and *that kind of stuff. And that's the thing that* my therapist raised, *she was like, "It's such a stupid thing in* our *society where nobody knows where to get their self-esteem from."* I know *I wasn't raised knowing where to find* my *own self-esteem; to not rely on others so much for self-esteem. It's very much tipped in that scale in society where there's Instagram and there are these kinds of things where you're very much relying on others. So once I started going to therapy,* I started *being able to develop that self-worth, that kind of affirmation, those kinds of things where it's like, "I'm actually not a garbage person. I'm pretty fucking cool."*

Another thing that I had a terrible problem with was believing other people when they said affirming things to me. So I needed to *realize that if* someone is *taking the time to say it to you, then they mean it. They're appreciating you. And to be able to be like, "Thank you." Saying thanks for compliments was something I could not do previously. I'd be like, "Shut up and stop looking at me." It would be a total distaste. The fact that somebody noticed* something positive *in me was like a spotlight being put on* me*. And I was like, "Nope, I don't like it. Goodbye."* So therapy helped me to build my *self-esteem.*

Therapy also helped me define what I want and what am I looking for in relationships*,* rather than just *floating from relationship to relationship.* I realized that *I have not been in a relationship since my ex-husband that I would* actually *consider a relationship.* So with therapy, I've clarified *that whole thing of the want versus the need.* Like, *I don't need no man!*

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Write an answer...

Julia

2 days ago

Counselling has been an important part of my healing. Sometimes, my counsellor will offer a phrase or insight that I carry with me and it helps me re-frame my challenges, like when I was really struggling with the *fallout* after I ended my marriage, she *said to me, "Don't overestimate the threat and don't underestimate your ability to cope."* Other times, my counsellor and I are examining underlying beliefs and coping mechanisms I have had for a long time that don't serve me. Like, *at this counselling appointment,* I *had earlier this week, we were talking about insecure versus secure attachment. I* had *an "aha" moment* while talking *about my insecurity around attachment and how that has affected all of my relationships with men. I was always running away from things and* my ex *was a reprieve because he helped to hide away all the issues that I needed to face. To be able to come to that* realization*, not that I'm self-actualized in any way, but to build towards that* is big for me*. Because I just was always running from that big beast that was chasing me. I don't fully know yet* what that "big beast" is for me but I know *it has to do with security around relationships* and *having security in myself. I don't feel like I'm worth it. I've never felt like I'm enough. So I was always trying to find my worth and my validation externally. And now, I'm in a spot where I'm learning how to find that validation internally, but it's a motherfucker to change at 35!*

There's a group for divorced women that's *run through the counselling office I go to. I remember asking my counsellor and I said, "Level with me, am I going to go there and find anyone that I connect with?" And she's like, "It's almost all women in their fifties and sixties." And I just said, "Okay, then I am not interested in talking* to women like *my mom about this again."*

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Write an answer...

Kaleigh

2 days ago

I kind of always see a counsellor, which is something helpful in my life. At the end of our marriage, my ex and I *were* also *in counselling together* and *he was seeing an addictions counsellor.* So between the two of us, at one point, we were seeing three different counselors at the same time.

When I was planning to leave my ex, *my counsellor* said to me, *"If you want to keep* your *friendships* with your girlfriends, *you need to be intentional about it. You're going to need to be very careful about what you share or how you speak about him." That was really good advice* and *helpful for me. So I was just really factual with my girlfriends because their husbands are friends with my ex.*

I think you have to do the work because something's gone wrong during a divorce and you need to identify it. And that forgiveness piece is huge. Like, you need to be able to forgive your ex and forgive yourself. And as my *yoga instructor* always says, *"Look with kindness" and just be easy on yourself.* I even got a divorce *tattoo* of an eye and a heart *behind my ear to remind me to look with kindness* at every situation. I also needed to *reclaim my body* for myself, after my divorce. But *I remember thinking my divorce was such a failure and it wasn't. Being a failure would have been staying in that marriage and subjecting myself to all of that torture. That would have been a failure. I would have lost so much. I would have been failing myself on so many levels. I'm more aware of myself and more in touch with my emotions* since my separation. *I think a lot of the anxious thinking I had been working through in therapy* actually *became a lot easier to work through after my separation because I didn't have to worry about a whole other person anymore. I did a lot of work after* my *separation. I've seen* the same *counsellor for a while and I still see her. Every time I leave my session, I always* think*, "That was so lovely! It feels so good!" I leave with constructive strategies or, if nothing's wrong, we just talk about things that have gone on retrospectively.* Therapy is an investment in myself!

But I don't want anyone reading this post, who is in the thick of divorce, to think therapy gives you this neat 'before and after' situation. Like, when I first separated, *I was cracking and losing my mind and only drinking wine and eating cinnamons.* I would eat a *four*-pack of *cinnamon buns in one sitting*. I thought this *hurt* might last forever; like that this was just my new reality. Luckily, I was seeing a counsellor. I pried myself out of my parents' basement to go see her and she offered me some perspective, which was a lifeline for me. Because counsellors *have talked to other women who have been through this*, or at least mine had, she could give me a helpful perspective I didn't have on my own or from any of my *friends*, who are still *married*. *I remember my counsellor being like, "This is early days,* Kaleigh*. Of course, this is going to hurt! Like, these are early, early days."* Hearing that helped me to trust that I wouldn't feel this way forever. And I didn't. Now, I'm in a totally different place emotionally *two years after my separation*. And you know what's kind of funny, *I'll* occasionally *buy* the same *cinnamon buns again* but *I can barely eat half of one*. It's like a gauge of my emotional well-being!

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Julia

Yeah, keep an eye on how many *cinnamon buns you are eating. It might be where you get to two and you're like, "I need to go to the counselling. It's getting bad."* Personally, *I just pummeled food into my mouth and turned to alcohol after my separation.*

2w Like Reply

Kaleigh

I definitely had a lot of red wine. Probably nightly, I would have one or two glasses of wine. And the frequency and amount of drinking on weekends definitely increased as kind of a therapeutic way of coping with *my separation.*

2w Like Reply

Write an answer...

Rhiannon

4 days ago

When I finally realized the situation that I was in, and how bad it really was, I mentioned it to a neighbour. And the neighbour happened to mention a counselling program. By that time, I didn't know I had lost what a healthy sense of self was. So I learned what a healthy sense of self was and I rebuilt my foundation from the counselling.

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Write an answer...

Alison

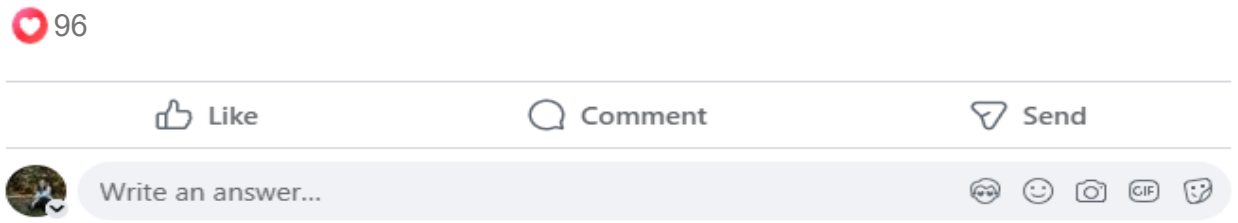
5 days ago

A bunch of folks I talked to had said, *"Here's my experience of divorce but I'm not the expert; I just did it. I have experience, not expertise. So you should go talk to an expert, to somebody professional." So they didn't want to give that anecdotal data as something generalizable or necessarily healthy because coping mechanisms aren't always healthy.* That advice *seemed sensible,* so *after* my *separation, I* saw *a therapist a couple of times.*

The therapist *sort of said to me, "You seem to handle things well and process quickly. But you might want to manage your expectations of other people a little bit more." Because I tend to have high expectations of myself and others. So I sort of have these ideas of what people should be like and it's not fair. So managing* my expectations *a little more in a sophisticated way was the one thing I started to work on.* But *I didn't find* the therapy I did *particularly helpful for* my *divorce because* the therapist *was sort of* just like, *"Yep, that's normal. Keep doing that."* Although *I think it was helpful* maybe just to hear that validation to just keep doing what I was already doing. *What I wanted* from therapy *was* checklists, like *"Do these three things...to ensure that you are productive and move on in the healthiest ways." Of course, that's not what therapy does. But I*

didn't have a context for therapy because I had *not really* been to therapy before, except for *talking to a counsellor once or twice maybe* at some point years ago. *So I was looking for more procedural kinds of advice.* But *my impression* now is that *this is not generally what therapists do. So I think it was helpful to have that validation that I was doing the correct things. But I was hoping* the therapist would *say, "And then here are these three other things you didn't think of and you should be doing."*

But, instead, *the expectation was more related to just me talking through* my experiences and frustrations. Like, I talked about how my ex had *these friend groups and they were very frustrating to me. So then* the therapist emphasized the limits of what we can control. S*o, you know, that people are going to be who they are so then it's a question of what expectations you bring to those people and if you engage them or if you disengage from them and set some boundaries and that kind of thing. I didn't have all that language before. I think it would have been very helpful* at the time *to say, "I'm not going to associate with your friends."* But I didn't say that *because I felt it would be mean. But now, I* would *feel much more confident to say, "Those people are not my people. If they're going to engage in misogyny and racism, I am not participating in those groups." And* to know *that's okay to do. So* learning that in therapy *was particularly helpful, but it wasn't as much* within *the context of the divorce as managing relations going forward.*



Melissa

6 days ago

Counselling helped me a lot after my separation, but it's not always positive. It depends a lot on the counsellor. When my ex and I were engaged, *I found out he was seeing someone* and *insisted we both go to counselling, which was* actually *one of the worst experiences of my life. I walked out of the counselling session feeling like the worst human being in the entire world.* The *counsellor basically said everything* my ex *did was justified.* It *was all my fault. I was too busy. I wasn't making time for him. I felt awful and it weighed on me for a long time.*

I have this interesting comparison of the role of therapy and other forms of self-work after divorce because my parents actually got divorced *ten years ago*. *My mom initiated* their *divorce*. She didn't seek counselling and *ten years later, she's still very emotional and angry. My mom got very bitter and hasn't dealt with her emotions. I think it's a choice if you're going to get better or bitter. And my mom chose to get bitter. It's exhausting to be around her. She thought we were going to be like a best friend, mother-daughter divorcée duo. My mom would try to get me upset to join* her *bitterness and to join* an *awful conversation* of *reliving a horrible situation* and bashing your ex. And, I mean, her ex is my dad! *I was just like, "Mom, like I'm not participating in that." I'm losing my relationship with her. My dad*, on the other hand, *did a lot of self-work. He went to counselling. He really made an effort.* He's *changed for the better* and so has our relationship. *I got some of my strength in my divorce* from *my dad* and seeing the *work* he's done *post-divorce*.

I'm *doing the work*, too. I will say *it did take me a couple of tries to find the right person to go to counselling with. You have to find that right fit. But I've also seen the alternative where people have gone through divorce and not go into counselling. And like I said, you either get better or you get bitter. And I have seen them get very bitter. My mom is one of those people and I have tried to say to her, "You need to go to counselling. It's been 10 years. You need to go to counselling and get over it."*

So you have to *do the work! I cannot stress how much you need to go to counselling. You just need someone who is on the outside, who has an unbiased opinion, who you can literally unload everything to and who can give you some sound advice and will listen to you.* I think doing the work also involves other

forms of *self-work. I've done two years of counselling*. *And I've done a lot of meditation and mindfulness* that have allowed me to do *a lot of soul-searching and self-healing.*

Compared to past generations, I think our generation of women *are more concerned about actually going to counselling and bettering themselves and getting through this process.* But, like a lot of "women's work," *people don't* often *realize or acknowledge how much work it is. It's just so much work!* It's not fun or glamorous, *but we come out stronger and to do that is a choice. When you decide to leave a marriage, you can choose to be the victim or you can choose to be the survivor. I think other women need to see* us *coming out of it stronger. I think they do. And knowing that* they *can, too. It's like any situation: you need to know that it can be better on the other side, whether it's a divorce or whatever it is.*

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Write an answer...

C

Cassandra

8 days ago

Eight months after I separated, *I heard a couple fighting outside my window and that sent me into a spiral. I had shortness of breath and felt claustrophobic. So I contacted a therapist and* we *started talking about PTSD.* I realized that *anytime I heard a man yell, I shut down.*

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Write an answer...

K

Kaitlyn

10 days ago

After my divorce, I had *to figure out who I was* and *build my foundation*. *It took me a long time to actually find* a therapist that was the right fit. *I found a relational psychologist* who *has created a space for me* to *build my confidence*, even when it's *awkward* or *uncomfortable. I'm a very awkward person with emotions, but he reminds me, "I really care about you." I get blushy and don't want to talk, and he points out my reactions. It's the weirdest therapy, but* it's *been very helpful. I wish everyone had a person like that* to help *them move forward.* I would say *therapy, journaling, and self-care* have been my post-divorce healing trifecta. I know those are all *words that are thrown about now*, but they've helped me.

192

Kaleigh

12 days ago

My counsellor asked me a question the other day and I think it's a good one to reflect on, maybe for all of us. She asked me what I've been proud of since my divorce. It's funny, the first thing I distinctly remember being proud of was when I first got my own place after I moved out of my parents' basement, *I changed a light fixture by myself.* I *installed a* whole *new light fixture* and re-wired it and everything. My ex was a *contractor* so he had always done that kind of stuff in our house. *I remember my dad* said, *"Your brother and I can come over and do it."* But *I was like, "Surely if you can do this, Dad, I can, because you are not particularly handy." I remember I was so proud of myself. I just looked at those light fixtures for like four months. I told anyone who came into my house, "I did that. I installed them. I did that myself." They'd be like, "You did the lights?" And I was like, "Yeah, into the wires, I did the whole thing." I was so proud.* Those light fixtures were a reminder of my independence, that I can figure things out on my own.

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Melissa

I had a similar experience when I was first living on my own after my separation. *Conquering stupid day-to-day challenges* really highlighted how proud I am of *my independence*. *For me, a big one was water softener salt. It's the worst. I live in a condo and I'm at the top and it's a walk-up.* Those giant, heavy bags of *water-softener salt are the bane of my existence. I remember the first* time I got water softener salt on my own *I carried the bag like a baby up the stairs and got it into my condo. I was so proud of myself and I was like, "This is the dumbest accomplishment ever."* But *I never had to deal with it before because that was one of* my ex's *jobs. I think just dealing with things that I didn't know how to deal with, or that weren't my responsibility in our marriage for whatever reason and figuring it out and doing it on my own was huge* for me.

2w Like Reply

Write an answer...

Kaleigh

12 days ago

Other than my light fixtures lol, *I'm really proud of getting to know myself and being confident in myself and confident in my relationships. I feel like I have a much bigger picture of what's actually happened in my life and what relationships are really important to me and I really value that.*

Part of my post-divorce journey has been a lot of personal growth and I'm really proud of that. *A big point for me in experiencing growth and knowing that I just deserve better and reclaiming* that *was setting my standards and knowing that I'm not going to* compromise them. *Because a lot of what happened with* my ex *and I was him stifling me a little bit. I have very clear standards in my mind now of how I need to be treated. I have really high expectations of myself and I expect my partner to have that of me. I don't want to be in a mediocre relationship. I have no interest in that. That's not what I see for myself. I think really taking charge of that has been a huge point of pride for me.*

Also part of my post-divorce journey is being able to identify how many more things I can do. *I'm in school part-time* and *I also have a second job. I couldn't have done any of that when I was with* my ex *because I was constantly being his emotional support and his actual support. I have so much more space in my life for me. That is such a nice feeling and such an important feeling and* it *has really allowed me to conquer a lot of things.*

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Write an answer...

M **Melissa**

12 days ago

I think another source of pride for me post-divorce *was just taking control of my finances. Before I was living with* my ex, *I was very good with my finances*, but *he got me into a lot of really bad habits. I remember when we bought our first house, our down payment was from my savings so literally all my money went into this house that I don't own anymore. I had to start completely from scratch again with saving up when I walked out of my marriage. Sometimes, it's a struggle.* But during my marriage, my ex *would make me feel guilty about like buying a coffee. We had a joint credit card* and he was always trying to *micromanage the money*. *I'd be like at Zehrs and* would *buy a $5 t-shirt from Joe Fresh and he'd be like, "Why did you buy this tee?" And I mean, combined, we made a lot of money and we never had any money and I don't know where it was. And now, I have* financial *control back. I know exactly where my finances are*, *and I can do this. I think that was a huge sense of pride for me: I can do this. I can live on my own. I can maintain my place. I can have a roof over my head. I have food to eat. I can go to work every day. I have a vehicle. I can still go out and do things for fun. I'm taking care of myself entirely by myself.*

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K **Kaleigh**

I agree with you on feeling proud of managing your own *finances. When my ex and I got together, I was so young and I had never just been on my own. I'd never lived on a single income, ever.* So when I separated, *I really was like, "How am I going to manage?" I had to make some adjustments and now having made those adjustments, I'm still able to make time and space in my finances to travel and do all the things I love.*

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Write an answer...

Laura

14 days ago

I'm definitely proud of the fact that I have established myself socially and with my family and everything so I'm no longer the pity; people don't see me as the sad *divorcée* anymore. I mean, I am a divorcée, but I'm reclaiming the term. *People actually complimented me on the strength that I had through it, and then afterwards. And to see that they enjoy that I am unapologetically who I am now. They've watched that growth happen. So that's a moment of pride for me because I'm no longer* someone to be pitied or someone who's afraid to be my full self.

Another big *point of pride* for me post-divorce is *how independent I am. I didn't know I had* it in me to be *this independent, to be able to survive independently and provide for myself and that kind of thing.* I'm also proud of *maintaining my story the whole way.* I *challenged people who tried to make it their story.* I *challenged people who made assumptions about something or didn't know the full picture.* Like, *people* in my *small town assumed that* I *"failed to be a wife",* whatever that's supposed to mean, or *that I didn't try to save my marriage.* When *people had those assumptions*, *I would just be honest with them and* assert, *"You're wrong. This is how it actually happened."* I won't let anyone shape my divorce story for their own purposes. But I also never made my corrections or challenges *about* the person, in terms of *judgment*, because I know that *people take* difficult *stuff*, like *with death or divorce or anything like that*, *people take that stuff and they manifest it in a way that they can understand it. I can't fault them for that,* but *I would like to correct them.*

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Write an answer...

Akhila

16 days ago

Divorce in my culture, in India, is a huge *"black mark."* So when I was leaving India *to come to Canada* as a *student*, *my cousin* shared, *"Two of my aunts and I, we were discussing that we all want to bring our daughters up like you. You are so bold. You face everything."* They all *know everything* that happened—that I'm divorced—and how I handled everything, and still they want their daughters to be like me. *They really know what* our *society is* like, as I do. So that stunned me and made me feel really proud and *happy*. My cousin added, *"We're just scared to say it because there are men in our family who suppress us,* so *we can't* be *fully open* about what we really think. *But* we want you to know that *as females of this family, we are very proud of you."* This brought me to tears: proud, happy tears. I just hope for a day when women in my family, and others in India, can openly share our support for divorced women. I'm working on it! I mean, it used to be *very difficult for me to tell people* in my culture *that I'm divorced. Now I'm like, "Yeah, I'm divorced. So what? The marriage didn't work out. That's okay. "*

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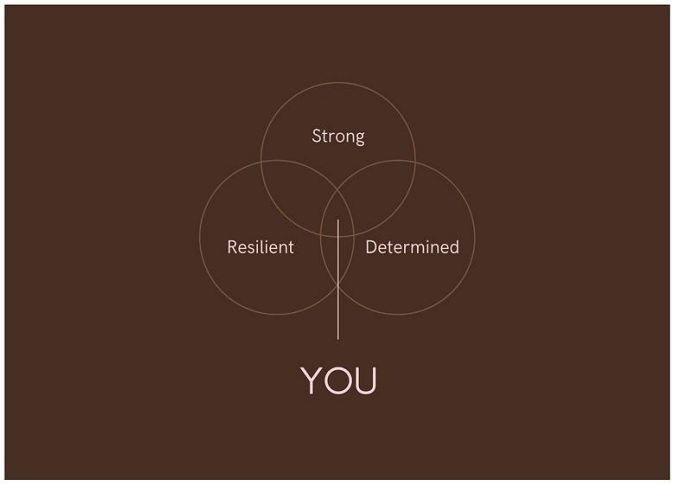
Write an answer...

Julia

13 days ago

I'm proud of *the resiliency that I've been able to gain through my support networks, counselling,* and *my own personal growth and development. Because when I look back on the time* when I first separated, *it was very, very difficult with people leaving and not feeling like I had support. I've always been someone who needs to please everyone. So* now, I'm *learning to have resiliency,* to *still depend on support, but also* to *depend on myself as opposed to needing to please everyone to be okay. It's been such an evolution. Now, I reflect and look back, and I can see those things;* I can see how I've grown.



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Epilogue

I Was There in The Room (Reprisal)[78]

Field Notes on Interactive Group Interviews: From Monologue to Dialogue

During the individual interviews, I asked every participant how the group interview process felt for them, and they candidly shared their reflections, challenges, and impacts. The interactive group interviews were at the heart of this research; they were the often surprising and transformative spaces where each woman's story moved from monologue to dialogue—with me, as the researcher, and with other participants in each of the four smaller groups. Our collective participation and efforts within (and beyond) these interviews was, indeed, another form of *Heartworks*, as much as the narratives and findings themselves. I offer these "field notes" assembled from the experts, the women who informed this research, so that other feminist researchers may be guided in fostering their own methodological spaces of transformative dialogue. Transparency about these possibilities and challenges honours the value of the research process that is paramount in feminist social justice research. Bring Kleenex and an open heart...

Initial Reluctance:

Julia: *I was a little* ***apprehensive*** about being part of this research *because I haven't been a part of a research study in quite some time. I* also *wanted to be a little* ***protective*** of my story. *I was feeling very sensitive and nervous about sharing my story. When I get nervous, I just kind of want to back away and ignore it.*

A couple of things helped ease my nerves though. First, *it was really* ***helpful having*** **a friend** as part of the group *because she already knew my story, so there was a little bit of a safety net there.* Second, a friend of mine knows you, Bronwen, and she *told me about the group, so there was* already *a lot of* ***trust*** *there, although I remember* still *being nervous. But then very quickly,* I felt more at ease *once we sat down and we all introduced ourselves and understood that all three of us were in the same position around roughly the same time,* which was such a neat coincidence.

Kaleigh: *Going into the first meeting, I was a little bit* ***nervous*** *and a little bit* ***anxious****, and I definitely thought about cancelling. That's a normal feeling* for me; *that's kind of my go-to* thought when I feel *anxious: "Do I have to do this? Can I just cancel?"*

Truthfully, if my friend *wasn't in it, I might not have gone through with it. I'm just a bit more of a nervous person about sharing things. I think part of that is because I find that my particular experience with divorce is really dramatic. I don't think* the way my ex treated me *is a normal way for people to treat each other. But I left the first session and subsequent sessions feeling*

[78] This title is a nod to the *Vagina Monologues* (Ensler, 1998/2018) piece entitled "I Was There in The Room" about a woman witnessing her friend giving birth. Many times during the group interviews, I felt I was witnessing, and participating in, something new that was coming into being, a new shared consciousness, perhaps. Like the friend narrating the original piece, **this 'reprisal' shares an unspoken reverence for the women in the interview room and the stories and possibilities they brought forth**.

really, really good. I remember calling my current partner *when I left saying, "That was so good! I'm so glad I went," and just getting to talk about it.* So *I was really happy after.*

Kaitlyn: *My perception* was *slight* ***anxiety*** *in the beginning,* mostly because *I generally don't enjoy group stuff.*

Laura: *I'm a very shy* person *in the beginning, like there's a lot of* ***walls*** *there that are defence mechanisms. So you've just got to crack that first wall, and then you're okay. It's like the turtle shell on the ice cream. You've just got to crack it.* And then, *I am* an *open* book; *I have no shame.*

<u>Normalization and Validation:</u>

Melissa: *It was* ***validating*** *in knowing, "Okay,* ***I'm not crazy*** *and these feelings, I guess, are common. Other women in this situation feel the way I do."* It's just such a relief to talk to people who are going through something similar. *It's the feeling of "Oh my god, I'm not lame. There are other people like me out there."* These women get it. And they get the whole picture, not just the Coles Notes, which is what most people only want to hear. *There are a lot of times, even when you're speaking with women or friends or whoever about your divorce or your separation, there are parts of it you want to talk about with someone that they don't care* to hear about. *They want the gossip. They want the nitty gritty, dirty gossip. They want to know about the fights you had. They want to know about when I had to go to mediation and what happened at mediation and what did he look like? They want reality TV. They don't want reality, and I'm like, "You weren't there when I laid on my bathroom floor and cried for two hours, and you didn't ask me about the two years of counselling I've done since this." There are these very real parts of going through a separation and divorce that people don't want to talk about because they're boring or they're ugly or they're not reality TV. They're hard to take. So meeting women who have been through this process and have also been through those hard times and done the counselling and done the work and been there for those ugly times, it's just, you get it. I'm not the only one who's going through this, and it's comforting. It's very* ***comforting****.*

Kaleigh: *I found it really* ***cathartic****. After our last session, I was like, "I am totally done talking about this." I haven't felt like that at all* before this group. And it's not like I haven't talked about my divorce. *I am in counselling. I go every few months and talking about my divorce is a main point of our conversation still.* But since I've been part of this research process, *it's kind of transitioned from that. I think talking to other people about it* who have been through it and who really get it on a personal level, rather than a professional one, like with my counsellor, has been so helpful. *Specifically, hearing* Melissa's *story, which also was dramatic like mine, really normalized that for me. I was like, "Okay, I'm not the only one who has this crazy* experience, and who *was married to this person that I really didn't know. That happens to other people. That's not your fault." So* hearing Melisssa's story, in particular, *really helped me normalize* my own experience, which I thought was such a dramatic anomaly. *So I came into* this research feeling *really anxious and kind of nervous about sharing that part of my life, but* I *left feeling very relaxed and happy about it.* What counselling couldn't give me was *creating those connections between people who have really* been through it, and not just through a divorce as a young woman, but particularly through a dramatic divorce, so *normalizing with* Melissa *was*

really helpful. I mean, hearing Melissa's dramatic divorce story helped me to normalize that part of my own dramatic experience, but *originally hearing* Julia's *story was* also *really helpful, knowing "Oh my gosh, her life is going on, my life's going on. Like, it's fine."* So *even that piece was really helpful.* Melissa's story *just helped in a different way. This* research group *would have been so great two years ago* when I was first going through my divorce, *just to say, "This is* ***normal****."*

Therapeutic Solidarity:

Maylin: One woman *had* a ***similar experience*** to me, in terms of *both of us having a long relationship* with our ex, at a young *age*, and *it made me feel* like **I *am not the only one.***

Cassandra: *It was definitely a positive thing for me to meet other people with similar experiences. As much as I hate that they had those* ***similar experiences****, there's something* ***therapeutic*** *about knowing that there were so many trends and similarities in our stories. Because I think, at this age, there's not a lot of people out there that I've connected with that have gone through the same thing. It's not necessarily something that we discuss openly as a society. So I think it was nice to see other people's perspectives and meet other people with a similar story.*

Melissa: *It's actually been amazing. I really feel like I've been able to tell my story. I've been able to talk to women and meet some amazing women who have been through what I've been through. My friends are very near and dear to me, but they haven't been through what I've been through. And they're all still married. They all have kids.* So *we're in very different stages of our life even though we are the same age. They love me and support me and did whatever they could to help me, but they didn't know how to help me because they've never been in that situation. So I found that meeting these women was like, "Oh,* ***somebody who gets me****!" It was just this* ***relief****, and I opened up to them and you about things that I never opened up to with my friends about because I'm like, "It's not worth it because they have no advice. They can't offer an opinion. There's probably just going to be judgment."* So with *the* research *group, it was just nice to know that there were other women in my situation, and* ***I wasn't the only one*** *out there!*
Before this research, *I had met* only *one other person who had gone through a separation and divorce in her early thirties. It was actually my boss at the time. They had kids* though so I felt *that there was a very big difference between* her *and me.* Plus, even though *she's a very good friend, she was still my boss,* so *there were some lines that had to be drawn in the sand, and there was definitely a dynamic.*

But then, just finding these other two women, through this research, *who were going through the same thing I was at the same time, and I said to them, "I wish you had been in my life two years ago."* But *I'm so grateful they're in my life now because I think we're still close enough to our divorces where you do still need that support. It's not like it was 10, 15 years ago and people don't talk about it anymore. We've all only been divorced for a year.* I just really loved *being able to talk with women who are going through* some of *the same* things as me. *It's that* ***comradery****; it's that* ***validation****; it's* ***therapeutic****; it's* ***cathartic****. It's like, "Okay, you get it! You're going through it, too." If I had this* research group *two years ago, I think my journey would have been*

very different because as it was, *there's no support. There's not an outlet for women in our situation.*

Julia: The research group *morphed into a* ***healing*** *opportunity for me. I shared a lot of information and it was almost like a bit of a* ***release****. Even though I've done extensive counselling and my own personal work, there's something about sharing it with peers and also women who have been through something very similar, there's something very* ***therapeutic*** *about it.* The research group was different than speaking to a counsellor *because we had the shared experience. I think that's the huge difference-maker. When I go to speak with my counsellor, she's empowering and she's supportive and positive, but she* hasn't *been through something like* this so *we can't* be *on the same level of being able to say, "You know what? I've been through that."* When you can do that, like we did in the group, *it* ***normalizes*** *it* and *makes it feel okay that it happened. A counsellor* or *friends can't do that for you unless they have been through it themselves. It's hard to give the support someone might need, and sometimes the support is just being able to say, "****I've been through the same thing****."* *It's exactly what we were all looking for: to find common ground with people. I think everyone wants to find something or someone or an outlet to be able to test what they're going through because it's so isolating.*

And I didn't really have that common ground before this group. *When I was going through all of this on my own, I was seeking out others and I scoured the internet for people's stories of what they'd been through. But I couldn't find* stories from anyone *in the same age range as me,* so they just didn't resonate. With the research group, I found the *normalization* and validation I was seeking before, and *a big part of* that was *definitely the similarities between our situations.* Our similar *age was a big thing.* Even *the timing* was similar for all of us. *It was very curious that we all kind of went through* this *at the same time.* We all got divorced about two years ago. *Knowing that other people were hurting,* too, *helped me to know it was okay for me to hurt. Hearing about the different ways that people kind of evolved through the experience*—like, *hearing people's grief processes* and *seeing all of our items—felt really good to hear. I'm not quite sure how,* but *it was* ***therapeutic****.*

When I was going through my separation and divorce, *I did have people who were great listeners, but it wasn't as therapeutic as knowing I had peers who had been through it like* I found with Melissa *and* Kaleigh *having been through it. There has been a ton of shame and embarrassment* and *guilt for me, so* connecting with these women in the research group *helped lessen those* feelings. And I needed that because *I didn't feel like I had a really great support system with my immediate family. I was blindsided by* their lack of support *so that just added to the intensity of my shame. So then, being able to just hear other women* with similar experiences *ignited a little more* ***strength*** *in me. This group has been very therapeutic!*

Kaleigh: *I remember being at work and* searching for someone, anyone, on the internet who had a similar divorce experience as me. *I can picture the desk I was sitting at then and just being so desperate to find* some solidarity. *I remember Googling "divorced in your late twenties" over and over again, like something new was going to pop up. I just* kept *renewing* my browser. And I remember feeling like I needed to find at least someone with a few important similarities to my own experience. I *definitely* wanted to find someone who was a young woman. But also *it wouldn't be someone who was only with* their husband *for a year and then got divorced because*

that wasn't my experience. So the length of marriage *was important to me.* The other factor I needed to feel like it was similar enough to resonate was *that there was a long relationship*, as mine was. So *those were the two really big things*—the *really important pieces to me*—I was seeking out in someone's experience of divorce.

At the time, I felt I just really needed someone who was going through exactly what I was going through. I think now I'm a little bit more open-minded that it still hurts for someone getting divorced after a one-year relationship or an otherwise different experience than mine. But *for me,* after my separation, *it was like I had redefined my entire life. I'd never lived on my own. I had never lived on a single income.* So there were all these sudden adulting 'firsts' for me when we separated because my ex *and I moved in together as soon as I finished post-secondary. So those were pretty* changes I had to navigate. *My whole reality changed and I think I needed to hear from someone else that I could do it.* I needed to hear from someone who had been where I was and could assure me, even through their story, that I could do it, too, *without just living in my parents' basement. Like,* that *I would thrive, you know*? *I really needed this to be normal. I was reading pages and pages* but *I found almost nothing! I remember feeling like, "Oh my god, what have I done?"* I was spiralling, thinking, *"I'm going to have to get back together with* my ex. *I can't do this.* I can't be the only one! *This is crazy."*

And then I found *like maybe three blog posts about being divorced under 30 and feeling good about it. I definitely have some screenshots* of those because I really needed to be reminded of what they were saying. *There were some I remember about figuring out who you are and* that *you're not the same person that you were, but now you are more confident and you stand on your own two feet, and you don't feel stifled, and that sort of thing. I remember this one screenshot I would always pull up at lunch* because *I just needed to know that I was going to be okay.* So when *I found this* assurance *from the in-person* research group, there was *a level of* ***release*** *and* ***peace*** *that was really helpful.*

Kaitlyn: *I think the setting that you chose was perfect: It's private, it's quiet, it's living room-esque. It was more of that round table,* ***comfortable environment****. It was definitely a lot easier to speak about things. And it gave me an opportunity to listen to stories that I wouldn't have otherwise heard. I think that was important because even though you can follow tags on social media about divorce and all that kind of stuff, none of those people really are real to you. Whereas being in a room beside someone on a couch telling their story definitely makes you realize that divorce happens to so many people.* I didn't feel that way when I was in the midst of it, so I *felt very alone. Like,* I thought, *"I can't believe this is happening to me. I'm wrong."* But *hearing those stories* from the other women in the group, *I realized, "No, it happens to so many people."* So *I've been very happy to be part of* this research. *I'm just happy to have been able to share* my story *in a way that I wouldn't have ever really thought of.* In retelling my story, I got to choose the parts that I wanted to hold onto and the parts that I am letting free. It was like a form of *talk therapy.*

Laura: *I'm the first of my friends that's gone through* a divorce. So being part of this research group and talking with women who get it, *those are people that I would consider outside* the "divorce *bubble." The people that are still inside the bubble, there is no way* they can really understand this experience. They *can get close but not touch anymore* because *it's such a big*

disconnect once you're on the outside. The other women in the group and I are "outsiders"; I guess that's what people mean when they say they're "marginalized."

Ava: *I think* the group interview *was useful in that there's a* ***connection*** with *other women who got divorced.*

<u>Interactive Learning, Resonances, and Reconsiderations:</u>

Maylin: *I listened carefully* to *the stories* of the other women in the group and *I think* ***we can learn from everyone*** *about how we go through* this.

Alison: *I thought* being part of the group interview *was really interesting. I enjoyed having folks at different stages to kind of* ***rethink*** my own experience and recollections. *I thought that it was actually quite useful to be in the group setting because I am so far out* from my divorce that *I've sort of forgotten* a lot of the details *and it doesn't have the emotional intensity or kind of urgency that it perhaps did.* So *it was really interesting in terms of kind of* ***juxtaposing*** *what I remembered my experience to be with what others seemed to be actually experiencing* with recent divorces.

Rhiannon: *I really loved hearing other people's stories. We were able to share our own personal stories and hear other stories. We were able to find what* ***resonated*** *with us and the* ***patterns*** *and trends that we recognized. It also helps* to hear people share and *to remember* parts of my own experiences that *I forgot about*. *So that really helps. It was interesting! I really liked the small group* dynamic. *I think three* participants in the group *is the right number*. I think f*ive or six might have been too much*. *It* also *really helped* me *to hear that both of* the other women in the group felt like I do now, in that they *were like, "Yeah, as soon as I finished the divorce, it was never again* for a relationship or getting married." *But then, they both got remarried.* So maybe I won't always feel the way I do now about another relationship.

Rayna: The group interview *was helpful because I could realize how* ***different*** *or how* ***similar*** *a certain experience could be. So there's something I could* ***compare*** my own experiences *to and it really* got *me to think in that direction. Like, if I heard* someone in the group *say something that she had a problem with, I would think, "Well, did I have a problem in that aspect and what was it? Or did I not? And why didn't I?" So it was helpful* in that respect.

<u>Navigating Challenging Group Dynamics:</u>

Cassandra: *I would say my only concern through the whole process was as I was telling my story, I noticed someone else was maybe a little bit* ***emotional*** and *I felt like, "Oh, should I stop?" Because I remember how raw things can feel, and I feel like maybe she's at a different point in the process. And I wasn't there that long ago that I can completely remove myself from it. So it was a little bit eye-opening for me, of like, "Okay, I remember how raw and real that can feel." Even sometimes, for me,* there are *still those moments that sort of trigger* me.

I was happy you observed that reaction, too, and checked in with her. *That made me feel really great because, at the time, I thought, "Oh, I don't know, in this setting, given what we're here for, if it's my job to ask her if she's okay." But as a person, I just wanted to make sure because I wasn't entirely sure if that's what was happening based on where I was sitting either.* So *I think you handled that extremely well. It made me feel more comfortable as well. And it was nice to hear her say, "No, I'm okay," because I think* then *the rest* of us knew *to all respect that, too.*

Kaleigh: *I definitely had a little bit of an* ***emotional hangover*** *after* the group interview *just from talking about it. It's hard to talk about it again,* but I'm still glad I did.

Laura: We did the two group interviews and *I think the first one was just structured in a way where there was a lot of deep,* ***heavy content****. It's like when you start a new TV show, the pilot episode is always shitty because they have to have so much character detail and introduction and everything. So I have to know* everyone's back *stories* in the group because they're *the origin stories of our* divorce journeys. *But then you start getting into the series, and you're like, "Well, I want to know what happens!"; I want to know what happens to* the women I met in my group. *And then they get over their character arc and they get to the part where it's like, "I'm okay now."*

Rayna: The experiences one woman, in particular, shared with the group, *that story was definitely a lot for me. It was heavy. It was* ***overwhelming****. It was quite emotional. So I found that for the rest of the day, I was really tired and a bit moody. And I think it was just a lot to take on someone else's problems like that. For hours after, I found myself thinking about* her *story and it was a bit overwhelming to hear.* So *maybe I wouldn't want to do* this kind of thing *too often. I mean, kudos to her that she can share so easily but she shared very personal things. I'm impressed by you because you are listening to all these stories, which obviously are a load to think about and that must be a lot for you to take in.* I was thinking about that after, actually, and especially given the personal nature of my story—of all our stories—I wanted to *thank you for being so kind and understanding. It was easy to share stories with you; you're an excellent listener.*

Rayna: One of the other women in my interview group *was very chatty. Sometimes I would speak, and all of a sudden, she would intervene just to share even more of her story. I felt like there should be a little more designated time,* where others are just listening to the person who is currently sharing. Like, *when I commented on her story, I tried to keep it to her story or what my opinion is of her story, not to add more of mine because, obviously, it's endless. I could give you* an *endless amount of details* about my story *but it's about, I guess, what's important or what's the gist of it.* I think that dynamic happens though with different *personalities. That's* how that person *saw it for herself and that's how I saw it for myself.* But *I felt like at the moment that I'm speaking,* ***interruption*** *would be more about commenting on what I'm saying, rather than plugging in a different story, which almost throws you off track. It's not intentional. I have a friend that's exactly like* that. But there is this element of that style of communication or that *personality* where *it's like*, *"I have these problems and I have more of them"* and it feels a bit *selfish.* So I was feeling a bit *irritated* by that dynamic*, especially at the end when she said that it took too long and I was thinking, "Yes, it took long because you spoke 90% of the time."* That was one of the *negatives* for me with the group interview.

Melissa: *I loved talking to* the women in my interview group and hearing their stories. With one woman in particular, *I'm so thrilled that she got to be with the person she wants, and they're having a baby. I'm so happy for her, but there's a part of me that's just dying on the inside and I'm like, "**Why wasn't that me?** Why couldn't that have been me? What did I do wrong? Or what did I do differently that I didn't get that? Or I don't deserve that."*

Release and Non-Judgement:

Julia: When we first sat down as a group, I wanted to share where I was at, emotionally, right off the bat. So I just said to everyone, two of whom I'd never met before (I did know one person), *"I will admit this before I start, I am pregnant, so I am very highly emotional right now. You might see tears."* I was anticipating that I might feel very emotional because of my pregnancy hormones, but I wasn't expecting that the group interviews (our group met three times) would help me let go of some of the emotions I had been carrying for a long time now. *It was almost like a bit of a **release**, an opportunity to be able to let go. It's kind of like* in the show *The Game of Thrones, how they send the bodies off into the water and then they shoot the fire arrow into it as it's sailing* and *lets it sail away. That's what it kind of felt like was my shame and my embarrassment. I'd been holding onto that bow and then, finally, I let it go. And maybe there's still a little* shame left, like, *in some of my pockets, but a lot of it went off on the boat and I shot that arrow. I shot that arrow hard! I think* I could do that in the group interviews because of *the **respect** that we all have for one another* and ***no judgment**. I felt **empathy** amongst the group. I think that was one of the big ones, too, is knowing that there was just no judgment; no negative feelings or emotions directed at each other.*

Laura: *I liked the group setting, especially the second one* (since our group met twice) *when it was just myself and* the one woman (when the other woman got mixed up with the timing*). Not that I didn't enjoy the first one. Both of them were equally as enjoyable, it's just the second one felt a lot more casual than the first one. I feel like that* one *was more of an **honest** and **non-judgmental*** conversation. *Not that the previous one was judgmental,* but the second interview just felt *like three girls having a cup of coffee. With the three of us* (the other woman, me, and you), *it was literally just "What's your opinion on this? Let's discuss."* And we talked about *the things that she was going through, the things that she was proud of, her accomplishments, the things that I was proud of, my accomplishments. It was like a **verbal high-five**.*

Melissa: There are *parts of* my story that *my family don't even know* and *my friends don't know.* But *I* was able to *tell* everything to the women in this group *because it was very **cathartic** and I think **I needed to*** **tell my whole story**. I could do that in the space you created for us, Bronwen. You invited us to share whatever we wanted to share about ourselves and our divorce stories. And when we weren't sure if it was okay or was "too much information" to share something, I remember you said, "*There is no TMI here..."Tangents" are part of it* so you don't need to 'get to the point' quickly; this space is yours to tell your story however you want." And you reminded us that "*tears are welcome*." And the tears did come. *I* even *brought* a box of *Kleenex* to our second meeting because we ran out in the first one and I knew we'd need it.

Connections Beyond the Interviews (Ripple Effects):

Melissa: *Before we met at the last session,* the three of us *got together for lunch. I think we're definitely going to plan something* else. *I'm so happy that* ***this has taken on a life of its own***; we're continuing the connections we made in this research outside of the interviews. *I love it! Actually, at one point* recently, one woman from the group *and I were just texting back and forth, and I actually had a situation with my ex and his new wife, and I texted her, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, guess what just happened?"* So I told her what happened and asked, *"What do you think? And how do I respond to this?" And she talked me through it, and I was like, "This is so constructive because she has been there." If I had asked my girlfriends for advice or my sister, they're just going to start talking about his stupid wife and how ugly she is. And that does not help me in this situation where this woman has emailed me at 1:30 in the morning.* When I've gotten that kind of response from girlfriends if I've vented to them about something like this, it would be like, "*That's not helping. I don't care what she's wearing. I don't care what she looks like on Facebook right now. Let's focus on the problem. I don't know what to do about this. And I'm trying very hard to respond to this and not react to this, and I don't need your reactions."* So when I texted the woman from our group about it*, she was very helpful.*

Julia: I've just been thinking of how I've felt in the several times we all met together and kind of comparing that with how I've felt about my divorce experience out in the world. And I think it's shame versus openness, really. *There's shame around divorce*. I've felt it. I still feel it. The other women felt it, too. But *maybe* ***if we could all just be more open*** *about it*, well then there wouldn't be the shame. *I mean divorce could happen* to anyone, really, *because the majority of people do get divorced, right? So why can't that be normalized?* I felt that openness and normalization in our research group. It was *like being in a* ***support group****.* And it made me want that more broadly. Like, *how can* divorce, especially young divorce, *just be normalized so you can openly talk about* it*? That's exactly what I needed, and I think we all needed* that *and were looking for* it, mostly without finding it in our own lives. *There should be like a* ***divorce conference****, where women can go and listen to motivational speakers* who are *women who have* been through it!

Melissa: *We mentioned in one of the meetings that we would love to do a Meetup or create a support group for women who are going through this. After our last session, I especially felt we need to do something,* so *I actually downloaded Meetup because we were talking about creating a support group. I got an email from Meetup and it was like, "Oh, we noticed you searched for this. Do you want to start it?" So I saved that email. I feel like there's a huge need for it. And I've still been thinking about it, whether that's in the form of some sort of* ***group*** *or if it's a* ***blog*** or something*. I really seriously debated starting a blog or something about getting divorced, not having kids, all this stuff around it and then trying to get back out there and date. And all the horrible dating stories and all the horrible men that are out there and the stupid shit that I've gone out with. And the dates we've gone on* with like *mothballs and leftover pizza. That's what I should call* the blog: *"Mothballs and Leftover Pizza."*

Whatever the outlet though, *I feel like I do have this story to tell. I mean, I've told you, and it is going in this research, which I am so happy about. I* remember one of the women in the group *said when she was going through her separation, she was scouring the internet and found this*

one person and she was like, "Oh good, so one woman in Denmark has gone through this and validated me. So there's *two of us* who *have gotten divorced* young." *I think there are more women out there,* obviously, but they're hard to find and connect with. And that's the mentality I was coming from when I first heard about your research from our mutual friend. *To be honest, when I contacted you about this project, I was thinking, "I've done an undergrad thesis and it is so hard to get people to participate in research. This poor woman needs my help." I have to do this because I know how hard it is to get* participants*, and I didn't even do interviews for my research. I was just doing questionnaires and people don't want to fill those out. So if I can help with research, I definitely will. And that was honestly my thought process because,* on top of people being generally reluctant to participate in research, *I was* also *like, "I really don't know how many women there are in this situation. I'm probably the only one!" So that was honestly where my thought process was, but it's turned into so much more than I was expecting. I really didn't know what was going to come of it. I've learned a lot about myself and I've learned about a lot of things* from the two other participants in our group. *I really didn't think I was going to end up with three incredible* ***friends*** *out of this. That's been a really pleasant surprise. And I didn't think I was going to end up with this amazing* ***support group*** *out of this* because that's *something that you've done, Bronwen, inadvertently; you've created a support group for the three of us. You are the seed that started it all. That's why I feel like we need to start an actual support group!*

Bronwen:

I was there in the room
when I witnessed
the consciousness-raising
that my foremothers must have felt
in those second-wave gatherings
when women confided
their anger
their hurt
their sadness
their struggle

their joys
their solidarity

With these women,
we shared stories
laughter
tears
And this palpable connection
that reverberated
with its quiet power

And I wasn't the same woman who entered that room

6.0 Discussion

Throughout my research journey, I reflected on various ways to conceptualize the many complex pieces I had heard, read, and now held. I sought a way to assemble these disparate, yet connected, pieces into some kind of whole that could be more readily held by others. Over time, the language and images that surfaced for me most often as I turned the pieces over in my mind were three central images: a heart-shaped vase; this same vase completely in pieces; and a similar, yet different, vase that had clearly been pieced back together. I searched, literally, for approximations of my mental images online and found these:

I pasted these three images onto the centre of my desktop and they remained there as I thought about women's divorce narratives within these images, and the unifying metaphor behind them, of course. At some point, I vaguely remembered learning about a Japanese art form where pieces of pottery are purposefully re-assembled in beautiful ways. After a little research, I learned that this art form is called *Kintsugi*, and it is, indeed, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the cracks with a lacquer made from gold, or other precious metals (Gopnik, 2009). Kintsugi translates to "joining with gold" or "repairing with gold" and is "built on the idea that in embracing flaws and imperfections, you can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art" (Ayuda, 2018, para. 3). Significantly, this 400-year-old technique seeks to highlight the "scars" within the design, reflecting a powerful "metaphor for healing ourselves" by recognizing, even celebrating, that "in the process of repairing things that have broken, we actually create something more unique, beautiful and resilient" (para. 3). Clearly, this metaphor resonated for

this research. From it emerged my conception of *Heartworks*—a play on 'heart' and 'art/work'—to reflect the broad process of young women's experiences of divorce, as shared with me by the twelve women in this research. As the findings elucidate in the first two "parts" (or pieces), *Shattering* and *Re-Creating* are the two overarching parts of this process, which comprise the *Heartwork*s. Before turning to the rest of my discussion, I explore the usefulness of this metaphoric approach.

6.1 Thinking with Metaphor

In my fourth chapter, I discussed how "thinking with theory" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023) influenced my analysis and representation. This approach, and other "moves" I described, led to the broad conceptualization of my findings as *Heartworks*, a metaphorical representation of women's processes of divorce through "shattering" and "re-creating" with parallels to *Kintsugi* artwork, as I situate above. As I learned about Kintsugi, one writer in particular, Candace Kumai, articulated what struck her most in her first-hand research on this Japanese art form for her book on its connections to wellness. In an interview with Ayuda (2018), Kumai shared that she travelled to Japan to study under a Kintsugi master and came to this realization: "It occurred to me that people *needed metaphors* and objects to understand the art of healing. Kintsugi reveals how to heal and shows you that you are better with your golden cracks" (para. 4, my emphasis). I jotted down this quote; it seemed meaningful that, perhaps, people "needed metaphors." In my original discussion, however, I did not unpack this observation and it remained a note in a document to be potentially considered at another time. That time was not far off.

In my defence of this dissertation, one of my examiners, Adele Pavlidis, prompted me to return to this thinking about metaphor. Specifically, she encouraged me to justify and develop my metaphoric approach. Following this apt invitation, I draw on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) now-classic assertion of the usefulness of metaphor: "Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of

one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding abstract, emotional or other experiences" (p. 36). Indeed, over the past decade or so, qualitative health researchers, in particular, have explored how individuals make sense of their experiences of illness, distress, and disease through metaphorical expressions (cf. Cardano, 2010; Hall, 2011). One context where this has been explored from a feminist perspective has been identifying women's metaphorical descriptions of depression and their changing sense of gendered self in their process of recovery (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2012; Lafrance, 2009). For instance, in their research on women's depression and recovery, Fullagar and O'Brien (2012) identified women's use of metaphors to reflect their complex challenges and negotiations through depression as a *battle*, and possibilities for recovery through the metaphor of a *journey* of self-knowledge. These women used these metaphors, and others, to resist limiting narratives they encountered, including biopolitical imperatives that insist women's depression arises from an "internal problem" and gendered narratives that identify this "problem" as a "deficient" feminine self (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2012). In this way, we can 'think with metaphor'—to extend Jackson and Mazzei's (2023) language—by recognizing that "metaphor can be a powerful resource that enables different ways of thinking . . . through imaginative leaps and associative connections in the play of language" (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2012, p. 1069).

In my own approach to 'thinking with metaphor', the *Heartworks* metaphor that frames my findings provides something to conceptually 'hold onto' to conceive of how the many 'parts' of women's divorce narratives coalesce into a broader whole (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The poem that begins the first part of the findings works this metaphor, invoking images of both a literal and metaphorical artwork/heartwork, to elucidate the long process of carefully making, displaying, and repairing "this vase, this vessel for all my hopes and dream" until this *Heartwork*

shattered and the woman in the poem (representing the women in this research) was left to "pick up the pieces." Hopefully, this metaphor—and the images and language that in*form* it—provides a compelling connection to what might otherwise remain more abstract concepts, such as devastation, disbelief, and grief. Even the concept of "heartbreak" itself has been rendered so common and pervasive (a cursory listen to any popular radio station illustrates this...) that we are abstracted from its true intensity. We are re-connected, however, through the "imaginative leap" (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2012) of 'heart break'—the heart/work actually breaking—as the "shattering" poem metaphorically describes. In this way, I see theorizing with metaphor as a direct "circuit" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023) that can travel quickly between concept/abstraction and emotion, electrifying the receiver (yet another metaphor...).

Moreover, I engage with my own metaphoric approach—the *Heartworks*—because it "enables different ways of thinking" through the play of language (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2012, p. 1069). The dominant cultural narrative of women's divorce is one of women "falling apart" and wallowing in that 'brokenness' indefinitely (Lenz, 2024). The metaphor of the *Heartworks* acknowledges and honours this 'heart break' but also enables a different way of thinking about young women's divorce, which critically includes "re-creating" as an ongoing "work in progress" of grieving, transitioning, and transforming. Connecting this metaphor to women's divorce grief specifically, for instance, we can more vividly and viscerally understand their grief as disorientation, disconnection, and fragmentation and a reckoning with grief, thus, that requires a new sense of orientation, connection, and wholeness. Significantly, the "different ways of thinking" that theorizing with and through metaphors incites is a meaningful tool in feminist researchers' toolkit (more metaphors abound) to "challenge taken-for-granted beliefs about women . . . and gendered lives within society" (Freysinger et al., 2013, p. 63). For the women in

this research, the *Heartworks* metaphor seamlessly challenges many taken-for-granted beliefs about young women's divorce, including that this heartbreak is the end of happiness and a meaningful life. As the women make clear, the shattering is, in fact, the *beginning* of "re-creating something [they] never could have imagined" precisely because "breaking open" transformed them into a different "artist" who no longer wants the same heartwork she had before the shattering.

Circling back to the note in my document, I agree with Kumai's realization that people "needed metaphors . . . to understand" (Ayuda, 2018, para. 4), at least as one way of understanding complex experiences. I would add that as a feminist researcher, *I* needed metaphor to more fully understand feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's (2017) own extension that "the personal is political" within feminism but also that "the personal is theoretical" (p. 17). That is, within feminist research, we can also resist the taken-for-granted belief of the assumed abstraction of theory from everyday life and, instead, we can "use the everyday as animation . . . to bring theory back to life" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17). This research theorizes with metaphor, animated by women's experiences, as a way to bring theory back to life; to make the personal theoretical and, perhaps, more *heart*felt.

The discussion that follows explores how participants' experiences elucidated the "shattering" and the "re-creating of their gendered selves. In so doing, I highlight insights that illuminate my three research questions: 1) What gendered ideologies do young, divorced women experience?; 2) How are these gendered ideologies experienced, circulated, reproduced, and maintained?; and 3) How do young, divorced women negotiate and resist these gendered ideologies? As the findings hopefully make clear, there is a lot to explore and unpack with this research. As such, I have chosen to focus this discussion in several ways: In the first part,

Shattering Gendered Selves, I explore some of the women's experiences of divorce as a complex and ambiguous (Boss, 2016) form of *grief* within the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2008). I extend the original conceptualization to consider distinctly *gendered grief*. In the second part, *Re-Creating Gendered Selves*, I highlight women's re-created relationships with *themselves* as they navigated the complexities of centering their own needs and desires following their divorces. This centering of self became a form of *self-love*, albeit complicated by competing ideological pressures to focus on others within the imperative of "heterosexual sociality" (Lazar, 2002). I intentionally focus the second part of the discussion on women's relationship with themselves given that, as hooks (2003) insists, "self-love is always risky for women within patriarchy" (p. 134). I extend this discussion to women's relationships with others, mainly their women family and friends. Within the scope of this discussion, however, and following the focus on women "meeting themselves" post-divorce, I do not discuss (some) women's subsequent romantic relationships, which is represented in the findings. Thirdly, I expand my consideration of women's relationships with both self and others—*Re-connecting Gendered Selves*—to emphasize the significance of *community* in women navigating and defining their lives following divorce. Finally, I highlight the role of *hope* within women's experiences of divorce and end by situating the "therapeutic solidarity" fostered within this research as a feminist praxis of *Heartworks*.

6.2 Shattering Gendered Selves

6.2.1 Before...Everything Fell Apart: Shattering the Fairytale

Young . . .
A bud breaking through the security of the ground.
The world.
Open. Daunting.
An expanse where fairytales ring true;
where the only endeavor is acquiring the love of a man.
Sex means love.
Rejection means insignificance.
Existence teeters on the edge of his lips.

(Bowman, 2019, p. 1)

Our earliest stories—the fairy tales of childhood—are replete with women protagonists' narratives divided clearly into two parts: the neatly demarcated 'before' marriage and 'after' marriage. Snow White and Cinderella, those classic damsels, provide ready examples of the sorry fates they faced before their princes showed up. Their 'befores' of domestic servitude and loneliness (assuaged only somewhat by the company of talking animals...) became 'happily ever afters' when they married their princes. These fairy tales conveniently end with 'happy' betrothals. In this way, fairy tales function as significant sociolinguistic tools that "share experience and knowledge of certain social contexts" (Totibadze, 2019, p. 150). However, these and other cultural narratives rarely speak of what happens *after* the distressed damsels are rescued by their royal marriages. The implied assumption is that there really isn't anything left to tell: they live happily ever after and that's it. It follows that if readers[79] (or listeners or viewers) also want a 'happily ever after', they better hope they lose the equivalent of a glass slipper and

[79] Specifically, female readers. Male readers typically identify with different fairy tale characters and narratives of an accepted or desired path to love and happiness (but more so, independence and adventure) (Le Clue, 2024).

get married to a charming, wealthy, loyal, devoted man. Critically, these kinds of pervasive cultural narratives deeply inform internalized gendered ideologies beginning with children's early constructions of gender by providing "young readers [with] access to the social information that will be stereotypes, gender roles or the cultural values" of their particular society (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Messner, 2000; Totibadze, 2019, p. 150).

Fortunately, these simplistic and unrealistic fairy tales, and their toxic implications for women, have been much maligned and critiqued within mainstream and academic spheres (cf. Haase, 2000; Heth & Nelson, 2022. Indeed, almost four decades ago, the "Cinderella complex" (or the "Cinderella Syndrome") was first described as an adverse psychological socialization process on girls and women that emphasized an ideal of femininity wherein women are expected to be beautiful and supportive of others, but incapable of independently taking care of themselves or altering their situation, as depicted through, and named for, the character of Cinderella within her fairy tale (Dowling, 1982). Within the sociocultural context of the 1970s, with the advent of no-fault divorce in North America (Bradford, 1997; Eichler, 2012), combined with the feminist "militancy of the times" (para. 1), Dowling and half the women she knew left their marriages and began experiencing a confusing ambivalence, or conflict, with independence: with "the need to live freely . . . and the need to feel safe" (Dowling, 1981, para. 2). She posited that women's conscious or unconscious psychological dependence on men, and specifically on marriage, is the outcome of pervasive socialization that has taught women "to believe that as females, we cannot stand alone, that we are too fragile, too delicate, too needful of protection" (para. 9), which distinctly conflicts with the (then) "new, socially encouraged thrust toward independence" for women (Dowling, 1981, para. 10)—a condition she called the "Cinderella Complex."

Decades later, Weaver (2017) explored a more modern interpretation of the Cinderella Complex, suggesting that the concept might be taken up by a younger generation "when a woman (often submissive and needy) spends all her time searching for her prince charming to come rescue her; brainwashed by rosy romantic images and ideals" (para. 2). Weaver (2017) further points to an "evolutionary aspect [wherein] women don't want to have to become a social outcast" (para. 11) by thwarting socially acceptable femininity. Indeed, the tensions between femininity and independence is the central theme articulated by Dowling's (1981) Cinderella Complex, which hinges on women's individual and collective "fear that independence will lead to loss of femininity . . . considering that only a generation ago [as of the 1970s], dependency was inextricably linked with what it meant to be feminine" (para. 10). This is certainly consistent with Stets and Burke's (2000) inclusion of "not independent" as one of the stable characteristics of the ideology of femininity according to several decades of both sociological and psychological research on femininity. The Cinderella Complex, thus, asserts its deleterious influence on women, Dowling (1981) contended, by invoking that "buried and denied" fear of dependency that surfaces for women "caught in transition between two vastly different concepts of femininity" (para. 10)—that of the 'past' and that of our 'modern' times, which may not be as "enlightened" as we might hope.

While I think the original and modern descriptions of the Cinderella Complex offer some helpful insights and frameworks, particularly around the shifting, complex relationship between femininity and independence/dependence, I take issue with the lack of women's agency (or potential thereof) that seems to be implied with the notion of women's "brainwashing" and a subtle but present psychoanalytic nuance that favours unconscious drives. More current critiques

offer a more balanced perspective that recognizes the often unexamined influence of these kinds of societal "fairy tale" narratives, while also accounting for women's self-awareness and agency.

Some of my favourite recent examples, thus, of more modern critiques of the Cinderella Complex and its corollaries include a cheeky self-help book, *Cinderella, You Bitch*, that encourages readers to "smash that glass slipper and find your own happily ever after . . . by identifying and releasing the fairy-tale narrative . . . of unrealistic expectations and impossible relationship goals" (Heth & Nelson, 2022, p. 4). Another example of a critique of "all the rules" of these fairy tale marriages is the American singer-songwriter Emeline's recent song *cinderella's dead*[80] that features in the women artist compilation album *Women Power 2023*, where she laments, "I was 19 in a white dress/ When you told me I'm your princess/ So I played right into your fantasy/ Was your good girl, so I'd sit tight" (EMELINE, 2023). But as she ramps up for the catchy chorus, she realizes the "fantasy" wasn't all she hoped it would be, and revises her approach, "I forgot I was a bad bitch/ tragic/ Breaking all the rules 'cause they were only habits/ Cinderella's dead now/ casket/ You thought the shoe fit, but I/ forgot I was a bad bitch..." A third example of a mainstream take on debunking the simplistic fairy tale marriage fantasy comes in the unlikely (but clever) form of a New York divorce attorney's blog entry written as an open letter to Cinderella on "how to divorce Prince Charming", offering her sound legal advice on getting a prenup and commingling assets so that Cinderella, who, "more than anyone . . . understands the complications of the fairy tale marriage . . . [can] take that knowledge, along with [her] glass slippers and [her] wits, to the bank" (Sexton, 2023, para. 10).

The stories of the women in this research draw back the curtain on the assumption that there is not more to tell *after* marriage. Each of them did *not* "live happily ever after" with the

[80] The song title's lack of capitalization is intentional, as the artist intended (whose own mononymous artist name is written in all capitals).

men they married and their 'afters' are infinitely more complex not only because, of course, their stories are not neatly packaged and "Disney-ified" (I am making this a verb), but also because the routes they were told would lead to "happiness"—and women have been told in endless ways—took a major detour with divorce.

So before we can appreciate the experiences of participants' shattered selves, we need to understand the contours of their selves before the fracture of divorce; before the 'fairy tale' was shattered. Who were they before? What were their hopes and expectations?

When I asked participants about their lives before their marriages, their discussions often centered on their expectations of relationships from an early age, then on their experiences with dating and the outcomes they ultimately expected. For instance, when she was growing up, Cassandra was repeatedly given the advice by her mother to "find someone who's your best friend" so that was her "expectation of relationships." Similarly, in the "Good Woman" monologue, Rhiannon shared that she was "raised with the old traditional married sense: You get married, you buy a house together, you have children, you live together as a family" and that this trajectory was simply "how it has to be" and, therefore, was (the only) one that she expected for herself. Likewise, Melissa and Julia both also expected they would eventually get married and have kids because that is what "[you] are supposed to [do]," as Julia contended. These hopes and expectations, even before marriage, closely align with the relationship orientation of femininity (Bem, 1974, 1981; Helgeson, 1994; Mahalik et al., 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000), as well as clearly with the ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism (Cobb, 2011, DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Parry, 2005). These hopes and expectations seemed on track to be realized once the women met their "prince charming" (as Kaitlyn described her early impression of her husband-to-be), except that there was much more to these women's stories than they had anticipated.

6.2.2 After...Everything Fell Apart: Holding the Pieces

6.2.2.1 Grieving Divorce

As a feminist researcher, I knew that the stories my participants shared would shift and expand my own thinking as we worked to co-construct understandings of their knowledge, as the experts of their experiences, and of my own evolving knowledge. When I developed the proposal for this dissertation and outlined the landscape of the literature, concepts, theories, and other organizational frameworks I proposed would be helpful and relevant in understanding this research, one concept was not on my radar at that point, which later became pivotal in my thinking about this research as it unfolded. A good friend of mine brought the complexities of grief to my attention, where it has remained ever since.

In the summer of 2022, I met up with this friend, whom I have known for some twenty years. We met in a French class in high school and have remained part of each other's lives ever since. That summer, she was visiting her parents who still live in the city where we grew up, as do I. After our high school days together, she moved overseas and then eventually back to Canada, but to another province, and we get together in person a couple of times a year and keep in touch over text and Skype the rest of the time. We regularly send each other interesting tidbits—virtual "pebbles"—we think the other will appreciate (like memes, articles, pictures etc.). I even sent her an article that named our funny little ritual as a modern-day version of how Gentoo penguins show their love by leaving little pebbles for each other (Travers, 2024). We have been there for each other through all kinds of life milestones and challenges: four university graduations; two marriages; the birth of three children between us; various mental health struggles; and the death of her father, among others.

Our visit in the summer of 2022 felt different than all our other times reconnecting in person when we normally pick up right where we left off—one of the gifts of long, authentic friendships. But this time, things felt different not only because of the pandemic that had us masked and forgoing our usual sharing of desserts, but also because it was the first time we had seen each other in person since my friend lost her baby son at 20 weeks, earlier that year. As we walked and talked together for some time, I felt that everything I was saying seemed somehow trivial or insensitive. She asked me how my kids were doing, and without thinking, I mentioned the most recent event that came to mind: that my daughters' first pet—a fish—had died the day before and that I had been surprised by both of their different reactions. Mid-story, I stopped suddenly, mortified that I was recounting the most insignificant loss given what my friend had been through. I started apologizing profusely, which made my blunder feel worse. My friend just looked at me, and generously assured me, "It's fine. You can talk about whatever you'd like. I'm okay..." But I needed to acknowledge the tension and uncertainty I was feeling, so I cut through my own awkwardness and admitted, "I don't know what to say. I don't know how to be "us" right now. I can't imagine..." Grief was the elephant in the room (well, in our outdoor stroll) and it felt suffocating.

What followed was a conversation now seared into my mind (and subsequently written about in a notebook I always keep with me). My friend invited me into a small part of her experience of grief (the first of several invitations). That story is her own but her candour in sharing some of her grieving process allowed me to consider how grief is intimately woven into the experiences of the women in my research. I will discuss some of the myriad ways grief showed up for these women as they grappled with the loss of their marriages, all that accompanied that loss, and what it can teach us.

6.2.2.2 Ambiguous Loss

My friend put grief on my radar in thinking about women's divorces as, indeed, a form of loss. Grappling with the personal and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic put another concept, related to grief, on my radar; one that was new to me—that of ambiguous loss. It was early 2022, my twins were five years old and in senior kindergarten, their first year ever of in-person school (I had somehow survived doing virtual junior kindergarten with them the year before). As January rolled around and a new year began, I remember being struck (as I had numerous times before then) by the loss of relative normalcy they were experiencing; we were all experiencing. At school, they had to eat lunch in complete silence (quite the expectation for a bunch of four-year-olds!) so as not to spread germs as they ate; they were distracted by the feeling of the masks on their faces and had trouble understanding what their teachers were saying behind their own masks. They had never experienced trick-or-treating and we had just celebrated Christmas without seeing any extended family in person for the second year in a row. I joked that I was losing all sense of time were it not for keeping track of how many virtual concerts we had tuned into to sing and dance in our living room with Erick Traplin (a local children's singer). Then, whenever I allowed myself to reflect on these losses of a 'normal' carefree childhood, guilt came knocking. After all, what right did I have to grieve these kinds of losses when people all over the world were losing loved ones to COVID? It was during this time, that I stumbled upon an online article where a journalist was interviewing Pauline Boss, the author of a new book, *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*. As Boss explained:

> People may long for closure, which psychologists define as the act or sense of . . . resolving a problem we're suffering from, but we will never get over what COVID-19

> took from us . . . and that's okay; . . . *not* feeling closure is actually healthy as we seek to move forward with life. (Dangor, 2022, para. 3)

In the 1970s, Boss coined the term "ambiguous loss" as a way to understand "a situation that's beyond human expectation," such as a family member who has physically gone missing or someone who is psychologically 'missing,' as with dementia or major mental illness (Dangor, 2022, para. 18). The disruption of norms and social networks that resulted from the pandemic was also a form of ambiguous loss, Boss asserted. Unlike clear forms of loss, such as death, which is an expected human experience for which we have rituals to help process the loss, "with ambiguous loss, there are no rituals; there are no customs. Society doesn't even acknowledge it. So the people who experience it are very isolated and alone, which makes it worse" (Dangor, 2022, para. 18). Reading this article and beginning to think about the concept of ambiguous loss, resonated with my own ambiguous experiences during the pandemic. It also became clear to me that this was the specific form of loss the women in my research had experienced and part of what made it so distinct and difficult to navigate. Indeed, as I delved into research on ambiguous loss, I learned that divorce was an example of one of the two types of ambiguous loss: that of a physical absence with a psychological presence (the other type being the reverse, as with someone with an addiction or dementia) (Boss, 2016). Furthermore, Boss (2016) asserted that "ambiguous loss is the most stressful type of loss because it defies resolution . . . there [are] no rituals of support. Instead, people are often . . . left on their own to cope, isolated and trapped between hope and despair" (pp. 270-271). The lack of rituals for divorce, specifically, was something I had been thinking about since the proposal stage of my research, except I had thought about them in terms of "celebrating divorce" and some young women's efforts to do just that with experiences like throwing a divorce party or trashing their wedding dress (cf. Caputa,

2014). Notably, when I asked my participants whether they had heard about, or participated in (their own or another's), "divorce party," a number of women had heard about the phenomenon, but *no one* wanted to have one for themself. This unanimous perception of divorce parties not resonating personally with the women in this study surprised me, given some of the popular media accounts of divorced women "celebrating" their divorces in this way. As the women shared with me, practically speaking they did not have people in their lives they felt would be receptive to a divorce party. Specifically, women's friends were mostly married, and many had children, so participants felt that this type of celebration might offend those who were firmly still within the institution of marriage. Even this dominant consideration for the needs and feelings of others, women's friends and family members, is indicative of the relationship-centering within femininity (ref.). Instead, if women celebrated their divorce, and acknowledged it as such, they did so in unassuming private ways, such as enjoying a favourite cocktail or dessert.

However, I had not thought about the need for rituals, perhaps, for *grieving* divorce, rather than only for celebrating it. Some of my participants did though. For instance, within Julia's discussion of "the mourning process" for the "loss in divorce," she wondered, "wouldn't it be nice if . . . maybe [we could] have a going away party [for divorce]?" As she aptly noted, "There are parties [for other] endings, like when you leave a job, or when someone passes away, or when someone graduates." I was starting to back my thinking up to the necessary grief before, potentially, any celebrating. This was made clearer for me in the writing of therapist Sullivan-Tuba (2024), whose clinical expertise is focused on supporting individuals and couples with relationships, particularly those with trauma or loss. Sullivan-Tuba (2024) affirms that heartbreak is, indeed, a form of ambiguous loss, and one that is "particularly devastating . . . because our identity was interwoven with someone who's now . . . uncoupled [with us]" (para. 5). And so

begins, as Sullivan-Tuba encourages, the invitation to "lean into grief" and "to accept the dizzying array of emotions that follow" (para. 7). I sought to "lean into" understanding how the women in this research experienced and navigated the grief of their divorces as ambiguous losses.

6.2.2.3 The Five Stages of Grief

Perhaps the most common understanding of grief that people often invoke comes from the "stages of grief" (Ross Rothweiler & Ross, 2019), specifically, the Five Stages of Grief that psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross outlined in her classic 1969 book *On Death and Dying*: denial (and isolation); anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2008). These now-famous five stages of grief (initially called "the five stages of death") originally detailed the emotional response individuals with terminal illness experience, a particular scope made clear by the book's subtitle: *What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families* (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2008). The scope of the stages was later expanded to include the grieving process of terminally ill patients' families and the professionals caring for them (Feldman, 2017). Still later, this popular grieving framework was further expanded to address a wide range of personal losses, including relationship breakups or divorce, and the focus shifted to the process of coping with change, more broadly, rather than solely grief, and its name was adapted accordingly to the Kübler-Ross Change Curve (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Below, I highlight some of my participants' experiences grieving the breakup of their marriages, specifically in relation to three of the stages of grief that were most clearly experienced: denial (and isolation); depression; and anger. In the second major part of this Discussion—Re-Creating Gendered Selves—I discuss the 'last' stage of grief: acceptance. Finally, I offer my

conceptualization of gendered grief to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of women's divorce grief.

6.2.2.3.1 Denial and Isolation.

In the monologue "Fallen Soldier", I evoked war imagery that stemmed from Laura's stark description of how her ex's unexpected initiation of divorce "imploded [her] world" just as if he had "pulled the pin on a grenade and threw it at [her] feet." In this description of her initial reaction to her husband saying he wanted a divorce, which was completely unexpected for Laura, her shock is palpable. Within Kübler-Ross's (1969/2008) first stage of grief—denial and isolation—shock or disbelief are common reactions, even if there is not an accompanying refusal to believe the reality of the loss, which was not the case for Laura. Kübler-Ross explained that the purpose of this psychological disconnection, through shock and/or denial, is that it buffers, or numbs, the immediate impact of the loss and acts as a defence mechanism to enable the person to gradually absorb their new reality. Following her shock, Laura "turned into a complete recluse" and remained inside her apartment "24 hours a day for a month." Her isolation also aligns with Kübler-Ross's first stage, wherein people often isolate themselves to avoid discussing or facing their loss. Cassandra also firmly situated "the beginning of [her] grief" as an experience of shock and denial. Surprisingly, perhaps, her own initiation of the divorce did not seem to mitigate the shock. As she described, "I was the one leaving [but] there was still the shock, like, I can't believe this is real. I can't believe this is actually happening. I can't believe the life that we thought we were building together is over." Once her shock subsided, Cassandra acknowledged that she experienced "denial in the sense that the first week or so [she] was going out with friends and having a good time [because she] had all this newfound freedom." But this denial was short-lived when it struck her coming home late one night that she was "coming home to an

empty apartment [and] just cried in the kitchen and thought, 'Oh my god, this is real.'" Cassandra was also the only participant to expressly locate her experiences within "the stages of grief," where she drew an explicit connection between her experience of grieving the loss of a family member and grieving her divorce: "Mourning [my] cousin [who] passed away felt a lot like [the] grief I [felt from my divorce]." Melissa also echoed this connection for her divorce: "It's like a death; it's very much grieving." Finally, Alison also made this connection but expanded it to not only assert that divorce is a form of loss that should be grieved, as others acknowledged, but that divorce is also "a two-part . . . form of death" in the sense that *both* people "as they were in the marriage . . . are not there anymore." Alison clarified this resonance with her experience: "That person I knew [as my husband] is gone [but] whoever I was in that marriage died, too."

6.2.2.3.2 Depression.

What struck me most about Laura's description of the initial points after her world "imploded" was that it was such a raw portrait of the physicality—or embodiment—of grief, painted so candidly through Laura's image-rich storytelling (e.g., "My hair was like when you find an animal with mange . . . I was turning into a barnacle"). She recounted how she stopped taking care of herself: she barely ate, showered, or socialized. On the flight home, after living abroad with her husband for almost a decade, she "cried the entire nine-hour flight" and then "collapsed" into the care of her family, who nearly took her to the hospital upon seeing her condition. These experiences are consistent with Kübler-Ross's fourth stage of grief, depression, where the person begins to face the reality of their loss, which can lead to profound sadness and despair. Not taking care of one's self, including not performing hygiene tasks and getting adequate nutrition, is a common symptom of depression (Serani, 2017). While Kübler-Ross's

fourth stage is not the mental health condition of clinical depression (Silva, 2024), which has specific criteria for diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), the stage is so-named because many of the symptoms of (clinical) depression are experienced in this stage of grief, including a loss of motivation (for self-care and socialization, for instance) (Silva, 2024). However, depending on the intensity and persistence of an individual's experiences, they may become depressed in a clinical sense[81] (Phillips, 2024), as did Laura, Julia, Akhila, and Melissa, for instance.

Furthermore, the physicality of Laura's grief also stripped away the markers of her "feminine" appearance. She recounted that her skin was terrible and ashen and her hair was long and unkempt ("mangy" even). She had stopped cutting her hair and nails and had stopped shaving or regularly showering. Laura had entirely "stopped taking care of [her]self" because she "wasn't interested in making [her]self pretty." Her grief took a heavy toll on her body, overall, to be sure. It also notably removed her interest in any efforts to maintain a feminine appearance. While it is well-documented within the mental health literature that apathy can be an aspect or symptom of depression (as part of grief or otherwise), with its associated diminished motivation (Ang et al., 2017; Levy et al., 1998), it seems meaningful that Laura specified that she had lost interest in "making [her]self pretty." The "making" and maintaining of appearance-based femininity within its prescriptive ideology (Helgeson, 1994; Mahalik et al., 2005), indeed, demands women's concerted efforts (cf. Kilbourne, 1999; Ramati-Ziber, 2020; Widdows, 2018; Wolf, 1990/2002) and given the centrality of a relationship orientation within the ideology of femininity (Lazar, 2002; Mahalik et al., 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000), when a woman's central

[81] Distinguishing between grief and depression has been an ongoing debate among mental health practitioners since the third *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) was being prepared in the 1970s and continues with the most recent DSM-5 proposing that "prolonged grief disorder" is distinct from depression, although clinically difficult to distinguish (Phillips, 2024).

relationship—her marriage—"implodes", so, too, perhaps, does the desire to continue upholding other imperatives of femininity, including constructing a feminine appearance for the sake of appearing "pretty." In this way, among others, grief can teach us to re-evaluate what really matters to us and where we want to direct our efforts. For Laura, her appearance—and specifically, her attractiveness or 'prettiness'—no longer mattered to her, resisting femininity's pressures for women to 'perform' their gender in prescribed ways (Butler, 1990/2007; Mahalik et al., 2005). Indeed, in her now-classic theorizations of *performative identity*, Butler (1990/2007) asserts that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame . . . set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender" (p. 33). Part of this "regulatory frame" is, of course, the operations of the ideology[82] of femininity. However, it seems that grief may have compelled (or necessitated) Laura's consideration of rejecting some of the 'regulations' of femininity, including her "social appearance of gender." Following this vein of grief as instructive, Sullivan (2022) compellingly insisted, "Grief is the teacher of a course that no one ever signs up to take" (para. 1) but once the "enrollment" begins, "grief customizes its teachings for each student . . . painful, precise, cutting, necessary" (para. 12). For Laura, her grief seemed to clarify that caring about whether she was perceived as "pretty" or not by others, was a necessary excision.

6.2.2.3.3 Anger.

Another participant, Melissa, clearly experienced another of Kübler-Ross's (1969/2008) stages of grief, that of anger, which is positioned as the second stage following denial. Kübler-Ross described that within this stage, individuals become frustrated and angry with those close to the situation, including themselves and others. Common psychological reactions for a person in

[82] *Discourse* is typically used in place of *ideology* for Butler and other poststructural feminists, among others (Butler, 1990/2007; Gannon & Davies, 2012).

this stage involve questioning why the loss happened and who is to blame (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2008). In the early stages of her separation, following her discovery of her ex's longstanding infidelity, Melissa initially turned her questions, and anger, towards herself: "How did I miss this? How did I let myself think and feel these things about this person for so long? How did I let this happen? I was so blind . . . [and] very stupid!" With this self-punishing interrogation of herself and insistence that she had "let this happen," Melissa took on the responsibility and guilt that accompanied laying the blame on herself. As she explained, "I carried a lot of guilt. I brought this man into my family. He even owed my parents money. I felt a lot of responsibility for him." Objectively, Melissa's ex engaged in a decade of lying, manipulation, and infidelity (with multiple women), and an overall pattern of behaviour that was ultimately identified by others as being truly sociopathic, including the professional opinion of a family lawyer.

However, when Melissa was grappling with where to lay the blame—as the grieving stage of anger implores (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2008)—for these behaviours and the accompanying dissolution of her marriage that they prompted, she initially blamed *herself* and directed her anger inwards. While this self-blame may seem irrational, it is neither incidental nor uncommon, particularly for women. Indeed, research across various contexts demonstrates that when confronted with an undesirable event, women are more likely to blame themselves while men are more likely to project blame onto others or to other external factors, such as "bad luck" (Napp & Breda, 2022). This persistent gendered self-blame has been documented in such contexts as domestic violence (O'Neill & Kerig, 2000), street harassment (Carretta & Szymanski, 2019), medical diagnoses (Ali et al., 2000; Bennett et al., 2005), and academic 'failures' (Napp & Breda, 2022).

While self-blame occurs at an individual level, as it did for Melissa, the gendered pattern of women self-blaming compels its examination at a broader, societal level. In her writing on recognizing harmful constant self-blame, clinical psychologist Ann Krajewski (2024) identified a number of signs that self-blame may be part of a person's "deeply ingrained" habitual response to difficult situations, rather than an isolated reaction. What struck me in reviewing these potential indications of constant self-blame was the glaring overlap between them and some of the characteristics (or imperatives) of the ideology of femininity. Namely, habits such as avoiding conflict, people-pleasing, and over-responsibility in relationships (Krajewski, 2024) map closely onto the cultural expectations that women should be cooperative, sensitive to the needs of others, and relationship-oriented (Stets & Burke, 2000). Notably, self-blame is also strongly associated with depression (or, specifically, major depressive disorder) (Krajewski, 2024), which is more prevalent in women (Albert, 2015). Some women's health advocates have explained this higher rate of depression in women as due, in part, to societal expectations emphasizing women's interpersonal relationships around which "society encourages . . . rumination and self-judgment for women in ways it does not for men" (Katz Institute for Women's Health, 2024, para. 4). This pattern seemed to parallel Melissa's own experiences, with her ruminations about her marriage ("I started going back over situations . . . and getting in my own head"), self-judgment, and self-blame, along with her diagnosed depression in both her marriage and separation. Simply put, then, part of Melissa's experience of grieving her divorce can be conceptualized within the stage of anger, but this anger took on a distinctly gendered form as it became self-directed.

Melissa's anger did not remain directed only at herself, however. It shifted to include others as she began to question the complicity of her friends and family and their role in her divorce. As Melissa described, "As I'm going through my separation and divorce, people start

coming out of the woodwork; they love to give you their opinions on what they actually think of your spouse. They thought that I wanted them to hate my ex." So some of her closest friends and family shared red flags they noticed before she and her ex were even married. But instead of these long withheld observations being "validating" for Melissa, she felt angry that her family and friends had not spoken up sooner, at any point in the over ten years she and her ex were together when she could have potentially avoided the divorce she was then facing. When the true observations and opinions of her friends and family finally came to light, Melissa directed her anger toward them, demanding, "If you knew he was this horrible person that I was marrying, why didn't you say something!? Why are you waiting until now to tell me this?" She made clear to them that by withholding what they knew—by not warning her of the red flags they had seen before it was too late—they had denied her the information she deserved to have to make her own informed decisions, instead of being completely blindsided as she was. She made the reasons for her anger towards her friends and family clear, in terms of the gravity of her divorce: "I'm not just going through a breakup; I'm going through a divorce. This is a legal proceeding. This is financial. This is very expensive. This is emotional. This is not just me dumping a boyfriend. This is very serious. There are huge ties here."

Thus, as Kübler-Ross (1969/2008) outlined in her description of the stage of anger, Melissa "lashed out" at her family and friends. However, even in Kübler-Ross's choice of words of what this stage's anger towards others might look like—lashing out at loved ones—there is an implication that this anger is irrational, albeit expected within this stage. Indeed, this notion of the expectation that a grieving person will likely become angry towards others is baffling enough that in Kübler-Ross's (1974/1997) follow-up book, *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying*, she does some explanatory hand-holding for those on the receiving end of this anger,

emphasizing that they should do their best to allow those who are in this stage of anger to feel and express their feelings and to try not to take the anger personally. While this advice, written in the 1970s, was intended for a general audience who may be supporting a grieving person(s) (including doctors, nurses, clergy, and their own families, as Kübler-Ross specified in her first book's subtitle), irrespective of any gendered nuances or implications, the role of anger for women, in particular, may be especially baffling (for others)...and meaningful.

The grief stage of anger—and anger, more broadly—is particularly meaningful from a feminist perspective given society's profound discomfort with, and stigmatization of, women's anger (Chemaly, 2018; Villines, 2024). This is the paradox of anger in our patriarchal society:

> When a man is angry, society views it as evidence of his righteousness . . . We associate great male leaders and activists with righteous, rightful, powerful anger [but] when a woman is angry, society views it as evidence that she's crazy [and] entitles us to ignore her. Our culture stigmatizes anger in women as irrational, hysterical, an embarrassing and childish loss of control. (Villines, 2024, para. 1-3)

In this paradox, we see an outcome of the binarized or "bipolar" division of traits and characteristics attributed to women and men within the ideologies of femininity and masculinity (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 7). That is, men are expected to be dominant, unemotional, and strong (Stets & Burke, 2000)—all of which are consistent with the acceptability of men's righteous anger. Conversely, women are expected to be caring, helpful and sensitive to the needs of others, cooperative, gentle, irrational and submissive (Bem, 1974, 1981; Helgeson, 1994; Mahalik et al., 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000), but an angry woman thwarts these imperatives. Indeed, Chemaly (2018) insists that even children "learn quickly that for boys and men, anger reinforces traditional gender expectations, but that for girls and women, anger confounds them" (para. 9).

Thus, while everyone feels anger and experiences it internally, the responses and perceptions of anger are "mediated culturally and externally by other people's expectations . . . [such that] roles and responsibilities, power and privilege, are the framers of our anger" (Chemaly, 2018, para. 8). For many women, their experiences of power and privilege within patriarchy have taught them that their anger will be an imposition to others, that it will alienate people, and will make them unlikeable and unattractive, which amounts to "the kiss of death for a class of people expected to maintain social connections" (Chemaly, 2018, para. 12).

So, as with other threats to the patriarchal status quo, women's anger is minimized and stigmatized by invoking that convenient Achilles' heel of femininity: emotional vulnerability (Stets & Burke, 2000). By dismissing women's anger as irrational, crazy or "hysterical" (this term itself originates from the Victorian pathologization of women's anger [Chesler, 1972/2005]), our patriarchal society pulls a bait and switch to distract from the reality that "women's anger is the rational reaction to oppression" (Villines, 2024, para. 1). Moreover, the focus moves to the individual, rather than to broader issues and systems. Essentially, by stigmatizing women's anger, the patriarchy "discourages women from expressing their rage, and therefore from seeking a solution to its causes. We subtly instruct [women] that their problems are due to personal failings rather than societal ones [and, as such] to view mistreatment as normal [and] unworthy of anger" (Villines, 2024, para. 7). In this way, patriarchy narrows the focus to the individual level—it makes the political personal, usefully weaponizing self-scrutiny and self-blame. This is precisely because "it is easier to criticize the angry women than to ask the questions "What is making you so angry?" and "What can we do about it?—the answers to which have disruptive and revolutionary implications" (Chemaly, 2018, para. 18). If the patriarchal utility of keeping the focus on individual women is not already obvious, you have

only to picture how readily disparaged and dismissed a woman would be if she was labelled an "angry woman" or worse, an "angry feminist." Of course, feminism subverts patriarchy's myopic focus, insisting, as the adage goes, that "the personal is political." Certainly, women have a lot to be angry about. And the women in this study have a lot to be angry about.

What was making the women in this study so angry? Each woman had a litany of reasons and experiences for her justified anger. While each of these experiences is unique and *personal* to each woman, there are, notably, commonalities between these experiences that speak to broader *political*, or sociocultural, contexts. Below, I will touch on a few of these contexts and the participants who experienced them. Some of these contexts will be further explored at other points. First, there were a lot of reasons why women were angry at their exes during their marriage and after (and had every right to be). During their marriages, Melissa, Kaleigh, and Maylin all experienced infidelity. As discussed above, Melissa's husband had affairs with multiple women over the period of a decade. Additionally, as one of the women he slept with shared with Melissa, he did not use protection and, thus, exposed Melissa to potentially contracting sexually transmitted infections. Kaleigh discovered that her husband had slept with another woman during a time when he was using drugs, which he also hid from her. Maylin and her husband had a long-distance relationship while she was working in a different location and during that time, she discovered that a woman he worked with had moved in with him and they had started a romantic relationship.

Another source of women's anger is made heartbreakingly clear in the composite monologue "Survivors," which chronicles different forms of abuse women experienced from their husbands during their marriages. For instance, Akhila's husband cruelly restricted her food, telling her, "Since you're not earning, you get to eat one piece of bread only . . . this lower

quality of rice, and no meat at all." Akhila was a highly educated woman who worked as a teacher before her arranged marriage, but she was not allowed to work after marriage, as per her husband's family. So, without an income of her own, her husband firmly controlled her access to, and quality of, food, reserving the most and best foods for himself (as prepared by Akhila). Akhila was living in another country with her husband, away from her own family, and even when concerned neighbours insisted they contact her parents to tell them what was happening, Akhila refused this offer of help because of her "duty as a daughter." As she explained, "I've been brought up to maintain respect for [my parents' arranged marriage] decision. They chose the guy for me . . . [So] I was trying to pretend that we are a dignified couple." Kaitlyn's husband was both verbally and physically abusive. Physically, he shoved her, shook her, dragged her down the stairs, and slammed and held her on the ground. Verbally, he yelled at her and uttered "cruel words," like that she was "an idiot" and "fucking stupid." Or he subjected her to the silent treatment of "days with him not acknowledging [or] speaking to [her]." Kaitlyn described that this frequent and prolonged silent treatment—"one of his favourite things"—was a "horrifying" experience that made her feel completely "not worthy . . . [and not even] human." Cassandra's husband had "explosive outbursts," where he screamed and yelled, threw things, broke a window, and punched a hole in their door. He sent her a "terrifying text," where he threatened: "I want to crack your skull" (and then dismissed it as a joke). Rhiannon's husband had "explosive anger" that led him to chase her around the house, frighten her, and blame and belittle her ("it was always my fault . . . I couldn't do anything good enough." He also "threatened to drag [her] over the cliff by her hair." Kaleigh's husband "got really mean" after they separated. He would search for her distinctive car in their small town to harass her at her parents' house where she

was staying, show up at friends' houses when she was there, and call her "10 to 15 times a day to yell at [her] and call [her] names."

While it may seem most obvious that women would be angry towards their exes and their actions that ultimately led to their divorces, it might seem less obvious that women would have reasons to be angry with their own family and friends, with respect to their marriages and divorces. But, in the midst of the turmoil of their marriages and their separations and divorces, women were let down by the people they thought would support them most through their challenges. For instance, as described above, when Julia shared with her father that "something wasn't right" in her dating relationship (with her now-ex) and sought his advice since he "was always [her] rock," her father focused on her boyfriend's qualities of reliability rather than on his daughter's feelings of (and reasons for being) unhappy in the relationship: "He's responsible, he takes care of you, he's good with money, he's mature. There's a lot that I see in him. Don't give up on this . . . I think you should stay." When Julia did end her relationship, which was a marriage at that point, her father unexpectedly withdrew his support for her, telling her she was "selfish" and that she was "going to lose a husband and a dad." Hypocritically, this was despite his own former divorce and advice to Julia's brother that if his marriage didn't work out, he could just get a divorce. Much of the rest of her family followed suit and "[she] lost a lot of [her] support," which, for her, was the "biggest fallout" of her divorce. She felt judged by those she thought would support her and ended up feeling "so much shame and guilt" that she "couldn't do anything [and] didn't know where to turn."

Similarly, when Melissa was desperately unhappy in her marriage and sought her mother's advice, who, incidentally, had recently divorced her husband, Melissa's father. Her mother wanted grandchildren so much that she gave her daughter the "worst advice" that she

consider “staying and having kids and leaving ten years down the road.” Melissa aptly acknowledged, however, that this advice, and the thinking behind it, was “much bigger thing than just [her] mom: it’s her generation, it’s her time, it’s gender.” Maylin’s male cousin not only did not support her in her divorce but he also rubbed salt in the wound by callously ‘reminding’ her that she better start looking for another relationship quickly because “as women get older, [their] value decreases . . . and [is] then diminished . . . [to] become nothing.”

For other women, their friends’ lack of support was another reason they had every right to be angry. After Ava separated from her husband, her friends, who were also her ex’s friends, “weren’t interested in talking to [her about] what happened; they only cared about his side.” Furthermore, Ava’s friends not only “picked sides” with her ex, but they also “ostracized” her and would not “talk to [her] at all.” One former friend even un-invited her to their wedding. Cassandra had the unusual experience (perhaps?) where a friend of hers began dating her ex, fully knowing he was her ex, but “never mentioned that they were a couple.” She later learned from someone else that they were a couple and “felt betrayed” by her friend, whom she later told directly that she would be removing as a friend on social media so that her ex did not “have access to that part of [her] life” via his new partner’s account. Cassandra also lost some of her friends who “turned their backs on [her]” because they chose to take sides with her ex, in part, because of the woman he was dating, who was also a co-worker of many of Cassandra’s friends who were still in the “very public, incestuous field,” which Cassandra had since left. The lost friendships, connected to her divorce, made Cassandra feel “abandoned [and] isolated by some people in [her] life, which [was] unfortunate and difficult.”

Lastly, the third—and broadest—context for which the women in this study had reasons to be angry was the failures of various institutional structures that could have, instead, made their

challenging situations easier. For example, Kaitlyn described two instances in her abusive marriage where she received help from medical professionals, but the help she received both times was only temporary, 'bandaid' solutions to larger issues, about which the providers knew or should have inquired. The first was when her boss, a doctor for whom she worked as a receptionist, became aware that her husband was a "psycho" and instead of supporting her to, indeed, "get out of there," she gave her a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication to be "able to handle anything he throws at you much better." The second instance that led Kaitlyn to encounter medical professionals, only to have them fall short in supporting someone clearly in need of help, was when she had an unexpected reaction to the medication. She "had never taken anything like that before" (perhaps another omission of care and due diligence from the first instance's doctor) and she became suicidal. As her husband began yelling at her again, she took a whole bottle of pills. Her husband drove her to the hospital and left her there. At the hospital, she had her stomach pumped, but there was no discussion about what circumstances led her to take a bottle of pills or any follow-up support offered. As she said, "The doctors didn't seem to care."

Cassandra's first encounter with the police, after her then-fiancé broke a window, was a "horrible" experience with "the worst cop in the history of time" who interrogated her, ignored her, and then left to pursue her fiancé, and never checked on her again or came back to tell her what was happening. As Cassandra remarked, "This really alarms me, as a woman, how the situation was dealt with" because the officer knew "a hundred percent" that the incident was potentially a domestic violence situation. Even more alarming was that the police implemented a no-contact order against her fiancé, without her knowledge or request, which led to a long-delayed court process that meant he was not allowed to contact her or come home for four months. So Cassandra was suddenly "left with all the finances for four months; [she] was left

with everything and no one." While the whole incident emphasized for her that her fiancé had "a much more serious issue than what [she] originally thought," more than that, however, Cassandra "felt like the worst that [she] was being treated was coming from a system that was meant to protect [her], which was really, really awful."

Finally, Rhiannon was also let down by "the system[s]" when she tried to leave her abusive marriage, and even after she finally left. When she realized that she needed to physically leave her home for her safety, she contacted the women's shelter in her area but "because there [were] no children involved and because there [were] no broken bones or bruises, [she] kept going on the bottom of the list. [She] had been on their waitlist for nine or ten months, and still nothing came of it." While Rhiannon understood that "because there's so much demand on women's services" they focused on women and children before single women, but as she asserted, this just "reinforces the undervaluing of your person[hood] [and that] makes me angry!" In addition to being physically and emotionally abusive, Rhiannon's husband was also financially abusive and controlled the money, so she did not have access to money to pay for legal advice. She realized that she was "only allowed five or six hours of free lawyer time. And if [her husband] has a good lawyer that knows [she is] on free lawyer time, he'll just eat it up. And then, [she will] be having to represent [her]self in a divorce situation." When she did eventually get to speak with a paralegal, "they made the legal situation sound extremely hopeless." When Rhiannon finally left her husband, she began a legal process that lasted years and cost her "a year and a half worth of wages" (which she borrowed from her mother), as well as her mental and physical health (she had "extreme anxiety to the point that it was making [her] sick"). This drawn-out legal process was due to her ex and his lawyer using "underhanded, nasty trickery and lies to outfox the legal system and stall." Pointedly, Rhiannon identified that gendered power

discrepancies she experienced made her "feel outplayed, outmaneuvered, and outsmarted . . . [in an] unfair legal system [that] still favours men."

Clearly, the women in this research had a lot to be angry about. However, femininity imperatives collectively work to suppress women's expressions of anger, however justified, such as the specific expectations of women being gentle, friendly, sympathetic, soft-spoken, passive, nice, and overall, "not aggressive" (Bem, 1974, 1981; Helgeson, 1994; Mahalik et al., 2005). These feminine norms are maintained and reinforced by the threat of forms of ostracization—of which women are all too aware—for "hysterical" women who may be tempted to denounce them and express their anger (Chemaly, 2018). As Chemaly (2018) insists, "there is not a woman alive who does not understand that women's anger is openly reviled" specifically because women's anger threatens the patriarchal status quo that legitimizes only men's anger (and only white men's anger) (para. 10). Indeed, when a woman is seen as an "angry woman . . . she automatically violates gender norms [and] is met with aversion, perceived as more hostile, irritable, less competent, unlikable . . . [or even] dismissed and pathologized [as] "crazy" [or] "hysterical" (para. 11-12). Thus, these "costs of displaying" anger teaches girls to "fear, ignore, [and] hide" their anger (para. 9) and compels women to "repackage, divert, or trivialize" their anger (para. 11).

Given this, I returned to the women's interviews to see if I could 'locate' expressions of anger as they detailed the many enraging experiences they had endured. I wondered whether a lifetime of femininity 'training' about anger as unacceptable for women had been internalized into tempering or dismissing their justified anger. Or whether, perhaps, in the safe space of the interviews, which women affirmed they had felt, enabled some expressions of anger to be shared. As with many complexities, the reality was not an either/or but, rather, a both/and: some women

had expressed their anger in tempered ways; *and* some women had named, claimed, or otherwise clearly expressed their anger. In terms of tempered anger, for instance, Rhiannon described receiving a particular legal document from her ex's lawyer that was intentionally obfuscatious, within the broader context of the lengthy legal struggles she experienced that cost her an exorbitant amount of money she did not have, as well as the mental and physical toll, as mentioned above. Upon reviewing the ambiguous language of the document, intended to further stall the legal process, she shared her initial impression with the interview group, "What the fuck is this? Excuse my language. What the fuck is that supposed to mean: 'The paperwork will be signed by the end of the month*s*'? Dropping the 'f-bomb' twice gives us a sense of the anger Rhiannon felt, and was able to express in the interview, but she did temper her expression with the common (feminine) addendum "excuse my language."

Other times, women used careful language that seemed to really constrain or belie the anger that would be expected in a situation. This was perhaps most apparent when Maylin described the "frustrating fact" she had learned of her husband starting a romantic relationship with another woman while she was away working. It struck me at the time that Maylin never actually identified this situation as her husband cheating on her or having an affair. Instead, she simply described her initial suspicions and then what she definitively learned of the situation when she returned home: "I was so suspicious and kept saying to him [when I called often] that he had something with a girl [from his lab] . . . I flew [home to surprise him and] found out [from seeing] someone else's [things] in his room." After Maylin confronted him, "he told [her] the truth" which is that he was living with a woman and they "were together instantly and quickly" because, as he "helped [her] to understand," he reasoned that she was "the right girl [for] him,

not [Maylin, because] he needed [to be with] someone [who] could help him [with] his experiments in his lab" as a fellow biology student.

I was surprised at Maylin's seemingly muted expression of mere "frustration" at her husband's infidelity (albeit unnamed as such) that ultimately led to the "heartbroken" end of their seven-year relationship. But I was perhaps even more bewildered by her self-blame for her husband's actions and her rationalization of his extramarital relationship with the 'other woman.' Maylin described how her lack of trust in her husband led her to "call him so frequently" that she worried she had created a "self-fulfilling [prophecy]" and that "if [she] did better in the beginning, to [not put] ideas in his mind that he might have something with the girl, then things [might not have] happened towards that direction." She also shared that when she began to grow suspicious, she started to notice "cheating and betrayal" in movies and songs, and attributed this to thinking "sometimes, people's minds are crazy." When I clarified whether her husband and this woman were living together romantically before her husband proposed their separation, Maylin confirmed this and then offered these observations (rationalizations), "The girl was much younger, five years younger than me, so I think she's just more open than me. [She has] more [of] a new style and [I have] more of [an] older style . . . Maybe I was too restrained." Perhaps by only acknowledging her "frustration" (a more temporary and acceptable emotion), blaming herself (for putting ideas in his mind and instigating the self-fulfilling prophecy), doubting her perceptions (dismissing them as "crazy"), and externalizing the reasons for the affair (the younger woman's new, open style), Maylin "repackaged" her anger, as women are encouraged to do (Chemaly, 2018). In this way, she certainly adhered to the femininity prescriptions of being sympathetic, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of others, even above her own (Bem, 1974, 1981; Stets & Burke, 2000, Mahalik et al., 2005).

Other women in the study, however, expressed their anger in more unmitigated ways, both in describing their reactions to the original experiences and in re-telling them in the interviews. For example, Kaitlyn shared that while she was married, her ex's behaviour became increasingly bizarre and abusive, like when he came outside and threw rice all over her car, making her late for work. She observed, "I always stood up for him and I allowed it to keep happening" but upon realizing that, "I started to escalate my responses, too. I started yelling back and getting louder and more angry." She asserted her anger—her right to respond 'appropriately' to the inappropriate actions of her ex. And she did so despite the psychological warfare he continued to wage, to undermine her reactions and mock her anger. She continued, "He would get a smirk on his face, like, 'Ha, I got her to think she's actually reacting now.'" Rhiannon and Rayna both named their anger as such. Rhiannon described how, after she left, her ex slandered her character with "everyone" they knew by saying "such nasty stuff about [her] . . . [when she] wasn't there to defend [herself]." As she acknowledged, "That makes me so angry, but that [also] just confirms that I made the right choice." Of her own ex, Rayna held her ground when he ex tried to convince her he was "entitled to keeping [all] the money [from their house] and "kept sending [her] long emails trying to explain himself that he is justified." She replied to one such email by asserting, "You can justify yourself as much as you want to yourself, but that's not what I think. You're not my friend. I'm shutting you out; I'm not responding [anymore] to your email." She insisted, "I was really mad with him and I stopped talking to him." Rayna was not only "mad" and described her feelings as such, but she further thwarted femininity imperatives by firmly refusing to even hear her ex's justifications. She was not "sympathetic" to his needs, in this sense, and (aptly) put her own needs *first* (Mahalik et al., 2005). Lastly, some women's anger was succinctly expressed with more choice words. Julia said, "fuck you!" with respect to her

family members not supporting her divorce. Kaleigh didn't mince words either when she described her ex as a "fucking asshole." Although these may not seem like significant utterances, they are the sounds of women expressing their justified anger in a "society [that] is infinitely creative in findings ways to dismiss women's rage" (Chemaly, 2018, para. 11). But, indeed, these women have a lot to be angry about, and they have every right to express and display this anger (of course, in ways that do not harm others; male egos notwithstanding...).

6.2.2.4 Gendered Grief

Although the Five Stages of Grief offer a useful framework for some of the women's experiences of grief, they do not capture the distinctly *gendered* experiences of women grieving their divorces. These gendered distinctions occurred within at least four separate, but related, dimensions: the loss of relationships with their exes' families and friends; increased social isolation; managing the loss for others; and legitimizing the right to grieve.

Certainly, women were acutely aware that their divorce meant the end of their current relationship with the man they married, their now-ex. For the majority of the women, the end of their marriage was also, largely or entirely, the end of any relationship (including friendship) with their exes, due to the very challenging realities and catalysts that led to most of the women's divorces. However, for many women, the impact of the loss of relationships with the people connected to their ex, particularly their family members, was unexpected. As Julia aptly described, "There's a big mourning process because you're ending the relationship with this one person [your spouse], but there's this whole group around them that you actually have to end it with, too. I didn't think about that in my process. I just thought, 'My husband and I are ending.'" Kaleigh shared a similar experience with the family members of her ex who had been in her life for ten years: "I was really close with [my ex's] mom, [like,] we talked a few times a week. [But

his] family completely stopped speaking to me. So I really grieved the loss of his family." Cassandra also felt the loss of her ex's family, particularly of one family member: "I really struggled with not seeing [my ex's] father; he was my father-in-law." For Ava, she had an extensive circle of friends while she was married, although she acknowledged that "a lot of my friend group were his friends more than my friends" and when she separated from her husband, they "picked sides" with her ex and "ostracized" her. So not only did Ava "lose close to 50 friends" but those former-friends, as she lamented, "hate me [and] won't talk to me at all." This painful reality for some women led to their experience of the next dimension.

The second dimension of gendered grief elucidated by participants was the experience and profound impact of the social isolation they encountered. While everyone, including women and men, is impacted by the social isolation that can result from a decreased social network (abruptly or otherwise), there are, again, gendered implications that distinctly affect women. For instance, because of women's lifelong exposure to femininity imperatives (simply by being a woman in our patriarchal society) that emphasize the fostering and maintenance of relationships as the "*all-consuming* priority in women's lives" (Lazar, 2002, p. 112, original emphasis), when relationships end (particularly many and abruptly, as was the case for many of the women's divorces), the impact is particularly devastating (cf. Caputa, 2014; Jerabek et al., 2014; Lunau, 2011; Thomas, 2011). The loss of significant relationships in women's lives as the result of their divorce is not only a loss of these relationships (certainly a huge loss in and of itself), but moreover, it can be experienced as a loss of something far more devastating, indeed: a loss of self-identity, given the centrality of "other-centredness" promoted within what Lazar (2002) identified as the "heterosexual sociality" of women's heterosexual relationships (and, indeed, the "whole group around them," as Julia explained). This social isolation was further compounded

by the stigmatization that often accompanied women's divorces, the impact of which included not only the abrupt ending of relationships with their exes' family and friends (understandably, perhaps, although often unexpected), but also with their *own* family and friends. As Julia continued, "When all these people [around my ex] stopped talking to me, I was like, "Oh my god. I feel so lonely." That's where the isolation comes from, too; it is [losing] your network." Not only did she lose her ex, and her ex's family, but she also unexpectedly lost the support of her own family, particularly her father, since they did not support her decision to get divorced (the hypocrisy of which is discussed above). So in the midst of the "big mourning process" of her divorce, what seemed to hurt the most for Julia was the "biggest fallout" that happened with her family when she ended her marriage. This is painfully apparent in her father's message to her when she told him she needed to end her marriage: "You're going to lose a husband and a dad." The implication of this missive was clear to Julia: "So my dad, my rock, essentially said to me, 'I don't want to be your dad anymore.' That was the last message I got from him for seven months. He didn't speak to me for seven months."

A third dimension of women's gendered grief was connected to the strong *ethic of care* that women are expected to uphold and perform within hegemonic femininity. This imperative insists not only that women perform care labour for others, but that they put the needs of others before their own (Samdahl, 2013). Thus, the women in this research had to navigate their own complicated grief while managing the secondary grief of those around them. When women were perceived as falling short of this ethic of care, they were called "selfish." As Julia observed, "[My family] were all worried about how [my divorce] affected *them*, like that they were losing [a son- and] brother-in-law [and] a potential grandchild. They were mourning their own losses as opposed to supporting me in my losses. I was told I was selfish because I wanted more support

from." Melissa had a similar reception from her mother: "When I told my mom I was leaving [my husband], she was so worried about herself and so devastated about losing her son-in-law that she wasn't even really thinking about me." She was empathetic that her mom "was grieving this as well," recognizing that her ex "had been in [all of their] lives for eleven years." However, because her mom was "so worried about herself," that left Melissa largely without her support for her own grieving, which caused her relationship with her mom to "really suffer" because she "wasn't someone [she] could go to and talk to; she wasn't a huge support." This lack of support from family members focused only (or primarily) on how their daughters' divorces affect *them*, thus, not only burdens women with the emotional labour of managing the grief of *others* (as well as their own) but can also mean those individuals are no longer a source of support for them, further compounding the social isolation discussed above.

For other women, while their families continued to support them, they were still very aware of the hurt their families experienced as a result of losing their own relationship with their ex-husband. Cassandra acknowledged, "I knew [my separation from my ex] hurt my parents. Everyone has relationships with that person. They're family, regardless." Cassandra was especially aware of the impact her separation had on her young nephews, with whom she is very close, as was her ex. She shared, "My nephews struggled with losing their uncle. They had this really strong bond with my ex. He was a really good uncle. When parents separate, you tend to see both parents in a lot of cases, but when aunts and uncles separate, that person is gone forever, right? So it was very final for my nephews." Her concern for helping her nephews to process this unusual loss led Cassandra to have numerous conversations with her nephews to answer any questions they may have and to allow them to grieve the loss of their uncle, all of which required her emotional labour and centering of their experience of grief.

Finally, a fourth way that women's divorce grief was distinctly gendered concerned others' perceptions, and their own, about whether they even had the right to grieve their divorces if they had initiated them. In the general literature on divorce, women initiate far more divorces than men (about two-thirds) (Hewitt, 2009; Miller, 2014). This pattern is consistent with the initiations of divorce in this research, wherein seven of the twelve participants initiated their divorces (Maylin, Alison, and Laura's husbands initiated their divorces). Julia further acknowledged, "Because I was the instigator—I was the one that made the choice [to end my marriage —I perceived that I couldn't be mourning the pain. I thought I had to be very discreet and couldn't really talk about [my] struggles of divorce." A few layers need to be unpacked here. This dimension is an extension of the femininity imperatives for women to be passive, submissive, cooperative, and generally agreeable (Stets & Burke, 2000), all towards the pursuit of maintaining relationships, particularly those within the "heterosexual sociality" (Lazar, 2002). The very act of a woman initiating a divorce (within a heterosexual marriage) flies in the face of all of these, and other related, prescriptions of "good womanhood." And as with any and all actions that defy hegemonic femininity—thereby challenging the patriarchal order—these actions and the woman who 'commits' them are sanctioned, or disciplined, as a deterrent (Berbary, 2012). Such disciplining of 'rogue' femininity includes the ever-effective (from a patriarchal perspective) self-surveillance and self-discipline (Berbary, 2013). For instance, shame functions as a powerful form of this kind of self-disciplining and self-punitive control (Skeaff, 2025). Indeed, as Julia expressed, she was self-disciplined by her own perception (based on societal directives) that she "*couldn't* be mourning the pain" and that if she did allow herself to mourn, she "had to be very discreet" and could not really share her struggles with others. Essentially, within this dimension of gendered grief, she had 'made her bed' (by initiating her

divorce) and now she, alone, had to 'lie in it' (suffer the consequences). Such is the punishment or repercussion of women daring to put their own needs first by ending their unhappy marriages.

6.3 Re-creating Gendered Selves

Make peace
with all the women you once were.
lay flowers at their feet.
offer them incense and honey and forgiveness.
honor them
and give them your silence.
listen.
bless them
and let them be.
for they are the bones of the temple you sit in now.
for they are the rivers of wisdom
leading you toward the sea.

— I have been a thousand different women

(Hall, 2024, p. 28)

After the participants' lives and gendered selves, as they had known them, were shattered by their divorces, they were left to gather the pieces and decide what they wanted to do next. To be sure, coming to a place of readiness to move forward was a process in itself. As discussed above, much of this process involved grieving the ambiguous losses that accompany divorce. For the young women in this research, this grieving process was distinctly gendered, in many ways, and so, too, was the process of re-creating their lives. It was very clear, and incredibly *heart*ening, that women's divorces were catalysts for each woman to transform her life into 'a life of her own,' to paraphrase Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928/2004), the early feminist polemic outlining the conditions needed for women to claim autonomy over their lives. Crucially, women's divorces became a line in the sand, so to speak, that demarcated another 'before' and 'after' point in their narratives; not the one of fairy tales that distinguishes 'before' marriage (to various Prince Charmings) and 'after' marriage (with the supposed 'happily ever

after') but, rather, a "counter-narrative" (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Berbary, 2014) that divides its major plot points 'before' divorce—before the utter heartbreak and pain of all that shattered with divorce—and 'after' divorce, when women's *re-creating* could begin.

6.3.1 Meeting Themselves

When the women divorced, many pieces of their lives and their identities shattered, as the findings and discussion elucidate, but what *also* shattered, perhaps unexpectedly, was the grip of the dominant ideologies of femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism. With this ideological loosening, something amazing began to happen: *women focused on themselves*! This seismic shift from others to self resists the most fundamental underlying imperative that runs through *all* of the gendered ideologies, which seek to define women through their relationships to others, including heterosexual partners, children, and broader families. Women began to put themselves first and to discover and assert "what [they] actually want," and who they really are (and want to become). Kaleigh aptly articulated this when she remarked, "Splitting with [my ex] . . . really let me meet myself." As she shared, this self-meeting and what it fostered for her was a pivotal part of her re-creation:

> I think a lot of the life I have now and that I've created are because of my divorce. Because it really inspired me to take control and really be honest with myself about the things that I like and how I like to spend my time and be selfish. I remember a couple of my friends being like, 'Just be selfish right now.' And I [thought], 'Okay, that sounds fantastic! I don't need to worry about anything.' [It was] permission almost. And I think through that time, I really know what I like in my life, even if it's as [simple as] how I want my house to be decorated, or how I want to dress, or spend my time, or eat.

Through Kaleigh's words, we can see her resistance to the other-centeredness of femininity ("just be selfish"), the supportive role of friends, and the autonomy she asserted to create the life she wants, including using leisure to make choices about her own décor, style, time, and food. Indeed, for about the past three decades, gender and leisure scholars have demonstrated how women's leisure can offer possibilities for *resistance*, that is, for "questioning, challenging, and seeking to change processes and circumstances that are disempowering" (Freysinger et al., 2013, p. 91; Shaw, 1994). Specifically, when Shaw (1994) first discussed an analytical approach to viewing women's leisure as resistance, she connected this possibility to "leisure as a situation of choice, control, and self-determination" (p. 9). Kaleigh's seemingly simple, or even mundane, *choices* about how she wanted to dress or spend her time, for instance, were instances within a much more meaningful (re-)claiming of *control* and *self-determination* over her life. This self-determination is underscored by how it was constrained within Kaleigh's marriage, with the "disparities" between her and her ex. Again, even within the quotidian choices of what to eat, Kaleigh explained, "[My ex] and I had very different eating patterns: he's a meat and potatoes [person], whereas I eat plant-based and very rarely eat meat." When they were together, she felt she had to compromise wherever these "disparities" arose, as women are expected to do within femininity's expectations of being "cooperative" and "yielding," among others (Bem, 1974; 1981; Stets & Burke, 2000). When she got divorced, however, she felt empowered to live differently than she had in her marriage (and in her early separation with its acute sadness and instability). After her divorce (and even, indeed, "*because* of [her] divorce"; my emphasis), she acknowledged, "[I] just really took control of [my] life: [like,] this is who I am, this is what I am, and these are my preferences . . . [and] I'm not compromising [anymore] on [anything] that doesn't feel good." In Kaleigh's ardent expressions of choice, control, and self-determination, it

is clear how resistance through leisure is connected to leisure as empowerment, following Shaw's (2001) seminal manuscript on women's leisure as a potential site for empowerment, wherein women can use their leisure to "challenge their own lack of power or their dissatisfaction with societal views about women's expected roles and behaviors" (p. 187). As I highlight throughout the rest of this discussion, leisure was an empowering context for the young, divorced women in this research to enact resistances to gendered ideologies, in large part, through focusing on themselves.

For many women, this meaningful focus on themselves often occurred within leisure contexts, particularly activities and friendships, where women intentionally sought to *re-discover and affirm* the parts of themselves they felt they had 'lost' in the course of their (unhappy and, often, toxic) marriages and divorces. For instance, after her divorce, Maylin learned to swim, which was meditative and healing for her. Specifically, it allowed her to turn inwards to find her confidence, which her divorce severely impacted. As she shared, "[My ex] chose [another] woman, a younger woman, over me. I felt abandoned [and] I didn't have any confidence in [myself], in [other] relationships, in my studies, or in my life." The far-reaching repercussions of Maylin's shattered confidence made its re-discovery through a new leisure activity all the more significant. As she described:

> After I learned to swim, I learned to spend my time seeing that moment. In the water, I concentrate on the sensations. I feel swimming is similar to meditation [where you're] focusing on the present moment [and] really listening to your body and being who you are. It's going inward to find the confidence in myself that I can be a good person without involvement in a relationship. [When I] look inwards, I see myself differently; I became

> more confident and love myself. Swimming was really, really important for me to gradually get better.

Maylin's moving description of the many lessons swimming fostered for her also encapsulates the restorative benefits of meditation and mindfulness, albeit in the perhaps less conventional context of swimming. But mindfulness is a quality that can be cultivated anywhere by "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Specifically, the *non-judgmental* awareness of a mindful approach may be particularly helpful in observing how the ideology of coupledom, in Maylin's case, ties a person's social and cultural worth to their relationship status (Cobb, 2011), and beginning to "see differently." In her discussion on mindfulness as a way to deepen leisure experiences, Arai (2017) suggests that mindfulness can "open up possibilities for freedom" by shifting habitual and automatic thoughts and beliefs, including "sorting and accounting for things in socially constructed categories, and judgments rooted in binaries" (pp.149-150). By "noticing when we are on autopilot" and staying with present moment awareness, as Maylin practices while swimming, an *embodied* sensory experience replaces the dominance of mental conceptual systems that seek evaluation and elaboration (Arai, 2017, p. 152). It is meaningful that Maylin centered her leisure experience in terms of "meditation" and elements of mindfulness—"focusing on the present moment" and "really listening to your body"—since these practices are rooted in Buddhism, the largest recognized religion in China (Pew Research Centre, 2023), which is Maylin's home country. As several leisure scholars have contended, exploring leisure experiences beyond the use of Western frameworks offers "alternative strategies for (re)conceptualizing . . . individual experiences within broader discourses of ideology and

power," including conceptualizations advanced by critical race theory (Arai & Kivel, 2005, p. 468).

Other women began to reclaim their power and confidence, 'shattered' in their marriages and divorces, through the wisdom and perspective they discovered in a particular book that crossed their path at just the right (almost serendipitous) time. For instance, Rhiannon "ended up getting a copy of the book *Warrior Goddess Training*," and, as she expressed, it "completely changed how I was viewing my situation from this injured creature, into the woman that I had been, and I am meant to be." Specifically, the book detailed an awareness of femininity's other-centredness and a much-needed approach to resisting it: "This [book] talked about stopping doing things for others: [how] women are the nurturers, and they like to take care of things or keep the peace. It helped me realize I do have internal power inside." Considering this paradigm shift from focusing on others to "stopping doing things for others" as a way to begin reclaiming her "power inside," Rhiannon was pivotally buoyed in a time where she previously "felt hopeless for the future." Julia also found an inspiring book that helped her to re-frame her "dark thoughts": the classic *Oh, The Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss. She remembered that when her brother was a university don, he had used this book to motivate students who were having a hard time. Julia shared how "she read it cover to cover like a gazillion times" and "kept visualizing" its simple, but profound, message that, like the character in the story, her own "stormy days [would] pass" with "better times" to come. As Julia put it succinctly: "I couldn't see the light, so I needed the light and that book was my light." As any bookworm (me included) can attest, the power of a great book can, indeed, be transformative. In our digital age, I was heartened to affirm that reading (or listening to) books remains among the most frequent leisure activities for Canadians, with almost half of (surveyed) Canadians reading at least weekly and about a third

reading daily (BookNet Canada, 2024). While people read for a variety of reasons, including enjoyment, relaxation, and learning (BookNet, 2024), for some of the women in this study, reading (certain books) became a form of bibliotherapy. Formally, *bibliotherapy* is a complementary psychotherapeutic intervention that uses books (both fiction and non-fiction) to change behaviour, improve distress, and support individuals with mental health challenges, for instance, including depression (Jack & Ronan, 2008; McKenna et al., 2010). From a therapeutic perspective, bibliotherapy with non-fictional books, in particular, like Julia's book, can be effective because "through *identification* with a character in the story, the reader gains an alternative position from which to view their own issues [and, as such,] undergoes a form of *catharsis* through gaining hope and releasing emotional tension, which . . . leads to *insights* and . . . change" (Mckenna et al., 2010, p. 498, my emphasis). This process of identification, catharsis, and insight (Canty, 2017) closely resembled the one Julia experienced and described as she identified her own "dark" situation of divorce with the character's "stormy days," which passed to become "become days," reassuring her (as she read it a "gazillion times") that her own days would also brighten. Non-fictional books, such as the one Rhiannon was inspired by, have been researched more extensively than has the use of fictional books within structured bibliotherapy (Dysart-Gale, 2008), and have been beneficial in providing information and encouraging behavioural changes for individuals with a wide array of psychological issues (Den Boer et al., 2004).

In a less structured way, however, the transformative 'effects' of books—bibliotherapy—can also be initiated and accessed outside of a psychotherapy setting, of course, as they were for participants. Indeed, the popular "self-help," or "self-improvement," genre speaks to the potent desire to seek out knowledge and insights to improve one's life in some way (Dolby, 2005).

Given this popularity, many advocates of the self-help genre view these books as an empowering "exercise in self-education" (Dolby, 2005, p. 8). And they certainly can be. Even a cursory glance at my own bookshelf indicates my long-standing and enthusiastic participation in this "prevalent and powerful . . . "pop" culture . . . phenomenon (Starker, 2005, p. 57): *Mind Over Mood*, *Reinventing Your Life*, *The Language of Letting Go*, *Think Like a Monk*, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, among *many* others. This self-help phenomenon is, undoubtedly, popular. The self-help book industry is, indeed, an industry, and one that is worth billions ($10.5 billion, five years ago, to be exact), with over 18 million volumes sold annually in the United States (Curcic, 2022). The self-help genre as a lucrative industry has led critics to be (rightly) skeptical of the "hope" these books sell, literally. As Dean (2008) writes in his critique of "modern self-help as a massive money-making scam": "the dark side of hope is that claims about potential improvement can, and are, grossly exaggerated, in order to prise open our wallets" (para. 19). Moreover, the "dark side" of this genre is an underestimation of the reality or difficulty of change coupled with the insistence that the changes required are, indeed, *self*-improvement. As Dean (2008) further contends, "A bright and breezy approach to potential change may lead us to believe that changing ourselves is easy, when often it requires considerable, sometimes monumental, effort" (para. 19). Notably, the self-help book genre originally emerged as an extension of self-help support groups—offering first-person perspectives, peer support and validation—which self-help books emulated in contrast to the often "objective and impersonal" writing of traditional psychology and psychotherapy books (Davis, 2008, p. 173). However, with the shift from the self-help *group* to the *individual* self-help reader, the locus on responsibility has also shifted, following similar other cultural shifts over the last few decades, such as neoliberal individualism

and “detraditionalization,” which advances capitalism by eclipsing communitarian knowledge transmission (Dolby, 2005; McGee, 2005).

Finally and significantly, the vast majority (over 60%) of self-help readers are women and the majority of self-help book authors are men, who specifically have a larger readership among women than men (Curic, 2022). There is, of course, a long and sordid history (literary and otherwise) of “expert” men advising women on how to “improve” themselves (cf. Chesler, 1972/2005). Much like Wolf’s (1990/2002) now-classic treatise, *The Beauty Myth*, which raised the alarm about the patriarchal motivations of the (even more) lucrative beauty industry, women’s consumption of self-help books within the “self-improvement” industry must also be undertaken critically. The further caution, thus, is as McGraw (2004) put it, “since all self-books [essentially] tell you that you have the power to change yourself . . . by implication, all of these books are saying, if you are in pain, if you are stuck and can’t seem to change, it’s no one’s fault but your own” (p. 5). Given these complexities, it is particularly meaningful that Melissa remarked “It is hard. There is no guide to getting divorced, like *Divorce For Dummies*. There’s nothing!” in response to navigating her divorce, largely alone and without guidance. Her observation—and my own awareness of the often overly simplified, and enumerated, platitudes or “advice” within some of the self-help genre—inspired my subversive representation of some of the worst “advice” participants received in my play on *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to*...series, in this case, *How NOT to Help a Young Woman Going Through a Divorce*.

6.3.2 Supportive Women Friendships: “Ride or Die”

While there was no *Divorce for Dummies* for Melissa, she did find inspiration and guidance from a book that does exist, *You Will Go Far*. For Melissa, however, while the content of the book was helpful, as with Rhiannon and Julia’s books, it was the *person* who gifted it to

her, her sister, that truly made it a meaningful reminder of the love and support she has from her sister, whom she described as "my best friend, my rock, [and] my everything." Melissa's sister was also the person in her life who "was by [her] side through [her] entire divorce process," including providing emotional support (they "talk every day") as well as practical support, such as helping her to move out of her house with her ex. Ironically, the act of Melissa's sister giving her the self-help book harkens back to the roots of the genre itself: support via self-help groups (Davis, 2008). Melissa's close relationship with her sister provided her with vital support in navigating her divorce, both emotionally and practically, facilitating re-creating her self and her life. By offering Melissa emotional support by talking together daily, for instance, her sister engaged in the particular form of support[83] Dennis (2003) identified as "emotional assistance," which involves listening, caring, encouraging, and generally avoiding judgment. This form of non-judgmental support is particularly significant for young, divorced women (and other equity-deserving groups) given the pervasive judgements they experienced, which reflect the "societal stigma, shame, and judgment" of "the D-word" (Kim, 2024, p. 194), which echo participants' own distancing language of "D-day" or their observation that, according to others, "divorce is a dirty word." But when women had supportive people in their lives, like Melissa's sister, who offered their non-judgmental emotional assistance (Dennis, 2003), women could begin to re-create their lives following divorce.

Indeed, the role of supportive others for participants, particularly other women, was instrumental in their processes of re-creating their lives on their own terms. Another participant's sister was also very supportive. Laura described her sister as her "ride or die," referring to the

[83] The forms of support Dennis (2003) outlines are specified within a *peer support* context, where support is provided or exchanged by a person who has shared experience of the relevant issue. Notably, Melissa's sister is not providing peer support given that she has not experienced a divorce, but distinguishing between particular forms of support is useful in this context, nonetheless.

expression (that has evolved in the popular cultural lexicon) signifying unwavering loyalty to someone (DigitalCultures, 2023). In particular, Laura's sister helped her to re-examine her belief that her divorce was her fault, and instead, to recognize that both she and her husband had played a role in the breakdown of their marriage. As Laura explained,

> For the longest time, I felt the divorce was my fault. I didn't see it coming [so] I thought [it had to be] my fault. My sister was a big help with [me realizing] that it takes two. She just brass tack[ed it for me,' like 'No, it wasn't your fault. It wasn't his fault. But here's all the reasons why he's an asshole,' as a sister does. So she got all of that information, she processed it, and she basically produced a report on why he was a bad husband. She's pragmatic and intellectual [like that]; she's Spock.

This particular support aligns with another type of support Dennis (2003) identified as "appraisal assistance," which involves communicating information that is relevant to self-evaluation. Laura further described how her sister's "Spock[-like]" appraisal of her situation provided the "outside perspective" she needed to hear "because once you're inside, the rose-coloured glasses is a very true thing." Furthermore, Laura's love and respect for her sister were the impetus of her abrupt sobriety, following an incident where her drinking led her to disappoint her sister. Laura decided, "I don't ever want to disappoint that woman, ever, so I gave up drinking that day [and] didn't touch it again. But she has no idea that she's the reason why I stopped drinking." Some family studies scholars have demonstrated that sisters, in particular, can provide distinct forms of support as confidants, for instance, wherein sisters can be comfortable sharing and seeking information and opinions with one another in ways that might feel awkward or inappropriate with others, such as friends or even other family members (Killoren & Roach, 2014). Despite the distinctly supportive roles that some participants' sisters played in their divorces, other women's

relationships with their sisters were not as supportive. For instance, Julia's sister told her directly that the challenges she was sharing with her post-separation and the discretion Julia asked her to maintain about the sensitive information she was disclosing were "too much of a burden" for her and so "she started telling people," which led to Julia to "feel the judgment" from others, including her other family members. Kaleigh had a similarly unsupportive relationship with her sister. She was clear about her sister's limitations: "My sister has a very limited emotional intelligence that expands past her own narcissism. It is alarming [how] out of touch [she] is with [her]self and with our relationship. So she wasn't someone I could lean on." The varied relationships participants had with their sisters speaks not only to the complexities of family dynamics, generally (Andersson et al., 2017) but also highlights that even within a shared sociocultural *and familial* environment, women respond differently to femininity's imperatives of being "helpful and caring to others" (Stets & Burke, 2000), among other relationship-oriented expectations. It is also somewhat striking that these two examples of sisterly non-support for participants are premised on qualities that are the very antithesis of femininity's expectations. That is, for instance, Julia's sister calling her a "burden" seems an especially hurtful indictment given that being (perceived as) a burden to others goes against femininity's insistence of women as caring, helpful, and "not selfish" as the very qualities that comprise being a "good person" (Helgeson, 1994). It is little wonder, then, that the often harsh and unsupportive reactions she received from others, like her sister, after her separation made her doubt her worth *as a person*: "I didn't believe that I was a good person, [which was] 100% [because of my experience of divorce]." She acknowledged the impact other people's judgements had on her, "I stocked up on the shame because I internalized other people's feelings towards me *as my own*" (my emphasis). Herein lies the potential for detrimental *enmeshment* (Hagan, 2014), not with a particular person,

per se, but a kind of *cultural enmeshment* as a symptom of femininity's "all-consuming" other-centredness (Lazar, 2002), where the primacy of others' feelings can make it difficult for women to determine where others' feelings about them end and their own feelings about themselves begin.

While some women received significant support from their sisters, for other women, their women friends played a critical role in supporting them through and after their divorces. As mentioned, Kaleigh's friends encouraged her to "just be selfish," which gave her "permission" to really "[re-]create the life [she] has now." Her girlfriends also surrounded her as she navigated the first summer after her separation and focused all her energy on celebrating seven weddings! Instead of being a time of sadness or resentment, however, all the bachelorette parties, bridal showers, and weddings gave her "a reason to stop focusing on [her] pain" and to, instead, "get dressed up, go out, [and] just dance [her] heart out with [her] friends." It occurs to me that the saying "...your heart out," whether applied to crying ("cry your heart out") or dancing, or something else, is about *catharsis*; about releasing difficult emotions that have been held onto. It is the opposite, really, of being told to "hold yourself together." Given the way our society has weaponized women's strong, released emotions (Chemaly, 2018), doing so anyways—getting them "out"—unapologetically and around people who will not judge you for the release becomes, as Kaleigh discovered, "positive, healing, [and] cleansing."

Cassandra's best friend also provided the significant combination of emotional and practical support (Dennis, 2003), particularly during the tumultuous parts of her marriage, and after she separated. In fact, it was this friend—the "Thelma" to Cassandra's "Louise"—that took charge of helping her to leave her marriage as her ex's abusive behaviour quickly escalated. She told her, "All right, Louise, it's time. We need to come up with a safety plan and get you out of

there." And they did. Cassandra's best friend's mother "took [her] in for as long as [she] needed." Another woman friend of Cassandra's, who was also her boss, came with her to her house to get some of her things while her ex was at work. This friend knew Cassandra so well that she helped her to have her own catharsis by way of sharing a song with her that she knew would speak to her, as a music-lover and given the parallels of the singer's situation and her own. Cassandra described this experience her friend facilitated:

> My friend [first shared this] song [with me by] Kesha called "Praying." It's about all of the abuse she went through with a manager and she wasn't able to speak her truth for a long time because of contracts and then, eventually, she could and it was this empowering moment for her. [Before she played the song for me,] my friend said, 'This song is going to make you cry, but you need to hear it. And I need you to be prepared that you might cry because it's very you; it's very [much] your story.' And she put it on, and the lines are essentially, 'I hope you're somewhere praying. I hope your soul is changing.' There's a line where she says, 'We both know all the truth I could tell. I'll just say this as I wish you farewell.' That [song] really set me free in a lot of ways, because it was so exactly how I was feeling. And I did cry. [My friend] handed me a box of tissue. I was like, 'What an amazing song.'

This experience closely aligns with the process scholars identified that can make bibliotherapy effective: identification, insight, and catharsis (Canty, 2017), albeit in a different context; that of music. Certainly, however, music can be a powerful and therapeutic context unto itself as it is "woven into the fabric of our culture [as] a source of inspiration, of protest, of wisdom, and of emotion" (Pellegrino & Lee, 2012, p. vii).

Moreover, the close women friendships experienced by Kaleigh and Cassandra, for instance, extend the leisure literature on the importance of women's friendships (cf. Green, 1998; Hutchinson, 2013). For many of the women in this research, their long-term friendships with other women provided crucial "stability and a 'linking thread' through personal and situational change" (Green, 1998, p. 182). Their women friendships also provided important benefits for women's psychological well-being, including hope, optimism, and self-worth (Nimrod, 2008). And while participants like Kaleigh and Cassandra were certainly able to talk openly and honestly with their girlfriends about their experiences and challenges—a hallmark within many women friendships (Green, 1998; Hey, 1997)—sometimes, simply being "able to spend time together in a shared activity without having to talk about problems [was a] valued chance to experience positive emotions and to escape problems, even temporarily, [which could] be a powerful salve" (Hutchinson, 2013, p. 209). It these salves were, indeed, "healing" and "freeing" for some of the women in this research.

For still other women, visual media, including movies and television, provided a way to (literally) "see things differently" or even to just provide comfort and familiarity amidst so much change. For Maylin, for example, the movie *Call Me By Your Name* had a character whose words resonated deeply and facilitated an important shift for her: "It [was] a moment of reconciliation with myself that [I could be] proud [that] I was honest and loyal and passionate in that relationship [with my ex]. I don't need to feel, 'Oh, I'm abandoned' [or] 'Oh, I'm bad luck.'" In this way, watching this movie helped Maylin to re-evaluate the shame and stigma she had felt from her divorce and to, instead, consider the reasons she could be proud of the admirable qualities and actions she brought to her relationship. Through watching and reflecting upon this movie, Maylin's mindful awareness of her shifted "reconciliation" with herself can be seen as a

form of what Arai (2017) called *insight leisure*, wherein there is congruency between one's activities and their deeply held values. Through this insight leisure, Maylin recognized that she had enacted her values of honesty, loyalty, and passion in her former relationship, which replaced her shame (in feeling abandoned) with 'insightful' pride.

For Melissa, a strange turn of events, centered on a television show, led to the rekindling of a friendship that had seemingly ended when Melissa separated. Melissa had a long friendship with a woman she used to live with, and one of their favourite relaxing activities to do together was watching a certain show, the glitzy drama-filled reality show *The Hills*. Melissa's ex was friends with her girlfriend's husband and navigating that tension after Melissa left her ex caused her friend to "drift" out of her life, unfortunately. But when their old show was rebooted, it was the catalyst for her girlfriend to reach out again. As Melissa explained, "The show came back on TV [and my friend] sent me a message that said, 'Hey, this show's back on! Do you want to come over Monday night [to watch it together]?" So, as Melissa said, "The show brought us together again, so we just sat on the couch and caught up. Then, we binge-watched a couple of the episodes of this show [and] we just kind of picked up where we left off." In her recent book on women's friendships, Bayard Jackson (2024) discusses the forms and contexts of bonding that deepen friendships. One such context is the "ritual" of watching reality TV with girlfriends. In their duoethnography exploring experiences of femininity while watching the popular reality series *The Bachelor*, Spencer and Paisley (2013) highlight how they as both viewers and researchers "are written by and also write culture" (p. 700). That is, how their consumption of, and participation in, the leisure experience of viewing reality TV underscored the "messy" contradictions of their own "real-world" reflexivities. This complexity of the reality TV genre is, perhaps, part of the reason it can be such a compelling "ritual" for women viewers and one that

requires the frequent debriefing of a good friend, as Melissa had with her friend. In her critical history of reality TV, Kale (2022) insists that "reality TV offers more space than most other formats for women to be their complicated, messy selves and for this (and the drama, and the ridiculous outfits) I'll defend my beloved genre to *The Hills* and beyond" (para. 10).

6.3.3 Unsupportive Women Friendships: Disintegration

Other women, however, felt that their existing women friendships no longer felt supportive or resonated with where they were in their lives, post-divorce. For instance, Laura felt the "disconnect" between where she was in her own life and where her friends were, in terms of their experiences and priorities:

> I'm the first of my friends to go through [a divorce]. Their lives are in different places [than mine]. [Like,] one of them just got married recently [and] another one is on her first kid. I don't want to know about how they're happy sitting in their four-bedroom house with their [husband or] whatever, you know? [And] they don't have the time to necessarily be able to support me or for me to be able to support [them]. I've known these people for over ten years and [our friendships] just disintegrated.

Crucially, the disintegration of Laura's friendships occurred, largely, because of the "disconnect" between the lives and experiences of her friends and herself. Her divorce had caused such a chasm that Laura felt she and her friends could "not touch anymore." Her friends' (well-intentioned) attempts to offer advice, for instance, for coping with her divorce felt irrelevant, out of touch, and irritating since they had not "gone through it." Furthermore, many of the activities her friends were doing were centered on marriage and children, such as engagement or bachelorette parties, and she found it "difficult seeing other people move on and be happy." She

shared her eventual realization that part of caring for her own needs meant critically reflecting on her current friendships, even long-term friendships:

> I started actually listening to what [some friends] were saying to me and realized they were just saying things in order to tell me what I wanted to hear as opposed to genuinely being concerned about my well-being. When I started to actually listen to their words, I went, 'Wait a minute, that doesn't even apply to me. Did you read that off of a Hallmark card?'

Not only were some friends "not helpful" because they did not have shared experience of divorce and, instead, offered only "Hallmark" platitudes, but Laura also had "older generation friends" who "don't believe in divorce" and who interrogated her rather than offering understanding or support: "Why didn't you try harder? You kind of gave up. Divorce is giving up on a marriage." She reflected on how the friendships in her life felt, both in person and online, and she asserted new boundaries that put her needs first in social interactions. She "ended up paring down a lot of friendships" and also recognized that her engagement with social media post-divorce was unhealthy for her, in part because she encountered the optics of the ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism through friends' posts and pictures of marriage and kids, which she felt were shown "entirely just [for] bragging." As she explained:

> I deleted Facebook because it wasn't healthy for me to have social media anymore because the people that I used to be friends with, that I gave up because of their lifestyle, the marriage and the kids and everything like that, I was still checking in and realizing, 'Oh their wedding was actually gorgeous', and I didn't go because I didn't want to hurt. And then you're just flipping through the 50,000 pictures of their wedding and everything. It was kind of like holding a flame to your skin just to see if it would hurt and

> then you just realize, 'What are you doing to yourself? That hurts you. Why are you doing it?' So I gave up social media for that.

Laura's experiences with unsupportive friends challenge our culture's expectation that "a woman can always count on her friends," in large part because of femininity's expectations that women "develop friendly and supportive relationships with others" (Mahalik et al., 2005, p. 424). But not all women friendships are friendly or supportive; some may be hurtful, harmful, or even "toxic," as Shapiro Barash (2010) details in her book *Toxic Friends*. This complexity, Laura's experiences, for instance, are also consistent with Parry and Glover's (2008) research on the friendship losses experienced by women dealing with another kind of "stressful life event"—infertility—wherein some friends who had not experienced this type of loss "lacked empathy . . . and could not grasp the 'emotional pain' and 'personal stress' associated with infertility" (p. 215). As hooks (2003) observes, "Many women find themselves rejected by female pals when they make changes that differ from shared patterns of behavior that once bonded them together" (p. 136). While this "rejection" may be overt or more of a gradual "disintegration," and may be initiated by either or both women in a friendship dyad, it is painful nonetheless to realize that where there was once mutual bonding and connection, there is now disconnection. This disconnection is intensified by the gendered ideologies that underlie the "different places" in women's lives. Like women's divorce, women's infertility is a stark departure from gendered ideologies, particularly pronatalism, with resulting stigma and isolation (Parry, 2005). As Laura experienced, within this context, friendships could be distressing rather than supportive through upsetting comparisons ("seeing other people move on and be happy") and through feeling obligated to attend leisure-based social settings that centered on celebrating the very thing that was 'lost' for her (Parry, 2008). As Laura realized, this kind of harmful dynamic can become

digitally mediated within social media contexts that can reinforce limiting gendered ideologies through carefully curated posts and images that seem like they are "entirely just [for] bragging," a phenomenon Tuttle-Singer (2014) coined "Fakebooking," originally related to the "airbrushed image" of motherhood presented on Facebook. But, of course, women have choices about how they engage (or not) with social media and can enact resistances (cf. Valtchanov, Parry, and Glover, 2016), as Laura did when she realized she was "hurting [her]self" by exposing herself to social media content like "the 50 000 pictures of [a friend's] gorgeous wedding." This recognition is congruent with a growing body of recent research demonstrating that social media negatively impacts women (more than men) in distinctly gendered ways, including the reinforcement of gender stereotypes about the social roles of women (Boston University College of Communication, 2024). Given this reality, it is all the more significant that Laura prioritized her own needs and mental health by "giving up social media" and "paring down friendships" in favour of more supportive and authentic connections with others.

Maylin shared a similar observation about social media as a forum for presenting the optics of pronatalism. As she remarked, "On Facebook or on other social media, every[one] is showing off pictures [of] their kids. I love kids but I cannot have them because [I'm] not [in a] good relationship. I'm jealous of those who have kids." She also made a keen observation that, for her, it's important to reflect on "the intentions of the poster and [her] own internal interpretation." When she engages with social media posts, then, particularly those about or with people's children, she asks herself, for instance, "Is the intention of the person posting a video about their kid on their social media [meant] to trigger our jealousy or to bring us their joy?" She asked this question of herself, for instance, when a friend shared a funny video of her daughter and Maylin "knew she was doing so because she wanted to cheer me up [and] I just laughed." In

this way, Maylin became a “critical consumer” of her social media, which itself resists (further) internalization of gendered ideologies through more passive, or non-critical, consumption (Kilbourn, 1999; Wood & Watson, 2023).

Thus, while women were acutely aware of the potentially negative effects of social media— particularly the reinforcement of the gendered ideologies of coupledom and pronatalism—they had different ways of protecting themselves from these effects, including removing themselves entirely from social media or engaging critically with the content and the perceived intentions of posters. Women’s complex engagements with social media, such as Laura’s and Maylin’s, were the impetus for representing some of their experiences as social media posts within various platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram.

6.3.4 Re-creating Through Leisure

Another way that women focused on themselves was to explore new leisure that met their needs and helped them to assert parts of themselves they wanted to reclaim or develop further. For instance, Rhiannon’s marriage and divorce had shattered her self-confidence and made her feel she should keep her thoughts and opinions to herself, so when she felt ready, she joined a Toastmasters club specifically to work on speaking openly and sharing her opinions with supportive others. She explained,

> It was so utterly disempowering with [my ex] and his friends [who were] disrespectful [to me]. So [during the] first term in my master’s program, I [joined a] campus Toastmasters club [which] builds leadership and communication skills. I [started] speaking in front of them and giving my opinions [and] people were caring and supportive and genuinely interested to listen and hear [me]; [they were] not dismissive and disempowering. So Toastmasters really helped me gain my confidence back.

Toastmasters is an international organization that effectively combines the benefits of leadership and communication skills with a self-help group approach (Kime, 1998). As such, groups such as Toastmasters can foster self-esteem, confidence, and empowerment, as Rhiannon experienced, through cultivating enriching relationships that empower members to safely "take risks" (Parachin, 1995) such as sharing their opinions openly when they were previously dismissed, for instance. In particular, this unique type of social group can facilitate "transformative" learning about oneself and broader relationships (Petrausch, 2002). Indeed, leisure experiences like the ones she had within the Toastmasters group supported her own transformation from an "injured creature [who] . . . wasn't allowed to voice her opinion" into the intelligent, opinionated, and vocal "woman [she] is meant to be."

For Laura, the depths of her depression that followed her separation took a heavy toll on her body and mind, so when the fog of depression began to lift for her, she began hiking to access the benefits of physical exercise and nature, both highly touted ways to boost mood and energy, (Chan et al., 2019; Williams, 2017) and in doing so regularly, by herself or with others, she literally found her stride and "reached [her] peak healthiness." She described how becoming "healthier" when she quit smoking and drinking was a catalyst for other lifestyle choices to further improve her physical and mental health:

> I was not very active previously [but] now that I'm healthier, I [started] doing a lot of hiking this summer. I found a new appreciation for getting out in nature and just being around trees. [I love] the solace [and] the serenity of just being able to leave my phone in the car, to unplug, and go for a long walk. So hiking was huge for me.

Laura's experiences with hiking in nature extend a fairly robust body of leisure literature (among other disciplines) that demonstrates the positive emotional effects of nature-based leisure (cf.

Burgin, 2018; Carr & Williams, 1993; Miller, 2018; Sharpe, 2005), including opportunities for empowerment, particularly for women (Powch, 1994). Furthermore, "unplugging" from technology, as Laura intentionally did on her walks, can improve both physical and mental health, including a cultivation of mindfulness that promotes being fully engaged in the present moment—"just being" as Laura described—"to tune into our own thoughts and emotions and gain a greater sense of clarity and focus" (Nair, 2023, para. 10).

Other women specifically continued leisure that had been meaningful to them as a way to ground themselves in something that felt familiar and positive. In contrast to Laura, hiking had always been an activity that Maylin had enjoyed, but it was one she had long done with her ex. After they separated, she was apprehensive about whether she could continue with this activity on her own but decided that it was important that she do so. As she commented,

> Previously, I only went hiking with my ex, [so when we separated,] I was hesitant to do so because that hobby was so closely related to my ex. I was also afraid to go by myself [because] I don't feel safe being [alone] in the mountains; no [one] knows what might happen, [like with wild] animals [or falling]. [But] I know that I like hiking, so I started to organize weekly hiking with my friends, [and] I found that I [still] like hiking [even] without my ex accompanying [me]. I think it is very important.

In this way, Maylin made a conscious choice to continue with leisure she enjoyed, despite her hesitations, and to find others with whom she could enjoy it. She was able to 'uncouple' her engagement with hiking from only being an activity "closely related to [her] ex" and in so doing, she experienced hiking not only as an enjoyable activity but also as a "rewarding healing process." Similarly to her description of mindfulness while swimming, Maylin described the mindfulness she practiced while "walking and paying attention to nature and the scenery of Hong

Kong's hiking trails and, gradually and automatically, your inner [self] becomes healed as well." Maylin's experiences speak to some of the complexities of navigating leisure post-divorce, which include new considerations of safety given the risks of venturing out into nature alone, for instance, particularly for women (Boniface, 2006). However, Maylin re-defined her engagement with a beloved leisure activity to become one she did with friends, instead of only with her ex, and in so doing, she was able to continue enjoying hiking, which also offered her a renewed "healing process."

After her separation, Cassandra was also apprehensive about continuing to attend concerts and other music events because she did not want to "run into" her ex given that they are "both passionate about music." She shared how her fear of seeing her ex, and the resulting avoidance impacted her: "I would buy tickets to concerts and then I'd be like, 'I don't want to go because I think [my ex] might be there and I'm not up to it.' I was avoiding. So I was really giving up part of myself because of fear." Cassandra realized that her avoidance of places where he ex might be was only part of the psychological aftermath of her "scary" (later part of her) marriage. She also had "shortness of breath and felt claustrophobic"—symptoms of physiological panic—when she heard men raising their voice, as her ex had done with her. She sought help from a therapist who helped her to identify her experiences as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Indeed, avoidance of "trauma-related stimuli" is one of the four core symptom clusters of PTSD (APA, 2022). The therapist encouraged her "to start taking agency again over spaces that make [her] uncomfortable and that [she] is free to go wherever [she] pleases and [to not let fear] have power over [her]." In reclaiming her agency and freedom to "go wherever [she] pleases," Cassandra also re-claimed the "part of [her]self" she had given up when she was fearful. Cassandra's agentic re-negotiation of her leisure and its spaces echoes Bauer's (2024)

recent research on leisure in the "aftermath of trauma," which situates the potential for leisure as empowering for individuals who have experienced trauma specifically because "choos[ing] what to do and how to do it can make some individuals feel as if they are regaining a space in which to exercise self-expression, which can increase self-esteem . . . a sense of belonging to communities, and a re-negotiation of interest and pleasure" (p. 10). While Cassandra learned to navigate her distinct experiences of PTSD, that resulted from the "terrifying" situations within her marriage, arguably, all participants experienced their *divorces as a form of trauma* when trauma is understood more broadly as a "fragmentation" or "psychic wound that leaves a scar" (Maté & Maté, 2022). For the women in this research, thus, they are engaged in the painful *and* joyful process of re-assembling the fragments of this trauma—of re-creating their *Heartwork*.

Kaleigh also experienced feeling constrained in her leisure post-separation. Her ex was "really losing touch with reality" and he would "show up places" where he knew she was because she had a distinctive car and they lived in the same small town. He showed up several times at her parents' house and at friends' houses when she was there. The yoga studio she used to go to several times a week was on a main street with very public parking and "laying there [worrying about her] personal privacy from [her ex] knowing [she] was there was *not* relaxing." So she continued to practice yoga but at home, rather than in the yoga studio. She shared her intentionality around shifting her yoga practice, "I found some videos that I really like, and I try to be intentional about creating a space. So I always do it in the same spot, and it's just really relaxing, and I always have a tea when I'm doing it." With the shift from a public to a private yoga practice, Kaleigh re-claimed the positive experiences of yoga for her, which include "feeling good in [her] body" and "creating a quiet mental space and emotional openness" wherein "the practice of it . . . just naturally cultivated a happiness." For Kaleigh, practicing

regular yoga at home also provided another way of embracing her newly discovered appreciation for solitude, "I like that it's quiet; I like quiet and being alone, [so my] yoga is just more of that doing movement alone." Post-divorce, Kaleigh's continuation of a leisure activity, yoga, in a way that shifted from a group setting (in a yoga studio) to a solo, home-based practice fostered some of the insight she gained about herself, more broadly, in recognizing her needs and "making space for [them]." This recognition also arose intentionally after her separation as she followed her girlfriends' advice to "just be selfish" and to really consider how she "wants to spend [her] time." This consideration involved an awareness of the leisure she experienced with her ex that did not feel meaningful to her. She expressed the "resentment" she felt with the leisure her ex wanted to do together, "[With my ex,] we spent a lot of time on the couch watching TV. I was always resentful of the time in front of the TV. I'm not really a TV person and I find it has a negative effect on my mental health. [But] at that time, binge-watching was starting to be a whole new phenomenon." Post-divorce, thus, she claimed for herself the kind of leisure she truly enjoyed, and as she came to discover, that was simply being alone. This choice of *independent* leisure, in and of itself, distinctly resists the other-centredness of femininity—in deferring to the leisure preferences of a partner, for instance, as she did with her ex—and the imperatives of being "not independent" (Stets & Burke, 2000), "social" and "talkative" within femininity (Helgeson, 1994). Indeed, she confidently asserted her leisure choices even when a girlfriend questioned them. She shared this exchange:

> I had [a friend] over and she was like, 'So when you're here [at home], what do you do?' and I was like, 'Sometimes, I just sit here and look at my house and hang out with my dog in the quiet.' And she was like, 'What? That's so weird." And I said, 'I don't think it's that weird. I just really like sitting here and drinking a glass of wine by myself. I get a lot

> from just being alone, listening to music, or reading a book, or just being quiet for an hour.' [When I was married.] I don't think I knew how much being alone [meant to me]. So my leisure now post-[divorce] is a lot of alone time, which I really value. I wish I would have known earlier that [this] was something I needed. [But now] that I [do], I make space for it.

The enjoyment Kaleigh found within yoga and in simply being alone, mindfully, aligns with other research on yoga and mindfulness that asserts positive psychological experiences, including decreased anxiety, improved mood, and even self-transformation (Arai, 2017; Bonura & Tenenbaum, 2013; Garrett et al., 2011).

Another participant, Melissa, continued leisure that had been part of her life since she was a child and, for her, this leisure was especially important because of the "social aspect," in contrast to Kaleigh. During her separation and beyond, Melissa's weekly dance class gave her a reason to get out of the house, when she might otherwise be unmotivated, and to receive the familiar support of her "dance family." As she expressed:

> Dance has always been my constant throughout my whole life since I was seven. There are times, especially post-marriage, when it was a struggle to get myself there; when it's very tempting to just sit on the couch or go to bed and not go, but I force myself to go [and] I always feel a lot better after. It's a social thing and it gets me out of the house. I go to see my friends. Some of these women have been in my life for a long time so I know them really well and they're kind of a little family, my little dance family.

Social leisure, like Melissa's weekly dance class with long-term friends, can be an important context for releasing stress and enjoying common interests (Lu & Lin, 2019), as well as regaining a sense of freedom during the "struggle" of difficult life transitions (Hutchinson et al.

2008). In addition to social benefits, dance as a leisure activity involves physical and psychological benefits, including self-esteem and the potential for self-transformation through feelings of empowerment (Houston, 2005; Markula, 2020).

Finally, For Ava, when COVID restrictions shut down a regular "coffee group" for women whose male spouses are in the military (as was Ava's partner following her ex), which comes with its own set of challenges and isolation, Ava initiated an online support group for military spouses. This facilitated continued social connections and social support, which extends extant research exploring online support groups (cf. Valtchanov, Parry & Glover, 2016). Like Kaleigh, continuing leisure that was meaningful to her required her to pivot in ways, as did many individuals during the pandemic, in particular (Sharp et al., 2023)

Some participants chose to physically represent the growth and transformation their divorces catalyzed (Kim, 2024) by getting a "divorce tattoo." Kaleigh's favourite yoga teacher's regular reminder to "look with kindness" at every situation, even the most painful ones, at first felt impossible and even irritating for Kaleigh as she tried to apply this advice to how she viewed her ex and her divorce. As she admitted, "The first time I heard her say this, I was like, 'What a load of crap! There's no way that helps.' I would picture [my ex] and try to 'look with kindness,' but I was actually throwing daggers at him. " In time, however, she did come to a place where she could do this: "I was so angry with [my ex, but] when I looked at him 'with kindness,' I tried to create some empathy for how he felt because I could see that he was desperate and I knew he wasn't getting support." So Kaleigh got a tattoo of an eye and a heart as a "reminder to [her]self to look at things with kindness." Her tattoo was also, crucially, a reclamation of her body. She shared this profound acknowledgement of the divorce "metamorphosis" her tattoo represented:

> I got a divorce tattoo because I just needed to reclaim some of my body for myself. I wanted something that [my ex] had not seen. It was in response to him trying to flex ownership over me. He would send me so many texts, emails, and voicemails saying things like, "We've been together for 10 years; I know you better than anyone. No one else is really going to like you" [and] those sorts of things [that were] tearing down my confidence. [So] I was resisting that with him. This [tattoo] was a very simple thing I could do to control that and be like, 'Actually, you don't know this!' This is a physical change that I can make that will remind me of this moment [where] I just felt like I really needed to reclaim something for myself. I was in like a metamorphosis stage.

Melissa also got a tattoo that reminded her of what she had survived in her divorce and the person she had become because of it. As she explained,

> My divorce tattoo is an anchor, [which] has a couple of meanings. One, it reminds me of *who* anchors me. So, who's important in my life, who keeps me grounded—my sister [and] a couple of my friends. It's [also] just a reminder of *what* keeps me grounded, and also that I refuse to sink. I will not let my divorce be the end of me. I will not let it bring me down. And I know it's kind of ironic because it is an anchor and it's meant to hold you down but I just liked the symbolism of "I refuse to sink." I'm not going to have this bring me down! [So] it's a permanent reminder to myself that I am a survivor. I am walking out of this [divorce] a better person: I chose to get better, not bitter. I was much better off without him. I was a better person for it [and] I have learned a lot about myself.

For these women, their divorce tattoos were deeply personal but also spoke to the emergent trend of divorce tattoos, more broadly, where some divorced women "take [their] body back," from the

"ownership" they felt from their exes, as did Kaleigh, and assert that they "refuse to sink," as did Melissa, under the weight of their divorces (Coulter, 2014, para. 3).

6.3.5 Bold Re-creations

Another way in which women focused on themselves and resisted the other-centredness of gendered ideologies was by making bold decisions to further their education or start a business. Rhiannon started a master's program in another province, further asserting her confidence in her intelligence and abilities, which her ex had severely undermined. Akhila started a master's program in another country (continent even). Both women physically distanced themselves from their exes and began investing their time, money, and energy in themselves through graduate education. Alison's ex declared he wanted a divorce shortly after she had moved to the States to start a doctoral program. Despite some of her colleagues' assumption that this would compel her to leave the program, she had no intention of doing so and continued with her original plan, simply without her husband. She began to view this kind of intentionality about her life as her "tabula rasa" onto which she could rewrite, or re-create, her story. As she described, "I realized that I could decide who and what I was going to be; I didn't have to be tied to the past. I could rewrite things. I could make new and different kinds of choices." Rayna recognized that she was no longer happy in her marriage, in large part because she wanted to "expand" her horizons after coming to a new country, Canada, and her husband "wanted the opposite; [to] stay the same." Part of her expansion was the college education she was pursuing in Canada, which aligned with her "priority [of] developing [her] career." Her ex did not support her educational and career prioritization and, instead, "wanted a wife at home getting the meals ready." Thus, Rayna ended her marriage and re-created "another beginning" where she could focus on her priorities and her happiness, and thereby, resisting the ideologies of femininity and

coupledom. Similarly, Kaitlyn decided to start a not-for-profit organization to protect animals, which aligns with her passion for animal welfare, and which has allowed her to define her own competencies and successes, thereby resisting the abusive ways her ex undermined her capabilities. As she described,

> When I was married, I was told all the time that I was stupid and an idiot and that I couldn't do anything. Now, I run [my own not-for-profit and] I'm getting my real estate license. I [even] plow my own driveway. I'm doing all of these things that [my ex] said I couldn't do, [but] I am doing it [and] it feels successful! When I sit back and actually look at what I have done between [my separation] and now, and *on my own*, I can see there's a lot to be said for what's happening.

In these ways, some women made bold decisions to make different choices for themselves and to pursue educational and career paths that opened new possibilities for their lives, using their divorces as crucial catalysts of growth (Kim, 2024).

6.3.6 Therapy "Work"

Another significant way in which women put themselves first and invested their energy in "meeting [them]self" was through seeking therapy. The vast majority of participants did some form and length of therapy following their separation. For some, there was reluctance and/or misunderstanding about what therapy involved. For instance, Laura had never done any therapy previously because, as she explained,

> I thought of therapy like going to a psychic; you have to believe it for it to work. So if you're going to a psychic, you're going there believing that that human's going to read those sticks and tell you your future. If you're going to a therapist, they're going to tell you some hard stuff and you better be ready to believe it. So I put it off, put it off, put it

> off, because I was like, “No, I'm not there yet.” I wasn’t ready to open that baggage. I wasn’t ready to do that stuff yet. I was trying to figure it out myself.

Melissa had a very negative experience with a couple’s therapist she and her ex saw during their marriage who told her she “wasn’t making [enough] time for [her husband]” so the problems in their marriage were “all [her] fault” making her feel like she was “the worst human being in the entire world.” With that experience, Melissa realized the importance of finding a therapist who is “that right fit.” That is, one who (at minimum) does not perpetuate stultifying femininity imperatives that blame women for the “bad behaviour of men” (as Cassandra said) by gaslighting them into doubting themselves that they were “too busy” and not, apparently, “making time” for their spouse’s needs. For Rhiannon, her reluctance to seek therapy came from her former prioritization of physical and intellectual development, but not the emotional development for which therapy is known. Alison was under the impression initially that therapy would provide her with “procedural kinds of advice, [such as,] ‘Do these three things to ensure you move on in the healthiest ways.’” Other participants were already in therapy as part of their ongoing self-care approach, particularly to navigate the challenges of their marriages and their eventual divorces. However women came to therapy post-divorce, either newly or as a continuation, it became an important part of women’s healing and re-creation of their lives.

For Laura, for instance, she described how therapy helped her to “re-shape” her life around herself, rather than any relationship, or even the need for a relationship, clearly resisting the coupledom ideology. She asserted,

> Therapy helped me build a foundation that I didn’t have previously. I started building that foundation and understanding that I’m perfectly fine being a single woman. That kind of understanding of building a life that does not need a man or a woman or anybody to

> complete it. So that's what I did. I started putting together my little foundation and making sure that I had gotten rid of a lot of friendships [that weren't actually supportive]. I bolstered the ones that did stay by my side and now they're my support system. So, therapy helped me with basically reshaping my whole life so that now I don't need a relationship. I would like one, [but] I don't need it. [So therapy clarified] that whole thing of the want versus the need: I don't need no man! I'm perfectly fine and awesome by myself. So going through therapy has given me more self-confidence [and] helped me develop myself and my self-worth.

Rhiannon also "rebuilt [her] foundation" and realized she had "lost what a healthy sense of self was" in her toxic marriage and learned how to reclaim her sense of self through counselling. Yet another woman, Kaitlyn, specifically used the same language: "After my divorce, [I had] to figure out who I was [and] build my foundation." She found a therapist who "created a space for [her] to build [her] confidence. Thus, for participants, there was significantly a lot of building or re-building of the foundations upon which women wanted to re-create themselves and their lives post-divorce.

Similarly, other women began examining core limiting beliefs about themselves. Julia acknowledged how process of finding validation internally and how difficult it can be to change lifelong patterns,

> I don't feel like I'm worth it. I've never felt like I'm enough. So I was always trying to find my worth and my validation externally, [which] has affected all of my relationships with men. And now, I'm in a spot where I'm learning how to find that validation internally, but it's a motherfucker to change at 35!

Other women engaged with "the work" of therapy to specifically examine what "went wrong" in their marriage and to re-frame thinking of their divorce as a "failure." Kaleigh insisted,

> I think you have to do the work because something's gone wrong during a divorce and you need to identify it. And that forgiveness piece is huge. Like, you need to be able to forgive your ex and forgive yourself. I remember thinking my divorce is such a failure and it wasn't. Being a failure would have been staying in that marriage and subjecting myself to all of that torture. That would have been a failure. I would have lost so much. I would have been failing myself on so many levels.

For Melissa, the importance of "doing the work" of therapy was highlighted by her own mother, who divorced ten years before her, who did not seek therapy and who is "still very emotional and angry." Seeing her mother who "chose to get bitter," Melissa knew she wanted to make a different choice for herself. As she said, "You either get better or you get bitter and I chose to get better." And that choice came with her recognition that you have to "do the work; I cannot stress how much you need to go to counselling" after a divorce. She lamented though "that people don't realize or acknowledge how much work it is. It's just so much work going to counselling and getting through this process." She also complemented therapy with other forms of "self-work," including "meditation and mindfulness [that facilitated] a lot of soul-searching and self-healing."

It struck me throughout women's discussion of therapy that they often used the word "work" in relation to it. They insisted, for instance, "you have to do the work" and "it's a lot of work." As a feminist leisure scholar, I am certainly aware of how gendered ideologies and the relations they compel blur the 'boundaries' of work and leisure for women (Bedini, 2017; Hilbrecht, 2017) and how "women's work" is often rendered largely invisible, including their

ethic of care and the emotional labour it involves (Samdahl, 2013). But something interesting and distinct appeared to be happening with women's language around, and conceptualizations of, the necessity of "doing the work" of therapy. It became clearer to me that this distinction of women's therapy as work is a critical resistance to the many forms of work, or labour, femininity has compelled women to do for and with others. But women seeking therapy to "work on themselves" is a direct subversion of where women's energy, time, and money typically go—to others. As Melissa observed, there is a generational context to this subversion: "[I think our generation of women] are more concerned about actually going to counselling and bettering [our]selves." And while the efforts of this *therapeutic labour* often go unrecognized, like much of "women's work," the beneficiaries of this 'betterment' are not husbands or children, for instance, but solely women themselves (although others may benefit indirectly). The increased normalization of therapy (Sutherland, 2022), also generationally driven, makes this "hard" and "rewarding" process of therapy a timely and distinct form of what Parry (in press) calls a "leisure-based modality of healing" wherein women can, indeed, "come out stronger."

6.3.7 Intentional Resistances

Finally, one of the major ways in which the young, divorced women in this research re-created lives of their own making following divorce was the *intentionality* around their considerations of whether or not they wanted to have children given that none of them had children in the marriage that ended in divorce, as per my participant criteria. They resisted the 'default' expectation of a pronatalist ideology that they will have children (Bogle, 2008; Parry, 2005) and that they will have children specifically within a heterosexual couple, as expected by the "heterosexual sociality" of the coupledom ideology (Cobb, 2011; Lazar, 2002). Women's experiences with these considerations are explored in the monologue "Kidding . . . Not Kidding"

where, for example, both Laura and Kaitlyn insisted that if they did have children in the future, they would not feel compelled to be in a romantic relationship. As Laura bluntly said, "You do not need a penis in your life in order to have a child. You can adopt, you can get a sperm donor..." Kaitlyn was raised by a single mom, so after her divorce, she felt she could "just intentionally have a baby on [her] own" and started exploring sperm bank options. Other women, like Kaleigh, firmly resisted people's intrusive assumptions that she might be pregnant when she was in a subsequent relationship and expressed any degree of tiredness or not feeling well. She explained:

> One of my girlfriends has asked me a couple of times if I've been pregnant [and] I really wanted to shut it down because I find it really annoying, so I said, 'I'm not trying to get pregnant and so just stop asking. I'm just tired. That can still happen without pregnancy [and also] it's not appropriate to ask me about it.'

Furthermore, Kaleigh specified that while she does think about having children at some point, she "thinks a lot about *who* [she] would have children with" and would "be intentional" about factors like having "similar parenting values," emotional stability, and an "equal division of labour is really important." This kind of intentionality about *the person* with whom to consider having children seemed to arise in direct response to the strikingly pervasive reality of *many* participants' exes being what they described as "a child" themselves. Indeed, women's awareness of their husbands (at the time) as someone they needed to "mother" rather than an equal, adult partner was the impetus behind several women deciding they would not be having children with their husbands, even before their divorces. By making this choice during their marriage, as Melissa did, for instance, and by being intentional about the kind of partner and parent a man would be for subsequent relationships, as Kaleigh was, women resisted participating in the

normalization of the "man child": so named for a male 'partner' whose behaviour is immature, irresponsible, and unreliable (Feuerman, 2024). Specifically, a "man child," also known as "Man Child Syndrome" or "Peter Pan Syndrome" (Feuerman, 2024) is "a man who depends on his partner for everyday tasks that he is actually capable of. He isn't contributing equally to the running of the household, he doesn't typically appreciate what is being done for them, nor does he really acknowledge it" (Ross, 2024, para. 12). Husbands opting out of adult and partner responsibilities, which leaves them for their wives, is also "weaponized incompetence" that perpetuates and intensifies the gender inequality that is still prevalent in the household division of labour, with women (still) carrying the majority of this burden (Gupta, 2023). While a number of participants considered alternative options for having children outside of a relationship, and others were intentional about re-partnering with someone who was *not* a man child, still others, like Rhiannon, began thinking critically about her "ingrained thought processes," which included "getting married and having children," and asserted a "different [and] liberating path" of not having kids and instead centering "all of [her] interests, goals, and pursuits."

6.3.8 Acceptance

Returning to the Stages of Grief, the final stage that Kübler-Ross (1969/2008) outlined is that of *acceptance*. During this stage, there is no longer denial or struggle against grief, but an acceptance of the reality of the loss (Fisher, 2023). Further, during this time, energy is focused on celebrating the life (and new reality) of the present, and making plans for the future (Fisher, 2023). Moreover, "acceptance is where the power lies," suggested David Kessler, Kübler-Ross's co-author of the last book she wrote before she died (Berinato, 2020). In a timely article for *The Harvard Business Review*, Kessler applied the five stages of grief to responses to the COVID-19 pandemic to situate for readers that, indeed, "the discomfort you're feeling is grief" (Berinato,

2020). In discussing acceptance, in the midst of all of our collective grief during this time, Kessler reminded us that in acceptance, there is power and agency in figuring out "how to proceed" with the "new normal" of that grievously abnormal time.

The women in this research found their way to acceptance and in so doing, claimed their power in re-creating their lives. For some participants, their acceptance centered on specific losses from their divorce, such as the loss of their sense of certainty that they would have children (within their marriage), following the assumptions and expectations of the "heterosexual sociality" (Lazar, 2002). For instance, Cassandra expressed, "I had to accept that I might not have children [and] I accepted that." This acceptance for Cassandra actually occurred "when things were ending" with her marriage and she confronted, and accepted, that she might not have children if she decided to leave her marriage because she knew she "can't bring a child into this relationship." For Melissa, her acceptance that she might not have children came about two years after her divorce, "I've only recently come to the acceptance that I may not have kids." Thus, even when women resisted pronatalism's imperative to define their lives around the role of motherhood (Parry, 2005), the very existence of this ideology compelled them to confront it in order to "accept" that, as Rhiannon said of her own reckoning with pronatalism, they might have "a different path" than the one laid out within pronatalism and more broadly within the "heterosexual sociality" that women proceed through the expected stages of couplehood, marriage, and couplehood, as captured in the children's nursery rhyme "First comes love, then comes marriage, then come baby in a baby carriage..." (McKeown & Parry, 2018). Women also came to accept other losses connected to their divorce, such as the love they once had within (better times during) their marriage. As Cassandra aptly recognized and offered as advice for other women, "It's okay to grieve the love you once had. But accept that [your ex] was incapable

of giving you the love you needed, whether it was their fault or not. Then, let go of that [and] feel at peace." For Alison, her grief process also involved "grieving the loss of the person [she] knew [as her husband]." Then, recognizing that "that person I knew is gone [and] they're not coming back." For her, this allowed her to avoid what she perceived as a challenge for some others, "the extended preoccupations with exes [because] you're thinking about that person as they were in the marriage." But when she focused on the reality that "they're not there anymore," it allowed her to "detach" from the person her ex is now. In this way, she navigated the ambiguous loss of grieving for someone who is still physically in the world (Boss, 2016). Moreover, Alison's approach of withdrawing, or detaching, her emotional investment from her relationship with her ex is a "stage" Kübler-Ross (2019) added later called *decathexis*. Indeed, this emotional withdrawal proceeded the physical withdrawal of women actually leaving their marriages and is captured in the monologue *Turning Points*, for instance, where many women express this form of "preparatory grief" where, as Alison noted elsewhere, she had "emotionally checked out of the marriage" following the turning point she experienced in the car with husband where she thought, "That's it, I'm done here," which was sometime before the physical, or official, end of her marriage.

Other women came to a broader acceptance of their divorce. As with the other stages of grief, Cassandra specifically situated the 'final' stage: "I accepted [that my divorce] was a part of my life, but it's not going to define my life. A big part of [me] moving forward was letting go [and] even eventually remembering some of the good times and taking some of the lessons away from it." For Cassandra, coming to a place of acceptance about her divorce involved "eventually, letting go of the anger and the hurt because it will consume you. It's like [the analogy of] drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." For her, that meant also letting go of the

need for a kind of closure she felt hindered "a lot of people who have been through a divorce [that makes it hard to] move on." And while what 'closure' might ideally look like certainly varies for different people, for Cassandra, she was initially holding onto 'finding closure' in "being able to say everything I wanted to say [to my ex] about how hurt I truly felt." In time though, she "reached a point where [she] just let it go" (cue *Frozen's* anthem "Let it Go"). Notably, however, her process of letting go and acceptance did not involve the often invoked advice to "move on" through forgiveness. As she asserted, "I don't think you have to forgive, because I hear it from a lot of people. I [also] heard it from [my ex]. You don't have to forgive when someone treats you terribly." This acknowledgement and resistance to the expectation of forgiveness, and moreover, to the femininity imperatives of understanding, compassion, sympathy, "yielding," and cooperation (Bem, 1974, 1981; Stets & Burke, 2000). She made this gendered connection very clear, as with her resistance to it, when she discussed how many of her family and friends had dismissed or excused her ex's behaviours and attributed the dissolution of their marriage to them being young. She explained:

> I push back when people have said things like, 'Oh, you guys were too young.' [I've retorted,] 'No, he got worse with age. So that was not the issue.' I personally take a lot of offence when people say that. I think people don't know what to say or [they] are actually trying to justify it, like, 'Oh, we understand you were young.' But, in this case, that's not what ended our marriage. I push back on that pretty hard because I feel like it dismisses [my ex's] behaviour in a way. Like, he was a grown-ass man who should have had his stuff together [but] couldn't get it together and was selfish. So I'm not going to dismiss that because we met when he was 19. He was not 19 when we got divorced. He's going to be 30 now. I think that's where the part about being a young woman comes into play, too,

> because I feel like if young women act that way, [people] might say something about their behaviour because women aren't meant to act that way. But with men, it's like 'Oh, well, he still had growing up to do. He was just a young, crazy, wild boy,' right? I think we excuse male behaviour as a society far too often! I think it's important to start acknowledging [that] maybe we make too many excuses for male behaviour sometimes. There are a lot of wonderful men out there who don't act that way. And there are a lot of women out there who would be shunned for acting that way.

When I heard Cassandra say this in her individual interview with me, I remember nodding vigorously and smiling. Had I been one to invoke the "preach" expression, I might have said that, but her words encapsulated a kind of divorcée polemic I could not have articulated better myself. Thus, women came to their own places of acceptance about the losses of their divorce, specifically and broadly, but they also asserted what they would *not* accept, including others' attempts to narrativize their experiences in inaccurate and dismissive ways, and the limitations placed on them by the pressures of gendered ideologies. In the popular words of Taylor Swift, these young, divorced women did, indeed, "shake it off." I turn now to a brief discussion of a 'piece' of this research that underscores the rest, either through its disparity or presence: the role of community as women sought to "re-connect" their gendered selves.

6.4 Re-connecting Gendered Selves

The findings and discussion above focused on illuminating and (selectively) discussing how the young, divorced women in this research navigated two significant parts of their divorce process: *shattering* and *re-creating* their gendered selves. However, there is a third part that runs throughout both of these and extends beyond through continual "becomings," reflecting the notion of evolving and fluid identities shaped by social forces, including patriarchy (Brice, Clark, & Thorpe, 2020; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). This third part is the narrative thread of

women *re-connecting* gendered selves. Within the *Heartworks*, this thread is the gold that "joins" the cracks, following Kintsugi's approach (Ayuda, 2018; Gopnik, 2009). Young, divorced women's re-connections center on the ways they found themselves in *community* following their divorces and the significance of these purposeful re-connections.

First, I consider the question, "With whom did women choose to re-connect?" Women's *choice* in re-connections is central because it speaks to the agency and self-determination fostered within feminism (Snyder-Hall, 2010; Rens, 2021), broadly, and specifically within possibilities for leisure as resistance (Freysinger et al., 2013; Shaw, 2001). As I discussed above, participants made deliberate choices about their relationships with friends and family.[84] Some women asserted their agency in establishing boundaries for themselves about existing relationships that did not feel supportive. For instance, Laura recognized the reality of some of her longtime friendships with women who were still inside the "bubble" of "heterosexual sociality" (Lazar, 2002) and who did not (or could not) provide the kind of genuine support and understanding she needed. She described her evolution of becoming more discriminating about the support she sought and the relationships she wanted to continue:

> When I came home [after I first separated], I was taking support from everybody, whether good or bad. I just needed somebody to tell me it was okay. I [started to] determine what is a good friend, or how those relationships change, and to be able to weed out the bad ones.

As such, Laura became very intentional about her re-connections by letting go of friendships that no longer felt supportive, allowing them to "disintegrate" rather than fighting to artificially preserve them according to the optics of femininity's relationship orientation (Mahalik et al.,

[84] Participants were also intentional about their romantic relationships post-divorce but that discussion is outside the scope of this Discussion. Stay tuned for future venues' focus on this topic.

2005; Stets & Burke, 2000). This loss of friendships is consistent with research that demonstrates a significant decrease in women's social support networks following divorce, which can compound social isolation (Duffy, 1993; Odis, 2021). However, the intentionality about relationships also involved forming new friendships that did feel enjoyable and supportive, such as those Laura sought out and found within her Meetup group, aptly named "Introverts Anonymous," where she proudly assumed the role of "helping people connect" as they met weekly at a board game café. Notably, the unique setup of the meetup.com site enables people to meet others who share any number of interests, which was also how another young, divorced woman (who was not part of this research) found a group of women "dedicated to all things baking, and they became a crucial lifeline for her" (Slotter & Markey, 2021, p. 18). Melissa also asserted boundaries with her re-connections, for instance, including with her own mother. She reflected on her mother's choice not to pursue therapy after her own divorce (with Melissa's father, when she was an adult) and how her mother expected Melissa to join her in being "angry" and "bitter" when she got divorced. As Melissa explained:

> My mom thought we were going to be like a best friend, mother-daughter divorcée duo. [She] would try to get me upset to join her bitterness. It's exhausting to be around her. [So] I was just like, "Mom, I'm not participating in that." I'm losing my relationship with her.

Melissa instead focused her energy on her family relationships with her supportive sister and her father, who had "changed for the better" by seeking counselling after the divorce and, conversely to her mother, was a source of strength (rather than exhaustion) for Melissa during her own divorce. The choices women made about their relationships with friends and family meant that they were ultimately intentional about the re-connections in their post-divorce lives, thereby

resisting femininity's imperatives of people-pleasing, self-sacrifice, and relationship orientation (Bem, 1974, 1981; Stets & Burke, 2000). In this sense, women's divorces were catalysts for growth (Kim, 2024) in their provision of a distinct *clarity* and *insistence* about the treatment from others they expected or would no longer tolerate or accept. This insistence, and the boundaries they enacted around it, required women to give themselves "permission," as one participant articulated, to subversively prioritize their own well-being in relationships.

Moreover, women's re-connections crucially resisted the isolation, shame, and stigma imposed by the dominant societal narratives of women's divorce (Caputa, 2014; Jerabek et al., 2014; Lenz, 2023; Lunau, 2011; Rothchild, 2010). Participants created communities, however small, where they found validation, support, and empowerment, generally with a few good friends and family members. Notably, however, these connections were not always readily available or sufficient, especially when women felt most isolated and alone in the early stages of their separations. Although a few participants did not have any supportive people in their lives during and following their divorce, most had some, but *no one* had support specifically from even one other young, divorced woman. As the peer support literature affirms, receiving support, especially during challenging life events, from *peers*—people with relevant shared experience—is a distinctly helpful form of support (cf. Dennis, 2003; Green et al., 2022; Rice et al., 2022; Wehrmann et al., 2024). Melissa clearly articulated this distinction:

> My friends are very near and dear to me, but they haven't been through what I've been through. And they're all still married. They all have kids. So we're in very different stages of our life even though we are the same age. They love me and support me and did whatever they could to help me, but they didn't know how to help me because they've never been in that situation.

Julia shared a similar observation, except about her therapist as well as friends:

> When I go to speak with my counsellor, she's empowering and she's supportive and positive, but she hasn't been through something like this so we can't be on the same level of being able to say, "You know what? I've been through that." A counsellor or friends can't do that for you unless they have been through it themselves. It's hard to give the support someone might need, and sometimes the support is just being able to say, "I've been through the same thing." It's exactly what we [young, divorced women] were all looking for: to find common ground with people.

Despite this deeply felt need to find "common ground," participants shared that they were the only young women in their social circles experiencing a divorce, so they turned to the internet for connection with similar others. As Julia further described, "When I was going through all of this on my own, I was seeking out others and I scoured the internet for people's stories of what they'd been through. But I couldn't find [stories from anyone] in the same age range as me." This lack of connection to similar others "added to the intensity of [her] shame." Kaleigh expressed similar desperation to find connection specifically with other young, divorced women, and how she, too, was left feeling alone:

> I remember Googling "divorced in your late twenties" over and over again and just being so desperate to find someone who was going through exactly what I was going through. I really needed this to be normal. I was reading pages and pages [but] I found almost nothing! I remember feeling like, "Oh my god, what have I done?"

While women made intentional choices to cultivate supportive and meaningful relationships with family and friends in their lives, they emphasized their urgent need for connection *with other young, divorced women*, which none of the participants had with their in-person social networks,

and surprisingly, often not even with online connections. This was, indeed, surprising given that digitally mediated leisure research, for instance, has demonstrated that online connections can often meet women's needs for connecting with similar others and receiving social support, particularly when in-person connections are lacking or otherwise challenging (cf. Lopez et al., 2019; Parry et al., 2019; Valtchanov, Parry, & Glover, 2016).

As a feminist researcher, it was one of the unexpected gifts of this research that many participants emphatically shared how they discovered these missing connections with similar others in the group interviews. The Epilogue of my findings highlights the significance of the comradery, validation, relief, healing, and solidarity that women felt *distinctly* with others "who have gone through the same thing." As Melissa insisted, "If I had this [research group] two years ago, I think my journey would have been very different [because as it was,] there's not support. There's not an outlet for women in our situation." This underscores the "serious work" that remains to be done (Douglas, 2010) to provide meaningful support to young, divorced women. This research contributes to recognizing this need and emphasizing the role of future research and community practices in developing these supports both online and in-person.

Returning to the notion of "becomings"—the evolving and fluid identity shifts within social forces—can be expanded as *feminist collaborative becomings*, which embraces "a feminist politics . . . to challenge the boundaries of our collaborative knowledge production processes" (Brice, Clark, & Thorpe, 2021, p. 763). This kind of feminist politics is akin to "the consciousness-raising that [our] foremothers must have felt in those second-wave gatherings," as I wrote in the final poem of the findings, this one in my own words. Certainly, consciousness-raising groups were a bedrock of second-wave feminism as a powerful way for women to speak out loud, *in community*, about the forms and forces of gendered oppressions (Blakemore, 2021).

Ironically, femininity's imperatives are fundamentally relationship-centered (Stets & Burke, 2000) but, critically, they are centered on women's relationships *to* and *for* others, particularly men, within the "heterosexual sociality" (Lazar, 2002). Significantly, the women in this research were adamant about re-connecting their gendered selves through relationships *with* others that were mutually supportive and authentic. These kinds of connections can foster transformative possibilities, both personally and politically (Parry, 2014; Richardson, 1990). As Ahmed (2017) contends of the potential when women share knowledge or, indeed, commune with one another, "No wonder feminism causes fear; together, we are dangerous" (p. 18). Patriarchy, consider yourself warned. To conclude this discussion, before outlining some limitations and future research, I consider the role of hope in women's divorce narratives and a hopeful enacting of feminist praxis in this research (and beyond).

6.5 Hope and Enacting Feminist Praxis Through Heartworks

In later conceptualizations of her Five Stages of Grief, Kübler-Ross (2019) considered other "stages" and one of these was *hope*. This recognition has also extended some iterations of the five stages with *Acceptance and Hope* as the final stage, or even more generally the "Upward Turn" (of either the original five stages or an adapted seven stages) (Gupta, 2024). Regardless of these various delineations, "the emergence and importance of hope during the grieving process" is a distinct "shift" towards optimism in seeing a way forward in a "new reality" (Gupta, 2024; Rosenbloom, 2023, para. 1-2). All participants embraced hopefulness in their own ways as a crucial and ongoing part of their grieving, healing, re-creating and re-connecting of their *Heartworks*. Women were variously hopeful about new jobs, new activities, new friendships, and new romantic relationships. They were hopeful in their expressions of self-care and self-love, the ultimate resistance to gendered ideologies that put others first. From this powerful place of

hopefulness and the resistance such a hopefulness demands, women asserted "if you put your happiness first, the rest of the pieces fall together." And fall together they did.

As I shared in the Epilogue of my findings, "I was there in the room" as the brave and resilient women in this research shared the many complex pieces of their stories with me and other women. In that vulnerable and transformative sharing, we helped to "repair with gold" the cracks of women's *Heartworks* through the *therapeutic solidarity* that was fostered by the normalization and validation that women felt strongly was *only* possible with other young, divorced women who "just get it." The women broke through the isolating sense they had of being "the only one" and, instead, realized the grounding reality and relief—for the first time, for some women—that they were not alone in their experiences of divorce as young women. This therapeutic solidarity meaningfully shifted women from the various places they were "stuck" by the adherences to femininity, coupledom, and pronatalism, until they began to shift from shame to validation; from secrecy to openness; and ultimately, from isolation to connection.

Through this community of women in this research, myself included, we experienced glimpses of a way forward where femininity could be empowering rather than restrictive. Following the lead of critical femininities using Femme Theory, which "challenges the common assumption that femininity is in itself a source of disempowerment or inherently subordinate" (Hoskin & Blair, 2022, p. 5). Femme Theory seeks to "rethink femininity" by expanding the "partial perspective" that is "only part of the story" (p. 4). To this end, I propose "rethinking femininity" to include its classic and foundational "communal" orientation (Bem, 1974, 1981) to be not only a source of self-sacrifice but also a source of self-love and sustaining solidarity. This recognition echoes hooks' (2003) *Communion*—her treatise on the "female search for love"—that makes the connection between self-love and "communion" with others, particularly other

women: “When we are self-loving . . . we see ourselves clearly as we really are. And that clarity is the source of our strength and . . . the space where we can search for love together, communing and celebrating, cherishing the sweetness of sustained female solidarity” (p. 139). As one participant keenly observed, this kind of women solidarity requires a different kind of “good wom[e]n”—not the kind patriarchy had defined—but, rather, “women [who] stand together and empower each other.” I see this feminist and feminine praxis as a pivotal part of the individual and collective *Heartworks*.

6.6 Limitations and Future Directions

Reflecting critically on the potential limitations of this research revealed two notable limitations. The first pertains to a third intended method not coming to fruition within the design of the study. In my proposal, in addition to the two kinds of interviews I proposed and conducted, I also intended to incorporate *participant observation* to “witness social action firsthand” by observing and engaging in a setting where relevant activities occur for the participants (Schwandt, 2007, p. 219). Using this method, I intended to observe “divorce culture,” such as a divorce party, a ‘divorce-aversary’ celebration, a trash-the-dress photo shoot, or the process of a woman getting a divorce tattoo. I describe this proposed method in more detail in Appendix G (as well as the consent forms that accompanied it). As it turned out, this was the methodological element of my ethics application that proved to be the most challenging and required significant considerations and revisions before approval. For instance, there were concerns about the recruitment and communications with divorce phenomena ‘gatekeepers,’ such as photographers or tattoo artists. My intention was to discuss “divorce culture” phenomena with each participant during my individual interviews to ask whether they planned to participate in any “divorce culture” events within the period of time allotted for my data collection and, if so, to ask if they

would consider having me observe the event. As it happened, while three participants did have divorce tattoos (already), *no one* was interested in participating in any other form of "divorce culture." Thus, organically from the experiences and interests (or lack thereof) of the participants in this study, it became clear that this method would not occur given that it was not relevant or otherwise applicable to my participants. In this sense, this discarded method is not so much a limitation, but an indication that exploring divorce culture phenomena may require a different approach, which was outside the scope of the current study. Specifically, connections could be developed with particular professionals that more regularly interact with, or facilitate, divorce culture phenomena, such as a photographer who does 'trash the dress' sessions. Through these 'gatekeepers' initially, perhaps, women who are interested in participating in these events could be contacted to consider participant observations. This also provides a direction for future research that could more fully explore young, divorced women's participation (for those who do, of course) in the flipside of wedding consumerism, the emergent divorcée consumerism. Such research could extend insights into gender roles and consumptive leisure (cf. Bhatti & Church, 2000; Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Cook, 2006; Foley, Holzman, & Wearing, 2007).

A second limitation, and opportunity for future research, pertains to the importance of feminist intersectionality. While this research did include participants with some diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, for instance, there was limited or no diversity in other dimensions of identity. For instance, in terms of education, all participants had at least a college diploma, most had an undergraduate degree, and some had advanced degrees. Research with young, divorced women that included women with lower educational levels (for instance, no post-secondary education) could provide distinct insights into the intersection of class, given educational level as a reliable indicator of socioeconomic status (Smith, 2013). Furthermore,

research has demonstrated that education level can affect marriage and divorce, for instance with lower educational levels being a risk factor for marital stress and divorce (Smith, 2013), and, perhaps surprisingly, that highly educated individuals are increasingly divorce-averse (Lunau, 2011).

Another dimension of identity that was homogenous for all participants was their sexual identity as heterosexual women. Future research with young, divorced women that specifically explored the experiences of lesbian women, for instance, would provide a fascinating examination of their distinct experiences and negotiations with divorce given their rejection of the "heterosexual sociality" (Lazar, 2002), especially given the socially entrenched construction of heteronormativity within wedding culture, for example, and marriage generally (Tombaugh, 2009). This heteronormativity extends to relatively recent legal revisions to marriage laws allowing same-sex marriage in Canada for just two decades (Hogg, 2006), and nationwide in the United States in only the last decade (Liptak, 2015). At the time of writing this, however, I am painfully aware of the American right-wing "2025 Presidential Transition Project," or "Project 2025," and its proposed retrenchment of legal rights and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals (among other marginalized groups), including the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the United States (Graves-Fitzsimmons, 2023). Given this intensified conservative backlash, both in the United States, certainly, but also in Canada (Patel, 2025), it is especially crucial to continue to expand our understandings of the experiences of equity-seeking groups. Moreover, the divorce experiences of lesbian women would contribute to the "more complete picture of femininity" through Femme Theory's invitation to "radically shift the way we conceive of gender and the heterosexual matrix by rethinking some of the taken-for-granted assumptions made about

femininity [including] that it signals sexual availability to men [and] that it is performed by cisgender heterosexual women" (Hoskin & Blair, 2022, p. 4).

In addition to exploring the particular experiences of lesbian women, future research could also utilize an intersectional lens focused on gender and sexuality, more broadly, recognizing sexual fluidity for some women (Diamond et al., 2020), to inform future research questions, such as "Do some women who divorce men subsequently recognize, assert, or explore sexualities other than heterosexuality?" Furthermore, given that marriage can be a particular site of patriarchal privilege with traditional and unequal gender roles (Humble et al., 2008; Lenz, 2024), future research could also explore how women—of any sexual identity—may experience their sexuality differently outside of marriage, as divorced women. Addressing these limitations and the avenues for future research reminds us that within feminism, broadly, and feminist research, specifically, there is still "serious work to do" (Douglas, 2010, p. 306). In solidarity, I invite others to join me in this work—this *Heartworks*.

7.0 Conclusion

What a journey this research has been for all involved! In one of our recent meetings, Diana shared with me that as she was finishing her own dissertation, writing her conclusion felt challenging given that it, necessarily, comes at the end of such a long research and writing process. I empathized that, although I certainly was not ready to write my own conclusion at that point, I was certainly not feeling as energized as I had at the beginning of my own doctoral journey. I joked, then, that perhaps when it came time for me to write my own conclusion I might just include a final blank page with the succinct invitation for readers to "Please draw your own conclusions and share widely." As tempting as that may be, I will offer some conclusions for consideration, but the above invitation still stands.

7.1 Heartworks as Substantive Insights

First, I emphasize the substantive insights and contributions of this research. Using narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005), I facilitated nineteen interactive, small group, and reflexive, dyadic interviews—or, group and individual interviews, more simply—with twelve young, divorced women. Through these interviews, women compellingly shared their divorce narratives, elucidating their experiences, broadly, before, during, and after their marriages. The interviews—and the stories women most wanted to share—focused on the periods of time following their separation and into the 'aftermath' of their divorces. Women's variously painful, resilient, and joyful narratives illuminated my conception of the *Heartworks* as a framework encompassing the complexities within two overarching (interconnected and non-linear) "pieces": *Shattering* and *Re-Creating*. In the discussion, I offered a third 'piece' emphasizing women *Re-connecting* within community on their own terms. Collectively, these pieces and the *Heartworks*, holistically, frame an understanding of young, divorced women's navigations with *shattered*

gendered selves, *re-creating gendered selves*, and *re-connecting gendered selves* as they confronted gendered ideologies that crucially shaped their experiences of surviving, and even thriving, after divorce.

Specifically, I situated and explored women's experiences with their shattered gendered selves as a form of *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 2016) through which women grieved. I drew on the well-known *Five Stages of Grief* (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2008) both to center and legitimize women's divorce as, indeed, a form of grief, and to explore some of the complexities within their grieving process, including denial and isolation, depression, and anger. I pay particular attention to the role of women's *anger* given cultural imperatives that deny or distort women's right to feel and express anger (Chemaly, 2018), for which they have ample reasons to be angry, including unsupportive family and friends, marital infidelity, domestic abuse, and the failures of institutional structures to support women. I extend this discussion of women's grief and its complexities by contributing to an understanding of women's distinctly *gendered grief*. These gendered distinctions occurred within four separate, but related, dimensions: the loss of relationships (with the families and friends of women's exes); increased social isolation; managing the loss for others; and legitimizing the right to grieve. All of these processes and challenging experiences within the *shattering* of women's *Heartwork* ultimately isolated and stigmatized women.

Women's divorce experiences within and after the *shattering* were thus, distinctly gendered, isolating, and stigmatizing. Women's divorces were *also* transformative catalysts for *re-creating gendered selves* and critically resisting the litany of disempowering cultural narratives about divorced women, such as "media portray[als of] divorcées [as] sad, lonely, [and] drowning their sorrows in a bottle of wine" (Lenz, 2024, p. 4). Instead, as self-proclaimed

modern “spinster” Bolick (2015) asserted, women can claim the “pleasures and possibilities of making a life of one’s own” (p. 24). That is exactly what the women in this research began to do, including centering their own needs and *self-love* (hooks, 2003) by “meeting themselves” and re-creating supportive relationships with the women in their lives, for instance, such as sisters and friends. Women also asserted new boundaries for themselves when their relationships with women felt unsupportive or inauthentic. Significantly, leisure provided an important context for women’s re-creations, for instance, through friendships, and through both new and continued leisure pursuits that variously provided opportunities for agency, mindfulness, and, at times, a reclamation of the parts of themselves they had ‘lost’ in toxic marriages and challenging divorces. The women gained a distinct, even subversive, clarity about themselves and what and who they wanted in their lives as they engaged with the processes of shattering and re-creating gendered selves to seek meaningful *re-connections* with others in *community*. Finally, I returned to the Five Stages of Grief to situate and discuss women’s *acceptance* and *hope*, including the hopefulness they both fostered and discovered within the “therapeutic solidarity” that emerged from the distinct understanding, validation, and encouragement they experienced with other young, divorced women within this research. The surprising power of this supportive peer group setting extends the possibilities of creating “restorative environments,” particularly within feminist research, to further facilitate the transformative healing that can arise through the mutual empathy that comes from lived experiences (van der Kolk, 2015), as the women in this research can attest.

I sought to compellingly represent the complexities of these findings through three forms, embracing creative analytic practice (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005): *The Divorcée Monologues*, A two-part *Vagina Monologues*-inspired form; a series of social media posts across several

platforms and focused topics; and an Epilogue in the form of researcher field notes. To be sure, within this research (and future directions for it), there remains much to be explored. Specifically, for instance, within the necessarily limited scope of my discussion, I am very mindful of the topics and insights still to be unpacked, such as some women's experiences with subsequent romantic relationships, and even second marriages, as well as some women's experiences with having children, as a solo parent or within another relationship. Furthermore, within the *shattering*, more attention should be devoted, in another venue than this dissertation, to discussing the complexities of women's experiences with depression (as a mental disorder, rather than within the stages of grief). Within the *re-creating*, for instance, there are also fruitful explorations to highlight women's experiences of dating and sexuality post-divorce. I acknowledge here that, for me, there is a certain grief in not being able to fully explore *all* that I witnessed and learned within this research. But, as peers and my committee members braced me to remember from the outset, as Lisbeth Berbary is keen to insist, "Just because you can't say everything, doesn't mean you shouldn't say something." And so, with the various "somethings" I have represented and discussed, it is my hope that readers can (still) embrace "new and different positions and perspectives" in considering how the women in this research, and the *Heartworks* they shared and I shaped, can, perhaps, teach us "new" ways of thinking about, and experiencing, love (with ourselves and others) and of, ultimately, making a meaningful life of one's own.

7.2 Heartworks as Methodological Insights

Having offered some conclusions on the *Heartworks* of young, divorced women's experiences, the substantive findings of this research, I turn now to a brief discussion of, and concluding thoughts about, the unexpected methodological pieces of the *Heartworks*, the people

who shaped it, including participants, myself, and the people along my research journey that kept this *Heartworks* beating.

First, I consider my role within the *Heartworks*; how it has shaped me, and how I have shaped it. I do so following Dupuis' (1999) encouragement for researchers to reflexively share their "naked truths," and the example of Spencer and Blair (2013) sharing their "vulnerable, authentic, reflexive" feminist duoethnography as a (brave) "act of narrative exposure and reconceptualization" (p. 712-13).

7.3 My Heartwork

There is a parallel story that runs throughout this research, and that stretches before it and after it. It is the story of the researcher, of me, in this case. This story is always part of any research, of course, whether it is acknowledged or not. Feminist research values urge researchers to consider and include their positionalities (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Certain kinds of research methodologies, such as autoethnographies, put researchers' own stories front and center and ask researchers to explore how their stories connect to broader cultural narratives (Coffey, 1999). While this research is certainly not an autoethnography, I have continuously asked myself such questions because, for me, as for many feminists, the personal is *also* always political. In Chapter Three, I discuss some of my positionalities, including my identities as a cis-gendered white woman in a middle-class socioeconomic position. At the beginning of each group interview, when I shared the inspiration for this research and my place within it, I clearly situated myself as a married woman with two children. At the time of the interviews, I was around the same age as almost all of my participants, in my early thirties. Thus, I, too, shared the age and gender aspects of my participant inclusion criteria of "young women in their 20s or 30s." But, significantly, I was *not* "divorced, without children (from the marriage)." In this sense, drawing on Smith's

(1974/2004) "insider-outsider" standpoint view, I was an 'insider' for some relevant identities and experiences but I was also an 'outsider' in terms of, arguably, the most distinct identities at the center of this research: being a young, *divorced* woman, *without children*.

One participant, Laura, spoke directly about this insider-outsider experience when she began describing some of the challenges she had encountered with people in her life who were unable to understand what she was experiencing and navigating simply because they had not experienced divorce (and its aftermath). As she aptly acknowledged, people who have not shared *the particular and distinct experience of divorce as a young woman* (as this research has sought to elucidate), are "still inside that bubble" of marriage (and all that it entails). She positioned herself as firmly being "outside the bubble" and recognized that she is also among other "like-minded [people] who have been hurt and violently pushed outside that bubble, [and] can't go back in." As I listened to Laura, I shared this thought with her and the other woman[85] in this group interview:

> I think the "bubble" you describe is a really powerful way of illustrating this 'in and out' perspective. I'm trying to tell the stories of the people [specifically, the young women] outside the bubble. And, I think, "the bubble" is also, more broadly, the 'mainstream'; it is gendered ideologies, it is movies, it is your family...Those are the things that build the bubble. And unless it's popped for you—and, of course, the "popping" is really, really hard [and that is also part of the stories of being outside the bubble]—but unless it's popped, you're on different planes. So I'm trying to gain insight from an outsider perspective.

[85] This particular group interview (part two for this group) had only two participants, rather than three, since the other woman had gotten mixed up with the time and insisted the three of us proceed without her.

Both women nodded or verbally agreed with my observation. Then, Laura added, "I was going to say, *you're* still in the bubble." I pondered for a few moments and then shared this with the women who had so candidly and vulnerably shared their stories with me:

> I am still in the marriage bubble, but I am also in an unhappy marriage. I started this research in a different place. But, like every relationship, my relationship is 'complicated.' [For my husband and I, it became particularly 'complicated' when we became parents to] twin girls. So I am in a marriage bubble but, in other ways, I'm trying to find ways out of the bubble [at least in its current state].

At the start of this group interview, as with others, I had explained that this feminist research might feel different than other types of research people had been a part of and I clarified my role, as I understood it, that, for me, "feminist interviewing is [in essence] listening deeply to people and disclosing [parts of] yourself [where that is relevant and meaningful]." It had felt meaningful to me then, and to the relationships we were building in that space, for me to disclose my own truth that was normally firmly "subjugated": *I am in an unhappy marriage*.

This truth remains and has, unsurprisingly perhaps, pervaded this research. When I shared this truth with Diana years ago, during one of our meetings, she was one of the first people in my life, including my family and friends, to hear and hold this truth and to say to me what I later said to the women in my study: "Your tears are welcome here" (and so they were, and so they came freely in her office, in a deluge I did not realize I was holding). She sat with me as I cried and blubbered various details. Remarkably, I did not feel embarrassed or hurried to "control myself." When my tears subsided, she asked: "How can I support you?" This seemingly simple question simultaneously conveyed three important things to me: first, that she was, indeed, willing and able to support me; second, that she did not presume to know what kinds of support I would

actually find helpful or welcome; and three, that she trusted and respected me enough to determine and articulate for myself what, if any, "support" could look like from her. She also, without hesitation, told me she would fully support me changing my dissertation topic entirely (even though I was already post-comps and post-proposal defence at that stage) if that is what I wanted to do (luckily, perhaps, for this current research, it was not what I wanted to do). I have since repeated Diana's exact question—*How can I support you?*—to friends who have also trusted me enough to share their struggles with me. The role of a researcher's supervisor is yet another story that runs parallel to any research. Diana's role in this research and in my life is not only something I want to contain within the Acknowledgements of this dissertation, but something that I want to center, at least here, because I am all too aware that many graduate students' experiences with supervisors and the broader academic institution are, to varying degrees, unsupportive or even outrightly hostile (cf. Berhe et al., 2020; Stark, 2008).

Thus, the supportive space that Diana fostered for me, in countless small and large ways, during the 'ridiculously' long time I have been a graduate student (as both a master's a doctoral student)—fourteen years to be exact, to share another 'uncomfortable' truth—her *unwavering* support is the clearest example I have of feminist care and leadership in action. Her support is the backbone of this research and of the researcher that grew from graduate 'infancy' to the (fourteen-year) 'adolescent' "emerging scholar" I am today. Moreover, the specific forms of support Diana provided that facilitated this is also a "story that needs to be told" (Berbary, 2013b, p. 9) and one I hope to share in another venue, in the hopes that its ripples may shift our academic communities to be ones that can more fully support its members. I see now that supervisory and academic relationships are also part of the *Heartworks*.

When I shared my hard truth—*I am in an unhappy marriage*—that day with the two participants, they, too, held it, and me, gently and graciously. They slid a box of Kleenex my way, and then Kaleigh mused: "Maybe you'll find one of the doors [out of the bubble]. After chatting with us, we're loosening all those [locks]." And Laura added, "We'll tell you the code to get out." I wonder now if one such "code" includes being able to acknowledge this truth in all its complexities; and to bring it out of the shadows. I have since done so with the other person in my marriage—my husband—and with some close friends, and with a therapist. One of the ways I am learning to think about this truth and what it means for me (and my family) is an insight from some of the women in the study who resisted a number of simplistic, overarching characterizations of their marriages, their divorces, and themselves. Similarly, while I can acknowledge that my marriage is unhappy (and not just sometimes, as expected), I also know that it is not *only* unhappy. I'm not sure yet where this messy truth will lead. This tension and ambiguity are hard to navigate, to be sure, but so are all forms of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2016). As I learned more about the nuances of this concept through this research, I could see that I had experienced, and continue to experience, a kind of ambiguous loss, too: specifically, the type Boss (2016) identifies as a "psychological absence with physical presence" (p. 271). My marriage is still physically 'intact,' but there are psychological absences that are surprisingly consistent with some of the examples of this type of ambiguous loss, including chronic mental illness, depression, and trauma (Boss, 2016). The way forward with any kind of ambiguous loss, according to Boss (2016)—the person who identified the phenomenon and has studied it in various contexts for decades—is to engage in *dialectical thinking*, or both-and thinking, "by holding two opposing ideas in mind at the same time" (instead of absolute and binary thinking) through which can foster resilience through "normalizing ambivalence" and "discovering new

hope" (p. 273). Indeed, as the women in this research illuminated, marriages and divorces can be *both* unhappy *and* happy (to put it simply). What each person does with this ambiguity is, of course, part of their unfolding stories. When parts of these/our stories are shared, despite our fears of judgements, there can be, indeed, the "discovery of new hope."

Strikingly, yet simply, I did not feel judged when I shared my truth with these two women, or with Diana, and yet the fears that stoke this truth and compel its secrecy would have me believe its apparent incompatibility with my own version of "happily ever after" or as an indictment as a "bad feminist" (Gay, 2014). But, as I discovered first-hand when these kinds of truths—the ones that are connected to core parts of our identities—are shared with supportive others, they begin to transform: they lose some of the sting of their power over us. This is the central premise, in fact, of Brown's insightful (2007) research on shame. As she insists:

> We spend so much precious time and energy managing perception and creating carefully edited versions of ourselves to show the world . . . We learn to hide our struggles to protect ourselves from shame, judgment, and criticism . . . by seeking safety in pretending and perfection . . . [but] an important truth [is that] our imperfections are what connect us to one another and to our humanity; . . . they are powerful reminders to keep our hearts and minds open to the reality that we're all in this together. (Brown, 2025, para. 1)

Through shared vulnerabilities, we begin to understand how we can, in fact, hold seemingly incongruous 'pieces' of our relationships, our identities, and our lives. That we do not, actually, have to always (or ever?) "hold ourselves together"; we can crack, shatter, and re-create. I'm still in my own painful *and* restorative process of re-creating. We all are, really. I am grateful for the "gold" I've been given, in lots of forms, to repair my own 'broken pieces' into something new.

So, the story that runs parallel to this research is my own. Like every life story, it has taken twists and turns I never foresaw (do we ever?) but one of the many gifts of this research has been the women who are its heart and who, unexpectedly, tinged my own story with layers and insights I still hold close to my heart. I see now that this is *all* part of the *Heartworks*.

7.4 Heartworks as Social Justice

Lastly and significantly, it is my hope that this research can be useful in contributing to social justice, which I consider the ultimate goal of my research, along with many feminist researchers, among others. Social justice broadly refers to fairness and equality, and to the struggle by individuals and groups for human rights, dignity, and the recognition of personal and collective identities (Kalsem & Williams, 2010; North, 2006). Such recognitions require a society with conditions that support the rights of "all individuals to exercise capacities, express experiences, and participate in determining actions" (Reid, 2004, p. 2). When joined with feminism, social justice—and the research it compels—aims to expose and critique societal patterns that reproduce oppression and privilege dominant groups (Reid, 2004; Valtchanov, 2022) with a hope and desire for the kind of society in which feminists would like to live (Kalsem & Williams, 2010).

Towards this end, I believe my research contributed to social justice on several levels. Firstly, I have always been especially interested in research possibilities for promoting personal transformations, or changes on a "micro" level. Parry (2014) asserts that personal transformations through research can be one way of fostering feminist social justice, as elucidated in Butler's (2001) notion of "transformative encounters" that require openness, vulnerability, and recognition, which is frequently denied to women. As this research has made clear, divorced women often feel that due to the stigma attached to divorce ("divorce is a dirty

word"), they are discouraged from being open about their experiences and, as such, are often denied recognition. Through sharing their stories, however, they "reclaim the capacity to tell, and hold on to, [their] own story, resisting narrative surrender" (Langellier, 2001, p. 146). Crucially, within feminist research, this "telling" can "*purposively* make space for engagement of ideas, thoughts, and experiences, which facilitates transformative moments" (Parry, 2014, p. 355-356, original emphasis). In this sense, divorced women sharing their narratives within a supportive space fostered positive changes in the narrators' own lives (Chase, 2005).

This is evident in the positive and, indeed, transformative "encounters" women experienced within the "therapeutic solidarity" of the group interviews. Such transformations also occurred for many women in reading the findings and providing their feedback. For instance, Julia shared, "Reliving my contribution to your work reopened some feelings and thoughts I haven't experienced in a while. It also provided perspective on how far things have come since then, which is a good thing! She continued, "I'm really proud of this work you've done and glad I could be a part of it. It certainly was a part of my healing journey." Similarly, Cassandra offered this feedback: "You reminded me of things I'd even swept away, but it was truly surreal to re-visit from this vantage point, as a woman, [and now,] as a mother." Kaitlyn voiced what I have felt about this work all along, "Your work is a true labour of love! Reading my own parts brings me back, but in a really amazing way as I'm [now] on the other side." Finally, Kaleigh expressed this after reading the findings, "It really felt like a reunion even re-meeting that version of myself from 5 years ago." Thus, I certainly agree with Parry (2014) that feminist social justice research, like this project, can be "quiet, yet persistent, full of strength and pride, with strong implications for the micro level" (p. 360). Attention to the micro-practices of power and their effects on individuals resonates deeply with me and my own feminist approach.

I also appreciate, however, the power of research to contribute to broader, or more macro, changes towards social justice, particularly through the use of counter-narratives as conceptualized within narrative inquiry. As discussed, with narrative inquiry, "there is the deliberate intention to move beyond any one dominant story to examine the subjugated stories that offer alternative ways of understanding experience" (Daly, 2007, p. 118). The counter-narratives of divorced women in this research offered "alternative ways of understanding" and, in so doing, provided transformative possibilities (Richardson, 1990). In some ways, the scope of possibilities for social change depends on the size and capacities of the audience(s) with whom narratives are shared. Given that narratives have a unique capacity to personalize and promote empathy (Gamson, 2002), when compelling narratives are shared with an audience and they can empathize with the narrator(s), they may understand their own stories in new ways (Chase, 2005) or they may be able to think and act in ways that benefit narrators and their advocacies (Madison, 1998).

This can be achieved on a larger scale through the use of "collective stories" connecting individual stories to the broader stories of a marginalized group (Richardson, 1990). Writer Tobias Wolff was asked in an interview about the power of narratives and counter-narratives as political writing and he eloquently insisted:

> The most radical political writing of all is that which makes you aware of the reality of another human being . . . Good stories slip past our defenses—we all want to know what happens next—and then slow time down, and compel our interest and belief in other lives than our own, so that we feel ourselves in another presence. It's a kind of awakening, a deliverance, it cracks our shell and opens us up to the truth and singularity of others—to their very being. (McDowell, 2015, para. 3)

This kind of opening up to the truth and the centrality of collective stories for social movements (Davis, 2002) is reflected in Caputa's (2014) collective stories from young, divorced women around the world contributing to what Caputa and others are calling "the new divorce revolution." This research has added new layers and nuances to this small, but mighty, existing collective of stories, which can be framed and explored as counter-narratives to the limiting meta-narratives of women, relationships, divorce, and other contexts that clearly need new stories to be heard and shared. Thus, this research galvanized social justice on both a micro and macro level, or a personal and political level, recognizing that even this distinction is crucially challenged within feminist research, where indeed "the personal is political."

I conclude, finally, following the wise advice of my eight-year-old daughter (who was not even born when this research began!) who has recently been learning about persuasive writing (I am the regular recipient of increasingly persuasive pleas to get a pet, for instance). When I explained what I had been working so steadily on lately (which she now, not entirely inaccurately, calls my "book"), she suggested a persuasive writing technique she had learned, to "leave my readers with a question that gets them thinking." So to that end, I hope this research—itself a "love note" to those who need it—can inspire "my readers" to consider this question: How can *you* put your own heart into the work of "repairing with gold" this broken world; to re-create something different, but beautiful, flaws and all?

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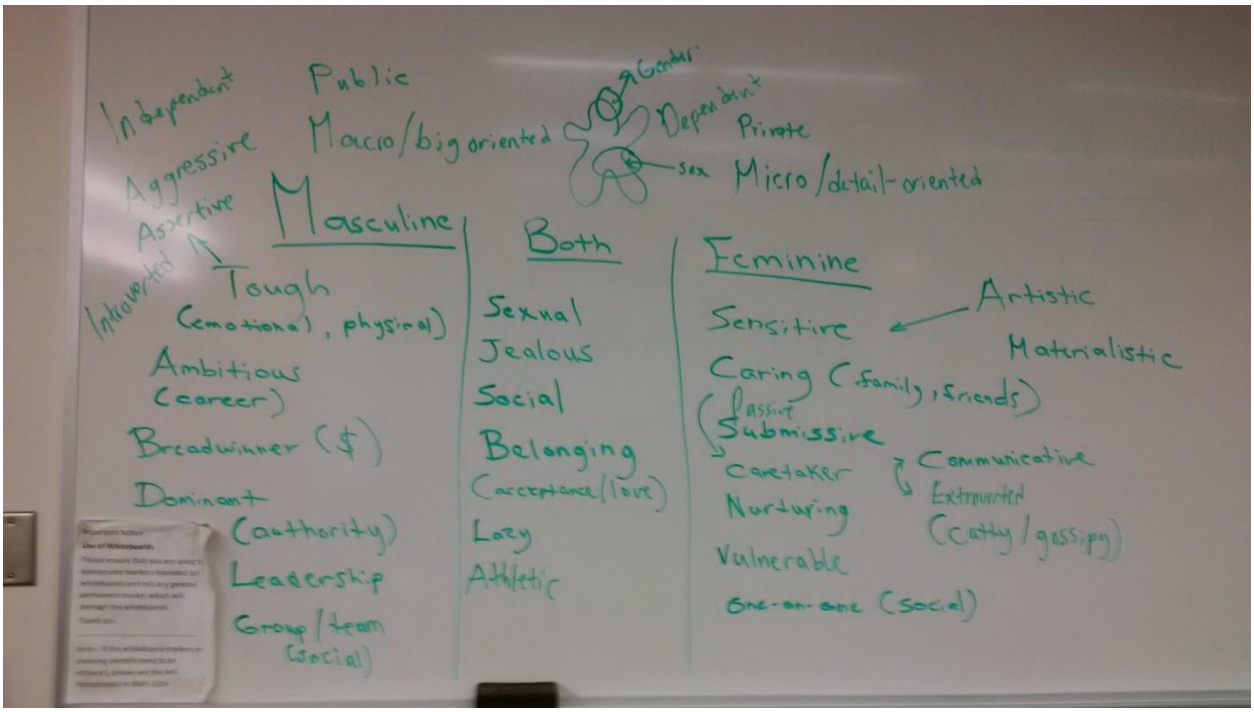
Appendices

Appendix A – Femininity (REC 408, 2016)



Class brainstorming of "feminine" traits (and "masculine" and both)

(Gender and Leisure seminar: REC 408/WS 308, Winter 2016)

Appendix B – Participant Information / Recruitment Letter

Dear (*insert name*),

This letter is an invitation to participate in a study exploring the experiences of divorced women, without children, who are in their 20s and 30s. The title of the study is "Untying the Knot: A Feminist Exploration of Young Women's Experiences of Divorce." This research is being completed for my dissertation, as part of the degree requirements for my PhD in Recreation and Leisure Studies. I am currently a third-year doctoral student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo, working under the supervision of Dr. Diana Parry. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with more information about the research study and to outline the details of your involvement if you decide to take part in the study.

There is limited research exploring the unique experiences of young, divorced women. The majority of existing research has focused on the divorce experiences of women who are over 40 years old, with children, many of whom have been married for many years. This research has also typically focused on single dimensions of experience, such as the economic impacts of divorce. In addition, there is a notable lack of research specifically on young women's experiences of divorce in connection to leisure experiences. This study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by exploring young women's lived experiences of divorce. In particular, I hope this research illuminates the social, relational, and personal influences shaping young women's experiences of divorce. I also hope this study will foster understanding and awareness of these experiences among the women who participate, but also within the broader community. In turn, insights from this study may help to shape practices in leisure studies as well as other fields and contribute to developing better community support systems and programs for young, divorced women, particularly given the marginalization they may experience.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in two interviews: 1) a one-on-one, in-person interview; and 2) a small group interview, with 3-5 other women. Both interviews will last approximately one to two hours and the interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon location between the participants and the researcher. You will also be asked to bring one item (e.g., photograph, book, song, article, advertisement) with you to both interviews that speaks to you about your experiences of divorce.

During the interviews, you may decline to answer any of the interview questions asked. You may also withdraw from the study at any time. With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded to facilitate the collection of information, which will later be transcribed into verbatim transcripts for analysis. The information you share in the one-on-one, in-person interview will be kept confidential. Although I cannot guarantee confidentiality within the small group interviews because of the context, I will be emphasizing the importance of keeping what is shared within the group interviews confidential, with all participants, prior to beginning the interview. When writing up the findings from this study, I may use direct quotes from the interviews, but I will ensure confidentiality by assigning each participant a pseudonym.

By participating in this study, there are no known risks or anticipated risks. However, since this study deals with a personal and sensitive topic, I will be implementing specific safeguards throughout the interviews. I will engage in a series of check-ins throughout both interview processes to address any questions or concerns that you may have. In addition, you will have the option to stop the interviews at any point.

Data collected during this study will be retained for three years. Only I and my supervisor, Dr. Diana Parry, will have access to this data. Moreover, to ensure the information shared in the interviews is being reflected accurately, I would like to share your interview transcripts, as well as my initial analysis and interpretation of the data with you. In addition, upon completion of the study, I will also make available a copy of the study. You may indicate your preference for receiving these documents relating to the study on the *Participant Informed Consent*, which I will distribute and collect at the interview. For your participation in both interviews, you will receive a $20 gift certificate of your choice (e.g., Chapters, Tim Hortons).

In addition to the two types of interviews, I will also be conducting participant observation(s). Participant observations involve the researcher engaging with participants in a particular setting to observe the social actions occurring within this setting. I am hoping to observe cultural events that are connected to some young women's experiences of divorce. These events include divorce parties, "trash the dress" photo shoots, and divorce tattoos. During our interview together, I will ask if you are planning on participating in any of these events within the time frame of my data collection (several months). If you are and would be willing to take part in a participant observation, I will provide you with more information and a consent form that is separate from the one for your involvement with the interviews.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information, feel free to contact me, Bronwen Valtchanov, by e-mail at bvaltcha@uwaterloo.ca. You can also reach my supervisor, Dr. Diana Parry, by phone at (519) 888-4567 ext. 33468 or by e-mail at dcparry@uwaterloo.ca. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. However, the final decision about participation is yours. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin, the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 36005 or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca. I look forward to speaking with you and I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this study.

Yours sincerely,

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Appendix C – Participant Informed Consent for Interviews

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I agree to participate in the study "Untying the Knot: A Feminist Exploration of Young Women's Experiences of Divorce" being conducted by Bronwen Valtchanov, a doctoral student in the University of Waterloo's Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, who is working under the supervision of Dr. Diana Parry.

I have made the decision to participate based on the information I have received in the information letter. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and request any additional details I wanted about this study. As a participant in this study, I realize I will be asked to participate in a small group interview and a one-on-one interview. As a participant in this study, I am aware that I may decline to answer any question that I prefer not to answer, and I may also withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

I am also aware that the interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. I am aware that excerpts from the interview, along with direct quotations, may be used by the researcher in any publications to come from this research. The researcher will use pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and to ensure my name is not identified in any way. In addition, I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time by asking that the interview be stopped.

I am aware that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo (file #40448). I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the researcher, Bronwen Valtchanov, by e-mail at bvaltcha@uwaterloo.ca or her advisor, Dr. Diana Parry, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 33468 or by e-mail at dcparry@uwaterloo.ca. I am also aware that I may contact the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, Dr. Maureen Nummelin, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 36005 or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca if I have any concerns or comments resulting from my participation in this study.

I agree to participate in the small group interview (60-120 minutes).

YES NO (Please circle your choice)

I also agree to participate in the one-on-one interview (60-120 minutes).

YES NO (Please circle your choice)

Participant Name (please print):

_____

Participant Signature:

_____

Witness Name (please print):

_____

Witness Signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Can I audio-record your interview to ensure accuracy?

__YES __NO

Would you be willing to review the transcripts from the interviews you participated in to ensure the information you shared is represented accurately?

__YES __NO

Would you like to receive a copy of the initial analysis and interpretation from the study?

__YES __NO

When the study is completed, would you like to receive a copy of the study?

__YES __NO

If you answered yes to any of the questions above, please leave your contact information below.

Participant Contact Information:

_____

Appendix D – General Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Bronwen Valtchanov. I am a graduate student at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study "Untying the Knot: A Feminist Exploration of Young Women's Experiences of Divorce." The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of young women (in their 20s and 30s), without children, who are divorced, which is a particularly under-researched group. To explore this topic, I will be conducting two kinds of interviews, a group interview with three to five women, and a one-on-one interview, both of which I'm hoping you will participate in.

Before we begin, I would like to go over a few important items. The interview is meant to be conversational in style, but there are several questions that I would like to ask you about your experiences with divorce. If there are any questions you are not comfortable answering, please let me know and we can skip them. You can also choose to stop the interview at any point, for any reason. In addition, the information you share in the interview will be kept confidential and your name will not be identified in any way. However, please be mindful throughout the interview that this is a research project. (*For the small group interview, I will also remind participants of the importance of keeping the personal information shared during the interviews confidential*).

Do you have any questions before we begin?

General questions to contextualize women's broad divorce experiences:

How long were you married?

When did you separate?

How long ago did you officially divorce?

Research Question One: What gendered ideologies do young, divorced women experience?

General lead-off questions:

Tell me about your experience with dating and relationships before your relationship with your ex-spouse.

Probes: What qualities looking for in partner, Kinds of dating experiences (e.g., casual; long-term relationships), Leisure contexts for dating (e.g., shared activities, friendships networks), Expectations for relationships

Tell me about your marriage.

Probes: What drew you together, Dating experience (including leisure contexts, as above), Wedding, What (if anything) was working well in marriage, What was not working well/When and what problems/challenges arose, How attempted to address challenges (if applicable)

Tell me about your divorce.

Probes: Process and experience of deciding to separate and then to divorce, Personal feelings and tensions, Connections/disconnections with others (e.g., friends, family), (Re)constructions of self, Importance/influence of other identities (e.g., race, religion, sexual identity)

Research Question Two: How are these gendered ideologies experienced, circulated, reproduced, and maintained?

General lead-off questions:

Tell me about your views of divorce before your own divorce.

Probes: Popular culture impressions/messages, Messages from family (e.g., own parents divorced) and friends

Tell me about expectations or pressures you experienced as a divorced/divorcing young woman.

Probes: Personal understandings/expectations of femininity (what it means to be a woman), Family considerations? (pronatalism), Expectations for couplehood (e.g., dating again), How others reacted (family, friends), Other sources of pressures and expectations (e.g., social media, mass media), Pressures and expectations connected to identities other than age and gender

Research Question Three: How do young, divorced women negotiate and resist these gendered ideologies?

General lead-off question:

Tell me about (whether and) how you are challenging some of these expectations and pressures.

Probes: Sources of pride in life now, New/different activities and relationships, Participation in any "divorce culture" (e.g., tattoos, divorce parties). Resistance from others for how you are challenging expectations, Important/meaningful changes in life now

Appendix E – Femininity Lenses Key

Ideology of femininity: Prescriptions of culturally appropriate ways of being a woman

Reference/source and year	**Characteristics**
1. Literature Review of seventy years of gender research **(Stets and Burke, 2000)** Overview from sociological and psychological research in the last several decades on femininity (and masculinity), which provides insights on what characteristics and behaviours are culturally considered 'feminine,' or how women should act	- *Expressive - *Emotional - *Emotionally vulnerable[86] - *Warm - *Submissive - *Passive - Cooperative - Affectionate - *Gentle - *Sensitive to the needs of others - *Caring and helpful to others - Not independent - *Relationship-oriented *My reflections:* Characteristics reflect broader themes/expectations of: ・What women's internal experiences are, focused on emotionality (e.g., emotional, emotionally vulnerable) ・How women show/display or withhold their experiences (e.g., expressive, submissive, passive) ・How women interact with others (e.g., cooperative, affectionate, gentle, warm, sensitive to the needs of others...)

[86] Similar to "cries easily" (Helgeson, 1994)

2. Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) **(Bem, 1974, 1981)** These 20 personality characteristics were judged to be socially desirable by both men and women Still most widely used gender scale (e.g., Fortuna et al., 2019)	'Feminine' personality traits: - *Affectionate - Cheerful - Childlike - Compassionate - Does not use harsh language - *Eager to soothe hurt feelings[87] - Feminine (removed in later version) - Flatterable - *Gentle - Gullible - *Loves children - Loyal - *Sensitive to the needs of others - *Shy - *Soft spoken - Sympathetic - Tender - Understanding - *Warm - *Yielding[88] ・These factors/items/characteristics encompass constructs of "expressive and/or communal" ・Other studies use different names for Bem's "Feminine" such as Emotional Expressiveness, Nurturance, Expressive-Communal, Interpersonal Sensitivity, and Personal Warmth ・Conversely, other studies named "Masculine" as Instrumental, Power, Assertive, and Social Dominance

[87] Similar to "sensitive to the needs of others" (Stets & Burke, 2000)
[88] Similar to "passive" and "submissive" (Stets & Burke, 2000)

3. Prototypes and Dimensions of Femininity **(Helgeson, 1994)** Developed Prototypical Features of Femininity and Masculinity to address criticisms with earlier scales (e.g., lack of multidimensional consideration of gender) Scale is unique in its use of two age groups/cohorts within the sample (instead of the typical one age group used, college students), college students and their parents, that it includes features related to personality, appearance, and interests, and seeks to represent "everyday conceptions of masculinity and femininity" using a prototype-based scale rather than the more typical schema-based scale	Prototypical Features for "Feminine Female" (From study 1) *Personality:* - *Caring - Good manners - Soft-spoken - Social - Delicate - Shy - *Friendly - Traditional *Appearance:* - Long hair - Well-dressed - Attractive - Smiles - Manicured nails - *Thin *Interests:* - *Concern with appearance - *Family-oriented - Likes music - Likes art - Books Study 2 determined 8 larger dimensions with specific features that comprise them: For femininity: 1. *Good person* (e.g., *caring, *helpful, intelligent, responsible, *not selfish) 2. *Attractive in style and manner* (e.g., wears makeup, dates men, elegant) 3. *Not aggressive* (e.g., *passive, *shy, *cries easily, women friends)

	4. *Gentle* (e.g., *gentle, *sensitive, delicate, romantic) 5. *Social* (e.g., talkative, flirts, socializes) 6. *Neat* (e.g., well dressed, poised, good manners) 7. **Family oriented* (e.g., likes kids, loving, traditional) 8. *Artistic/*expressive* (e.g., likes art, creative, *emotional)
4. Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI) **Mahalik et al., 2005** Scale developed to reflect "how women are supposed to act, think, and feel, as well as what benefits and costs women experience when they either endorse or reject these messages"	Eight feminine norms: 1. *Nice in relationships*: "Develop *friendly and *supportive relationships with others"[89] 2. *Thinness*: "Pursue a *thin body ideal" 3. *Modesty*: "Refrain from calling attention to one's talents or abilities" 4. *Domestic*: "Maintain the home" 5. *Care for *children*: "Take care and be with children" 6. *Romantic relationship*: "Invest self in romantic relationship" 7. *Sexual fidelity*: "Keep sexual intimacy contained within one committed relationship" 8. *Invest in *appearance*: "Commit resources to maintaining and improving physical appearance"

* Indicates overlap with other scale(s)

[89] Similar to "sensitive to the needs of others" and "caring and helpful to others" (Stets & Burke, 2000)

Appendix F – 'Catalogue' of Representational Forms in *The Vagina Monologues*[90]

1. Brief, autobiographical reflection (e.g., centered around one focus)

Elements:

- One style: Short, pithy sentences/statements

- Standard paragraphs (full page width)

- Another style: Longer sentences/descriptions (bookended by italicized, poetic insights)

- One style includes a list-like format (i.e., types of orgasm moans: "There's the clit moan (a soft, in-the-mouth sound), the vaginal moan (a deep, in-the-throat sound...")

Examples:

・Hair (p. 7)

"You cannot love a vagina unless you love hair. Many people do not love hair. My first and only husband hated hair. He said it was cluttered and dirty. He made me shave my vagina. It looked puffy and exposed and like a little girl. This excited him..."

・The Vagina Workshop (p. 33)

"*My vagina is a shell, a round pink tender shell, opening and closing, closing and opening. My vagina is a flower, an eccentric tulip, the center acute and deep, the scent delicate, the petals gentle but sturdy.*

I did not always know this, I learned this in the vagina workshop. I learned this from a woman who runs the vagina workshop, a woman who believes in vaginas, who really sees vaginas..."

・The Woman who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy (p. 77)

I love vaginas. I love women. I do not see them as separate things. Women pay me to dominate them, to excite them, to make them come. I did not start out like this. No, to the contrary: I started out as a lawyer. But in my late thirties, I became obsessed with making women happy. There were so many unfulfilled women."

2. Question and answers

Elements:

- Italicized question

[90] Ensler (1998/2018)

- 1–3-word answers, each on one line

Example: p. 11

"If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?"

A beret.

A leather jacket.

Silk stockings.

Mink.

A pink boa.

Note: I could have a question like, "If your heart could talk, what would it say?" and this could be a kind of summary for each "part"

3. One-sided dialogue (e.g., describing relationship over time to her vagina)

Elements:

- Standard paragraphs (full page width)

- Short and longer sentences (almost rambling/stream of consciousness, run-on type of sentences)

- Vivid metaphorical/simile comparisons

- 'Director's note' under title (e.g., [Jewish, Queens accent])

Example:

・The Flood (p. 19)

"I can't tell you this. I can't do this, talk about down there. You just know it's there. Like the cellar. There's rumbles down there sometimes. You can hear the pipes, and things get caught there, little animals and things, and it gets wet, and sometimes people have to come and plug up the leaks. Otherwise, the door stays closed..."

4. Encyclopedic facts

Elements:

- Quoted encyclopedia (other sources include official reports, like UNICEF, news articles etc.) entry with italicized source underneath entry
Example:

・Vagina Fact (p. 25; p. 53; p. 55)

"At a witch trial in 1593, the investigating lawyer (a married man) apparently discovered a clitoris for the first time; [he] identified it as a devil's teat, sure proof of the witch's guilt..."
— *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*

Note: This could be a good format for some surprising, impactful (historical?) facts about marriage and divorce etc.

5. Short, varied replies (from different people) to a common prompt

(e.g., When did you first get your period and what happened?)

Elements:

- Prompt/question not specified, but implied from answers
- Time/age noted first, then brief description of memory
- Describes how speaker felt and/or how key others felt/reacted
- Each new memory/speaker starts in a new paragraph

Example:

・I was Twelve. My mother Slapped Me (p. 27)

"I was ten and a half. No preparation. Brown gunk on my underpants.
She showed me how to put in a tampon. Only got halfway there.
My mother gave me codeine. We had bunk beds. I went down and lay there. My mother was so uncomfortable..."

6. First-person description/recount including two-person dialogue

Elements:

- Written in a fiction or memoir style
- Varied sentence lengths
- Somewhat humorous (e.g., in its candour, ability to capture the contrasts of societal expectations and reality, and apt details)

Example:

・Because He Liked to Look at it (p. 43)

"This is how I came to love my vagina. It's embarrassing, because it's not politically correct. I mean, I know it should have happened in a bath with salt grains from the Dead Sea, Enya playing, me loving my woman self. I know the story...

Then I met Bob. Bob was the most ordinary man I ever met, He was thin and tall and non-descript and wore khaki clothes. Bob did not like spicy food or listen to Prodigy....

The first time we had sex, he told me he had to see me.

"I'm right here," I said.

"No, you," he said. "I have to see you."

"Turn on the light," I said.

Thinking he was a weirdo, I was freaking out in the dark. He turned on the light."

7. Contrasting 'before' and 'after' states

Elements:

- Short (~2-5 sentences) paragraphs, alternating between past and present tense/description
- Powerful personification/objectification (as in comparing the vagina to various places and things)
- Past and present paragraphs (alternating) are delineated by regular and italicized fonts
- Different writing styles for each tense (e.g., past/positive is like poetry: short, vivid descriptions, lyrical; present/negative is more formal-sounding, blunt, detached – the styles mirror the content)
- The final verse collides past and present (in regular font) with one-line statements (and poignant repetition from earlier lines)
- Under title, dedicated to a certain group of women whose specific experiences are reflected (i.e., "For the women of Bosnia")

<u>Example</u>:

・My Vagina was my Village (p. 49)

My vagina was green, water soft pink fields, cow mooing sun resting sweet boyfriend touching lightly with soft piece of blond straw.

There is something between my legs. I do not know what it is. I do not know where it is,. I do not touch. Not now. Not anymore. Not since.

...

My vagina. A live wet water village. My vagina my hometown.

Not since they took turns for seven days smelling like feces and smoked meat, they left their dirty sperm inside me. I became a river of poison and pus and all the crops died, and the fish.

My vagina a live wet water village.

They invaded it. Butchered it and burned it down.

I do not touch now.

Do not visit.

I live someplace else now.

Note: I vividly remember parts of this monologue from when I saw it performed (by Erin at UW). This was so powerful, heartbreaking, and unforgettable. I'd like to try to re-create this style for part of my findings. Think of what powerful 'before' and 'after' contrast(s) I could highlight with this format (e.g., what women thought love/relationships/marriage was/would be like; and what they experienced it to be).

8. The rant

Elements:

- Short, candid sentences in a "tell it like it is" no sugar-coating style

- Sentence fragments (e.g., "My vagina, my vagina")

- Asking questions and making statements as if speaking to someone/a group

- Descriptive phrases

- Swearing, open anger/calling out

- Personification (of the vagina... "It needs to talk..." "It's hungry for depth"))

<u>Example</u>:

・My Angry Vagina (p. 57)

"My vagina's angry. It is. It is pissed off. My vagina's furious and it needs to talk. It needs to talk about all this shit. It needs to talk to you. I mean, what's the deal? An army of people out there thinking up ways to torture my poor-ass, gentle, loving vagina...Vagina motherfuckers."

Note: I could write a version of this 'rant' from the "heart's" perspective (e.g., My heart is angry...It's pissed off. I mean, what's the deal? All these movies and TV shows, and ads, and social media posts...telling my heart that this is what love looks like...) to offer a contrast between the ideals/ideologies and the harsher truths/realities.

9. Memory snapshots

Elements:

- One paragraph snapshots of key points in time (for one person – or composited as one – as they relate to her experiences with her vagina)

- Snapshots are written from the perspective and with the language and thoughts etc. of the time point (e.g., from a younger voice compared to a teenager)

- Each memory is written in the present tense rather than in the past tense as a reflection/retrospective (e.g., "I play on the bed, bouncing and falling, and impale my coochi snoorcher")

- Language and tone are key to authenticity (e.g., hyperbole for younger/earlier memories) and align with the speaker's positionality (e.g., [Southern woman])

- Details also add to the authenticity (e.g., "...three pairs of happy heart-shaped cotton underpants...")

Example:

・The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could (p. 63)

"Memory: Seven Years Old

Edgar Montane, who is ten, gets angry at me and punches me with all his might between my legs. It feels like he breaks my entire self. I limp home. I can't pee. My mama asks me what's wrong with my coochi snorcher..."

10. Word/sound focus (reclamation)

Elements:

- Breaking down the sounds of a key, and controversial/pejorated, word (e.g., "cunt")
- Listing words that start with the same deconstructed sound and are evocative of nuances of the whole word and its parts

- Describing the physical letters with some personification (e.g., "n . . . always round in uppercase" "snug letters fitting perfectly together")

Example: Reclaiming cunt (p. 73)

"I call it cunt. I've reclaimed it, "cunt." I really like it. "Cunt." Listen to it. C C, Ca Ca. Cavern, cackle, clit, cute, come—closed c—closed inside, inside ca—then u—then curvy, inviting..."

Note: Could use this style for the word "divorcée."

11. Poetic eyewitness account

Elements:

- Repeated starting line (e.g., "I was there...")
- A lot of sensory descriptions (what the speaker heard and saw etc.)
- Left-indented line by line structure with some words indented
- Clever, vivid comparisons (e.g., "her vagina changed . . . to an archaeological tunnel, a sacred vessel, a Venetian canal, a deep well with a tiny stuck child inside")

Example:

・I Was There in the Room (p. 85)

"...I was there when the doctor

reached in with Alice in Wonderland spoons

and there as her vagina became a wide operatic

mouth

singing with all its strength”

12. Spotlights

Elements:

- Focus on a specific “spotlight” of a group of women with distinct experiences, composited
- Poetry structure (individual, left-indented lines)
- Select repetition of beginnings of lines (“300 smiles/ 300 mulatto cheeks/ 300 hungry mouths”)
- Very powerful, vivid, short descriptions

Example:

・Spotlight Monologues (from pp. 91-166)

・Under the Burqa (p. 99)

Imagine a huge dark piece of cloth
hung over your entire body
like you were a shameful statue
...
imagine muttering and screaming
inside a cage
and no one is hearing
...
imagine you can see me
I was beautiful once
big dark eyes
you would know me

・Say It
For the “Comfort Women” (p.123)

Our stories only exist inside our heads
Inside our ravaged bodies
Inside a time and space of war
And emptiness
...

What we found:
No mountains
No trees
No water
Yellow sand
A desert
A warehouse full of tears
Thousands of worried girls

・Over It (p. 149)

I am over rape.
I am over rape happening in broad daylight.
I am over rape culture, rape mentality.
I am over rape pages on Facebook.
I am over the thousands of people who signed
those pages with their real names without
shame.

・My Revolution Begins in the Body (p. 155)
For the women in Tondo, Philippines

My revolution begins in the body
It isn't waiting anymore
My revolution does not need approval or permission
...
It may be gradual and soft
It may be spontaneous and loud
It may be happening already
...
My revolution is ready to live big
My revolution is overthrowing the state
Of mind called patriarchy
My revolution will not be choreographed
Although it begins with a few familiar steps

Appendix G – Description of (Proposed) Participant Observation and Consent Forms

Participant Observation

In addition to conducting two kinds of interviews, I will also incorporate a third method—participant observation—which I think further complements my methodological approach. Broadly, participant observation is a method originally developed within cultural anthropology as part of a number of ethnographic methods, which facilitates "the notion of 'being there,' of witnessing social action firsthand" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 219). With this method, the researcher observes and engages in a setting where activities occur for the participants that are being studied. The social actions within this setting are documented using field notes that capture observations, reflections, and interpretations (Schwandt, 2007). Using this method, I would like to observe one or more of the unique "divorce culture" phenomena I have discussed, such as a divorce party, a 'divorce-aversary' celebration, a trash-the-dress photo shoot, or even the process of a woman getting a divorce tattoo. Observing such events would also allow me to speak informally with other individuals who may be participating (Berbary, 2008), such as guests at a divorce party, to hear their perspectives. Moreover, consistent with other ethnographic methods, which include collecting visual materials (Schwandt, 2007), I hope to combine my participant observation(s) with the collection of photos and possibly audio-visual materials that can contribute to varied and compelling forms for the representations of my findings.

Participant Informed Consent for Participant Observation

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I agree to participate in the study "Untying the Knot: A Feminist Exploration of Young Women's Experiences of Divorce" being conducted by Bronwen Valtchanov, a doctoral student in the University of Waterloo's Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, who is working under the supervision of Dr. Diana Parry.

I have made the decision to participate based on the information I have received in the information letter. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and request any additional details I wanted about this study. As a participant in this part of the study (which is separate from the interview component), I realize that the researcher, Bronwen Valtchanov, will be conducting a participant observation. During this observation, she will be taking notes and conducting informal interviews with you and others in the setting to facilitate her understanding of the activities that are occurring.

I am aware that excerpts from the informal interviews, along with direct quotations, may be used by the researcher in any publications to come from this research. The researcher will use pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and to ensure my name is not identified in any way. In addition, I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time by asking that the participant observation be stopped.

I am aware that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo (file #40448). I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the researcher, Bronwen Valtchanov, by e-mail at bvaltcha@uwaterloo.ca or her advisor, Dr. Diana Parry, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 33468 or by e-mail at dcparry@uwaterloo.ca. I am also aware that I may contact the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, Dr. Maureen Nummelin, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 36005 or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca if I have any concerns or comments resulting from my participation in this study.

I agree to participate in a participant observation.

YES NO (Please circle your choice)

Participant Name (please print):

_____

Participant Signature:

_____

Witness Name (please print):

_____

Witness Signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Can I audio-record the informal interviews to ensure accuracy?

__YES __NO

Can I video record the participant observation?

__YES __NO

Can I take photographs during the participant observation?

__YES __NO

Information / Recruitment Letter for Professionals (Participant Observation)

Dear (*insert name*),

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo, working under the supervision of Dr. Diana Parry. I am currently conducting a research study for my dissertation as part of my degree requirements. The title of the study is "Untying the Knot: A Feminist Exploration of Young Women's Experiences of Divorce." The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of divorced women, without children, who are in their 20s and 30s. This letter will provide you with more information about the research study and outline the details of your involvement if you decide to assist me with contacting potential participants.

There is limited research exploring the unique experiences of young, divorced women. The majority of existing research has focused on the divorce experiences of women who are over 40 years old, with children, many of whom have been married for many years. This research has also typically focused on single dimensions of experience, such as the economic impacts of divorce. In addition, there is a notable lack of research specifically on young women's experiences of divorce in connection to leisure experiences. This study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by exploring young women's lived experiences of divorce. In particular, I hope this research illuminates the social, relational, and personal influences shaping young women's experiences of divorce. I also hope this study will foster understanding and awareness of these experiences among the women who participate, but also within the broader community. In turn, insights from this study may help to shape practices in leisure studies as well as other fields and contribute to developing better community support systems and programs for young, divorced women, particularly given the marginalization they may experience.

In order to gain an understanding of young women's experiences of divorce, my research will consist of three approaches: one-on-one interviews, group interviews, and participant observation(s). I am seeking your assistance with this last approach. Participant observations involve the researcher engaging with participants in a particular setting to observe the social actions occurring within this setting. I am hoping to observe cultural events that are connected to some young women's experiences of divorce. These events include divorce parties, "trash the dress" photo shoots, and divorce tattoos. I am contacting you given your involvement with (*insert name of business or service and divorce culture event*).

I am hoping that you will consider contacting clients who are planning a (*specify applicable divorce culture event*) within the next several months. If you are comfortable with this, I would ask that you provide them with my contact information (found below) so that they can contact me to hear about my study and consider taking part in a participant observation of their event.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information, feel free to contact me, Bronwen Valtchanov, by e-mail at bvaltcha@uwaterloo.ca. You can also reach my supervisor, Dr. Diana Parry, by phone at (519) 888-4567 ext. 33468 or by e-mail at dcparry@uwaterloo.ca. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. If you have any comments or concerns

about this study, please contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin, the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 36005 or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca.

I appreciate your consideration of my request and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

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