



The joy of ex

Divorce is the kiss of death for a relationship—or maybe not. Can a medical crisis heal the wounds of the past?

BY ANNA MONARDO



Neither my ex (let's call him X) nor I had really wanted a divorce. What we'd wanted was a baby. I believe we shared a frustrating sense that during our few years together we had not had a fair chance—almost as if we were teenagers whose love had been muddied by the adults. In fact, we were old enough to be the parents of teenagers (X was the father of three terrific adolescent boys), but we had conducted our relationship with the kind of abandon you'd never want your kids to indulge in: work tossed aside for three-hour phone calls in the middle of the day, urgent (overpriced) rendezvous travel, lots of anywhere-anytime lovemaking. We married five months after we met. The

wedding happened four days after the proposal. It was a romantic binge, a spree.

What followed was equally intense, a marriage that accorded time and distance. I left the Pacific Northwest, where I was a visiting professor, and moved to the Midwest city of X's university, where there was no work for me, so I flew in and out of New York City, where I did have work. When we weren't in airports, we were in medical offices, dealing with two pregnancies that ended in miscarriage, two surgeries and innumerable visits to doctors, who ranged from dismissive

(“You’re 39. You don’t have many good eggs left”) to disquieting (“There are tests we can do to see if you are allergic to your husband’s sperm”).

Infertility and geography, along with the tricky economics of maintaining and traveling between two households, were among the stressors that turned us into overbearing adults who muddled our own young love. Two weeks before our third anniversary was our court date. Though neither of us had contested the dissolution of our marriage, we felt battered, bruised and very tired. “Listen,” X said as we exited the courtroom, “I’m following you home to make sure you’re all right.” It was a seven-hour drive to the city where a year earlier I’d begun a new job and bought a house. When I had to pull off the interstate to nap, X parked his car next to my rented van and read.

We got to my house late, so he slept on the couch. The next day, he helped me unpack the van. One day’s help turned into a couple days’ visit. After X got home, we indulged in long e-mails and phone calls and tried to ignore the irony that in the aftermath of our divorce, we were turning to each other for comfort. Unsure if we were being brave or rash, we decided it would be OK if he drove back up for a weekend visit.

Is anything lovelier than reconciliation? You both say such gentle things. You treat each other to sweet, small attentions. You offer favors, half your dessert. In fact, it was at dinner on the second day of X’s visit that my fever and abdominal pains began. “Really,” I said, sliding over my plate of pie, “you’re welcome to the whole thing.”

The pain got worse, wrapped across my middle and swung around to my back. The only doctor I knew in town was the fertility goddess I’d visited in my last-ditch efforts to conceive, and she was away at a conference. X took me to the ER, where my suspicion was confirmed: The fibroid tumor discovered during my pregnancies had grown and was now infected. I was admitted for major IV antibiotics. X canceled his classes and stayed with me until my

doctor returned to schedule surgery. “Next Monday,” she told me. “You can go home until then.” Offhand, she added, “But you’ll need to continue the antibiotics through the weekend.”

“OK,” I said. “If you’ll call in the prescription, we can pick it up on the way home.”

“Oh, no, you need IV meds.”

I was confused. “A nurse comes to the house?”

“No nurse,” Dr. Goddess scoffed. “You two can do it.”

“No, we can’t. We’re writers.” When I had the chance, I pulled her aside. “We just got divorced. We don’t always get along. We’re not medical people.” For emphasis, I added, “He’s a poet.”

“Oh, come on.” Dr. Goddess actually laughed. “You two I’m not worried about. You should see some of the people who go home with these procedures. Really, it’s easy.”

It was complicated. I left the hospital with an IV port inserted into the top of my hand. A nurse came to my house

downstairs to the “sickroom,” he was unfailingly upbeat, but we were both bleary eyed. Flushing the line was the scariest part. We referred to the nurse’s notes meticulously each time. Watching X’s steadiness and precision as he filled the syringe and flicked it to dislodge air bubbles, I remembered how much I’d always loved his hands. “I’m sorry you got stuck doing this,” I whispered. “You’re a good nurse.”

“I’m glad I’m here,” he whispered back.

As he completed each of the treatments successfully, we were giddy with relief. We laughed a lot that weekend, but we never got over being frightened. We were in over our heads. We were sleep deprived. We were divorced.

And yet, during those days I felt profoundly married. How easy it suddenly seemed—to be not only in love but also in alliance, to have each other’s back. What was that divorce all about? Had a loaf of bread really flown across the kitchen and smashed against the wall?

(Me, on Clomid.) Had there really been pre-dawn scream fests in the garage? (Him, as I was leaving, again, for the airport.) How many couples counselors’ offices had he stormed out of? Had I really packed a U-Haul one day and then greeted him when he returned from work with the news “I’m outta here”?

During marriage, so many doors had slammed shut on us that we’d begun to slam them shut, literally, on each other. But

now, postdivorce and trusting my care to my ex, I finally felt admitted into the deep heart of the secret of what goes on between two people when they conceive a new life—conceive as in visualize, believe in. How could this potent feeling, at once newborn and sage, not bring forth something as monumental as family? I remember thinking, If I ever have children, this kind of love is the air I would want them to breathe daily. »



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once, to show us the ropes, and then she left. X would have to flush out the line by injecting a syringe of saline solution. After the drip was administered, he’d have to flush out the line again. There were two drugs, each injected within one hour of the other and given four times daily. The schedule: noon, 1 PM, 6 PM, 7 PM, 11 PM, midnight, 6 AM, 7 AM. For four days, X set the alarm for the early-morning treatments. Coming

Married, X and I had had sublime times, but they never lasted longer than two weeks before some skirmish erupted between us. Our letdowns and flare-ups, along with our passionate truces, had whipped us around in an endless loop. Desperate for clarity, I'd clung to logic to carve out a path: "Fact: We've not been able to stop the chaos in our marriage. Fact: I will not give up hope of someday having a child.



Divorce had seemed the only logical solution. But I'd needed a lot of handholding from friends. Now, when those friends heard that I was sick and that X was taking care of me, all they could say was, "What is going on?"

Fact: There's no way I will bring a child into chaos. Therefore . . ." Divorce had seemed the only logical solution. But it was a terrible solution, and I'd needed a lot of handholding from friends. Now, when those friends heard that I was sick and that X was taking care of me, all they could say was, "What is going on?" I had no idea. I just knew it was powerful and beyond logic.

Months down the road in our fragile reconciliation, X and I realized that one of the main reasons we'd felt compelled to come together postdivorce was that we couldn't move forward in any direction until we mourned the babies we'd lost through miscarriage. X suggested we plant a memorial garden in my backyard. Rather than daisies or other flowers commonly associated with infants, I chose irises. Those complicated inside-out blooms seemed more appropriate to our situation. Though X and I continued to get along so well that we sometimes joked about marry-

ing each other again, we both knew we couldn't go backward. Every few weekends, we visited in his town or mine. I grieved with him, I grieved alone. Trying to figure out if I should or could or should not become a single mother, I talked to doctors about new regimens of fertility drugs and other medical options, but none felt right for me. And then one autumn Sunday morning over long-distance phone, I admitted to X

that I was making lists of all the opportunities that would be available to me if I lived out my days as a childless person: I could travel, buy cashmere, live in Paris. "But I can't do it," I cried. "I can't give up the idea of being a mother."

"But you shouldn't give it up," X said. "You already are a mother. You just have to figure out how to make it happen."

Even after so many failures, X still believed I had a chance. And if I was, as he said, already a mother,

didn't that qualify me to step in and sweep my arms around an already-born baby who needed a mother? Already. All ready. With those words, the seed of the idea of adoption was firmly planted in my heart. Two and a half years later, I adopted a four-month-old baby, Leo.

X did not become my son's adoptive father, nor did he become a father figure to him. They've never met and most likely never will. X was with me right up until I reached the threshold of motherhood, but a few months before I got word from Vietnam of my baby's birth, our reconciliation ended. The arguments had begun again. Our good intentions and mutual attraction had run out. Was it the weekend X visited and saw the high chair in my kitchen? The day I got lost among the racks of tiny clothes at the Carter's outlet? Did he begin to feel left out? Bored? And was I kidding myself? I had ended the marriage and opted for single motherhood, yet I'd hoped that X, in some

murky role as "friend of family," would stay by my side. Was there logic in that? What I know for sure is that couples are ever inventive in the ways they manage to disappoint each other. There was one last fiery clash, and then X and I moved on separately to the next lives we were meant to live. I hear that he has remarried. I wish him well, as I do his boys, who are now men and thriving.

Leo is 11. He loves science. Recently, he asked me, "Do I have to believe in God? There's no proof, so how can I believe?"

"Honey, no one can ever tell you what to believe. That's the whole point of belief. It comes from inside you." I told him the truth as I know it, yet I kept thinking there was something more I wanted to say on this topic—something about mystery and faith, which may not be part of science but which have been, at times, very real in my life.

Then the other day, picking through the Legos piled deep in our sunroom turned playroom, trying to remember what the house looked like before it became a toy pit, I flashed on the memory of that odd long-ago weekend when this tiny room with the daybed and TV was transformed into a sickroom, syringe wrappings and IV tubing scattered across the floor, and I realized that though Leo never saw that scene, it's always here with us. Like a single thread of color woven into the pillow coverings of our playroom, that IV weekend—and the generous love it inspired—is a pointillist pinpoint in the fabric of our family life.

It can't be scientifically proved, but I do believe that weekend was the beginning of the long conception that eventually brought Leo and me together. I probably would have found my way to single motherhood without my ex-husband, but I'm glad I didn't have to. Years earlier, he had been the first and only man ever to whisper to me in the night, "Want to make a baby?"

And in time, in the most mysterious way, we did. ✱

ANNA MONARDO's most recent novel is *Falling in Love with Natassia*.