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# Falling Apart in One Piece: One Optimist's Journey Through the Hell of Divorce

By Stacy Morrison



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The emotionally charged story of a divorce that brought the surprising gift of grace

Just when Stacy Morrison thought everything in her life had come together, her husband of ten years announced that he wanted a divorce. She was left alone with a new house that needed a lot of work, a new baby who needed a lot of attention, and a new job in the high-pressure world of New York magazine publishing.

Morrison had never been one to believe in fairy tales. As far as she was concerned, happy endings were the product of the kind of ambition and hard work that had propelled her to the top of her profession. But she had always considered her relationship with her husband a safe place in her often stressful life. All of her assumptions about how life works crumbled, though, when she discovered that no amount of will and determination was going to save her marriage.

For Stacy, the only solution was to keep on living, and to listen—as deeply and openly as possible—to what this experience was teaching her.

Told with humor and heart, her honest and intimate account of the stress of being a working mother while trying to make sense of her unraveling marriage offers unexpected lessons of love, forgiveness, and dignity that will resonate with women everywhere.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"I loved the tone of this honest, thoughtful memoir: heartbreaking and real, without the slightest hint of self-pity."

—ELIZABETH GILBERT, " "AUTHOR OF "EAT, PRAY, LOVE" AND "COMMITTED"

"Stacy Morrison's memoir is as sweet as it is sad, both honest as an anvil and full of genuine hope. Morrison's buoyant prose and hard-earned wisdom make the mess and roar of love, however difficult, all seem worthwhile."

—Karen Karbo, author of "The Stuff of Life: A Daughter's Memoir"

"I loved it. Raw, wonderful, honest, brash, truth-telling—*Falling Apart in One Piece* is a story about learning to let go and come to terms with the journey of life. It is a book for anyone whose life has just taken an unexpected turn and who needs to be reminded that not only can they be happy again, but that the human spirit is capable of great resilience." —Lee Woodruff, author of "Perfectly Imperfect: A Life in Progress"

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#### About the Author

Stacy Morrison is the editor in chief of *Redbook* magazine. Under her guidance, the magazine has found new vibrancy and relevance for today's generations, winning a Folio award for General Excellence (2005), a Clarion award for General Excellence (2007), and a National Magazine Award nomination for Personal Service (2006). She has appeared as an expert on women, love, sex, money and more on the *Today Show*, *CNN Headline News*, *CNN Moneyline*, and *The Early Show*, among many other TV programs.

Before becoming editor in chief of *Redbook* magazine, she was Executive Editor at *Marie Claire*, working on the international advocacy projects, and had previously been the editor in chief of *Modern Bride* magazine and the venture-funded dot.com/magazine about design, *One* (which won three Ozzie awards in its short lifespan). She was also a part of the launches of *Conde Nast Sports for Women*, *Time Out New York*,

and *Mirabella* magazine.

She lives in Brooklyn with her 4-year-old son, Zack, whose father is at the house many, many times a week.

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Chapter 1

## **We Begin at the End**

I suppose I should start where it all started. Or, more specifically, started ending. The night Chris told me he was done with our marriage.

I can recall exactly what I was doing on the June evening this one-way conversation started: I was standing at the sink in the kitchen area of our one-room first floor, washing a bunch of arugula, my favorite salad green, pushing my hands through the cold water in the salad spinner to shake the dirt loose. I was looking out the window over the sink, marveling at the beautiful backyard of our Brooklyn home: an actual lawn, its bright green grass thick as a carpet; a wood deck; and a pergola with grapevines climbing over it in curlicue abandon. The yard was my favorite thing about our house, a house that we'd bought and moved into just five months before on a freezing-cold January day, when our son, Zack, was just five months old. Stationed in his bouncy seat on the floor in the empty living room, he'd watched with wide eyes as everything we owned was marched through the front door in big cardboard boxes.

I felt lucky to live in this house every single day, especially now that the backyard had come to verdant life. Every evening after I took the subway home to Brooklyn from my job in Manhattan, I'd pick up Zack as I walked in the door and nuzzle his soft, sweet skin, say my goodbyes to his nanny, and head out the back door and lie down in the grass while Zack crawled around. I'd stare up at the soft blue sky, drink in the smell of the green all around me, and think, I can't believe how lucky we are. I cherished that skyward view: a simple pleasure that made me feel small in the best way, as if I were being cupped in the hands of the universe. Simple and small were antidotes to the way I had been living my life for so long, with a complicated, jam-packed schedule, forging a career in the larger-than-life world of magazine publishing. For me, small was new, and small was good. I finally felt ready to stop going at a dead run, as I had been for so long, to slow down and settle into being happy.

Making dinner every night was a new pleasure for me after years of takeout meals at home or at my desk. I looked forward to putting in the half hour of calming busywork that getting dinner on the table entails, once Chris had come home and was able to take Zack off my hands. I'd stand in the kitchen and feel my brain slowly empty of the zillions of details and to-dos that make up a day in the office as my hands took over, chopping peppers and onions into just-right dice, whisking a vinaigrette, and washing salad greens.

As I poured the water from the salad spinner down the drain that night, I was feeling grateful for everything in my life, but I couldn't ignore Chris's silence pressing against my back. Sometimes people are quiet in a room in a way that feels like company, but today, as with a lot of days in the last few years, and especially since Zack was born, Chris was quiet in a way that felt like an absence. I started to turn around from the sink, wanting to find a way to pull Chris back into the room. I was sure that when I faced the sofa my eyes would find Chris staring blankly into middle distance, ignoring our tiny son, who was playing at his feet. And that was exactly the domestic tableau I beheld. Chris didn't turn to meet my gaze. Instead, as he felt my eyes come to rest on him, he let out a slow, pointed exhale. I bristled, disappointed and annoyed. "Want to tell me what you hate so much about your life today?" I said, wincing inward slightly as the harsh words came out.

And so, still not turning his face, with its long, aquiline nose, huge blue-green eyes, and those full, pink lips I

was delirious to call mine when we were first married, he said, simple as pie, “I’m done.” Then he sighed again, and turned slowly to look at me with a flat, empty gaze. “I’m done with this,” he said, gesturing with his hand to encompass our living room, our kitchen, our home, our son, our future, our dreams, every single memory we’d ever made together in our thirteen years as a couple, and me, suddenly meaningless me.

I felt my face go slack in shock as my vision narrowed to a tunnel centered on Chris’s blank face, and everything else went dark. Done. Just like that.

\* \* \*

From the day Chris made this pronouncement, I felt my whole life click into slow motion as the last moments of my marriage started to slip through the hourglass. Suddenly there was a time bomb ticking loudly in the middle of the house, threatening to smash my life—my family, my security, my entire identity—into unrecognizable bits.

I entered a kind of split-screen crisis mode, shuttling between a panicked search for solutions and the velvety comfort of hiding in denial as I tried to figure out how to defuse the bomb. My mind became a Japanese teahouse: orderly, quiet, with delicate sliding shoji screens to separate my conflicting needs, to make it possible for me to keep on keeping on when it seemed that my husband had just brought everything in our life to a dead stop. As I started to ponder the impossible whys of how he and I had found ourselves here, and the impossible questions of how I would begin again, I slid open and shut the shoji screens in my mind to hide or reveal, a little at a time, what I was feeling—the anger, the fear, the bottomless grief—so that I could keep myself from being overwhelmed by my emotions. In a hush, I tiptoed around Chris and I tiptoed around myself, afraid to glimpse my reflection in the mirror and see the fear in my eyes.

This talk of divorce was coming at a spectacularly bad time. I was the primary breadwinner in our family, and I had recently been fired from a job I loved. Chris and I were still learning how to be parents; our cherubic son was still an infant. We owned this lovely, but needy, house, and the big mortgage that went along with it. And I was interviewing for a big new job, the job of my dreams: taking the helm of *Redbook*, a huge national magazine that was all about women living their grown-up lives—and in no small part, their married lives.

The irony was as rich as buttercream frosting on a wedding cake.

In the end, I got the job. But I lost the guy. The life we’d built together over thirteen years began disassembling itself without my permission as Chris and I started the slow, hard work of breaking up. Then our house began falling apart, too, revealing breaches in the foundation and the roof that the house inspector, my husband, and I had all missed before Chris and I bought it—and, we would find out later, that the couple who sold us the house had maybe intended to hide. On my very first day as editor in chief of *Redbook*, torrents of water poured into the basement of the house. And the floods continued as September-hurricane rains worked their way up the coast and pounded the Northeast, forcing me to undertake a months-long renovation that led to the house’s foundation being jackhammered into bits. A few weeks later, the roof and walls of the house started to leak in three or four or five different places, depending on how the wind was blowing.

The symbolism of it all was undeniable: water flooded my house for months, as pain was flooding my life. The foundation of my existence was being rocked, as was the foundation of my house. Water followed me everywhere, and so did the tears. I was running a magazine about love and marriage just when everything I

thought I knew about either was being put to the test. And I was reinventing that magazine at the same time that I was going through the incredibly painful process of reinventing myself.

And it got worse. I had to fire two full-time nannies in a row and so found myself scrambling to patch together child-care arrangements for Zack. And then there would be a beach house fire and the two emergency room visits, and all the heartbreaking ways in which my family and friends couldn't give me what I asked for despite their best intentions, because they had to live their own lives, too.

I kept my best game face on at work, desperate not to show weakness either to my staff or to upper management as I spearheaded the magazine's transformation. My friends marveled at how I was able to handle the pressure of the big job while I had such a young son. But the job was, in many ways, the easy part, even though it absorbed so much of my concentration and time: I knew that I knew how to run a magazine, and I trusted my skills and instincts at work. But I was just learning how to trust myself as a mother. And I had absolutely no idea how to handle the crisis in my marriage.

Had someone sent me a short story with a heroine living the events that were unfolding in my life, I would have rejected it for being facile and unbelievable. But this wasn't a story, it was my life. And there was no way to get to the other side—of the divorce, of the house's flaws, of my own weaknesses, which I'd spent a lifetime trying to ignore or exorcise—except to live through it all.

I know that on many days I watched my divorce unfurl from a safe distance, as if I were perched somewhere over my own shoulder, or standing just behind one of my mental shoji screens, my eyes peeled for the flashes of wisdom that would help me to begin to make sense of the end of everything I thought I knew about myself. Friends and family commented on my calm, wondering why I wasn't angrier. But I didn't want the heated blur that comes from anger. I wanted clarity. I wanted *answers*. And eventually I realized that anger—at my ex, at life, at God, at the house that leaked, the dishes that were dirty, the fate that would seemingly send me plague after plague until I started wondering if maybe I had been cursed—would keep me from feeling everything I needed to feel to be able to let go and be free.

That is just one of the lessons I learned on my journey through divorce. I stumbled across these lessons like so many river stones tossed on the shore, quieting thoughts coughed up out of the endless roil and thunder that filled my head in those two dark years. I picked them up and played with them in my mind, the way a hand will worry coins in a pocket. They gave me comfort, even though they weren't the answers I thought I wanted, and the lessons weren't always easy. Like the time I found myself lying on my kitchen floor for the fourth or fifth time, crying away another night, and I realized that even though I had so many people in my life who wanted to help me, no army of friends was going to be able to meet me here in my alone.

But as the weeks, and then, the months unfolded, it slowly dawned on me that I didn't need an army, even though I often felt my friends and strangers and our whole entire culture urging me to make divorce the ultimate battle. What I wanted on the other side of all this pain wasn't to win, to be "right," or even just to be able to claim the cruddy consolation prize of being the one who was "wronged."

What I wanted was peace.

I decided the only way to rebuild was to start to understand who I really was, to love and forgive myself my failures, to move beyond all the dashed dreams to trust myself again. To dare to imagine who I might be on the other side of all this. To hold my best idea of myself in my mind's eye and walk toward her, instead of being distracted by the anger and hurt that threatened to take root in my soul and scar it forever.

And that has been the journey of a lifetime: to decide who I am and who I've been and who I want to be, and to do all of that with compassion, both for myself and for my ex.

Five years later, I can honestly say that my divorce is the best thing that ever happened to me. Because I am at peace, and not just with my divorce. With myself.

Who but an optimist would propose that this is what divorce has to offer?

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