

LOVE's Just Full of Surprises

It's a love adventure like no other, and it's spelled D-I-V-O-R-C-E. After 30 years of marriage, Lynn and Matt Harlow decide to call it quits. To family and close friends, including me, the news drops like a mega-bomb, its devastation all the greater because Matt and Lynn Harlow have for decades represented the miracle of sustained romantic love, while all along they were keeping its dying embers a closely guarded secret. Even their only child, Andy, hadn't a clue his parents were drifting apart.

I'm on the outside — a close friend to both Matt and Lynn — and view them as the ideal match. In the U.S., nearly 50% of first-time married couples divorce, but those divorces usually occur between the seventh and eighth years of tying the (Gordian?) knot. Matt and Lynn's knot survives more than three times that long and only begins to unravel over the past few years as Matt experiences a serious stroke; Lynn, older than Matt by 10 years, enters menopause; and son, Andy, grows up and goes away to college.

Presto Change-o: With Andy now on his own, Lynn and Matt take time to test the deep waters of their one-to-one bond. While they seek counseling and work hard to repair their

benumbed relationship, they tell no one outside their professional counselors that they are suffering through a dreadful ennui only foundering lovers understand.

Susan Brown, coauthor of *The Gray Divorce Revolution* (Brown & Lin, 2012), has found that, between ages 55 and 64, the national divorce rate has more than doubled in the past 25 years, from five to 11 per thousand marriages. Over age 65, however, the percentage of divorce nearly *triples*, from two to five per thousand marriages. What's going on here, Wizenod Owls?

Brown suggests that part of the reason may lie with the current improvements in the health of post-menopausal women, increasing options for surgeries that render both men and women a more youthful appearance and/or attitude toward life, and overall better healthcare that results in longer life spans. In other words, marriages that may well have ended in death a couple of decades ago are now ending in divorce as the partners are discovering they have a lot of life left to live and want to do so on their own terms.

Like Matt and Lynn, many couples realize that to survive as individuals, they'll need to set out individually, because together they're sinking fast.

Finally, they arrive on the shoals of divorce by mutual consent.

For five months and two weeks, Matt and Lynn keep their divorce a secret. They give themselves a six-month period of adjustment, agreeing to tell no one, even their son, until the six months elapse. They agree to tell Andy in late December and other family and friends in mid-January, once Lynn returns from a long-planned trip to South America.

Although each has changed, and the divorce is final, they still love each other and mutually promise to take baby steps together toward the physical separation, even sharing a house until the lease comes up. After all, they've been living together for more than 30 years. They also vow to emotionally support each other while both experience the "mourning," the sense of loss that comes with the territory.

Meanwhile, we remain clueless, a troop of "intelligent, sensitive, emotionally, in-touch" friends who Lynn and Matt totally dupe with artful acting skills. Through two changes of seasons, from summer house-boating parties to Halloween festivities, through Thanksgiving and Christmas, Matt and Lynn keep their secret.

Christmas dinner finds us all gathered around the same table. The

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by Skye Moody

Novelist, essayist, photographer and world traveler



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atmosphere is merry, music playing, people dancing. As we share Christmas dinner, laughter surfs on waves of jolly repartee and glasses clink. Yet, seated beside me, young Andy Harlow's face bares inconsolable sadness, a grief he isn't sharing with anyone tonight. Andy's color is off; his eyes pool tears. I want to ask what's wrong, but refrain; he doesn't want to talk about it, not now, maybe never. (Days earlier, Andy's parents told him about the divorce.)

New Year's Eve night: A party brings us all together again. All, except for Matt Harlow. Matt tells Lynn he's meeting old friends from out of town and will stop in at the party later, around midnight. After three decades of trusting his every word, Lynn believes him. Unknown to Lynn, unknown to anyone at this party, Matt is attending another party nearby with a circle of friends that somewhat incestuously fringes on our own rather flexible circle.

At midnight, Matt fails to appear at Lynn's side. Matt, we learn days later, went home with Fresh-Ex, the former wife of a mutual friend, who is himself still healing from a nasty divorce from Fresh-Ex. While Matt and Fresh-Ex see fireworks this night, Lynn — clueless — returns home and waits up for him. In the wee hours of New Year's Day, Matt finally comes home. To his credit, he confesses his lie, his betrayal of their agreement, and, worse, that he's having an affair with Fresh-Ex, who Lynn had thought was a friend.

Two weeks shy of the deadline, the newly besotted Matt seems to have forgotten about the

six-month agreement. Instead, Matt, with Fresh-Ex at his side, has recklessly given up his and Lynn's secret to mutual friends during a party, and without Lynn's knowledge. Happy New Year, darling.

Matt isn't malevolent, yet his actions hurt and humiliate his former partner, and, too, his son, Andy. By January 2, Matt's new partner, Fresh-Ex, has spread the word of their affair. Matt stops coming home. Lynn feels both privately and publicly betrayed and humiliated.

Their friends and families react with incredulity, followed by group depression. We are one big collectively bleeding heart. Why couldn't Matt wait just two more weeks until the end of the six-month period to swing from the trees, or else just have sex with someone outside the social boundaries of his and Lynn's mutual friends, sparing Lynn the humiliation and hurt that accompanies gossip and rumors?

Lynn asks herself, "Can I know someone that intimately and be so utterly duped by him?"

In Matt's defense, when an offer of — if not illicit still in very poor taste — sex stares him in the face, why should he bother searching farther afield? I call this the Adventure of the Libidinous Lazy. The reason he should've traveled farther afield to visit the funhouse is out of respect for his longtime partner. Hadn't anyone told Matt that you don't do your business in your own front yard?

Behold the humiliated partner, who certainly wanted a severance of the problematic bond. Lynn wonders: Will their mutual friends desert

her now and accept the new couple, Matt and Fresh-Ex, into the family? How will Lynn, under these circumstances, fit in at social events? And what about Fresh-Ex's ex-husband? Did anyone take his feelings into account?

Meanwhile, will Lynn — besides feeling humiliated — be pitied, an attitude she abhors in herself or anyone else? Will she do the right thing and refuse to lower her own principles in some petty act of revenge? Will she put a healthy perspective between herself and the frolicking Matt in his honeymoon stage with Fresh-Ex, a liaison that surely will fizzle once the thrill has gone?

Days later, Lynn flies off to South America on the long-planned visit with friends. While she basks beneath the Southern constellations, the healing balm of geographical distance and new sights and sounds may inspire new perspectives on Lynn's past and suggest fresh plans for her future, one that will enhance what happiness she derived during her life with Matt. Enhance, not replace.

Surely, in time, Andy's heart will heal as he embarks upon a new adventure of his own and shares — or doesn't — his parents' separate new adventures. Judgments withheld — we all make fools of ourselves at least once in our lives

— Lynn still loves Matt, only doesn't want to be married to him, and she's also a tad embarrassed for him.

Matt's fessing up drops a little shine back onto his halo. I suspect he's working hard to earn back Lynn's trust. While he chose to belly flop into his new adventure, our heroine seeks a graceful path to clarity. I grieve for the old Matt and Lynn. I miss them with all my heart. But that's my problem. ♦

Sources:

For more information, read Susan L. Brown's complete study on seniors and divorce at tiny.cc/gray-divorce-revolution.

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