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“Stranger on a train”

When divorce is new, it can be like
a third person in a conversation.

I tried to have a romantic adventure this summer; I really did. The setting couldn't have been more conducive: the night train from Venice to Paris. My train compartment on the way in to Venice was crammed with strangers, but on the way out, there was only me, blissfully alone. I was still relishing my solitude when a man poked his head in and asked if he could join me.

He was good-looking and fit with grizzled curls and an intense gaze - Italian, fluent in English. We began to chat; I found him witty, magnetic. He wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and a Harlequin fantasy began to unfurl in my mind - “Strangers in the Night.” Our eyes locked, the conversation picked up heat, and we jumped into more personal matters. Soon I knew more than I could ever want to know about him, because we spent the next two hours discussing his divorce.

He couldn't stop talking about it, and try as I might, I couldn't steer the conversation away. His wife's family always destroyed their men, he said; there wasn't a man left anywhere in her bunch. How would he keep the love of his four daughters when she was poisoning their thoughts? he asked me. I made sympathetic noises; I've lived through a divorce myself, though so long ago, it's not something I want to talk about with a handsome stranger in the dead of night, with Italy flashing by outside the window.

In Milan, other passengers appeared. We all pulled down our beds and went to sleep, and in the morning my Italian friend, grasping my hand, thanked me profusely for listening and dashed off.

I realized that this was not an isolated incident. In the spring an old high-school buddy turned up; a skinny teenager with an Afro when I last saw him, now he's balding with a paunch. Right away the saga emerged: he'd left his wife, which meant leaving his children too, and was still in the thick of turmoil and guilt. We sat in the garden, old friends meeting after three decades, going over and over - what else? - how to survive divorce. Then another old buddy called, and another; same problem, same turmoil. Old girlfriends too; not long ago, a dear friend's unhappy marriage ended, and she's consumed with rage, incomprehension, pain.

What's going on out there? Perhaps the millennium is to blame, marital cataclysms erupting as the big shift looms. Perhaps it's just my Boomer generation's self-centered, I-want-everything-right-now philosophy. Whatever the reasons, unhappy husbands and wives don't know that, though separation ends the troubles of the marriage, it unleashes a breathtaking array of brand new troubles, and that's just for the adults involved, let alone for the greatest victims, the children. Divorce, almost any divorce, is a disaster for the

soul. The wounded on both sides are left struggling to figure out what hit them, and why it hurts so much. As I had to, once.

After all these years, I understand why my divorce was necessary, and yet it remains the greatest tragedy of my life - because it meant the end of promise and hope and love; because he and I produced two human beings together, the greatest act of intimacy and creativity possible, and now the parents of those children know almost nothing about each other. The end of my marriage, though it was mutually agreed upon, and though he and I are still friends, left a grief that was acute for years, is still there, and will always be there. I regretted my non-romance on the train, but I understood my Italian fellow traveler. The wound was new, for him. A person recently out of a long-term marriage, whether the separation is wanted or not, is a sudden amputee dealing with the loss of a leg, an arm, an eye.

In one way, divorce is like marriage - you have no idea what it's going to be like until you're in the middle of it. But at least marriages provide some joy and companionship before they go wrong. The only good thing to say about a divorce is that sometimes it's not too hideous, and then you get used to it; and sometimes, in the end, it turns out to be healthy.

Sometimes life without that partner is better, in the end. But when divorce is new, even when you're in the world's most beautiful country, communing with a stranger on a velvet August night, it will be sitting there, too, right next to you, hanging on every word.
