

A Brand-new Ending

Sexy. Whenever I think of Perry and how it was, I think sexy. The thought makes me smile. A buoyant inner smile, almost smug. Falling in love at 47 and marrying at 52 is both miraculous and terrifying.

But, then, falling in love is always miraculous and terrifying. In your 50s, it just comes with an end date built-in.

Oh, some people claim that 50 is the new 30 and all that. But, for me, when Perry and I married, I was keenly aware that one of us was going to have to usher the other out. Maybe not for another 30 years or so, knock on wood, but Perry's parents both died in their early 60s. I'd buried many loved ones already. I just wanted it to be Perry ushering me out.

I should have remembered: *Be careful what you wish for.*

Before meeting Perry, I'd go about my day, striding between work meetings and appointments, feeling dumpy. In flats with knee-length skirts and suit jackets, I felt...well, old. After meeting Perry, I strode in those same flat shoes with my soft belly, my fleshy hips, and my upper arms jiggling, and I felt, well...sexy. Even my brown curls bounced.

Of course, nothing about my body had changed, but I felt altogether different. The openness of our desire, the undeniable fact of it, was a gift. I wasn't just enamored with Perry; I was hooked on who I became while with him. Sensual. Adventurous. Brave.

When we first met, Perry was tan from playing tennis. Dark forearms and neck. He had pale blue eyes with deep laugh lines. Barrel chested with thighs like tree trunks, he was 5-foot-10 to my 5-foot-5. We fit well together.

Perry taught English as a Second Language in New Hampshire. Kids in their early teens arrived from all parts of the world speaking no English. Perry exuded calm.

Complemented by kind eyes, his smile said *everything will be OK*.

I was a psychotherapist, and, like Perry, I was skilled at soothing people in crisis, helping them recognize they had the strength to deal with whatever life hurled at them.

Over the years, Perry and I developed an easy rhythm. Our routines were not uncommon. We spent entire weekend afternoons exploring the local library and drinking coffee at our local café, Breaking New Grounds. We walked the beaches of Maine and sketched the rocks at low tide. We cooked together, nothing fancy. We ate copious amounts of broccoli and broiled chicken, both relishing and feeling virtuous in our healthful simplicity. Occasionally, we ate popcorn for dinner as we read books by the fire.

We took care of each other, inconsequential things: me, placing a water glass on his bedside table; him, refilling my coffee as I wrote in the morning.

We touched each other often, like shorthand. *I'm here. I'm here.*

Fourteen years almost to the day we met, Perry sits across from me on the couch as he delivers my morning coffee. He leans forward as if he's about to say something, but instead, he sinks back and remains silent. "What's up?" I invite.

He breathes in. "I want a divorce; I'm not attracted to you anymore; I want children of my own." His words whoosh out, as though he's practiced them and must speak fast, afraid he'll forget one.

"What?" Dread, immediate and physical, lands in my solar plexus. My mind skitters, like a rock skimmed over tranquil water. I can't make sense of his sounds. It's as though he's speaking in a foreign language. I wonder if this is how his students feel – shocked by the words coming at them too quickly.

He continues to talk. I catch snippets: *just realized...last chance...* He's babbling.

When faced with disaster, I become hyper-focused, with excellent diction. In times of crisis, I exhibit supernatural composure. I'm the person you want around when a kid cracks his head on the radiator and blood spurts everywhere. It's the skill of dissociation, learned early in childhood, and, if employed judiciously, very handy.

"Is there a mother for these children?" I ask, reaching for my coffee as if this is a casual conversation.

"No," he says. "But I want to be free to pursue someone."

I grip my mug, feeling light-headed.

Is Perry leaving after 14 years to make babies?

This can't be. He's 60 years old.

"Can I grab a few things?" he asks. "I just...need some stuff...for the hotel." He looks visibly relieved there isn't more of a scene.

Five minutes later, he walks out with his gym duffle.

I begin calling everyone I know.

“Perry asked for a divorce because he wants babies,” I announce. “I’m so disoriented,” I repeat this over and over.

I thought I was someone who could read people, who understood people. I’m a goddamn therapist. Just two weeks ago, we celebrated our 14 years together. We held hands on the beach, laughing as the frigid water caught our feet, talking about our future. Just yesterday morning, he suggested we change our cable package so we could watch the Red Sox this summer.

“Maybe he has a brain tumor,” says one friend.

“He’s having an affair,” announces another.

“Clearly, it’s a nervous breakdown.”

“He already knocked someone up,” one decides.

“Could he have a urinary tract infection? Old people get psychotic from them.”

(This, from a younger friend, who thought of 60 as elderly. I forgave her.)

“He’s an asshole,” Ricky, my best friend, tells me.

But Perry was never an asshole. He’s the most gentle, caring man I’ve ever known.

Sixty is the age of leaving the house and returning for the car keys, the age of *have you seen my glasses?* The age of sudden, unwanted diagnoses. Who leaves a marriage at this point? Accepting old age is considered sinful. We exercise, eat organic, and pretend we can make youth last. I’d imagined us together till the end, laughing and commiserating as we handled the shifts and tweaks aging requires.

Some, hoping to postpone death, topple their lives. There are names for this group: *gray divorcé*, *silver splitters*. Heartbreak hurtles me back into shaky adolescence – not the youth I want to revisit.

During one sloppy call, both of us weeping over what a wonderful life we'd had together, I ask him in desperation, "Why can't you try to get what you want here? With me?"

"You can't give me babies."

No, that I can't do.

Grief-land is its own territory. It's lonely and filled with steep, treacherous, rocky paths and lots of mosquitos. It rains often.

There are no caves to crawl into and get dry. There's no place to sleep. One must keep trudging and trudging. Occasionally, one meets another person in this land, but often they're not in the mood to talk. Our heads face down, watching our feet, plodding.

Because, over there, just over the next rise, or possibly the next, it's sunny with cool breezes that blow away the mosquitos. There are hot boulders to lean against for warmth. People smile and hold your hand over the rough patches. They feed you soup and tell you it will be OK. You'll be OK.

Everyone's dragged into Grief-land at some point, but no one enters willingly.

By the time we're in our 60s, most of us have spent time in Grief-land.

I have. So, I trust that the sunny place over the rise is truly there and all I have to do is keep walking.

But I haven't even entered Grief-land yet. I'm in some anteroom, I name Howl-land. A long wail of repeated questions. What did I miss? What did I do wrong?

As we move through the divorce, as he waffles about coming back, as his narrative shifts, I reconstruct my understanding of our past and unearth a revised future.

When I stomp around, bitter about the raw deal he dealt, anger and defeat own me. When I face how life is a wild ride – and appreciate the love in my life, then and now – I grow expansive and walk straight.

Starting with small actions, I build back my life. Nothing earth-shattering. Planting daisies. Going out with friends. Finishing my novel. Getting a promotion at work. Hunting dinosaurs with grandchildren.

When my youngest son gets engaged, he asks, “So, Mom, do you still believe in love and marriage?”

I want to take my time here. Each person we love takes a little piece of us and then they're careless, forget to look both ways, drink too much, climb mountain cliffs, or are otherwise negligent.

People die. They fall out of love. They leave.

We grieve.

The only way to avoid this pain is to avoid love. That is too hard a way to live.

"Yes," I say. "I do. It didn't work out for me, but I still think getting to know a person till the end of days is a superb endeavor." I pause and then say, "Love, alone, isn't enough. You need to be fearless."

Loss is such a constant, and yet such a mammoth concern. We protect against it. We put in smoke detectors and immunize our children. We try to be careful with money and don't curse out our boss.

So, when loss comes anyway, as it will, we blame. We judge. Why weren't you more careful? Why did you walk alone at night? Why didn't you recognize he was flawed?

These judgments aren't evil. They're our hope that if we do all things right, we'll be immune to devastating loss.

As time passes, people begin to ask if I'm seeing anyone – dating.

I understand the motivation. It's some version of getting back on the horse. A satisfying conclusion to this saga of lost love involves me meeting another love. It isn't a terrible notion.

Friends and family would relax. They'd stop worrying and cease imagining bleak, long, empty evenings for me.

Probably the only people who don't care if I am in a relationship or not are my grandchildren. I appreciate this.

Because a funny thing happened during my grief over Perry. I discovered I really like living alone. I found my way back to myself. Of course, it's difficult to describe being alone and happy without sounding like I'm trying to convince myself that low-fat yogurt tastes as delicious as ice cream. But I think there can be a gratifying ending with being in alliance with myself, my own desires, and the people I cherish.

I've taken to watching couples in their 60s walking and wishing them luck. I miss having our shared history, our private jokes, the look across a roomful of people that said, *I've got you*.

What I have instead – what I have created – is a life of connection with love. Not a love. Not *one* person. But a life of love, nonetheless. So many stories end with finding the right person; I want to end with luxuriating in the right me.

Six years after our divorce, I meet Perry for lunch. We eat lobster rolls, watching the gulls follow the tugboats on the river. It's May, and his tennis tan has begun. At 66, his hair, like mine, is mostly gray. He appears tired. It's nearing the end of the school year, and I'm sure he is exhausted.

He tells me he and his new wife are expecting twins. Perry will be a first-time father at 66. He'll unquestionably be way too busy to obsess about old age and dying. I hope he's bought good life insurance.

"Congratulations," I say.

The waiter clears our plates.

"Do you remember," I ask, "while we were married, I told you the next book I intended to write was about the gifts of later-in-life love?"

He nods.

"I still plan to write that book," I tell him. "Only now it has a different ending."

—Virginia DeLuca is the author of the novel As If Women Mattered and is working on a memoir about divorcing in her 60s.