



EXILE ON LOCUST STREET

By The Husband

Six months ago I had a wife, a family and a home on The Main Line. Now I have none of those. Well, sure, I am only separated, not yet divorced, see my children a couple days a week, still own the house and have an apartment in Center City. But I have lost the life I had for almost 20 years.

As David Byrne famously sang in “Once In A Lifetime,” “Well, how did I get here”? How did I lose all that I loved and that meant the most to me?

The Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, wisely stated, “Fools learn by experience; wise men learn by the experience of others.” While it is too late for me, I write for all the other lawyer husbands out there who may be in danger of losing what I have. It does not have to be.

Like many men, especially Baby Boomers, I grew up thinking that being a good husband and father meant working hard and as much as possible to provide everything and anything for my wife and children. The Wife, also a lawyer, chose to give up the career she loved in order to care for our home and raise our children. I worked outside the home. She inside. Seemed like a nice arrangement.

I ceded control of the children and the home to her and concentrated on professional success. I worked at the law and advancing my practice and career tirelessly, including nights and weekends – trials, client development and enhancing my professional profile by teaching and writing. And I read, a lot.

What I did not do is spend enough time with my children or attend to my wife’s needs. Somehow, I thought my professional success would make them love me and provide all that they needed to be, as The Wife would say, “Happy, happy, happy. Lucky, lucky, lucky. Spoiled, spoiled, spoiled.” I was wrong, wrong, wrong.

Those who know me best tell me I am too hard on myself and that it takes two to fail at marriage. True, The Wife was not always a day at the beach as wife or mother. In recent times she, spent most of her time not taking care of the kids, home or me, but playing computer games and chain smoking. Indolent, imperious, impassive and unsupportive. The housekeeper and the nanny did most of the work. It had not always been thus. Perhaps it was a chicken-and-egg dilemma.

Despite the fact that The Wife often confronted me with my domestic inadequacies, I was blind to them and thought her obtuse, lazy, cold and ungrateful. She withdrew more and more. I smoldered with anger. I held my tongue regarding her foibles to keep the peace. We were both too proud/stubborn to talk or to go to therapy.

On top of this, one our children developed serious behavioral problems requiring hospitalization. The stress of all this on The Wife was too much. She did what I never imagined she would, and what I would not have had the courage to do – she exercised the nuclear option – she filed for divorce and moved out.

I was devastated. Shocked. Angry. Hurt. Disbelieving. But, as Bob Dylan sings, “... always have respected her for doin’ what she did and gettin’ free.”

When she made it clear that reconciliation was not an option, my heart sank. I went through the appropriate stages of grief, pity, anger, hate, sorrow, soul-searching and then like any Type-A personality, I began to look upon this as a learning experience and an opportunity for a new and maybe even better life. As my children always say, “Mess it up. Dress it up.”

I moved out and let The Wife return to the family home with

the children, two dogs and two cats.

I began to re-invent myself. I got a bachelor apartment on Locust Street. I worked out twice a day. Lost more than 50 pounds. Colored my gray. Got contacts. Started dating. And soon had a beautiful, intelligent girlfriend. My new life seemed exciting and promising.

I resolved, however, to treat The Wife fairly and civilly in all respects, but to move on with my life and not look back.

After awhile, we settled into a routine with the children visiting me and The Wife decided it would be good for us to go to “co-parenting” therapy. Making it clear, however painfully for me, that it was not to help us get back together. I agreed, though insisting that I did not want to pay a third party merely to hear The Wife criticize me.

One of my law partners recommended B. Janet Hibbs, a local family therapist and author of the book, “Try to See It My Way” (Penguin Group 2009). In anticipation of seeing her, I bought copies for both of us. Unfortunately, she had no openings for a few weeks and The Wife was eager to get started. So we found another therapist, Barbara Krasner. We went to one session that helped us to talk to each other rather than at each other, albeit through the therapist.

The next day, out of curiosity, I decided to read the Hibbs book anyway. I was pleased and amused to find the author, at page 137, praise our therapist as one of her valued mentors. But the real shocker came when I hit page 177 at which she tells of “Caleb and Leslie” (p. 177 – p. 201) in vignettes and dialogue.

I was stunned. I was Caleb. And it was not pretty. My focus on professional success was not my only error. Almost everything The Wife had been saying about/to me for years seemed true. And I had contributed to the ruin of my marriage by precisely the ugly behavior that jumped out at me so vividly from these pages. And The Wife, like Leslie to Caleb, had tried to make me see it for years. But I never heard it, understood it or appreciated it, until I read it in black and white.

I truly had an epiphany. I saw myself as I never had before – condescending, disrespectful, petty, controlling, selfish,

self-absorbed, demanding, hyper-critical and often not there for my wife and children. How could I have so mistreated my best friend, the love of my life?

I have always disliked such claims, but truly believe that you cannot imagine what it is like to really see yourself as others do. Until it hits you like a Mack truck. It was as if someone had held a mirror up to me for the first time and I realized how truly repulsive I was.

I was profoundly ashamed and filled with regret and remorse. A man quite unfamiliar with failure, I had failed in the most important endeavor of my life – my marriage and family. But I

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now understand what I had done and why. And I knew I could change. How unfortunate that I had to hit rock bottom to have this realization.

I had to talk to The Wife. She agreed to meet me for dinner and I told her of my epiphany and my shame, sorrow and remorse. I begged her forgiveness, however undeserved and boldly, for another chance ... a chance to show her that I could be a better man, father, and, if she would let me, husband. Like Lincoln, I was prepared to do almost anything to preserve this union.

She was visibly pleased, but understandably skeptical. She acknowledged that I never intended to hurt her. To my surprise and delight

she agreed “not to close the door” on possible reconciliation and to ask our therapist to turn our then “co-parenting” therapy into “marriage” therapy. So the next session, I explained all this and told the therapist, with The Wife’s agreement, “We would like you to help us save our marriage.”

The Wife and therapist said the process would take six months, maybe more. And there was, of course, no certainty as to the outcome. I resolved to be patient, give The Wife her space and time to heal and go with her to therapy once a week. So there was hope.

Until this morning. In our second post-epiphany therapy session, The Wife announced that she had had an epiphany of her own. Unfortunately, it was not that she now saw her own significant shortcomings, but rather – that she could not envision us together, again, ever.

I knew her so well. I had seen this coming. We are thus proceeding with divorce. As Warren Zevon pleaded, “Send lawyers, guns and money. The shit has hit the fan.”

After much reflection, I, now, too, see things as she does. We have too much baggage and are too different. I mourn not so much loss of The Wife, but of a wife and my family life. I will move on with my life and The Wife with hers. I maintain my resolve to be civil and fair with her for the sake of the children and because it is the right thing to do. Perhaps some day, we can be friends, as we once were.

I have learned much from this very painful experience, and hope I am a better man for it, but I would not wish this means of education on my worst enemy.

So put down that brief, that contract, that motion, that book. Leave work in the office. Go home and hug your wife and ask her what you can do to make her happy today. No man on his deathbed ever regretted not working more billable hours, but far too many do regret not spending more time with their wives and children. Hackneyed, nevertheless true. ■

The Husband is a Philadelphia lawyer and a soon-to-be ex-husband, father and hopefully, better man.