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THE DIVORCE

Jean Rikhoff

It was the summer the heat burned the front yards down to the roots, the summer that water was rationed and everybody's garden failed, the summer that began so badly and ended worse for me, though the rains came in time to save the autumn chrysanthemums and we had a clear October, full of brilliant leaves. (Everyone said the drought had made the colors brighter that year than any other—perhaps it was true; I never knew, but I heard it often enough to believe it.) I remember the heat and the October, but most of all I remember that year because it was the one in which my parents got their divorce.

I suppose the final separation didn't surprise many people. We had long been one of those families that neighbors and friends describe as "not getting on well." Like most clichés this one minimized those emotions not considered, by Indiana standards at least, socially acceptable. In our neighborhood we had a whole textbook of observations to water down disaster, and even now I find it difficult not to think in clichés, no matter what the situation.

My mother, on the other hand, had a positive loathing for homespun homilies, and she used to be driven nearly insane by being told, in a Hoosier twang, that "everything works out for the best," "nothing succeeds like success," and that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"Marry in haste, repent at leisure," my grandmother used to comfort my unhappy, distracted mother; and my mother—unable to understand in her own way why her marriage was such a failure and even more incapable of explaining its failures to her mother—would fall back on her only resource, tears, to which my grandmother would say, "There's no use crying over spilt milk."

My parents had not got on from almost the first, but their differences were doctored by the community prescriptions for quarrelling couples: "It takes two to make trouble," "Two wrongs don't make a right," "The children come first." Besides, divorce in those days wasn't something nice people did. Like losing your money, losing your husband showed there was something seriously wrong with you.

As people constantly pointed out, you got as good as you gave. My mother had made her bed and now she would have to lie in it. She would have to take her medicine whether she liked the taste or not.

My mother and father had struggled through thirteen years of disputes, differences, quarrels, temporary separations, reconciliations "for the children," and they were no closer to coming to terms than they had been in the beginning. Given my mother and father, I suppose this was inevitable.

My father was one of those people who is always trying to get back to the land. In every one of his efforts—the plan to breed fine Holstein cows, the hope of making money off chickens, the pathetic attempt to make kohlrabi popular—he came to grief. We were constantly retreating back to the city to recoup the losses of the land, then moving back to the country with a fresh frail nest egg with which to put down our roots. It is almost impossible for me to convey how much I came to hate Nature in those years, but my feelings must have been mild compared to my mother's.

My mother loved excitement, crowds, all the pleasures of apartment living—what she used to describe as "being sensible and civilized." Our periodic migrations back to nature were a nightmare to her, but she bore them patiently and (with what was for her) subdued resignation. I remember one rainy day seeing her trying to chase chickens into a coop two feet from the brood, running back and forth pelting them with apples, drenched and half out of her mind with exasperation, shouting, "Oh, you filthy, dirty, horrible things, get into that house!" But of course they simply stood still regarding her blankly. A chicken doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain.

She picked up a handful of apples and threw them into the flock. One of the apples hit a chicken on the head—by mistake, I'm sure, for my mother had a dreadful aim just as she had a dreadful sense of direction—and it went crazy, running around in circles in the yard, its feathers wet and plucked-looking. My mother wept, standing by the chicken house, sobbing and saying over and over, "I never meant to do it. I never did. It deserved it, god knows, but I never meant to hurt it."

My parents were incompatible: at least that was the nice word used in our community for two people who found that they had no business living together and doing so drove them to saying, doing, and plotting meannesses they would never normally have contemplated. In the colloquialism of Indiana, "they brought out the worst in each other."

In my mother and father's case, all the clichés in the world had been

insufficient to cover their disappointment, their humiliation, their shame, their hatred of one another, and while the quarrels were violent enough verbally they were also almost inevitably bound to end up in my father using his fists and my mother screaming out her terror in the dark, dusty country nights. At these times my brother and I huddled under our blankets in the drafty upstairs farmhouse (or overheated city apartment) and tried to pretend we were asleep, that we couldn't hear these awful outbursts of passion.

Trembling, terrified, I would lie under the covers afraid to move for fear even the slightest creak of a bedspring would give me away. I don't know what frightened me so. I don't think I ever felt they would take their anger out on me—not beat me, that is—I was simply paralyzed by the idea that their voices would drop, there would be a pause, and one of them would call out, "Is that you, Jean?"

Invariably I ended up having to go to the toilet—a terrible calamity since that meant I had to get up and go down the hall to the bathroom, which was next door to my parents' room. I remember once going in the waste paper basket, crouched in the darkness, half sick with fear, hearing those heated, violent voices.

The morning after one of these terrible arguments my brother and I crept downstairs and pretended we had slept through the whole thing, inwardly shaking and sick, outwardly smiling and cheerful, coming down the steps and calling out in loud, hearty voices, "Hi! Breakfast ready?"

We always knew how bad the quarrels had been by mother's face. Sometimes she had a black eye or a bruised lip or a swollen cheek. More often she looked normal save that her eyes were puffed and she was martyrishly quiet bending over the stove. My father's frustrations—his inability to make the land love him back or his failure to make his animals multiply and be fruitful—came out in physical violence, something he was always mortally ashamed of but something he was unable in his rages to control. I remember seeing him pace up and down, his face contorted, his limbs shaking with rage, as he shouted again and again to no one in particular, "I will control myself, I will." But he always ended up smashing something: furniture or the car, crockery or my mother.

My mother, on the other hand, felt violence was a sign of weakness, and she despised him after these scenes not so much for his having hit her as for his having lost control of himself. She would look at him with pity and loathing, mostly loathing, the pity having long since

washed itself out in her tears, and not say a word. She went about her chores, ironing or sewing or washing dishes, calmly, as if nothing had happened, which would only drive my father into further anger until he went off, sullen and slamming the door, to disappear for a day or two. At the end of this time he would turn up, quiet and resigned, having determined after his experiences away from home (perhaps drunk or with another woman) to give it a try again. During those terrible hours when he was away my mother sat, sad-faced and mostly speechless, over her sewing, or she tried to read to us, the corners of her mouth trembling and her hands buttoning and unbuttoning the buttons of her blouse.

I loved both of them and I wanted the farm to be a success as well as I wanted my mother to have her parties and gaiety, but I did not see then how their opposite desires could be reconciled any more than I saw how their opposite dispositions could be altered. But most of all I wanted to be like the other children I knew whose mothers and fathers lived regular, happy, normal lives. It was only later, when I was married myself with children of my own, that I realized nobody has a regular, normal, happy life, but then I thought anything and everything was possible—if you only had the clue.

That summer that the heat broke over us like a Biblical judgment my mother and father were quarreling nearly every day. We were living on a bone dry bit of land that my father used to tell company he had "picked up for a song." The truth was that the earth was parched the color of cinnamon and that people all around us considered us fools. They called the place Harold's Folly, Harold being my father's name, and the folly being obvious. My father was trying to raise corn—he said there wasn't any reason why he couldn't raise corn on good Indiana soil, but there were plenty of reasons. In the first place, the soil was worn out, its dry gray top covering as powdery as dust. In the second place, the acres he had bought "for a song" were cluttered with rocks, weeds, briars, old tree stumps, rusty machinery, abandoned car parts. It would have taken years to rehabilitate that land, but my father was impatient to nurse the soil back to good health. He thought he had the cure: fertilizer. All that summer he was forever running over his five acres throwing manure to the winds, like the patient father forgiving the prodigal son and ordering a feast in honor of his wastefulness. Perhaps he was a fool, as the neighboring farmers said, and scatter-brained, as my mother's relatives pointed out; but he had his dream

and by god the land was going to send it up to the heavens, or he would go bankrupt trying.

My mother had just turned thirty. She had been and was then, I guess, a beautiful woman, but she was obsessed by the thought of losing her looks, their fineness honed away by the terrible sacrifices the land required, by the endless chores of the house, by the unrelenting malevolence of Nature itself. It was the dust she used to complain of most. Like a plague it blew through her windows, staining her curtains and sifting over her shelves, and no matter how much she turned her eyes inward on her possessions, those memories of parties and balls of ten years before, the dust was always around her as a constant reminder of what her existence had become. She spent her few spare hours wiping the sills down with a clean rag or reading fashion magazines, as if the secret of happiness were somewhere under a dust cloth or between the pages of *Vogue*.

Twice that summer my mother packed her things and went, in our exhausted Buick, to Indianapolis to her mother. And twice she came back. But she couldn't make the seeds yield or the land bloom any more than my father could stop the clock. The ground was cursed, my mother shouted at him. She was beguiled by the worthless dreams of trashy magazines, he said. Meanwhile my brother and I put on our assumed cheerfulness, like borrowed clothes for a play: we went about trying to act the part of what we thought normal children. Looking back, I can see we must have been grotesque; at the time we thought we were heroic.

One day in August when it had long been apparent the corn was nothing but a shrivelled mass of stalks and misshapen husks (but nobody would admit we weren't going to have a bumper crop of sweet corn), the flies came. The heat had been terrible all that day, worse than usual, raging from sun up on, the air vibrating and humming with heat. Looking out into that awful sunlight you saw yellow motes, probably dust, but they looked like concentrated cones of fire. About ten my father had turned the hose on the kitchen, which was a low one-story extension on the rear of the house, but instead of cooling things off as he had promised my mother, he only succeeded in raising a rich hot steam which obscured the windows and door, where shortly before I had seen her bent over the stove trying to eke out our income by canning tomatoes.

About noon the sky clouded over with swarms of horse flies passing

across our fields. They settled on the corn spikes and hung there, black and hairy, so thick the stalks swayed. The flies were big ugly brutes with a terrible bite. Later the farmers talked in awed voices of how their stings had driven the cattle crazy in a matter of minutes. My father and the hired man came into the house; it was dark but not cool. Nothing was cool under that sun. The hired man could not be persuaded to go into the living room; he sat in a straight chair in the steamy kitchen, his sweat-marked hat in his hand, watching my mother pack tomatoes into pint jars.

My brother and I were playing quietly in the old-fashioned dining room. Of all the rooms in the house we liked this one best because it was seldom used (except for Sunday and holiday dinners) and we could stay out of the way of the adults. There were two fine glowing prints there: "Bonnie Prince Charlie Crossing to Skye with Flora McDonald" and "Lee Surrendering to Grant at Appomatox." Our usual game was to play Secret Club under the dining room table, a game which involved our forming an organization known only to ourselves and drawing up lengthy and complicated rules for ourselves, prohibitions and penances, trails and quests. But that day we had our faces pressed against the window watching the clouds of flies drift over the land. My brother, who was younger and who spent every summer with his system poisoned by some noxious weed or other, was scratching rhythmically. I was terribly afraid he would give me his current infection, which was poison oak, though I had never had anything like it in my life, and I kept saying, "Get away from me. Go on, stand over there. You'll give it to me!" "I will not," he said, moving closer, getting that voracious look on his face of the dedicated tormentor.

"Go away. This minute, I tell you." I began to push him.

My father, who had been in the living room, crossed the hall. "Stop it," he called to us. "I have enough on my mind without having you two quarrel."

He was very angry—his face was quite white and the two crescent-shaped creases at the sides of his mouth were firm and deep. He was also very nervous, not in any specific way but generally nervous the way he sometimes got so that I had the impression he was trembling, though he never actually did.

My brother moved away from me and stood at the opposite side of the room. I played with the folds of my dress and didn't say anything. I knew that my father's fits of irritation with us generally signaled the prelude of one of his spells of rage with our mother and I was terribly

frightened: first, by the fact that because of the flies I was shut up in the house with them; and secondly by the fact that the hired hand would probably hear my father shout and see my mother cry.

My father stood watching us a few moments; then he turned quickly and went back into the living room. When he came back he was carrying a book. "Here, read this," he said, "Or look at the pictures. But don't go out. You'll get stung if you do." For the first time I noticed he had red welts on his hands and arms and around his neck. I took the book and my brother sat down meekly on the floor ready for me to read. I was only nine and did not read well, but Tommie was only five and I knew it didn't much matter. He didn't understand the relationship of ideas very well. Besides I was pathetically grateful to my father for having thought of us at all; so often he was so engrossed with his own problems that he seemed to have forgotten we existed. I opened the book; it was *Huckleberry Finn*. "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* . . ." I read.

"Who?" my brother asked.

"Tom Sawyer."

"Who's that?"

I thought a moment; I didn't know but because I was four years older I was supposed to know everything. "Some boy," I said abruptly.

My brother looked at me; then he began to chew on his finger. I read on, in the background the sounds of the flies dashing themselves against the windows, my mother rattling glass jars in the kitchen, my father pacing back and forth in the living room. Only the hired man was quiet; he was paid to turn up the earth, not to cultivate the art of conversation.

The book was long and discouraged me. There were lots of words I couldn't even begin to guess at. Presently I saw that my brother's eyelids fluttered and his head drooped against his regularly breathing body. When I was sure he was asleep, I closed the book and sat quietly thinking about Nancy Drew.

Nancy Drew had for me the most wonderful of all lives: according to her author she lived with only her father and a housekeeper in a big, well-run house; she had a car of her own, a snappy little roadster as I recall, though she was only sixteen, and her life was an endless solving of interesting mysteries during which she exposed herself to terrible dangers and proved that she was brave, noble, admirable, cheerful, intelligent, and single-minded. Disasters only strengthened her conviction.

tions. Everyone admired her. She seemed to me the most remarkable person I had ever heard of, and I wished more than anything in the world that I had her problems and not my own. I knew that, given the right circumstances and conditions, I could prove myself.

Real farm life I supposed I would like, but these barren acres of earth that refused to yield anything and the terrible labor that had gone into failure, my father's failure, it seemed to me, my mother's failure, too, shamed me. There was nothing in this house that I could see that was noble or brave or successful, and I thought that showed how doomed we were. In the middle of my thoughts I heard a terrible crash from the kitchen and then the sounds of my mother's quick response to any crisis, sobbing.

My brother awakened suddenly and began to whimper in a low voice. He put his short arms around his head, as if to ward off a blow, and rocked gently back and forth on his heels. This was his classic approach to sorrow; I had seen him in the same stance time and again. He was a very small boy for his age and extremely nervous—he had nightmares nearly every evening—and often when he cried he could not stop. He would begin by sobbing gently, his body heaving up and down in greater and greater gasps, until he got the hiccoughs or made himself sick. I considered him a terrible baby. To my way of thinking crying was a weakness and, like most children, I despised weakness of any kind. I gave him a push to quiet him and then went into the kitchen.

The crash had been a pot of stewing tomatoes that had apparently slipped out of my mother's hands. The kitchen was a mess, tomatoes and tomato juice scattered all over everything. My mother was weeping, her apron clutched to her face; the hired man was on his hands and knees, silently trying to clean up the mess as best he could; in the doorway my father stood, white-faced and tight-lipped, looking at both of them. "Oh my god," he said at last, "Oh my god, what next?"

My mother did not even look at him. For a moment she stood surrounded by tomato debris; then she walked out of the kitchen very quickly; from the dining room came the sound of her sobbing and the gentle echo of my brother's tears. I got a rag and began to help the hired man. There was so much juice that I had to wring the cloth constantly. We didn't seem, William and I, to be making any progress at all, but I didn't know what else to do. My father stood hesitantly in the doorway a moment, then went into the dining room. His voice came to us clear and sharp: "Leave the boy alone, Helen. You'll only upset him."

I didn't want William to hear them and I said, very loudly and cheerfully, "Here, William, I'll get a bowl and spoon and we can scoop them up. We'll get this done in no time flat, you'll see."

"Leave the boy alone, Helen!"

"There must be a bowl here somewhere," I insisted, making as big a smile as I could.

Then I heard my mother say, in a clear voice a little broken by her sobbing, "Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me again." There was an instant of silence, dead and heavy, stone still, and then the sound of scuffling, a scrape of furniture, then more scuffling. William and I stood rock still, looking toward the dining room where the sounds came from but where no figures could be seen.

"No, don't, Harold, not in front of the boy," my mother cried, and then there was the sharp smack of hand on flesh followed by my brother's rising sobs.

I turned to William. "When my brother gets one of his crying fits," I said, "sometimes you have to slap him to make him stop."

William looked at me.

"Are the flies still there?" I asked. I was afraid to look myself because I knew there were tears starting in my eyes and above everything, and because of everything that had happened, I did not want William to see them. It would give the game away.

"I'll go and see," he answered, shuffling toward the door. He stood for a moment, his back toward me. For that one instant I thought he was going to turn around and I worked with my mouth, trying to make it into a smile, but instead his hand lifted, clutched the door knob, turned it slowly, and an instant later he had gone out into that terrible heat, the sky still black with bugs. It was the last time I ever saw William.

A second later my father was gone too, slamming the front door, and I went into the dining room. My mother was lifting Tommie up; he still had his arms around his head, but he wasn't crying anymore. She had a hard time making him stand up because he kept slipping back down to the floor. All the time he kept his hands over his head. "Stand up, Tommie," my mother said, not unkindly, but firmly. "Stand up like a good boy."

He stood up.

"Now," she said, turning to me, "leave the tomatoes. They don't matter. I don't care," she said bitterly, "if I ever see another home-grown thing as long as I live. I want you to go upstairs and get your

things together. Put them all in piles on the bed: your underwear in one pile, your dresses in another, your pajamas separate. Make a separate pile for each thing. Do you understand?"

I said yes, I understood.

She bent down and kissed Tommie. "It's all right, honey. Everything's all right. You can come upstairs and watch me." She looked up. "Go on, Jean, go upstairs and get your clothes ready. You understand, don't you? Each thing in a separate pile?"

I nodded. She waited until I started up the hall stairs. All the way to the top I could hear her saying, "It's all right, Tommie. Everything's all right. You have to take care of Mommie now. We're not going to have Daddie with us anymore. He'll be here and we'll be with Grandma. You know, you have to be the man of the family now and men don't cry." Then I heard her catch her breath. "After all," she said in a voice that sounded almost exactly like my grandmother's, "a leopard can't change its spots. I'm just," she added, "at the end of my rope."

In her most difficult moment she had fallen back on the hated country wisdom which she had never really, I think, until then, understood. More than the weather changes.