



Tom and Phyllis in 1984 with Emma, aged eight months

‘AT 30 YEARS OF AGE, I AM *a child of divorce* AND I DON’T LIKE IT’

While her friends were getting married and having babies, Emma Laurence was busy playing mum to a pair of sixtysomething teenagers, formerly known as her parents

We’re not getting a divorce. Daddy and I just need some time apart.’ What followed was a largely practical speech from Mummy about living arrangements, peppered with jarringly simple lines from books and movies: ‘We both love you very much.’ ‘Nothing’s going to change.’ Daddy said very little.

I was upset, yes, but more than that - I knew everything was going to change because, you see, I’m not a child. This conversation was just last year, I was 29 years old and fully capable of comprehending the news my sixtysomething parents had just delivered.

I’d last seen them a few weeks earlier, at my aunt Ginny’s wedding. My dad was in one of his ‘funny moods’ that day and I remember asking my mum if he was alright. But rather than the usual, ‘Oh, you know your father, just ignore him,’ she simply answered, ‘I don’t know, Emma.’ I should have guessed then that something wasn’t right. But when you (and your parents’ marriage) are almost 30, you assume that they are indestructible. If they hadn’t split by now, surely they never would.

Except that they did. Once they had separated - my dad, Tom, 69, holing himself up in our holiday flat in Spain; my mum, Phyllis, 64, remaining at home in Hertfordshire - the divorce came very quickly. And a year later, it is done. At 30 years of age, I am a child of divorce. A rather fashionable one, in fact - an ACOD, as they call us Adult Children Of Divorce. We’re a fast-growing breed. New figures from the Office for National Statistics show a 75% rise in the number of over-sixties getting divorced, or ‘silver splitters’, in the past 20 years.

When my dad left for Spain, I was angry. My mum and I have always been able to argue about anything, but in my dad I only ever saw an ally. Now, he had disappeared off to ‘find himself’ and left me to pick up the pieces. ‘Contrary to prior thinking,’ says London-based clinical psychologist Dr Katharine Ayivor, ‘the effect of parental divorce in later life has a significant impact on the adult child. It is a loss of life as we knew it and can cause us to review previously held values and beliefs, which can affect our views of self and significant others, and relationships in general.’

I tried to tell my dad how I felt over the phone - angry, scared, abandoned - but he cut me off, saying, ‘I don’t need this. Call me when you have something nice to say,’ and hung up. He felt guilty, I realised later. He knew what he had done by leaving and he simply didn’t know how to have an adult conversation with me about it. If I had been younger, of course, he wouldn’t have had to. In some ways, I think that would have been easier on both of us. Suddenly I hated him and felt sorry for him at the same time. Neither emotion was familiar to me.

My mum, meanwhile, would ignore my calls for days on end. She told me she didn’t want to deal with anyone; I told her I wasn’t ‘anyone’ and I was worried about her. When I saw her, she looked dreadful. Her face sunken and pale, eyes puffy from the tears she was obviously trying to hide. The only other time I had seen her like this was when her brother died.

I imagine my dad was in a similar state, although I never witnessed it. I knew that he was drinking too much and had no real friends around to support him. And there was nothing I could do about it. My friends were busying themselves having babies; I had a mum who wouldn’t leave the house, a dad who had run away to Spain and, as an only child, no one else to turn to. It was as if my >>

'LITTLE BY LITTLE,
IT WOULD GET
EASIER... WHAT
WASN'T EASY WAS
ACCEPTING THIS
NEW ROLE I HAD
BEEN THROWN INTO
- OF CONFIDANTE,
COUNSELLOR,
MEDIATOR AND
PARENT ALL IN ONE'

parents had morphed into a pair of self-absorbed teenagers, each coming and going in and out of my head as they pleased, and I was supposed to just deal with it.

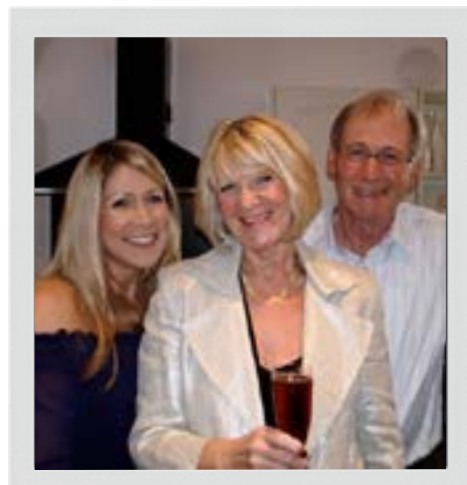
My boyfriend Sean's parents had split up when he was 18 and just starting university. He told me that, little by little, it would get easier, and it did. What wasn't easy was accepting this new role I had been thrown into - of confidante, counsellor, mediator and parent all in one. I didn't want to know the million reasons my mum and dad were going through with the divorce, or have their daily squabbles relayed to me with added hyperbole. They were still in constant contact - and when one didn't like what the other had to say, I would get a call or an email detailing the other's failings and be expected to intervene. I don't think they realised that was what they were asking me to do, but they asked nonetheless. There were three of us in this divorce, and it was all on their terms.

As Maggi Stamp, relationship consultant for laterlife.com and former Relate counsellor, puts it, 'Just as children can regress in their behaviour, an adult whose parents are divorcing can become the parent.' With that, she says, comes 'the worry of having to take sides or play confessor (too much information), or counsellor (too much responsibility), and, let's face it, a fear of being left holding the hurt one'. I can vouch for that.

Stamp also points out, 'Divorce in later years runs the risk of adding to the load on already stressed young adults if they are leaned upon too much.' Indeed, had I been a child, I can't imagine my dad would ever have called me up and told me to have a word with my mother, please, because she was being 'totally weird and unreasonable'. He probably would have just taken me out for ice cream.

You hear of divorced parents spoiling their children - trying to outdo each other with the best gifts, to win the most affection. There was none of that. The divorce, I was told, was crippling 'us' financially. No presents for me. My dad didn't even come home for my thirtieth birthday. He couldn't face it. I understood, and yet I didn't. You're supposed to put your children first, aren't you? Not when they're grown up, I discovered.

While my dad took Spanish lessons, went blonde and discovered the Power Plate, my mum tinkered with online



Emma with her parents in 2008, on her mum's sixtieth birthday

dating. A horrifying prospect. 'You met Sean online,' she argued (she was getting feistier by now). That much was true, but, I reminded her, I did not do so with a username like 'Devilsclaw1'. It was, she explained, inspired by the new herbal remedy she'd received in the post for her arthritis that morning, rather than anything more risqué. On voicing my concerns that perhaps it didn't give out quite the right sort of impression, however, she couldn't delete her profile quick enough. I won that battle - but only, I suspect, temporarily.

I saw a lot of my mum over those next few months. And as she proceeded to piece together the fragments of her old self, I found from somewhere a new respect for her.

I took her out for lunch, listened to stories from when she and my dad were young, held her while she sobbed. And she got better. She still has bad days, of course, but on those days, she gets up and puts on one of her many new pairs of heels (after grief came shopping), and she answers when I call.

My dad and I, on the other hand, could not be further apart. In our most recent chat, he tells me he might 'go travelling'. The thought of him standing on the Khao San Road, backpacked and bewildered, pops into my head. I laugh, instinctively, then see that he is serious. I went travelling eight years ago and actually, I think that this is brave of him. You're never too old to find yourself, or to find yourself again. I hate the thought of him being on his own in a faraway place, but I am aware that it is his decision to make, even if I think it's the wrong one. This, I decide, is what it must feel like to be a parent.

This summer, I watched Sean perform dad duties at his mum Hillary's wedding. My mum was there, too, and when she wanted to sit the slow songs out at the reception, Sean opened his arms and insisted that she join us - and so we danced, us three, shuffling about in the moonlight, singing along at the top of our voices, warm in each others' embrace. It's a gesture I will never forget. It told me that we are family - and that wherever the pieces of my broken-apart, put-back-together family may fall, we will be okay.

Dr Ayivor suggests that children, like me, of so-called silver splitters often 'question the validity of their experiences through childhood, which may lead them to question their own relationships'. If this is true then I am lucky that we had so many good years together, my parents and I, because those memories remain intact. I still believe in love, and in marriage, possibly more than ever. I know the odds, Sean and I both do. When we decide to get married, it will be with eyes wide open, knowing the odds, and beating them anyway. ■