

Dishes but No Table: Picking Up the Pieces from Divorce

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By Annie Groer
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Of all the dislocation and pain associated with divorce, one thing is certain. The wife or the husband, or maybe both, will have to leave home. No more morning coffee and newspaper on that sunny porch. No more view from the kitchen sink of the oak tree that once was a tiny sapling. No more shrieks and giggles from the kids' playroom, or family celebrations at a table set with the "good" china.

For the spouse who decamps, home becomes a hastily rented apartment, a friend's spare room or an unfamiliar, empty house. Routines vanish, along with a sense of place in the world. The task of rebuilding - from picking up the emotional pieces to picking out a new sofa - looms large.

"It's a major loss of one's life, a loss of possessions, the death of a dream, of expectations, of objects that defined you and the life you once had," says Judith Bernardi, a Silver Spring, Md., psychologist.

"Whether you are the leave-ee or leave-er, there is something about starting over," says Dan Couvrette, whose own breakup 12 years ago inspired him to publish *Divorce* magazine, aimed at those he calls "Generation Ex."

The first challenge often is to find a new home, says Couvrette, who lived with a friend in Toronto for three months while vainly hoping to reconcile. Then he bought a house.

"I had three chairs for the living room but needed a couch. I had a microwave but needed a TV. My mother bought me a new set of dishes and cutlery," he recalls.

He and his ex split their art collection and he retrieved the sofa, which only reminded him of loss.

"I remembered that we moved it four times, that it was where the family gathered. It wasn't a happy period for me, so the space didn't make me feel any better."

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that as many as half of the 2.2 million marriages annually could fail for first-time brides and grooms under age 45; second marriages are even riskier, with a 60 percent divorce rate. That represents a great many separate dwellings to furnish each year.

"Marriage and divorce are the two life stages that stimulate the most furniture purchases," says New York-based marketing strategist J'Amy Owens, whose clients include home furnishings retailers. She speaks from experience, having been married and divorced twice. After her first breakup, she painted the living room vivid red and filled it with white and floral furniture; after the second, she bought and completely gutted a home.

"Women will start nesting instantly," says Owens. "Most men on their own are like bears in a cave. They have some funky lamp they can read by, a La-Z-Boy chair. ... It's really bleak — a mattress on a frame, no headboard, no nice linens."

Brette Sember, a former divorce lawyer outside Buffalo who has written four books on the subject, agrees. Women, she says, tend to redecorate immediately and often go girly in their homes. If men can afford to, they go high-tech, and seem able to tolerate low- to no-style interiors for a longer period than their onetime wives.

"He is wiring the house. He buys electronics, a big-screen TV, expensive stereo stuff, a computer, a laptop. Those are the toys he wants," she says. In time, he will also acquire "a nice comfy couch and a recliner. No table. They would eat on the couch."

Such behavior melds acquisition therapy with a frat-house ambience. "It's like being a single bachelor again," observes Sember. "They are starting over the way that makes them feel happy."

There are, certainly, ex-husbands who make decisive moves to resettle: hit a store, buy the basics and get it over with, says Amy Johnson, furniture manager of the Crate & Barrel in Tysons Corner, Va. "Some are just angry that they have to start over with nothing, but some look at it as a new beginning. 'I need a bed, a sofa, a table.' They are just looking for the essentials."

Children add an element of urgency in setting up a new home.

"Men realize the children need to be comfortable. If school-age kids are saying, 'Where is the kitchen table?' or, 'Here's a bed, but where do I put my clothes?' it will hit home sooner," Sember says.

"Often the woman remains in the home where they were together, particularly if there are kids. So she still has a sense of home," Sember adds. If she can afford it, "she is out buying canopy beds, wicker furniture for the bedroom, really feminine things. I know a woman getting a divorce who wanted pink sheets. Such women no longer have to incorporate that masculine thing in their home."

The bad news about splitting up is that you have to start over. For some people, that may also be the good news.

What we might think of as "divorce decor" can be liberating, an opportunity to follow an interior design muse, say some experts. Why not choose swagged and tasseled bedroom curtains, or throw out the hulking recliner, or replace that fussy Victorian parlor suite with chrome tables and low-slung leather sofas?

Decorator Darlene Mathis, who owns Collectibles Gallery in Washington, has a client who took only the artwork in her amicable parting from a beige-loving husband who couldn't bear strong colors.

"She now has a celadon green kitchen, a cherry bathroom and one room that is sun yellow with a floral sofa — something he never wanted to see. She calls it her 'coming alive room.'" says Mathis. "One of her frequent comments is she can put her beautiful bedspread on the bed and not have to worry about his shoes, his newspapers."

Many divorces are marked by the sort of pitched battles over possessions found in novels, movies and celebrity magazines. Since post-divorce money is often tight, such fights may be purely economic.

But not always.

"It isn't the intrinsic value, but an opportunity to torture each other," says Edie Guidice, a family mediator in Silver Spring, Md.

"Sometimes the impetus for one party is just to get out, and furnishings are a low priority, so they agree to give it up. Sometimes they say, 'It's my Great-Aunt Tillie's, and I don't care if I was the partner at fault, I want that bureau or my childhood toy chest,'" she adds. "Sometimes they fight over every little scatter rug, lamp, kitchen utensil. They go down to dividing up the potato peeler."

"The things take on meaning," says Bernardi. "If you are civilized, you take what you brought into the marriage and divide what you bought together. If you feel you have been victimized, you will fight over the stuff."

Interior designer Sarah Boyer Jenkins of Chevy Chase, Md., remembers a couple who fought bitterly over an antique highboy. "It came in two sections and neither wanted to give in. I said, 'Can't you put this together in some way so that your children will have the piece intact?' They did not. My client had the top, which was a little difficult to use. I don't know if the highboy ever got back together."