

PREFACE:
SOMETHING CHANGED

'Thousands of pounds for a piece of paper...'

Cynics often voice this opinion when asked to consider the value of marriage. In a bitter irony you could say exactly the same thing about divorce, only the signing of the papers takes place without ceremony and the cost is counted in far more than pounds and pence.

I always wanted to get married. I've always had a strong sense of the importance of family and for me marriage was an important step in becoming a family. I don't presume to judge how anybody else chooses to live, but it's important to me. And everything about my wedding was wonderful – the stag do (a world title fight, a natural for a boxing nut), the honeymoon (Las Vegas – and an early act of self-sacrifice in forgoing the opportunity to be part of the crowd for the fight scenes for 'Rocky Balboa' which were being filmed on day one of the honeymoon), and, above all, the wedding day itself.

Sound advice from friends helped to create the perfect day: the day goes quickly, make sure you take it all in; when circulating to talk to all of your guests make sure you don't spend too much of the day away from each other, and select the menu yourself instead of offering options – it will save you having to chase people up for their choices (soup and chicken, you can't go wrong). Of course, there were 'moments' in the planning stages (the usual, you know, arguments with family about guests), but all of that was forgotten about on the big day.

Sunday 4th December 2005

It was, well, it was perfect. Everything I could have hoped for and more. And, as a music lover the soundtrack had to be perfect, and so it was. Our first dance, Pulp's 'Something Changed'. A song from one of my favourite albums, released a week before we met and a soundtrack to those early days; a song quoted in her first

Christmas card to me. A song that became tied to a dance that felt every bit an act of love timetabled by someone up above.

Fast forward, Tuesday 5th August 2014

The day began as a significant day for me – a year to the day that I had returned to work after my second bout of severe depression, the first having struck me down during our first year of marriage. I had no way of knowing that my life was about to dramatically change course and I was completely unprepared for the new significance that this date was about to assume. A date that would mark the beginning of a very different life. The date that ‘Till death do us part’ became a hollow echo from the past, empty of the promise that it once held. The date that my marriage died.

The truth is that my marriage must have been dying long before that. I didn’t see it, or maybe I just didn’t want to see it. There had been warnings but somehow I really hadn’t faced up to them. In some ways I couldn’t face up to them. I was blinded to my wife’s unhappiness, blinded by my own belief in what marriage is: by my belief that my marriage would be for life, by the rock solid conviction that now we had children nothing would tear us asunder. I was wrong. Only realising that fact once it was too late is one of the hardest things I have ever had to face. Yes, there are regrets, but at a distance removed from that time, it is easy to look back at what could have, perhaps what should have been. Whatever led us to that fork in the road – at that time and for reasons I will probably never fully understand – it determined that our futures lay apart. Our sacred lifelong bond was broken. And it couldn’t (or perhaps wouldn’t?) be repaired.

I don’t know the official date that my marriage ended, the date that the decree absolute was passed. It doesn’t matter, my marriage died the day that my wife told me that she no longer loved me. At least that’s the day it died for me. But my belief in marriage never died; marriage was never a piece of paper to me and I still remember taking my vows, how deeply and sincerely I meant them. Being married – after ten years together – meant something. It felt different. It felt special. In marriage I believe that love isn’t just a feeling – indeed, at times it may not be a

feeling at all – it is a daily decision to face life, to navigate its peaks and valleys, together. It is a decision that we had taken for nearly nine years.

Where would I be now if we hadn't met on that day so many years ago? For most of us, any contemplation of this question on our wedding day leads us only to that day, the happiest day of our lives. Wherever we would be it wouldn't be here, and here is the only place we want to be. Upon divorce the question inevitably leads to an altogether different form of contemplation – at what point in our journey could we have taken a different turn, a turn that would have avoided the signpost to divorce? Or perhaps a turn that would have steered us away from this sudden adversary disguised as the person we married? But that path leads us nowhere for, once in our lives, that person was everything we wanted. And while acutely and painfully aware of what we have lost, we must not lose sight of what was gained; not only in joining together, but also in facing the challenges of breaking apart.

This is a story of facing those challenges, of starting over again and finding new meaning and new purpose in life. It is a story of coming to terms with divorce and becoming a single father. Of facing the spectre of mental illness, and of riding the rollercoaster of modern dating. It is a story of looking inside and facing the demons that live there.

This is my story.

PART 1??

WHEN THE LOVE STOPS: DEALING WITH DIVORCE

HERE GOES...

It's funny how life can be. In December 2015 I felt a compulsion to write. I was going through a difficult time after an arduous few years that included a severe depression and a divorce. That week it would have been my tenth anniversary. One of the family cats, part of the family that I lost, had just died. My ex-wife's new partner was moving in with her and my children. The woman I'd had a brief relationship with after my marriage ended had started dating somebody new. And my first Christmas alone was looming.

I'd never written expressively before but on this particular evening, alone in a Travelodge in Tamworth, I sat down and I typed. I really didn't know what I would say, just that I had to write to make some sort of sense of the thoughts, feelings and emotions that swirled inside of me. Writing was to be my catharsis, my way of avoiding the slide into the blackness that had engulfed me previously. I was going to make it into a blog (even though I had no idea of how to create a blog). So I began:

Well, hello, I guess. At this point I expect I am talking to a vast empty space but hey-ho we've all got to start somewhere. So, why blog, and why now?

I've toyed with the idea of blogging for over a year now, since I started feeling almost human again after my whole world was tipped upside down when my then wife told me that our marriage was over. In the year since my break-up, two things have loomed large in my life – divorce and dating. If I'm honest another big, dark D lurks in the background – depression; thankfully two break-ups in the last eighteen months haven't led to a third breakdown.

Why blog now? Well, post-divorce life is a rollercoaster of emotions, of good experiences and bad, of lessons learned and loves lost. Glowing optimism gives way to deep loneliness only for rays of hope to shine through again. Often within days. This seems to be my life's playlist and it's playing on repeat. For me, equally cursed and blessed with a brain that over-thinks and a lot of time for it to do its best and its worst, this blog offers an opportunity to make sense of the maelstrom of thoughts, feelings and emotions that divorce and dating bring. It also offers me the

opportunity to learn, to use my experiences to become a better person, a better parent and hopefully, in time, a better partner. To the right partner.

Is this something that many men do? I expect not, apparently expressing our deepest hopes and fears, sharing our highs and lows and opening ourselves emotionally is not the done thing for us men. Well, I say fuck that. We're human, we all feel these things to a greater or lesser degree and whether tens of people or thousands of people read this, I hope that somehow, something that I say will connect with somebody, will act as a light in sad times, and provide some laughs along the way.

I'm a lover of a good quote; with the advent of social media we see inspirational quotes every day – well, if that's your thing, one person's inspiration is another's clichéd bollocks I guess – and I will end my first ever blog with one of my favourites (and my next tattoo), from the late, great US comedian Bill Hicks:

'Don't worry, don't be afraid, ever, because this is just a ride.'

It's one thing feeling touched by inspiration when we are happily going about our days, it's another thing entirely to hold on to your belief in such words when life hits you where it hurts. But you know what? If there's one thing that life has taught me in my forty one years, it's that things have a way of working out. And in the rear-view mirror of our lives our blackest days can reveal themselves to be signposts to a better future to be enjoyed by a wiser version of ourselves.

Why now? I missed the real reason. This week has been the shits for me. I am hurting like I haven't hurt for a long time. But I can't allow myself to wallow in it; it will pass, I will learn, and as sure as day follows night, life will continue with all of the ups and downs that create the rich tapestry of our own personal stories.

Here's mine.

After downloading a blogging app, I released my thoughts into the world and I wondered... wondered whether the whole thing was a bit, well, trite and self-pitying, given the huge suffering that we see in the world and in the lives of others. Yes, I had doubts about what I was doing, after all it's not every day that you decide to place

your thoughts and feelings out there for all to see. I've always said that I don't care what others think of me and to an extent that is true – when all is said and done I've largely followed my own path in life. But can I really say that I'm not bothered by what anybody else thinks? Of course not. We are social animals and a large part of how we define ourselves is by the relationships that we have and the way that we are perceived by others. And I'd rather be perceived positively thank you very much.

We can't control how others will judge us nor allow ourselves to become preoccupied with what others think to the extent that we begin to turn in on ourselves, giving free rein to the negative voice that we all have. As I've learned to my own cost, it will be more than happy to do its worst given the opportunity. I was, and at times remain, conscious that people will judge me based on the way I express my thoughts and feelings to the world. I caught myself wondering whether one day in the future (or on many days...) I would read my words back to myself and cringe, wondering what the fuck I was thinking. Who knows, but at that time I knew that writing was good for me and was helping me a great deal. We have to follow our own instincts and for some reason mine told me that I had to write. Not that I should, or that I might want to, but that I had to.

Once the floodgates of my brain were opened and the words began to flow, they weren't about to stop. It seemed I had a lot of shit just waiting to be let out.

WHEN THE LOVE STOPS: PART 1

When the love stops
Hopes lost
Gone is our forever
Promises made
That we'd stay
Together whatever the weather

Till death do us part
Blown apart
Promises in tatters
Solemn vows
A love that's bound
For eternity, now shattered

Devastation hits
A tonne of bricks
Desperation writ upon me
Where to turn
How to learn
To live without her beside me

A dismantled life
Cut like a knife
The ties that bind, severed
Future days
An unfamiliar shape
Drifting, alone, untethered

I WUZ ROBBED!

Two of the more surreal incidents in my life involve being robbed. The first of these was in London around sixteen years or so ago (when I bought my first drink. Boom boom). Well, it was about as blatant as the everyday robbery that is London prices anyway. I was mugged by some apparent drug addict in broad daylight on one of London's busiest streets in the middle of the day. The guy loudly demanded money that I told him I didn't have, despite having a £5 and £10 note in my pocket, so he proceeded to march me to a cash machine to draw some out for him. He did kindly offer me a spliff for my trouble but I politely declined. Germs and that.

I remember feeling very calm throughout and considering my options. The best seemed to be smacking him and running away but I was on my way for a weekend back home in the North East and was carrying a heavy bag that I couldn't lug about in a chase. As he was clearly not the most stable of individuals there was also an obvious risk involved. So, I found myself following him up the street looking for a cash machine watching the multitudes of people passing by while thinking to myself how bizarre the whole situation was. In the end I couldn't be arsed with it and told him I had a train to catch so I'd give him a note from my pocket. Reaching blindly into it I pulled out the... £10. Of course, cheers. Still, I got my train and presumably he got as high as a kite. All's well that ends well.

The second incident was even more surreal. I'd had a long day working in London and returned to Darlington train station around 9.30pm. As I returned to my car, something looked off and I noticed that all of my paperwork was scattered on the backseat. I went to put my bag in the boot before checking things out, when I noticed movement in the car. Yup, some filthy scummer was in my car rifling through my things. Fair to say it wasn't quite as pleasant a surprise as the time an admiring passer-by had left a note with her phone number on my windscreen.

I used the button on my keys to make sure he was locked in and called the police, at which point I heard a noise and noticed my scruffy new acquaintance sliding his drug-addled semi-corpse through the smashed driver's window. My options appeared before me in a PlayStation RPG-esque slow motion time capsule.

'Get out of my FUCKING car!!!' I growled, with as much menace as I could muster.

'Is this yours?' (Errrrr, well it ain't yours, is it, shithead?)

'Yeah, now put my things down and FUCK OFF!' (Scrufter shuffles forward, puts hand in pocket).

'I'm going to stab you.'

You know what? He might have had a satnav and some sunglasses of mine but I had two beautiful children at home. He didn't have much to lose judging by the clip of him. I wasn't going to risk dying in a pool of blood in a shitty car park in Darlington in the pissing rain soundtracked by the groans of nearby cattle. So I ran, enough so he wouldn't catch me but all the while keeping him in my sights to get a good description. He was caught – an addict that had plenty of previous and was well-known to police – and I got my stuff back. He got a community order and I got £100 compensation deposited sporadically in my bank account a few pennies at a time until I'm about eighty seven. That'll teach him. (It didn't actually, he was in front of the magistrate again the following year and they sent me a letter asking me if I would let him off paying what he owed me. Errrr, good thinking, Batman. What do you think I told them?).

Why am I prattling on about this? Well, because I was struck by the similarities between the emotions felt during these incidents and their immediate aftermath and those felt as I was being told that my marriage was over that day in August 2014.

Surreal calm. Time slows and momentarily stands still. Adrenaline. Heart pounds. Breathing shallows. A rush of emotion floods through numbed limbs. Divergent paths appear ahead. The beaten, bloody remains of my life. I was robbed. I was fucking robbed!! How dare you?!?! What gives you the fucking right to intrude on MY life like this?!? Who the fuck do you think you are?!?

Helpless. Hopeless.

Anger, fear, denial, injustice, revenge, compassion, understanding, empathy, sorrow, anger, justice. Anger. Defeat. Emasculation.

Emotions ripping through me like a tornado, devastating, violating all in their wake. Hopes, dreams, stability, security, my imagined future and the future of my family.

Gone, taken. Mugged. Robbed.

Why? Seeking answers, seeking sense. Maybe I'll find it, maybe I won't. Maybe I will never understand the full truth, the full reasons. Maybe she doesn't know the full reasons herself knowing only that things couldn't continue, things had to change and the time had come to walk away, however hard that may have been.

Often answers aren't forthcoming in the short-term but distance, time and a broader perspective can and should be used to unwrap the layers of doubt and confusion and reveal answers to the questions that really matter: what can I learn from this? How did I contribute to the breakdown of my relationship? How can I take these lessons and use them to create the future that I want? That I deserve? If we are to avoid making the mistakes of the past we must recognise, accept and learn from them. Only then can we truly move forward.

EMBRACING THE UNKNOWN

No man is promised tomorrow
If it comes, it's without guarantee
That today will be better than yesterday
That you will wake beside me

The sun it always rises
But clouds can obscure its shine
Cold winds cut through its warming glow
With a chill that bites inside

Change is an ever-present constant
What is, becomes what was
Appreciate moments whilst they're here because
What is found can become what was lost

Embrace boldly life's uncertainty
Know that to fight it will hold you back
From opportunities hidden within the chaos
From moving forwards without looking back

Be resolute on the unknowing
And unknowable road ahead
Beautiful destinations await you
So calm the storm that's in your head

Let the turmoil that surrounds you
Be not your enemy, but a friend
That will lead you to a better place
Until you find it, it's not the end

The only certainty we'll get from life
The only guarantee, for sure
Is that it's what we make of it
And the power to change it lies with you

BECOMING STRANGERS

Stability. Security. Familiarity. Borrrring... What about adventure? Excitement? New experiences? Aren't they the things that give life its rich flavour? Aren't they the things that we will look back on and remember with a smile? Those peak experiences, the thrill of the new, the taste of the unfamiliar.

Well, yes, but by their very nature these are fleeting and transitory, and whilst these things are memorable the truth is that everything in our lives, no matter how new and exciting once, becomes familiar and, if we're not careful, over-familiar. When going through divorce we have to face losing everything that was once familiar, everything that comprised the day to day foundations of our lives. There can be few things that are more daunting and scary than having to face that journey on your own. At this time we realise just how much those familiar routines and rituals have come to define who we are, and we must face the questions of who we really are now that we are cut adrift from those things that acted as our anchors.

Who am I? At once both a small question and one of the largest that we can ask (and never really answer). During divorce this is something that we are forced to ask ourselves by virtue of what we are no longer – 'us'. Us, the thing that formed such a large part of who we have been – in my case for nineteen years – is no more. We must face up to becoming strangers to each other as we look to the future knowing that the person that has been a constant by our side, is now walking in their own, different direction. With each day, with each communication, with each silence, with each argument, we grow further and further apart, as the ties that made us 'us' become ever looser.

In the early days after separation, after the initial numbness, shock and despair have begun to fade, we begin to discover new things about ourselves. We can rediscover aspects of ourselves that have, perhaps inevitably, changed in accommodating ourselves to a life shared with another. This time of discovery and rediscovery can be exciting, and viewed from a distance it can take on a strangely nostalgic hue as our inbuilt defences remind us of the thrill and excitement we felt at

the start of our new journey whilst seeking to lock away the anger, pain and hurt that were also a regular feature of those days.

In hindsight I ran on adrenaline for many months after my separation, embarking on a new relationship, buying new clothes, going on holiday, buying a new home – running headlong into becoming the new me with a new life that would be better than the old one that I had lost. But there comes a time when the adrenaline stops, when the thrill of the new is replaced by the ‘new normal’, where the longing for those once ever-presents – stability, security, familiarity – becomes greater and greater. Never is this longing more pronounced than at Christmas, a time of routines and rituals built around the most important things that we have in our lives – our families and loved ones. Despite my many blessings I couldn’t help but ache for what I missed, that someone special with whom new routines could be made, new memories of shared love and laughter being created and a new future being built on love and the hope of creating something special and lasting.

That day will come. In the meantime, by adapting to a life that I never anticipated, I was becoming a new me, shaped by the challenges and adversity that always offer the greatest opportunities for growth and prepare us to accept life’s future gifts with greater appreciation and to hold on to happiness wherever we find it.

HOME

'There's no place like home.'

One of the most famous movie lines ever spoken; nowadays a well-worn cliché. When you no longer have a home, you gain a vivid insight into just how true this saying is. Another well-worn cliché,

'You don't know what you've got till it's gone.'

Indeed. Indeed.

I have always been conscious of the many ways in which I have been very fortunate, even blessed, in my life and I would often consciously remind myself of the fact. One of the things I was always grateful for was owning a warm, comfortable home for my family and me. Still, however much you are grateful for and truly appreciate what you have, it's impossible to understand the depth of just how much it means until it's gone. Loss gives new meaning to what we had and creates a yearning for the apparently simple pleasures that are no more.

When my wife and I first split, I left my home with a small bag of essentials and an empty bag of ideas as to what I was going to do next. First port of call was, of course, my parents. As I entered with the awful news that I had completed the family hat-trick of three broken marriages (within one year, but don't let that put any potential future Mrs Williams' off; we're quite the catch – form an orderly queue, ladies...) one of the first questions after the initial disbelief was, 'Where are you going to live?'

No. Idea.

To be fair, at that point I had no idea about pretty much anything, with shock doing the job that nature intended and numbing the brain and the senses to protect against the emotional trauma that it would one day need come to terms with (and share with the world; it's strange the roads down which life can take us...). Staying with my parents wasn't an option as one of my brothers had beaten me to it. The only option I could think of was one of my best and oldest friends who happened to

live locally and live alone. At times like this it's true that you see both the worst and the best of life, and amongst the very best things that life has to offer is the love and support of family and friends. My friend was unhesitating in offering me his spare room for as long as needed. I will be forever grateful to him for this, not only for providing the practical necessity of a roof over my head, but the wise counsel, sympathetic ear and welcome distractions that he offered throughout the four months that I inhabited the spare room. And also for the vacant look that accompanied my question about any house rules.

When your marriage has caved in, it's hard to think that you have fallen on your feet, but I certainly wasn't having to rebuild from rock bottom and that was a very welcome blessing. Those four months passed in a blur of a new relationship, new clothes, a fortieth birthday and the unravelling of a marriage and a family. And whilst the loss of a wife and a great deal of time with my children was predictably difficult – after all, having to face these things is something you never wish to contemplate – I hadn't anticipated how losing my home would affect me.

Going back and forth to my old home to pick up and drop off the children was a strange experience, and with each visit it became more and more apparent that home was no longer a concept that applied in my life. The stages along the way to detaching were odd, dictated by a growing sense of unease at being at my former home: from knocking on the door and walking in; to knocking and waiting at the door to be let in, to knocking at the door and waiting outside, no longer feeling comfortable setting foot into what was once my own little place in this big wide world. Over the weeks and months that followed my leaving, it was hard seeing my home become more and more not home, seeing the symbols of our shared life together being gradually removed and replaced until no sign of me remained and my home was no longer. This loss created a void, not just the obvious void of a place to call my own, but also in a missing sense of security and stability, a missing sense of having a place of my own in the world, and a missing sense of having somewhere that could offer stability for my children as we started to build a new life together as a different family unit. And it's funny what your mind – or mine at least – latches onto as a symbol of your loss.

My armchair.

Relaxing in my armchair, reading a good book, enjoying a cup of tea, listening to my children playing, all with a cat lying on the cushion behind me. That was my place. That was me.

DOWN AT THE END OF LONELY STREET

'Write about something that scares you.'

After around six months of writing, a new friend – a writer – gave me this advice to help me to develop my own writing and to push myself into new places. Hmmmm, there might be one slight problem with that: what the hell could I be scared to write about? Since beginning my blog, I had written candidly about my depression, feeling suicidal, my children living with another man, close encounters with sex people...

I racked my brains for ideas of what might scare me: sitting alone in my kitchen at the laptop I pondered; lying alone in my bed I considered; relaxing alone in my living room I debated with myself, eating alone in the silence of an empty house I dwelled. Alone with my thoughts; alone, searching for my fears. Alone. I realised, 'I am living what scares me. I am living my fears: I am living alone.' Okay, it wasn't strictly true, my children live with me half of the time; but there is still a sense of loneliness apparent in the role of single parent, where the everyday demands you once faced as a team you now have to face on your own.

I always liked being on my own. I like my own company and can think of many a worse way to while away the hours than burying my head in a good book, enjoying a cup of tea and watching the world go by. I have spent many an hour doing just that, and would often look forward to and savour such opportunities, those chances to escape from the busyness and repeated demands of everyday life. But these moments take on a different meaning when they cease to become moments, when they cease to become an escape from everyday life and instead become everyday life. When being alone is no longer a choice that we make, but a fear we must face.

When loneliness makes our acquaintance, it can take an almost physical form, of absence coming disguised as a heavy presence that we can feel beside us. A presence reminding us of our solitude, demanding to know why, in a world of seven billion people, not one of them is with us.

We live in an ever more individualistic age, an age where everything from consumerism to modern spirituality is geared towards self-actualisation, towards

claiming what we rightfully deserve, because we're worth it. Where independence and strength are found in not needing anybody else but in marching to the beat of our own drum, where the rest of the world can accept us as we are, on our own terms. An age where we ain't changing for nobody, mister, where what you see is what you get and if you don't like it then you know what you can go and do, don't you?

In our age of self, here's what I was scared to say: I get lonely.

I'd like to think I've been reasonably successful in my life: I love my job, I am strong, I am confident; I have close lifelong friends; I have wonderful children, and I have a home. I can go anywhere and do anything, I can go where I want to, when I want to, with who I want to. I am comfortable enough in my own skin to lay myself bare for all to see – and judge – as I seek to better understand myself, hoping that in the process I am helping others that wish to do the same. Yet it scares me to admit that I get lonely. That I am lonely.

As my fingers type out the words 'I am lonely', my mind seeks justification and prepares the case for the defence. 'I am not looking for sympathy', 'I don't want you to think that I'm some sort of sadsack', 'I'm not sat here crying into my Weetabix...' (really, I'm not). Because it is hard to write 'I am lonely' without a sense that it translates to 'I am needy, I am weak'. I am not. Here's what I am: human.

We all crave connection, it is a core part of the human condition and we are by design pack creatures, social animals. We are products of our environment and our identity is formed in large part through our relations with others. As we journey through life, our character is both developed and revealed in the roles that we adopt: son, daughter; brother, sister; friend, enemy; father, mother. Husband, wife. We are one of the few species that create lifelong partnerships and this expectation of how life should be is threaded through the very fabric of our society. When your lifelong partnership is terminated and you find you are alone, it is hard not to feel that something, someone, is missing.

I have met some wonderful people since I have been single, and I'm fortunate to live in an age where I have been able to virtually meet many more. We are able to connect and communicate with others more easily than we ever have before. But when the message alerts are quiet, when the notifications stop, the silence rings and

reminds me of what I miss. Someone special. Their smile. Their laugh. Their embrace. The hundreds of little things that add up to the biggest thing – that one person that will always be there, no matter what. Someone to laugh with, to make plans with, to dream with and to share my inner self with. Someone to unlock parts of me that otherwise lie dormant, to whom I can offer the gifts of my best self.

I don't need another half – the last time I checked I was pretty whole as I am (more whole than I would like to be in fact, but that's middle-age for you). I don't need anyone to fill a gap inside of me. I don't need anyone to help fill my time, and I won't accept 'anyone' in an attempt to lock the door to keep loneliness at bay. Because loneliness hurts, but settling for less than you deserve hurts even more.

DISCONNECTED

Disconnected

Cut loose from life

Conversation, laughter

All around me

Passing me by

Alone

Isolated from the world without

A floating island

In a foreign sea

LESSONS FROM A RECOVERING REJECT

Have you ever been rejected? Of course you have. We all have. And doesn't it just hurt like a...? I'll let you insert your own expletive. I'm not going to whine on about it, I'm not the first and I won't be the last. But no matter how many times it's happened to us, no matter that we know that in time we'll get over it, no matter how we try to distract ourselves... it still hurts like hell. So I'll go ahead and presume that we can all agree – rejection sucks. And no rejection that I've experienced sucks quite as bad as the rejection of divorce.

Not only is divorce a personal rejection – which is bad enough – it is the rejection of the shared promise that life held for you as you set out on the journey of marriage. Most painfully, it is the rejection of the family that you have built together. Many times in the year following my break up – as I adapted to my new life, as I struggled through the heartache of divorce, as I learned to live as a single dad getting used to spending half of my life away from my children – a nagging thought chipped its way to the forefront of my consciousness: this life was a choice. Only the choice wasn't mine.

The pain, the heartache, the arguments, the tears, the fear, the worry, the loneliness – this was considered to be the better path. This was preferable to staying married. It doesn't leave you feeling too great, let me tell you. And such thoughts can cause your sense of self-worth to take quite a battering, if you let them. So, what can you do about it? Well, if you want to get through it here's what you're not going to do: you're not going to wallow in self-pity. Of course you will feel sorry for yourself, perhaps deservedly so; and yes, you will hurt, you will feel miserable, you will cry and question why the hell it had to happen. That's okay, that's normal, and feeling that and not trying to deny it is healthy. But staying there, making it your default setting – not good. Yes, somebody has hurt you, and yes, you may be on the canvas, but the last thing you want is to be the person that is responsible for tolling the ten count over your crumpled figure.

What if you were felled by a punch below the belt? What if it just wasn't fair? What if you just can't move forward until you understand how the rules could have

been flouted so brazenly, so hurtfully? What about closure dammit?!? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Your relationship stubbed out like a half-smoked cigarette; you, discarded like the empty packet. Closure? You've got to find it in yourself. Whoever it was that put you on the floor, how they did it, why they did it... it's up to you to get yourself up again. And it's probably best to assume that the person that put you there isn't going to be the one that's holding out a hand to help you.

There are always lessons to be learned; lessons about ourselves, our partners, our expectations, our boundaries. Lessons about our hopes, our fears, our mistakes and our virtues. Lessons about our worth. About our self-worth. We can become better, wiser people in taking responsibility for our failings, in apologising and making amends where we can, in taking an honest look at ourselves and our role in our break-ups. But in so doing we also need to remember that we are imperfect creatures and our failings, our mistakes, should not be used as sticks to beat ourselves with and to further batter our tenderised self-worth. Instead we should consider them to be guides that will help us to write better stories in the future. Maybe sometimes we need to just accept that those that hurt and reject us are imperfect too. That they, like us, are just doing their best to find happiness in this sometimes messy, confusing world.

If you have been rejected, if you feel about as desirable as a Betamax video recorder or a Sinclair ZX Spectrum, remember that millions of people loved them once. Hell, even Skoda became popular. So, lick your wounds, learn your lessons and don't give up; for one day you will find your happy ending.

TIME, ALWAYS TIME

Post-break up I found myself listening to too much Damien Rice. A particular lyric played on a loop in my mind, from the song 'Older Chests', extolling the age-old remedy for the broken heart: time.

You don't expect to be broken-hearted in your forties, and you certainly don't expect it to happen twice in a year. Isn't that stuff for teenagers? Like any pain, when it's at its most intense we would give anything for it to stop. We can distract ourselves for a time but it's always there and it is scant consolation that deep down we know that there is a medicine, one true cure that will heal the broken pieces: always time.

There is no fast forward (or rewind), however much we may wish to accelerate (or avoid) the grieving process. But sometimes we do things that slow our progress. One of the ways we do this is with three small words: let's stay friends. By staying friends we initially shield ourselves from the worst of the pain, placing a band-aid over our wounds. In the familiarity of each other's company, we conduct a careful dance, trying to shield each other and ourselves from the pain that we know lurks underneath, whilst trying to find a gentler way to move on with a minimum of hurt. But the pain can't be smoothed away and it can't be avoided, it will distribute itself gradually over time until something causes it to grab you by the guts, forcing you to face it and to deal with it. Most likely this will happen when someone new enters the picture, when your friendship is forced to take a back seat and your special place is reserved for another, carrying with them the hopes that were once to be found within you. And the pain won't be denied any longer.

Time, always time. It must be allowed to do its work to replace pain with acceptance, and regrets with hope for a better future. But to allow this, for things to work out fine – according to Guns N Roses at least – we need something else too, patience. Patience is indeed a virtue but it is a difficult one to apply, particularly in the fast-paced world in which we live where such store is set in immediacy and short-term wish fulfilment. And what we need here is trust. Trust that the future does indeed hold better days, and in moving towards them we can patiently use our

time to learn the lessons that are available to help us to understand why love wasn't enough, and what we can do differently in the future to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Another song that struck a chord with me in the immediate aftermath of separation was 'The Masterplan' by Oasis, in which Noel Gallagher sings beautifully of the need to sail our words away, with acquiesce and with hope. When relationships break down it is easy to be filled with regrets, to think about the words that we could have said and the things that we could have done differently. At times amidst the raw pain of separation, regrets can be all that we seem to have, and we can scramble around frantically in our minds looking for the things that we can say or do now to make a difference, words and deeds that could somehow turn back the tide and make things right. We can be torn between thoughts, to fight or to accept, to hold on or to let go, to keep in touch or to break away completely. There are no firm rights or wrongs, we can only do our best amongst the rising tide of our emotions to ride the wave that feels best at that time, especially when we know the journey will be difficult whichever choice we make.

Having made difficult decisions, it is inevitable that we shall look back and question the wisdom of our choices, and at times to allow regrets to seep in and to infect our thoughts. How we act in these turbulent times is one of the challenges that we must face on our way to what we hope will be a better future. Because in the end we need to be able to look ourselves in the mirror, to be able to walk tall with our dignity and self-respect intact. There are things we may need to say and do to bring closure, one way or the other. And when we do so, amidst our hurt and confusion we must strive to be true to our higher principles, to follow the course that feels right in our heart, with sincere intent, without fear, and without wishing to cause hurt to others.

In saying what we need to say, we leave ourselves emotionally raw, swaying between the hope that things can be different and the fear of facing what we have lost and having to accept that we will have to find a way to move on and let go. But in being true to ourselves when we act, in acting out of love and not fear, in being prepared to accept whatever outcome knowing that whatever happens we did our

best, then we will find our peace and one way or another we will move on to what life has in store for us next.

Sometimes our best isn't enough to get us what we want, and at those times acceptance can be difficult to come by. But find it we must, because as long as we are true to ourselves we will always be moving towards a better future.

HOPE

Hold on to the faintest of glimmers and know, that this dark winter is

Only but a season, and though it may be cold and dark, I

Promise you, that

Everything is going to be alright, your light will shine again

SINGLE PARENTHOOD FOR BEGINNERS

'Daddy.'

There is no sweeter sound in the world than the word Daddy from the mouths of your children. Of course there are also times when its sound is rather less than sweet – 'Daddy, that's not fair!', 'Daddy, I'm finished, can you come and wipe, I think it's a messy one...' – but for my purposes here let's stick with the sweetness. And from sweetness let's jump to the bitterest pill that you are forced to swallow when your marriage collapses – you will no longer be spending every day with your children. You will wake up and they won't be there. You will arrive home from work without them to greet you. You will go to bed at night without being able to check in on them and kiss their foreheads. These realisations are sudden and devastating. They are accompanied by fear over how their lives will be affected and a crushing sense of failure that your children, the most precious people in your world, will no longer have a stable, loving home with their mummy and daddy.

Then comes the heart-wrenching, inevitable realisation of a new truth: that sooner or later another man will become a significant person in the lives of your children. Nothing can prepare you for this hurt, pain and sense of powerlessness. And so you set about doing what you can to create a new life for them, new routines, always making sure that they know that you love them and are there for them even when you're not there physically. Looking back from a distance this period of adjustment seems like a blur, a foggy period of transition from everything that was stable and secure to a new world of doubts and just doing my best. A new world of visits to familiar places with a new and unfamiliar definition of family, akin to a body that is missing a limb and must learn to adapt and function in a new way.

One of the things that you realise – and is frequently pointed out to you – is that this situation isn't unusual anymore. Of course that is scant consolation – everybody wants what is best for their own children and being a 'broken' family (or a 'different' family) never figured in my vision of the future. A source of real sadness for me was the realisation that, as my children were young at the time of my divorce, they will

grow up with little or no memory of our complete family despite the fact that my ex-wife and I were together for nineteen years. But then many children have to grow up with all-too vivid and painful memories of their parents' divorce. There is always a silver-lining of sorts to be found, I guess.

Without the counterbalance of a wife to raise your children alongside you, you can become all too aware of your personal deficiencies. As a man with a daughter, I am now acutely aware that I am pretty useless when it comes to doing her hair, and deficiencies in my organisational skills in the home, though improving, are frequently thrown into sharp focus: when getting everything ready for school in the morning; when trying to keep on top of homework (for under five year olds, don't get me started on that subject), for making sure there are enough clean school uniforms when every day a white polo shirt comes home covered in paint and ink... Somehow though you manage, and as in everything you just do your best.

Even though you know that is all that you can do, and even though you know that the most important things that you can give to your children are your time and attention – and even though I am one of the fortunate fathers that has shared custody of the children – there is a little part of you that questions yourself, that wonders whether your children prefer the life that they have with your ex. For the children, shared parenting in two different homes becomes the norm, and although any reasonable, mature consideration of the situation concludes that this is not a competition between parents, in the inevitable moments of doubt and loneliness the niggling question arises. And then the time comes when another man enters their lives.

As hard as it is to face losing your wife and the thought that she will, sooner or later, love another, somewhere underneath it all is the awareness that so too will you. But nothing can really prepare you for another man entering the lives of your children. For the thought that no matter how good a father you can be, no matter how special and unique and wonderful your relationship with your children is, there is somebody else that will become a significant influence in their lives. If I'm honest there are times when I'm not sure I will ever really come to terms with this. You get on with it – after all, what choice do you have? – but it leaves its mark on you, on the dreams that you had for your future, and on the anticipation of the special family

events that you looked forward to when you embarked on the wonderful and scary world of parenthood – birthdays, graduations, weddings, grandchildren – suddenly there is a new and unwanted presence in the storybook of their lives.

I've worked hard on greater acceptance; I strongly believe that if we are to truly make the most of the limited time that we have on this earth we need to accept the world as it is and not how we thought or wished it should be. There is a saying that it is not the strongest that survives but the most adaptable to change and I guess that is true of families; through adversity we can learn how fantastically adaptable people can be to their circumstances and there is no one certain way to raise a happy, secure, loving family. But adapting to a new definition of family isn't easy and it isn't quick, and for me a sense of stability is something that took a long time to find. Sometimes I still doubt that I have. But when I'm with my children we still smile, we still laugh, and together we are creating many happy new memories.

Above all we know that we will love and be there for each other. Always.

THE GREATEST OF FRIENDS?

We frequently read of the apparently idyllic marriages of celebrities biting the dust. Following the announcement that Gary Lineker's marriage had ended, the Match Of The Day presenter insisted that he and his ex-wife remained, 'very close and the greatest of friends'. I sincerely hoped this to be true. Divorce can be a brutal process that I wouldn't wish upon anyone and if from the wreckage of broken promises and dreams a genuine friendship can be salvaged, then that is to be respected, applauded even. So why did I feel so cynical?

I count myself among those whose first reaction to those words was something along the lines of, 'yeah, right, course you are'. After pause for reflection I felt a little crappy at taking such a dim and condescending view of the statement. I do believe that people can be friends after divorce and there are plenty of examples to attest to this. So what was my problem? Well, I wasn't in that place, and for the near three years since separation I have been a very long way from 'the greatest of friends'. Will I ever get there? Honestly, I don't know.

On first separating, it is difficult to conceive of the possibility that the person you have shared so much with for so long will fade out of your life, or worse, become an enemy. Of course you are aware of what divorce can do to people, how appallingly people that once swore to love, honour and cherish each other until death do they part can treat each other.

But that won't happen to you, will it? You're above that, and nothing can take away all that you have shared. And anyway, you know each other, really know each other; whatever happens you will be dignified, you will be civil. You're good people. I thought so too. As hard as it was to hear, I could accept the reasons for our separation and, with time, came to terms with the fact that the rest of our lives were to be spent apart from each other. I came to truly believe that in the long run I would find greater happiness than any I had known before. Yes, the dust would settle, we'd adapt to our new circumstances and build lives of our own. We would share 100% commitment to doing what was best for our children and, in time, we would be friends. Well let me tell you, it ain't easy...

A few weeks after the revelation of the final demise of our marriage, and in the early stages of recovery from that savage blow to the guts, I told those around me that I held no grudges, that we would divorce amicably and yes, in time we would be friends. Sadly in today's society, divorce has touched many families and I came to face many knowing looks and sympathetic, but not utterly convincing, nods of heads. 'If I had a pound for every time I'd heard that...'

I took advantage of the free legal advice that I was entitled to – discovering that it was free for a reason – before selecting a solicitor to act on my behalf in the divorce, which I was keen to finalise as soon as I could. For right or wrong, I'm not comfortable with the anticipation of known troubles ahead, my attitude to dealing with such situations is pretty much akin to pulling off a plaster – do it quickly and get the pain out of the way. But really it doesn't work like that. For me, being divorced was important symbolically in helping me to move on and accept that the marriage was over, but the feelings that surround it don't follow any externally imposed timetable. In dealing with the powerful and painful emotions and rituals of divorce, the idea of a present or future friendship slipped further and further away.

It is odd to enlist a professional stranger to act on your behalf 'against' the person that you thought you would be spending the rest of your life with. But there is no getting away from the fact that divorce is an adversarial process and throughout it our thoughts turn from 'we' to 'me'. What is best for me and for my future? Recognising this attitude in your ex is painful and difficult not to take personally, proof as it is that you no longer matter in the way that you once did, that their plans for the future no longer concern you and what is best for your future. Because now that is solely your responsibility. And in the case of a mother or father, that responsibility is not just to you but to your children too. In the confused, unfamiliar emotional terrain of marital breakdown, professional legal support – detached, practical and logical support – can be essential.

As divorces go I would say mine was one of the 'better' ones, not exactly a 'conscious uncoupling' (ughhh) but no 'War Of The Roses' either. The major issues that can make divorce so painful and that can set out the stall for years of battles and recriminations – child custody and money – were settled quickly and with little conflict. But friendship was, and remains, elusive. Why is this? And does it point to

some flaw in me? I'd like to think I'm a good person and can honestly say that I wouldn't do anything to deliberately hurt anybody. That's not to say that my actions haven't caused hurt to others, but I do my best to treat others how I would hope that they would treat me. And as such I would have thought that future friendship would be possible for me. But in the end there is no rulebook in the complex and often messy world of human relationships.

Some people grow closer after divorce, others develop a lifelong bitterness and enmity. I've never wanted to live with anger and bitterness, recognising how they could consequently poison other significant relationships in my life and damage my happiness and health in the process. But in contemplating and dealing with what you have lost, it is perhaps inevitable for most that anger and bitterness will have to be faced and tackled. I carried that anger and bitterness and at times it got the better of me, but it has passed. Still, the seeds of friendship have yet to sprout.

When a marriage ends, it is rarely a truly mutual decision. Even if both parties can recognise the need to go their separate ways, it will usually be one person that has instigated the start of that journey. It is unlikely that the decision will have been taken quickly. As such, one party will have a head start in the processing of the emotions of divorce, and in anticipating and preparing mentally for a different future to the one that was for so long taken for granted. Being at such different stages of the grieving process can make it difficult for each to comprehend the behaviours of the other, and as you begin to become strangers, friendship can become a distant goal.

I have found that in becoming strangers and in establishing separate lives, we are given the space to heal, to move on and to live in a different present. In doing so, over time maybe the door to some sort of future friendship can open. But divorce leaves a scar and I'm not sure that it ever fully heals. I guess the ability to live with that scar, to wear it as a sign of the adversity that we have faced and overcome rather than as an ugly sign of failure, is part of what will determine whether friendship is possible.

For now I am living for me and for my children. And, hopefully, the lessons that I have learned will help to build a strong foundation for a future relationship that will last the course; a relationship where we will grow closer together with the passing of

the years rather than grow apart. I'm not perfect. I've made mistakes. But I can look myself in the mirror and be comfortable with how I have dealt with my divorce. I can look my children in the eyes and tell them that I did my best and I never compromised my values. And nothing is more important than that.

A LIFE SEGMENTED

When I was eight, I fell off my bike and dislocated my elbow. It bloody knacked. The pain wasn't helped by the friendly doctor in Accident & Emergency who helpfully advised me that 'crying isn't going to help'. Yeah thanks, wish I'd thought of that.

It was months before my arm would fully straighten and, although it hasn't caused any long term problems, it's always felt... different. Not in any way that I can explain, not in terms of any tangible feeling, just different. It could be a psychological thing, I guess, or it might just be that we have a natural sense of our right arm feeling different to the left. Who knows? Anyway, what's the point of that random bit of rambling? One word: dislocation.

'Dislocation: disturbance from a proper, original, or usual place or state.'

This, ladies and gentleman, is how life has felt to me post-divorce; dislocated. And I'm not sure when, or even if, it will be fully straightened. So much of the last few years has been spent adjusting: to being a single parent, to being single, to living alone, to dating (and then not dating, then dating, then not dating); to being a different person to who I was before, cut loose from the conventions of marriage to navigate a foreign landscape, without a map. So many things to try and make sense of, so many circumstances in which a new definition of self is needed, a self untethered from familiar roles and routines and guided by the compass of one's own instincts. For better or for worse.

Prior to divorce, my anchor point, my point of stability, had always been my family. That's not to say life was all happy clappy (well, obviously, I suffered with depression and ended up getting divorced), but there was a sense of wholeness about my life. And now, well, now there isn't. That's not to say I don't appreciate what I have in my life – I truly do know how fortunate I am to have family, friends, a lovely home, a great job – but life feels very different these days. My life has lost that sense of wholeness and instead it feels segmented.

One of the recommendations for a psychologically healthy life is to not put all of your eggs in one basket, to focus on developing and maximising various aspects of your life so that if there are difficulties in one area, there are plenty of other areas from which meaning and satisfaction are gained. One of the reasons ex-athletes often struggle to cope with retirement is that the single-minded and necessarily selfish pursuit of achieving goals in one aspect of life – essential if one is to reach the summit of one's sport – is not conducive to functioning healthily within the 'normal' world inhabited by the ex-athlete. Like I say, I'm very fortunate to have various 'segments' to my life that are hugely gratifying to me and provide a real sense of purpose and meaning but it's difficult to shake that sense of dislocation, of a segmented life lacking in structure and cohesiveness.

I expect that many will wonder what the hell I'm going on about – if I'm honest, I'm not really sure myself – but I know that that sense is there and when I've mentioned it to others in a similar situation they have identified with it too. Still, I'm finding it very difficult to articulate. I know that deep down I hope to find that sense of wholeness, that feeling that things are as they ought to be and that life feels settled again. Don't get me wrong, life has taken on a spontaneity this year that has at times been exciting, but the thrill of a rollercoaster lies in the brevity of its twists and turns, after a while you start to feel sick from lurching in every direction and you want it to stop.

Will I find a sense of wholeness? I'm not sure. I could be all deep and profound and talk of a future shift within myself that allows me to feel settled and at peace regardless of whatever chaos may surround me. I would love to think that could happen but I can't honestly say I expect it anytime soon. Ultimately my anchor – my family – has taken on a shape that I never expected nor wanted and it will never be whole in the sense that it was. I guess I have accepted that to a point but the truth remains that it still doesn't feel 'right' to me that half of my life is spent away from my children, that half of their lives are spent away from me.

That's my normal now, but normal will never be what the majority of my life has been spent believing it to be. Life's good, but it's not right.

10 THINGS TO EXPECT WHEN YOUR MARRIAGE ENDS

You know what really sucks balls? Getting divorced. Big time. But three years on from the end of my marriage I've learned a lot and I'd like to share some of the key lessons in the hope that they may help other men – and women – going through the turbulence of a broken marriage. So without further ado, let class commence.

1. Who the hell are you?

Remember your wedding day? Best day of your life, right? A day shared with the most special person in your life, your wife. Remember her? Be prepared to wonder where the hell she went. The journey from life-partners and soul mates to warring adversaries can be alarmingly quick and can leave you shell-shocked. Divorce is, by its nature, an adversarial process and despite best intentions, the changed focus from 'we' to 'me' quickly creates a distance from which your now ex-partner can become barely recognisable.

2. Who the hell am I?

If you have been part of a couple for any length of time, chances are you will have made compromises, compromises that enabled you to live as a couple and to respect each other's differences. Upon separating you will find yourself rediscovering old parts of yourself and also discovering new parts. These discoveries can be exciting, intoxicating even, but can also lead you – and those around you – to wonder who you are now that you are no longer defined by the role of husband.

3. She's going to sleep with other men

I can't speak for the women here but I'd place a large wager that for 99% of men a predominant, sickening fear in the wake of marriage breakdown is that their loved one will, sooner or later, be in the arms – and the bed – of another man. And fuck me, can that drive you mad. What can I say? It's going to happen. It's going to hurt. And there's nothing you can do about it. Well, you could shout, scream, cry, beg and

make an all-round arse of yourself but I'd recommend you don't. Believe me, your future self will thank me. And anyway...

4. You're going to sleep with other women

Now we're talking! Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty you're free at last! Free to get yourself back out there and have some new X-rated adventures. It is undeniably exciting to realise that, having chosen to spend the rest of your life sleeping with only one person (I hope), there are at least one or two other women out there that are going to let you do rude things with them. Things could be worse.

5. You've just got to feel it

Marriage breakdown and divorce hurts. Like, really hurts. Hurts. Like. Hell. Love, security, home, family life, friends, stability, money, comfort, the future – all can be lost in the wake of divorce and all will be affected to a greater or lesser extent. So, it's going to hurt. Why bother pointing out the bloody obvious, Matthew? Because we don't like people to know we're hurt, do we? Especially us blokes. Often we don't even want to admit it to ourselves. We are from the land of the stiff upper lip, of stoicism in the face of setbacks, a land where we pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and get on with it. But there's no getting away from it, it's going to fucking hurt and you'd better accept that and you'd better let yourself feel it. Cry, shout, scream, hit a punchbag as hard as you can, whatever it takes to really feel it. We might want to run from our feelings but we can't hide. They're there, and one way or another, some day, some way they are going to let you know about it, no matter how hard you try to fight against it.

Getting pissed, getting laid, getting away – these can help you through the acute phase and numb the pain but they won't take it away. Unless you allow yourself to face the pain and feel it, you'll never be free of it.

6. You have no idea...

Divorce is a minefield, and potentially a bloody expensive one at that. Do your homework. Read articles, get legal advice as soon as possible and talk to people that have been there – and believe them. Of course, everyone's experience is different

and one person's tale of hell doesn't have to be a portent of things to come. But... it's going to be tough and there's no escaping the fact. However amicable, however reasonable, divorce is traumatic. Accept this, but also know that you'll get through it and one day it will be but a painful memory, and one that may well lay the foundations of future happiness.

7. You'll be so lonely

Loneliness, bone-aching loneliness, will make your acquaintance, both the physical loneliness of being on your own and the emotional loneliness of being alone. As the saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum and the new space in your life will need to be filled. The natural tendency may be to fill it with somebody else but this isn't necessarily the best option, particularly if you are dealing (or not) with the emotions of your break up and/or you don't really know what you want other than to not feel lonely.

8. You're free, to do what you want to do

There are other ways to tackle loneliness. Being newly single is an opportunity to travel, make new friends, spend time with old friends, pick up an interest that you've lost along the way or discover new things that alight your passions and offer the opportunity to meet and connect with new people. The internet places a world of opportunity at your fingertips – activities to try, people to meet, groups to join – if you're going to be single, it couldn't happen at a better time.

It's not often we are able to do what we want to do and live how we want to live without having to consider the wishes of someone else. You don't know how long this opportunity will last; make the most of it.

9. Really, you have no idea...

Dating, bloody hell. If you are emerging from a long relationship, be prepared to be dazzled. Modern dating for those of us who are new to it all can be bewildering, bizarre and bloody brilliant, sometimes all at the same time. Tinder, texting, swiping and sexting, searching and settling – the options are limitless. It can be great fun but it can also be disappointing and dispiriting.

Try not to have too many expectations, accept it will probably take a while to find someone special – if that’s what you’re looking for – take things as they come and enjoy it. You may need to develop a thick skin as you ride the dating rollercoaster but use it as an opportunity to meet new people and to meet the new you, to discover what it is you really want. But please, do it with decency; if you find yourself dating in your thirties and forties, chances are you’ve been through some shit and so have the people you’re going to be dating. Have some respect for that and don’t mess people about.

10. Most importantly, remember...

You’re going to be alright.

PART 2
BATTLING THE BLACK DOG:
DEPRESSION

I HAD A BLACK DOG

As I faced up to divorce and its attendant changes and stresses, a dark spectre lurked on the fringes of my consciousness. Winston Churchill used the metaphor of the black dog to describe his bouts of depression and – in the only sentence I will ever be mentioned alongside Winston Churchill – I too am the owner of a black dog. It wasn't my intention to be a mental health advocate when I began writing. In my early blog posts I referred to my previous struggles with depression, and the resulting feedback from others that were struggling prompted me to want to tackle the subject head-on. In reality, if I was to share my journey truthfully I couldn't not tackle it.

I have always sought to be open about my struggles; I like to try and find the positives in the challenges that I face in my life and being an open person by nature I felt something of a responsibility to try and help others by challenging the stigma and misunderstanding that exists around the illness. And make no mistake, depression is an illness.

At its worst, it is an all-consuming, torturous, desperate, lonely, terrifying illness that has the power to strip you of your very sense of self, to crush your self-worth and your dignity as you try and fail to face the obstacles, both real and those that are perceived in your damaged mind, of everyday life. Depression closes around you like a prison and from within its walls it is all but impossible to conceive of a way to escape. You are no longer you, and it is incredibly difficult to comprehend just who and what it is that depression has turned you into.

At its most severe, depression offers not a single moment of respite from its cruel grip, the physical sensation of your head trapped in a vice with a storm of terrifying thoughts constantly battering your mind, shaking, sweating, losing the ability to think and speak coherently, and the ability to spontaneously smile and laugh cut from your being as if by a surgeon. This suffering can persist, unrelenting, for months, and in some people for years. And so, exhausted, the only haven appears to be beneath the covers, where we find one final cruelty as our ability to sleep is lost.

There is no exaggeration here. And whilst it is impossible to conceive of unless you have experienced it, by writing about it I have always hoped that more people can at least open their minds to the idea that depression is a real and serious illness. The sense of disconnection from others and, critically, from yourself makes depression a cruelly isolating experience and as such the words of others who understand and who have prevailed over the illness can be a huge source of comfort and support when these are in desperately short supply.

They can also help those that are around the sufferer to better understand what they are going through. The sufferer's pain can be compounded by the sense that they are somehow to blame for their illness, that some failing or weakness on their part caused it and that their continuing condition is their fault for not being stronger or more resilient. It must be said that being around somebody in the grip of depression is a draining, isolating and emotionally exhausting experience itself and relationships can be rocked to their foundations. Families and friends do their best but whilst they can visit the sufferer in their prison, they can't break down the walls, they can't provide the key. Only the sufferer themselves can do that, but the love, support and care of others, including qualified professionals, are an essential part of the cure. And when the depression passes, the bonds of love and friendship can be stronger than ever before.

Therein lies an important truth of depression, it passes. There is no magic solution, no immediate fix, but a gradual process of recovery facilitated by a combination of things that together help to lift the sufferer out of despair and into the brightness of new days of hope. And there are truly no brighter days than those that follow the darkness of depression.

It is difficult to accept that a black dog lies within. Following my first depression I managed to convince myself that it was a one-off event and that in my recovery lay the proof that I had conquered whatever it was that had caused it to strike. I had to reassess that view when it returned to viciously shake me from my complacency. Now I try to maintain a balanced view of myself as someone that has the seeds of depression within, whilst not accepting as inevitable the possibility of a future episode.

Vigilance is key. We need to understand depression – as far as it is possible to understand an illness whose roots are still largely unknown – and understand ourselves, our triggers, and the sometimes subtle behavioural signs that indicate that the black dog may have started padding along in our slipstream. It's important to keep busy, take one day at a time, and be around others, whilst recognising that sometimes it is necessary to take time out to rest. And always to know that 'this too shall pass'.

Depression can be very difficult to admit to but I don't fear being thought weak for admitting my struggles, because I know from experience just how much strength it takes to overcome them.

THE PROMISE OF DAY

Tear off my skin, climb outside
To escape the captors that imprison my mind
Depart the body, broken and used
Dragging my demons, to my soul they fuse

Extinguishing hope, narrowing view
Life as I'd known it, over, through
The life that's coming, distant, unclear
Suffocating, breathless, blanketed in fear

A void widens afore me
The abyss, it calls my name
Hell affords its invite
Another broken soul to claim

As swirling madness batters
All that once was good
My silent scream, echoes
Throughout an empty wood

Stripped of all that held me
Raw flesh angrily exposed
Liberating loneliness
It's me and me alone

Descending through the darkness
Weighted by my blackened soul
Praying I find rock bottom
It's my only chance to grow

I will endure the torture
From the ashes I shall stride
In the light of a new morning
I will see with brand new eyes

Scars no longer angry
Mere patterns of the past
Wisdom sealed within them
To guide along the path

The sun it always rises
Shadows never stay
Persevere through the darkness
Night holds the promise of day

I'M NOT OKAY (& THAT'S OKAY)

'Hi, how are you?'

'Yeah, I'm alright thanks, are you?'

Well, no actually I'm not, I'm not okay.'

I'm not okay. Three small words, three of the biggest words you can ever say out loud. Yet, to so many people – and especially men – these words are almost impossible to say. Some people retreat ever further into themselves, others overcompensate by being overly cheerful as they try to maintain the illusion that they are fine.

No matter who surrounds us – friends, colleagues, loved ones – sometimes we feel all alone and all we want is for one person, just one, to take us aside and ask, 'Are you okay?' The conversation that opens this chapter was the first conversation I had with my doctor as I slid into my first crippling depression. It was April 2006 and the black dog had been following me for around three months, and things were getting worse to the point that it was seriously affecting my ability to function in daily life. My grip was loosening day by day as my mental health deteriorated and it was becoming more and more apparent to me that this wasn't just going to go away.

It was only at this point that I began to realise that what was happening to me was an illness; it was something that was happening to me, not something that I was doing to myself by 'being miserable' or failing to 'cheer up'. I was suffering with clinical depression.

Since that first horrific episode, I suffered a major relapse in 2013 that lasted four months. Through these experiences I have learned to recognise the signs that things are not quite right with me; on their own these signs can seem pretty innocuous but if I have a number of them together and they last more than a few days then I know that I need to be more vigilant with and take better care of myself. These signs include:

- Lack of motivation

- Feeling tired all the time
- Waking early/disturbed sleep
- Withdrawing and wanting to be on my own
- Lack of spontaneous thought
- Loss of interest in things that I usually enjoy, • especially listening to music
- Lack of patience and becoming snappy

This increased self-awareness is an important part of recovery and being able to recognise potential triggers helps me to guard against complacency and tells me, 'Hey, be careful; you're not okay, but you will be.'

Why is it so hard to admit that we are not okay, that we hurt, that we're struggling? Logically we know that everybody struggles at some time in their life, and yet when it's us, we worry about what people will think, we don't want to be thought of as 'weak' or to 'let people down'. Maybe we don't want to admit our 'weakness' to ourselves. Here's what I've learned: admitting that we're not okay takes strength. If doing so were weak then it wouldn't be so damned difficult. Confronting our fears, admitting that we need help – that takes strength and that is why it is often such a big step on the road to recovery, to taking some control over the situation and to dealing with it.

Will other people think we're weak? Maybe some will, but that speaks about them and not about us. We could all use help sometimes and during such times our priority should be in seeking it, in caring about what's best for us and not the opinions and prejudices of others. And wouldn't most of us want to be there for a friend or family member that needs us? At such times we really do see the best in people and we can really learn to appreciate the value with which others hold us.

Sometimes what we see as weakness is actually just a characteristic of who we are, free from judgements such as 'strong' or 'weak'. The very characteristics that hurt us may actually serve us well at other times, in other circumstances. We are all a mixture of weakness and strength, of resolve and vulnerability, and we will all face illness, heartbreak, grief, loss and confusion in our lives. The more willing we are to accept that then the more likely we are to be able to ask for help when we need it. This is important. As male suicide rates show, lives depend on it.

As even the former world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury admits that he needs help to deal with mental health problems maybe it's time to truly recognise that even the biggest and strongest amongst us can feel broken and damaged sometimes. Admitting you're not okay may be one of the hardest things you ever do; it is also one of the strongest.