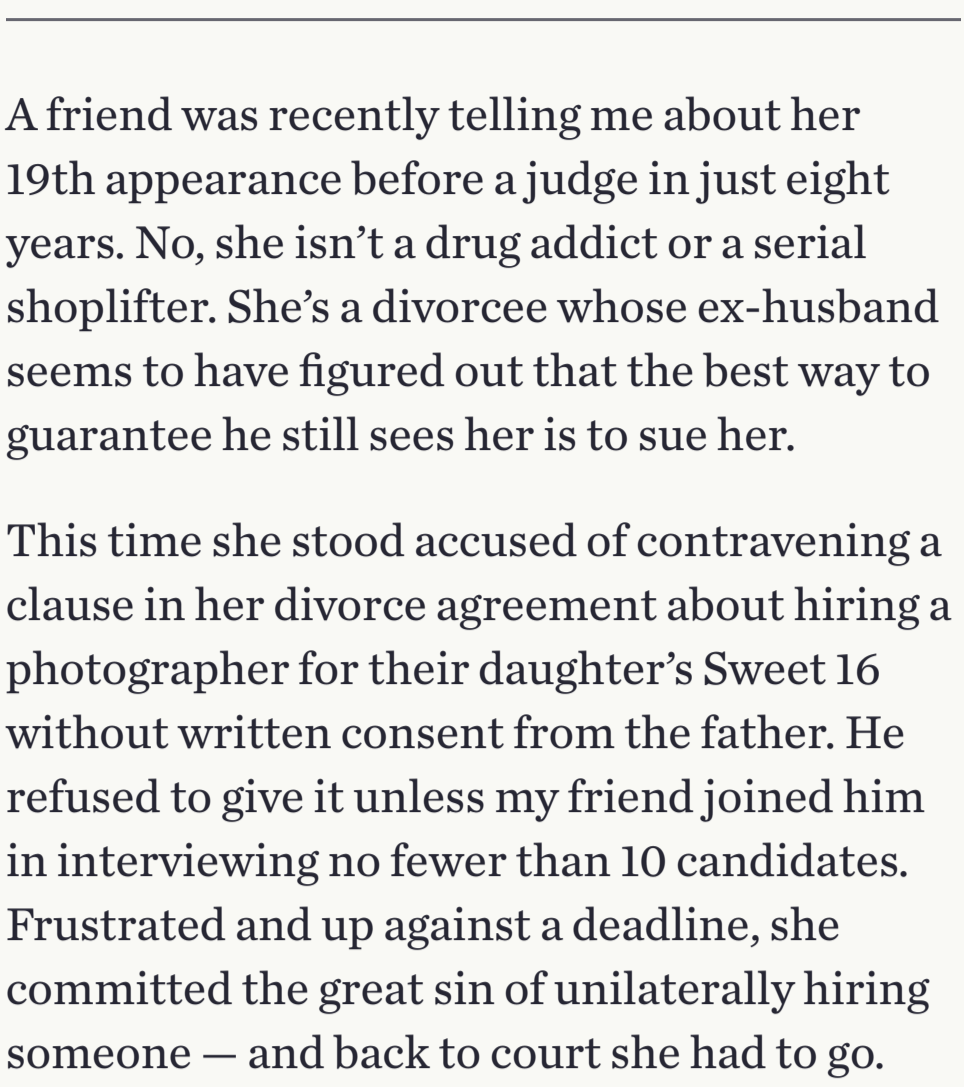


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# The Cocktail Party Contrarian: Divorce Stories Aren't Always What They Seem

While there are often two versions of every marriage, that's not necessarily true of every divorce. Sometimes, one party becomes unhinged and unleashes unnecessary drama and avoidable despair.



Jennifer Pahlka via Wikimedia Commons.

REBECCA SUGAR Friday, March 4, 2022

A friend was recently telling me about her 19th appearance before a judge in just eight years. No, she isn't a drug addict or a serial shoplifter. She's a divorcee whose ex-husband seems to have figured out that the best way to guarantee he still sees her is to sue her.

This time she stood accused of contravening a clause in her divorce agreement about hiring a photographer for their daughter's Sweet 16 without written consent from the father. He refused to give it unless my friend joined him in interviewing no fewer than 10 candidates. Frustrated and up against a deadline, she committed the great sin of unilaterally hiring someone — and back to court she had to go. Her ex- tells people she refuses to co-parent and uses her money to marginalize him.

Other friends hear her story and sympathize, but are quick to qualify their acceptance of her set of facts with, "Well, there are two sides to every story." I am not so sure. While there are often two versions of every marriage, that's not necessarily true of every divorce. Sometimes, one party becomes unhinged and unleashes unnecessary drama and avoidable despair. Their "side" isn't a representation of the truth, but a desperate attempt to obscure it. Sometimes it isn't "everyone's fault" that divorce lawyers have second homes in Southampton.

Listening to another friend describe her post-divorce journey of spiritual growth, you might mistake her for a courageous, jilted ex-wife finding her way in the world as a strong single woman. That is the "side of the story" she tells. What she doesn't talk about is her night in jail after attacking her husband with a knife, or her promise to ruin his name and career after he refused to take her back. She has scrubbed her story of her now six-year campaign of harassment, hacking, threats, and frivolous lawsuits. Her public tale isn't one perspective on a set of events, but a complete erasure of them in an attempt to create a more flattering narrative for herself. We used to call this lying before "personal truths" were a thing.

A male acquaintance divorced his ex-wife 16 years ago. During the pandemic, his now-adult son reached out to him for the first time since high school. The boy's mother had successfully alienated him from his father, who may have earned his wife's ire as a husband but who had never been less than a devoted dad. If there is another side to the story here, it isn't the ex-wife's. It is the son's, whose relationship with his father has been irreparably damaged.

Good divorces happen but more often they are bad. Responsibility for a certain percentage of those lies at the doorstep of one bitter ex-spouse with an incentive to spin. We are all so conditioned to think in "two-sides-to-every-story" terms that sometimes we miss the fact that instead of two sides to the story, there may be two sides to the person telling hers. The two-sides trap leaves those unfortunate targets of ex-spouses who speak out of two sides of their mouths with little recourse. All they can do is hope the rest of us remember that divorce can be dirty.

Wouldn't it be lovely if the truth always resided somewhere in the middle? It would be so much easier to locate.

REBECCA SUGAR Ms. Sugar is a writer and philanthropic consultant living in New York. She is married and has twin teenagers and an English Bulldog named Batman.

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## Conversation

1 Comment

What do you think? Comment

Peter Hirsch 2 days ago

I know so many stories like this, have a couple of friends right now going through D, in most cases (because I'm older) there are no kids to deal with, still takes forever because one side is unreason...

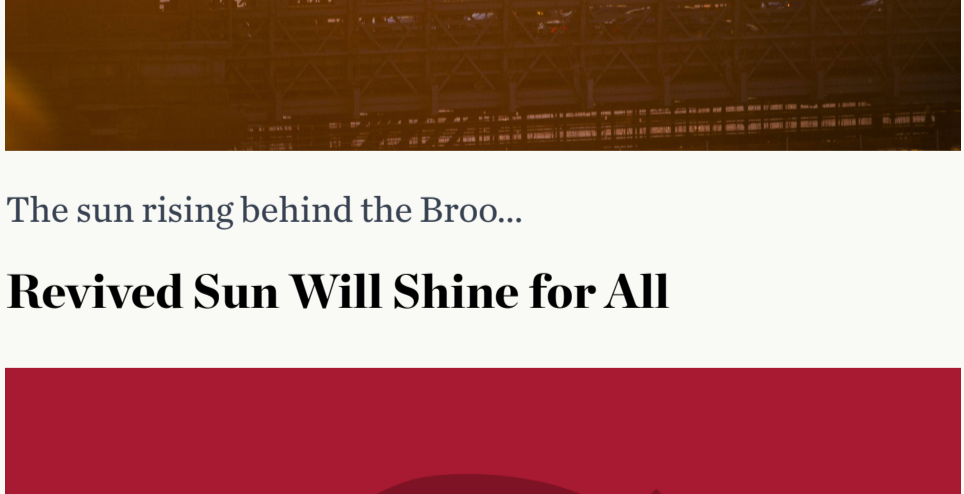
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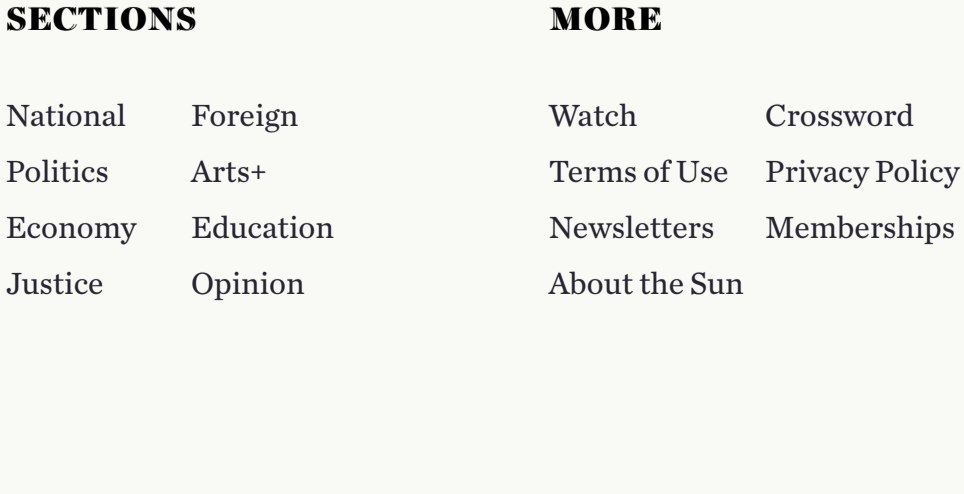
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