

FIRST PERSON

Divorce Stinks, But It Could Be Your Superpower

A divorced mother of two finds a new sense of pride in learning how to manage a home and much more, on her own.



By Hanna Ingber

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Three years ago, as I contemplated ending my marriage, I looked out my kitchen window and saw my husband mowing our lawn. I didn't yet know if I'd be able to manage on my own, living in the New Jersey suburbs as a divorced mother of two. Yes, I had spent years alone when I was younger. As a journalist, I had even moved to Myanmar and India by myself. But this was different. Could I manage a house alone? Could I mow the lawn?

That summer, I started experimenting with taking on some of the tasks that he had always done.

First up: cutting the grass.

Luckily, my husband years earlier had bought us an old-school mower you push yourself. There was no way I would go near a motorized one. But a push one? It seemed unlikely to hurt me.

One day I went out to the garage, grabbed the mower and tried it out. I first pushed it the wrong way; it did nothing. But after a lap or two down the lawn, I turned it around, and it worked. The grass got shorter. This was surely a sign: If I needed to, I could get divorced.

As the months went on, and our marital problems intensified, I kept testing my abilities. And when I couldn't do something myself, I figured out a plan for how I would tackle it. One night as I made dinner, I looked at a bottle of pasta sauce and wondered what I would do if I had no one around to open a particularly tight bottle. I decided I'd buy lots of bottles so that I always had a backup available.

It made no sense why our married roles had been so gendered. We both worked full time, and we lived in a super-progressive town. But at home, my husband was responsible for the car and house maintenance. When we bought the house, I didn't even follow along as the inspector pointed things out. I had no interest in learning that stuff, mostly because I assumed that I'd never understand it. I was happy to divide and conquer, with me focused on our babies.

Then came divorce. Suddenly, I had no one to nag about taking the AC units out of the windows. My retirement account? Ripped tire on the car? Taxes? My husband was so much better at those things, but he was gone.

Divorce is miserable; I don't recommend it. But I've got to say, it's forced me to do all sorts of things I never imagined I could.

The summer after we separated, I drove five hours with the boys, then ages 5 and 3, to a cabin on a lake in the Adirondacks. I packed our car with what seemed like every toy and snack and item of clothing we owned. I was terrified to go away alone with them, and extra Lego sets were my security blanket. There were moments on that trip when I imagined that the other guests were looking at me with pity, wondering why I didn't have a partner helping me. I asked myself that, too.

I kept that vacation mild. Rather than take the boys hiking up a mountain alone, we grabbed our bug collecting equipment and took a walk around the lake. Instead of going out on the water, we climbed in and out of boats on the dock. But we did it. I did it.

The boys and I spent the first two years after the separation having only Netflix and Amazon Prime on our TV. Figuring out all of the streaming services felt too overwhelming to me. Initially I assumed that I'd wait until my older son, Isaac, figured it out for me. But Isaac was still only in first grade, and with a pandemic upon us, we needed Disney+. I ordered a Fire TV stick online and followed the directions. It worked! We too could watch "Soul."

Then the real challenge came. Our divorce process was finally concluding, and I ended up with the marital house. And by "house," I mean a fixer-upper.

Many of my married friends had told me that I should keep renting. A house was a lot of work for anyone, let alone a single mom with a busy job and during normal times a commute into the city. But I wanted a place that was mine. A place where I could buy a couch just the right size for my living room because it would likely be my living room for a long time.

I knew that just because I was a single woman didn't mean that I shouldn't also partake in homeownership. But I was scared.

The day I got the house back was the blizzard of 2021. We got so much snow I couldn't even get out of my rental to go see my new home. Suddenly, I was responsible for shoveling the driveway and sidewalk of a home I couldn't access. And I had my job to do. I was a mess. Then a friend put me in touch with a new neighbor, and she put me in touch with a student who was shoveling homes in the neighborhood. Again, it miraculously worked out.

I moved (back) in, and it's been a lot. I set to work getting the house into shape. Along the way, a handyman showed me how to work my steam radiators and turn off the boiler. I hired someone to fix the downspouts. (Yes, I now know about downspouts.)

On day four I went to retrieve some of my pandemic toilet paper and heard a gush of water coming from the basement. The basement. When I was married living there, I never went into the basement. This time, I had no choice. The sump pump was spewing a volcano of water. My heart raced. I called a plumber who walked me through how to turn off the pump and what to do about the water. My basement flooding was my biggest fear of owning a home by myself, but I managed it.

Later my family told me how proud they were of me for not panicking. (But I did panic, I said.) I was not proud at that moment. I was exhausted and overwhelmed and sad that I had no one to help me. And I still had to put the kids to bed.

Other moments were better. A friend recommended a product that restores grout, and the boys and I spent a few evenings fixing up my kitchen floor. (As we huddled over the tiles, I said to them: "Isn't there a great sense of accomplishment doing it yourself?" Aarav, now 5, responded: "No.")

They've helped me fill bags with yard waste, plant flowers and seed the grass. Technically, Isaac, now 7, seeded the grass and the sidewalk — but I'll take it.

One afternoon I grabbed my lawn mower and set about cutting the grass. It was the same mower I had watched my then-husband use years earlier. The same one I had tested out before making the leap. This time, the mower was barely cutting anything. I was appreciative that he had left it behind for me. (We too were making progress.) But I worried it was now too old, and I'd have to buy a new one.

I looked a little closer. Maybe if I just undid the screws and moved up the piece that ran along the grass, I could get a closer cut. I tried it. I readjusted the left piece, and then worked on the right. I prayed that the blades weren't going to suddenly slice off my fingers. They didn't. I aligned the right side and tested the mower. It cut the grass, even better than before.

Showing myself that I can do these things has felt incredible. But it's not enough that I know. I want to climb onto my roof and tell all of New Jersey. (Don't worry, I'm still not crazy enough to use a ladder.)

I have always thought of myself as a strong, independent woman. But getting divorced made me realize all the things I didn't do and had been relying on my husband for. I wish this hadn't been our path, and I am looking forward to the day when I'm not doing everything alone. Yet I must admit, I am super proud of the woman divorce is forcing me to become.

I took the boys back to the Adirondacks this summer. This time, we didn't make it a mild trip. We went out on boats and hiked up a steep mountain. As we neared the peak, we got lost in the woods, alone. I immediately imagined us lost forever. But after some backtracking, we spotted the trail markers and together found our way to the top. The tough climb made the view that much more beautiful.

Hanna Ingber, an editor at The New York Times, writes essays that poke into the messiness of (single) parenting.