



Tom and Phyllis in 1984 with Emma, aged eight months

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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