The Great Divorce

There once was a man whose wife was dead. She was dead when he fell in love with her, and she was dead for the twelve years they lived together, during which time she bore him three children, all of them dead as well, and at the time of which I am speaking, the time during which her husband began to suspect that she was having an affair, she was still dead.

It has been only in the last two decades that the living have been in the habit of marrying the dead, and it is still not common practice. Divorcing the dead is still less common. More usual is that the living husband—or wife—who regrets a marriage no longer acknowledges the admittedly tenuous presence of his spouse. Bigamy is easily accomplished when one's first wife is dead. It may not even be bigamy. And yet, where there are children concerned, the dissolution of a mixed marriage becomes stickier. Thirteen years after they first met at a cocktail party in the home of a celebrated medium and matchmaker who had been both profiled in The New Yorker and picketed by conservative religious groups, it was clear to both Alan Robley (living) and Lavvie Tyler (deceased), that there were worse fates than death. Their marriage was as dead as a doorknob.

At least, that was what Alan Robley said.

Alan and Lavvie Robley-Tyler's children had communicated to their father, via the household planchette and Ouija board, a desire to be taken to Disneyland; because divorce is always hardest on the children, and
because Disneyland offered, at that time, an extraordinary discount to the dead, their medium had agreed to meet Alan Robley and his wife at Disneyland, which was only a fifteen-minute commute from her home, provided Alan Robley-Tyler pay her admission as well as the usual fee. Besides, the medium had always loved watching amusement park visitors wait in long, orderly lines. She found it comforting.

The medium’s name was Sarah Parminter. Her movements were economical: abbreviated and curiously ungraceful. Alan Robley imagined that this was so because she could see, at all times, the dead crowding around her. He himself had grown accustomed to moving slowly when he came home from work, in order to avoid unexpectedly stepping on or passing through his wife, or one of his three children. It takes great effort for the dead to make the living see them and therefore mixed marriages rely on dedicated dead-spaces: areas of floor and furniture that have been marked out with special red tape, red tile, squares of red fabric. (The children of the living and the dead most often take after their dead parents. Life, like red hair or blue eyes, is a recessive gene.)

Alan Robley-Tyler longed for a better, less complicated relationship with his children. He wanted to know them better. Who doesn’t?

Sarah Parminter and Alan sat on an uncomfortable bench beneath a pink bougainvillea. The three Robley-Tyler children were ignoring a you must be this tall sign. There are advantages to being the child of a mixed marriage. The usual rules don’t apply. Their mother, Lavvie, was sitting in the crown of the bougainvillea above the bench, shaking down the papery flowers. He loves me not. He loves me not. The bougainvillea hung like tiny lanterns in Alan Robley’s longish hair and in the curl of his collar. He ignored them. Lavvie got up to worse things. At one time, he’d found her behavior endearing.

Lavvie Tyler had stopped living sometime around the turn of the century. She’d been twenty-two and unmarried. She’d died of tuberculosis. Even in death, she still trembled and coughed, silently, so that the bougainvillea shook too. She was both older and younger than her husband. Marriage and the birth of three children had only made this more true.

“Explain this to me again, Alan,” Sarah Parminter said. “You say that you and Lavvie have talked about this a great deal. You agree that there are irreconcilable differences. You say you both want this. This divorce.”

“Yes,” Alan said. He looked away. He wore an expensive shirt, in a shade of red that the dead were supposed to find attractive. He wore lipstick in the same shade of red, and there were greasy little flecks of it on his front teeth. Red fingernail polish. No doubt the soles of his shoes were red as well. Was it for Lavvie, despite their difficulties, or for his children? To draw them near? Sarah wondered why the living, who were so very much more solid, after all, than the dead, so often looked shifty and deceitful to her. She tried not to be prejudiced. But the dead were so beautiful, so fixed and so fluid, like sheets of calligraphy. They belonged to her, although she told herself that she was wrong to feel this way.

“Lavvie says that this is your idea, not hers,” Sarah said. “That’s what she’s telling me. She says that there have been difficulties. She admits that. She says that the children take up a great deal of her time. She says that your romantic life has suffered. She says that there have been arguments. Smashed dishes, icy silences, bouts of unearthly weeping. She knows that she has a temper. But she says she still loves you. You don’t understand her, but she still loves you. She says she wonders if you’ve met someone else.”

“I don’t believe this!” Alan said. He laughed. He looked around, as if Lavvie might suddenly, finally, at last, materialize. But he never once looked up at the top of the bougainvillea. “Why is she saying this? I sat up all Tuesday night with the Ouija board, helping Carson and Allie and Essie with their homework, and she never said one single word to me. Carson said that Lavvie was down in the basement folding laundry, but I think it was one of the kids who was folding laundry, covering up for their mother. I think Lavvie has a boyfriend. A dead boyfriend. Some days I don’t even feel like the kids are mine. I love them to pieces, but it’s hard for me, thinking that they don’t really belong to me. They already spend so much time with their mother. Who knows what she says to them about me?”

“Lavvie says you’re jealous of her friends,” Sarah said. “She says she’s the
one who should be jealous. She says that you only married a dead woman because you like the people at your work to think you’re trendy. She says she can see the way you look at living women. You’re always flirting with women at the grocery store. She knows you spend hours looking at porn online, and you don’t even think about whether the children are there, too.”

Silence. Sarah could hear Alan Robley-Tyler’s teeth, grinding together like pieces of chalk. Lavvie trembled in her tree.

“Where are the kids?” Alan said. “Do me a favor, Sarah, tell the kids not to get too far away. Last time we came, Essie got lost. Apparently she just kept getting on different boats at It’s a Small World. She was singing ‘It’s a Small World After All’ in people’s ears, only she kept changing the lyrics. All these kids were getting off the ride in tears. If Carson wants to go to Frontierland, he should come ask us. We can all walk over.”

“They’re still in line for Space Mountain,” Sarah said. “They’re beautiful kids, Alan. And even though this must be difficult for them, they’re handling it so well. You and Lavvie must be very proud. Lavvie says she falls in love with you again each time she looks at them. They look so much like you, Alan.”

Alan’s red lower lip was trembling now, too. Tremble, tremble: Lavvie in the bougainvillea. Tremble, tremble: Alan’s lip. Sarah Parminter realized that she had begun to tap one foot in sympathy. She stopped her foot and made herself look at the faces of the people waiting in line. Dead people hung in the air, their heels resting on the shoulders of living people, and living people walked right through two dead people who were making out, well, having sex right there in line, practically, but nobody got upset. It was astonishing how well the dead and living got along under normal circumstances, just so long as they could ignore each other.

Alan said, “I only look at other women because—because when a woman walks by, I think maybe that’s how Lavvie looks. Maybe Lavvie walks fast like that. Maybe Lavvie’s ass moves like that when she’s walking. And when some woman laughs, I think maybe that’s how Lavvie sounds when she laughs. I know Lavvie’s hair is blonde. I find her hair on the sheets sometimes, and in the drain. She’s told me that she has brown eyes. I know how tall she is. Sex. Ah, sex isn’t very good right now, but sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I can feel her lying on top of me. She’s so heavy! She’s cold and she’s real curvy and she doesn’t breathe, but sometimes she coughs and coughs and can’t stop. She just lies there on top of me, with her cheek on my cheek. And I think she’s smiling, but I don’t know why she’s smiling. I don’t know what she’s smiling about. She won’t tell me. She writes stuff on my skin with her finger, but I don’t know what she’s writing. Sometimes the kids get in bed too, and do you know what that’s like, rolling over and there are a couple of dead kids in bed with you? And Lavvie, I don’t know if Lavvie bounces when she walks, or if she trips over things, or if she still thinks my jokes are funny, or if she even listens when I’m talking. If she’s even there. Or if she just laughs at me when I’m yelling at her. I don’t know when she’s being sarcastic or when I’ve really hurt her feelings or when she’s teasing me. I know she’s there, but she seems so far away. Sometimes when I come up to bed, I think maybe somebody else has been up there. Not one of the kids, or Lavvie, but somebody else. Some other dead person. He goes through my drawers and he throws stuff around. If it isn’t Lavvie’s boyfriend, then it’s Lavvie or one of the kids. But they swear up and down it isn’t them, they say I’m imagining things. And then I think, so okay, even if you’re really my kids, you’re her kids, really. Because they’re like her. They’re just like her. They’re dead too. So what I keep thinking is that this was a mistake right from the beginning. Like people say. Maybe the living shouldn’t fall in love with the dead.”

Now Lavvie had come down out of the bougainvillea. She was curled up in her husband’s lap, gazing up at him. Alan didn’t seem to know she was there. Lavvie didn’t say anything, she just winked at Sarah Parminter. It was a furious wink. Isn’t he a card? Isn’t he a blabbermouth? He never shuts up. She said to Sarah. Talk, talk, talk. Let me tell you what I did today, Lavvie. Let me tell you what this guy said at work. Blah, blah, blah. Don’t you just want to eat him up? If he leaves me, I’ll make him wish he were dead, too.

“What’s she saying?” Alan said. “She’s saying something to you, isn’t she? Where is she? You can’t believe a word she says. You think that just because you can hear her talking, just because you can see her, you think
you know what she's thinking. You think you can tell if she's telling the truth. But I've lived with her for the last twelve years and she's a liar and a bitch and she's a whore. Every time she opens that cold little mouth of hers, it's because she's thought up some new lie. Every time she says she loves me. If she could lie about death, if she could make people believe she was a living woman, she'd lie about that, too, just because.

The bougainvillea was getting thick with dead people. They hung down from the branches and listened to Alan. Lavvie listened hardest of all. Her face shone with wisely approval.

"Alan," Sarah said. "Let's try to talk about this in a calm and reasonable manner."

Recently, Sarah Parminter's clients had been coming to her, wanting her to fix their love lives. If you read horoscopes, you'd think it was something in the air. Perhaps soon the alignment of the stars would change, all recent unhappinesses and catastrophes would be reversed and people would fall in love all over again and life would be good and death would be good too. Perhaps Sarah Parminter's own horoscope had advised her not to meddle in other people's affairs at this time. But Sarah didn't believe in astrology. Her cousin Fred was also a medium, and his clients were just as difficult, just as unhappy. Sarah and Fred sometimes sat out on her balcony in the airless, dirty yellow afternoons, watching cars go up and down the ramps of the I-5. They talked about work. Opposite the apartment building, there was a dead end sign across the street which someone had turned into dead end. Every time she saw it, Sarah Parminter thought about going down and adding an ER. But Fred didn't have a great sense of humor. He claimed it had been eroded away by contact with the outer world. But Sarah remembered him as a child, and even then he'd never enjoyed the sort of practical jokes that the dead liked to play.

Fred had a new client, a man named Sam Callahan whose wife was also dead, just like Lavvie Robley-Tyler. Only the Callahans had been married for decades while both were still living, and the problem was now that she was dead, his wife didn't want to have anything to do with Sam Callahan.

As far as she was concerned, the marriage was over. But Callahan couldn't let go.

Fred didn't approve of the way that Sarah coddled her clients. When Callahan came in, what he'd said straightaway was, "I know who you want to talk to. But she doesn't want to talk to you."

Callahan was a big man with small hands. He said, "I was just hoping that I could talk to her one more time. I messed up. I'm sorry. I wanted to explain. I need to tell her how much I loved her. Please make her talk to me."

Fred said, "You do know she's dead, right?"

There had been a boy at Callahan's school, Paul. That had been his name. After he did what he did, he still wasn't very popular, but he became more distinct. He came into focus.

The name of the girl he'd done it for: Popsicle. A nickname, because she was so cool.

Everyone at school followed Popsicle around. Even the girls had crushes on Popsicle. People gave her things. Sometimes at recess there was an ice cream truck parked across the street. Somebody bought Popsicle a cherry popsicle. Paul came back with six ice creams—a screwball, a popsicle, two creamsicles, a fudge pop, an ice-cream sandwich. He spent all his lunch money. His hands were full of ice cream. He went and stood in front of Popsicle. She said something like, I can't eat all those.

Paul said, "I'll eat them for you. To prove how much I love you." As if they'd been arguing about it. Nobody even knew if he'd ever said anything to Popsicle before.

All the other kids stood around and watched. Those who weren't there, who weren't watching, were pretty sure later on that they had been there: they'd heard the story so many times. Callahan thought he'd been there, although really he hadn't. When he fell in love for the first time, he remembered Paul's hands, Popsicle's polite, confused smile.

Later on, everybody watched Paul eat stuff, except for Popsicle, who hid in the girl's bathroom every single time. Nobody had crushes on her
after a while. Nobody else loved her as much as Paul.

In his locker, Callahan had kept a list of everything Paul ate. It was a love poem, a grocery list, secret evidence: Paul loves Popsicle. Paul ate a few ants. He drank someone’s milk, which had gone off. Everyone smelled it. Paul ate a little glue booger that someone brought him. He ate dead leaves, and a ball of hair that someone took from Popsicle’s comb. He ate a piece of raw meat a girl stole from her mother’s refrigerator. He ate other things, all year long. The teachers never saw what was going on.

The next year Paul didn’t come back. Neither did Popsicle. Someone made a joke about it. Perhaps Paul had eaten Popsicle.

Callahan didn’t know what had happened to Paul or to Popsicle. Fred, on the other hand, knew what happens to everyone eventually. He could see the map that Paul and Popsicle had left on Callahan’s face, just like Callahan’s wife could see it now that she was dead. The dead can afford to see more than the living, Fred said. “She says you didn’t really love her. And that she’s better off without you. She hopes you grow old and die alone.”

Callahan said, “I’m paying you so you can say these things to me? This is bullshit! And how do I even know if she’s really here? Why should I believe what some guy says? Why would she talk to you and not to me?”

Fred said, “Remember you’re talking to a medium. Not a therapist.” (He tried to sound reasonable; detached rather than snappish. He knew as he said it that he sounded like Callahan’s therapist.) “Laura says you have more money than you know how to spend, and she says she hopes you spend it all on charlatans and quacks. Don’t get angry at me. I’m just saying this because you want me to tell you what she’s saying.”

Callahan said, “Laura, if you’re here, talk to me—why are you talking to him, and not to me?” Like Fred, he was trying his best to talk reasonably. Soon he’d be throwing furniture around. “Don’t you know how much I love you?”

She knew. Even Fred knew. But what did how much matter to a dead woman?

Fred said, “She says you ought to take better care of yourself. Your refrigerator is empty. She wants you to go out and buy some groceries. She doesn’t want you to starve to death. She doesn’t want to see you anytime soon. She’s got her own afterlife to live, her own things to deal with. This is an important time for her. She has things to do.”

“So is that it?” Callahan said. “Is that all you can do for me?”

Fred shrugged. “Do you want me to produce some ectoplasm? A souvenir of the spirit world? Would you like to talk to somebody famous? Marilyn Monroe?”

“You are one real son of a bitch,” Callahan said. “So how do you like the way this asshole talks to me, Laura? You approve?”

Fred said nothing. Laura said nothing, either. She indicated, however, that she’d like to write something down.

The table where they were sitting was solid oak. Round. No sharp edges. It was good to have a nice heavy piece of furniture to sit behind. Both the living and the dead liked to throw stuff around, as if it proved something. Fred kept a pad of paper and a ballpoint pen on the table. He picked the pen up so that Laura could write down exactly what she wanted to say. He didn’t watch as Laura wrote. It was uncomfortable, watching someone else use your hand. The fingers always looked too wriggly. Stretched. Laura dragged the pen across the page as if Fred’s fingers were bags of dirt.

Callahan kept on talking to Laura. He had this feeling that Laura was hiding somewhere in the room, maybe under the medium’s floppy toupee, or under the oak table. Laura had never been good at keeping still. She liked to swim laps until she could barely climb out of the pool. He couldn’t help it. He said, “Do they have swimming pools? For dead people? Does Laura still swim every day?”

Fred tried to keep a straight face. Swimming pools? He couldn’t wait to tell that one to Sarah. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “They have swimming pools. Laura’s learning to play bridge. And she’s thinking about getting a dog. You know, for companionship.”

Callahan thought about that. He could learn how to play bridge, if that was what Laura wanted. He was sure he could feel Laura moving
around the room, brushing her fingers against the walls, sliding behind the curtains at the window, touching the backs of the chair where he sat, but Laura never touched him. What if she touched him and he couldn’t feel anything? How was all this supposed to work, if they tried to make it work? They’d been married for almost thirty years.

Fred read what Laura had written. Terrible handwriting, even for a dead person. “So she wants you to throw a dinner party. But she doesn’t want you to invite anyone else. This is the menu she’s giving me. She says, you want to prove you love her, then prove it. Make her dinner.”

Callahan said, “I used to make dinner for her all the time.”

Fred said, “You’ll notice I haven’t asked you why she’s so mad at you. I’m not going to ask you, either. I don’t like to pry.” He looked down at the list Laura was making, and then back up at Callahan. “But yeah, she’s pretty pissed. This is one weird-ass menu. She says ants, a piece of chut—sorry, chalk, her handwriting is execrable—old milk, vinegar, popsicles, erasers, grass, sawdust, sand, dirt. She says if you really love her, you’ll show her how much you love her.”

“So what did he do?” Sarah Parminter said, after a while. “Is he going to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Fred said. “I just thought it was kind of funny. He wrote me a check and it bounced. And she said he had lots of money too, so maybe it wasn’t really his wife, even. Maybe it was just somebody who wanted to fuck with him. I wouldn’t eat grass just for a dead girl. Not unless she was paying me.”

“You haven’t mentioned your mother yet,” Sarah Parminter said to Alan Robley-Tyler.

“Why?” Alan said. “Is she here? Does she want to talk to me?”

“She’s over there with the kids,” Sarah said. “They’re teasing a Goofy.”

“She’s good with the kids,” Alan said. But he didn’t look over to where a crowd was gathering around the Goofy. He wasn’t going to tell his kids to leave the Goofy alone. Living parents had a hard time disciplining dead children. You had to indulge them, even when their fun got a little vicious. You had to pretend that they didn’t belong to you. “I mean, even when she was alive, she was good with them. She was so excited to have grandchildren. She read to them all the time.”

“She didn’t like Lavvie much,” Sarah said.

“No,” Alan said. “They didn’t get along.”

“Your mother still doesn’t approve,” Sarah said. “She still thinks Lavvie’s too old for you.”

Lavvie said something.

“Lavvie says your mother is a real, ah, bitch.”

“Fuck Lavvie,” Alan said, but he didn’t really mean it. And now he was watching the Goofy stumble around, and he was feeling an odd jealousy. Here he was, all dressed up in red, and the kids still preferred a guy in a fur suit to their own father. Dead people had favorite characters at Disneyland. Goofy, for example. The costume was so baggy. That silly hat. You could poke him in the ass, really jab him good, and he never moved fast enough. Minnie Mouses were also popular with dead people. They liked hiding her pocketbook, or putting things in it.

The Goofy was shouting obscenities now. Living children were crying. Dead ones were laughing. Alan said, “She never made any effort. She always made fun of my mother, the way she put on lipstick, and why are the dead so obsessed with makeup, anyway? The way my mother cut up her food real small.”

Lavvie said something else.

“Lavvie wants to know if you ever loved her,” Sarah said. It delighted her, how the line for Space Mountain never got any shorter, no matter how long you sat and watched. She’d never waited, herself. It was enough to watch the tourists shuffle into line, disappear and come back out again, and wander over to join the line once again.

“Could I talk to my mom?” Alan said.

Sarah tried waving Alan’s mother over, but Mrs. Robley only gave her a black, murderous glare. Her lips were pressed together so tightly that her entire mouth had disappeared. One hand was clamped around the Goofy’s long ear. The other hand was burrowing into the Goofy’s costume, as if
she were going to disembowel him right through the fake fur. Lavvie was still sitting weightlessly in Alan's lap. The little slut. She gave Mrs. Robley the finger when the kids weren't looking.

"She's, ah, she's busy," Sarah said. "And our time's up, Alan. I have another appointment at four. But Lavvie has one last thing to say to you."

Lavvie didn't really have anything to say to Alan, but Sarah knew she wouldn't mind that Sarah was making something up. The stranger the better; it would only amuse her. All of it was true, after all. I love you. I don't love you. Don't leave me. Fuck off. I fuck the ghost of Eleanor Roosevelt with a dildo all day long while you're at work.

If Alan divorced Lavvie, he'd still need Sarah. There would be issues of child custody. And there was Mrs. Robley, too. There would be things Alan needed to ask his mother about his childhood.

A divorce would mean more trips to amusement parks for the kids and for Sarah. She could always say the kids wanted to go to Six Flags next week. There were always good lines for the Psyclone.

Alan was still waiting, his hands in his lap. Let him wait a minute longer. It was strange, the way his arms just disappeared right through Lavvie's body. And it was unkind of Lavvie, Sarah thought, to sit like that. It was indecent and unkind. Someday she might write an etiquette book for the dead, although it would be the living that ended up reading it, no doubt, and one ought to draw a veil over certain things. Or at least not pull the veil back too far. Sarah had talked to a historian once—had he been a living man or had he already been dead? He was certainly dead now—about the past. The past was, of course, a different country. A different amusement park and the lines were much longer. The dead didn't know the way back any better than the living did.

Sarah's historian said that one way you went about figuring out what the past had been like was to read contemporary books of etiquette. When one of these etiquette books suggested that it was not well-bred behavior to pick up a human turd from the gutter to remark upon its color or size, you knew then that people had needed to be told not to do such things because they'd once done such things. Sarah hadn't batted an eye when he'd said that. Better not to let on about the habits of the dead, she knew. Sarah knew this, and Lavvie Robley-Tyler and the Robley-Tyler children and Mrs. Robley know this, and me, I know, too. Even as I've been telling you this story, I haven't described things exactly as they went on. I haven't been honest about the dead people in this story, about how the dead carry on.

There were living people waiting in line at Disneyland, and there was a dead woman sitting on the park bench with Sarah Parminter and Alan Robley-Tyler and there were lots of other dead people, too, hundreds of them, and what they got up to isn't any of your business. It's just as well that only people like Sarah Parminter and her cousin Fred ever see what the dead are really like. But the dead, of course, see everything that you do. Next time you and your new wife take your kids to Disneyland and you're waiting in line, you think about me. You think about that.