

# The agreement

*by* Stephen Stark

It didn't take much more than a couple of days for Susan Blythe, Esq. and Elaine S. Powers, Esq. to work out an agreeable separation agreement [agreeable being a really disagreeable term for something so awful].

Child support, shared custody, visitation every weekend beginning on Thursday afternoons, after school, so that Robert could remain involved in Robbie's education. Child support. Spousal support that amounted to exactly one half of the mortgage on their house. And then there were a few outlier details, and some final negotiations. A document that was shocking in its detail and legal power.

The final language of this was all 'negotiated' during a miserable session at Elaine S. Powers's office in Fairfax, near the courthouse. It was the first time that he had seen Ann since she had left the morning before the papers were served. Ann (looking typically beautiful, but also really haggard) would scarcely look at him. Robert had a couple of deeply humiliating and embarrassing moments of completely awful pleading[1] in which he expressed his incomprehension of 'this whole thing,' which didn't seem to warm Ann at all. [He had ignored, or was unable to hew to, Bob's advice just to keep his mouth shut.] He was out numbered by beautiful women. Even if one of them was hired to be on his side. And he was completely out of his depth, hung over, and feeling very small and very insignificant.

And but so after a couple of hours at Elaine S. Powers, Esq.'s beautiful walnut burl conference table, they had worked out the final details of the agreement. That agreement would obtain until one calendar year had passed and an actual divorce settlement could be put into place. Paperwork was passed around said beautiful burl table for signature and for initialing, all of which Robert did dutifully, though completely in a daze. Elaine S. Powers, Esq. made copies, and she would file them with the court. Final copies would be available in a few days.

As soon as he signed the paperwork, he walked out with Susan Blythe. He said to her in the parking lot, I really don't want a divorce.

At a few inches north of six feet, he had to look up to look her in the eye, and in four-inch spike heels (blood red, by the way), she towered over him.

I know, Robert, she said, and there came one of her signature warbles, and then she sighed. Maybe the two of you will work something out.

Do you think she does? I mean really? Want a divorce?

Those kinds of questions, Robert, cost you money, and any answer would be purely speculative on my part. But given that she filed, I'd say you already have your answer.

It was hard to refute the logic of this, and he said: I know. But I love her. I'm *in* love with her. I just...

Warble. Maybe that's what you should work on, Robert, Susan Blythe said, and she seemed ready to say something else, but merely warbled. (There was a certain charm to this. When she did her warbles, there was a look that came over her face that was completely distant and childlike, as though her mind was tuned to two entirely different wavelengths at once.)

See you, he said and walked away.

It almost felt without volition, his legs just moving, his feet adhering to his shadow, which itself seemed more substantial than he was.

He stopped a moment and looked for his car.

A tremendous sense of loneliness and loss descended upon him, and the only thing he could compare it to was the day his father had died, when he had gone to the nursing home and spent an hour or so with the body before they took it away to the funeral home to prepare it for cremation. His mother had been there, and their minister, and he was wounded at first by tears but then wracked with sobs. And then he was outside and it was over and time went on and he was still alive but there seemed an enormous injustice to it

all. The loss, the emptiness. Which was pretty much how he felt now, in terms of loss and injustice.

*Dad was such a good guy, he'd kept saying to himself, and, What am I going to do?*

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Ann here: You know, Robert, in reading this, which is putatively fiction, this is the closest I've felt to your grief. Ever. Odd because it's not exactly the most you've really shared. It's perhaps it's the way you've shared it, I don't know. I won't deny that I have an admittedly selfish sense of being cheated.

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When he was alone in his Civic, in the sun and boiling inside, it dawned on him, the ugly reality of what had just happened—which felt like he'd just taken his marriage out into the woods, forced it to its knees, and put a bullet through its head[2]. Or they had, together.

What had she meant by: 'Maybe that's what you should work on?' It was almost like something his mother would say—totally impenetrable. How did you 'work' on love?

The first night after the paperwork, after he'd gone to see Arlene, he spent at the house, his house, their house, wandering around in a daze, calling people—people from grad school, work friends, people he hadn't talked to in years—and drinking progressively more of the fifth of Maker's Mark that he'd got at the ABC store after Arlene's. (This would have been when Ann ran into Bob.) And then the house was quiet and he was drunk and he wandered every inch of it in disbelief. Now and again, brief spasms of sobbing overtook him. There was so much here. Not material stuff, though there was plenty of that. There were Robbie's birthday parties. There were dinner parties and arguments, there were conversations and there was lovemaking and more arguments. And so for a couple of hours—he really had no idea how much time it was—he submerged himself in sentimentality until he awoke in the claw-footed bathtub in the downstairs bathroom that they'd remodeled together.

There was so little that was either his or hers (Ann had taken her jewelry with her[3]). All of it was theirs, and how did you

disentangle things, the helpful community property list not withstanding?

The second night, after meeting up with Bob, he'd been a little more level-headed and started packing. Ditto the third night. He'd got the paperwork on Monday. Now it was Thursday—or Wednesday?—no, Thursday. Tomorrow Greg and Leo would come to help him move out.

And so now here he was, in his car. Without putting up any kind of fight[4], he'd just signed papers that would make her not his wife. At that moment in the burning car, if an asteroid had wiped the planet clean of all higher forms of life, that would have been just fine with Robert Duke Grayson, Jr.

He got control of himself. For a moment, he'd been sobbing like a little girl. If Ann came out, he didn't want her to see him like that.

It was when he was cranking down his window, his eyes blurry with tears, that he did a double-take.

A guy came out of one of the offices—these were row house office buildings—and came down the stairs, and it was Bob. He was dressed in good slacks, a sport coat and a tie, which Robert rarely wore. He resisted the urge to jump out of the car and tell him to keep down, that Ann would come out any minute. Because it would be way weirder if she actually saw the two of them together. Instead, he watched Bob—the purposeful stride, the confidence—until he got into a BMW and drove off. All the while he kept his eye on Elaine S. Powers's office.

How strange it was, this. No explanation at all. But he thought of what Bob had said about his legal work, about how the narratives he shaped as a lawyer could actually change people's lives

He was lost in thought when Ann came out. She was alone, and for a moment he thought of getting out and saying something, but he had no idea what it would be[5].

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Ann here: What if you had? I have no idea, now, what it might have been like, but likely it would not have been pretty. I had steeled

myself for this, and you had just been completely clueless about everything during the negotiation. At that moment, as hard as it was, I was certain that I'd done the right thing, and I was starting to feel better about it. Not good, but better.

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He started the Civic and headed back to the house to continue packing. He hated moving, but he had to be ready when Greg and Leo came.

[1] Charlie Burns here: Mr. Grayson's failure to take hold of the situation and try to revise the narrative is really breathtaking. A creature of astonishing imaginative abilities, his singular failure of imagination is hard to square with the novelist. It seems almost as though there could be a level of performance anxiety. In any case, his "embarrassing moments" of girlish "pleading" are indeed embarrassing.

[2] Charlie Burns here: This is astonishingly violent imagery—and in its aggressive action, in stark opposition to the passivity of Mr. Grayson's overall actions.

[3] Which seemed completely weird. Maybe it was a lawyer's recommendation. It wasn't that he'd been looking for her jewelry, it was that when he came into their bedroom, he was startled by the empty space on her dresser, and it took a moment of gazing at the dust-free rectangle there on top before he remembered that that was where she kept her jewelry box.

[4] Charlie Burns here: Mr. Grayson's repeated depiction of his [perhaps] regret over the 'failure' of his masculinity suggests confusion in his gender discourse, or that set of ideas and beliefs that are "a powerful framework for understanding and action in social life." (See Bilton et al, 1996, p. 657) He has made the statement that he wanted for Mrs. Grayson to see him as the man he was, the man she thought she married. And yet it's clear that his sense of his manhood is powerfully confused. He does not in these preceding pages describe what action he might have taken. There's

only the longing to have taken action—and perhaps to have that action prescribed for him.

[5] Charlie Burns here: Precisely my point.

