

'I *LOST* my marriage- but *GAINED* so much..'

When Penny Rich's marriage broke up, her comfortable country life vanished overnight. But amidst the wreckage she found a new strength to fight her way back to happiness

JUST THREE YEARS AGO, in the summer of 2008, I had the 'perfect' life. I was lucky enough to have a husband, two beautiful daughters at one of the UK's top schools, a country house in a wooded Hampshire lane, a flat in central London, no real worries, and holidays that ranged from Mauritius to the Caribbean. My husband had his own business and had inherited a nest-egg that would – if we were careful – last into our old age. I had been lucky enough to pursue a career I loved for 20 years (which included working at Good Housekeeping) before becoming a full-time mother and housewife for 15 years – something I was pleasantly surprised to find I loved even more. I enjoyed a rather comfortable, charmed life that I assumed would continue indefinitely.

Well, if that makes me sound like a smug cow, rest assured I've had my come-uppance. My husband uttered one little word – divorce – and everything changed.

Looking back, the signs of our marriage breakdown were there, but at the time it was a terrible shock. Fast forward to the summer of 2011 and I am now starting all over again, aged 53. I have gone from owning two homes to renting one, and from never worrying about money to worrying about it all the time. I have gone from living in glorious countryside to living in a noisy city that never sleeps, from being friends with my neighbours, to being surrounded by strangers. Family life has vanished – no more noise, chaos, arguments, laughter. I fall asleep and wake up to silence. The daughters are in the Off-At-University phase, I am in the throes of [CONTINUED OVER PAGE]



*'I have been forced to
rediscover myself'*

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE]

Empty Nest syndrome, and the ex-husband prefers not to communicate.

Although my life came crashing down, three years later I can finally see something in the rubble – but it has been a long, hard, scary journey, travelling through turmoil, chaos, fear and loss. A time of letting go and crying copiously. The biggest challenge hasn't been the change in lifestyle, finances, friendships or prospects. It has been the change in me, personally. I have been forced to rediscover myself.

I was last single and renting in London nearly 30 years ago, and I was a very different person then. I was in charge of my destiny, had a well paid career and the energy, enthusiasm and conceit of youth. Now I am low on confidence and full of fear.

This is what starting over has taught me about myself. During my marriage, I slipped into the classic Cinderella complex and let my partner manage the practicalities of life. Turns out there wasn't as much money as I'd thought. The country house was sold and a judge kindly gave me a half share of joint marital assets after debts. Challenge one was learning to manage this money in a recession: How do you protect it? Are banks safe? How do I choose a financial advisor? Do I risk the stock market?

Challenge two was learning to keep a grip on the purse strings and live within my diminished means. I am ashamed to say that three years ago I did not know the price of a litre of milk. Now, I give myself brain strain working out the cheapest loo rolls on the supermarket shelf. As I fought to remember how to deal with insurance quotes, council tax, a TV licence and so on, the thing that saved me was the order and sanity of an Excel spreadsheet – now I know what I have and what I spend. I much prefer the new frugal me to the spoilt, pampered woman I was.

The next challenge was letting go and downsizing. So little of our old life (tissue-wrapped baby clothes, toys, old china, four king-size beds, thousands of books, a lawn mower, three wheelbarrows) would fit into a flat. I was forced to learn a skill I will value into my dotage – how to sell on eBay. Everything else went into storage awaiting a time when I was more settled. I lived out of two suitcases, moved three times in nine months. It reminded me that possessions aren't as important as



'If I sound like a smug cow, rest assured I've had my come-uppance'

memories or people and that I – like most of us in the past decade – had been bewitched by consumerism.

Learning to make decisions is still a challenge. Post divorce, there is a fear of rejection, and the irrational thought that if you don't try, you can't fail. Also there is no one to blame but you, no one to discuss things with, too many choices and too many risks. I am scared to start a new business, or a new career, or buy a flat of my own. Day after day I am paralysed by fear, caught between procrastination and action, achieving nothing apart from stress and palpitations. This eventually forced me to find a coping mechanism: a weekly 'try-to-do' list – so named because I don't always succeed, but as my confidence grows I try harder.

One of the toughest challenges after relocating is meeting new friends. The older we get, the harder this is – and as a singleton you need to be a burglar to infiltrate the 50-plus social life (which seems to be at-home dinners with couples, then dishwasher on and into bed by midnight!) My new social life relies on two other single women I know,

occasional outings with a daughter, trips on my own to the cinema, and talking to myself rather more than is healthy.

Big cities are lonely places, and what I miss most is the sense of belonging you have in a village. I needed to be in London to be nearer our daughters, who are studying there. But having spent too many nights at home alone, I took action and shoved a flyer through local letterboxes offering my services as a babysitter or dog walker (earning, saving on heating, and avoiding loneliness in one go.) The extra money was a godsend, and the bonus, six months later, is that when I walk down the street my new neighbours know my name and stop for a chat. I do a yoga class to help with the stress, and a modern dance class for the sheer fun of it.

The biggest challenge of all is to not worry. I worry that I can't earn enough, can't revive my writing career, can't retrain, can't decide what to retrain as, won't get a mortgage, can't afford the rent, can't save for old age, will forget how to laugh, will die and several months later, someone will find a wizened old lady with a beard (because I couldn't afford electrolysis!) Get the picture? On bad days, I even worry about why I can't stop worrying!

The only thing that helps on dark days is my 'one small step for mankind' routine.

I force myself to look back at all I have achieved, and how very far I have come. I think positive thoughts about the new me (I might be home alone, but I get to slob about in my tracksuit and no one knows! I might be lacking in social invitations, but that means I have more than enough clothes to last a lifetime!). I remember how much I have learned. Above all, I hold on to the hope that, like the phoenix, I may rise from the ashes, that I will have a life, earn enough to support myself and help my daughters in the future. That a second chance might be there for the

taking, and the best has not passed by. That (deep breath) I may even find a kind, loving (possibly blind and mute!) man to grow old with. This new life may not be perfect, but at least it is real. □

SOUND FAMILIAR?

Over 100,000 women have to start a new life after divorce each year. Have you been through it too?

Tell us your experiences and advice at goodh.mail@natmags.co.uk, or Good Housekeeping, 72 Broadwick Street, London W1F 9EP