

# REAL SIMPLE

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## Toward a More Perfect Union

Meet four couples who faced serious struggles in their marriages—and emerged stronger and happier in the end.

by Stephanie Booth



Glenn Glasser

### Mary L. Tabor and Del Persinger

Washington, D.C.

Married 26 years

[See another photo of this couple.](#)

Mary was still in her nightgown and robe, sipping a cappuccino in the kitchen of the Washington, D.C., brownstone she shared with her husband, Del, when he walked in and announced he wanted to live alone. They had been married for 21 years. "I didn't know what had hit me," Mary, 64, recalls of that fall morning in 2005. "I wondered, *Does he have a girlfriend? A boyfriend?* I had no idea what was wrong."

Although the couple's relationship had been strained for a few months, Mary simply

assumed they were going through a rough patch. She attributed Del's loss of interest in sex and his suddenly quick temper to stress from his high-pressure job as a financial analyst. "Del was so on edge that he would yell at me about every little thing—like a knife accidentally placed in the dishwasher with the point up," says Mary, a writer and a teacher. Still, she figured that things would soon return to normal.

For Del, the decision had been a long time coming. Increasingly restless within his marriage, he wondered whether it was holding him back from leading a more exciting life. "I knew the problem wasn't Mary—it was me," he says. "And I felt I needed to work through my mixed emotions alone."

To Mary's frustration, Del couldn't articulate any of these concerns—all she knew was that he wanted a separation. She and Del took turns sleeping in the guest room for a few months until she moved into an apartment of her own. By January 2006, the couple had hired attorneys. Their home, which they had spent the previous seven years painstakingly renovating, was put up for sale.

Mary felt “broken” without Del, who had helped her raise two children from her first marriage and supported her through the deaths of her parents and sister. “He understood me better than anyone,” she says. She tried to move on and began dating other men—to little avail. “I was still in love with my husband.”

For Del, the bachelor lifestyle lost its luster rather quickly. "I thought the separation would allow me to make all those friends I never had, do all the things I never did," says Del, 61. But in reality his days were fairly mundane. "I went to work, went to the gym, and spent the rest of my time reading." He also found himself stalling on the divorce negotiations, bringing up smaller and smaller details. In retrospect, he realizes he probably did that to prolong the process indefinitely.

By August 2009, the couple had cautiously started spending time together again, even venturing out on a few dates. "It wasn't the dinners or dances that made me feel in love, but the conversations," says Mary. Del, who had been seeing a therapist, finally opened up to her about his worries and fears. "To me, the most seductive thing a man can do is be truly honest," says Mary.

Del had clearly experienced a change of heart. But Mary, concerned it wouldn't last, wanted time to think. In the winter of 2009, she took an extended trip alone to Paris. One morning, as she was having her breakfast, her cell phone rang. It was Del. He had flown in from D.C. and was outside her building. Could he come up? Mary buzzed him in, and when he reached her doorway, suitcase in hand, he told her how much he loved her. That grand romantic gesture, so out of character for Del, "moved me deeply," says Mary. "At that moment, I thought our marriage could be saved."

A few weeks later, the pair flew home together. Del sold his apartment and moved in with Mary. Divorce proceedings were halted. Their "new" relationship is free of the stressful arguments that were so commonplace back in 2005, the couple report. "I'm not confused anymore, so I'm a more contented person," says Del.

"Del is at ease with himself, and that makes him at ease in the world," Mary explains. "When people hear that Del left me, they say, 'You were betrayed!' But I don't feel that way. Look, life is messy. I'm happy we got this second shot."

**Akilah and Kris Richards**

Lawrenceville, Georgia  
Married eight years

[See a photo of this couple.](#)

When Akilah and Kris became friends in the 10th grade, she was the extroverted captain of the cheerleading squad and the student-government vice president. He was a precocious student (he had skipped a grade) and a serious artist who preferred drawing to, well, people. Still, they clicked. "I liked that Kris was really laid-back," says Akilah, 33, "and he appreciated my big personality."

She and Kris, 32, lost touch after graduation but reconnected through an old pal four years later. Their friendship picked up where it had left off and slowly evolved into something more. "After one phone call, in which we joked about the typical day of a married couple, I knew he would be my husband," Akilah recalls.

Problems started shortly after their 2002 marriage. They bickered over everything, from Kris's habit of leaving his shoes in the front hallway to how often the home office should be cleaned. (The couple jointly own their own businesses.) A slight difference of opinion would leave them fuming for days. "We'd high-five each other if we could go three days without a fight," Akilah admits.

The qualities the couple once prized in each other—Akilah's verve and attitude, Kris's easygoing manner—were now sources of irritation. When faced with a problem, Akilah preferred to lay everything out on the table, while Kris, who hates conflict, would try to drop the subject. "Now I realize avoiding the issue just made everything get worse," he says.

All that pent-up frustration was bound to explode—and it did, on one wintry evening in December 2009. Akilah and Kris had taken their two daughters to a Kwanzaa celebration. When their five-year-old, Marley, climbed onto the stage during a performance, Kris was appalled by her behavior and gave her a stern dressing down. Akilah thought he was overreacting and angrily told him so. Kris withdrew coldly. The pair drove home in sullen silence, put Marley and her younger sister, Sage, three, to bed, and once again began to fight.

Akilah knew she had reached a tipping point in the marriage. Throughout her teens, she had watched her mother struggle in a troubled relationship. "I remember all the anger and raised voices," she says. "My mother was unhappy but stayed with her boyfriend for years. That was not what I wanted for myself." A few days later, Akilah told Kris she intended to call a divorce lawyer. He was shocked and saddened. But he didn't want to argue anymore, either. Numbly, he agreed.

Soon after, the couple sat down to rehearse how they would break the news to their daughters. And Kris surprised Akilah. Calmly, he started asking her questions that warranted thoughtful answers, like "How can I speak honestly when you lash out at what I say?" Once Akilah realized her husband was genuinely trying to understand what had gone wrong between them, she says, "I was willing to stop saying 'I quit' and get into the thick of things with him."

Akilah and Kris discussed what was upsetting about the other's communication style. Kris felt Akilah tended to cross-examine him. Akilah needed Kris to talk to her rather than retreat. To break the cycle, Kris proposed they set aside a period of time to think through an issue before hashing out a solution. And when Akilah felt herself acting like an imperious prosecutor, she would reach out and take Kris's hand. "That simple gesture reminded me of what matters—our relationship—not the details of some trivial incident," she says.

Today the two still have their scuffles, "but we get through the conflicts better and faster," says Kris. During a recent trip to New York City, Akilah was irked when Kris scheduled a client appointment that took up some of the time they had planned to spend sightseeing. "A year ago, we would have gotten in a snit and gone our separate ways for the day," says Akilah. This time they talked it through and took advantage of the hours they could be together.

"A lot of people have a misconception that marriage is the culmination of a relationship," says Kris. "Far from it. Marriage is a constant process of finding the best possible way to connect with another person—and that's what Akilah and I want from each other."

**Elke Govertsen and Paul Donaldson**

Missoula, Missouri

Married seven years

[See a photo of this couple.](#)

Sex with Paul had stopped being fun, says Elke, 35. "In the middle of it, I'd make to-do lists in my head or interrupt to ask, 'Did you let the dog out?'"

Five years after their 2004 marriage, Elke and Paul found they could go weeks without being intimate—something the couple, who had been inseparable since meeting in their 20s as camp counselors, would have once found unimaginable. For a time, they even joked to close friends that Elke wished she could read a book during intercourse.

Around the middle of 2009, the situation stopped being funny, says Elke: "We became too lazy to be romantic." Their conversations "were strictly utilitarian," she says. "Can you pick up the kids?' 'Did you pay that bill?' 'I need to be out of town on Saturday.'"

At first Elke blamed her husband's job for their eroded connection. His event-staging business requires him to travel extensively every summer to set up concert stages for popular musicians. During that time, Paul was home for only a few days every two weeks, leaving Elke to juggle her job as the publisher of a regional women's magazine and caring for their two sons, Boone, eight, and Dimitri, six. Elke felt lonesome when Paul was gone and resentful when he returned. Paul was equally miserable. "All the hard work and late nights I was putting in were for nothing," he says. "What good is success if you're unhappy?"

Knowing how much her sons missed their father, Elke encouraged Paul to spend what time he had at home with the boys. He often fell asleep on their bunk bed while reading stories and would stay there until morning, prompting the children to refer to the master bed as "Mommy's bed."

Finally, during one late-night call in July 2009, Elke blurted out, "This isn't working." Paul felt the same way. But when Elke suggested they consider a separation, he balked. "I couldn't imagine finding someone else who has Elke's rare blend of brains, grace, and beauty," says Paul. "We had spent such a large portion of our lives growing and changing together." But he admitted to feeling out of sync with her, too.

The couple batted around the idea of seeing a therapist but dithered for months over finding one. Then, this past March, *Elke's* magazine held a contest for local business owners, and a clinical sexologist was chosen as the winner. "I called to congratulate her—and immediately made an appointment," says Elke.

During that first session, the sex therapist pointed out that the pair had fallen into a trap common to many couples with young children. "We kept waiting to feel less busy or less tired before we had sex, but that physical connection was the crucial thing we were missing," says Elke.

Their therapist suggested they stop taking sex so seriously and try to flirt with each other again. Following her advice, Elke and Paul went separately to a local pub and pretended to meet for the first time. "We felt ridiculous, but it was fun," says Elke. "The role-playing got Paul and me laughing again."

They also changed their routine at home. To turn off her "work brain," Elke moved her laptop out of the bedroom and into a home office. Instead of zoning out in front of the TV, the couple insisted on spending every night together from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. And when Elke complained that she still sometimes just wanted to sleep when she got into bed? The sexologist told her, "Well, have sex somewhere else then."

Elke and Paul saw the therapist five more times over the next few months. "Speaking candidly about our sex life was awkward, but it turned out to be essential," says Paul, 34. "Sex really is a barometer of how much fun a couple can have together." Once he and Elke began to relax and tease each other again, their physical relationship improved, and so did their emotional bond. By late spring, says Elke, "we had become *that* couple who hold hands at parties."

Last summer, when Paul came home between concerts, Elke didn't foist him off on the kids. "I need Paul's attention, too," she says. "He and I have seen what it's like to have nearly separate lives, and it's important to us that we don't go back to being strangers."

**Angie and Greg Cooper**

Duluth, Georgia  
Married 20 years

[See a photo of this couple.](#)

One afternoon in the fall of 2002, Greg sat down at the family's computer with the intention of researching their upcoming trip to Walt Disney World. He never got that far. Once he woke up the monitor, he made a bewildering discovery: The screen displayed the in-box of an unfamiliar e-mail account registered to his wife, Angie, 43. Perplexed, he called her into the room.

Angie realized she had forgotten to close her old account and knew it was time to come clean. "It's over," she said. "But please don't read the e-mails." Angie then made a startling confession: For nearly a year, she had had an affair. It had ended only seven months earlier. "I was sick to my stomach," says Greg, 46. "I thought, *I'll never get over this. We're getting a divorce.*"

Angie, an insurance account manager, and Greg had been growing apart for years. Before the birth of their sons, Nicholas, 17, and Aidan, 10, the couple had liked to curl up on the couch to watch Marx Brothers classics and while away hours perusing local flea markets for antiques. That had changed: Angie was spending her time either at work or at home with young Aidan, while Greg, a photographer, busily coached Nicholas's soccer team and led his Cub Scout pack. "I didn't feel important to Greg beyond being our children's caregiver," says Angie. "I just felt lonely and trapped."

She was flattered when, in the spring of 2001, the married father of one of her son's friends began flirting with her. When he took her aside at a neighborhood gathering and proposed they meet privately, Angie agreed. "I never wanted an actual relationship with him. I was drawn to the craziness of it, seeing what we could get away with," she says. Eventually the affair fizzled out. But for reasons she can't explain, Angie never deleted the e-mails or the account she had used to correspond with her lover.

After Greg learned about the affair, he furiously warned the man, whom he knew casually, never to come near Angie or their sons again. (The man and his family moved away a few weeks later.) Angie said she hoped to reunite with Greg, but he told her he was dead set on divorcing.

That's what he said, anyway; emotionally he was ambivalent. "I stayed awake for two nights, thinking, *I still love her. I can't end it,*" says Greg. Ultimately he told her he wanted to stay together—but acknowledged he had no idea how to reconcile. For months they slept in the same bed but rarely spoke to each other except in their therapist's office. Aidan was too young to notice the change in his parents' behavior, but Nicholas, aware of their unhappiness (though not the cause of it), became quiet and withdrawn.

Greg began suffering from anxiety and insomnia. His moods swung from anger to grief. "It was terrible to watch him trying to cope," says Angie. "I knew it was because of my actions." Close friends even suggested the couple consider divorce, but Angie wasn't ready to call it quits.

In July 2003, she searched online for marriage support groups and found Retrouvaille, a Catholic seminar that promises to help couples communicate better. She signed them up for the next three-day session. At first Greg wasn't thrilled. "I envisioned a group where everyone just aired their grievances," he says. "How could that help?" But he agreed to try it. There they met some couples who had gone through the program after experiencing infidelity and had come back as mentors. "We were encouraged to see others who had survived the same thing," says Angie.

Over the next year, the couple attended more seminars, including one in October 2004 where they discussed the reason behind Angie's affair for the first time. It was revelatory, says Greg: "I had no idea Angie had the affair because she felt lonely. I thought she had done it because she didn't love me."

Now they mentor other couples at Retrouvaille, an experience Greg has found so rewarding that he's returned to graduate school to become a marriage and family therapist. He and Angie check in with each other constantly about how the other is doing. When Greg began worrying recently that his course load would force them to spend a lot of time apart, he spoke up. And she reassured him: "I reminded Greg that it's all the things we've been through together that have led to this new career. I told him I love him and believe in him, and we will be fine. Neither of us is going anywhere."

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