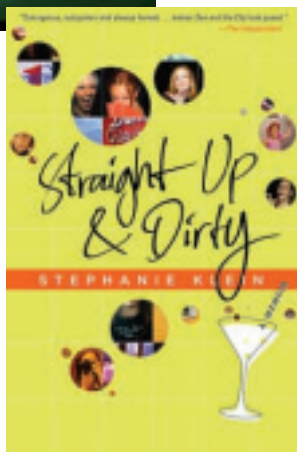




# MARRIAGE, INTERRUPTED

WHEN STEPHANIE KLEIN WAS REJECTED BY HER DOCTOR HUSBAND, SHE TURNED IT INTO TRIUMPH, TRANSFORMING HERSELF INTO AN IT GIRL WITH A POPULAR BLOG, A BOOK DEAL, AND A TV SHOW IN THE WORKS. BY SARAH WILDMAN



**O**n a wet, miserable night in Manhattan, Stephanie Klein—blogger, memoirist, self-dubbed “divorcette”—sweeps into the Union Square branch of the upscale Mexican restaurant Rosa Mexicano, folds down the hood on her puffy, fur-trim Searle jacket, and does a quick scan of the room, looking for her “chicklets,” the pack of glam mostly singles she runs with from Bergdorf’s to Soho House, documenting their every move with a Nikon D100 and a T-Mobile wireless account. None of the girls are in sight. Behind us we hear a man call her name. “Steph! Hey Steph!” He bounds up like a puppy; his well-tailored gray suit matches his hair. Klein smiles uncertainly. “Steph! It’s been ages! Great to see you!” he gushes.

“I’m sorry,” she says, batting her lashes and smiling politely,

“how do I know you? Did we date?”

His face contorts. “Yes, we dated!” He puffs out his chest, glancing now at me. “Several times! Hotel Gansevoort?” he says with a hopeful lilt, referencing the sceney Meatpacking District hotel where Klein’s photographs hang. “I think I met you, too,” he says, turning to me. Nope. Not me.

You can practically see Klein’s internal Rolodex working. “Right! There was some issue. Boat house? Boat slip? You’re in pharmaceuticals?” It’s just as awkward as it sounds. He starts to back away, a little bruised. It becomes the story of the evening, told to each friend as she arrives at the bar. “You’ll never guess what happened...” At the end of the night Klein takes one of her crowd over to see if she can make a match. It’s like watching an anecdote straight from her popular website.

In a blog-saturated world, *Greek Tragedy*—Klein’s voyeuristic, acerbic, anxiety-filled, often astute, always narcissistic romp through her *Sex and the City*-like adventures—landed in the top one percent of all blogs soon after it debuted in January 2004, according to Technorati.com, a website that makes such counts. Klein’s exploits got press coverage early—first in the London *Independent*, and then in newspapers in Italy, Germany, Holland, and ultimately, *The New York Times*. She gained an army of obsessive fans, nearly as many rabid critics, and an agent. About a year later, she

landed the equivalent of a home run for a first-time author: a six-figure advance for a two-memoir deal, bundled with film and television rights, promoted by publishing maven Judith Regan. The first book, *Straight Up & Dirty*, hits stores in late July. The second will focus on her childhood battles with her weight. In the meantime, Klein is hammering out a TV pilot for NBC based on her search for love and independence, and keeping her blog packed with fresh tidbits about her life.

Klein’s appeal comes not just from her nocturnal wonderings, but from her relentless plumbing of what went wrong in her twenties and how those mistakes inform her present. The book weaves the stories of the website into a narrative, flipping between the life Klein lives now and the life she used to have as a pre-30 once-wife.

Before she was photographing herself and her friends hanging out at Tao, Klein was married—at the tender age of 24—to a handsome and wealthy Jewish urologist, living on the Upper East Side, and wearing Hermès scarves and Lilly Pulitzer. Dr. and Mrs. met each other through mutual friends the year she graduated from Barnard and dated for three years before marrying. She was a rising-star art director at the Wunderman ad agency and took classes in writing and photography at night,

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but at heart she was just happy to be a homemaker, cooking big meals and shunning nightclubs, choosing, instead, to nest.

The relationship was far from perfect—he canceled their wedding (after she'd bought an \$8,000 Vera Wang gown, to this day never worn) before they eloped, and his family never accepted her. But she always thought that once they were married, it would get easier. And it certainly seemed that way. Two years after taking their vows, she suggested children—he was a resident, she was lonely, he agreed. When they hadn't conceived after a few months, they started fertility treatments. Pregnant at last, Klein then discovered her spouse's long hospital hours were actually spent gallivanting around town with an older socialite. She confronted him; he pled innocent. But two weeks later Klein found out her husband had not ended the dalliance. Still in her first trimester, Klein had an abortion. A month or so later, she was aggressively dating as she pursued a divorce.

Not long after, Klein began turning her pursuit of love, revenge, and happiness into daily blog posts. She waxed lyrical about waxing her labia, unapologetically declared her disinterest in receiving oral sex, and narrated sexual romps with Colavita olive oil. She posted photographs of herself and her friends dressed in designer tank tops with \$75 blow-outs downing Sancerre. "I definitely had freedom rage," Klein says. "I was in a marriage, and I played the nice girl. I wore the pearls and the cable-knit sweaters—and now I'm wearing garters! And doing whatever the hell I want!" Through it all she mooned for love, worried about her weight, told stories about her fat-camp childhood, obsessed about her prospects, changed her career, and eventually, found love again. "My divorce," she wrote on her site a year ago, "enabled me to take my dreams seriously."

"She's a sign of a gigantic, massive change in societal norms about divorce and female sexuality," says Stephanie Coontz, professor of history and family studies at the Evergreen State College and author of, most recently, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. Until the 1960s, she says, the sexy divorcée was a mythological nymphet who made other women hold their husbands a little closer when she walked by. A woman who abandoned (or was abandoned by) marriage remained sexed—but in a lewd, shield-the-kids'-eyes kind of way. Divorce was practically synonymous with failure. But Klein has connected her divorce with success, even triumph. Her readers have responded.

"There is definitely that stigma of damaged goods," Klein says. We are sitting in the hipster eatery Coffee Shop on Union Square a few hours before we find her friends at Rosa Mexicano. She is pretty, with clear, lightly freckled skin. Her preppy pastel cashmere sweater is offset by distressed jeans, a two-tiered gold necklace dotted with dangling semiprecious stones that I recognize from her thirtieth-birthday photos, and an oversize Gucci tote. She hugged me when we met, but she's both more guarded than her overly disclosive posts would suggest, and more of a yenta—"Your sex life," she says with just the faintest hint of her East Williston, Long Island, childhood in her

vowels, "is as important to your health as your teeth!" Klein calls herself a "quatterrican Jew"—a reference to a Puerto Rican grandmother and Jewish father; her mother is half Greek, hence *Greek Tragedy*. She grew up in an upper-middle-class neighborhood where kids drove expensive foreign cars to high school. Her parents seemed happy, going on dinner dates, she says with no small degree of nostalgia, until she was in college. Then they abruptly divorced. (Oddly, when I ask if she knew many divorced people when her own marriage deteriorated, she says no.) She hates being asked if she married too young. "I wasn't too young. I married the wrong person," she says, sighing. "Women in our generation, we were taught we can be and do anything as long as we work hard. But you can't work hard enough for two people..." she says, trailing off.

With her blog and now her book, Klein set about constructing a new postmarital identity; it might also be read as getting the last word with her ex. Her former husband craved fame, she says, to the point of saying he wanted to be "on Page Six." But it is Klein who made it to the gossip pages. "I think there have been times where it has pushed me out," Klein says of her blog. "I'd say, 'You know what, I'll go out with the guy. Even if it sucks, it's something to write about.' It made me more comfortable alone. Going out to a bar by myself with a notebook wasn't like going out by yourself because you feel like, Hey, I'm writing about what's going on in the city."

Part reality TV-style bid for fame, part quest for love, Klein's every move over the past two years has been validated and evaluated by an audience that has latched on to her life with aspirational zeal. "I feel a little like I'm living a real New York life—vicariously. She seems so glamorous and cool but at the same time *real*," writes Holly Rosby, 28, a Cleveland newlywed. Klein's readers are not all divorcées: She spins the end of her marriage in the context of all rejections, making it universal.

"My readership," Klein says, "is women at a crossroads, divorced women, or women fresh from a breakup connecting to the same tribulations in starting again. Your typical chick-lit reader looking for funny, relatable reading."

She has parlayed her divorce into a Horatio Alger story—not only is she engaged again (her fiancé e-mails earnestly, "The connection she has with readers is based on her honesty," and claims he has no problem being blogged about), she was also able to quit her job to write full-time. "Every morning I drink my tea and read her blog," gushes Meryl Paimre, 23, a single New Yorker with her own blog. "She's like older sister, best friend, lover...all in one amazing person.... It takes a lot of courage to put yourself out there to be judged by total strangers. I read her because she's funny, sarcastic, and smart, and I can learn so much from her. From writing to what kind of men to avoid. She's an inspiration."

If that sounds cheesy that's because it can be—both Klein's fans and her blog can swoon in a *Tuesdays With Morrie* direction. Her prose is heavy with writing-class-exercise descriptors. ("Three bands perform one-hour sets, one after the other, like

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IT TO PAGE SIX.

LifeSavers rolling onto a table.”) An entire blog—*Tale of Two Sisters*—was launched to mock her. Coauthor Heather Ann Snodgrass calls Klein’s writing “horrific” and her “supportive readership...completely deluded.” She and Sarah Pritchard, her partner on the site, launched it “on a whim,” she e-mails. “In a way we were making fun of all those Carrie Bradshaw wannabes, with their self-absorbed prattle and suspect writing skills. And at points we were making fun of ourselves, because, let’s face it—being a blogger is fairly self-absorbed to begin with.”

Klein’s character—the devastated woman who learns to love again—may sound like she’s been plucked straight from the pages of a Candace Bushnell novel, but Klein has also fashioned herself into something of a self-help guru. While the divorce is a refrain throughout her work—“once upon a once-wife life...” she’ll write—she launched into a Dr. Phil-ish diatribe about self-actualization when I asked her how her ex influenced her writing. “I certainly don’t think my work has evolved as a result of my relationship with anyone,” she e-mailed. “My life has evolved, yes. Absolutely. I’ve learned from my mistakes, learned not to be in a relationship where you’re always the one trying to move it forward. I’ve learned not to push and to let it go. I’ll keep learning that. But by ‘my work,’ I think ‘my writing,’ not ‘my life.’ There is a difference. My life is much more than a blog or a memoir, obviously. My writing, or my work, has evolved by doing just that. By writing. By working. By pushing myself. And that has nothing to do with the aftermath of a relationship.”

But, of course, the book is about the end of a marriage, and

my question was about how her writing has allowed her to process its dissolution—and use that process to advance her career and her sense of self. Klein’s relationship with her ex-husband—the “wasband”—never really makes sense in the book. He’s mean to her; his mother is awful, pushing her to stall the wedding, passing on anti-Klein gossip to her son. Moments before walking down the aisle, he freaks and asks for a prenup, worried his future earnings will be taken from him if they divorce. Oh, and they married secretly—he didn’t want to tell anyone. His anxiety about marrying her isn’t a red flag, it’s a red brick wall she crashes right through. Klein’s slavish devotion to keeping the relationship alive is almost unfathomable—can someone romanticize romance so much that she completely overlooks rejection? But that painful fumbling is a big part of what draws in her audience. “It is poignant and honest—the kind of material that resonates with us all,” says Judith Regan, who preempted all other offers to publish the book.

Of course, the hidden-in-plain-sight key to Klein’s life as a divorcée-in-the-city is that none of it could have happened if she’d gone ahead with the pregnancy. The cultural agonizing about divorce has been refocused on the damage to children, Coontz and other sociologists say. It’s the auto response when we hear about a young divorce, a so-called starter marriage. “That’s tough,” we say, “but at least there were no children.” And that’s where Klein’s story shifts the paradigm. “I didn’t just want a baby, I wanted a family,” Klein says simply.

“The abortion,” Coontz says, “that’s the thing that will most likely garner her the most publicity and considerable

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stigma because most pro-choice women start from the idea that you choose a child because you want a child. I think many people will raise their eyebrows at a definition of liberation that says, ‘If I can’t be a partnered mother, then I don’t want the child at all.’”

The night before the procedure, Klein’s husband told her he “didn’t love her enough” to have a child with her, she says. It was shocking to her after all they’d gone through together to get pregnant. “I needed to hear it,” she says. “I said, ‘Look, stop with the lies and tell me the truth. We never should have married.’” He didn’t go with her to the clinic.

She tells the full story in her memoir: her paper gown, her sobbing in the hallway with a clutch of women much younger than she (it was apparently once on the blog, but she took it down to save it for her memoir). Her trip to the clinic with her father takes place toward the end of the book, after you’ve had a chance to build up a relationship with Stephanie Klein the character. It’s wrenching. “I felt like I was being punished,” she tells me. “It was so traumatic and horrible.”

In the past few months, Klein has begun telling her friends’ stories as well as her own—translations of conversations she has had, advice that has been sought. The change is subtle, but noticeable if you read her writing from the beginning; she is holding something back. Early last year, Klein posted she was looking for a man “who can take charge, ignore my bullshit.” Last August she wrote that she had found him—calling him “the Suitor.” She started writing posts about being in a relationship, about fighting, about debating moving in together,

about talking in terms of the future again with a new person. Even about starting a family. She laughs that the Suitor’s mother called her when she posted about their arguing, but it is clearly more uncomfortable to write about the person you want to spend your life with than the person who didn’t want to spend his life with you. She is taking a six-month leave of absence from New York to try Austin, of all places, and that decision is completely bewildering—partly because we haven’t been privy to the process behind it.

And yet where Klein was once compulsive about dating, or about the affirmation that came from men, now it seems it’s hard to wrench her away from creating a stir among her fans. In February she posted an open letter to her father, disclosing she was pregnant. When I e-mail her my congratulations, she writes back that, in fact, she’d miscarried a month before and had delayed posting the news of both the pregnancy and the miscarriage until well after the fact. I offer condolences, but I’m a little shocked she wrote about it at all—never mind timing her posts seemingly with an eye to their dramatic effect. “I felt it was important,” she writes me, “to show people what I went through, the joy and the sadness, to show the full breadth of the experience. It’s just not the same sorrow without knowing the joy first. It’s also not the same joy without knowing the sorrow.” But who needed to learn that? Her audience? Her? Once life is literally performed for and analyzed by others—the pregnancy post and the recant got about 100 comments each—can you ever go back to living for yourself? □

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