

The Life You Thought You Were Going to Have

The future itself did not disappear. It changed ownership.



Most of us make plans based on the assumption that some things will continue. Not perfectly. Not without difficulty. But continue. You assume the house will still be yours next year. You assume the person beside you will probably still be there. You assume holidays will follow a familiar rhythm. You assume retirement will involve certain people, certain places, certain resources, certain routines. You assume there will be someone who remembers the same twenty-five-year-old stories you do.

Then divorce changes the future tense. Suddenly, the life you thought you were moving toward is no longer the life in front of you.

And that is its own kind of grief.

We Grieve Futures We Never Got to Live

Sometimes people are reluctant to call this grief because the future had not happened yet. How can you lose something you never actually had? But human beings live partly by anticipation.

We save for things. Plan for things. Prepare for things. Imagine things. We invest emotionally in what we believe is coming. Perhaps you expected to retire together. Travel. Downsize. Spend holidays with grandchildren. Move closer to family. Finally have more time. Perhaps you had ordinary plans that felt so certain you barely thought of them as plans at all. Then one day those assumptions no longer hold.

The fact that the future had not yet arrived does not mean it carried no meaning. You were already living toward it.

Sometimes the Loss Is Practical

Divorce can change the future in very concrete ways. Retirement accounts are divided. A house is sold. Income changes. Insurance changes. Debt becomes more visible. Plans that once depended on two incomes now depend on one. You may have to work longer than expected. Move somewhere different. Give up a plan you had been building toward for years. These are not just financial adjustments. They can change your sense of possibility.

There is grief in looking at a future you once believed was reachable and realizing the route has changed. Or disappeared. Or become much harder.

That grief does not make you materialistic. It means practical realities shape the lives we are able to build.



Sometimes the Loss Is Relational

Perhaps you expected companionship. Not romance in some idealized sense. Just presence. Someone to go with you to the doctor. Someone who knew the family history. Someone to sit beside you at the wedding. Someone who would remember that you hate driving at night. Someone who knew which stories had already been told too many times.

You may have expected to grow older beside someone who had witnessed most of your adult life.

After divorce, the loss of that imagined companionship can feel especially sharp. Even if the marriage itself had become lonely. Sometimes we grieve not the companionship we had, but the companionship we thought would eventually return.

Sometimes the Future Was the Reason You Stayed

This can be difficult to acknowledge. Perhaps part of what kept you in the marriage was the future.

You thought:

Things will be easier when the kids are older. We just need to get through this season. Once we retire, we'll have time to reconnect. Once the financial pressure decreases, things will improve.

You may have endured years that were difficult because you believed you were still building toward something. Then the marriage ends. And along with it goes the future that helped make the present tolerable. That can create a particular kind of grief.

Not only:

I lost what I had.

But:

I endured what I had because I believed it was leading somewhere.

Recognizing that can hurt. It can also explain why the ending feels larger than the final years of the marriage would suggest.

The Future Can Become a Place You Stop Visiting

After a major loss, it can feel safer not to imagine too much. Why make plans? Why assume anything? Why become attached to another possibility that might disappear?

So the future becomes smaller. You stop picturing it. Stop anticipating. Stop making plans that feel too far away. You become very good at managing what is directly in front of you.

Sometimes that is necessary. Stability matters. But over time, protection can become limitation. The future stops feeling like a place you are moving toward and begins feeling like something that merely happens to you.

That is worth noticing.

You Don't Need a Replacement Future

There can be pressure to create a new vision quickly. A better house. A new relationship. A more exciting career. Travel. A reinvention. A triumphant second act.

Perhaps some of those things will become part of your life.

But you do not need to produce a superior future to justify losing the old one. You do not need to prove that divorce was worth it by becoming happier, richer, thinner, more adventurous, or more spiritually evolved. You are not applying for admission to your own life. You do not need a compelling personal transformation story. You can begin with something much smaller.

A future that is simply yours.



Grieving the Future Does Not Mean You Were Entitled to It

This distinction matters. You may have expected certain things from your marriage. Companionship. Shared finances. Family traditions. A retirement together. That expectation does not mean another person was obligated to fulfill every future you imagined. Human beings change. Relationships fail. People make choices. Circumstances shift.

Recognizing the loss of an expected future is not the same as claiming ownership of another person's life. It simply means that your life was organized around assumptions that no longer hold.

That change deserves to be acknowledged.

What Is Still Possible?

After enough loss, possibility can sound like marketing language. *Now you can create anything!*

No.

You cannot create anything. Reality still exists. Money matters. Health matters. Age matters. Responsibilities matter. Other people's choices matter. Some possibilities are gone. But not all possibilities are gone.

The useful question is not:

What amazing new life can I manifest?

Perhaps it is:

What remains possible from where I actually stand?

That is a quieter question. A more honest one. And sometimes a much more hopeful one.

Build From Reality, Not Compensation

There can be a temptation to build the next chapter in reaction to the last one. If the marriage was restrictive, become completely untethered. If money was tight, prove you can become wealthy. If you felt unseen, become impossible to ignore. If your former spouse said you could not do something, make doing it the point.

Sometimes reaction creates momentum. But a life built entirely in opposition is still organized around what happened. Eventually, you may want something different. Not a life that proves the marriage wrong. A life that fits you now.

That may require slower questions. What matters to me? What do I need? What do I value now? What do I want more of? What do I want less of? What has become possible because circumstances changed? What became impossible? What is simply different?

This is not glamorous work.

It is real work.

There May Be Things You Want Now That You Never Wanted Before

A changed future can reveal parts of you that had no room before. Perhaps you discover that you like living alone. Or that you do not. Perhaps you want more community. Less responsibility. A smaller house. A larger garden. More travel. Less travel. Work that matters. Work that ends at five. A relationship. No relationship. Something you would never have chosen ten years ago may fit who you are now. That does not make your former self wrong.

It means you changed. So did your circumstances.

A future does not have to match your old imagination in order to be worth inhabiting.

You Are Allowed to Want Again

Sometimes grief makes desire feel dangerous. Wanting creates vulnerability. If you want something, you can lose it. If you imagine a future, reality may disappoint you again.

But refusing to want is also a decision. It protects you from some disappointment. It can also protect you from participation. You do not have to become wildly hopeful. You do not need a vision board. You do not need to declare that your best years are ahead. Maybe they are. Maybe they aren't.

You can begin with something simpler. Something you would like. Something you would enjoy. Something worth moving toward. Something that belongs to your life now.



The Future Did Not Disappear

The future you expected may be gone. That deserves grief. You do not have to pretend otherwise.

There may be parts of it you still miss years later. A place you thought you would live. A financial security you expected. A person you thought would still be beside you. A version of yourself you assumed you would become. All of that can be true.

And still:

The future itself did not disappear. It changed ownership. It is no longer a shared projection held together by a marriage that ended. It belongs to the life you are actually living now. You do not have to know exactly what it looks like. You do not have to make it impressive. You do not have to make it compensate for anything.

You can grieve the life you thought you were going to have.

And slowly become curious about the life that is still possible.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: When Anger Is Easier to Carry Than Grief

Anger can feel clearer, stronger, and more protective than sadness. Sometimes it is also telling the truth about harm, betrayal, or injustice. Next, we'll look at what anger can teach us - and how to keep another person's wrongdoing from becoming the organizing center of life after the marriage.