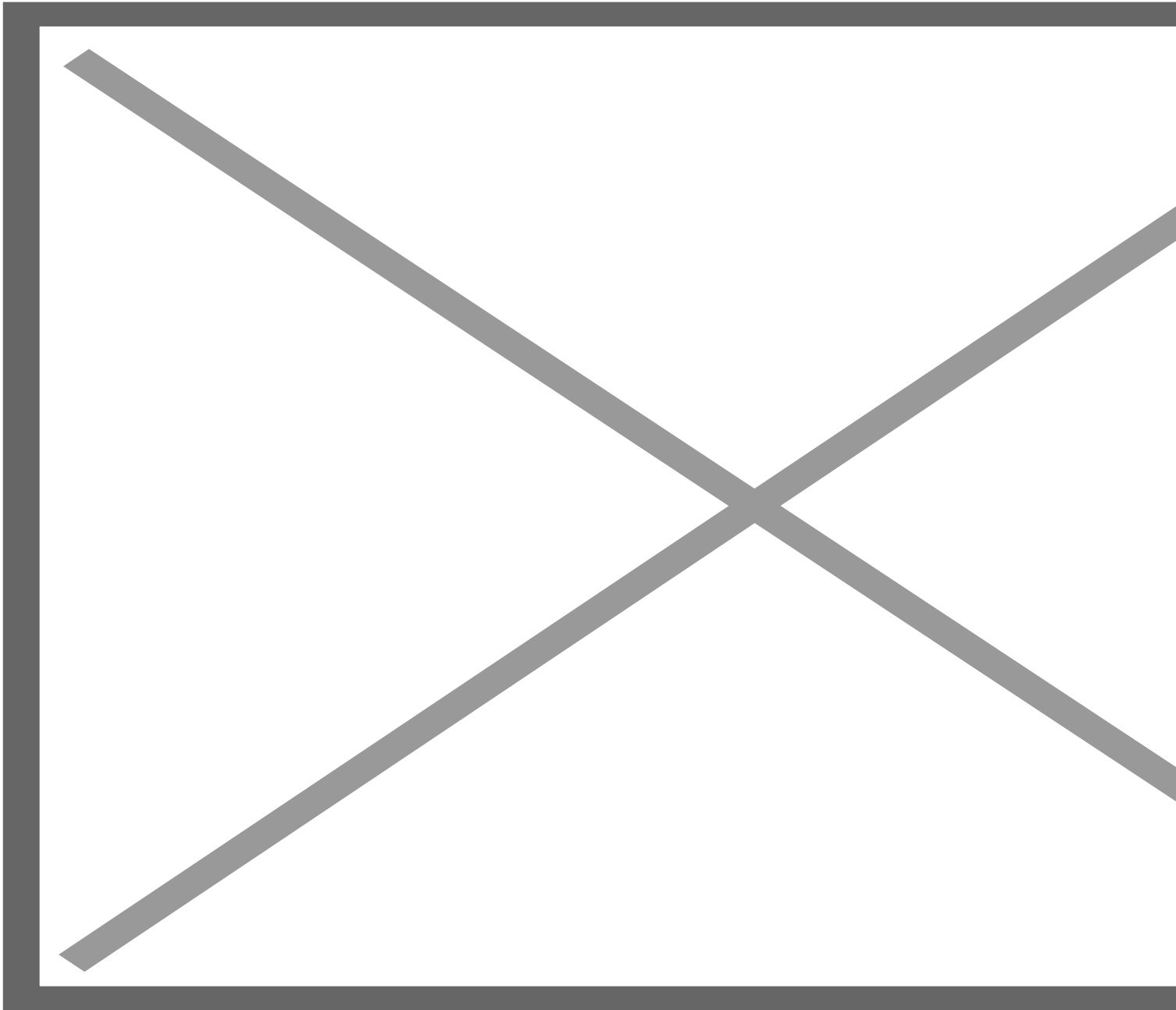


The art of marital crisis

***Splitsville* and *The Roses* arrive at a time when the institution of marriage itself is on the rocks.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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Left to right: Michael Angelo Covino, Kyle Marvin, Adria Arjona and Dakota Johnson in *Splitsville*. (Neon / Courtesy Everett Collection)

“If you don’t have kids or money, divorce is just like a regular break up,” Paul (Michael Angelo Covino) tells his best friend Carey (Kyle Marvin) in an early scene in *Splitsville* (written by the two actors and directed by Angelo). Carey’s wife Ashley (Adria Arjona) has just announced she wants a divorce so she can pursue sex with other people, and Paul is trying to cheer him up. But the sentiment really just reflects the way Paul thinks about his own marriage. Paul and his wife Julie (Dakota Johnson) have a kid and a lot of money, and divorce feels like an unthinkable depreciation of assets. So much so that they are hedging their bets against divorce by opening their marriage to non-monogamous dalliances.

Carey is flummoxed and slightly awed at the casual sophistication of his friends, who profess not to be the least bit bothered by their spouse having sex with other people. Carey, who has neither kids nor money, loves his wife and is devastated by any kind of break, up no matter how logistically simple. He decides to take his friends’ advice, offering to open his marriage in an attempt to save it.

Neither couple, it turns out, is very good at non-monogamy. It takes approximately 20 minutes of the movie (or really just the trailer) to realize that Paul and Julie are both hiding a tsunami of insecurity, jealousy, and resentment under the surface of their placid, luxurious lives. When Julie sleeps with someone close to Paul to get back at him for his selfishness, the storm comes crashing out in a tidal wave of pent-up violence, including a literal explosion of water. Carey, on the other hand, befriends every lover Ashley brings home, and they turn to him for comfort when she breaks their hearts. Their small apartment is increasingly, and hilariously, full of her castoffs, which really cramps Ashley’s free-love style. No one is any happier or feels much freer.

Splitsville opened in theaters around the same time as another movie about the discontents of modern marriage, *The Roses* (directed by Jay Roach). The titular couple—Ivy (Olivia Colman) and Theo (Benedict Cumberbatch)—also have kids and money, but their jealousy takes the form of professional competition, not sexual possessiveness. After Ivy gives up her career as a chef to raise their kids, Theo beneficently suggests she open her own restaurant—on a little-traveled side street, where it is all but guaranteed not to get much traffic. It is clear this work is not meant to interfere with Ivy’s domestic obligations, nor to impinge on Theo’s career as an architect, which is on the verge of a meteoric rise. When a freak storm spells disaster for his prospects while simultaneously catapulting Ivy’s restaurant to instant fame, they agree to a temporary swap: Theo will stay home with the kids, and Ivy will start working full time.

If you guessed that this setup would lead to a bruised male ego as Theo watches Ivy succeed while he does endless loads of laundry, and a wounded female one as Ivy watches her kids prefer their father’s advice and presence, you can already see how uncreatively the film approaches its major themes. *Have they never heard of child care?* I wondered. By the major crisis point of the movie, their children are teenagers, and I could not for the life of me figure out why they couldn’t both just work and maybe pay someone to help with their laundry, since money does not seem to be an object in any other arena of their lives. Such an arrangement never occurs to either of them. Instead, they sink deeper into resentment and jealousy until the only option is utter destruction—of their marriage, their property, their sanity.

Given the general confusion about the institution of marriage in our wider culture—with the rise of polyamory on the one hand and trad wives on the other—I was initially excited to see what this doubleheader could offer our popular imagination. *The Roses* mostly just proved Paul’s adage true: for the wealthy, money makes divorce seem like a pain in the neck (far more than kids, who are an afterthought in both films). Despite the characters’ initial assertions of love and the film’s conventional plot points, it was hard to see why marriage seemed compelling to either of them. *Splitsville*, on the other hand, felt morally profound in comparison, which is saying something for a movie that relies on repeated sight gags involving a naked penis and physical comedy that smashes tables and windows and imperils pet fish.

For all its silly physical comedy and increasingly absurd plot twists, the characters in *Splitsville* undergo something like a moral journey. At the start of the film, they oscillate between ideals of perfect romantic fulfillment and mercenary ideas about asset management that could come straight out of a feudal marriage contract. They are jaded and confused before they even get started. But all their missteps and non-monogamous experimentation eventually lead to an earnest desire to be honest, transparent, and vulnerable. It's not a happy ending, exactly, but it is a kind of growth.

Early in the film, Carey probes Julie about her decision to be OK with Paul's potential sex outside their marriage. "Do you know why people break up?" she asks in response.

"Yeah, cheating," Carey responds.

"Guilt," she counters. "But if you make the bad thing OK, then there's no guilt," she explains.

"Or maybe, you just stop doing the bad thing," Carey suggests. Though it might take a few black eyes, some heartbreak, and a whole lot of nonsense to get there.