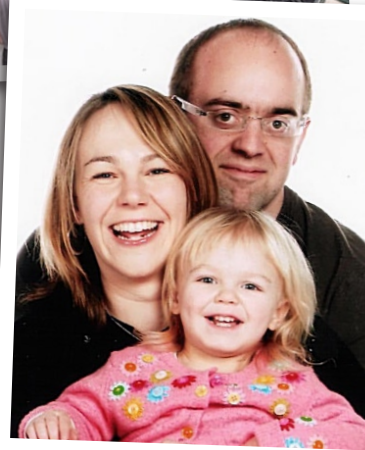




Better off apart: Sara and James



Family ties: Ex-partners Maria and Simon, top, and Suzy and Julius with daughter Faith

James have coffee after the children have gone to school, and she confides in him.

'I tell him about my frustration at having to give up work and become a housewife, and how I hate relying on Ben for money.'

Despite this closeness, James is confident their relationship will remain platonic. 'We get on brilliantly, but there is no chance of getting back together,' he says.

Suzy Ashworth is a divorce consultant who works for National Family Mediation — an organisation encouraging divorcing couples to make their own arrangements about property and children. She says many are keen to remain friends after divorce — and cites her own relationship with her ex-husband as proof.

'With rising costs many couples are keen not to go to court and to keep costs down,' she says.

SUZY and her ex-husband Julius Stobbs divorced in 2009 after seven years of marriage. They are so close that Julius has a key to Suzy's home, which she shares with her new partner, lawyer Simon Bethel, 38.

'Julius and I still love each other, even though we're not in love with each other,' she says.

'I know if I was in any kind of trouble, Julius would move heaven and earth to help me.'

Suzy and Julius met at Cambridge University, where they studied law, and married in 2002.

Their daughter Faith, now seven, was born in April 2004. It was when Faith fell catastrophically ill the following year that problems began.

'Faith got meningitis and we nearly lost her,' explains Suzy, 37. 'The trauma tore us apart, and we stopped communicating.'

They agreed to separate in May 2007. It was so amicable that neither filed for divorce immediately: they waited two years for a consensual divorce.

'I can't pretend it was easy, but we did most of our grieving for the marriage while we were still together,' she says.

Julius, 38, agrees it took hard work. He says: 'Suzy and I gradually built up a friendship by remembering the good times.'

Suzy adds: 'Some friends think it's strange, but I'm convinced it's the healthiest way.'

Few would disagree that in an age where divorce is so common, salvaging something positive from the ruins of a marriage seems a very wise move indeed.

Rise and rise of bizarre bread

IF YOU'RE eating bog-standard granary for breakfast, it's time to give peas a chance. Pea bread is back on the menu. Barely seen since the Middle Ages when it provided protein for peasants who couldn't afford meat, the recipe has been adopted by baker Ingrid Eissfeldt from ABO Artisan Bread Organic. Peas, she says, are a high-protein, low-carb and gluten free alternative to wheat. Yellow split peas give the bread a golden hue and a fragrant, curry-like flavour.

'When I use regular peas the loaf comes out a sweet, luminous green which children love,' adds Ingrid. Across the country, blue cheese-walnut, fennel-raisin and potato-rosemary loaves are selling like hotcakes, says baker Country Style. Whole Foods Market stocks lentil and bean breads and speciality slices stuffed with pecans, cranberries and apricots. Gails is experimenting with wine and dark chocolate; and green tea loaf, with its lurid green dough, is creeping into cafes. Even Warburton's are adding orange and cinnamon to the mix. 'During the economic downturn, people are trading expensive cuts of meat for high-end loaves of bread. We want something luxurious without being too dear,' says Peter Gialantzi, head of bakery for Whole Foods Market. Steven Mackintosh, founder of the Hedonist Bakery, agrees. 'Putting an unusual loaf on the table is a great conversation point for a dinner party.' You could say speciality bread is fast becoming the best thing since, um, sliced bread.

INDIA STURGIS



Grand opening

GUDRUN SJÖDÉN'S
first UK flagship store

at 65-67 Monmouth Street/
Covent Garden

Friday March 30, 12 noon

Linen & cotton skirt
£75

Braided clogs, £75



Premiere offer!

Lots of surprises
and Earlybird prices
throughout the entire
opening weekend.



Swedish design with a green soul
www.gudrunsjoden.com

65-67 Monmouth Street, London

RCE

other people.' New relationships are a major hurdle for divorced couples who remain close. Sara Dixon, 28, and ex-husband James Simpson, 36, have forged a close bond since their split two years ago — despite the fact that Sara has remarried. Six months after they separated, Sara met Ben, 28, through internet dating, and they wed last September.

HER new husband is convinced James is still in love with her, says Sara — but that doesn't stop her discussing with James the minutiae of her new marriage. 'It can feel like a betrayal, but James is so easy to talk to,' she says. 'Ben gets a bit jealous — if he had his way, I wouldn't see him.'

Christine Northam warns that friendship with an ex can jeopardise a new relationship: 'It's important to be above-board. It's good to remain friends, as long as your relationship

doesn't have echoes of dependence, longing or regret.'

Sara insists her relationship with James is purely platonic: 'My physical attraction to James disappeared in the last year of our marriage, when I would deliberately take on night shifts to avoid sharing a bed with him.'

They met in the local pub when Sara was 22. James proposed after a whirlwind one-month courtship in November 2005.

Sara already had two children, Samuel, now seven, and Alisha, ten. It was when she fell pregnant to James, in January 2006, that cracks appeared.

'James was ecstatic, but I was daunted by the idea of being a mother-of-three,' says Sara, who recently resigned from her job as a care home manager to be a stay-at-home mother.

'After Ella was born, I began feeling isolated and resentful toward James, whose life continued much the same as before.'

They married in July 2007, but Sara says James wouldn't change his bachelor ways. 'He wanted to go out with his friends

every night. He was ten years older and used to the single life. He'd be so hung over on Sundays, he'd spend all day lying on the sofa rather than helping me.'

'When I confronted him, he was angry and defensive. I realised we were incompatible.' One night, in June 2009, when James came home after yet another evening out, Sara told him it wasn't working. 'He was distraught. I was upset, but I also felt annoyed that he was making me feel so guilty.'

James moved in with a friend. After their divorce, they agreed to share custody of Ella.

James says: 'We married too soon, but for Ella's sake I wanted to remain on good terms, and slowly that became friendship.'

James has also remained close to Samuel and Alisha, and, remarkably, helps out with Ben and Sara's new daughter Daisy. Sara explains: 'Ben's an accountant and has to leave early for work, so in the mornings James will come over and feed Daisy while I get Ella dressed or take Samuel to school.' Sara and



I don't know how I do it

Lorraine Candy

ON FRIDAY night, I attended a friend's fancy dress birthday party dressed as a Buddhist monk of indeterminate sexuality.

The theme was seventies TV shows and I had planned to go as the dishevelled, but vaguely glamorous, Hot Lips from U.S. series MASH: instead, I was dressed as the monk Tripitaka from the dubbed Japanese TV series Monkey. Google it and you'll be gripped with mirth, I promise.

Other women partied as Miss World 1974, Dallas' Sue Ellen or Daisy Duke. I appeared in a ridiculous hat, an oversized white tunic and some white tights (which I fear had not been washed since they were last hired out).

I'm blaming this latest humiliation (people queued to have their picture taken with me, because I looked so daft) on the fact that I'm a working mother. It sounds improbable, I know, but I would have had more choice in the matter if I hadn't been on the losing side in the war of parental responsibility this week.

'This is yet another of example the small sacrifices I make on a daily basis for you,' I had told the children earlier as I got ready and they documented the occasion with the family camera, howling with laughter.

'Sacrifices you'll never appreciate or be grateful for,' I added grumpily, because, let's face it, in 20 years time when I'm a dribbling wreck wandering the house looking for my glasses, which will be on top of my head, my children won't put me in a top-notch nursing home (attached to sherry drip) as thanks.

They'll abandon me to my own devices, and I'll be found starved to death surrounded by tins of sausages and beans which I've tried to chew open.

Where will Mr Candy be, you ask? Well, I'm currently contemplating his future fate — because if he ever pulls a fancy dress stunt like this again, he will certainly die before me.

Let me explain it from the beginning — for this sorry tale is perhaps the best argument I have encountered for being a stay-at-home mum.

My working week was so busy I had to hand over emergency child care responsibilities to Mr Candy, whose office workload is more flexible.

He stood in for our flu-ridden nanny (sorry child-care expert/ reserve grandma: I know how the word nanny inflames the 'tie them to the sink' brigade, so just insert an alternative and stay calm).

Mr Candy also had to drop off a forgotten PE kit at school late one morning and then collect our ill five-year-old from class one lunch time.

It's rare that so many parental duties fall on one of us, but as I have only been back at work four weeks since maternity leave, there have been excessive demands on my time.

So as a result of his Olympic efforts on the fatherhood front — honestly, I don't know how he does it — I felt obliged to agree to things I may not necessarily have agreed to otherwise.

As a result, when he rang me to tell me enthusiastically he had found the perfect costumes from a Seventies TV series he loved for the party, I had to show willing. Who was I to beg: 'Can't

How did I end up going to a party dressed as a monk in tights?

I just go as Margot from The Good Life and wear a dress like a normal wife?

I wanted to explain that, as I rarely go out any more, this invite for a child-free evening was my chance to dress up.

I toyed with 'Purdy-to-Patsy' (starting dressed as Joanna Lumley's character from The Avengers and drinking until I resembled an alcohol-sodden Patsy from Ab Fab).

Wonder Woman was also a possibility, until Monkey was mentioned.

But to argue against Tripitaka on the grounds the pictures will live for ever and I'll never be allowed to forget it by my closest friends would have been selfish, as my husband's heart was set on it. And I owed him, didn't I?

He was cashing in his payback — the unwritten rule that whoever drops everything at work to be there for unexpected parental chores is elevated to a higher ground.

They are able to take all sorts of liberties for a couple of days such as lie-ins, solitary baths or choosing what you both wear to a fancy dress knees up.

This agreement is never mentioned out loud, of course, but most couples abide by it if they both work.

If I didn't work I wouldn't have owed Mr Candy anything. So I sighed, agreed and braced myself for an evening as a laughing stock.

Fortunately I remember very little of it, and the evening is now referred to as the night that coined the phrase 'as drunk as a monk'.

■ *Lorraine Candy is editor-in-chief of Elle magazine*

by Antonia Hoyle

ENJOYING the warmth of the Mediterranean sun as their daughter builds sandcastles on the beach, Maria and Simon Paxton look like any other couple enjoying their summer holiday.

They finish each other's sentences, share the same wry humour, and are comfortable in the knowledge that they have weathered life's most testing times together.

Yet Maria, 46, and Simon, 38, aren't married, nor do they harbour any romantic aspirations towards each other.

In fact they divorced a decade ago — far from amicably, after Simon walked out when Maria was in remission from cancer, leaving her to bring up their two-year-old alone.

Such desertion would test the affections of the most resilient woman. Not only has Maria forgiven Simon, however, she has also forged the closest of friendships with him.

'I was distraught when Simon left,' she says. 'But, over time, my anger abated.'

'I didn't want to feel bitter. Simon has seen me at my worst and we've forged an incredibly special emotional bond.'

Many divorced couples barely tolerate each other, trying to remain civil only for the sake of their children, while others exist in a state of mutual loathing.

Marital breakdown is said to be second only to bereavement in terms of life's stresses. Whether prompted by infidelity or a gnawing incompatibility, it can lead to years of expensive legal wrangling and irreparable rifts over child custody and property.

But Maria and Simon are one of a growing breed who feel that, while the love may have died with their marriage, the friendship that went with it is too treasured to squander.

Incredibly, rather than rendering them sworn enemies, the traumatic process of divorce has brought the couple from Tunbridge Wells, Kent, closer together.

This trend even seems to extend to Hollywood, where splits are notoriously acrimonious. Actress Courteney Cox, 47, recently revealed that she is still close friends with her former husband, actor David Arquette, 40, — and not just for the sake of their seven-year-old daughter, Coco.

'He's my favourite person in the world,' Courteney said of her ex. 'No matter what happens, he's my very best friend.'

Christine Northam, a counsellor with the relationship charity Relate, says many couples from the non-celebrity world find themselves becoming closer post divorce.

'It is possible to build a friendship if they can let go of the hurt and anger,' she says. 'Often, once the pressure to make the marriage work has gone, couples are free to enjoy the qualities they do have in common.'

That is exactly the situation in which Maria, a hairdresser, and Simon, a decorator, find themselves.

Not only do they go to the cinema and enjoy Chinese takeaways together; in recent years they have also holidayed in Majorca and France. Sometimes, after a night out, Simon will even sleep on Maria's sofa.

DOES their continued closeness suggest the possibility of a reunion?

Absolutely not, she says. 'For years, I dreamt of us rebuilding our marriage, but there is no way we would get back together now.'

'We're both open to the idea of committing to other people.'

Maria met Simon through a client in 1994, and they married in March 1997. Freya was born two years later.

But their happiness was shattered in December 1999, when Maria was diagnosed with bone marrow cancer.

'I was shocked and frightened,' she says. 'But Simon tried to be positive. His calmness gave me strength, and brought us closer. Even in my darkest moments, when I was too weak to talk, I wanted him there.'

Maria was admitted to hospital for chemotherapy and radiation, which made it impossible for her to have any more children.

'Simon and I were desperate for another baby, but I couldn't dwell on that,' she says. Maria had a stem cell transplant in May 2000, and was in hospital for much of the next year.

'There were terrifying moments: Simon would comfort me and hold my sick bucket as I rocked back and forth in terror,' she recalls. In

They couldn't stand each other when they were married, but now these couples share holidays, dates and heart-to-hearts

WE'RE CLOSER SINCE WE GOT DIVO

December 2000, as they sat holding hands in Maria's consultant's room, she and Simon were told that the transplant had worked and she was in remission. 'I'd never dared believe it could happen. I was euphoric,' she says.

But instead of heralding a new beginning, Maria's improving health sounded the death knell for her marriage. The night before Freya's second birthday, in February 2001, Simon emerged from their bedroom with three carrier bags of belongings, and announced he was leaving.

'I was furious that he was walking out when I was so vulnerable,' says Maria. Simon admits: 'I ran away. I was being selfish, but seeing Maria through her illness made me a mess. I was desperately disappointed that we couldn't have any more children.'

Simon moved in with a friend, and he and Maria had little contact. A year later, she filed for divorce citing Simon's unreasonable behaviour.

Maria got custody of Freya, and contact with Simon was minimal.

As the months passed, however, Simon realised he had suffered an emotional breakdown after Maria's illness and felt terribly guilty about

abandoning his wife and child. 'Simon called towards the end of 2002 when I had barely spoken to him for a year,' Maria recalls.

'We met beside a lake where we used to walk Freya when she was little, and he broke down in tears. He said he'd messed up and hadn't been thinking properly. 'He was so ashamed. I could tell how sorry he was, and we agreed to rebuild a friendship.'

Maria says: 'I didn't want to deny Simon contact with Freya, and the more I saw of him, the more I missed him. Most of my friends thought I was crazy, but I wanted him back in my life.'

'Maria is my best friend,' says Simon. 'We're definitely better as friends than husband and wife. I'm so grateful to have her back in my life.'

They now see each other almost every day, though their relationship is not uncomplicated.

'When Simon told me he was seeing someone else, I was jealous, especially in the early years,' says Maria. 'I don't think he's found it easy when I've had relationships either, even though they haven't lasted longer than a few months, but we both understand that we're free to meet

Who knew?

WOMEN drink almost 50 per cent more at fancy dress parties than at regular parties