

He Took My Story, So I Made a New One

When my 60-year-old husband suddenly left, I lost a sense of who I was, but not entirely.

By Virginia DeLuca

July 18, 2025

Three times a day, my friend called.

“I am not capable of maintaining relationships,” I said.

“No,” she said, “he was not capable of being honest.”

My 60-year-old husband had told me out of the blue that he wanted a divorce so he could find someone with whom he could start a family of his own. And then he left. I was shocked. Nothing about this had ever come up in the decade we had been together. He was my second husband. I already had children from my first marriage.

Randy listened as I described our latest conversation in minute detail. She lived in Boston; I was in New Hampshire. This was our afternoon call, and I heard an ambulance siren through the phone. At my end was the sound of noisy, mating, insistent birds — it was spring.

“How could I have missed his unhappiness?” I said. “I’m a therapist.”

“Even you can’t mind-read,” she said. “He was a master at hiding.” Randy is as fast a talker as I am, and her hair is as curly as mine. During this time, she was endlessly patient as I told identical stories over and over and over.

All I wanted to do was not see anyone, not talk to anyone. In the weeks after my husband left, my immediate back story was that I was unlovable — an ancient tale rooted in childhood, and I was stunned by its force as it spewed from the depths.

If I didn't pick up, my friend would call again. We had done this for each other for decades. We met when our first children were babies. Most of our peers were becoming trailblazing women in medical and law schools or joining construction crews.

Instead, we formed a consciousness-raising group, and the women I met there became our women's group, which continued to meet more than 40 years later. We scrutinized our relationships, revealed our inner thoughts and desires, and sang along with Marlo Thomas and Harry Belafonte's "Parents Are People" and Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman."

My friend and I celebrated new babies, loves and careers and helped each other through the losses. We stood beside each other, holding the other person upright when they buckled. When my brother was dying of AIDS, she arranged flights, folded me into a taxi and took me home as I cried. We kept each other steady when our children threatened to veer off into dangerous territory.

We knew each other's sore places and tender spots and didn't need to poke. She had a hard time with being criticized; I hated being told what I "should" do.

So, when my previously loving and caring husband suddenly decided he wanted a different life, one that included having his own children, I tried to make sense of it as my friend and I walked around the pond in Boston's Forest Hills Cemetery. I worried out loud that maybe he was suffering from early-onset dementia and that I, as part of our marital vows, should take care of him.

Randy stopped so short that I almost tripped over her.

"Are you nuts?" she said. "I would choose many words to describe this man, but 'dementia' wouldn't be among them."

“He’s not making sense,” I said. “Behavioral changes are a symptom of frontal lobe dementia. I looked it up. It fits perfectly.”

She resumed walking. She didn’t argue back, but I imagine her tongue was sore.

I spoke to her about a different friend who had just finished a book about how relationships end. “There are always signs, but people rarely pay attention,” that friend had insisted, before adding hastily, “Not that it was your fault.”

“No, it’s not your fault,” Randy said with surety and conviction. “Let’s sit.”

After my husband left, people judged me. They insisted that he must have been cheating. What had I missed? Hadn’t we ever talked about him wanting children? How was our sex life?

I understood. Loss is a constant and yet such a huge fear. We all want to believe that we can be immune from loss if we do everything right. Love and attachment are a gamble. Each person we love takes a little piece of us, and then they are careless, forget to look both ways, drink too much or climb mountain cliffs.

People die. They fall out of love. They leave. We grieve.

The only way to avoid this pain is to avoid love. I knew that was too hard a way to live.

I needed to bring my car into the shop, and the repair shop had a car service that would drive me home and then bring me back. See? Look at me, such an independent single woman.

The driver was very chatty. I learned he was from Romania and had grown children doing well in college. When I spoke about my grandchildren, he asked where my husband was.

I squirmed. “I lost my husband,” I said, giving him a sorrowful look. It was kind of true.

When acquaintances asked about my divorce, I said, “I’m a bad husband picker.” I said it as if I lacked the skill to choose a ripe cantaloupe from the market.

What I was really saying, and I'm sure I fooled no one, was: It's not me! It's not because I'm bad at relationships!

I believed my husband and I had a wonderful relationship. Clearly, that wasn't true. Did he already have a new relationship? Or was he acting on some fantasy of recapturing youth? Where did this wish for his own family come from?

My friend and I covered this ground together, dissecting every conversation.

All humans tell stories, and the most powerful story is the one we tell ourselves about ourselves. In so many ways, this story is our self. Who we were, where we came from and where we're going.

My husband left without warning and without, in my view, an adequate explanation. Over and over I asked him why, and he could only sputter through sobs before hanging up the phone. It was as confusing as it was devastating.

I kept asking if any of my memories were true. We used to love walking together on the Marginal Way in Maine. Or had only I loved it? What about cooking together? I questioned my joy at playing in the ocean with him and laughing with friends by the fire.

This sudden ending destroyed our life together, but he also walked away with my story. He left me storyless. All I had believed about myself was smashed and lay on the ground in little pieces.

Day after day, my friend called, visited and invited me out. She asked about how my daughter-in-law was dealing with my grandson's sleep training. And I remembered how I managed my son's sleep struggles. She asked how my boss handled an employee at work, and I told her how I had averted the crisis.

These were not huge events, but in this way, Randy kept me sane by repeatedly telling me the story of myself. It was a story I couldn't remember and could barely hear, full of bravery, strength and good humor in the face of adversity.

She held onto my story until I could again tell it myself.

I don't have a word for this love. Calling her "my friend" doesn't quite cover it. We all have connections that defy labels. She and I are not cousins, lovers or sisters. I need a name for this relationship.

Now, 11 years later, Randy and I are 73 and 72 and sharing the adventure of aging. We have the same cardiologist. We escape from our daily lives, travel to Provincetown to write and walk our steps on Commercial Street. She is a brilliant and much-published writer, and I buy all her books and give them to others as holiday presents. I just released my memoir, which she encouraged me to write.

She brags about me. I'm so proud of her. We talk every day and walk often. We dissect our loves. She knows details about how my sewer pipe broke on Tuesday, and I know how her hydrangea plants have fared over the winter. Occasionally, we have differences. She thinks I don't worry enough, and I think she worries too much.

I no longer believe I am a love failure because, after all, I have loved her so deeply and so well for so long. She is proof that I do have long-lasting loves, just not long-lasting husbands.

Originally published in The New York Times, Modern Love column, July 18, 2025.