



*The experience was traumatic –  
and lonely*

# BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

Whether it's what Gwyneth Paltrow would classify  
*as a "conscious uncoupling"*

**OR A GUT-WRENCHING GOODBYE,**  
breaking up with a friend is never easy.

Writer *Diana Ballon* digs deep into the loss of her  
own BFF and learns some valuable lessons  
about the bonds of female friendship.



*Illustrations by Tim Zeltner*

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# FRANCIS\* AND I FIRST MET WHEN WE WERE *eight* OR *nine*

years old and our families shared cottages next to each other on Ontario's Georgian Bay. While we were initially thrown together due to our mothers' friendship, we soon began to spend time together because we genuinely enjoyed each other's company.

From the beginning, I was intrigued by Francis: She seemed as free-spirited and cool as I was awkward and self-conscious. Francis could have a fiery temper at times, but I attributed that to her striking red hair. She reminded me of my favourite heroine, Anne of Green Gables. We both liked to paint, to swim, to lie on the flat beige and pink rocks on the side of the bay. We'd continue to meet up at the cottage each summer – I was from Montreal, and she was from Toronto.

Over the years, we bonded over many cups of tea. At first it was tentatively at the cottage on wooden chairs at the family dinner table. Then later, during our high school years, she'd buy exotic flavours of loose-leaf teas in Toronto's Kensington Market, wrap them in cellophane and mail them to me. When I moved to Toronto in my 20s, we would get together more often. And once a year, we'd meet up for high tea. We'd dress up in dangling earrings, dresses and loose scarves and meet at a fancy hotel, leaving diapers and other domestic responsibilities at home. While I always cherished these times together – and still do – as the years passed, it became harder and harder to get together. Weeks stretched into many months of not getting together. I could see that she was happy and knew that life was busy, but I couldn't stand not feeling prioritized. Eventually, our friendship simply fizzled.

In retrospect, even when Francis did make overtures to reconnect, I think I pulled away: Too much of a sense of rejection had already settled in. Francis never did anything awful to me; she simply didn't make the effort I needed to feel like an important friend. On a Friday night in October 2013, we found our breaking point: We were supposed to get together for dinner, but I ended up staying at work late, waiting to hear back from her about a plan. I became increasingly irritated as the hours ticked by. Eventually I called and left her an angry message. She called back, very angry, and we agreed, I suppose, to disagree. She said, "Well, what does this mean? Is this it?"

## WHEN IT'S OVER, IT'S OVER

Best friends "rarely are forever," writes psychologist Irene S. Levine in her book *Best Friends Forever: Surviving a Breakup with your Best Friend*. After polling more than 1,500 women on their fractured friendships and friendship breakups, Levine confirmed that "being tossed aside by a best friend is just as painful as being jilted by a boyfriend, husband or lover." It shouldn't be so surprising, considering the amount of negotiation necessary for platonic friendships to succeed. It's much the same as a romantic relationship: You need to be able to manage conflict and have the capacity to talk about the relationship and set boundaries.

Sociologist Carol Smart, professor emerita at the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives at The University of Manchester, says that the difference between the breakup of a relationship with an intimate partner and platonic friend is that one is recognized and one isn't: "While everyone talks about a breakup with a lover or a divorce, you're kind of not supposed to feel that way [with the end of a platonic friendship]. People don't understand why, since we choose our friends, it's such a big deal to 'unchoose' them."

But the loss of a friendship can be a serious life event because our friends have become significant and lasting figures in our lives. The intimacy and intensity of female friendships tend to last longer these days compared to, say, our grandparents' generation because "youth is extending until about age 30," says Smart. With people getting married later, having children later and staying in university longer, there are many more years for women to focus on everyday friendships in a way they often can't when they have their own families and full-time jobs.

## DEALING WITH A BREAKUP

Women "break up" for all kinds of reasons. For some, it's because of a betrayal, because they feel replaced or because one person becomes too needy and the relationship doesn't feel reciprocal. For others, feeling unsupported after a significant life event, such as a parent's death or the birth of a child, is enough to end a friendship. Other times, over many years, women may simply



cease to have things in common. For me, I stopped feeling prioritized and, perhaps because I'm a twin, this is something I feel particularly sensitive to. I need to be the most special, at least part of the time.

Montreal therapist and sole parent Isabel Melo describes feeling ravaged when a 37-year-old friendship to someone she says was like a sister came to an end very abruptly via email. After months of her friend not returning her calls or emails, she received what she described as a breakup letter on New Year's Eve from her "ex-friend." It stated that she was not to try to reach her again and that "to contact her would be a serious violation of her boundaries."

"She broke my heart: I cried and cried and cried," she says. "It's like a hole. It affects your history. When I think back to my childhood, she's there. My adolescence, she's there...."

Mara Korkola, a Toronto artist, also experienced a breakup by email, without explanation, in what she describes as a "Dear John" letter. She says she felt confused and frustrated at not even being given an opportunity to process what had happened with her friend.

When Francis uttered those words to me over the phone that fall day in 2013, I was crushed. I cried on several occasions, engaged my poor husband in one too many conversations about this severance and suffered miserably from feeling rejected. The experience was traumatic – and lonely. It was like getting divorced but without the recognized grieving process. People don't exactly send cards or call after a breakup with a friend.

## THE LOSS OF A FRIENDSHIP CAN BE A *serious life event*



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### MOVING ON

Melo says that, while she is hurt and wouldn't have the same trust or respect for her friend, she has forgiven her and would rekindle the relationship in a minute. Toronto writer Abigail Pugh, who has seen a couple of close friendships end due to conflicts that could not be resolved, says she hasn't ever quite let go of any "broken" friendship. After several years pass, the "rights" and "wrongs" disappear, replaced by a much simpler sense of missing the person. Korkola, on the other hand, has moved on. Ending that one old friendship has paved the way for new, more fulfilling ones, she says. As for me and Francis, there have been several kind overtures between us. She called, emailed and came to my dad's funeral last spring – for which I am so grateful and touched.

I called and emailed to wish her happy birthday shortly after, and we've had several other email exchanges since then. Perhaps a reconnection is possible.

I have difficulty abandoning the past. Francis accepted and valued me from an age when I didn't even do the same for myself. We know each other. We have fun and we can be silly and young like we were when we first met – and I do miss her. Writing this article has been therapeutic. I realize now that neither of us is "wrong" or bad; we've simply landed in different places – literally and figuratively. We're no longer those young girls whiling away the steamy summer days on a cottage dock. And that, I now understand, is OK. *hr*

*\*name has been changed.*