The Friend Divorce

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Wham!

A gut punch. That's what it felt like. A big, unexpected blow to the belly. And I didn't even see it coming.

I read the email two, three times, not even processing what I saw on the screen, just moving my eyes over words that occasionally leaped out at me: selfish, never, uncaring, over, done. But I refused to let the words in. This was my best friend since second grade — and she'd just dumped me. Hard.

It seemed like the details I remembered should've precluded being cut off like that: I remembered that she showed up to the science fair in her First Communion dress; I'd never seen anything like it before and I wanted one, too. I remembered that, before she moved away at the end of third grade, our beloved teacher threw an at-school sleepover and we fabric-painted a pillowcase as a farewell gift. She kept that pillowcase for years afterward — might even have it still.

I remembered that, when we were little, her Italian mother always accommodated my heathenish refusal to eat sauce on pasta and let me have it plain instead. I remembered that I wasn't there when her mother died suddenly. I remembered that we were pen pals while she lived in Colorado and then Texas.

I remembered that she was the bridesmaid who accommodated everyone else. "That's fine with me" was her mantra. I remembered that she was the faithful gift-recorder at my showers, wedding and baby. I remembered how, in the post-college swamp of what-comes-next, I convinced her to move to D.C. I thought it would be like third grade again. I remembered the pictures of her holding my newborn son at Christmastime — she had her own stocking at our house — and his birthdays.

Now, I wonder how much of what I remembered was a lie. I wrestle with the proportions of it: how much hers, how much mine? I think we're both complicit, but in the years since she disappeared from my life, I've gone from self-righteous indignation — who the hell was she to accuse me of being unconcerned about her? — to uncomfortable, stomach-acid laced guilt. Was I so caught up in the drama of my own life that I left no space for hers?

I think about the times she helped me out in a babysitting pinch — my coverage fell through for back-to-school night, I needed to be at a late class before my husband got home from work.

"I'm not doing anything," she insisted. "I can be there." I accepted the help gratefully, but maybe arrogantly. When my own sister died, she was the sister I had remaining. But after that email — and the follow-up, when I asked if we could talk and she gave me a written shrug: "Why bother when I know I need to walk away?" – I doubted the truth of the bond.

I kept dreaming about her, too. She still pops in occasionally, somewhere between a special guest star and the mental version of a hole left by a rotten tooth. I'm sad when I wake from those dreams, reminded anew that the deeper-than-friendship we once had no longer exists, that maybe the one I thought we had was a dream, too.

Of course, I still miss her. The pictures, the memories — all still present and accounted for. My son asks who she is in the photos. I remind him, even as I remind myself that she no longer claims the title "aunt."

"Oh, right," he says vaguely, no longer recalling her beyond a random figure in some albums.

I no longer recall her completely either. I have no idea where she is now, what she is doing, what she looks like. I don't know if she found someone to love and to love her back. I hope so.Maybe she found and lost and found again. Maybe she got a dog like the one she had when we were kids, with one blue eye and one brown eye. She told me the dog showed people her brown eye if she liked you and her blue eye if you were suspect. I'm saddened by the realization that I'm now a blue eye person to her.

Was I a bad friend, so wrapped up in my own tidily-progressing life that I ignored her loitering around the fringes of adulthood: yes to a responsible job, no to forming any romantic attachments; yes to grownup suits and heels, no to any living arrangement that made a space entirely hers? What was happening there, all that time? Was I blind, or was it just more convenient to not inquire? I squirm like a worm on a hook, asking myself these questions.

I was culpable. Just like a broken romance, a broken friendship is the product of a failure on both ends. I wish she hadn't felt the need to burn it to the ground and walk away completely, but it was what she needed to do. But if someday she reaches out again, I'll be the friend she deserves.