

The Breakup No One Talks About

Nina Gaby '86N, '90N (MS) explores what happens when a friendship—suddenly and without explanation—ends.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

In recent years, I experienced a lost friendship that was so powerfully derailing, in spite of all I know as a psychiatric nurse practitioner, that I had to stop and look at it. I'd had essays and short stories published. So I started to just pitch the idea of the universality of this phenomenon of women unfriending other women—despite everything that we know about how important these relationships are. I started talking not only with people in psychiatry and medicine, but also other creative writers. And everybody had a story.

So many of the women whose stories appear in my anthology didn't follow through or confront the friend who'd dumped them.

In spite of all these waves of feminism, I honestly don't think that we yet possess the skills to feel comfortable with confrontation. Whether confrontation would help or hinder a friendship, I don't know. But what is it that we're afraid of learning about ourselves? We are so vulnerable in that situation. What if we're forced to hear something about ourselves that we can't handle?

Nina Gaby '86N, '90N (MS)

Psychiatric nurse practitioner, studio artist, and essayist; editor and contributor, *Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women* (She Writes Press)

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On her first lost friendship:

"I was 13. I can go back to that moment in a split second, and I'm there. Linda and I did everything together, and overnight, she cut me out. I told myself I had to be tough. It was the age of girl groups, and we were almost trying to look like little hoodlums with our black clothes, eyeliner, and teased-up hair. So I just figured I was going to be tougher, and I wasn't going to let it matter. And I moved on. But in a sense I didn't, because here I am at 64 years old and I'm writing about it."

I conduct women's groups. And sometimes we'll say, "Ok, you're mad at something that happened to you. And you're in this group and you're yelling at us, and you're mad at me. Have you talked to the person who upset you?" And they say, "Well, no." And I back up and say, "Let's talk about how you can talk to the person who upset you in the first place, so you don't absorb all this negativity and project it out onto everyone else but the person who upset you in the first place." Not confronting people is a very protective thing that women do for themselves, but it fails.

The more I talk to men in my line of work, the more I understand that they, too, question themselves when they lose a connection.

I think many men process these losses differently, however. The husband of a friend of mine wrote this very funny blog post. He wrote, in effect, "If you've been good friends with Barry and you're not friends anymore, and somebody says, 'Hey, whatever happened to Barry?,' you'll say, 'Oh, yeah, I haven't seen Barry in a while. And how do you think the Knicks are going to do Saturday night?'" A male friend of mine said, "I hated that blog post. Because I don't think it's true. I don't think that all men just jump into talking about sports." But I think they can.

How many songs and poems are written about romance? But as I write in the book, there's no Adele song for the breakup of a friendship.

If there were a song? Maybe "Love is Everything," by Jane Siberry. It's clearly about a romantic relationship, but it distills things down to some very basic truths. "So take a lesson from the strangeness you feel / And know you'll never be the same / And find it in your heart to kneel down and say I gave my love, didn't I?" Maybe you have to say, it's great that you did care deeply for someone, and that's good enough. Because often there isn't any resolution. You have to learn how to live with that pain. 

