



SARAH OVERSTREET

Learning a friend's value

By Sarah Overstreet

The day I packed her belongings into the U-Haul, it was drizzling and she was crying. She was crying because she couldn't fit her grandma's kitchen chairs into the trailer, and because she was moving a 13-hour drive from the town she'd lived in for eight years, and from me, her best friend. She didn't know what the future

held, and she knew whatever it was, she'd be doing it without me just across town. I can be a very good ear, a calm, rational and comforting friend. So can she. We'd seen each other through the suicide of a parent, the breakup of a marriage, three excruciating love affairs, the quitting of a job without another one to go to, and a firing. (If we'd known what was facing us just in the next few months, we'd

have both cried, and cried a lot harder.)

I tried to reassure her, because I wanted her to feel better and because I wouldn't admit to myself what her moving could mean. "We'll see each other, don't worry," I told her. "Thirteen hours isn't such a long drive, and we'll get those month-in-advance plane tickets for weekends." I put her kitchen chairs in my pickup truck to take home. "I'll have these refinished for your birthday and bring them out."

The chairs moved with me a year later, and sat in my barn for another two. The weekly phone calls dwindled to monthly. We saw each other once a year and tried to ignore the fact that what we had feared actually happened: We had passed from each other's physical presence, except for yearly visits, and those were hurried

and unsatisfying.

Now it has been nine years since she left. I have spent my vacations sitting in her law office waiting, and she has grabbed a few weekends with me. We shopped for her maternity clothes on her lunch hour, and I was away from home when the call came that she'd had her baby after a long difficult labor and a C-section.

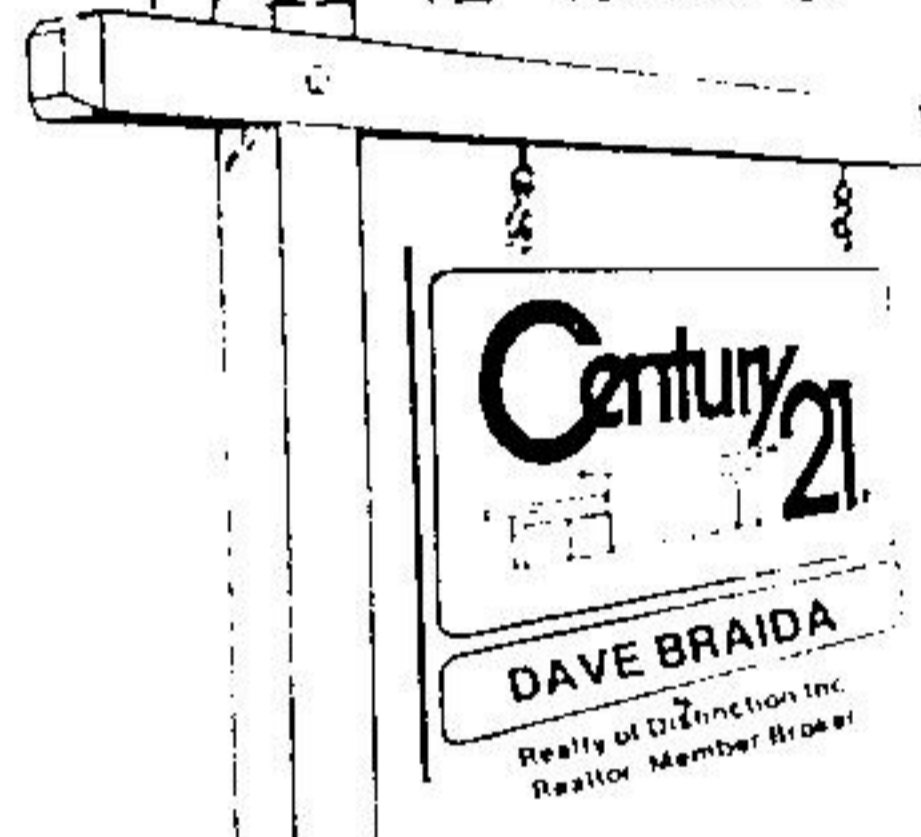
We are no different from hundreds of thousands of our generation, kids who had promised each other relationships would always mean more than things. We wouldn't be like our blue-collar parents, who grew up in the Depression and valued security above all, to whom friendship are a necessary casualty in the war for survival. That day in her yard, I honestly believed nothing could keep us apart.

Our careers took us by surprise and enflamed us before we even smelled

smoke. She got a job in a small college library and started law school at night. I went to work as a newspaper reporter and found the license to discover secrets more intoxicating than anything I could have imagined. She felt the same way about law. A few extra hours here, a weekend there, meant the difference between winning a case or losing it, of getting a story or not. We never begrudged the time we spent at our work, but gradually our jobs became like marathons, the runners never seeing the scenery along one inch of the 26 miles they pass.

Personal events have made us need each other like we never have in our 17 years together: a new and trying marriage, the breakup of another, a birth. For the most part, we have gone it alone.

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