

The moment I discovered my husband was having an affair with my best friend

A chance moment revealed the worst imaginable betrayal, but it's only years later that I realise that he did me a favour



877



Gift this article free



My husband of 35 years and a woman I've known for three decades were having an affair right under my nose

Anonymous

26 February 2025 1:00pm GMT

Lucy Marshall is a qualified accountant and interior designer. She's single, with two grown-up children and two grandsons, and lives in Oxfordshire.*

It's nearly midnight and my husband, Leo* is not in the bed beside me. Sighing, I put my book down, heading downstairs knowing exactly where he'll be – passed out in front of the blaring television. The cup of herbal tea I'd made him hours ago remains untouched. There's an empty [bottle of red](#) (not the same white, I note, that we'd uncorked during dinner earlier) and a drained whisky tumbler.

Leo is sprawled out, barely conscious. In his palm is his mobile phone, the messages still open on the screen. My eye is drawn to one he can only have written in the last two minutes. "Would you be prepared to leave your husband?" it reads. Then beneath is a second text bubble: "Well, what's the point, if you're never prepared to leave Lucy?"

The reply, clear and bold with no attempt to disguise her name, is from Jilly*, a friend of 30 years. I am totally stunned. I blink. There's no room for ambiguity: my husband of 35 years and a woman I've known for three decades are [having an affair](#). A serious one. Right under my nose.

And that night, back in the dreg ends of 2018, was when my whole life turned upside down.

I'd been married to Leo since I was 24, meeting at university where we'd both studied accountancy. He was witty, charming, self-assured and sporty too, as I was. In my 20s I once completed a marathon in two hours and 41 minutes.

Then in my early 30s, I had my son (who's now 32) and my daughter, 30. By then Leo had been offered a more senior position working abroad, which seemed a great chance to relocate, have a new adventure, and I gave up work.

For three years we lived the high life socialising with other expats. One of the English couples we met were Jilly and Henry*. We fell into the scene of mixing in couples and families, it was all very convivial, fuelled by generous expenses allowances. Having never drunk much before, especially with my athletic background, suddenly we found ourselves drinking most evenings, albeit fine wine.

By the time we returned to the UK in 2005, Leo's career was flying high. We were lucky enough to afford a lovely Berkshire family home, with a pool and large garden for the children (then nearly teens) and dogs to run around.

Naturally, Leo had to earn his City salary, and while he spent long days working in London (or so I thought at the time) I busied myself being a classic Home Counties mum, retraining as an interior designer too.

Many nights Leo spent away from home. "He's grafting in the office for our family's sake," I reminded myself to be grateful. He often seemed stressed, and drank heavily; I reasoned he was under pressure and needed to relieve some of that at home. Frequently, he'd come to bed hours later than me, or I'd wake in the night and have to haul him off the sofa, clearing empty bottles and packing him off to bed.

It was while doing exactly that one evening – with him dozily clasping his phone – when I spotted those fateful digital exchanges between my husband and Jilly.

Jilly and Henry's lives were woven into the fabric of ours. It felt like I'd been physically punched in the gut, too surreal to comprehend. I just kept thinking, "I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do," it was too enormous to take in. But fury and utter betrayal were seeded.

Leo was too drunk for me to tackle him that night. And I was too shocked for a confrontation. Instead I went upstairs, sat on our marital bed with shaking hands, and typed out a midnight text to Jilly: "I've just read the conversations between you tonight. And my heart is broken."

I didn't know what else to say, or do, at that moment.

I didn't sleep much that night, in between the tears, tossing and turning. Questions going round and round in my head... How could they? Replaying every scenario over the weeks, months and – God, years? – trying to think if there had been [signs](#) I had missed.

RECOMMENDED

These are the signs of cheating only a relationship therapist can spot

[Read more →](#)

In the morning there was no reply on my mobile, though I could see Jilly had read the messages. Leo had never come to bed. Spare room? Or had he sobered up and gone to her? I gave up on sleep, took the dogs out and walked and walked as I cried down the phone to my two younger sisters telling them what I'd seen. One of them, she admitted, had suspected it. I felt flabbergasted but had to park that extra betrayal. It was too much at that time.

When I returned home after walking, eyes puffy from crying and no sleep, Leo was waiting for me in the living room. "We need to have a chat," was his greeting. I dutifully sat down and listened to his explanation.

He confirmed that yes, they were having a sexual and emotional affair, but that he wasn't sure how he felt towards Jilly. Numb and in shock, I heard him tell me that they'd agreed to end it. Leo said that he "loved me" but wasn't "in love with me". That old chestnut. (It never helps soften the blow, I warn you, only the second part "I'm not in love with you" rings in your ears forever.)

We both cried. Most people's first question might have been "how long has it been going on for?" But it wasn't mine, I just couldn't handle knowing it. What if years of my life, our marriage, had all been a lie? To this day, I still don't know how long their affair had been.

During this emotional, surreal conversation, we decided that with our son's wedding six months away, we'd best try and patch things up until then, and not tell anyone. "But she is not coming to the wedding!" I angrily demanded.

It took days for my "friend" to return my original text. "I'm sorry", she wrote, that was it.

I also rang Henry, Jilly's husband, wondering if he knew the truth. He dismissed me, called me "a liar," seeming to think I was the devil incarnate.

Leo and I somehow got through the wedding in October 2019, though barely speaking and with him sleeping in the spare room by then. Yet I was absolutely determined to enjoy my son's big day, not let this ruin it.

But just two weeks after the wedding, Leo told me he was leaving – and moving in with her. I have no idea whether they had ever really ended it back when he

said they had, after “message gate”. Or whether that was merely another lie to stop it all blowing up ahead of the wedding.

Bitterness and resentment had long set in by then, and all trust was shattered. I questioned my entire life. [Our marriage](#) was over and I refused to fight for it. “Just go,” I calmly told him, I wasn’t going to beg. Dignity was all I had left. “But it’s up to you, Leo, to tell the children the truth.”

By then I had also discovered my mother (and my cleaner!) had known about the affair, yet no one had dared mention it. This amplified my sense of betrayal and foolishness – how had I been so naive? I’d never seen them flirting, nor caught stolen touches, or even much eye contact exchanged. They had clearly been extremely careful. All I knew was that Jilly and Henry had been included in almost every social occasion we’d been to in recent years. That hurt was immense.

Leo and Jilly, seemingly, had exactly choreographed delivering the devastating news to both me and Henry. (Well, I did try warning him...) They’d rented themselves a new place to live, five miles up the road. They are still together now.

The whole experience rocked me, as you might expect. My sisters were my rocks, they’d seen plenty of Leo over the years and believed the [marriage should have ended sooner](#). Looking back now, I do too. I can see that for the last decade of our married life we weren’t happy.

Because I was so ashamed and felt so foolish I found it incredibly hard to talk to any friends. Especially as so many of them had shared friendships with Jilly and Henry too. It was incredibly isolating, and while my children were adults I didn’t want to burden them with my woes.

I refused [antidepressants](#). But sadly it was during this time, coinciding with the long, lonely nights of lockdown, when I began drinking unhealthily. I was desperately isolated.

For the first in my life I wasn’t drinking socially, but alone to numb the pain. I’d never finish a whole bottle of wine by myself, but I realised that even three quarters of a bottle added up to six units, double the recommended amount and enough to damage health. Oh the irony! After years of living with a heavy drinker (and reprimanding him about it), I’d ended up becoming one myself.

Eventually, counselling helped me work through my anger along with my grief. Leo wasn't dead but I still had to mourn the end of a long marriage as well as the future that we'd never share. I'd always imagined us raising our grandchildren together, watching them play in the garden as our children once had. My counsellor advised me to find two old friends to confide in, away from the expat circles, that made me feel so much lighter.

For two years my drinking niggled at me, it wasn't chaotic but I knew it wasn't good. I decided in October 2023 enough was enough. I found the alcohol-free coach Sandra Parker online, and signed up to her Just the Tonic programme. It changed my life. I [kicked booze out](#) of it entirely, slept much better, and sold the family home with all its ghosts and bad memories.

I now keep in touch with Leo for the sake of the children, but that's it. He's their father and I want them to still have a relationship with him. Once they'd officially moved in together, Jilly sent one long apologetic message, which I ignored. Occasionally, we'd awkwardly bump into each other but thankfully her and Leo eventually bought a home 90 miles away.

Good riddance and good luck to them. Our divorce was finalised in 2022 and I've reverted to my maiden name.

Today, at 63, I've moved on. I'm now 18 months alcohol-free and feel great. I've just been skiing and have a Spanish cycling trip planned. I see my grandchildren and also volunteer weekly, for a support group for families affected by alcohol. It feels good to "give back".

Designing and decorating my new home from scratch was me literally and metaphorically carving out my new future. And it looks rosy. I have friends (proper trustworthy ones!), great kids and grandkids and lovely sisters. There's no one special in my life now, but I'm not ruling out love, I'm ready to trust again after surviving one of the worst betrayals imaginable. I've finally come out smiling.

As told to Susanna Galton

*Names changed to protect identities.