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**THE MODERN LOVE  
PODCAST**

# Inside an Exploding Marriage Belle Burden in Her Own Words

After 20 years, Belle  
Burden's picture-  
perfect marriage  
*came crashing down*

came crashing down  
when her husband  
suddenly walked  
away.

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Photo Illustration by The New York Times; Background: Brian Rea; Inset photo: Victor Llorente for The New York Times



**Hosted by Anna Martin**

I remember the first time I read Belle Burden's Modern Love essay, "Was I Married to a Stranger?" about her husband blindsiding her by suddenly leaving their marriage of 20 years. And I remember the second time I read it, just a few minutes later. I ended up reading her essay three times in a row. It was almost like I was searching for clues that I might've missed, about why this happened to her. How a life that seemed so perfect could fall apart in one night.

Soon after the essay was published, it went viral. Burden comes from a wealthy New York family, with ties to the Vanderbilts and John Jay, and her story fascinated the people in her elite circle — and those outside of it. There were tabloid articles, Reddit threads filled with gossip and whole message

boards dedicated to speculating about her marriage. That attention might've dissuaded someone from ever publishing anything again. But not Belle Burden. Instead, she's decided to share even more.

In her new memoir, "Strangers: A Memoir of Marriage," Burden opens up about what happened after that fateful night when her world fell apart. And in our conversation, she tells me about how what seemed like an abrupt, tragic ending — was actually a new beginning.

*This is a transcript of an episode of "Modern Love," edited for length and clarity. You can listen below, or by following or subscribing to the show on the NYT App, Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, iHeartRadio or wherever you get your podcasts.*

**Anna Martin:** Back in 2023, you wrote a Modern Love essay, and it stopped me in my tracks. Now you've written a book, in which you talk about how one night, out of the blue, your marriage collapsed and your life changed forever. This happened in March of 2020. You wrote that you and your family left Manhattan for your home in Martha's Vineyard. You were quarantining there during the early days of Covid. What was life like there as you settled in?

**Belle Burden:** So we drove up there with our two daughters, who were then 15 and 12, and it was a very scary time for all of us. New York was shut down, but we were very lucky that we had a place to go that was isolated, that we loved, and we really settled in. My husband works for a hedge fund, so he was getting up early and working, and I was doing house cleaning and going for walks. He'd love to be in the forest chopping wood, and he would bring in different kinds, like blueberry and oak, and he'd build these gorgeous fires. He had bought a lot of whiskey because we thought whiskey would kill the virus, and so he made whiskey sours, or sometimes like a hot toddy, and we would sit there and we'd read or we would talk about the latest pandemic news. And in addition to chopping the wood, he loved to make dinner. He loved to make

sure that we were secure and ready for this period of quarantine. And so it was both a scary time, but also I felt very safe with my girls in the house all the time and just that kind of coziness together.

**Martin:** Did anything seem off with your husband?

**Burden:** Nothing seemed off at all, honestly. We were very affectionate with each other. There was absolutely nothing that made me worried.

We had a really nice dinner and I started cleaning up, loading the dishwasher, mopping the floor. And I got a call on my cellphone. And then it registered the message and I pressed play and it was a man. And he said, "I'm trying to reach Belle." I can still hear it. "I'm trying to reach Belle. I'm sorry to tell you that your husband is having an affair with my wife."

**Martin:** What was your immediate reaction?

**Burden:** My immediate feeling was that this can't be true and that my husband would explain it. It did not fit at all with what I knew of my husband. I was wearing pajama pants and a cozy sweater and I'd just taken a shower and I can still feel that feeling of the coziness with the panic.

I started going downstairs to find my husband, and I could tell that he knew because he looked worried. And he said, "It meant nothing. It was very short. I love you. I love only you. I love our family. I'm so sorry. I'm so embarrassed."

He has taken my hands, he is looking directly in my eye and I remember looking down at our hands and he had his wedding ring on that's very scuffed from wearing it for 20 years and I had no rings on because a friend had told me that Covid could hide under rings because you can't get soap and Purell in there. And as I'm sitting there with him holding my hands, I think, "Did I cause this because I took off my wedding ring for the first time in 20 years?" I thought maybe I had shaken something loose in the universe and that this had led to this moment. I mean, not thinking rationally, but that's where I was.

I also thought, “OK, we’re in this house together. We’re in lockdown. We are going to have to live here together and try and work through this. And see a therapist on Zoom. How am I going to manage this?” And then at that moment, my younger daughter, who was 12, called for me and asked me to make her turnovers, and I realized I have to pretend that everything is OK for the girls until we can figure out what we’re doing. And so I raised my voice to sound chipper and said, “OK, I’ll make the turnovers.” I left the room and put the turnovers in the oven and then went to my shower where I could seal myself in and close the bathroom door and just wailed. I just couldn’t contain it any longer.

**Martin:** And then how does the night end? Can you even sleep?

**Burden:** I can’t sleep. I go downstairs to check on the girls, and my husband is asleep in my son’s bed, and he looks very peaceful. I’m thinking, how can he be sleeping? I haven’t slept all night. Our marriage is either going to go through a very difficult period or it might end and he’s sleeping.

At six in the morning, he comes in carrying a tote bag and he says to me, “I thought I was happy but I’m not. I’ve decided I want a divorce.” And I was stunned because I honestly thought it would be my decision to make, whether we would stay married or not, but it was not going to be my decision. It was going to be his decision. I looked at him and in that moment, he seemed very, very different to me. His eyes looked different. The warmth had gone.

Then he says, “You’re going to be OK. You’re still young.” And then he walked out of the room, walked to our front door, walked out, boarded a ferry and left.

When he got to New York, he said, “You can have custody of the kids. You can have the house and the apartment. I don’t want any part of this life anymore.”

**Martin:** Did you ask him why, why is this happening?

**Burden:** When he left, I didn't have a chance because he left very quickly. So I just kept calling him. I would go to places where the girls couldn't hear me in the garage, in the woods, just calling and just begging him to explain, to tell what was wrong with me, what he wasn't happy about, to say that he was in love, but he couldn't do it or he wouldn't do it. He said it was not my fault, which should be reassuring, but it's also just a nonanswer. And the only thing he would tell me is that he felt like a switch had flipped. And that he thought he wanted our life, but he didn't. He thought he was happy, but wasn't.

**Martin:** At some point, you have to tell the kids. How did they find out?

**Burden:** A therapist I spoke with had advised that we not tell them until the pandemic became less scary. But after a month, I just thought, I can't keep pretending. We have to tell them.

**Martin:** So this conversation would be the first time you were talking face-to-face again. How did you decide to tell them?

**Burden:** My husband was on his way up to the island; his boss had lent him use of a seaplane. He arrived and I watched him come up the walkway. And I thought to myself, "He seems happy." I sat on the couch with the girls, my arms around them, and my husband sort of paced in front of them and said, "I have not been happy and I've decided that we're going to divorce." And my younger daughter turned, and I think she thought this was a joke. And then she looked at my face and saw how sad I looked, and she just screamed. My older daughter just sat very calmly with her arms crossed, just watching her father. And my husband looked at me and said, "I'm starving. Can you make me a sandwich?"

I had one of those moments that I think we have as parents where I have a whole dialogue with myself: "What would a good mother do in this situation? This is my child's father. I want her to feel like things will be OK." I'm a child of divorce. I hated if my parents spoke badly of each other. Of course, another

part of me is thinking: “What are you talking about? I’m not gonna make you a sandwich.” But I went with making the sandwich and I really tried to make the best sandwich I possibly could because I thought, if I’m going to do this, I will make the best sandwich he has ever had so that he will say to himself, “How could I possibly leave this woman who can make these incredible sandwiches?” This is what I’m thinking to myself.

**Martin:** I mean, I’m laughing, but it’s a dark laughter. I know you grew up in a very prominent New York City family. Your lineage includes John Jay, the Vanderbilts, your grandmother is Babe Paley, a magazine editor, socialite. This world that you grew up in is not a world that a lot of people have access to. Did you feel like there were certain norms or expectations around marriage?

**Burden:** In some ways, yes, I think because of where I grew up in the Upper East Side and then going to private schools, there was an expectation that you would meet your mate and you would have a nice wedding and you’d get married. There was sort of a playbook for that. But I think because I’d been through my parents’ divorce and then my mother’s divorce from my stepfather, I had a deep yearning to be married for eternity and to have an intact family. I think it was the thing I wanted most in life.

**Martin:** What did you think made a good marriage?

**Burden:** Well, I’ve given more thought to that now, I think. But I actually thought I was improving on the model when I chose my husband. Because the men in my family have tempers that are not super scary, but more like stomping your feet. And my husband, from the day I met him, was always very calm. He didn’t believe in yelling. And so I thought I had really improved.

**Martin:** Tell me about the first time you met the man that would become your husband.

**Burden:** My first impression was that he looked very much like my father. He was six feet tall, blonde, preppy, went to boarding school, and at that time in my life I was not interested in that. The first time I met him I just thought, “Who is this guy?” So I did not think anything would come of it. And then we started working together, and I was pretty dazzled by his intelligence. He was an amazing lawyer. And I was very drawn to his manner. Very kind to people around him. So I started to soften.

**Martin:** Could you tell that he was interested in you?

**Burden:** I started to get that sense, and then he sent me an email and said: would you consider ditching your boyfriend, and coming to Greece with me this August? Initially I said no. And then two weeks later I was working late and he came into my office and said, I just wanted to say goodbye. And he shut the door and I sort of stood up and he kissed me. And it was by far the best kiss of my life. And something just clicked. I just knew that this was my person. So we got together and it was just fireworks and we got engaged three months later.

**Martin:** Tell me what you mean by fireworks, because that can mean a lot.

**Burden:** It was unbelievable sex that I did not expect from the steady lawyer. I did not expect that at all, but we were very physically attracted to each other.

**Martin:** So you get married, you have three kids. You have these gorgeous summers on Martha’s Vineyard. Your husband works for a hedge fund. You’re staying home, you’re raising the kids. It sounds perfect.

**Burden:** Well, nothing’s perfect, but I felt like we were very aligned and happy together and intentional about our lives and made decisions together, and even though it may not have been perfect and easy all the time, I felt like we were in it together.



**Martin:** After your husband left, when did you start to think about telling other people beyond the inner circle?

**Burden:** Well, right in the beginning, he said, or he texted, “I think we should say that this is amicable, it’s better for you if we say that.” And I think that made sense, knowing what he knew of me, that I tend to be very private. But I knew right from the beginning that I had to tell the truth about this, not to bash him, but because I couldn’t tell an untrue story about what I was experiencing and survive it.

So I told people, both friends and people I didn’t know that well, I would say: “He left me. I have no idea why and I’m in agony.” It was all I could say. And I think people were genuinely shocked, not just by the story, but that I was saying it.

**Martin:** What motivated you to be so honest?

**Burden:** I think I felt like I had this open wound and I was bleeding, and I couldn’t explain my presence without saying this is why I’m bleeding.

**Martin:** You said that being honest was the only way to survive. We talked a bit about the world that you grew up in. And I imagine discretion is a part of that. What compelled you to break that norm?

**Burden:** Both my mother and my grandmother had infidelity in their relationships, and they were always very elegant, always very graceful, but in a way that really protected the men. And I was never interested in bashing my husband, but I felt like I was not going to clean this up very gracefully and sweep it under the rug and say, “Everything is fine.” I think a lot about legacy. I have two daughters and a son, and I’m hoping that in doing it this way, that it might change that.

**Martin:** How did people react?

**Burden:** It was an interesting thing because in Martha's Vineyard, we belong to a tennis club, and people start coming back in May and June, and it's a very married place. I only know of a couple of people who are divorced, so you feel very alienated. And from one day to the next, to go from feeling like you're part of this community, to feeling like an alien is hard. I'm certainly not alone in that. I think a lot of divorcing people feel that way. It's a jarring experience.

**Martin:** Did you have the sense that people were gossiping about you?

**Burden:** Yes, I would have been gossiping about it, too. I actually don't blame them for that. It's a pretty dramatic story. But there were a couple of instances where people spoke about my story where it was reframed that this was actually a love story, but my husband's love story with his mistress. And it's actually a good thing that he left because he's going to be happy. And I just thought, "What about my love story with my husband?"

The thing that was the hardest, which I heard a few times, was that it wasn't clear who should remain a member of the club. The club has a tradition that if you divorce only one member can remain in the club and the other member has to reapply, which is a three-year process. So I just assumed that I would be a member of the club. I had bought my house, I was with the kids. He was in New York having an affair, but that wasn't clear to everyone. Who should remain? And even as I talk about this, it seems sort of silly, because, who cares, it's a private club, no one should be members of private clubs. But in that moment, it felt so shocking to me.

**Martin:** Who was able to stay a part of the club?

**Burden:** I was. I was able to stay a part of the club and people have been very welcoming and kind to me. And by the way, there are so many worse things that happen in life, but we're going down this road. So I think it is reflective of when women divorce and they lose that status of being married, especially to a man who has money. You can be treated in a way you do not expect.

**Martin:** Discarded.

**Burden:** Discarded. I felt discarded by him. That's exactly right. I felt discarded by him and then I thought I could be discarded by my community.

**Martin:** Eventually you return to New York and divorce proceedings start. When you told me about him leaving, your husband said you can take the house, you can have the kids, I don't want any of it. So was that the custody arrangement that he suggested as well?

**Burden:** My lawyer and I served up a 50-50 custody agreement because that's what I would have wanted. As a kid, I had a very '70s arrangement where I only saw my father every other weekend, but I wanted 50- 50. I wanted the kids to go back and forth in whatever way we decided, split holidays and vacations. He sent it back blacklined with all of his time taken out. He did not want them to have to go back and forth. He thought that they were fully formed human beings. They were 12, 15, and 18, so they were not tiny, but my 12-year-old really wanted a room at his house. And he did not do that. So that really shocked me when I got that custody agreement back with all of the time taken out. And that was very painful.

**Martin:** Had he been an attentive father up to this point?

**Burden:** He had been a very kind and sweet father. He took the girls to every musical. He took them to soup dumplings every weekend. He took our son to 5 a.m. hockey practice. He was not a yeller. He was very loving and sweet with them. I wouldn't say he was very hands-on, but he was a very lovely father. But the way I talk about it with the kids is, he just has not been able to create a home. He just was not able to do that and I don't know why.

**Martin:** That honesty is powerful. You don't manufacture a reason.

**Burden:** I still don't know and I just didn't want to say this is normal like, "Yeah, I know your friend has a room at her dad's house, but you don't." I wanted to acknowledge: "I know it's really hard that you don't."

**Martin:** When the divorce was finalized, how much time had passed since that night on Martha's Vineyard?

**Burden:** He left in March of 2020, and we signed our divorce agreement in October of '21. So all things considered, quite fast. I made a decision, which I think is hard for people to put together with me writing a book, but I really didn't want to live in the divorce anymore. So I remember signing the agreement, like I am signing this and I am putting it behind me. And then I went back to my maiden name, which felt very empowering.

**Martin:** Was that a reclamation? Was that a statement?

**Burden:** It was. I was very clear on it very early, and it wasn't so much discarding his name, which is my children's name, and that was a little bit hard for my kids. For me, it really felt like coming back to myself, who I was before I got married, to my family of origin, and obviously it's another man's name. It's my father's name! It's not that feminist, but it felt really good. It felt like a very tangible way to come back to myself.

**Martin:** I can see how writing the essay, it could feel risky. You are very honest and open. I can also see how it would be even more risky, given the world that you're from.

**Burden:** Not expected, right? But sometimes I still can't believe it that I'm doing it and that I did it. Sometimes I really cannot believe it.

**Martin:** So I said it was risky, but it also sounds like it felt really good.

**Burden:** It really did. It really, really did.

The night it came out, it appeared on my screen and I was like, “Oh my God, I really did this.”

**Martin:** Did you kind of have this vibe of like, “Let’s burn it all down”?

**Burden:** A little. It did. And it still does right now. I feel a lot of the same fear that, “Oh my God, I’m going to forever be attached to this story of my husband leaving me.” But there is a part of me that’s like, “Burn it all down,” like we are on this planet for such a short time, I am going for it and come what may.

**Martin:** What did people say to you after it came out?

**Burden:** The overwhelming reaction that I carry with me is from strangers who wrote to me and said “the same thing happened to me.” Both men and women, actually. A sudden ending to a relationship with no explanation and no lead up or warning, how that feels and how disorienting it is, and that it helped them to hear me talk about it. And then in turn, their letters to me made me feel less alone in it. But there was definitely some shock and discomfort, both from strangers and from people I knew.

**Martin:** Did anyone say anything to you directly?

**Burden:** One friend did, and she’s a fantastic person and we’ve totally worked through it, but she just was like: “This is shocking. Why would you do this?” It took me a while to really get my head around it because I was like: “But look at my byline. I’ve been published. What do you mean?”

**Martin:** Are you and your ex-husband still in contact?

**Burden:** We are in very limited contact, occasionally about something with the kids, occasionally about something financial. But we do not have a real relationship.

**Martin:** Are the kids seeing him?

**Burden:** He's very sweet with them. They do things occasionally, like dinner or a Rangers game, but there are no overnights or vacations or anything like that.

**Martin:** Now five and a half years later, do you feel like you have any clarity on why this happened?

**Burden:** The closest I can get to it, because he still has never offered me an explanation, does come from him, which is the idea of the switch going off. He was playing the role of husband and father, believing that was his role, and at some point it became unsustainable for him. And he took off that costume and he wasn't able to do it gracefully or in a way that he could explain. That's how I think about it.

**Martin:** I wonder whether that question of why will become less and less important to you.

**Burden:** It has become less important to me, and I think I've made peace with the fact that I won't know because I'm not sure he knows.

**Martin:** Your book ends with you running into your ex-husband in the city.

**Burden:** Yes, I was walking with a friend near the Brooklyn Bridge and I heard someone calling my name: "Belle, Belle." I looked to see who it was, and my ex-husband was standing there, waving at me and smiling.

**Martin:** What did he look like?

**Burden:** He looked very happy and cheerful and like we were long lost friends. He just doesn't see the toll that all of this took. There is this man I was with for 20 years, slept in bed with for 20 years, and I do not know him anymore. I do not know how he spends his time. I do not know his character. I do not know

how he makes decisions. And also that he really does not know me. So, I say “Hi,” and I could see out of the corner of my eye he was still standing there, but I just kept moving forward.

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*When reached for comment about Ms. Burden’s recollections relating to their divorce and custody of their children, Ms. Burden’s ex-husband provided the following response:*

“While I disagree with many of her recollections, as well as her overall mischaracterization of my relationship with my children, I do not wish to comment in more detail in order to protect them from further violations of their privacy other than to say that I continue to lovingly support, and be lovingly supported by, my children.”

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**Hosted by Anna Martin Produced by Amy Pearl and Sara Curtis Edited by Jen Poyant and Lynn Levy  
Engineered by Daniel Ramirez Original music by Dan Powell, Rowan Niemisto and Marion Lozano**

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***A correction was made on Jan. 14, 2026: A previous version of this transcript unintentionally omitted the word “not” from several of Ms. Burden’s sentences. It has been updated to correct this error.***

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When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at [corrections@nytimes.com](mailto:corrections@nytimes.com). [Learn more](#)