

This girl is a diamond's worst friend.

First engagement ring: a two-thirds carat oval. We bought it together at a now-long-closed Loop jewelry store — two college kids investing in each other's futures. Every movement of my hand set off a spray of fireworks. Fate: 12 years later, it disappeared from my desk when the house was over-run with guests. I'd taken it off because it slipped when I typed. I put it next to the keyboard. The next morning: gone. I searched on my hands and knees. With a flashlight in the dark. Vacuumed with old pantyhose stretched over the nozzle. It was nowhere.

Insurance money bought a replacement ring: five oval diamonds, one for my husband, one for me and one for each daughter, totaling a carat. Fate: A few years later one of the stones fell out, the prongs loosened from catching on threads while I was sewing. I was horrified at the gaping emptiness, as though someone had been erased from a family portrait. My husband and I sadly tucked it into a tiny, velvet-lined coffin in a corner of my jewelry box.

At least I know where it is.

To thank me for navigating a daughter safely home after a sudden, critical illness while he was out of town, my husband gave me a diamond and sapphire bracelet. Fate: missing in action for seven years. When we had the house painted, I had put the bracelet in a jewelry box in a safe, safe place. Not in a dresser drawer. Not in a closet. Not on a shelf. But, as I found out when we prepared to move from that house, seven years later, I'd somehow put it with an archive of family photos accidentally stowed with paint cans in the basement. I searched and searched, but I never told him that I didn't know where it was. When at last I opened the box where it had been hiding, I rushed to show him. "I'd been afraid to ask why you weren't wearing it," he said.

A diamond is love crystallized. That's what the industry wants us to believe. Diamonds have enjoyed one of the most successful marketing campaigns in human history. In the space of just three generations, diamonds have become democratized. A century ago, only royalty — both born and made — could afford to wear gemstones, or, really, had the right to. But the industry had rocks to sell, and returning World War II vets had spouses to woo, so the cartel forged demand from the raw coal of aspiration.

You say you love her? Prove it. It takes millions of years to press carbon into diamonds, but

COMMENTARY

Some diamonds aren't forever

BY JOANNE CLEAVER

it took only four decades for peer pressure to harden into tradition.

Like the eternal circle of a wedding band, diamonds are supposed to symbolize eternal devotion. I didn't have to be persuaded. I, too, wanted a public symbol that I was worth the investment.

My own original wedding ring was not a circle. It was designed to notch around my engagement ring, but on its own, it simply looked bent.

On vacation, we bought a traditional gold band with a lacy etched edge. It's the perfect companion to my husband's completely plain band. Which, by the way, he has never so much as misplaced.

We could have replaced the missing stone in my five-diamond ring every year for 11 years, if we hadn't been paying college tuition. So the dinged ring sat in my jewelry box, its prongs groping for something to hug.

A few weeks ago, I had coffee with an acquaintance, mes-

merized by how her bottle-cap diamond flashed as she gestured. I don't remember much of what she said, but I could have sketched her ring, the square diamond haloed with sparkling smaller stones. I suddenly remembered how my own hand used to catch the light. I used to look down just to see my diamond ring — either of them. It's time, I thought. We're going to get that ring fixed.

Unless we need to replace our old van.

Or hit a certain milestone in our 401(k).

Or ... anything, really. After 32 years, was there anything left for a diamond ring to validate?

At dinner this past Christmas Eve, my husband suddenly teared up. He put a small blue velvet box on the table. We looked at each other for a long moment.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's already insured."