

A LIFE IN HER OWN WORDS

A Free Thinker's Heart

The Life Story of
Kandy Rice



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Foreword

This book is Kandy Rice's life, told largely in her own words. It was gathered over three recorded conversations in 2026, near the end of her life, when talking took real effort and every hour of energy was precious. She chose to spend some of those hours telling her story.

Kandy did not think her life was remarkable. "I had a pretty ordinary life," she said. "I don't know why anyone would want to know." Then she added, "I think it was ordinary, but there is no such thing. Everybody's life is different."

What follows is the story of a shy, bookish girl from New Jersey who always knew she would be a nurse. It is the story of a caregiver who began caring for others at twelve and never really stopped. It is the story of a free thinker who would not wear the hat she was told to wear. And above all, it is a love story that began on a blind date in November 1965.

When asked how she hoped to be remembered, Kandy answered without hesitation: "As a person who loved this world, loved this country, and loved helping people."

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Chapter One: A 1950s Childhood

A Name and a Beginning

Kandy was born on May 29, 1946, at Beth Israel Hospital in northern New Jersey. Her mother had planned to name her Sandy. But the night before Kandy was born, her father's mother died, and the baby was named for her instead. The grandmother, an immigrant from Romania, was known as Katie, or possibly Katya. The name given to the baby was Caroline, spelled with a K in the European way.

From the very beginning, though, everyone called her Kandy. She used Caroline only for signatures, and later for the legal papers and insurance forms that came after her husband's death. As for how "Sandy" became "Kandy," family lore says an aunt suggested it. Kandy always suspected her mother made up a few of these stories, but Kandy is who she was.

Family Roots

Kandy came from a family of immigrants and was proud of it. Her father's parents came from Romania. They were poor and lived in a crowded tenement, and her father did not speak English until he started school. He was one of five children, and he rarely talked about his childhood.

Her mother's side had deeper American roots. Her mother's father's family, the Feists, came from Germany in the 1840s and were very proud of their long history in America. The family still treasures a letter from Kandy's great-great-grandmother, who sent flowers to be placed on Abraham Lincoln's grave. Her mother's mother was the daughter of immigrants from Austria. Kandy's mother, an only child, was raised in Brooklyn, and her parents later moved to Newark.

The family was Jewish, but, as Kandy put it, "ethnic Jewish, not religious Jewish." They were thoroughly Americanized. They celebrated the Jewish holidays, and Kandy attended religious school and was confirmed. Yet because her grandparents were not religious, the family also opened presents on Christmas Day, though they never had a tree.

"I am proud of being an immigrant's granddaughter," Kandy said. "A lot of people want to hide that. I'm very proud of it."

The Neighborhood on the Circle

Kandy grew up in North Plainfield, New Jersey, in a new development built for World War II veterans. It was a smaller version of Levittown. The houses were modest and nearly identical, arranged around one big circle. Her family's home had four rooms, two bedrooms, and one bath, with a detached garage.

Her mother kept it well decorated and spotless. Kandy shared a small room with her sister, who was two and a half years younger. The room had a built-in chest, two beds, and more stuffed animals than it had space for.

Because all the fathers had come home from the same war, all the children were about the same age. There were no fences, and the backyards all faced one another. Kandy's aunt and uncle lived right next door. Her father's sister was the one who had introduced her parents, and the two households felt like one family with two sets of parents.

The neighborhood kids put on plays in the summer. They had their own Mickey Mouse Club, and every afternoon at four o'clock they put on their mouse-ear hats and gathered at a different house. Everyone had a Mouseketeer name. Kandy wanted to be Annette, but someone else claimed her first, so Kandy was Darlene.

Across the street were woods where the children played Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. Every girl was Dale Evans, every boy was Roy Rogers, and everyone was Davy Crockett. They played kickball in the street and croquet in the yards. In winter, they went sledding down what seemed like a huge hill. Kandy would put her dog at the front of the sled to ride down with her. Years later she went back and discovered the hill wasn't very big at all.

Milk and bread were delivered to the door. The bread man sometimes let the children ride in his truck around the neighborhood. "Today, people would die," Kandy laughed. The best treat of all was a Good Humor orange Creamsicle from the ice cream truck, because nobody's freezer was big enough to keep ice cream at home.

On hot summer nights, with no air conditioning anywhere, the whole neighborhood gathered outdoors. The parents visited

while the children ran with flashlights and chased fireflies until late. Near the end of her life, this was the memory that came back to her as one of her happiest. "The freedom," she said. "Kids don't get to do that today, and neighborhoods aren't like that anymore."

"It was a real 1950s childhood," she said. "It was really a perfect childhood."

Her Parents

Kandy's father was a salesman who sold everything from shoes to cigars. He never went long without a job, though the jobs changed often. He had spent four years in combat during World War II, and only as an adult did Kandy understand how deeply the war had affected him. He was the strict parent, and Kandy remembered the belt and having her mouth washed out with soap. "I don't know what I did to deserve it," she said, "but I'm sure it was my mouth."

Her mother did not work outside the home. In those early years she was an involved and caring mother. She helped with Brownies and Girl Scouts, played mahjong with friends, and took tender care of Kandy when she was sick. She also knitted sweaters, whose sleeves never quite came out even.

The family did not have much money. "You don't know how poor you are until you're an adult," Kandy said. Her grandparents helped fill in the gaps, paying for summer pool memberships, Girl Scout camp, and even a car for her mother. The family took only one real vacation during those years, a trip to Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Kandy described her parents' marriage as "a true love story." Her mother had waited for her father all through the war. There

was yelling and fighting, as in any family, but they loved each other to the very end. Kandy knew it because she cared for them both in their last years.

Her Grandparents

Kandy's mother's parents lived in an apartment in a close-knit Jewish neighborhood in Newark. The butcher and the greengrocer were just two blocks away, and everyone knew everyone. Kandy spent as much time there as she could.

Her grandmother loved to dress well. She took Kandy shopping at Bamberger's department store and then to lunch in the tea room. On weekend visits they made ice cream sodas together.

But it was her grandfather Kandy adored most. He had never gone past the eighth grade, yet he did well as a salesman. The two of them went to the park together and shared a stamp collection, and he always sent her the first editions. There was a trip to Coney Island she never forgot.

Passover Seders were held at her grandmother's apartment, which had a long hallway leading to the bathroom. Every year, a glass of wine was set out by the front door for the prophet Elijah. When young Kandy walked down that hall at night, she was a little frightened, and the wine was always gone. Only years later did she learn that it was her father who had been drinking it.

A Shy Girl Who Loved to Read

Kandy described herself as a child who was gawky, very quiet, and very shy. She spent a lot of time in her imagination. She was not popular with the boys and never quite sure of herself. But she was an A student, a quick thinker, and an even quicker

reader.

She read everything she could find, especially mysteries and books about nurses. Her favorites were *The Secret Garden* and *Charlotte's Web*. She read through every children's book in the small town library. By about age ten she needed special permission to borrow books from the adult section.

Her elementary school, built in the early 1900s, kept the same class together from kindergarten through sixth grade. Around 2010, Kandy and her husband went back to visit. Her first-grade classroom looked exactly as she remembered it.

Kandy loved being a Girl Scout. She earned her badges, and her grandparents sent her to rustic Girl Scout camp for two summers. She had a good speaking voice and was always chosen to make announcements and take parts in plays. Her best friend was Tricia. Even after Tricia moved to the next town, the two girls met halfway on their bicycles and walked to the movies in Plainfield. Kandy saved her 25-cent weekly allowance to buy Ginny dolls, which cost about two dollars each. She and Tricia spent endless hours making furniture and accessories for them. Her favorite doll, Mary, had red hair.

There was one gift she wished for and never received: a china tea set like her friend's. Years later she bought tea sets for her daughter and granddaughters. "Nobody wanted them but me," she said.

She remembered watching the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on television at school. She remembered the family's beagle, Lady, and another dog she lost to the street, which always stayed with her.

Born to Be a Nurse

No one in Kandy's family was a nurse, a doctor, or a dentist. Yet she never wanted to be anything else. "I just was born wanting to be a nurse," she said. As a child she delivered her dog's puppies and cared for every sick animal she could find.

When she was about twelve, her beloved grandfather had a stroke. Children had to be sixteen to visit hospital patients, so the family dressed her up to look older and sneaked her in. When he came home, she went over constantly to feed him and care for him. "Nobody made me do it," she said. "I just loved him."

His death, when Kandy was twelve, was the end of her childhood. "It took me years to get over his death," she said. "And that changed everything."

Chapter Two: Growing Up Fast in Miami

A Move South

After her grandfather died, Kandy's mother fell into a deep depression and spent time in a mental hospital. Believing a warmer climate would help her recover, the family moved to Miami, in Dade County, Florida. Kandy was thirteen.

The move was an adventure, but it upended everything. Along the way they stopped at places her father wanted to revisit, paid for by the sale of their house. In Florida, Kandy found herself in a completely different culture. Her first school was mostly Cuban. She arrived in bobby socks, saddle shoes, a sweater, and a skirt, only to find the other girls in light dresses and shoes without socks. "I had all the wrong clothes, all the wrong shoes, all the wrong hairstyles," she remembered. "I looked really silly the first day."

The family moved from a duplex to an apartment and, about a year later, to a three-bedroom house bought with her father's second VA mortgage. For the first time, Kandy had her own room.

Her father found his best job in Florida as a mailman. Miami then felt like a small, safe town where people walked everywhere and took the bus. School buildings had no air conditioning, which is why, to the end of her life, Kandy could not stand being hot.

The move cost her the large, loving circle of family she had known in New Jersey. Her mother's illness led her to pull away from relatives on both sides, and the family became isolated. More than twenty years later, Kandy organized a reunion with her cousins so they could see one another at least once more.

The Family Caregiver

Kandy's teenage years were shaped by her mother's illness. Her mother was in and out of hospitals, and when she was home she was often in bed. At one point she went away to care for her own mother, who was dying of cancer, and then brought her back to Florida. Kandy, at sixteen, helped her mother care for her grandmother until her death.

During those years Kandy ran the household. She did the laundry, the cooking, the cleaning, and the shopping, looked after her father, and drove her mother to doctor appointments. "I was kind of made an adult," she said. With her usual humor she added that she didn't see it as a trauma, "because I got to drive the car."

She learned to drive in school at fifteen and passed her test on the first try at sixteen, in a car that made it anything but easy. It was old and poorly kept, with no power steering, no power brakes, and no air conditioning. She had to learn to pop the hood and open the carburetor just to get it started.

No one guided her through those years. "I did it all on my own," she said. "Nobody helped."

Friends for Life

What carried Kandy through was her friends: Barbara, Eileen, and Bonnie. Eileen's father had a boat, and since her mother wouldn't go out on it, he took the girls boating and fishing and out to lunch, as long as they cleaned the boat afterward. The girls belonged to a service club and did charity work together. On weekends they went cruising along Miami Beach at Surfside, yelling at boys from the car. "We would have died if anybody had ever jumped in the car," Kandy laughed.

Kandy was a model teenager. She never drank or smoked, always paid attention, and got top grades. By senior year she was so bored that she read novels hidden behind her propped-up textbooks. Her chemistry teacher nominated her for a prestigious summer science program at the University of Miami, but science was not her passion, and she turned it down. Instead, she spent her summers volunteering at the hospital, caring for patients.

Dating mostly meant movies and pizza. She had a real crush on a boy named Ted, who eventually left her for another girl in her group. "I was just lonely," she said of those years. "I wanted a boyfriend. I wanted to be loved."

Those friendships lasted a lifetime. All the girls went on to marry their college sweethearts and stay married until one spouse died. Barbara has since passed away, and Kandy and Eileen still talked every day. Late in life, Eileen told Kandy that what she remembered most about high school was the friendship among the three of them. Kandy agreed.

The Day Kennedy Died

Like many girls her age, Kandy adored President John F. Kennedy, and she kept his picture above her bed. On November 22, 1963, she was a senior in high school. When the news was announced near the end of the school day, she and Barbara ran to the classroom of their favorite teacher, their Spanish teacher. They hugged her and each other and cried.

It happened to be one of the rare days Kandy had driven the family's second car to school. She drove home to an empty house and waited for her parents. "We cried for days," she said. That same season, she and her friends went to the airport to see the Beatles arrive in Miami.

Looking Ahead

The summer before college, Kandy took her first paying job as a nurse's aide at a nursing home, earning less than \$36 a week. A year later, in the summer of 1965, she saved her wages from a summer job and traveled to New York for the World's Fair, staying with her mother's relatives, before heading back to college.

Kandy won a full scholarship to the University of Miami. But in one of the few moments of guidance Kandy remembered from her, her mother told her, "You need to go away." Kandy borrowed money and enrolled at the University of Florida, three hundred miles away.

She left high school with big dreams: "I hoped to be famous someday and be the best nurse ever. I was going to have a big career and move to New York." High school, she said, was simply something to get through. "The happiest time of my life started

in college.”

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Chapter Three: November 1965

The University of Florida

Kandy called her years at the University of Florida the best of her life. The campus in Gainesville was beautiful, “like an Ivy League school,” and three hundred miles from home. She lived in the dorms, then in apartments, and for the first time she was truly on her own.

She studied for a Bachelor of Science in Nursing in a program that was ahead of its time. It was intellectual and taught nurses to think, plan, and act independently, which was not common in nursing then. Her graduating class had only about thirty students, and half of them were married by graduation. “Everybody went to school to get married,” she said. Kandy was not one of them. She planned on a big career.

She took four years to finish rather than accelerating through summers, because she had to work. Her plan to room with her best friend Barbara fell through when Barbara was not accepted, though Barbara transferred in as a junior and they stayed close.

The Blind Date

In November 1965, during Kandy's sophomore year, her roommate asked if she would go out with a friend of the young man she was dating. Kandy agreed. Then she looked him up in the student directory, which listed each student's year. He was a freshman.

Kandy, who was always outspoken, picked up the phone. "I'm sorry," she told him, "but I can't go out with you. I can't be seen on campus with a freshman."

He was not pleased, and told her that was fine if she didn't want to go. But something in his voice stopped her. "There was something in his voice, I cannot tell you what," she remembered, "but the sound of his voice just hit me really, really hard." She changed her mind: just this once.

His name was Stephen Rice. He turned out not to be the awkward kid she had feared but a handsome young man with a wonderful voice. He had a late birthday, so he was nineteen, just like Kandy.

She never forgot what she wore that night: a cranberry jumper and one of her mother's hand-knit sweaters with uneven sleeves. Winter in northern Florida meant a sweater, not a coat. They walked to the movies and then out for pizza, since neither had a car. He was so polite, helped her into her sweater, and always kept her on the inside of the sidewalk. At the door of her dorm, she kissed him goodnight. He told her later that if she hadn't, he might not have asked her out again.

"I think I was already in love with him at the end of the first date," Kandy said.

Instant Best Friends

Next came the military ball, and then his brother's wedding reception. A week after they met, they rode the same bus home to Miami for Thanksgiving. It was an all-night trip, made longer by a stop in Orlando, and they spent most of it kissing. "This is not something I would recommend people do," she added. When her father picked her up at the station, he asked who the boy was. "Oh, just some boy that I just met," she answered.

Back at school they studied for exams together, and from then on they were simply always together. That New Year's Eve was, in her words, "the most wonderful New Year's Eve." They never really dated in the usual sense. "We almost instantly became best friends," Kandy said.

Their fun was simple. They walked the dog. They did their laundry together and had a beer at the bar next door while it washed. They went to free movies and watched TV in the lobby of a nearby motel because they didn't own a set. In her senior year, in a run-down house where she at least had her own room, they lay in bed with the dog watching *Peanuts* on TV. "It's such a stupid thing," she said, "but those are the things I keep remembering. They obviously meant something."

"He was my first love and my only love," she said. "I say that to him every day."

Long after, Kandy was looking through Stephen's high school yearbook and found a two-page letter from his high school girlfriend breaking up with him. She wished him well and hoped he would find someone new in college. "And I thought, okay, he did," Kandy said. "A couple of months later, he found me. So thank you for breaking up with him."

The Proposal That Wasn't

Stephen never actually proposed. In February of Kandy's senior year, after three years together, she told him it was time to either get married or break up, because everything was about to change. He said he needed to think about it, because he didn't "see butterflies and stars." He went across the street to ask his friends what they thought. When he came back, he said, "Okay, maybe I'll marry you."

Years later, when he wondered aloud what love really was, Kandy had her answer ready. "If it isn't love when you spend every day in one person's company, then why are you always with me? Why do you share everything with me?" It was friendship, she said, and romance too, "and it was there till the day he died."

Stephen's Father's Advice

While they were in college, Stephen's father told them, "These are the best years of your life. Life gets much more complicated." The young couple laughed it off. College meant term papers and pressure over grades; surely real life would be easier.

"But you know who was right?" Kandy said. "My father-in-law was right. Those were my happiest memories of my whole life, because they really were uncomplicated."

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Chapter Four: Marriage, the Army, and a Baby

A Bold Decision

Going into her senior year, Kandy's college funding was cut. Her National Defense Loan was reduced by half, and she no longer had enough money to finish. Stephen's father offered to help, telling her he was sure his son was going to marry her. But the two had not yet made any commitment, and Kandy would not accept it. Instead, at a friend's urging, she joined the Army Nurse Corps, which paid for her final year. For the first time she had some money of her own, and she bought a car.

After they became engaged, Kandy wanted to marry right away. It was the late 1960s, and couples at their conservative university did not simply live together. Their parents talked them into waiting. When August came and there was still no date, she pressed Stephen again. "Give me 24 hours," he said. They were married during Christmas vacation, on December 22, 1968. Kandy had graduated; Stephen was still in college. "All I

really wanted to do was just run away,” she admitted about the wedding planning.

Two Lieutenants

Kandy's Army service complicated the start of their marriage. As a college graduate she was commissioned a first lieutenant, and for the first months they lived apart while she worked in Miami and he finished school.

Stephen was in ROTC and a natural leader. His college roommate said he was always the one in charge, and he led his drill team. When he graduated, he was commissioned a second lieutenant and assigned to field artillery. Kandy liked to point out that she outranked him.

This was 1969. Women served in the Nurse Corps or the Women's Army Corps, and the rules were strict. When Kandy asked to be stationed with her husband, the answer was an emphatic no. At that time a woman could not remain in the service while pregnant, so when Kandy became pregnant, she was discharged.

Oklahoma, a Sports Car, and a Dog

Kandy and Stephen's son was born on December 20, 1969. The young couple spent a summer in Miami, where Kandy worked at North Miami General Hospital. Then they packed everything they owned, which wasn't much, and drove to Oklahoma for Stephen's artillery training. They had their clothes, their dog, and a sports car bought on payments, not the most practical choice for a young family. “We didn't know where we were going or what we were doing, but we didn't care,” Kandy said.

“We were happy we were together.”

In Oklahoma, Kandy worked weekends at the local hospital so that Stephen could watch the baby. They could not afford a babysitter, and he needed their only car on weekdays to get to the base.

The Vietnam War was underway. When officers asked for volunteers for additional training in nuclear weapons, Stephen raised his hand immediately. There were no nuclear weapons in Vietnam. The assignments were in Italy or Germany. They asked for Italy. “And they sent us to Germany,” Kandy said, “but that’s how it works in the Army.”

Germany

The family was stationed near the town of Neu-Ulm, between Stuttgart and Augsburg, in the pretty Swabian region of Germany. It was a small base with a nuclear missile unit, where, as Kandy remembered, the Russians used to follow people around. They had saved up to bring their dog with them, even though they had almost no money.

Kandy wanted to work, but the base clinic hired only Germans. So she became an Army wife, and she did not take to it. She skipped the colonel’s wife’s teas. She refused to wear the expected hat. During a briefing for wives on what to do in a nuclear attack, she walked out, saying, “Why bother? I’m going to go home and have a glass of wine.”

Stephen was regularly called into the colonel’s office over things his wife had done. “I don’t like being told what to do,” Kandy said. “I’m a free thinker. So if you tell me to wear a hat, I’m definitely not wearing one.”

They were supposed to stay two years. After six months,

Stephen's father died suddenly at just 57. His mother was left with nothing, so Stephen obtained a hardship discharge. Almost overnight, the young family was back in Miami, starting over again. Stephen went on to serve twenty years in the Army Reserve, attending every Tuesday night and two weeks each summer with a teaching unit.

Through all the moves, Kandy was never unhappy. "I was happy wherever I was with him," she said.

Chapter Five: Building a Life in Miami

Starting From Scratch

Back in Miami, the family lived briefly with Kandy's parents and then found an apartment. They had only one car, so they chose a place next to the hospital where Kandy could walk to work, with a daycare center nearby.

Stephen came home to take over his late father's insurance agency. In sales, you earn only what you sell, so he was essentially starting from nothing. Many of his father's clients were in the Miami garment business, an offshoot of New York's garment trade. It brought him into contact with some colorful characters and produced some interesting stories over the years.

Stephen built the agency into a thriving business. He moved into financial planning and, years later, co-founded a brokerage business that served other agents. Much of what he knew, he taught himself. "He really started with nothing and built something up," Kandy said. "I was proud of him."

Kandy understood where his drive came from. Stephen had

grown up on a farm, and when he was eight years old his father declared bankruptcy, and the family had to start over in Florida. "He had struggles in his life, too," Kandy said, "and I think that's one of the things that drew us so close together so fast."

The Old American Dream

The apartment had two bedrooms and two baths, and Kandy disliked it: hauling laundry, groceries, a baby, and a dog up and down the stairs. They furnished it one piece at a time, buying a bed and paying it off, then a couch and paying that off. They built a bookcase out of bricks and boards, the way they had in college, and made it a home.

After a year, they bought a house in a new development with a VA mortgage and no money down. Stephen's mother asked how they could possibly afford it, but the mortgage was the same as their rent. It was a three-bedroom, two-bath ranch house with a garage in a young, working-class neighborhood. They laid the sod and built the fence themselves, put in better carpet, and repainted. "That was the old American dream," Kandy said.

They lived there four years. When their son proved to be a bright student, Kandy wanted him in a better school district, so they sold the house and moved to a nicer home in a better neighborhood.

"Our house was always the center of our life," she said. "It wasn't partying or going out. Home was our place."

Two Children

Kandy named her children in the Jewish tradition of honoring loved ones who had passed. Her son, Jeffrey, was named for her adored grandfather, with the middle name Ralph after Stephen's grandfather. Her daughter, Deborah Ruth, was born on May 13, 1974, four and a half years after her brother. She was named for Stephen's father, David, and for Kandy's grandmother, Ruth. Had she been a boy, which Kandy expected, she would have been David.

Jeffrey was a hard baby who cried a lot. "Maybe it was me as a young mother," Kandy said. He grew into a teenager who could always make her laugh. Like his father, he loved to tell jokes, and he walked around the house reading from a joke book. Even after Deborah was born, Kandy made sure to get a babysitter one afternoon a week so she could spend time alone with Jeffrey, even if it was just a trip to the grocery store.

Deborah was a peaceful, happy baby who loved the heat. Put her out in the warm sun, and she was content. She grew into a sweet, eager-to-help child. A family friend called her "a yummy child" because she was always so obliging.

Kandy stayed home when the children were small and worked part-time. When Jeffrey was six weeks old she went back to work on weekends, because they needed the money. Later came a teaching job and, when Deborah was about two, a full-time position. Jeffrey went to an Episcopal preschool with afternoon care, which he always teased her about.

Children First

"My children were number one in my life," Kandy said. Stephen used to joke that the order of importance was the children, the dog, and then him. "Kind of true," she admitted. She arranged her career around them, made sure they got to religious school and every after-school activity, and when it became too much, she left nursing to work in Stephen's business, where she could control her own hours. That move also turned out to be good for the family's finances.

She was not an overprotective mother. She gave her children the freedom to be who they were. When Deborah complained that Kandy didn't hover over her homework like other mothers, Kandy's answer was simple: "It wasn't my homework." Deborah earned straight A's anyway. "I taught them to be independent," Kandy said.

Money was often tight, and there were few big vacations. Stephen spent two weeks every summer on Army Reserve duty, and in sales, time off meant no income. Instead, the family went to Disney World often, back when it was affordable, and spent many weekends camping in their camper.

In 1980, Kandy sent the children to a summer camp in North Carolina and worked there as the camp nurse so they could attend. They did this for four summers, and for Kandy it was a welcome chance to get away. In 1984, the family bought a small house in Hendersonville, North Carolina, and spent a month there each summer for several years. As the children grew older, Kandy often went on her own. The mountains had captured her heart.

There were lean moments. Around the time Deborah was born, Stephen told her he wasn't sure he had enough money to meet

payroll, and then went out and bought a camera. "I thought I was going to strangle him," she laughed.

Two Free Thinkers Under One Roof

Kandy and Stephen were both strong-willed. "He couldn't tell me what to do. Nobody could," she said. "And you couldn't tell him what to do, either." They had real fights, some of them fierce, and their daughter sometimes asked if they were getting divorced. Many of the fights were about silly things: Stephen emptying his pockets onto the kitchen counter when he came in from the garage, or dropping his laundry on the floor.

They always made up. "He was super supportive and really a good husband," Kandy said. "There were clashes, but we loved each other, so we worked our way through it." He stood by her through years of caring for her parents and the times money ran short. "He was my support, he was my strength, and I think I was his strength. I think I knew him better than he knew himself."

When someone once asked her the secret of a long marriage, Kandy answered in two words: perseverance and forgiveness. "If you truly love somebody, then you find a way around it," she said. "You can't live together and not get mad at each other. And if you say you don't, then you're lying. But you have to support each other, and you have to be there for the bad times and the good times."

Letting Go

The hardest part of raising children, Kandy said, was letting them go. When Jeffrey left home she missed him terribly, because he had always been there when she came home from

work. By the time Deborah left, the family was already preparing to move to North Carolina, and life was changing anyway.

Both children built independent lives and strong careers, far from home. For years Kandy cried over missing them. A friend reminded her that this was exactly what she had raised them to do. "Which I guess was the intention," Kandy said. "But once they fly the nest, you'd like them to fly home."

She was proud of them. "They're leaders in their fields," she said. "They support themselves, they're good parents, and they take really good care of their kids." In time, Kandy and Stephen had four grandchildren. They loved babysitting when the children were small and made many trips to Atlanta to spend time with Deborah's family.

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Chapter Six: Nurse and Teacher

A Dream Made Official

Kandy's nursing life began long before her degree. She worked every college summer as a nursing assistant, doing much of a nurse's work before she held the title. When she graduated from the University of Florida, it was one of the happiest days of her life. "It was official," she said.

Her first nursing job was on the medical-surgical unit at North Miami General Hospital. After that came hospitals wherever life took the family, weekend shifts when the children were small, and teaching positions as they grew.

Kandy was never a quiet nurse. "I am the young nurse who told doctors off," she said, "because if I believed that something was wrong, or something needed to be righted, I stood by it."

Going Back to School

Kandy discovered that she loved teaching. With Stephen's encouragement, she went back to graduate school while raising two small children. She took classes at night and squeezed in reports and papers wherever she could. It was before the internet, so every piece of research meant a trip to the library. "But I was proud of myself for doing that," she said.

She was proud, too, that she found every one of her jobs on her own. "I had great jobs," she said. "I was proud of every job that I had."

The Podium

Her last job, and the one she was proudest of, was teaching certified nursing assistants. Because she shared classrooms, there was never a podium, and she was always stacking books to hold her notes. Her students noticed. At the end of one of her last classes, they presented her with a folding podium with her name on it and a handle so she could carry it from class to class. She kept it for the rest of her life.

For years afterward, former students would stop her around town. "Oh my God, let me tell you what I've done with my life," they would say, and tell her how she had changed it. It used to amaze Stephen. She once served as a labor coach for one of her students and helped her bring her baby into the world.

"I could keep you going for hours and hours on the stories of the people that came back to me," Kandy said, "and the things that they told me about the difference that I made in their life."

Partners

When the demands of family made nursing too much, Kandy went to work in Stephen's business. She was proud that they built it together as equal partners, and that the business they built was still supporting her at the end of her life.

"It wasn't the great, famous career that I planned when I was eighteen," she said. "But it turned out to be pretty good."

Chapter Seven: The Mountains of North Carolina

A House Built for the Future

Kandy had never loved Florida's heat. What she loved was nature and trees, and she found them in the mountains of western North Carolina. In time, she and Stephen made their home there, on land with a backyard that climbs up a mountain.

When they built their house, around the time they were 45, they planned ahead more than most people do. Kandy's father had lost his legs, and they had seen what that meant. So their house had no hallways, and every door was wide enough for a wheelchair. Although it had three stories, everything they needed was on the main floor: kitchen, living room, bathrooms, laundry, and access to the porch and outdoors. The only thing they did not think of was the steps up to the front door. "Who thinks of that when you're 45?" she said.

Caring for Her Parents

Kandy had promised her father, when he was very ill, that she would always look after her mother. She kept that promise. She brought her parents to North Carolina and cared for them for many years. She sat with her father while he died. Her mother lived with dementia in her later years.

Caring for them from so close eventually began to take over her life, and Kandy had to learn to put that care in perspective and set limits. Looking back, she carried one regret. “I wish I had been more understanding of my mother’s illness,” she said, “and been kinder and not so dismissive.” It took her twenty years, she said, to realize she had not always been as patient with her parents as she believed.

Finding Herself

In her late forties and early fifties, Kandy entered what she called the fourth stage of her life. The children were grown and gone, and for the first time since college she had room to ask who she was. She had gone straight from school to marriage to motherhood to caregiving. “I needed time to find who the real me was,” she said. “And the real me wasn’t any different than the other me. It’s just how I felt about myself.”

She built a life of her own, with her own friends, her own work, and her own comings and goings. She and Stephen were at different stages then. She was ready for a quieter, more peaceful life in the woods, and he was still driven by his work. Kandy wanted to stay in the mountains she loved. The strain nearly cost them their marriage.

Kandy did not hide from that chapter. She said she made

mistakes during those years and felt guilty about some of them. But she also believed the time was necessary. "I needed that time," she said. "I really needed it to find me."

Coming Back Together

In 2001, Kandy was diagnosed with cancer. It was the turning point. "I'm not sure if we ever would have really put it back together if it wasn't for my getting cancer," she said.

Stephen was at her side through all of it. He sat with her through every treatment, found special food for her, and took her away every weekend so she wouldn't worry and fret. "Nobody could have been more supportive," she said. She came through "with flying colors," crediting the support of her husband and family.

After the cancer, Kandy did not go back to work. Stephen retired early. The travels they had only just begun would carry them across the country together for the next twenty years.

Chapter Eight: The Open Road

Five Motorhomes and Twenty Years

Around 2000, Stephen announced that he wanted a motorhome. Kandy thought it was a crazy idea. He hated driving so much that he had once had a secretary drive him to work. But he did his research, as he always did, and she gave in. “I thought I would hate it,” she said, “but I loved it.”

Stephen had never driven anything like it, yet he got behind the wheel and drove it all over the country. It was exactly the kind of thing Kandy admired in him. “How did he get behind a motorhome and drive it all over the country when he’d never driven one before?” she marveled.

Over more than twenty years they owned five different motorhomes. They usually traveled for about three months at a time, sometimes twice a year. They saw the national parks and the beauty of the country from coast to coast, and went north into Canada and Nova Scotia.

The travel had a cost. Being away so much, they gradually

lost touch with many friends at home, apart from the people they met on the road. But it also proved something about their marriage. "If you can travel for twenty years in a motorhome with somebody, live in small spaces, and spend all your time with that person," Kandy said, "then it says something for the relationship you built."

Beaches and Cruises

After Stephen's heart attack, they gave up the motorhome for a while and began renting places at the beach, from the Florida Panhandle to the East Coast. They loved it. His favorite beach was Hilton Head. Hers was St. Simons Island, Georgia.

Eventually they missed the road and bought another motorhome, first a small one they didn't like and then a bigger one. Their last long trip was in 2018, to Louisiana to visit Kandy's cousins and to New Orleans.

In between, they took seven cruises. There was a river cruise, a small-ship Viking cruise to the Eastern Caribbean, and a voyage across the Atlantic by way of Iceland and Greenland, along with others that took them all over.

Kandy's advice from those years was simple. "Do what you can while you can," she said. "If we had waited until 65, we never would have been able to do all the things that we did."

Chapter Nine: Caring for Stephen

The Diagnosis

In November 2019, while they were away, Stephen had what Kandy believed was a mini-stroke. She couldn't get him to go to the hospital, so as soon as they got home she took him to his doctors and insisted they check him. The tests found cancer in his lungs and kidneys. He had no symptoms and did not feel sick. Kandy called finding out one of the worst days of her life.

A Quiet Blessing

Then came COVID. The world shut down, and Kandy and Stephen were at home together, with groceries dropped at the door. It turned out to be, in its way, a gift. "Those two years that he wasn't sick, and we were locked in the house together, were a blessing," she said. "We were undisturbed by other people. It was just him and me."

Two or three times a week they went out driving. They went to

the tops of mountains, walked in parks, and found places where they could be together, away from people. "It was a pretty calm time," she said. "We didn't have any responsibilities except to each other."

When Stephen learned he was dying, he bought a car for their daughter. "I'd rather get the joy of giving now while I'm alive," he told Kandy, "than what they get when I'm dead." She never forgot it.

The Make-A-Wish Trip

In April 2022, just before Stephen became seriously ill, Kandy planned one last trip. She found the perfect house on St. Simons Island, her favorite beach, and took him there for two weeks. She hired someone to come along, but she did most of the caregiving herself. She called it his Make-A-Wish trip. He enjoyed it and appreciated it deeply.

When Stephen could no longer manage a public restroom on his own, Kandy took him into the men's room herself. People stared. She didn't care. "I wasn't about to give him the indignity," she said.

Every Step of the Way

Stephen died about four months later. Kandy was with him through all of it. "He was never alone," she said. "He never had to fear any of it, because I was there for him."

The work was exhausting, and it took a great deal out of her. Yet when she spoke of it, her voice changed. "There was true joy in caring for my husband," she said. "I wish that I could have done more. I would do it again in an instant if I could."

At his memorial service, their daughter said that if her father had taught her nothing else, he taught her this: don't spend what you don't have, don't run up debt, don't buy what you can't afford, and plan your life and do the best you can.

After Stephen

"The day my husband died," Kandy said, "is the day I died. My body continues to live, but I don't live." She tried. There were moments, and she laughed again. But nothing felt the same without him.

Within a year or so, Kandy herself became ill, and over the next three years her health steadily declined. She had always been healthy. She had never had surgery, rarely went to the doctor, and walked for years to stay well. At first, few people believed how sick she was.

She chose to remain in the home she and Stephen had built in the mountains, cared for day to day by her devoted caregiver, Kathy, and supported by hospice. Her nephew, whom she had welcomed into her life in her later years, was close to her as well. It was from there, in the home she loved, that she told this story.

Chapter Ten: Who She Is

A Pusher, Not a Giver-Upper

One of Kandy's high school friends once asked her, "Where did you come from?" She wasn't like her parents, her sister, or her cousins. She had pushed herself through college, the first in her family to go. "They were giver-uppers," she said, "and I was a pusher."

Asked to name her best qualities, Kandy said she truly cared about other people and gave freely of herself. She was honest to a fault and told the truth even when people didn't want to hear it. She expressed her feelings openly. And helping others gave her great joy.

She was just as honest about her faults. She was stubborn. She made her own decisions and would not let others make them for her, and people sometimes resented that. She rarely lost her temper, but when she did, "I really blow." And thanks to years of living with Stephen, she picked up what her father called a "potty mouth." "I say it like it is," she said.

The person she admired most in the world was her husband. “I know that’s going to sound stupid,” she said. He could build a computer, a house, or a piece of furniture, work out figures in his head, design, photograph, and paint. He taught half the family to drive a stick shift without ever owning one. “I was good at nursing and good at being a mother,” Kandy said. “But he could do anything.”

Three Wishes

If she could have three wishes, Kandy said, the first would be to go back to November 1965 and start her life all over again, “because that’s when it really started.” The second would be to understand what had come between her and her children. The third would be to go back and be more understanding of her mother’s illness, and kinder.

Giving It Away

Asked what she would do with a million dollars, Kandy said she would give it away, and she did give generously. When Stephen sold his business, he set up a small foundation that for years supported a Miami organization serving people with intellectual disabilities. Near the end of her life, Kandy closed the foundation and gave the remaining \$44,000 to the Veterans Healing Farm, a local organization that helps veterans. With a million dollars, she said, she would build housing and programs for people who are homeless.

Fears, Old and New

As a young woman, Kandy's greatest fear was being alone. When Stephen was away on military duty, she would drive an hour to stay at her parents' house rather than spend the night by herself, or she would bring her young son into bed with her. She learned, over time, to live on her own. Her deeper fear was losing the people she loved.

Later, she feared suffering and dependence more than death. "I'm more scared of being disabled than I am of dying," she said.

What She Learned

Over the years, Kandy said, she became more understanding and calmer about people, and less critical. But she never stopped hoping others would be as kind and caring as she tried to be. "What I have learned over the years," she said, "is that there's only a handful of people that ever count in your life."

She lived what she called a clean life: she never smoked, never got drunk, and always followed the rules. Looking back, she wished she had loosened up a little. "Maybe I should have been a little wilder," she said. "I was too perfect a person. I think maybe I missed out on joy."

Her philosophy was clear: "Live each day the best way you can. But take charge. Don't let life take you over. You can change outcomes."

A good life, she believed, is "one that makes you happy," and everyone's version of happiness is different. "Whatever makes you happy and whatever works for you is how you should live your life, not how other people want you to live," she said. "People should be in love with whomever they choose."

The Simple Moments

When she looked back, it was not the big events Kandy remembered most. It was doing laundry with Stephen and having a beer next door while it washed. It was lying in bed with him and the dog watching TV. It was chasing fireflies on a summer night in New Jersey. “The simple moments in life are the ones you remember,” she said.

Her advice to children today was to slow down. Be free, don’t rush from one lesson to the next, and don’t wish to be grown up. “Enjoy your childhood while you can,” she said. “Life seems endless when you’re a child. It goes so fast. People said that to me, and I never believed it. You have a newborn baby, and then you look back, and that newborn baby is 56 years old.”

And if she could speak to the shy, bookish girl she once was? She would tell her only this: “You won’t always be shy. You’re going to do okay in the world, and you’re going to have a happy life and a happy family.”

To My Children and Grandchildren

Near the end of her interviews, Kandy was asked what she would write to her children and grandchildren if she could place a letter in a time capsule for them to open in twenty years. This is what she said:

Remember that I loved you, and I did the best that I could. I'm sorry that your memories of me are going to be as a sick person and not a happy, healthy person. But I did the best that I could. I hope you remember that I was a kind, caring person, and I hope you will carry some of that on. That you will give back to society, as I did, and as your grandfather did.

Asked what she wanted her family to remember about her, she began with love. "I didn't always agree with them, but I loved them. They were my life. They really were." She wanted them to remember an independent woman who took care of herself and cared deeply about others. She was proud of the life she and Stephen built together, proud of the career she made at a time when that was not easy for a woman with a family, proud that she was there for her parents, and proud of every person she helped as a nurse.

She also wanted to say something she felt was important:

I'm sorry if I've caused pain. If I hurt anybody, it wasn't done purposely. I never purposely did anything mean in my life. My husband was the glue that held the family together, and I'm sorry that I ended so distant from my children. The choices I made were the choices that were right for me. I am who I am.

What did she hope for her family after she was gone? "I hope they'll have long and happy lives, and their children and everybody will stay healthy and have long and happy lives." And she hoped they would understand her someday, just as it had taken her many years to understand her own mother. "I did love them very much," she said.

Kandy did not believe she had done anything famous. "Nobody's going to remember me," she said. But when she was told that her story would be kept and shared, she said simply, "I really want to be remembered as a person who loved this world, loved this country, and loved helping people."

Her wish was that her ashes be placed together with Stephen's and scattered in the backyard of the home they built, where the land rises up the mountain.

"So that we will always be here," she said.

Karoline "Kandy" Rice was born May 29, 1946, in New Jersey. She married Stephen Rice on December 22, 1968. She was a nurse, a teacher, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and, from the time she was twelve years old, a caregiver.

About the Author

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