

thought—or grim academic works analyzing the cruelty of schoolgirls. I couldn't stomach either.

I knew I could really only take comfort in a book that contained intimate, thoughtful tales of friendships like mine—with all the ecstasy, agony, and absurdity intact—written from the point of view of my peers. Such a book would show in vivid detail how and why women's bonds are so fascinating and funny and complex. It would be necessarily political, because friendships are the first place where we practice, or don't, what we preach, and usually where we're first called on our shortcomings. When I broached the idea of such a book with fellow writers, editors, and artists, they agreed heartily—and suddenly, I couldn't *not* put the idea into motion. It was in this spirit of enthusiasm and collaboration that we set out to produce a collection that begins to chart the unexplored territory of real friendships between real women.

I say "begins" because a book of twenty-three pieces can barely hope to scratch the surface. For every story included in this volume, there are a hundred waiting to be told. The friendships you will read about in this collection take place on university campuses, on beaches in Britain and Israel, in poor dwellings in Africa, suburban bedrooms and basements, urban playgrounds and schools. The stories are of bonds forged through girlhood, motherhood, artistic striving, and plain survival, across class, culture, race, geographical distance, and time.

So here's an inside view of the hope and elation we experience in our relationships, the craziness and unlikelihood of some of our bonds, as well as some of the inevitable disappointments and grief. I hope these stories get passed along as the gifts that they are, along the way offering insight, saying what's often left unsaid, and honoring the essence of being female and a friend.

Cowboys and Indians

Jennifer Maher

Sadie Fink was my first true love. We became friends in fifth-grade phonics group, both misdiagnosed as "slow" readers because, though we'd both been reading at a junior-high level since the age of nine, we couldn't pass a phonics test to save our lives. So, we were lumped in with a group of kids who not only couldn't pass phonics but who had never, not even once, read *Harriet the Spy*.

We had been eyeing each other warily before this moment, though. As when boy meets girl, there was lots of looking, locking eyes, and looking down again. I wasn't happy with my relationship at the time; neither was she. I hung out mostly with Tracey, a girl with whom I had little in common besides a history of Barbie melodrama and a shared love of sno-cones. Sadie was friends with Bridget, a sweet kid whose father, though Jewish, had an Irish fetish. He even started a jeans line called Bridget Girl with a shamrock on the label.

I saw their differences early on and predicted a breakup even before I was interested in Sadie. For one thing, Bridget was sporty and especially

good at tetherball, whereas Sadie's first impulse (like mine) when a ball headed her way was to cover her head with a book. They were miles apart intellectually as well. Once I overheard Bridget complaining about a girl making fun of her for being Jewish. Sadie, also Jewish, advised her to take the most direct, confrontational approach:

"Get right in her face like this and shout, 'I'M A DAUGHTER OF DAVID, YOU DUMMY!'" she urged.

"David who?" Bridget asked.

"Oh, never mind," Sadie said, rubbing her forehead.

We all went to a private school as a result of a dying progressive-policy attempt to create a more level playing field in the public schools. "Busing," it was called, and it left parents like ours in the awkward position of having to live their politics. They'd claim they supported busing in principle, but that it wasn't right for us to have to take a long bus ride to a school where we had no "peers"—meaning other white children of liberal parents who drove Toyotas with Peace Now bumper stickers. The private-school market grew exponentially from such fears, and a makeshift school like ours, Woodcrest, presented itself as an option for the non-Catholic. It was more affordable than its uniform-wearing counterparts, but it wasn't cheap. It enrolled a variety of kids—from those whose parents were spending every last penny for them to attend (sometimes living in teeny apartments or with the grandparents) to those who got their homework assignments in advance to complete before the annual family trip to Aruba.

Sadie and I belonged to the former category. We weren't picked up in Jaguars by stay-at-home moms in tennis whites at 3:30. Rather, we stayed around until 5:45 or so, because that's when our mothers got off work. This meant we were free to run around on a nearly empty playground with our jacket hoods on our heads as makeshift capes or long princess hair, while some teenager getting paid to make sure we didn't get abducted finished her homework. The closer it got to five, the

fewer of us there were: usually just Sadie and me, plus Jennifer Boles, whose mother was a cocktail waitress and whose father fixed pinball machines. And Summer, who moved in a higher social stratum than her late after-school pickup would lead one to believe. Her father was a minor rock star who didn't drop her off in the mornings until 10 A.M., when she'd climb out of their airbrushed van as if she were Stevie Nicks herself. We'd crowd the classroom window to watch her gorgeous father—in his fraying shirt and velvet pants—flip his hair, kiss her on the cheek, and hand her a Big Gulp and a doughnut before climbing back in and driving off to the recording studio.

Neither Sadie nor I had such glamour on our side. We were outcasts. Both of us lived with our single mothers, which added to this status, though not in the way you might think. This was the time of Studio 54—less about scarlet letters than scarlet-sequined tube tops. No, our chief problem was that we never quite looked "right" because we didn't have the money to style ourselves appropriately. First, there was the hair, which our mothers cut for us. At the height of Farrah hysteria, ours just wouldn't cooperate. Sadie's was dark, wavy, and beautiful, but resistant to the fixed style of "feathering." Mine was so thin and fine it just wouldn't do anything. I could sometimes force the sides into a wing shape by freezing my hair with my hand and then spraying it to death, but even then the bottom hung like yellow yarn strings on a wool beanie pompom.

Additionally, we were hopelessly out of fashion, and the harder we tried, the worse it was. While the rich girls wore gold S-chains with Italian horns, or #1 Kid charms, we had gold-plated ones from JC Penney. This seemed okay until one of us would be in the lunch line behind Michelle, or Tiffany, or Madison, who'd say, "Ooooooh, pretty necklace," turning it this way and that, looking for the telltale 14K stamp. Finding none, they'd whisper to each other and roll their eyes. Instead of Lacoste shirts, we wore Le Tigre, a poor-kid fake brand that replaced the little blue alligator with a little blue tiger. Again, fine from a distance, deadly in the next-up-to-bat P.E. line.

We were both wearing Le Tigre shirts—mine purple, hers yellow—the day we officially bonded in phonics group. Our teacher, Grace, was an ex-hippie, which meant we began each day with a Pete Seeger or Joan Baez song. She put us in “learning clusters” based on our supposed abilities, rewarding students in the higher groups with more interesting assignments, like reading *The Hobbit*. Sadie and I formed a professional alliance early, filling in our other group members’ workbook pages so we could then read our own books or draw. We already knew how to spell and read, but neither of us could master that phonics book. It was supposed to be about words, but somehow it scrambled everything up and made it look like math.

It was the “schwa” business that finally sent Sadie over the edge and initiated the friendship. We were taking turns answering phonics questions with Grace, while the kids in Group One got to practice writing their own short stories. Sadie was picking at a hangnail and sighing loudly. When her question in the workbook came up, Grace turned to her, saying, “Now, Sadie, this question is asking, ‘What sound does a schwa make?’” No answer.

“Sadie, is there something that you don’t understand about the schwa? Remember on page seventeen when we looked at the symbol in those other words? We can go back and look together as a group if you think it . . .”

“SCHWA!” Sadie shouted, throwing her arms back behind her like the first swimmer about to jump off the edge of the pool for a relay race.

“The SCHWA makes the SCHWA sound, OK? SCHWA! SCHWA-SCHWA-SCHWA-SCHWA! God.”

Grace’s face twitched, as if she had accidentally swallowed a gnat, but she recovered quickly, saying, “Sadie, I think you need some cool-down time, to think about how outbursts like that hurt the group.”

Sadie quietly shut her notebook and got up, but not before her eyes met mine and we started laughing. Even after she was sitting with her back to me across the room, I could still see her shoulders shaking up and down silently, and I could not stop the heaving

noises coming through my nose. Luckily, trying to hold back my laughter for so long resulted in a mild asthma attack, just in the nick of time. I was sent to the office for my inhaler rather than for interrupting “together learning time.”

After that, we began spending every minute we could with each other, dropping our other friends unceremoniously and indulging in the private secret language and customs of love. We would try to wear the same colors to school and pretend it was an accident. Sadie’s dad bought her a real gold Best Friend charm, a serious trend in those days. It was a heart with a kind of lightning-bolt crack down the middle, and you wore one half while your best friend wore the other. Our mothers became friends, sort of, sharing the occasional smoke or two and complaining about our bastard fathers before they took one or the other of us home from one or the other of our houses. People began calling us Starsky and Hutch.

The honeymoon lasted only until Halloween. The beginning of the end, I have come to believe, started with our school pumpkin-carving contest, though I couldn’t have said this at the time. Mr. Berman, our social studies teacher, was the judge, and though parents could opt out altogether, my mother did her best to participate, aided by Sadie’s mother, Jackie, and a pitcher of homemade margaritas.

The official directions specified that children were supposed to do the work on the pumpkins, adults helping only with the use of sharp objects. But as the night wore on and the drinks continued, we were summarily (if silently) excused. As far as I can remember, all I did that night was pull the pumpkin guts out and toss them in the garbage disposal.

My mother had recently acquired a new position at Walt Disney, which is where she got the idea for my pumpkin. Using wire and black silk, she constructed Mickey Mouse ears to be held onto the pumpkin’s head with pushpins. Jackie carved the eyes and used Liquid Paper to make the whites of them. Through lack of time or poor planning, no one

thought to paint the pumpkin white; though it looked passable, it also looked like Mickey had taken too many of those self-tanning pills you saw advertised in the back of *Cosmopolitan*.

Jackie was working on Sadie's pumpkin, a lopsided facsimile of Cher's head whose orange skin and taped-on Indian feathers made a bit more sense than a tan Mickey Mouse. As our mothers worked away, we sat at the table and drew pictures of horses, a growing obsession of Sadie's, and one I was getting tired of. The room she shared with her younger brother was separated by cinder block-and-pine bookshelves where she had painstakingly lined up over fifteen breeds of plastic horses in alphabetical order, and still, this was all she wanted to draw. I wanted to trace the photo of the stars of *Charlie's Angels* from the cover of *Time* but was reduced to negotiating with Sadie to at least let me make one of the horse manes feathered.

The next morning, with Halloween three days away, we carried our pumpkins into the auditorium. Although neither of us expected to win, we couldn't help but be shocked by the scene on the lunch benches. Our school went up to the seventh grade, and it was clear that the older kids' more-sophisticated imaginations had pushed their parents—this being Los Angeles, these were set designers and makeup artists in the “industry”—to create ever more sophisticated spectacles. There was a set of KISS pumpkins, complete with a motion-sensor tape loop of “Rock and Roll All Nite.” Though the number of children passing it eventually wore out its batteries, the concept won out, and the display sat proudly on one of the prize tables. Next to it perched Shanni Singh's award-winning, spray-painted blue, many-armed Shiva perched on a huge butternut squash hand painted with illustrations from the Bhagavad Gita. The butternut cushion and Shiva's zucchini-constructed arms broke the pumpkin-only rule, but, Shanni's homeroom teacher offered, they were from India and were therefore confused. But the pièce de résistance, truly a wonder to behold, sat in the center of the last table, rising at least three feet higher than the rest of the pumpkins worshipping at its base. The

grand-prize winner consisted of a lifelike sculpture in gray clay of a headless man riding a rearing horse (its naturalistic mane *not* feathered). Its painstakingly carved, nineteenth century-sleeved arm stuck out at a perfect forty-five-degree angle, a pumpkin resting elegantly on its outstretched palm.

Because it involved a horse, we had to visit it repeatedly. The smell of cafeteria food nauseated Sadie, so we could view it only in short bursts, but we did, over and over before the first class began, and again at recess and again after school. Sadie held her breath longer and longer, trying not to cry with envy.

Thoroughly crestfallen by five o'clock, we prepared to carry our naive pumpkins home. We were not going to tell our mothers that the white Winner! ribbons pinned to them were a pathetic appeasement put on all of the pumpkins, just like the Good Worker awards passed out to everyone except those who got Excellent Worker at the end of the school year. However, the end of October was a downright chilly sixty degrees by five, sending assorted working mothers into the auditorium to collect children normally hailed from the playground.

When my mother came to pick me up, she saw the Headless Horseman and gasped. She grabbed my jacket rather violently, rushing out before I could say goodbye to anyone. We drove straight to the McDonald's drive-through, where she let me get a pumpkin shake and a McGoblin figurine with no haggling on my part whatsoever. I was allowed to eat in front of the TV watching *Charlie's Angels*, something normally forbidden (“bimbettes,” she called them), and dip my french fries into my shake, a habit she hated. Nothing really came of this at first, and it seemed to have little to do with Sadie and me. That is, until the “Social Studies in Three Dimensions” assignment a couple of months later. Perhaps high on his power as pumpkin-contest judge, Mr. Berman assigned us to make something in three dimensions representing some aspect of American history listed in the timeline at the front of our Harcourt-Brace *Introduction to Your Nation* textbook. It was specified, again, that children were to construct the

model on their own, with only minimal help from their parents. But my mother was having none of it. Of course, she also left for work at 6:30 A.M. and didn't get home until 6:30 P.M. And then, suddenly, it was Sunday night and we had to come up with something, so we did the best we could with the limited materials available from the drug-store. On a piece of thick-backed construction paper, we hand-glued inch-tall plastic cowboys and Indians fighting around a fence, the lot of them—fence included!—purchased in one convenient ninety-nine-cent plastic bag. I colored in ground and arrows as best I could since we made the mistake of gluing on the figurines—blue cowboys shooting, red and orange Indians kneeling with tomahawks and head-dresses like rooster combs—before I'd thought to trompe l'oeil the poster board itself.

It was the first time we had actually worked on anything together, except for the agonizing hours we spent on my long-division homework that I failed anyway since in England (where my mother is from) they multiplied in a singsong rhyme. I got busted for not "showing my work," which seemed absurd since I had memorized "seven sevens are forty-nine" and hence considered adding up the quantity on the side of the page redundant. This was different, though, because it didn't make me cry like math did. My mother showed an expertise with Elmer's I could hardly have imagined, considering her absolute lack of interest in coloring, drawing, or crafts of any kind. Toward the end of her fifth Virginia Slim, she got downright giddy and ripped some grass and leaves out of the front lawn to sprinkle on the cardboard as a final effect.

But my heart sank as we took it into the classroom and I saw the other, intricate mini-dioramas. In that class alone, five of the fathers had jobs in the animation department at Disney. After I caught my breath and put down our cardboard, plastic, and dirt—much of the grass had blown off during the walk from the parking lot—I saw, among other concoctions, the following lined up along a row of desks at the front of the room:

A twelve-inch-high adobe church with meticulously hand-molded Play-Doh tiles on its roof and a working bell that rang when you pulled a string cleverly hidden in a bonsai bush at the front.

A shoebox on its side with a teeny *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María*—with the historically accurate number of paper sails on each—resting between layers of hand-painted tissue-paper ocean that moved when you twisted two knobs at the side of the box.

Some sort of Indian village thing with orange-painted Barbies in hand-sewn burlap costumes, with a volcano in the back that let off a wisp of steam when you hit a button hidden under a tepee.

Sadie's project, like mine, appeared awful and amateurish in comparison, but for different reasons. She had, in fact, crafted hers in the formal sense of the term, in that she had made Play-Doh models of the Beatles getting off of one of her old Barbie airplanes. A picture of a crowd, cut out of one of her father's NASCAR magazines, was affixed beside the plane. She had even transformed one of her brother's action figures into a bobby, covering him in blue felt, giving him a twig for a nightstick, and sitting him on top of one of her plastic horses. It was clever, but totally flawed in its execution. You couldn't really tell one Beatle from another, and the boundary between their skin and their jackets was turning green from the Magic Marker she'd used to color their suits. But she got a B. I got a C. The index card next to hers was filled with praise like "Great idea!! Glad to see you really making an effort!!!" Mine said, "This is a piece of cardboard with plastic toys glued onto it." Out of compassion, Sadie sneaked up on the index card to change my grade to a C+, which resulted in the two of us in the principal's office, questioned separately as if we were partners in a counterfeiting scheme—which I suppose in a way we were.

Sadie's mother was furious with her and could hardly look at me

as she led Sadie to the car that night. My mother was called in later. She lost it with the principal, lighting up in the trophy-studded office and blowing smoke through her nose when she heard about the grade I (originally) received. She said something to the effect that she had neither the time nor the money to construct adobe houses or paper oceans, and it was supposed to be a child's project to begin with, and she knew goddamn well who those parents were and had actually seen them huddled over small pieces of clay and paper at the Disney commissary that very week. Besides which, even though she was English she knew bloody well the Cheyenne Indians didn't live anywhere near bloody volcanoes.

The grade didn't change. That didn't bother me as much as the change that seemed to take place in Sadie over the next couple of weeks. Summer's father, it turns out, went crazy for her piece; he thought it was the funniest and coolest thing ever. He *paid* for the damn thing, and there was a picture of Sadie handing it to him in the school newsletter. She was wearing, I should add, a brand-new sundress and Famolare shoes, courtesy of the family Sears card.

Sadie even got invited to spend the night at Summer's house. And she went. I was crushed. I wouldn't think of spending the night at someone else's house, or at least I wouldn't tell her if I did. For days I was regaled with descriptions of the décor (lots of Oriental carpets and fringed table lamps), the food (a casserole with potato chips on top, and even a splash of wine in a glass whose stem was designed to look like a dragon's tail), and the pets (a parakeet named Apple and two Chihuahuas named Pico and Sepulveda). All I could do was pout, which probably made me very unpleasant to be around, driving her further into the clutches of the in-crowd. She even started playing volleyball, which was as sure a sign we were headed for trouble as lipstick on the proverbial collar.

Not that we ever had a direct confrontation about this. Sadie never totally "dumped" me, as I think I offered her something that Summer's crowd couldn't: freedom to be her wavy-haired self; a

chance not to worry every second about whether she was wearing or doing the right thing. We still occasionally had long giggling fits on the phone, and when it was just the two of us left on the playground at night, it felt like old times. But the notes we passed got shorter and shorter, and she didn't eat lunch with me anymore. Twice when I called her during the week her mother said she wasn't there, though she wouldn't tell me where she was. I took to riding my bike to her house and peeking around—for what, I'm not sure. I wanted to catch her in the act—tanning in the yard with one of the popular girls, say, or making up dances to ELO songs like we used to do on the curb. Instead I just scrabbled for the crumbs she threw me. I was, in fact, losing my first true love. If I'd asked in the right way, I'm sure she would have said, "It's not you, it's me," or "I need to see other people right now," or "I need my space."

Yet somehow she swung me an invite to the slumber birthday party of a popular girl, Hailey. I'm not sure whether it was because Sadie missed me, or felt sorry for me, or both. No matter what, I was determined to do this right. I was going to be accepted. I wore my one good pair of jeans, put on the Best Friend necklace (though Sadie didn't wear hers anymore; she said she had lost it), and borrowed my mother's rolling suitcase and my sister's Serious Camper sleeping bag. We went out to pizza and Hailey opened present after present, gifts that, had I received even one of them, I'd be shaking over. But her response to a new gold heart charm or another pair of Calvin Klein jeans was just a quick smile and a "Thanks, Mom," until she moved on to the next item. Her parents had a condominium with a hot tub and an answering machine and a huge TV that had these big red, green, and yellow lights on it, so the cast of *The Love Boat* looked even more glamorous than usual. There was mirrored wallpaper in the bathroom. We were allowed to sleep in our bathing suits. I was mesmerized.

As the evening wore on and all of us, high on sugar and lack of sleep, started talking about school and the teachers we hated so much we were going to look them up and crank-call them, I felt perfectly

comfortable stating my opinion: Mr. Berman was the most vile and, worst of all, the most unfair. I launched into the pumpkin-carving contest first, describing the humiliation Sadie and I went through over our pumpkins versus Paul Stinson's, he of the Headless Horseman and special effects-coordinator father. I talked about the social studies project and its underhanded nature, too. I described how unfair it was for a teacher to tell kids to work on something themselves and then reward those who obviously hadn't. It was an injustice and it needed to be stopped.

I must have been going at it for a while because, before I had the chance to notice, the room had gone quiet. Hailey's pumpkin, a model of Cinderella's carriage—with tiny hand-carved wooden mice and a Barbie shoe painted silver—had, in fact, won a prize. Probably one of the other girls was the proud owner of the adobe church with the hidden bell or the Columbus Discovers America shoebox. I was terrifically embarrassed, and when Sadie opened her mouth I was expecting a save of some sort. But the only person she was saving was herself.

"But, wait," she began quietly. "Your mom *did* do most of your social studies project. And she, like, made the pumpkin, too, just like my mom did. They just aren't, like, talented or anything. They just didn't do it good enough."

My stomach dropped. I couldn't think of a word to say.

The moment passed, thank god, when Hailey's mother arrived with a plate of Double Stuf Oreos. I tried to eat them, but they felt like crushed porcelain in my throat.

I slept on and off that night, and between awake and asleep a series of disconnected pictures flashed through my mind: tissue-paper oceans, our kitchen table with the pen marks on it, the horse Sadie would never get, my mother at a disco. Images rained down like loose grass blown onto poster board: dinner plates, phone cords, fathers. Sadie's ease with this situation felt like a punch in the stomach. Her betrayal was offhand, but profound. I feared a future I couldn't fit myself into. This world was made for those who did things good enough, or

who were loved by the ones who did things good enough. Or for the ones who had neither talent nor the love of the talented, but were lucky enough to feel okay about this fact.

Mr. Berman, I thought, knew all of this, and he graded—our projects, our pumpkins, our parents—accordingly. I woke up with a start that night in a stranger's condominium. In my dream I had been trying to cover my head against a rain of plastic cowboys and Indians, their guns and tomahawks catching in my hair, their teeny bodies tensed upon my shoulders, crouched low and ready for a fight. I searched for Sadie in the shapes of the sleeping girls around me, but I couldn't find her anywhere.