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AMAZON TRAIL

Friends indeed

This writer finds friends where she thought she had none— it's a matter of perspective

by Lee Lynch

When I was a really little kid, most of my friends were of the male persuasion. I mean, they were the tree-climbers and mud-diggers. They were the ones willing to play King of the Mountain, standing on top of a small rise of earth and wrestling everyone else off the hill. Great fun.

It must have been around grammar school that kids got sorted by sex. All of a sudden it wasn't OK for the boys to be playing with a girl.

But I hated paper dolls and Tiny Tears. My female playmates started getting boy-crazy by about fifth grade. One day my best friend wasn't home when I stopped to walk to school with her. I saw her across the street, walking with Pam. Pam! She was one of those hoody girls—the ones the older boys were after.

That's when I found my first real best friend. Charlie was two to three years younger than me and still a tomboy. It was all so simple. We roller-skated, we played cowboys. We both knew we'd be friends forever.

friends. But what was a friend?

Of course there was always Patsy, my assistant store manager. We talked on the phone every night and never ran out of things to say. There was June, our relief manager. She and Patsy would come up when the three of us were off and sit around the kitchen table talking and laughing till Patsy had to get back to her six kids, June to her husband and four kids. There was Lynn, too, an ex with whom I had dinner once a week for 15 years or so. I take no credit for that. Lynn's simply good at taking the time for a phone call, remembering birthdays, ignoring her shyness and reaching out.

What can I say? I process slowly. One night when I was out with Lynn, about 10 years after we'd stopped being lovers, it hit me. "You know what I just figured out? You're my best friend!"

That realization changed my perspective. If Lynn was a friend, what did that make Patsy and June? Wow. I had friends!

Then I pulled a Charlie.



Then Charlie moved away. I visited her once, but by then she lived in a fancy house in a ritzy town an hour away. She never came back to the apartments where we'd grown up. And to this day I miss that joyous, laughing girl.

Things got kind of confusing at adolescence. I couldn't find the line between friendship and romance. I was looking for what I had with Charlie, but ended up making out instead of riding mock horses. I wanted the playfulness, the devotion and the companionship, but all I played was musical beds. That went on for 20 years. I forgot how to do friendship. I just kept "falling in love."

You probably know what it's like. On Tuesday you pledge "forever" as you undress your field hockey teammate, and on Wednesday you develop an unquenchable passion for the long-haired girl in the front row of World Civilization. A few years after the teammate leaves, you and your newest sweetie buy matching rings on vacation and at work the next week the cruiy supervisor chooses you to accompany her to a conference—and to share a room.

Eventually, I got tired of the drama and trauma of it all. I wanted one true love and

I moved across the country. I worked part-time out of my home so I wasn't likely to meet any Patsys or Junes. Lynn and I talked monthly, but would we, with such different lives—she urban, me rural, she a secure state employee, me a struggling writer—drift apart?

I've since found my true love, but pure friendship remains a mystery to me. We don't get many Charlies in our lives. It's only in childhood that we have the time to spend hours kicking around the yard with someone. Grownups (and I think I'm finally one of those) make friends while we work together or compare miserable bowling scores. And the friends are not forever. We move away, or they do. We change jobs or someone's new lover doesn't like us. We burn out on a church committee or stop drinking.

It's taken a while for me to accept that it's OK to be friends with someone just for today. I don't have to have the kind of intense connection that I once required. Somewhere along the line I relearned that old childhood talent for having fun.

Next week Lynn's flying out here for a visit. I'm really excited. She's the one who taught me, after all, that friendship is more like a house plant than an exotic orchid. Varied, common, requiring a little care and a lot of constancy. We've known each other since 1964. Thirty-two years. We may not climb trees together, but I think I've got a friend.