

Friends

We knew each other from third grade, when Earlena's family moved to town. But we met, really, when I started piano lessons in 6th grade and discovered that my teacher was her teacher, and had been for three years. After one of my first lessons, when I was still feeling really awkward there, I came out into the waiting room and there she was, looking as comfortable as an old cat. She gave me a big smile, and said "Paige, are you learning to make music? Cool!"

In those first months she did a wonderful job of welcoming me without patronizing me. She gave me tips on how to make Mrs. Hooper like me. They were brief and perhaps obvious, but useful: I should definitely practice, and I should always remember her suggestions even if I couldn't follow them. Plus, she was so cheerful, always making silly little jokes. She was just good to be around. We started hanging out a lot at school, then going over to each other's houses, then having sleepovers until we got too old for that.

Freshman year we still hung out a lot, but the high school in our town is a lot bigger than our middle school had been, and there were a lot more black kids and she was getting to know them and I was making new friends too. We got to know some of each other's new friends but it felt like there was some writing on the wall: black girl and white girl, good friends for years, will gradually drift apart.

Then sophomore year I started dating this guy who turned out to be a jerk but it took me a long time to see that. Because I spent so much time with him I had little to spend with all my girlfriends, including Earlena. By junior year the distance between us was huge. There'd never

been a break-up, or argument, or even any tension. But now there was a little twinge of embarrassment when we ran into each other at Mrs. Hooper's house. We're both too down-to-earth or honest or something to get all gushy like some girls might. There wasn't any "Paige, I haven't seen you for ages!" or "Earlena, I've missed you so much!" We'd just ask about each other in a polite, distant kind of way. We didn't talk much at all.

Senior year, I almost never saw her. What with being able to take so many electives, and how big that school is, I hardly saw any of my friends inside the building that year. I didn't even lay eyes on her at graduation although both of us ran into each other's parents. I was running late and heading for my seat as the ceremony was about to start when I saw her parents in the midst of a big crowd and I waved at them, and her dad hollered, "Congratulations!" and I yelled, "Thank you!" and that was all. When we got home my parents told me they had run into Earlena. They said she looked good, and then waited for me to say something, but I didn't know what to say. It occurred to me then that they must be puzzled that I no longer spent time with her; she'd been my closest friend for years. My next thought was that they were probably disappointed that I had dropped such a good friend. I knew they were very fond of Earlena.

I thought about all of this for a few weeks after graduation and realized that I was just as puzzled as my mom and dad about the disappearance of our friendship. A couple of times I picked up the phone to call her, but then I'd feel hurt that she had never called me. I told myself she must have lots of other friends, and didn't need me.

Here's what's weird: in January of the next year, just seven months after our graduation, I ran into her again. After finishing a half-gap-year program in Spain, I got a job at M.I.T. as a
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secretary in their health service. When I arrived for my first day of work, there she was at the next desk, greeting patients for the eye clinic.

Even Earlena the Always Unflappable was a little thrown by this. No jokes, just a faint little smile. Later, when we got to be good friends again, we used to try to come up with a surprise that would outdo the one we had had that day. She said, “Maybe you were boarding a trans-Atlantic flight and your seatmate was your ex?” I said, “How about this: you go to one of those hippie restaurants in Vermont where you have to share a table with strangers, and one of them is a girl you haven’t talked to since she got you in trouble in fourth grade?” You can see that these little vignettes, which we thought were very funny, suggest some old conflict behind our falling away from each other, even though, as I’ve said, there hadn’t been any.

Anyway, we became friends again, and it was both exciting and relaxing to spend time together. in. Sometimes we even went to each other’s homes like the old days. And it was great to see each other at work. When things were slow, we could fool around, and we would get the other secretaries, most of them young like us, to join in. There was a day with a sudden blizzard and there were almost no patients, and we pretended we were the Shirelles, and were dancing and singing Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow when the medical director walked in. She raised an eyebrow but, to our great relief, said nothing.

When we were younger and spent so much time in each other’s homes, our mothers each got to know her daughter’s friend, and sometimes our moms talked on the phone. Now, both of our mothers seemed a little wary. I think each of them wondered if her daughter had been hurt, and worried it might happen again. But my mom certainly welcomed Earlena—she made Earlena’s

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favorite pie (pecan) the first time she came to our house for dinner. And Earlena's mother personally invited me, very warmly, to Earlena's older sister's wedding.

It was a fine wedding, and Shakila and Roy were a great couple. But it was a fateful day for Earlena and me. It was May, one of those amazingly beautiful days you get then. The reception included a full dinner outdoors on the church lawn, very festive. But both of us did something we had never done before: we drank a lot of champagne. First, we got silly, telling dumb jokes to each other and anyone else who was listening. Then as the evening began, I got tired, and when I pulled out of that I felt okay, but I wasn't. A cousin of the groom started to put the moves on me. I think he'd had too much to drink too, because it was definitely out of place at that wedding for him to come on to me. Although we were in liberal Massachusetts, at a wedding that included a mixed-race couple among the guests, there were several older family members there—two grandmothers and a great aunt—who were pretty old-fashioned. I learned later that one of them, Earlena's maternal grandmother, was especially wary of black boy/white girl romances, because when she was young her brother (Earlena's great uncle) had a white girlfriend who ditched him after a disagreement, and then, falsely, reported that he'd been violent to her. I still don't know the whole story but I know it changed his life. At the wedding, I didn't know this story, but I kind of knew our flirting was being seen as inappropriate by some. But I didn't listen to my better judgment; I just ignored it and I met him almost half-way. I'd never been that flirty with a guy. He was very attractive, and we were both being kind of jokey about it and it was such fun.

But it wasn't fun the next day. I called Earlena at home to tell her and her mom that I'd had a great time, and to congratulate everybody again. Her mom wasn't home but Earlena was, and she was cold as ice. This was a huge surprise. At first, she wouldn't tell me what was wrong, just

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said, “If you can’t figure it out—well, I don’t think I can explain it.” We were both silent, until she said “Paige, you were way over the top with that boy Sam,” in a quiet and deadly way. I was shocked. I said, “Wait, you’re mad at me about that guy?” She just said, “Um-hmm” and nothing else. I’d called her right after getting up and wasn’t completely awake at first, but I sure was now.

I said I hadn’t meant anything by talking with him. Well, I added, I guess it wasn’t so much talking as flirting—and I stopped, not having anything else to say. More silence. Then I said, “Wait, I don’t get it. What’s wrong with flirting at a wedding? Don’t people do that?” She said, “My best friend doesn’t flirt with a boy I’ve known forever, at my sister’s wedding, that’s what’s wrong. I *thought* you were my best friend. Guess I just didn’t know enough about you yet.” This was really bad. It dawned on me now that she’d wanted him to flirt with her, if anyone, but I knew I couldn’t say that. I had no idea what to say. Finally, I managed, “Earlena, I want to be your best friend—I want you to be my best friend— and I feel totally miserable right now, and I’m so sorry. Can you forgive me?” Silence again. Then she said, “I need to think about this. I’ll tell my Mama you called, Shakila too. I gotta go now.” She hung up.

We didn’t talk again until Monday, and to tell the truth we didn’t really talk then, just the bare politeness demanded by having desks ten feet apart. Mercifully, it was a busy day and we could pretend to be absorbed in our work because most of the time we were. But Tuesday was slow and she got a project to work on in another room. It was clear that I was not being forgiven. I was mad for a while, but that passed, and I just felt sad and ashamed. I started college in the fall, and Earlena stayed at her job. She was hoping to make enough money to go to a state school

without getting loans. She was out on a personal day my last day there. That would have stung, but by now I was numb.

At college, I made a couple of good friends and that helped me think maybe I wasn't the worst person on the planet. But I was real careful at parties. If I had anything alcoholic, I'd nurse it all night. Mostly I drank ginger ale. This got me a reputation as some kind of prude, almost straight-edge. But I was okay with that. My classes were good, I found a piano teacher near campus, and I played on an intramural softball team in the spring. I got a job at a camp in New Hampshire for the summer and wasn't home much, and that was good too because my parents were arguing a lot that year. My mom is the Admin person for an OB-GYN group and her responsibilities had expanded as the group hired more doctors. And she felt that my dad was still expecting her to do most of the housework, and he thought she was expecting too much of him. As their only kid I was very much in the middle.

My sophomore year was good too. I figured out I wanted to major in primary education, and minor in music. Every time I was home, I'd think about Earlena, and whether or not I should get in touch with her. Then I'd remind myself that she wasn't getting in touch with me. Once, I almost talked to my mom about what had happened to our friendship. Unlike some mothers, she had strong feelings about respecting kids' privacy. She'd say, "You tell me if you want to talk about friend issues. I don't want to intrude." That time I almost talked to her, I stopped because I realized that she'd really look down on me—not for the flirting, but for not trying harder to convince Earlena to be my friend again.

It seemed like our history was just going to fade away, but then fate took another turn. My old boss at M.I.T. called my mom in April of my sophomore year. She said they'd lost the permanent secretary who'd taken over my old desk, and were having trouble replacing her, even with temps. She wondered if I would be willing pick up the job for the summer. My mom said I'd be happy to, then she called to tell me she'd signed me up. I didn't mind, really. My parents were getting along again, and the Health Service job was a lot less stressful than working at that camp had been. It didn't occur to me I might run into Earlena there at that point in time.

But, first day, there she was at the eye clinic, looking older and not her typical chipper self, although she was checking patients in efficiently, as always. I felt all hot and flushed, but I managed to catch her eye and smile, and then I just went to work. There was a lot to do since the last temp had left a mess. But I was thinking about our friendship all morning as I worked through the stack of paperwork and made phone calls, and I figured out what I wanted to do. That afternoon, when there was a slow spell, I walked over to her desk and said, "I hope we can have lunch some day this week—to catch up and maybe even, if we're brave, talk about what happened at the wedding." I got a long look, and a reluctant but not hostile "Okay." She realized that lunch wouldn't work out since we would usually be covering each other's breaks, so we made a plan for Thursday evening—dinner right after work.

It was a hard meeting, but not for the reasons I had anticipated. Earlena was way different from her old self, so subdued she was almost unrecognizable. In a distant kind of way, not angry at all, she told me her father had died of a heart attack about a year earlier, and without his income it didn't look like college was going to happen any time soon. Her mom's income, even with Shakila's contribution, was barely enough to run the household. There were two younger sibs,
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boy-and-girl twins who were seven now. And the icing on the cake was that her piano lessons were not quite gone, but only once a month, even with Mrs. Hooper giving her a discount. Earlena grimaced when she said “discount.” I realized now that the break in our friendship was pretty much the least of Earlena’s problems, although maybe if we’d been friends through all of this it would have helped a little. When she asked me about how I’d been, I told her about my softball team, and my decision about my major, feeling it was way too pat. I’d never felt so uncomfortable. But at least I had the sense to not say much, I just listened. Toward the end of dinner when she told me about the last couple of days of her father’s life I couldn’t help crying; he was a sweet and gentle man. Earlena let her tears flow just a little. Not much, not for long, but somehow, I felt she was grateful for the opportunity, and I was glad for that.

Not long after that night we finally talked about the wedding fiasco. Earlena started by saying she’d figured out a couple of things she should tell me. She said, “You didn’t know this but I’ve had my eye on Sam for years. His family goes to our church and I’ve known him forever.” I said, “You know, I kind of thought that might be the case.” She rolled her eyes, said, “Well, Paige, I guess you can still put two and two together, huh?” We both laughed a little. She added, “Oh, and I had started to think he might like me, but then he took off on you. It was too much. I’m sorry I got so mad.”

Then it was time for my confession. I said I was majorly sorry to have been so clueless that day. “But,” I went on, “I have gotten a little smarter. I haven’t dated anyone at college—since I basically don’t drink at parties. I do *not* want to make a fool of myself again.” After a minute I said something about how dumb it is that in college the only way you can meet someone is to get drunk. “So, of course, you meet them when they’re drunk too, and the two of you start out in this

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creepy drunk place.” She said that was happening in our town too. Then she said, “Oh, I should update you on Sam’s romantic status. He had a girlfriend for a while in his freshman year at college. He seemed really happy with her but then she dumped him, with no warning, for another guy. Two weeks later she got dumped by her new boyfriend. She tried to get Sam back but, like you, he’d realized that the college romance scene is just a mess. So, he’s going it solo—like you and I are doing.” After reflecting a moment, she said, “Now we’re The Three Celibates!” I felt very happy to be included in this little group.

That was June and it’s August now. I’ll be going back to college soon. It’s been an interesting summer. Earlena and I have been reminiscing about grade school and high school, talking about the teachers we liked, and those we didn’t. Our most entertaining memories were about recitals. Almost all of them featured somebody, sometimes one of us, making a horrid mistake.

All of that has been interesting, but the most important conversations have been about our friendship. We were having dinner at my house one night when my parents had gone to Cape Cod for a week. We were eating our personal favorites. We started with an eggplant casserole I love, and finished up with the pecan pie she’s been partial to forever. I said I’d been realizing that I’d let go of our friendship—twice! —and I didn’t want to do that again. I said, “I’m trying to figure out why I did that.”

Earlena put her fork down, then picked it up again and finished off the last bit of pie on her plate, looking at me silently. She said, “You know, I’ve been puzzling over it too.” One of us, I can’t remember which, brought up those weird jokes we told each other when we became friends again after high school, and I got my job at M.I.T. Then we both simultaneously said, “What was

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that about?” We were both quiet for a while. She said, “I think were, both of us, embarrassed . . . and I think we were trying to cover something up.” This brought me a brand-new idea which felt scary, but I summoned my courage and said it—that it might have to do with the race difference between us, and the fact that we live, to a large extent, in different cultures. You could say we belong to different tribes.

Earlena said, “Yes! And at least to me, it seemed I was betraying my own people to have a good friend in your culture! Can you believe it?” I said, “I don’t *want* to believe it. But you’re definitely right. I had some foggy idea just like that in my head. Despite living in a mixed and liberal community, and the friendship between our mothers. Racism came and got me without my knowing it.”

We just looked at each other. For a long time. Finally, we cleaned up the kitchen, then took a walk, and after that we played Uno for a while, giving our twelve-year-old selves a chance to come out and have a good time.

We’ve made plans for her to come up to Burlington when she can, to visit my college and see some of the other ones around Burlington. She’s been saving money all along, and has found some scholarships she is eligible for. The final piece of her grand plan is to take courses this year, probably at Harvard’s night school, so she’d have some credits to transfer. It will be really cool if we can both be in college in the Burlington area during my senior year there. I’m keeping my fingers crossed.