

AMONG FRIENDS

A memoir of one woman's expectations, disappointments, regrets & discoveries while searching for friends-for-life.



"Jaw-droppingly honest."

MARY LOU SANELLI

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New Friends

“All friendship between women has a uterine air about it, the air of a slow exchange, of an original situation being repeated all over again.”

— MARIA ISABEL BARRENO (1939-)



It occurs to me that when I'm bored or dissatisfied with certain aspects of my life, say when my work is going badly or the only living creature I can relate to is my cat ... the list reads on: When I feel stuck, unable to focus on what I *have* instead of what it is I think I want. When I'm overly compelled to do more and *be* more. When I can't seem to practice or even remember my rescue catchphrases: Failure vs. success is a moment-to-moment thing. Or: In the course of becoming there is no arriving (my personal favorite). Anyway, when I'm in this rubble of a mood, I sort of retreat from the world because I lose a sense of my 5-foot-2-inch self.

When I go limp in this way and don't take responsibility for what it is I need to change, self-doubt sits itself plunk down and I begin to see myself as a victim of my life rather than in control of it. The unfortunate outcome is that, now, I'm not only bored, I'm boring. I don't think of myself as a boring person, or I don't want to think of myself as a boring person, but as I fall into the grips of what I know darn well is boringness, I start to criticize the very things about myself (oh ... and about my husband) that I normally love. And I know I'm at my lowest when I begin to attribute others, even my friends, with some of the dissatisfaction I feel, which is something I thought I might never be able to admit, but there it is. Whether this dip in mood is psychological or physiological, I haven't a clue, but, on the other hand, it doesn't really matter, does it? Because either way it feels awful.

Finally, one day something changed: I woke up, and for whatever reason, I could see how a large part of my ennui was fear. Plain old fear of nothing specific. Just of everything. When it was happening, I just kind of froze. But I made myself listen. The day went on from there, a day that had a lot to teach me about how fear can make me spineless and resistant to the changes I know I need to make. And to the best advice I receive from friends, books, even my conscience.

That day was a signal that I needed to get back out in the mix, that a part of me had become too isolated as a writer and that I needed to shake things up, try something new, someone new. No, I'm not talking romance.

When we're younger, dating, of course, is directed towards finding a mate. We read magazines full of silly ideas that steer us toward snagging a date. But as we move on in life and become more confident in our sexual fulfillment (and even if we don't), I think a lot of us need to apply a few "dating" techniques toward the pursuit of friendship. And, as in dating, with all its uncertainty and embarrassing what-was-I-thinking-this-man-is-a-moron situations, we may also need to follow through with a *if at first you don't succeed* mind set in order to weed out the bad dates from ones good enough to pursue.

And, for the record, I have endured a few really bad dates. No, truly, they were really

bad. But that's the point. They were exactly what I needed.

Such as: A few years back, while visiting Manhattan, I looked up an acquaintance who lives in the city. We'd met months before at a writers conference in Seattle where we were both hired as consultants. Our meeting in New York was to be our official second "date." A friendship-spark had clearly passed between us at the conference, so, I thought, here's where my new mix begins! Ready. Set. Off I go.

I bought tickets to a production of a play entitled (and this is such a weird and funny coincidence) "Bad Dates," starring Julie White. It was the story of a divorced, middle-aged, shoe-obsessed, ebullient New Yorker who resolves to re-enter the world of dating. Staged at the Playwrights Horizons Theater, it was a cozy theater in keeping with most off-Broadway venues, seating about a hundred people.

Our seats were front row center. No more than ten feet from the actress at all times. Now, I agree the "lonely-heart in love with her shoes" theme of the play isn't the most original plot, but I thought the monologue was well-written and captivating. Because, *passé* or no, I, too, have a shoe addiction I have to keep under wraps if I don't want to be a high-heeled bag lady some day, so when the actress looked longingly at her favorite pair of Chanel pumps before propping them on her dressing table under a tiny spotlight, it tossed my sense of humor into the air. Only minutes into the play the purest appreciation swept over me. I was fully absorbed and it felt wonderful to laugh out loud.

Now, to all around us, *forget* the play. My embarrassing theater date was the real show. Appalled by the character, she made audible sounds of disapproval during the entire first act. Then, as soon as the lights went out for a scene change, she exclaimed, "This is not fresh! This is not funny! This is the worst play I have ever seen!"

I was horrified. My ears were on fire as I slid down in my seat. I wanted to pinch her and not let go, or shout, "Shut up and act like a normal person!" I sat there wishing I could click my heels together and make the whole evening go away.

Julie White kept her composure and never missed a beat. I have never admired a performer more. Still, what I found even more amazing was how my friend was tone-deaf to the disruption she was causing. I, on the other hand, felt like a ticking Geiger counter, so far on the other side of embarrassed that I came fully around to feeling calm. I had to. My only other choice was to rise from my seat and run.

That, I decided, was not an option.

Not only was I enjoying the play and paid a small fortune to be there, I was determined to ride the date out for my *research*, I told myself (at least a hundred times). Add that to the second reminder nagging me: Anyone who thinks they have the tenacity to write a book, better have the strength to ride out an uncomfortable evening.

As the lights came up for intermission, I could think of no snappy comeback to my friend's too-loud comment that the play was "sooo shallow" other than ... *for Christ's sakes, if you want deep jump down a fucking well!* Instead, I let her words sit without comment between us like the last wedge of Brie on a party tray.

But later, over dinner, we shared a good laugh about our polarized reactions to the play. And I was reminded that people are seldom, maybe never, just who we want them to

be. I know some actions are unacceptable, but I could easily forgive her outbursts simply because she was willing to laugh at herself. I figured if she didn't care if the entire theater thought she was a nutcase, why should I?

Where we settle tells a lot about us. New York is full of colorful, opinionated characters. I looked over at my new acquaintance and thought *she is just one of them*. And later, when I thought more about her high-stress career as an editor in a major publishing house, all at once it dawned on me that, in her mind, she was simply editing the play from the office of her seat. She was not, in the least, ashamed of her behavior. I'd done nothing wrong, so I decided to give myself a break and not feel embarrassed *for* her. Because I can do this sometimes: be a little too willing to take another's behavior to heart.

That evening showed me all over again that in order to make friends, keep friends, and *be* a friend I have to step back and view someone from more of a distance. *In order to see, you need perspective*. Who was it that said that? I don't want to peer in so closely, study it, so that I get lost in one bad behavior and become blind to the entire person. Because if we can't see beyond a few shortcomings, who will that leave us? Exactly no one.

I was relieved when, after the play and sitting in a sidewalk café on 46th Street, there was so much else about my friend's intellect and wit I enjoyed. I was satisfied with my first "date." I gained something positive from the evening. Good. Because the real me hates when her efforts turn into a total wash.

You don't have to read too carefully between the lines of this story to see how hopeful I was that evening. All of my desire was there: an attempt to get to know someone new, the first setback of the evening and then of my confidence, the turn-around of events so that a connection was finally made. As I left her to jump into my cab, my first thought was how much work it is to make a new friend. More important, I *liked* the work.

The dates rolled into one. For every one in a string of them that went awry, there was the one that flicked me into the good stuff. Here is where I like to remember what the visionary Doug Engelbart wrote, advice that sounds terrifying (because it is), but is also the kind of guidance I look for (I like my guidance to be like my body — short and to the point): "Your ability to grow in life is directly related to your ability to suffer embarrassment."

And the next time a woman triggers my interest, I'm going to step up to the plate again and ask her out for a walk, a drink, dinner. And not just for the sake of this book. I can't sit back and wait to be found. I'd never approach my work like this, so why should I my personal life? My motto is not original, but it *is* essential to the way I live: If I want something to happen, I have to *make* it happen. And prepare for it by working hard, damn hard, so that if and when it does come about I'm ready.

All this talk about friendship. It makes me question my choosing to be a writer, which means, ultimately, that I spend most hours of each day alone. Still, the voice inside me says, solitude is what, at the end of my workday, compels me to meet up with my friends. Sure, I like a lot of privacy, but I don't always bask in it.

But for women who experience a social swirl on a daily basis (office work, family), the subject of loneliness can be even more confusing. I talked to many bright, well-accomplished women of various ages who appear, from the outside looking in, to "have it

all.” Yet, underneath, most admitted that they are experiencing loneliness to some degree, or a lack of real friendship in their lives. I didn’t want to turn our conversations into a political commentary on our culture, but still, we all seem to agree that something is wrong with our way of life. It’s less complicated to understand why the elderly experience loneliness, but why at these earlier stages of fully-engaged life?

It’s a tough question. Is it because we hold independence in the highest esteem? Which can make, either consciously or unconsciously, us view our most basic human quality — needing each other — as a weakness. Even if we pretend all is fine all of the time, each of us experiences similar emotions and needs. Whether it be jealousy, affection, fear, betrayal, doubt, or the alpha emotion: anger.

And, weird as this may sound, I believe in anger. Or, at least, recognizing it as true and finding a way to express it. I think channeling anger in the right direction makes for more satisfying relationships in the long run. Denying it, well, that just doesn’t fly in my book, even if, while writing this, I’m a little concerned with setting an uneasy precedent. I know how far removed anger is from the near-desensitizing sensitivity that seems to be everywhere lately, making it difficult to speak out honestly. But I think in some circumstances (I’m thinking mother-big here: as in the complexities of family dynamics or love relationships) in order to initiate change, anger has to be met at the door and escorted in, not downplayed.

Now wait, *nothing* is acceptable about verbal or physical abuse; that’s not what I’m saying. But anger as honesty, anger that stays focused on your own set of feelings, anger as a tension breaker, a release valve for the pressure cooker life can be. Why, I wonder, are we so afraid of it? Is it because we’ve had to bury it for so long so that we don’t really know how to feel it? And why do we so often try to call it something else, as if getting angry implies something offensive instead of the strength it can be. Holding it back is unlike us. It runs contrary to who we really are. Certainly to what we feel.

I know we both get how things are: We get the message early on that if we express anger, people won’t love us. It’s such an affliction, all this self-censoring. I think it invites loneliness because we are not being ourselves. Sometimes it seems we’re all just bluffing our way through.

In so many ways, men are allowed to get angry and still receive admiration and respect. He gets to be strong-minded while we are labeled *emotional*. His anger viewed as compelling while ours is interpreted as desperate. Part of me, the part that wants to give myself a break from trying to see life as fair, is willing to accept this as the way it is. But the other part, the larger part, still seethes ...

Sure, the women I spend time with express their anger. But most of us aren’t all that comfortable with it. Not really. There is still so much guilt tacked on, and that’s the part we go over and over in our conversations. I listen to my friends apologize for getting angry at their husbands, their friends, co-workers, or kids, even when the situation calls for it. As if anger is something to keep under wraps at all times. Even though we can see it right in front of us, like our own hand waving. If we don’t allow it to surface, we have to repress it, right? And repression, as my massage-therapist says, “builds in us like dynamite. It’s set to go off.”

Just the other day I listened to my friend, a 37-year-old mother of a young son and a business owner, chastise herself for getting mad at her husband. When I asked what happened, I thought *thirty lashes to his backside would have worked for me, too.*

For months she'd been asking him to clean out his truck, their only transportation at the time. Whenever she tried to climb in, things would tumble out the door. And things went missing. Important things like his wallet, check receipts, keys. She was sure these items were in the mess that was the front and back seat of the truck.

Yet, to him the issue had become, "if the mess bothers you so much, then clean it up." But the reality of her life is that she is mother to a toddler, in the throes of opening her own clothing boutique and caring for her aging parents. Come on.

By now the missing checkbook was affecting their mutual life. But still her husband made no time to clean out the truck. He played golf, he played poker, but no clean-up.

She was forced to cancel their checking account and open a new one. Days later, while searching in the truck for a lost toy, she came across the check book she had pressed him to look for. That was, as the saying goes, her last straw. Her anger, she said, "had body weight." And why, I reminded her, would it not?

Later, as if on cue, she felt guilty. When she called, I didn't know what I would say that we hadn't gone over a hundred times before. Things like: Why do we find it so hard to let go of our real emotions? Aren't they our biggest strengths? But when someone is feeling really guilty, you can't go back and underline the important parts of past conversations. There is really little you can do to help. So I said to my younger friend, "I was thirty-five before I could express anger without crying, forty before I stopped apologizing for it. Especially to my husband." We laughed.

But, you know what, I'm not above this fall back. Not even close. I can easily retreat into the "good girl" dialogue of repentance (once a Catholic, always a Catholic) before I stop to consider what I'm doing. I can't seem to shake it entirely. I guess I'm still afraid of being labeled feisty, bossy, or bitchy if, in certain company, I don't cushion my anger with "nice." I fear I'll be judged harshly for giving voice to this emotion (I will be) which can end up taking a huge bite out of my self-esteem. So I hold back, censor what I say. But I need something more honest to build my friendships on.

Here's where I admit I have less and less patience for those who bring this hesitancy out in me, people who downright *refuse!* to get angry no matter what. New-age (what does that mean, really?) devotees — often sort of cranky, have you noticed? — who make a practice out of containing their emotions flat-out bore me. I can't blame them. In certain circles, especially in Seattle, "nice" has become too ingrained as appropriate behavior. But to me, too much of it seems out of balance, as if pursuing goodness swings people too far one way as much as drinking too much careens others. How are we ever going to bear the world's woes if we can't, at least, share an inappropriate giggle now and again? What, I wonder, is so nice about denying what you really feel if what you really feel is not all that nice? I don't think it's all that balanced if you've lost your sense of humor; that's what I'd shout from the mountain top. As one friend put it, "Eventually, you gotta show your dark side or it's dull, dull, dull!" When I find myself in this kind of careful, I can feel my tolerance oozing over the sides of me like a fallen soufflé. I have trouble keeping my

irritation to myself.

But I'm not *completely* unsympathetic. I understand when it's a culturally born detachment — think Scotch-Irish (I am), or any background where the personal or *inappropriate* isn't readily discussed either within or outside the family — how difficult it must be to pass one's past on, its scars. But, as any Italian woman who has taken a WASP for a husband can tell you, understanding something intellectually doesn't mean you can easily (or always) apply it emotionally. Too long in the company of someone afraid to risk (in conversation or in life) and I'm secretly hoping for a pressurized emotion of some kind to rise up and burst them open like a blow hole. Sometimes, usually after my eyes have glazed over, I prod, which is one of my many character flaws, just to try and free their habit of holding back.

And once I went so far as to look directly into my own eyes in the mirror and make avow that I would never ever befriend another ex-Midwesterner or Presbyterian. I get too distracted by what I sense lies underneath, pacing but not poking through, as if restraint rises like a blister before me. And though I tell myself *don't pick, don't pick*, I am pathetically unpitiful. And ribbing. And blunt. God help me, I get out my needle, pass it through the flame, and move in for the stab.

Suffice it to say, there are many attributes to my character I am not especially proud of. Maybe by the time you read this, I will have learned to walk away with a nod rather than prod, like a full-fledged mature person.

At a woman's retreat a couple of years ago, I was asked to give a talk about "living one's passion." That was the theme of the entire retreat, and I thought that would be good. The kind of women who would attend, it seemed to me, would be those who don't feel that they are living their passion, who won't or can't give themselves permission to. Even under normal, non-workshop/retreat circumstances, unsatisfied people can be a particularly receptive audience. But, at the same time, authenticity-seekers can be tough nuts to crack open in conversation. They've spent so many years in a holding pattern, not making the genuine connections they now crave. Or they can blather on and on, a little too eager to hear themselves talk, which is not making a connection, either.

When I finished my talk, I sat next to a woman who had clapped for me with her arms way up over her head, so I thought she'd be easy to talk to. Or, at least, receptive. She also wore a pin that read, "Passion is as passion does," which made me stop and think *huh?* but I still thought *good for you, honey!* But then I couldn't get her to open up about one single thing all during lunch. *It's not like I'm asking for a play by play of your sex life*, I thought, *or how big your savings account is, but give me something other than a rundown of your kid's life*. I'm embarrassed to say exactly how fast I ate my lunch.

My point is that in order to flourish in the company of another, we have to be willing to share the truth of ourselves, to reveal doubts, insecurities, fears, what disappoints and angers us. We have to try — please try — to reach beyond a display of ourselves. It's not that I want to wallow in what disappoints (I don't) or let anger bury me (absolutely, I don't), but I do want to speak from a true place. And to get angry if I need to. To quote my friend Gale, "I need to be able to have a hissy-fit now and again. I need friends who let me do this without assuming I'm a negative, fed-up person. It's my way of exhaling."

I talked with a woman who works at the corporate level of the traditionally male-dominated bastion of journalism. At the time I was writing for *The Seattle Times*, for the Job Market section and, for the first time in my life, I came to understand how a writer could, in fact, come to hate writing, and detest her job. It was so consuming, so thankless, so frenzied and demoralizing. But it was my *choice*. I didn't need the work. I thought it was "prestigious." And in some circles it was. Oh, the lessons we learn.

Sorry, I didn't mean to take that turn.

Anyway, I sat with her in her cubicle as she waited for a fax to feed through her machine. She is forty-one, short-haired, and intense. We talked about the conflict she often experiences at work: a struggle between her intuitive way of relating to the world and the acceptable way she needs to express herself within the rather rigid workplace.

We know the work place is not the smartest place to confide in someone anyway, or where we should expect or hope for unqualified loyalty from our associates. (Some of us have learned this the hard way.) Yet, the very layout of the office space with its tiny cubicles tempts our basic human tendency to be intimate. Proximity invites confession. Confession is the quickest means to intimacy. What a gnarl of juxtaposition versus closeness to wade through on a daily basis. It's hard, really hard, to unravel this tightly held knot when you leave the office and want to connect to the world on a personal level. It's all so nuts these days, isn't it?

I found another kind of loneliness true for a few women who live in suburban developments. Especially once their children are raised. What seems to be missing from their lives is a sense of community, often more obtainable in a smaller town or even in the hub of a larger established city with its tightly meshed, multi-generational neighborhoods. True, they have the luxury of a private home, but is the trade-off their feeling more confined than ever?

A few years back, my sister moved from Brooklyn to a suburb on Long Island. She admitted to me that life is lonelier now that she bought her "dream" house. After several years in her new home, she has befriended only one neighbor. One. "And *that* acquaintance was forged," she said, "because our dogs found each other and wanted to play."

We laughed. I could do this, laugh everyday with my sister if only we made time for it. It is so comforting and familiar, the overlapping of us.

When she first told me she bought the house, I wanted to say what I'd recently learned, that dreams and dream-houses are polar-opposites; that dreams come from within *us*, not from our houses. I wanted to say that, but I didn't. I didn't want to spill on my sister's dream. Who wants to be afraid of what others will say about their dreams? Sooner or later, though, I think my sister will redefine her dream and move back to the city.

Leslie lives in a suburb of Seattle after fifteen years in an apartment in the colorful, inner-city neighborhood of Capital Hill. She said she always wanted a yard but now she feels isolated and soft.

"What do you mean by 'soft'?" I asked.

"I don't walk anymore. It's all about driving now. On my walks in the city I used to

meet people, stand on the sidewalk and chat about the neighborhood, get the word about local politics. People aren't as open out here. There's no community. That's a suburban myth. Everyone pulls their car in the garage and goes inside. I don't care about lawn maintenance and school districts. And no one ever stops by. I miss that, my neighbors sticking their heads in my door. No one tells you about the loneliness. Look around when you drive out of here. You'll see pricey outdoor chairs everywhere but no one sits on them. After commuting, no one has time."

"Will you move back to the city?" I asked.

"Soon as the market comes around again."

"Will it?"

"Who knows?"

"Will you wait?"

"It would feel really good if I could say 'no.' Want to buy my house?"

There was a pause. And then this came to me: "A cul-de-sac is a dead end in more ways than one." I wrote that awhile back about my mother's move from her inner city neighborhood to a cul-de-sac in rural Connecticut.

Leslie looked at me and nodded. "Now, *there's* a description for the neighborhood newsletter," she said and we laughed. "Even though there's no neighborhood. Or newsletter. It's an email from some woman I've yet to meet."

I find these little moments, two of us poking fun, my favorite part about writing this book, about life.

After I left her I pulled my car over to the side of the road to write this: I remember growing up in a place like this. I feel the same impulse to run, to leave it behind. If I lived here I'd feel the peer pressure I felt in highschool. I see the weedless lawn, the acceptable color to paint the house, the nondescript clothes women wear to be seen in but not *noticed*, and I panic. Suburbs are such a strong equalizer. In my own life, I find a strong connection between aloneness and freedom. But aloneness is not ... *this*. This new development looks lonely to me. I feel more loneliness here than I ever thought possible.

I continued writing: If this is what is passing for community these days, it's only a matter of time before even our mortuaries are located in the nearest strip mall. (When I said this to my sister she said, "There *are* mortuaries located in the nearest strip mall. Where have *you* been?")

I'll say that every home standing alone may still be the American dream but it makes it hard to admit that you are in need of anything. Whether it be a cup of sugar or a friend.

To live where you need to drive miles and miles to any place that gives you a sense of community — well, just think of the time spent coming and going. Which leaves little time for much else. "I'm surprised how exhausted commuting leaves me sometimes, how vacant I feel when I get home," my sister said. Something has to give.

I think the first thing to give is the time we once had for friends. As the writer Judith Viorst put it: "The suburbs are good for children, but no place for grown-ups."

Or as my friend Jeane revealed: “I didn’t have friends when I lived in suburbia, I raised my kids there. I took long baths and I cried a lot.”

I know you realize I’m not proposing that everyone pack up their three-bedroom, two garage home and move to some small town in Idaho or a condo in the city. It’s just that, no matter where we live, I think there is more we can do, more lines we can cross, to improve our emotional connections if we’re just willing to reach past our four walls and get to know who lives around us, one-on-one (which is key for me; otherwise it’s socializing, which is something entirely different). Because connection comes slowly, incrementally, no where near as fast as the construction that builds houses. It takes work, the emotional hard work of reaching out, to turn a development (or a city block, or a small town if people are new to it) into something that can hold people together.

Because I think ... I stop writing for a moment ... I *believe* that the kindest thing I can do for myself, no matter how busy I am, is to maintain my working friendships. And I want a new one now and again because I like how it feels to get another sense of myself, and enough old ones to keep me connected to my oh-so-old self.

One more thing: I just received an email from one of my dearest friends, Sheila. I sent her this opening chapter for a little feedback, you know, to quell the fears every writer has, fears that whine on about how, for God’s sake, the world doesn’t need another book. Certainly not mine.

Upon finishing the first chapter, the hardest one for me, instead of feeling relieved, I was bummed, wound up, and fidgety. Here’s what she said: “As an artist I am accustomed to and need time alone. So it came as a surprise to me to realize that, recently, at the end of my day, because I’ve lost touch with several friends, one especially dear to me, there is *this* problem now. I’m lonely. And here you come with your book about friendship.”

I write back that, yes, the thin line between aloneness and loneliness is exactly at the center of what I’m saying. (So maybe there is room in the world for just one more book after all.)

The poet in me would say it like this: Releasing myself in friendship is the silver dollar, the rare and worthy thing I want to hold onto. The realist? She’s shown me, repeatedly, how a friendship that works is key to my sense of well-being, many times more than family ties. So, she’s going to put it more like: *Listen, Miss I’m-So-Busy. You can pretend all you want, but no one wants to go it alone.*

Or something like that.

MEETING FOR LUNCH — *for Seth*

As the sun climbs to mid-day
we share food, a little gossip
harmless enough.

Nothing too trashy.

When young, you say, you looked to others
to measure your own merits by. To this day,
your self-esteem is temperamental
and I think how difficult it is to release the past,
that web of fear holding firm.

After you describe me to me:

a gust of getting things done, I say
its my father's fault. His work ethic
iron like in me as the pile driver
hammering in the distance, a sound driving us
to drink up, bustle into farewell, and return
to various selves, concerns, the push
it takes to earn one's way.

Recently, I lost a friend.

She and I went searching for women
other than the ones we'd become.

I think of her, walking with you
on my arm, companion completely. My heart grows
no larger than this.

Once, you and I shopped together, hours
in artificial light. *Boys will be girls*, you said,
and we laughed from that safe place
two can share when they aren't afraid.

You needed shoes, suit, even a hat.

Surrounded by so much to buy,
we grew weary, bickered briefly,

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