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Friend for a Time:

How I Found and Lost a Best Friend in my Freshman Year of College

***“Moving on is simple; what you leave behind, that  
makes it difficult.”***

***-Unknown***

*I first met Heather when I was in desperate need of a friend. It was my first semester at ETSU, and I didn't know anyone on campus. After being homeschooled throughout middle and high school I had always felt out of place, but I really wanted college to be different. And it was.*

**The Beginning**

My family and I moved to Kingsport, Tennessee in 2018, halfway through my junior year of high school. I had to leave my best friend and only friend back in Albany, Georgia and move to a place where I knew absolutely no one. Even before we made the move, my parents were talking about where I would go to college. They had it fixed in their minds that it would be East Tennessee State University, which was only about thirty minutes away from our new home. Having been homeschooled throughout middle and high school, I was terrified of navigating a college campus, and even more terrified that I wouldn't fit in. Before I knew it though, I had graduated high school, summer had passed, and it was time for me to enter the "real world".

Awkward and anxious, I hadn't made many connections during my first week of classes. I had never been around so many people my age and it was so overwhelming. In all my classes I sat near the front row so I could see the white boards and projector screens, but ever the wallflower, I made sure to sit near a wall so that I wouldn't draw too much attention to myself as I got used to my new surroundings.

Foundations of Student Success is a mandatory class for incoming freshmen and transfer students, and that's where I met Heather. I had no idea at the time how important her friendship would be for me. From my usual seat at the very edge of the classroom I was immediately drawn to her warm and calm demeanor. She sat at the front of the class and conversed easily with the students around her. I wanted so badly to reach out and try to make a friend, and it seemed like she was the perfect place to start.

After a couple weeks of reconnaissance, I decided to make my move. One day as we were all filing into the classroom, rather than sitting off to the side, I approached Heather.

There she was: perfect winged eyeliner, dark brown hair pulled up into two buns, and a tiny stud in the side of her nose that matched the glint in her eye. And there I was: baggy t-shirt, unruly curly hair wrestled into a bad ponytail, and wearing jeans in the late August heat.

I stopped at her desk and fumbled my way through an introduction and said something about how I had been wanting to come say hi to her for a while. To my utter astonishment she said that she had been meaning to say hi to me as well. She asked if I wanted to sit with her, and so I did.

From then on, we continued sitting together in class and we became fast friends. We talked a lot and even though we didn't have a whole lot in common, we got along wonderfully. I had felt an instant connection to her, and I was ecstatic to have a friend in one of my classes.

### **The Middle**

After a couple weeks we started hanging out together outside of class as well. We walked each other to and from classes and sat outside to talk during our breaks. She didn't have a pass for the dining hall on campus, so occasionally we would leave campus together to get food. We talked about everything from family drama to favorite Disney characters. She let me stay the night with her when I needed a break from my family, and before I knew it, she was talking about how I would be one of her bridesmaids one day.

I learned that she was a sociology major, a painter, a firm believer in astrology, a singer, and a lover of theater and reality tv. She had a great sense of style, a big laugh, and the sweetest and most southern way of calling everyone "honey". Her confidence was infectious and under her influence I began to slowly creep out of my shell so that I could begin to grow into who I am today.

As the semester went on, I met her boyfriend, Christian, and I later introduced them to my family. They were the first of my friends that my parents actually liked and approved of, so naturally they were invited back again and again. For the next few months there wasn't a family game night that they weren't invited to. I can't remember any other time that I was able to successfully combine my family with my friends and I was so happy.

For Christmas, Heather painted a portrait of me in her unique abstract style. I felt like she really knew me in a way that few people did, and it meant so much for me to feel so seen and understood.

After that first class, Heather and I didn't have any other classes together. She was one semester behind me in French, so I helped to tutor her when she needed it. We put effort into hanging out with each other around campus and at each other's houses. She and I attended musical performances that Christian did on and off campus. That winter we made plans and even bought plane tickets for a trip out to New Mexico during the summer of 2020. I was so relieved that this friendship I had seemed to be lasting and even growing.

But then suddenly things changed.

### **Red Flags**

I was so wrapped up in the excitement of having a new friend that I completely ignored so many red flags. When I say red flags, maybe these things aren't really that bad, but looking back I really wonder how I could have ignored them. Of course they bothered me in the moment, but I think I just wanted to focus on the good things so badly that I let a lot of bad things slide.

One of the biggest things that bothers me about my relationship with Heather was that, due to her obsession with astrology, she lived her life by the star signs. She would immediately

judge people based on their sign and she loved to always tell me “I’m the Capricorn, I make the decisions.” It was honestly a lot like having a friendship with my mom. She did indeed make most of the decisions and for all her warmth she was very judgmental. She also believed she was always right.

While at the time I didn’t mind, looking back now it really unnerves me how obsessed Heather was with my appearance. Right off the bat she was giving me tips on how to make my hair look nicer and how I should get it cut. One time we went to the mall and the entire trip consisted of her picking out clothes for me to try on. She would tell me which colors I should and shouldn’t wear, often without any regard for which colors I liked. She pushed me to wear more revealing cuts that at the time made me very feel very insecure and uncomfortable.

Somewhat related is her obsession with hooking me up with Zach, Christian’s brother. Against all logic Heather was convinced that Zach and I would make the perfect match. For one thing he lived in New Mexico where he was stationed with the US Air Force. For another, we had nothing in common and hadn’t expressed any desires for relationships. But Heather’s excitement was infectious and once she set her mind on something she wouldn’t let it go. I decided there wasn’t any harm in stepping out of my comfort zone and just talking to the guy. Because I was wary of giving out my phone number, I downloaded the Facebook Messenger app just for messaging Zach and tried to start a conversation with him. Heather immediately started telling me how excited she was that we would be sisters one day. Even at the time I went along with things begrudgingly because in all honesty the whole situation was way out of my comfort zone. A lot of things that Heather insisted on were out of my comfort zone.

**The End**

Things started to take a turn for the worst when Covid hit the US in the spring of 2020. Our plane tickets to New Mexico got refunded and our classes moved online. Heather and I kept up contact for most of the spring, but by the summer she had completely stopped talking to me. There was no warning or explanation. She just stopped.

I tried for weeks to reach out to her, worried that something had happened or that she was in some kind of trouble. But as the weeks passed, she never responded.

When she finally did respond all she gave me was a cryptic message saying that we couldn't be friends anymore because she didn't think that we were "compatible". I pressed her for an explanation, sure that if I had done something to hurt her, I could fix it. But she refused to say anything else.

And that was that. My first friend in East Tennessee dropped me with no explanation. I was wrecked. My confidence was shaken and I could not understand how a girl who used to call me her best friend and her sister suddenly thought we weren't compatible. I internalized a lot of this and really struggled with it for a while. This experience caused me to lose confidence in other people and made me doubt whether new friends actually liked me.

For a while I was confused, hurt, and even bitter. I couldn't stop asking myself what I had done to make her abandon me. I tried to explain it to myself that she was just a manipulative person who used me for a while and got bored. But that was almost worse than not having any explanation.

**After**

Several months later though, I had a breakthrough. It isn't about me. And it isn't about her. I know that I didn't do anything to push her away, and at the same time I have no right to say that she's a horrible person for doing what she did. She's human.

I decided that I can't waste my energy trying to understand why someone did something when they clearly don't want to explain it for themselves. I just choose to believe that she did what she felt she had to do to take care of herself, and who am I to judge that?

All I can do is appreciate her for the friendship that she gave me when I needed it most. In a lot of ways, she helped me to grow into the person I am today. I really wouldn't be where I am in life without her brief friendship, despite its flaws. Because of her friendship, I gained the confidence to express myself, I learned how to set boundaries and how to be content with myself, and I opened my mind to new ways of thinking about the world. In her I found the friendship that I needed at that moment in my life, and I will forever be grateful that I had a friend, even if only for a time.