

Friendship, Layered  
April 2021

Friendships are worth more than diamonds. As I grow older and as I slowly twist my way out of the stifling, imprisoning Year of the Pandemic, I have come to see each of my friendships as something to be cherished, as a child is cherished. I have clung to them through muffled masks at six feet apart, and via phone, text, notecards, and long missives. We have shared the frivolous, the heart-breaking, the serious, and the debatable. We have discussed the global and the intimate, the political and the personal. Together we have shed tears; we have laughed ourselves silly. Often, we have finished each other's sentences.

During my years as a schoolgirl, our family, because my father was an officer in the United States Navy, moved frequently: to new school districts, new towns, new states, even a new country. Friendships were critical in my nomadic life, but at each new location, they—for many of us were fellow military brats—were made quickly.

“Hi, can you be my friend?”  
“Yeah, sure.”

Just as quickly, they were ended.

“Let's stay friends forever.”  
“Yeah, sure.”

When Orders came from that high level of the military complex, our family—or my friend's family—might be gone in as early as a month. Friends, in my mind, were fleeting, ephemeral, ghostly.

It wasn't until I had a family of my own that life slowed down enough for me to truly get to know another woman. Times shared and long conversations later, I discovered what I had missed as a young girl quickly seeking “forever friends”. In that slower style of friend-gathering, our personalities meshed. We realized commonalities in our likes and dislikes, and in what motivated us or made us back away. We shared what we could from memories that floated to the surface at any given time: the fragmented stories of our lives. But in listening, while digressions needed in or interruptions flopped in front of us, were we ever exposed to the full, deep, rich part of the friendship?

Did I, after assiduously reading *Becoming*, suddenly know Michelle Obama better than my dearest friends? Have I missed out, by not reading my dearest friends' lengthy memoirs, on uncovering a significant and substantial part of these marvelous women? Is there more to them—personality, choices, consequences, responses—than I could ever imagine? Layers nestled in the farthest rooms in their memories? Layers, like blankets unfurled on a bed to be used in the coldest of nights?

Yes, perhaps. But who of us ordinary women has time to write a memoir?

And then a friend—a normal, everyday, unexceptional, obscure woman—was offered a way, through a gift from her two daughters. And I was invited to join her on her memoirists' journey. The immeasurable treasure that I have received thus far—Neither her writing nor my reading is near an end—is made up of nothing more than mere quotidian remembrances: slices of ordinary life, nothing dramatic. A treasure, though, of a life just now unfolding to me. A simple gift, worth more than imaginable.

I shall refer to my friend as T, since she is a humble and somewhat private person. Her daughters, after careful research, found this literary journey via a legitimate online stories project. The service, simply put, offers subscribers several questions each month, one question per week. The questions may include prompts as simple as “What was your first big trip?” or “Who was an influential person when you were in school?” The subscribers are then invited to type their responses, however long or short, and submit these responses to be artfully compiled, at the year's end, into a manuscript, which is presented as a gift to each writer. T asked me if I would like to read the first month's responses that she and her husband wrote. Of course, I said yes.

Recall is one of T's fortes; I had no idea, though, that the act of writing would carry her—and me—into a cinematic but genuine world of daily events and sentient details; of fully drawn and intriguing characters; of thought and choice and decisions. Into a time that came alive for her and thrust me into a life to which I held no parallels but that beckoned me eagerly.

I received the envelope bearing the first month's writings—five questions fully answered—after a busy day, so I planned that evening to read only the first two weeks' responses. I soon lost track of time and when I finished the entirety of the envelope's contents, all I wanted was more. This was my friend, who grew up in a rural setting, who still meets high school friends for lunch, who wrote of her mother and other women as having taught her the lessons that she would carry to adulthood, who wrote of the abundance of family support, whose daddy hunted deer, rabbits, and squirrels to feed a family that knew they were rich only in love. This was a childhood so different from mine. I had never realized—T and I finding our friendship as grown women—that the convergence of our lives was based on—or perhaps in spite of—two entirely different worlds.

Finishing that first of what would be many packets, I sat stunned. I had just returned to a place from which I had been fully transported. The pages that lay in my lap held stories so vibrant and intense that for a split second, I had to work to return to my life. When in a few moments I drifted down the hall and into my bedroom, its walls cluttered with framed pictures of my own little family, I felt a jolt, as if seeing mementos and photos for the first time. Of course, I knew that every item held its own history, yet it was as if all of them were suddenly chattering away at me, as if I were a stranger, if not someone entirely changed, and that much better for it.