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THE NEW GIRL

“Class, we have a new girl. She’s from kindergarten.”

Five years old and crimson-faced, I stood in front of twenty new first grade classmates. It was the middle of the 1960-61 school year. Because I could already read, Falcon Heights Elementary School was moving me up.

After several awkward moments, my new teacher, Miss Welin, showed me where to sit, and class began. I tried to pay attention, fiddling with the top of my new wooden desk and curling my feet around its metal frame. At lunch, nobody spoke to me, and during recess, I explored the icy edges of the playground by myself.

As the year went on, I failed to connect with my classmates. I’d had one friend in kindergarten JoAnn, but I didn’t see her anymore. And my same-age neighborhood pals closed ranks.

“They’re just jealous,” my mother remarked.

My friendlessness continued through second and third grades. Nobody mentioned that putting me with children a year or more older might have caused this problem.

“I just want one friend,” I’d tell my parents, standing in front of them in our basement rec room, Dad sitting on the couch and Mom running her iron over damp clothes. Wasn’t there a set of instructions they could give me, like the steps I followed when I helped bake cookies? There was not.

My parents meant well, but had little to offer. How was it, they must have wondered, that their smart daughter was stumbling over something that, to them, had been as easy and natural as taking a breath? Our conversations always ended with me walking away, dramatically (I thought a bit of acting might rouse them to action), my head down and tears flowing.

I spent much of my free time alone. I read books about the Bobbsey Twins and Trixie Belden, and daydreamed in my bedroom. With my two brothers, I built Lincoln Log houses, and watched *I Love Lucy*. On summer days, I curled up with a book, trying to ignore the squeals of kids playing outside.

I decided there must be something wrong with me. Perhaps it was the way I looked. My hair wasn’t dark brown like the rest of my family, and when adults exclaimed, “Where did you *get* that *red hair*?” I felt like

I didn't fit. I wanted long hair, like my dolls, but Mom liked mine short, and I wept after every "pixie" haircut. I fretted that my ankle socks bunched. I even worried about the backs of my knees; did they look like those of other girls?

Before the start of fourth grade, I performed a common end-of-summer ritual, walking over to my elementary school to view class rosters taped to the outside door. I found myself on Mrs. Moore's list, and scanning down, my eyes caught on a name I didn't recognize. Vicky Cooper. There's a new girl, I told my mother when I got home.

Setting down a folded towel, she commented, "Maybe you should introduce yourself to her."

Talking to someone I didn't know sounded scary. In fact, I wasn't accustomed to conversing with my peers. But what if I said hello to Vicky on the first day? Maybe I could make a new friend before the other girls got to know her.

I came up with, "Hi! You must be the new girl. I'm Sue." Then, facing my bedroom mirror, I practiced it.

On the first day of school, I glanced around at my classmates. There she was, slender and narrow-shouldered, of medium height, with paper white skin, dark hair, and huge brown eyes. Like me, Vicky was wearing a knee-length, shirtwaist dress. Hers was green plaid, and her white anklets stretched halfway, though not perfectly, up her calves.

Mid-morning, I found myself standing next to her beside the drinking fountain in the back of the classroom. It was my chance. I turned to her, my voice shaking, "You must be the new girl. I'm Sue."

She smiled. "I'm Vicky."

Vicky sat beside me in the cafeteria that day and we ventured to the playground together. Before long, we were whispering together about our teacher and the other girls, and calling each other in the evenings, my first social use of the telephone. I carried a bag of play clothes with me on the days Vicky invited me to her house after school.

Pushing aside self-consciousness, I began to notice others who lacked friends. They also welcomed my overtures. I was starting to get outside of myself, learning to take other perspectives.

By high school, I had a solid social group. I went off to college, got a job, married, and raised a family. It wasn't until after my kids were grown that I began to look back. I had seldom felt truly secure about my friendships. Even though I met people easily and received plenty of social invitations, a part of me still worried that I was unlikeable. I felt anxious

whenever someone didn't return my call promptly, or let too much time elapse between contact. My hunger to be liked had also produced "friends" who didn't treat me particularly well.

I finally understood how much of my insecurity stemmed from that long-ago grade skip. It had truly handicapped me, and I wondered why the school and my parents had okayed my move. Since reading was my only advanced skill, why hadn't they simply given me higher-level books? Why hadn't Miss Welin enlisted a classmate to show me around, or even approached me from time to time, to ask how I was feeling? Had she opposed the move, or was she simply overwhelmed with a crowded, baby-boomer classroom? Whatever the reason, none of the adults in my life had taken my perspective.

I wish I could take hold of that five-year-old Susan and keep her in kindergarten. I wish I'd been able to continue that friendship with JoAnn; she has become a kind of stand-in for the more carefree life I might have had. Perhaps that is why I mourned more than my own children when friends of theirs moved away.

Skipping a grade did, however, give me the message that I was smart. Because of that, I have never shied away from learning new things. My resulting capabilities in foreign languages and cultures, and my self-taught gardening and cooking skills, gave me back some of the confidence that friendlessness stole from me. As Toni Morrison writes, it was as if, "I could be made myself by the struggle."

Fortunately, parenting sometimes allows for do-overs. I was thrilled when my children's preschool began offering Friendship Groups, weekly meetings in which teachers helped children understand their feelings and put themselves in others' shoes. Social skills were finally being recognized as important—and that seemed to validate my long-ago struggles. I felt I was giving my kids something I myself hadn't received: the ability to connect with others.

It is a sunny spring afternoon in 1964. I am over at Vicky's house, and we are bouncing on her bed. We are running our hands over her family's vintage mahogany desk, searching for hidden drawers. We are slipping Salerno butter cookies onto our ring fingers and then nibbling them.

Two grateful little girls experiencing the joy of getting to know each other—and ourselves. Vicky has a friend at her new school. I have a whole new life.