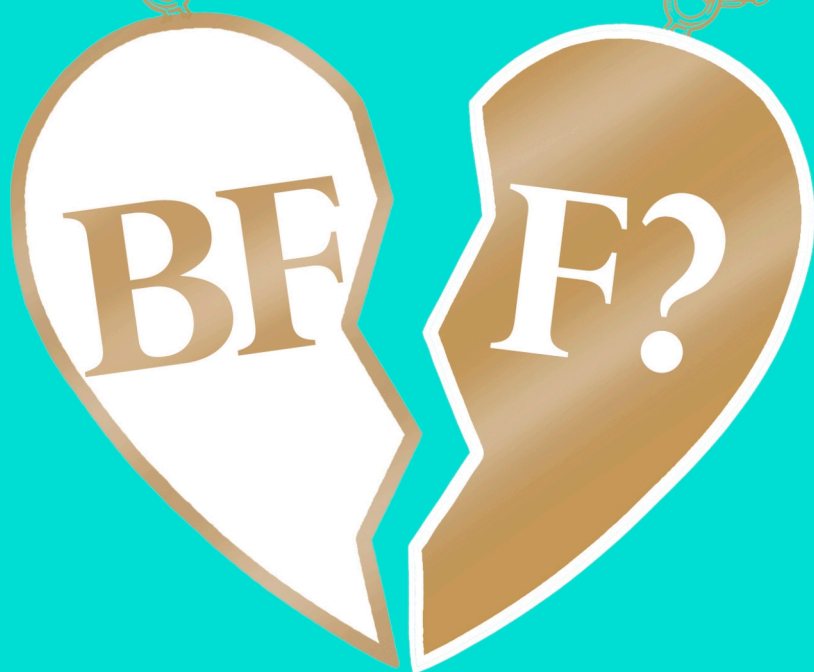


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The truth
about female
friendship

*'BFF?' is like having a best mate on your bookshelf –
I'll be giving it to all the women I love'*

DAISY BUCHANAN

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The truth about female friendship

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For my friends

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Prologue

Most days, on the train to work, I sit beside the same group of women. They are in their thirties and forties, stylishly dressed and clearly confident in whatever it is they do. But that's not what fascinates me about them. It's their laughter and easy camaraderie that has me removing one earphone and straining to listen to their conversation. I've overheard them talking about work, offering advice that is sometimes brutally honest. When one woman had a broken phone, she was visibly touched when another offered her a spare: 'Take it, I don't need it!' Sometimes they just talk rubbish for half an hour.

These women jokingly call themselves the Mum Commute Club (told you I was eavesdropping), because their children go to the same school, but their bond clearly runs deeper than shared homework timetables. There's something about soaking up a little of their friendship each morning that puts me on the right track. And, if I'm being honest, intrigues me. Why? Because for years, I struggled to connect with other girls and women and I know how hard it is – at

school, university and well into adulthood. I was never one of those people who seemed to be able to slide seamlessly into a squad, or find that perfect BFF. Perhaps you feel the same way. So many of us do and yet we tend not to vocalize it. Instead, we come through any tricky friendship experiences or look back at our younger selves, when we might have struggled to make friends, shrug and think, 'Phew, that was tough.' We can spend years silently consumed with self-doubt or licking our wounds. But does it have to be that way? Are we really destined to go through life not paying as much attention to our friendships as we do our romantic relationships? Or could we be having a different conversation?

It took me until my thirties to feel truly secure in my friendships – my female ones in particular. I firmly believe that if I'd had a book like this when I was younger, it would have fallen into place sooner. That I'd have been happier, more trusting and better able to deal with any bumps in the road. And we do need help. According to the Onward think tank¹ in July 2021, a fifth of adults under thirty-five say they have only one or no close friends – three times higher than a decade ago. We are in the grip of an 'epidemic of loneliness', as they put it.

According to the Office for National Statistics, 4.2 million British adults describe themselves as 'always or often lonely' compared to 2.6 million before the pandemic. Overall – including those who said they were 'sometimes lonely' – one in four adults in the UK said they were experiencing loneliness, and women more than men. The Campaign to End Loneliness takes it even further, estimating that almost half

(45 per cent) of adults in England feel ‘occasionally, sometimes or often lonely’. And while social isolation is something that can disproportionately impact the unemployed, poor and migrant populations, none of us is immune – it can strike anyone, of any age. Indeed, a 2020 Children’s Society report² found that British youngsters aged ten to fifteen are the unhappiest they have been for decades, with a lack of strong friendships specifically blamed. Which makes the fact that *Friends* is one of the most streamed series among Generation Z – who weren’t even born when it started in 1994 – not so much interesting as sad. A new lonelier-than-ever generation is searching for aspirational depictions of friendship it can feel good about, because it’s struggling to make and maintain its own.

When it comes to female friendships – which, as we will learn, are naturally more intense and intimate – that process can be even more fraught. Of course, a certain amount of friendship trial and error is all part of growing up, but I’m convinced that it doesn’t have to be so hard. That’s why it’s more important than ever that we start being honest about what’s going on behind closed doors. This is a moment to take stock. To think about who our friends really are. Because, when we get it right, there is nothing so nourishing as female friendship. And there are things we can do right now to change how we see them, how we define them – and how we celebrate them.

I believe this is the golden age of female friendship and it’s only going to get brighter. We’re entering a future where the women in our lives are just as

important, if not more so, than anyone else. The conventional markers of femininity that have followed us around for centuries are shifting, and with that will come a recasting of our most significant relationships. It means that, for many of us, our female friendships are taking on a much higher level of visibility and importance.

It's already happening: we are marrying and having children later than ever, if at all. The roles we are expected to perform as women – thinking of ourselves first and foremost as romantic love interests, defined by the male gaze – are slowly starting to be questioned. Is that what we want? What other shape might our lives take? Friends are having children on their own, secure in the knowledge that they have a strong network around them to help make it work. Others are happy to say that they don't want a family, where they felt unable to just a few years ago, so strong was the sense that it was somehow 'unwomanly' not to give birth.

'The friendship tie is incredibly powerful and for women is going to become more and more important as we move through this century,' evolutionary anthropologist Dr Anna Machin of the University of Oxford tells me. 'Actually we need to reassess friendship because for an increasing number of women, that is going to be your "survival critical relationship" – the bond that is going to give you stability, give you that secure attachment, influence your life decisions and your health. If you don't want to be in a relationship, if you don't want children, then it's your friends who are going to be the ones that will carry you through.'

Friendship is becoming more important for women than it has been in the past, and we need to recognize that.'

Isn't that exciting? The idea that we don't have to rely on finding a romantic partner to make our happily-ever-after come true? That it's a bonus if it happens – the cherry on the top of a big cake made entirely of female friendships – but not the be-all? I love the idea that female-friendship love is occupying the same space as romantic love in our lives. It's about time and I have a feeling that, if we talk about it as much as we do our relationships, it could be even bigger and better.

That's why I want us all to start telling the truth about female friendship. Because if I – raised in a house full of women, the product of two all-girls schools and the women's editor of a national newspaper – found it hard to trust and open up, and had convinced myself that female friends 'weren't for me', then you might not have it worked out either. It took me a long time to realize that the people who might seem like the 'right' friends on paper can be nothing of the sort. That humans are thrillingly unpredictable and that sometimes, the greatest friends are the ones you least expect.

That's not the narrative we're sold, though. From the time we start school, we are fed a diet of 'Best Friends Forever' – the idea that you should have a female soulmate to whom you tell all your secrets and who always has your back. But for most of us this is unachievable, so we spend years striving for a vision of

female friendship that isn't realistic, instead of searching for what suits us best or appreciating what we've already got.

Well, you know what? I'm fed up with pretending that the 'perfect' female friendship exists.

It's a lie that every woman must have a cosy clique. It's a lie that the rest of the world is brunching like the *Sex and the City* gang, smoking fags like Bridget Jones and her mates, singing along to the car radio like the pals in *Waiting to Exhale*, having a hotel pyjama party like the 'Flossy Posse' in *Girls Trip*, or dissecting one another's love lives in kooky apartments straight out of *Girls*. Not that there's anything wrong with these models of female friendship, and they might ring true to you. But, in my experience, they're just as idealistic as the expectations of romantic love they're intended to free us from. And even if you do relate, I bet you've also had moments when you've sat at home feeling like you don't have anyone to call. It's also a lie that, if we're not BFFs, we're at one another's throats. Women are so 'tricky', 'overreact' and want to be 'queen bee' – I'd carry on, but you've probably heard all these stereotypes before.

Female-friendship stories might be starting to make themselves heard above those of romantic love, but they come with all their own cliches and myths. Those friendship tropes are just another version of the Madonna/whore complex, identified by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century, that says women are either chaste and pure, or degraded. We're saints or sluts. Good girls or bad girls. BFFs or mean girls.

These myths stem from the same tradition that historically tried to hold women back and keep us in our place. To put us in boxes with neat little labels to make it easier for men to identify what ‘kind’ of woman we might be. It’s why female friendship wasn’t even seen as a socially acceptable concept until around two hundred years ago. We women might have been making friends for as long as we’ve walked the Earth, but our bonds weren’t deemed legit until the eighteenth century. Nice.

‘For a very long time, there was a kind of assumption that it was only men,’ explains Professor Barbara Caine, a historian at the University of Sydney and editor of the book *Friendship: A History*. ‘You need independence in order to have friendship and women lacked the power and the capacity in that way. Partly [women were seen as] not high minded enough; lacking the rationality that friendship was seen to require, as well as the independence.’

This only changed when Romanticism suddenly made having deep feelings fashionable, especially in letter-writing – something women were thought to be better at than men. Then, in the nineteenth century, women began to have friendships outside of the home, *doing* things together and gaining a sense of self. (Imagine!) They joined reform movements, political groups and became involved in suffrage. So while we continued to be legally beholden to men, our independent relationships began to flourish, too.

Barbara Caine sees Jane Austen as a major turning point in normalizing female friendship, putting the concept at the centre of the popular novels of the day.

The example she gives is from *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth Bennet's friend Charlotte marries the dreadful Mr Collins, a man Lizzie loathes, but we see their friendship survive despite that. 'You begin to see women's friendships existing within familiar constraints but being accorded a particular kind of significance and weight,' says Barbara.

The incredible female friendships I have encountered while researching this book make it seem impossible to me that the strength and ability of women to bond was ever in doubt. Some of the accounts that will stay with me are those from Holocaust survivors, who had their own word for female friendship, *lagerschwester*, which means 'camp sisters' – used to describe the groups of unrelated women who tried to help one another to make the best of their tragic situation.

They taught one another recipes, passed around their lice combs and gave out precious pots of rouge, carefully hidden from the guards, before the 'selection' process – a matter of life and death, since the healthier you looked, the more likely you were to be given hard labour and not sent to the gas chambers. Incredibly, there was also a menstruation sisterhood: there are stories of older women befriending confused young girls who began their periods and didn't have their mothers to help them. In one astonishing tale, a woman lent another her bloodied underwear (many women's periods having stopped through malnutrition and stress) to help her avoid being raped by squeamish German guards. It worked.

When our past and present are filled with such

amazing and nuanced stories of female friendship, isn't it maddening that we're still trapped in those stereotypes? That we think it's impossible to have more than one 'best friend', that we can't make new ones later in life, that once a gap opens up in a friendship it's too late to close it.

The myths that we perpetuate around female friendship are poisonous, for both women and men. They hold us back, pit us against one another and see us give up too easily. And they have followed me around my entire life – making me feel inadequate, insecure and as if I didn't know where I stood. I'll bet you've been nodding your head at some of them, too.

Because that's the thing about friendship: on some level, everyone's an expert. By that I mean that we all have our own tales to tell: our own heartbreaks, dramas, love stories and the general ups and downs of the friendship-coaster. And whether we have one close friend, a scattered group from across our lives, or a circle of casual acquaintances, we are navigating those same grey areas every day. We need to start speaking about female friendship in this way: giving voice to the almost invisible things that go into making it the complex beast it is – so much more than the catchy labels suggest. Yes, we should be celebrating the good times and calling out the not-so-good ones. But it's those many small moments – the thoughtful card, the hand squeeze, the act of kindness, the unexpected apology – that are the oxygen of every female friendship, and deserve to be aired. Right now, we're often pretty bad at doing so and I'm no exception. It is only through my work, some soul-searching and a lot of

painful personal experience that I have started to understand the true power of female friendship and how to talk about it more truthfully.

It's taken me more than three decades to realize who my friends really are and, importantly, what it takes to be a good friend myself. During that time, I had my faith in women blown to bits, and had to rebuild it slowly – in part while spending my days reporting on inspirational women doing inspirational stuff, with this mystical-sounding thing they referred to as a 'support network'. But despite outwardly being part of this Sisterhood, inside I felt like a total imposter who wasn't sure she even knew how to trust women – let alone love them.

Because female friendships are, at their core, love stories. For many women, they are the great romances of our lives. Think about it – what really separates our closest friends from our lovers? It's all there: loyalty, selflessness, kindness, generosity, companionship. The laughter and tears. The shared world view. In other words, all the things you look for in a relationship and which are ultimately far more important than sleeping in the same bed. And if a friendship breaks up? The pain can rival any heartbreak, and leave deeper wounds.

That's why, in these pages, I want to bring to life some of my own stories – and those from other women – for the purpose of discovering all the faces of female friendship, and so that we can better understand our own. I have interviewed women (and the odd man) aged nine to ninety-two, and had conversations with many, many more. I've picked the brains of

psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians and coaches to identify trends in female friendship – unpredictable as they can be. Mostly, I'm humbled and hugely grateful to everyone who has shared with me their most intimate and painful friendship moments.

So many of the women I spoke to found it hard to put their female friendships under the spotlight – whether replying to my research email Q and A or during formal interviews in which they were forced to examine certain aspects in detail, often for the first time. But once they started to talk, most said it felt like a release. Even the experts I spoke to, once we were done talking about psychology or science, couldn't wait to tell me about their own friendships. This is something that is central to our lives – whether we have it, want it, or are seeking more from it – and every person's story begets another and another. Speaking about it is liberating. Even if, right now, you're feeling as though you don't have enough friends, you want to go deeper with someone in particular, or you feel fulfilled but there's a nagging doubt at the back of your mind about that old school pal . . . there will be so many other women who are going through the same thing, or have done so and have come through it understanding more about themselves and their friendships.

Through their words and mine, I want to offer hope; that despite not having a 'perfect' girl gang, or even one best friend – and despite it all feeling impossible at times – our friendships can be hilarious, joyful and mutual. And that any struggles along the way will be worth it. You might not recognize every single tale

from your own life and the cast of characters will undoubtedly be different, but I'm certain that many of the scenarios and the emotions associated with them will be all too familiar. I hope to help you see your female friendships in a new light – hopefully for the better, leaving you with a renewed sense of security and pride in the women you know. This process might be challenging at times and demand honesty, from yourself and your friends – as it did from me.

Before I go on, perhaps I should explain why I'm not writing about male and female friendships. It's something you've probably had a conversation about at some point – the different ways in which men and women interact. Perhaps you find it easier to make friends with men, as I have done in the past. For a long time, I saw myself as 'one of the boys', and it was only on looking around at my wedding, three years ago, that I realized this was no longer true. But while I absolutely believe that men and women can have wonderful friendships – my male friends will no doubt be put out not to see themselves in these pages, and I know that for many women, their gay male friends are a crucial part of their circle – there's something about female friendship that meets our emotional needs in a way that friendships with men often can't. It's all that unspoken stuff about being a woman; the things you don't have to explain (or womansplain) to a female friend, and which can help press fast-forward on forming a bond. For me, the massive hole in the conversation is around women's friendships with other women. There's a female

friendship gap in our lives and that's the one I want to begin to close.

A disclaimer here: not all my female friendships are easy, even now. Far from it. They are, and will always be, works in progress, defined by intimacies shared, effort maintained and generally trying not to be an asshole. It would be wrong to tell you that I have all the answers.

Plus, none of our female friendships are made any easier by the narratives we are sold in popular culture. As well as those BFF or mean-girls tropes (the ones where we fall out and then make up, start out as enemies and end up friends, or are part of an unbreakable girl squad), a new breed of female friendship has emerged: the 'real and unvarnished' type. To me, these still aren't all that relatable. Films like *Animals*, *Lady Bird*, *Girls Trip* and *Booksmart* were hailed as watershed moments in recent years and, like many of you, I was relieved to see something approaching the truth emerging about the love (and moments of hate) that can exist between female friends. But I can't help worrying that the focus is still on the intensity of having a BFF. Isn't the scene where the two characters in *Animals* pee in front of one another and peer into the bowl ('You need to drink more water') just another rarely attainable ideal of female friendship: the raw, hilariously honest kind?

I know that our everyday experiences of female friendship might not make the best movies. I'm not sure a film about two very tired women trying to arrange a date to meet for brunch over a series of increasingly terse WhatsApp messages is going to

break box-office records. But aren't you just a bit tired of seeing and reading the same old female-friendship clichés over and over?

It's been going on for far too long. In her 1940 book *Testament of Friendship*, Vera Brittain wrote: 'From the days of Homer, the friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women . . . have usually been not merely unsung but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted.' I'd add to that: taken for granted.

Because, in our real-life relationship rankings, families, partners and children tend to take priority. Friendships are the first to go when life gets too hectic. It's easy to neglect them. You wouldn't dream of going for months without investing time and effort in your love interest, but you might do that with a platonic friend.

Friends are easy to fob off when things seem stressful. While I was writing this book, my pal Alexa asked to come and meet me for a coffee/accountability check, and my instinct was to say no. Too busy, sorry. What was I thinking? I'm writing a book about female friendship and I haven't got twenty minutes to give her? Those little check-ins are just as vital for reinforcing your bond as any girls' road trip or shared wee. So why are they always the first to go?

Friendships linger near the bottom of the pile when it comes to academic research, too. Where studies have been done, they tend to focus on the statistics: how many friends we have at school, college, university – and how that number fluctuates throughout our lives. But the emotional aspect? The importance of friends'

support? How much value we place on them? The love? You're far more likely to stumble across one of the many studies into male–female romantic relationships that asks, 'What makes women most attractive to men?' (Answer: wear high heels³ and make-up,⁴ naturally.)

And yet, where research *has* been done, friendship has been shown to be at the heart of what keeps us healthy. As we'll soon discover, female friends can even help us live longer. That's something we should be seriously happy about. Because, at the heart of it, female kinship and connection breed happiness – so much of it. This is absolutely not a story about women being horrible to one another.

Female friendships can help you frame the world and grow into the person you are. They vibrate on a different level, inspiring you and showing you what might be possible. They're a lot like our romantic relationships. And, just as we know how to manage our love lives, so too there are things we can do to improve and deepen our female friendships.

Looking back at my own friendships now, I wonder why no one ever told me how rocky things could be. About the friendships that would go wrong and the women I would sideline while chasing the BFF myth. You probably have your own regrets, or things you wish you'd known sooner. That's why it's time to shine a light on the complexities and realities of female friendship: what happens when you outgrow a friend, how to make and keep new friends as an adult, when to let a toxic friendship go, why it hurts so much

when you're the one who's dumped, the power of unlikely friendships, the laughter.

I hope to put all these on the map and present an honest picture . . . and a positive one. Because female friendship is a positive story. But, friends, it just isn't always easy to get there.

Best Friends Forever?

*Myth: Every girl or woman needs a
platonic female soulmate*

'I don't think we should be friends any more,' a voice that sounds like Ana's is saying down the phone.

'What?' I reply.

'I don't. Want. To be your friend,' she repeats, drawing the words out in that deliberate way teenagers do – though usually to their parents, not their bestie. Their soulmate. Their BFF.

I burst into tears.

I am sixteen, just back from a summer in California and desperate to tell my best friend all about it. Except that before I've even reached the part about the Jurassic Park ride at Universal Studios, she's broken my heart.

Ana and I have been best friends for three years. We met when I moved to a new school aged twelve; awkwardly, a year after everyone else had started and already formed friendships. It didn't help that I was

immediately nicknamed ‘Posh’ – this being two months after the Spice Girls had released ‘Wannabe’ – on account of my straight brown bob with a fringe and my straight-outta-Wimbledon voice.

I immediately gravitate towards Ana. She has long wavy hair, and neat nails with perfect white moons. Her ears are pierced with actual diamonds. She’s rude to our teachers but always gets straight As. She’s everything I want to be. It takes a while, but what finally brings us together is a shared love of the band Hanson (told you I liked long hair). We spend hours swooning over them. We memorize their lyrics, scribbling them on our school folders and up our arms in biro. When Ana gets the internet at home – the first person in our class to have this futuristic, beeping, hissing portal to the wider world – we scour chat rooms for more information about the objects of our lust. When we get tickets to see them at Wembley, we devote days to carefully crafting a love letter. It is written in fountain pen on lined A4 paper, as all respectable love letters should be, and in Ana’s handwriting, which is more grown-up than mine. We draw a border of pink hearts around it.

No copy exists, but I imagine it went something like this:

Dear Isaac, Taylor and Zac,

We are two 13-year-old girls who live in London [translation: we’re your age and therefore fine for you to snog and maybe even go to second base, depending on your version of the bases because they might be different in America] and are your biggest fans eva!!!

We think it's tres cool that you write all your own songs and we have all your albums, including the Christmas one [which we inflict on our families every December until their ears bleed].

We bought you an inflatable Jelly Belly bean as we read that they're your favourite food. What flavours do you like? We love buttered popcorn and watermelon [we secretly hate them all but Haribo Tangfastics haven't been invented yet].

Do you ever ask fans backstage? We'd love to meet you! [Please take our virginitities.]

Mahoosive love,

*Ana and Claire xxx [alphabetical
order for fairness]*

What MTV award-winning pop superstar could resist?

On the big night, we tie our letter to the large inflatable jelly bean, on which we have spent all our pocket money, before hurling it towards the stage. It lands in the dark pit between bouncer and band, but we don't care. We spend the rest of the concert arm in arm, jumping up and down, while Ana's dad waits outside to drive us home. I had never been happier and thought Ana felt the same. Until she broke up with me – an event so seismic that my teenage heart was shattered into a million tiny pieces.

If it's ever happened to you, you'll know it, too: the feeling that your small world, which revolves around school, has collapsed. The fear of having to go into class the next day without the security of your BFF beside you. The worry that everyone else will be

looking at you and thinking: ‘Ugh, she must be a really bad friend. What did she do wrong? It must be her fault she was dumped.’

For years, I didn’t think of it that way, though. We don’t naturally use that language for the end of a friendship: *split, break up, separate*. But we should, because the heartbreaks that have, without question, hurt the most in my life have been from female best friends. Mine occurred at school and university, a time when having a best friend is as vital in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as air, water and food. But friendship fractures can just as easily happen in adulthood, causing as much agony as any romantic split – probably more.

I blame the BFF – best friends forever – myth. It’s something little girls are spoon-fed from the moment we start school and our parents ask, ‘So who’s your best friend?’ It’s in the books you read and on the TV you watch: that you should have one special person to whom you are joined at the hip and with whom you never fall out. It’s even in our playground rhymes: *‘Make friends, make friends, never ever break friends’*.

This is when the ‘girl code’ first raises its head – the unwritten dos and don’ts by which every female friendship must operate: ‘You’ve got my back, I’ve got yours.’ It doesn’t suddenly stop the minute we leave school either. I’ve heard grown women accused of ‘breaking the girl code’, having started dating the ex of some distant acquaintance, or not taking their friend’s side in an argument. And it holds us back from having the freedom to find true and meaningful friendships – ones that don’t demand loyalty based on gender alone.

It might sound supportive and nurturing, but it's actually pretty proprietorial when you think about it. How many of us have ignored friendship red flags because of such unquestioning devotion? From a young age, the BFF myth encourages us not to question why we are friends with someone and how that friendship might be sustained and improved, but simply tells us that we are friends because 'that's what girls do'. Having a best friend in this way can be reassuring and make you feel as though you belong, but it can also bring with it a pressure to perform and not to put a foot wrong. It can make us feel insecure: will she be my BFF? What if she likes another girl more than me? Does she want to steal my best friend? How can I win?

And the myth is quite specific to girls and women. 'The term "best friend" is not something that you hear men say very often,' says evolutionary anthropologist Dr Anna Machin. As part of her initial research into friendship, she sent out a questionnaire in which 85 per cent of the women who responded said they had a female BFF. That seems extraordinarily high to me, but Anna suggests that it could be linked to both the BFF myth and our biology.

'It is very high and there might have been some pressure to say "Of course I've got a best friend, I'm not a sad, lonely person,"' she explains. But, she adds, women do place importance on close friendships in a way that men simply don't. 'What women tend to need from their friendships is real emotional intimacy,' she says. 'They are getting something from that which is absolutely vital to being a woman. Men don't look

for emotional intimacy with friends and so it's not the case that they need that very close dyadic relationship. They tend to attract bigger groups.'

As women, we place so much pressure on ourselves to find the perfect partner, the perfect job, the perfect house, the perfect family, and we are expected to juggle it all perfectly. I'd add to that list the pressure to have a perfect friendship; the sort of female soulmate with whom you can have a conversation by merely raising an eyebrow, and who knows all your secrets. It's an intoxicating idea; but the reality? Usually less than perfect. It's just as poisonous as the notion of Prince (or Princess) Charming swooping in on a white horse. Why on earth are we letting little girls imagine that their perfect BFF will turn up on a My Little Pony and that, magically, life will be complete? It's not a myth that every single girl and woman buys into, of course, but so many of us do. You might not even realize that you have.

'In childhood, when you're just discovering that someone outside the family can be very important to you, there's the myth that a friend is someone who's "just like me";' says psychologist and University of Cambridge professor Terri Apter. 'It's a myth that some girls buy into . . . *she's a sister, she's my real twin*. And then what happens is that as girls develop and change, they face a dilemma: *does that mean she's no longer my best friend? Should I change? What do I do?*'

That idea of things changing in friendship is something we all worry about. When you're young and devoted to the idea of a BFF, it can be all-consuming – the fear that your friend might be moving in another

direction is intimately tied up with your fledgling sense of identity. Do you allow yourself to potentially lose your ‘soulmate’? Do you also change to try to keep up? *Does* it mean you’re no longer best friends?

Simply, it can be hard to find the space to change when external forces suggest that to ‘grow out of’ a friendship or to drift apart is somehow to have failed at being a BFF. And it doesn’t necessarily get easier to negotiate as we get older – not only allowing our friends the space to embrace new challenges, but rejecting the impulse to keep old friends in a box; expecting them to remain just how they were when we first met them. Say that you and a friend are both single and sharing that life, with all the same ups and downs, and flickers of doubt about the future. Then your friend meets someone and you’re left wondering where your friendship sits in her list of priorities and whether you still have anything in common. It can, as Terri Apter says, ‘lead to a sense of “I’ve been betrayed, because she’s changed”.’

Of all the women I have interviewed, Lauren probably knows more about change within friendship than most, and how it can work for the better. She began to transition while living with her (cis) female friend ‘M’ and tells me how it helped to deepen their bond.

‘We were housemates during the time when I was starting to question my gender,’ she says. ‘You often come out to your housemates before friends and family, because you want to try out dressing differently and it’s nice to not have to be confined to your room. M and I remember vividly one night we spent lying