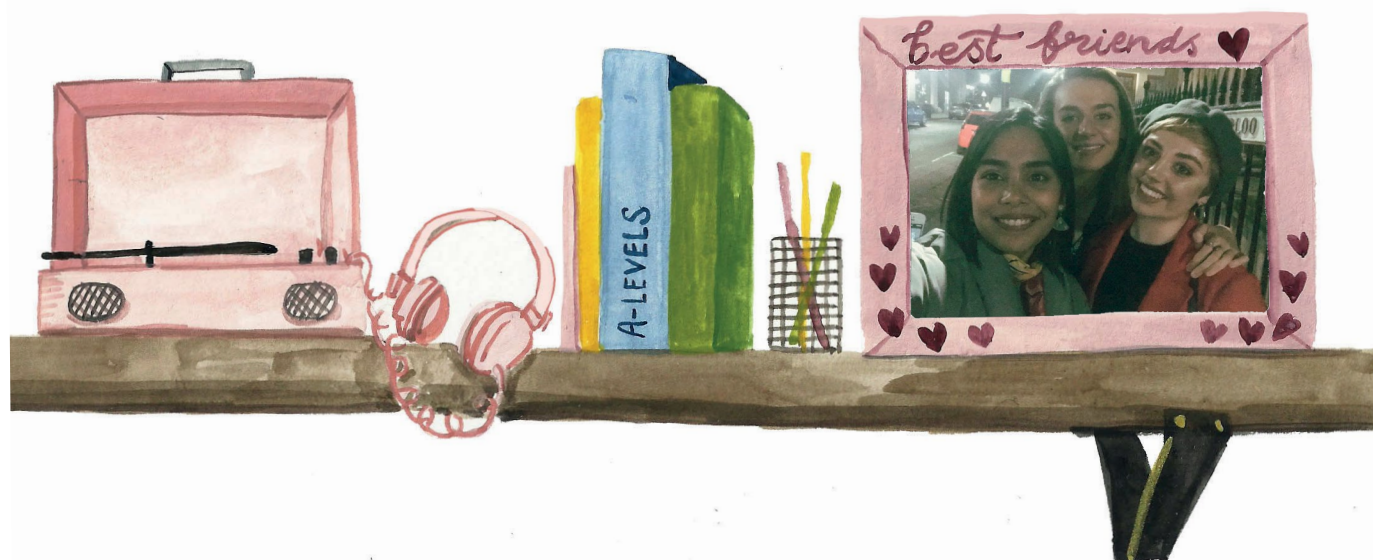




*We'll never forgot when we fell in love with our besties,
from school to first job, five writers share the moments
they met their mates*

illustrations ella masters



Sixth form

words *tahmina begum*

When Grace Peutherer and Emily Ballard walked into my life, I didn't need them. Sixth form wasn't like secondary school, where you had obvious cliques. As someone who had many friendships growing up, but not many genuine relationships, aged 16 I was slightly bitter by the fleet of women coming into my life with the promise of "best friends forever". Only for that length of forever to be cut short when forever meant a boyfriend or simply someone else whose parents allowed them to stay out until 2am.

I've always desired that kind of friendship that endured time. Those bridesmaids at weddings whose sobbing speeches involved lines such as "I've known her since she was two!". Going into a career that was infamous for being fickle, I wanted that *Sex and the City* kind of friendship. People who were going to be there for you at the drop of a

WhatsApp message. They didn't just ask if everything was alright - they made it so.

Both of my friendships with Grace and Emily started in the most traditional, feminine way: a compliment. Grace wore a fantastic leather jacket to one of our first Spanish, European and Medieval History A-level classes while Emily's natural easygoing aura, with a good (dry) sense of humour, in addition to owning legs that to this day are longer than my entire body, meant I needed to tell her all of the above.

Knowing you only have a short amount of time together before heading to uni, there's this unsaid rule to enjoy your friendship while it lasts - we all saw friendships grow apart at secondary school, the first heartbreaks hinting at lessons of real life to come. University is a time to grow, of debauchery, commitment doesn't usually go hand in hand.

But these two women became the first people I messaged when I landed in my

dorm room and didn't know what to do. They were the first people I messaged when I got my heart broken or was just getting laid. They showed up every night I needed them. Once I got moved away from Grace for speaking too much in English, the change in seating just meant we adjusted how we spoke to each other and I always think of that as metaphor for the different jobs, cities and circles we've all had in the past seven years. No change has yet cut the ties with the "girls from home" because home is the one thing we have in common.

There are only some people in life you can't fool. No amount of followers, accolades or poker faces you play at parties will wash over them. The ones who have been there while life ebbed back and forth. You can't hide the facets you don't like; or only show what you prefer. That doesn't work when your best friends made you into a woman. →



University

words *frances ambler*

I lost myself during my first year of university. I'd thought it was where people found themselves. Or at least found people who 'found' them. In sixth form, my best friend and I had squeezed as much culture out of the secondhand shops and library of our small Lincolnshire town as we possibly could. I was primed for university to encourage me to new heights of pretension. I didn't expect to find myself listening to Westlife.

I lived with four other girls who were open and warm and generous. But our gang, as it instantly became, interacted with the suffocating intensity of teen friendship. Collective taste ruled: it was Ant and Dec, Ewan McGregor and, yes, Westlife. I lost that sixth form courage in standing out, and exhausted myself trying

to fit into a box of interests that wasn't quite me.

Perhaps I recognised this more than I knew because, in my second year, I dusted off my ambition to become a music writer and took myself along to the student newspaper society. Although off-puttingly full of people with burning convictions that they'd take over the world, I stuck around. Not long after, I was regularly staying up to early hours, either working in our basement newspaper offices or out dancing, with a new group of women.

These three friends weren't necessarily what I'd imagined back in sixth form but it was a form of friendship that fitted me better. There were less rules. They helped me believe that whatever I was into, however geeky or niche – from the straplines in *Heat* magazine to the art of

Helen Chadwick – was worthy of interest. They gave me space where I could voice my ambitions, however still ill-formed. When the opportunity came, they gave me the confidence to become the newspaper's editor and then, when I finished university and despaired of ever finding a job, they were the ones who never encouraged me to set my sights lower.

These women have continued to stick around. Our lives are scattered, our ambitions have shifted but they remain a constant loving presence. Last summer, for the first time in four years, we were all in the same place together, back in the city where we met. That Edinburgh weekend, I realised the feeling was exactly the same as it always had been: that ease in knowing that these were people I could be exactly myself with.



First job

words *alice snape*

It was my first proper, grown-up job. My ticket to moving to London. I felt so fancy, I had my very own work email address, complete with signature and everything – goodbye Hotmail account. The role was in the publishing department of a London examination board.

I was the first of the three of us to work there. Ruth started as a temp until she got moved to my department and made a permanent fixture. I knew we'd be friends as soon as I spotted her from afar. She was glamorous and poised, a stark contrast to everyone else who worked there. We cackled together about who we fancied in the office and where we were going for wine that evening – which always descended into the most debauched fun-filled night. It didn't

matter what day of the week it was, we'd sit up all night smoking Marlboro Lights talking about who we were, and, more importantly, who we wanted to become. The talk of twenty-somethings who knew, deep down, this job was just a stepping stone to the next. We knew we could face a hangover filled day in the office if we had each other – and a constant stream of Doritos and Diet Coke.

Sophie made up our publishing trinity. When we trotted through the office – me with my ever-varied and possibly inappropriate work wardrobe – they nicknamed us “Charlie's Angels”. Sophie slotted straight in and didn't bat an eyelid when I made her check that my fake tan was even on her third day in the office. I thank Sophie for encouraging me to online date, although she has since admitted she selfishly just enjoyed

the morning debrief after particularly hideous encounters. When I debated cancelling a mid-week date because I was too tired, Sophie encouraged me to go as she thought James (yep, my now husband) had a nice face.

We helped each other fix mistakes, get over heartaches and office snogs (oops). Thank goodness I have long given up on the fake tan, but our friendship has endured. We've watched each other get married, have babies, move jobs and move homes. We still regularly meet up for a good old gossip – just this time it's no longer by the office printer or a sneaky work email while our manager isn't looking. And I will forever love it when our 'Angels' WhatsApp group pings with a funny joke, a memory or just to say hey. I can't imagine my life without them. →



Becoming a mum words *catherine hufton*

I had a baby just over four months ago. A monumental life change that has altered the dynamic of so many of my relationships – especially friendships. Once a social butterfly with plenty of time for everyone, I would flit from lunch meeting, to gallery visit and dinner date with ease. Now, with a small baby in tow, my friends have to come to me for the most part, while watching me breastfeed and regale stories of bad nights and reflux.

I'm lucky in that the majority of my friends have been amazing: checking in on me regularly and helping me navigate

my new world of parental responsibility with supportive words and unlimited kindness. But sadly, I've lost a couple along the way too. The first few weeks of motherhood were the hardest of my life, so it's no surprise that the absence of these people cut a little deeper than normal. Some losses have been due to friends struggling to come to terms with their own personal infertility and relationship breakdowns – while others, well, who knows. They just stopped replying.

On the flip side, motherhood has also been a wonderful exercise in making new friends. From my excellent neighbour who has become a daily confidante

(greeting me most mornings with a text simply saying, "How was your night?") to the brilliant women I've met at my local Mindful Mums support group, it's opened up a whole new world of people that I would never normally have crossed paths with. Having others to share new experiences, struggles and worries with, at such an important part of my life, brings me more comfort than I could ever possibly explain.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and while that idea in its traditional sense may not be possible when living hundreds of miles away from my family, I feel I'm making my own kind of tribe – one coffee-and-cake-date at a time.



Grief

words *lulah ellender*

When my mother died I felt unmoored, as if my world's axis was tilting at a strange angle and it was all I could do to hold on. To counter this disorientation I felt an urge to be outside, grounding myself onto the earth. I sought out people who shared my particular kind of loss. I wanted to combine these two things: needing to be in nature, and spending time with people who were also grieving. So I set up Walking Without, a walking group for people who had lost parents.

The name reflects how we live with an absence that is an odd kind of presence.

In William Stafford's *A Message From the Wanderer* he describes the sense of knowing that an antelope had been nearby because "there is something wrong about the grass". The animal has left a trace, a shape that looks and feels different – "wrong". I wanted to acknowledge this strange "form in the grass" that was beside each of us as we walk.

We met each month, an incongruent bunch from different backgrounds, some friends already, some strangers who became good friends. And all of us knew a little bit of what the others were experiencing. Someone always brought cake. As we walked we often

just chatted, but there was usually a gently unfolding moment where we talked about our loss.

Something about the rhythmic motion of walking helped us turn our attention to the people who had gone, and to our own feelings. For those of us feeling lost, walking connects more than just geographical points. In a world that seemed chaotic and broken, our walks became what Mary Oliver describes as "an antidote to confusion". And we laughed a lot too.

These friendships have endured, thanks perhaps to this quiet recognition of each others' need for connection and rootedness. ♦