

CROSSED

By Susan Hodara

When I heard my then seven-year-old daughter Sofie's friend asking her, "Who do you like better, me or Hannah?", I was livid. Driven by leftover guilt and the memory of a similar question asked of me many years earlier, I burst into the room, and trying to keep my voice somewhat even, announced: "That's a question that should never be asked!" Sofie and her friend looked up at me with a combination of surprise at my outburst and annoyance at my intrusion, but the question was never answered.

We moved to Belmont when I started third grade, and I quickly became friends with Mary Sullivan. She was a thin, pale girl with thick brown hair chopped off at her chin, and though she wore pretty dresses with puffy skirts and bows in the back, she was rather plain. She spoke in a quiet, airy voice, her words drifting from her thin, pursed lips. Shy though she seemed, she was by no means delicate, and we often played together outside in one of our yards.

She lived up the hill about a quarter of a mile from us, in a house that was bigger than ours. I wanted to live in that house. Actually, I just wanted to live in the same house as Mary, and I'd spend hours determining that if our two homes could be somehow connected by underground tunnels that would cut through tree roots and under bushes and roads, they would essentially become one house shared by Mary and me. No longer would I have to ask my parents, "Can I go to Mary's?"; I'd already be there, albeit the same distance away. I thought that would be perfect, although I never shared my fantasies with Mary.

Later that year, I became friends with Monique. She lived in the other direction, across the school yard and down a few blocks. We played hopscotch together, and drew pictures on the sidewalk with the leftover chalk. The thing about Monique was that she was so pretty. I admired her straight blonde hair and freckles, far superior, I felt, to the short brown curls that surrounded my face; her long agile limbs contrasted sharply my shorter, stockier ones. I liked to look at her, and was flattered that she seemed to enjoy my company.

Such an attraction had already happened to me once before, in second grade before we moved. My best friend then was the girl across the street, but the girl I really wanted to play with was Susan Bonano, and the reason was her hair. It was golden and hung neatly at her shoulders where every strand turned obediently inward towards her neck. She sat at her desk with her hands folded, and I recall finding it hard to believe that someone so elegant could actually go to the bathroom. Once we worked together on a school project, and later we exchanged those little school pictures, but that was the extent of our interaction.

So as Monique and I developed a friendship, it resonated with some mysterious pull of which I was innocently and entirely unaware. Call it charisma, or chemistry — I was too young to know or care. I'd been told before, "It's what's inside that counts," but nonetheless, some people just seemed more interesting, more appealing, more beautiful, and it was they who drew me in. I couldn't understand why the friends I played with and truly liked paled when contrasted to those prettier girls, but I didn't wonder much, and counted my luck as Monique tugged at me in the school yard.

Predictably, Monique and Mary didn't like each other, and for much of that spring, I yoyo-ed between them. I wanted them to be friends; I wanted us all to get along together, and now Monique joined me in the imaginary tunnels between Mary's house and mine. In reality, however, they were too different, and I increasingly felt myself in that linguistically impossible but all too common position when you're a schoolgirl of having two best friends.

It didn't bother me at all. I enjoyed the time I spent with both of these playmates, and my young ego, I'm sure, was eating it up. But I guess it did bother them, or Monique, at least. It was the end of recess, and groups of children were clustered near the door waiting to go inside. That's probably how Mary, Monique and I came to be standing together, and Monique grabbed the opportunity.

"Who's your real best friend, me or her?" she asked, her voice sweet but her eyes catching mine and holding fast, darting momentarily in the direction of Mary, but never really looking at her. She was directly in front of me, while Mary was between us on my left. I'm sure Mary was as unprepared for the question as I was; it was not the kind of thing she dwelled on. As for me, I felt caught, trapped in a moment I hadn't asked for but felt compelled to resolve. Within minutes, we'd all be sitting at our desks, lined up in our classroom. Between then and the present gaped an impasse, with me smack in the middle.

My mind raced, juggled, toyed with diplomacy as the seconds passed, but never considered just not replying. "I can't answer that!" I should have declared, or laughed it off with, "What a silly question!" "I like you both," I could have answered, and honestly at that. Instead, I tried to have it all. I held Monique's eyes as I said: "You are," while

my left hand moved slowly over towards Mary, its two fingers crossed. “You see? I don’t mean it,” I vainly attempted to telegraph to Mary, focusing on my fingers, trying to get her to look. “It means it’s a lie.”

I don’t know if she ever looked down to notice my hand; I don’t know if she even heard my reply to Monique. She never said a word to me about it, then or later. In an instant, the bell rang and we were herded inside.

That pretty much ended my friendship with Mary. We weren’t in the same class in fourth grade, and I made new friends and moved on easily. I never got much closer to Monique either, and when her family relocated at the end of the summer, I barely noticed.

I can picture them both clearly, though. I can see in my mind the intricate design I’d dreamed up so Mary and I could share a house, and Monique’s freckly smile is still vivid in my memory. I remember, too, the three of us on that fateful day, a triangle of children about to float apart.

Until I had children of my own, I never realized I didn’t have to answer Monique’s question that day. Instead, I came up with the best solution I could, a fiasco, it turned out, and the moment is seared in my memory. I crossed two fingers, but I really crossed two friends.