

US

In the beginning, it was us. There we were, five years old, cutting off chunks of our hair. Playing with little model fruits. Counting to twenty. Snakes and ladders. Just Dance battles. My fear of dogs, and your love of them. My fierce defense of you when the boys started being rude. Your kindness to me when I fell on the concrete. Our rebellion of going into the bottom playground, where only the year fours and above were allowed. That was us, together.

Then before we knew it, we were seven. We had graduated to the lower half of the school, and we were ecstatic. It was the age of the blue climbing frame. The gymnastics tricks. The competitions. Who can hang from the bar the longest? The sharing of gel pens and Smiggle stationery that my mum wouldn't buy but yours did and that was just as good. The food-shaped erasers. The same handwriting. The sitting on the mat together, still, always, because it was us.

And once again, we had grown. We were nine, and we were up and down. You ignored the texts from my rose gold iPhone five. And then we were friends again, because we were still us and we still needed each other. And we sat on the mat, and I drew on your back with my finger, and we coordinated our hair and then you hated me again. And then we were fine. And then I had a crush on your cousin, so you were mad, but after he hit me with a skipping rope we were good.

As they do, the double digits hit us, and we were ten. We were fighting and friends and we got over it and into it again and it cycled like that, always ending with you winning but I didn't mind. We spent our time on the adventure playground, swinging and climbing, until you decided you didn't like it. So, I settled, and I would leave the adventure playground too, with you, and we could play house like you wanted and I would be the dad and you would be the mum and we would be a little couple. A pretend couple. Pretend.

That summer we had a sleepover, many, since you just live down the road. We stayed up until eleven and we talked about boys and boys and boys and eventually I couldn't hold it so I told you that I think I like girls. You said that you didn't. So, I said I didn't either, it was just a mistake, because we never disagreed. You won again.

We moved to big school when we were eleven, and we weren't in the same class. Or the same house. But we were still us and we found some more, and we had our group of five. We played in

the trees, and we cut our hair short together, you me and Olive. We joked and we laughed and then you found some other friends, some class friends, and suddenly I was the jealous one and I missed us playing house.

Then when we were thirteen, you left for a few weeks in the holidays, so did I. When we came back, I was the only one you liked. Our group of five split into us and them, two versus three, and no one knew why. I liked being your only friend. I fed off of you talking badly about the others. I needed the attention, and I got it, constantly. I was always at your house. Every day, after school. Your mum would drive me home from the bus and we would make mug cakes, and it was good. So good.

You went away when you were fourteen. I was still at school. I spent my time with the others, and then we were a group of four and you were - I don't know where? When you came back you only wore long sleeves and plasters and turned up late all the time and you were angry and spiteful. We weren't friends. But then you dated a girl, and it wasn't me, I didn't know how to feel about that.

At fifteen we got close again. Super close. And you broke up with that girl and you came to my house, and we kissed, just as friends, obviously. We've kissed a lot. As friends. You wore short sleeves now, and I could see your scars, but I didn't say anything. You had been away a lot more by then. You said to the hospital, but I think the proper word is 'facility'. And we vaped together, lychee raspberry, and now the smell of it makes me sick.

Then I didn't see you for a long, long time. The teachers asked me where you were. I had no idea. I still have no idea.

I am seventeen. That means you are too. Almost, since your birthday is in May. You didn't message me on my birthday. Maybe you're back in a facility? If only you had settled for cutting chunks out of your hair instead of yourself. And you still vape, I think. Probably lychee raspberry. I don't. Haven't in months. You wouldn't care, probably. We aren't fighting, we are just nothing, which is worse. If we were fighting, I would know you thought about me.

Playing house was more than pretending for me. I wish we could do that again sometime. I had a crush on your cousin because he looked like you. I held you when you cried more for my benefit than yours.

I hope your scars begin to look less harsh on your once spotless arms, and that you make it out of the facilities for good. I hope you become a nurse, like your mum, like you always wanted. I hope you can quit vaping one day, it's hard when you start so young. I hope you have some friends, the kind that encourage you to eat and sleep and ease up on the alcohol. I hope you know I think of you more often than I should. I really hope you make it to eighteen.