

Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (Or, How I Made My First Real Friend)

by Mindy Kaling

IN NINTH GRADE I had a secret friend. Her name was Mavis Lehrman. Mavis lived a few streets away from me in a Tudor-style house that every Halloween her parents made look like the evil witch's cottage from Hansel and Gretel. (This is amazing, by the way. It behooves anyone who lives in a Tudor house to make it look like a witch cottage once in a while.) The Lehrmans were a creative and eccentric family who my parents deemed good people. Mavis was my Saturday friend, which meant she came over to my house Saturday and we spent the afternoon watching television together.

Mavis and I bonded over comedy. It didn't matter if it was good or bad; at fourteen, we didn't really know the difference. We were comedy nerds, and we just loved watching and talking about it nonstop. We holed up in my family's TV room with blankets and watched hours of Comedy Central. Keep in mind this is not the Comedy Central of today, with the abundance of great shows like *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*. This was the early '90s, where you had to really search around to find decent stuff to watch. We'd start with the good shows, *Dr. Katz*, *Kids in the Hall*, or *Saturday Night Live* reruns, but when those were over, we were lucky if there was some dated movie playing like *Porky's* or *Kentucky Fried Movie*. With all the raunchy '80s sex comedies Comedy Central played, at times it felt like we were watching a confusing soft-core porn channel. It wasn't our favorite programming, but like the tray of croissants from Costco my mom left for us on the kitchen table, Mavis and I devoured it nonetheless. We loved comedy and wanted to watch everything. And more than that, we loved reenacting what we saw. The Church Lady's catchphrases were our catchphrases, and we repeated them until my mother said, exasperated: "Please stop saying 'Isn't that special?' in that strange voice. It is annoying to me and to others."

At fourteen, Mavis was already five foot ten. She had short, dark, slicked-back hair like Don Johnson in *Miami Vice*. She was very skinny and had women's size eleven feet. I know this because she accidentally wore my dad's boat shoes home one time. Mavis was a big, appreciative eater, which my parents loved. When she visited, she made a habit of immediately opening the fridge and helping herself to a heaping bowl of whatever leftover Indian food we had and a large glass of orange juice. "This roti and aloo gobi is delicious, Dr. Chokalingam," she'd say to my mother, between bites. "You should start a restaurant." My mother always protested when Mavis called her by the formal "Dr." name, but I think it secretly pleased her. She was sick of some of my other friends saying things like: "Hey, Swati, how's the practice going?" in that modern, we-call-parents-by-their-first-names fashion of liberally raised East Coast kids. Both my parents were very fond of Mavis. Who wouldn't love a hungry, complimentary, respectful kid?

But that was Saturday. At school, I had a completely different set of friends.

My posse at school was tight, and there were exactly four of us: Jana, Lauren, Polly, and me. We had been friends since middle school, which was only two years, but seemed like a lifetime. The number of people in our friend group was important because of all the personalized best friend gear we had that read "JLMP," the first letters of our first names. We had JLMP beaded bracelets, JLMP embroidered bobby socks. We commissioned a caricature artist at Faneuil Hall in Boston to do a cartoon of the four of us with JLMP in giant cursive letters underneath. These mementos cemented our foursome to both us and the other people at school. You couldn't get in, and you couldn't get out. Nothing says impenetrability and closeness like a silk-screened T-shirt with an acronym most people don't understand. JLMP knew who Mavis was—she was a lifer at our school, which meant she had

been there since kindergarten, and longer than any of us had been there—but she made no impact on our view of the social landscape. We didn't really talk or think about her; it was as if she was a substitute Spanish teacher or something.

The Cheesecake Factory played a major role in JLMP's social life. We went there every Friday after school. These were our wild Friday night plans. Remember, this was back in the '90s, before the only way to be a cool teenager was to have a baby or a reality show (or both). We'd stay for hours chewing on straws and gossiping about boys, and collectively only spend about fifteen dollars on one slice of cheesecake and four Cokes. Then we'd leave and have our regular dinners at our respective homes. Obviously, the waiters loathed us. In a way we were worse than the dine-and-dashers because at least the dine-and-dashers only hit up Cheesecake Factory once and never showed up again. We, on the other hand, thought we were beloved regulars and that people lit up when we walked in. *We're back, Cheesecake Factory! JLMP's back! Your favorite cool, young people here to jazz up the joint!*

I know what you're thinking, that I ditched Mavis because she wasn't as cool as my more classically "girly" friends, but that wasn't it. First of all, JLMP wasn't even very cool. High school girls who have time to be super cliquy are usually not the popular girls. The actual popular girls have boyfriends, and, by that point, have chilled out on intense girl friendships to explore sex and stuff. Not us. Sex? Forget it. JLMP had given up on that happening until grad school. Yep, we were the kind of girls who, at age fourteen, pictured ourselves attending grad school. Getting a good idea of us now?

Mavis had her own friends. Maybe because of her height and short hair, she hung out with mostly guys. Her crowd was the techie boys, the ones who built the sets at school and proudly wore all black, covered in dried paint splatter. The techie boys all had fancy names like "Conrad" and "Xander" and "Sebastian." It's as if their parents had hoped that by naming them these manly, ornate names, they might have a fighting chance of being the leading men of our school. Unfortunately, the actual leading men in our school were named "Matt" or "Rob" or "Chris" and wouldn't be caught dead near our student theater unless they were receiving a soccer trophy in a sports assembly. Mavis and her guy pals built gorgeous sets for our plays like *Evita*, *Rags*, and *City of Angels*, and got absolutely zero recognition for it. They were just kind of expected to build the sets, like the janitors were expected to clean up the hallways.

Though Mavis could have been confused for a boy from almost every angle, she had the pale skin and high cheekbones of an Edith Wharton character. Thinking back on her now, she had all the prerequisites to be a runway model in New York, especially since this was the early '90s, when it was advantageous to look like a flat-chested, rail-thin boy. But our school was behind the times, and the aesthetic that ruled was the curvy, petite, all-American Tiffani Amber Thiessen look, which Polly and Lauren had to some degree. At school, Mavis was considered neither pretty nor popular. Neither was I, by any stretch of the imagination, but at least I didn't tower over the boys in our class by a good five inches.

We both lived by a weird code: Mavis and I might be friends on Saturday afternoon, but Friday nights and weekend sleepovers were for JLMP. If it sounds weird and compartmentalized, that's because it was. But I was used to compartmentalization. My entire teenage life was a highly organized map of activities: twenty minutes to shower and get ready for school, five-minute breakfast, forty-five-minute Latin class to thirty-minute lunch to forty-five-minute jazz band rehearsal, etc. Compartmentalizing friendships did not feel different to me. Mavis and I would say "hi" in the hallways, and we would nod at each other. Occasionally we would sit next to each other in study hall. But Mavis did not fit into my life as my school friend.

Then things started to change.

One Saturday night, I had JLMP over my house. They wanted to watch *Sleeping with the Enemy*—you know, the movie where Julia Roberts fakes her own death to avoid being married to her psycho husband? And I wanted to watch *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and show them the Ministry of Silly Walks, one of their funniest and most famous sketches. Mavis and I had watched it earlier that day several times in a row, trying to imitate the walks ourselves. I played it for them. No one laughed. Lauren said: “I don’t get it.” I played it again. Still no response to it. I couldn’t believe it. The very same sketch that had made Mavis and me clutch our chests in diaphragm-hurting laughter had rendered my best friends bored and silent. I made the classic mistake of trying to explain why it was so funny, as though a great explanation would be the key to eliciting a huge laugh from them. Eventually Polly said, gently, “I guess it’s funny in a random kind of way.”

Within the hour we were watching Julia Roberts flushing her wedding ring down the toilet and starting a new life in Iowa under an assumed identity. I could barely enjoy the movie, still stunned by my closest friends’ utter lack of interest in something I loved so much. I had always known, yeah, maybe JLMP wouldn’t be as interested in comedy as Mavis had been, but it scared me that they dismissed it so completely. I felt like two different people.

What happened to me was something that I think happens to a lot of professional comedy writers or comedians, or really anyone who’s passionate about anything and discovering it for the first time. Most people who do what I do are obsessed with comedy, especially during adolescence. I think we all have that moment when our non-comedy-obsessed friends or family are like: “Nope. I’m at my limit. I can’t talk about *In Living Color* anymore. It’s kind of funny, but come on.”

And more and more, I found that I didn’t want to do what JLMP wanted to do. Like one time Lauren wanted me to go to the yarn store in Harvard Square with her so we could both learn to knit. I reluctantly used my allowance to buy a skein of yarn. Who was I knitting stuff for? If I gave my mother a knitted scarf she’d be worried I was wasting my time doing stupid stuff like knitting instead of school work. Presenting a homemade knitted object to my parents was actually like handing them a detailed backlog of my idleness.

And Jana, sweet old Jana, was crazy about horses. Like super-nutso crazy about horses—that was her thing. All her drawings and back-from-vacation stories and Halloween costumes were horses. She would even pretend to be a horse during free period and lunch. We had to feed her pizza out of our hand, and she’d neigh back “thank you.” Now I was getting bored of driving forty-five minutes with her parents to the equestrian center to pretend to care about her galloping back and forth in her horse recital or whatever. I found myself wanting to spend more time with Mavis than JLMP. I spent the week looking forward to Saturday so I could write sketches with her. I didn’t want her to be my secret friend anymore.

One Friday in November I didn’t go to the Cheesecake Factory with JLMP. I asked Mavis if she wanted to hang out at the mall after school. We had never spent time together outside of our houses. Mavis was surprised but agreed to go. We went to the Arsenal Mall after school. We bought sour gummy worms at the bulk candy store; we walked around Express and The Limited, trying things on and buying nothing. It felt weird being with Mavis in the real world, but good-weird.

The next Friday I bailed on JLMP again so my brother, Mavis, and I could see *Wayne’s World* together. We spend the whole night afterward chanting: “Wayne’s World! Party Time! Excellent! Schwing!” Mavis and I spent a long time discussing Rob Lowe’s emergence as a comedy actor. (Again, we were comedy nerds. This was exciting to us.) The following Friday we went to her house

where Mr. Lehrman showed us how to use his camcorder so we could tape a sketch we had written, which used the characters in Gap Girls, that old SNL sketch with Chris Farley, Adam Sandler, and David Spade dressed up as female Gap employees. Mavis played David Spade and Adam Sandler. I played Chris Farley and all the other characters. Sometime around then, Mavis and I became real friends. Friends at school.

I spent most of winter break with Mavis, going to Harvard Square to see movies and buying comic books. I discovered she wasn't into going shopping as much as JLMP had been, but I had my mom and Aunt Sreela for that, anyway. I still considered JLMP my best friends, but began flaking on them more and more. Jana's mom even called my mom to tell her how hurt Jana was that I missed a big horse show. One Friday evening in mid-February, Mavis and I were at the RadioShack trying to find a tripod to use with her dad's camcorder. It was the mall with JLMP's Cheesecake Factory. On the escalator ride down, you could see right into the restaurant. That's when Mavis and I saw it. Jana, Lauren, and Polly were sitting in a booth together. They were laughing and talking over a slice of cheesecake, but without me. Just JLP. I was so hurt and embarrassed. Yeah, I had made another friend, but did that give them the right to orchestrate a hangout where I was so left out? For a second, I hated Mavis. I wasn't sure why, exactly, maybe for witnessing this humiliation, or for unwittingly being the cause of it? My immediate reaction was to rush over to them and confront them. But then I thought ... why? What was I going to do with them after I confronted them? Sit with them and gossip about all the things I didn't really care about anymore?

Mavis said, quietly, "If you want to go with them, I totally get it."

There was something about the unexpectedly kind way she said that that made me happy to be with her, and not them. For some reason, I immediately thought about how my parents had always been especially fond of Mavis, and here was this moment when I understood exactly why: she was a good person. It felt so good to realize how smart my parents had been all along. "Are you kidding me?" I said. "We have to go home and film this sketch."

By the time we got down the escalator and walked to the parking lot to get picked up by her parents, my ego was still bruised, but I was also able to identify another feeling: relief.

Pretty soon after that, the rest of JLP disintegrated too. Polly was getting into music more and was getting chummier with the kids who all smoked regularly across the street in the Fairy Woods. It was Jana, surprisingly, who first got a boyfriend. A cool Thai kid named Prem, who was a senior, asked her out. Prem was pretty possessive, and within weeks Jana was learning Thai and I never saw her. Lauren and I, with whom I had the least in common, faded out quickly without the buffer of the other two. It was almost a lifting of a burden when we weren't required to stay in touch.

By the end of freshman year, it was just Mavis and me. I once half-jokingly suggested naming our friendship M&M, and Mavis looked at me with friendly but mild disgust. That was so not Mavis's style. She stayed friends with her techie guy friends, and I even had lunch with them sometimes. They were smart guys, funny and edgier than any other guys at school, and they were knowledgeable about politics, a subject barely anyone cared about. But my friend group definitely shrunk. I was without a posse, no small herd to confidently walk down the hall with. There was just Mavis and me, but it never seemed lonely because we never stopped talking. I could have an argument, in earnest, about who was the best "Kid" in the Hall, without having to explain who they were. One friend with whom you have a lot in common is better than three with whom you struggle to find things to talk about. We never needed best friend gear because I guess with real friends you don't have to make it official. It just is.

Junior year of high school, the Lehrmans moved to Evanston, Illinois, but Mavis and I kept in touch. She would call me and tell me about the amazing shows her dad took her to see at Second City, and we planned for me to visit, but it never materialized. When we graduated high school, she went to the Cooper Union in Manhattan to pursue her love of set design, and I went to Dartmouth to pursue my love of white people and North Face parkas. We e-mailed a bit for a year or so, and then by sophomore year, the e-mails stopped. We both just got so consumed with college. I would be reminded of Mavis when my parents asked about her over summer and holiday breaks. “How is Mavis doing these days?” my mom would ask. “I think pretty good,” I replied, vaguely, reminding myself to send her an e-mail one of these days, but never following through.

Mavis helped me learn so much about who I am, and who I wanted to be. I love comedy and now surround myself with people who love to talk about it just as much as I do. I like to think that Polly is in a band, that Lauren joined the right knitting circle, and that Jana found a nice horse to settle down with. Even though Mavis was my secret friend, she is the only one I hope I see again. She’s the only one I wonder about. I hope she wonders about me, too.

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