



## Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

# Make New Friends, But Keep the Old

It was 1982—the year rabbit fur jackets were all the rage.

I'd gotten mine for Christmas, and like every girl in my fifth grade class, I wore it to Michelle's birthday party. The fact that it was January and freezing-cold outside didn't deter Michelle from hosting an indoor swim party.

Inside the YMCA ladies lounge, my friends and I changed into swimsuits. We stuffed our winter clothes into lockers and hit the pool.

An hour later, we returned to the lounge, shivering and dripping wet. Desperate to warm up, we ripped open our lockers and found...nothing. Someone had stolen *everything*: our clothes, our shoes, even socks and panties.

Even our beloved rabbit jackets.

We all stared at each other in shock—then burst into tears. Mass hysteria kicked in as the police arrived and our moms picked us up early. Michelle's mother—looking out for her daughter, naturally—lit the birthday cake. In between gasping sobs, we sang a pitiful rendition of "Happy Birthday" to my sad friend.

Yes, it was a party to remember. And for the rest of that school year, we prayed fervently at Holy Spirit Elementary, asking God to please "find our stuff."

Almost three decades have passed since that cold winter day. And what once seemed tragic in my young, impressionable mind has grown comical with time. To be honest, I now reflect fondly on the experience. Not many people can say they once had all their clothes stolen at a YMCA birthday party. There's something special about a memory like that.

There's also something special about old friends, isn't there? I met Michelle in fourth grade, and though our daily lives don't intersect anymore, we shared enough memories growing up to seal her importance in my heart. As my oldest friend, Michelle doesn't need cliff notes to my past, explanations of family dynamics, or insight into the formative events that shaped me. She witnessed these things firsthand—even risking her life on occasion when my sisters and I declared war in her presence.

The older I get, the more affection I feel toward friends like Michelle, people

who knew me "way back when." Why, exactly, is that? And why are stories from my adolescence—ridiculous tales like the one above—funnier than anything that happens now? Is it simply the bond of youth, riding life's roller coaster together for the first time? Never again will the highs seem so high—or the lows so low. Those who experienced the test run with me are hard to forget.

Or maybe the draw of old friends has more to do with ease and familiarity. There's no need to impress, or put up airs, or feign sophistication. Those who knew the early version of me—Kari 1.0—expect nothing but my company when we're together. Hanging out is comfortable, like spending Saturday in my favorite pair of jeans.

And then there's the sense of self I get from old friends. Like many people, I believe what brought me joy as a child—when I wasn't *trying* to be happy—feeds my soul as an adult. Around friends like Michelle, I'm reminded of central themes in my life, consistencies that have always kept me grounded. Whenever I stray too far from these roots, things seem to fall apart.

It's interesting to think the friends I make today—mostly moms I meet through my kids—will qualify as "old friends" twenty years from now. At the same juncture, Michelle and I will celebrate a half-century of friendship. That's a milestone I never considered when we were prank-calling strangers on Friday nights, giving each other makeovers, and practicing dance moves in front of a mirror.

I may have lost a rabbit jacket because of Michelle, but she's given me plenty to keep. Our good times can never be taken away. And though we only meet up a few times a year, I don't worry about outgrowing each other. The beauty of an old friend, after all, is the classic fit of the relationship.

There's something special about that.

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