

## First Encounters

I was sitting in my den, enjoying the feeling of boredom that so many kindergarteners experience and every high schooler now longs for. I was beginning yet another rerun of some sit-com on Disney Channel when my zealous father marched towards the back window.

“Mary!” He exclaimed. “I think I see the new girl out in her backyard. We should go out and meet her!”

I suspiciously eyed a short, tan girl looking a little confused around her playset. Although moments ago I had been dying for something new and exciting to occupy myself with, I suddenly felt as though I was glued to my sofa. I was an exceedingly friendly five year-old, but I was suddenly fearful of appearing extremely lame next to my grinning dad. I grudgingly stood up and followed closely behind my father to our back yard.

He called out to the girl from our yard, as if it was an invincible barrier that could only be broken by an introduction. My dad told the girl my name as I remained peering at her from behind his back. She shyly told us that her name was Mia (pronounced as “Maya”). Apparently my dad thought that if one of us said purely one word to the other, we would become fast friends, as he then headed back inside the warmth and welcome of my house.

For a while the two of us played on Mia’s playset, not daring to expose words to the chilling awkwardness between our tiny bodies. Both of our heads snapped up at the sound of crunching fall leaves grew loud. My eyes met those of my neighbor and idol. Maggie organized every game that her siblings, my brother and I took part in. I could only hope to be as spectacular once I reached the second grade.

Being as bold as only she could be, Maggie informed Mia of her name and house. Mia appeared thrilled to meet the girl who had been *my* neighbor for years and engaged in more

conversation with Maggie within a few minutes than she had with me for the entire length of time we played. I stood still with my mouth shut tight, fear rooting me to the ground. I was hardly 40 pounds and pumped jealousy through my veins as frequently as blood. My fists clenched and I exhaled steam, praying not to lose one of my greatest friends to Mia.

As many do, the conversation died for a few moments. Whether this was due to verbal communication or merely a silent agreement, I cannot recall, but something in the air shifted. The three of us moved to the playset and began to play together. Slowly we eased into the sharing of stories and details about each of our families, getting slightly more comfortable with each sentence.

None of us knew then that ourselves, along with Mia's older sister Cassie, and Maggie's younger sister Julia would become best friends within about a month. We couldn't yet see the five of us at the Hannah Montana concert in a few years, or feel the warmth of Mia's fireplace and Maggie's homemade hot chocolate thawing away at our frozen December bodies. We certainly did not foresee the heartbreak we all felt after learning that Mia's family would be moving back to Ohio, or the way our souls soared when we got a call that the family would be returning to live in Wisconsin, only to sink back into the ground after learning that they were forced to recoil back to Ohio yet again (yes, they did move back twice, and yes, it was somehow even more crushing the second time around). Greatest of all, those two kindergarteners and one second grader standing in a circle that crisp October day, never could have predicted that ten years later, they would be laughing and talking together after being reunited over Thanksgiving break as if it were still 2008.

No, the three of us were oblivious to these facts. However, we all felt the ice between us crack that day. It may have been due to a shared love of Suite Life of Zack and Cody, or the shared desire to write and perform an original play and complete a full 9-inning backyard-baseball game within one afternoon. Regardless, I have had a number of meaningful friendships already and will, I am sure, continue to, but none have yet to compare to the daily adventures I experienced with the two sets of sisters from the houses next door and behind my own. Had I not fulfilled my father's wishes that first afternoon and remained in my back room, I am sure I would have known Mia, but I doubt our relationship would have been entirely the same. In her backyard, we broke the iceberg full of any insecurities, uncertainties and envy that remains cracked open to this day.