

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Sparkly Green Earrings*

Nobody's Cuter than You



A memoir about the beauty of friendship

Melanie Shankle

Author of the Big Mama blog



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Nobody's Cuter than You: A Memoir about the Beauty of Friendship

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Author's Note

I WILL NOT even pretend like I've remembered all the events in this book exactly as they occurred. Many years have passed since some of the events happened, and—true story—I forgot to pick up my daughter's friend for a soccer game yesterday. It's safe to say that total recall of forty-plus years of life is probably not my gift. However, I have done my best to piece together memories and conversations to the best of my ability, although some names and places have been changed to protect people who may not necessarily want part of their life story told in my little book. But I have stayed true to the story of all that my friends have meant to me and how they have all been a gift in my life. I'm thankful for every bit of it, even the tough parts.

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Introduction

A friend is one that knows you as you are, understands where you have been, accepts what you have become, and still, gently allows you to grow.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN



I HAVE TO be honest and confess that I'd planned to write a completely different book than this one. I'd even signed a contract for it and everything. But then, because I am daring and madcap and fly by the seat of my pants, I totally changed direction and decided to write a book about friendship instead.

It also may have helped that I visited my publisher a few weeks ago, and in the middle of our meeting they said, "Hey, why don't you write a book about friendship?" And I said, "Okay."

Of course, this could have been because I'd just suggested that perhaps I should write a book called *Barley and Me: The Story of a Dog That Fought in World War II, Died, Went to Heaven, and Came Back to Tell about It*. I chose that title based on extensive research I did at my local bookstore, where I realized that the majority of bestselling books are about three things:

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someone's dog
a person who fought in World War II
someone who has gone to heaven and come back to life

I guess in all fairness I could have a chance at similar success if I wrote a fiction book for teenage girls about vampires or various factions in a dystopian society or tributes being forced to fight to the death in an arena, but I am not that creative and really don't have the time because I'm too busy trying to figure out how to braid my hair like Katniss Everdeen. Here's what I've learned from that: you can pin all the pins on Pinterest, but that doesn't mean that hairstyle is actually going to happen.

Ultimately, a book about friendship seemed to make the most sense. Even when I was writing *The Antelope in the Living Room* (a memoir about marriage), my husband, Perry, told someone, "What she needs to write next is a book called *Gulley and Mel: The Real Love Story*."

A few months ago, my daughter, Caroline, curled up next to me on the couch after a day of school that had left her tired and frustrated. She began to tell me about some of the girl drama going on in the fifth grade and that she just wasn't sure who she could trust and who her real friends were. We talked through it, and I wiped her tears as she let out a big sigh, saying, "I just haven't met my Gulley yet."

And it made me want to cry because one of the things I want most for Caroline to know is the beauty of female friendship and what it adds to our lives. We need those people who will listen to our stories and hold our hands as we go through heartbreak and joy and try to figure out all that life throws our way. Those loyal soldiers who will defend us and stand with us when times get hard

and it feels like the world is against us. The women we can surround ourselves with, knowing without a doubt that our names and our hearts are safe on their tongues and in their hands.

So yes, this book is about my friendship with my best friend, Gulley, and how we've managed to sustain our friendship over the last twenty-five years. But it's more than that. It's about all the friendships we as women develop over a lifetime and the influence they have over who we were, who we are, and who we will become. It's about the friends who wounded us and the ones who taught us to love better.

Here's the thing: it seems that over the last couple of decades we've substituted the joy of real friendship with cheap imitations. We settle for "community" on Facebook and Twitter and through a series of text messages that allow us to communicate with someone without the commitment. We have a tendency to swim in the shallow pool of relationships because we know that getting deep can equate to being vulnerable. And more often than not, that's a risk we're not willing to take. It's so much easier to just text a few happy-face emojis.

I feel like many years ago, women had a better grasp of real friendship than we do today. Both my grandmothers had a close circle of girl friends they called first thing every morning and played bridge with over coffee as they shared secrets and recipes and tips for getting the ring around the collar out of their husbands' dress shirts. (Perhaps I am basing this entire assumption on what I used to see in those commercials for Wisk detergent.) They rocked babies and yelled at one another's kids and diagnosed illnesses. But then society changed as our world became more global and high tech, and the simple joy of day-to-day friendship began to fade because everyone is just so busy.

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So instead, we “like” one another’s beautifully filtered photos on Instagram and delude ourselves into believing we have community. But here’s my question: Do we really? Do you have those people who will show up on your doorstep with food and Kleenex when the hard times come? Is there someone in your life who can look into your eyes and ask if you’re okay when she already knows you’re not?

Real friendship requires effort. It’s showing up and laughing loud and crying hard. It’s forgiving and loving and giving the benefit of the doubt. It’s making a casserole, doing a last-minute car pool pickup, and making sure she knows that those cute shoes are now 50 percent off.

And that’s what this book is: a memoir about the beauty of friendship. I hope it serves as a reminder to all of us that there is nothing as precious in life as a friend who knows you and loves you in spite of yourself. Because we all need those people in our lives. They serve as a mirror that allows us to see a better version of ourselves. And on those days when our jeans feel too tight and our chins have decided to embrace hormone-related acne reminiscent of our teen years and our kids have tested the limits of our sanity, a best friend will look at us and say what Gulley and I say to each other when we’re having a bad day: “Nobody’s cuter than you!”

And we may know that it certainly isn’t the truth at that particular moment, but we’ll love her for it anyway.



CHAPTER 1

Diamonds Sometimes Really Are a Girl's Best Friend

"We'll be Friends Forever, won't we, Pooh?" asked Piglet.

"Even longer," Pooh answered.

A. A. MILNE

I DROPPED OFF my daughter, Caroline, at camp for the first time ever yesterday and am in the midst of what can only be described as an emotional hangover. Perry and I helped her get her room for the week all set up, and then I hugged her good-bye as her little eyes filled with tears. At that point I basically had to sprint down the hallway without daring to cast a look back over my shoulder lest I be like Lot's wife and dissolve into a pillar of salt. Or maybe just tears.

Whatever.

Sometimes a mama likes to incorporate some Old Testament-level drama.

I managed to hold it together until I got a text from her later that night, after we'd already made the three-hour drive back to San Antonio, that read, "I'm not having fun. Please come get me,"

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followed shortly thereafter by, “The matrices here are really hard and I can’t sleep.” Which confused me for a moment, because she is at soccer camp, not math camp. I felt her pain, though, because I do remember thinking that matrices were really hard back in the days when I still had to attend math classes to learn things I’ve never used one time in real life.

But then I realized she meant *mattresses*, not *matrices*. So maybe instead of focusing so much on soccer, we should spend some time at spelling camp.

Either way, she had begged to go to camp and gave me her word that she’d stay the whole time, and this was now one of those moments when I had to practice the art of tough love. Which is so easy in theory, but so hard when your baby girl is texting you little emojis with tears rolling down their cheeks. In short, I was like Ron Burgundy and in “a glass case of emotion.”

I showed the texts to Perry and began to cry. But dads are generally the bad cop in these situations, so he was unsympathetic to her plight. He looked at me and said, “You’re getting all worked up. She’s safe, she’s secure, and it’s only for four nights. She can do anything for four nights.”

Technically, I know he’s right, but there’s always that nagging thing inside me that realizes Caroline is our only child and if we screw this up, no one will come to visit us for Christmas when we’re old. We don’t have a backup plan, unless you count our dogs, and everyone knows that dogs are the worst gift givers at holidays.

So I texted my best friend, Gulley, who happened to be visiting her mom in College Station, which happens to be only five minutes away from Caroline’s camp dorm. My texts were a flurry of all my feelings and emotions and anxieties, and finally Gulley texted back, “Can you just call me?”

I told her I could but if I heard her voice, I knew all I'd be able to do was cry. She replied, "You can just cry."

And so I did. I called her and sobbed all my fears and worries until I had nothing left but a bad case of the hiccups and her offer to go sleep in the dorm with Caroline if it would make me feel better.

Because there are some things that your best friend just understands in a way your husband never will. When I got off the phone an hour later, I said a prayer of gratitude that Gulley has been a constant in my life every day for the last twenty-five years. How many phone calls have we had when one of us sat and listened while the other poured out every possible emotion until there was no possibility that there were any feelings left anywhere else in the world? The answer is too many to count.



It's funny how you can have almost no memory of the first time you meet a person who eventually becomes so important to you. Some relationships are so pivotal in your life that it seems like surely you must have felt a little bit of electricity run through your veins the first time you met them—some type of jolting realization that feels like an internal neon sign flashing, "YOU'VE FOUND ONE OF YOUR PEOPLE! YOU'VE FOUND ONE OF YOUR PEOPLE!" But I really don't remember the first time I met Gulley.

After I graduated from high school, I ended up at Texas A&M by the grace of God and the generosity of my high school geometry teacher, who chose to give me a passing grade in spite of the fact I still can't come up with a proof for a theorem. Or a theorem for a proof. I can't remember, but it turns out I was right back in 1989 when I said it wasn't going to be a deal breaker to go through life without this knowledge. However, I was a master in the art of

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charm and bribery in the form of apple fritters, and you shouldn't underestimate how far that particular skill can take you in life.

I was so ready for a new start in a new place, and that's what College Station became for me. With one exception. I had a serious boyfriend who'd ended up at Stephen F. Austin in Nacogdoches, and I wasn't ready to let go of the relationship. So instead of immersing myself in the full Aggie experience, I spent a lot of my time driving to see my boyfriend and ultimately chose to transfer to SFA for my spring semester.

Let's all reflect for a moment on how smart and levelheaded eighteen-year-old girls are in general.

I'd made some really good friends during the fall of my freshman year, thanks to my brave step of going potluck on a roommate and hitting the jackpot with a sweet girl named Elizabeth and our suitemates, Leslie and Tiffany. But the pull of the boyfriend was too strong, and I was too insecure to walk away from the relationship at that point, even though I will be the first to admit now that the end was long overdue.

Within minutes of my arrival to Stephen F. Austin that spring, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake, but I was way too stubborn to admit it at that juncture. My boyfriend and I fought all the time, and I realized more every day that I'd given up way too much for way too little.

Anyone who knows me knows how much I love Texas A&M, and I think so much of that is because I almost let it slip out of my hands. I'll never take for granted what that university did for me—in a real way, it caused me to make one of my first adult decisions. Because when it came down to it, my desire to be back in College Station ended up being stronger than my fear of walking away from my high school boyfriend. Granted, I was only eighteen, so

that decision looked a lot like calling my daddy and crying, “I’ve made a terrible mistake! Please help me figure out how to get back to College Station!”

When I arrived back at Texas A&M in the fall of 1990 as a sophomore, it took everything in me not to kiss the ground like a world traveler who has just returned to her homeland. I was so grateful to be back and vowed to immerse myself in every possible activity and live my college experience to the fullest. I went through sorority rush, I signed up to be part of student government, I registered to take sixteen hours, and in what turned out to be the most important decision of all, I tried out for a group known as the Diamond Darlings.

The Diamond Darlings are essentially bat girls/hostesses for the Texas A&M baseball team. They are chosen through a series of applications and interviews with athletic department personnel, and now there is even a test to assess their knowledge of baseball. The test is part of the tryout process because during my first year as a Diamond Darling, one of the girls kept referring to the umpire as the catcher.

So obviously not everyone was trying out because of a pure love of the game.

And no, that girl wasn’t me. I may not know about geometry, but I know my sports.

These days I usually hesitate to mention I was a Diamond Darling, because unless someone went to Texas A&M and knows what the Diamond Darlings do, there’s a certain stereotype that seems to come with saying you were a bat girl. It’s kind of an assumption that all we did was hang out and date the players, which was strictly forbidden and we never did unless there were extenuating circumstances, like if he was really cute.

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What people might not guess is that being a Diamond Darling gave me some of the best memories of my college career. It's the reason that to this day if I hear Van Halen singing "Top of the World" on a spring day, I feel an urge to get in my car and find a baseball game to watch. It's the reason I watch the College World Series every year and cry no matter who wins.

I'm sure I could have done other things that would have looked better on a résumé, but I guarantee those activities wouldn't have been nearly as much fun, given me as many good memories, or taught me that you should never bend at the waist to pick up a baseball bat while wearing short white shorts.

Always bend at the knees.

There are some lessons that can't be learned in a classroom.

Anyway, I'm certain I met Gulley for the first time at one of the early Diamond Darling meetings, but I can't remember the specifics. However, I do vividly remember meeting Jen, who would also become a lifelong friend, because she came sweeping into that meeting in a denim wrap skirt, Cole Haan loafers, and so much self-confidence that I found her completely and totally fascinating, especially when I found out she was only a freshman. I wasn't sure if I liked her or wanted to run away from her. I can say now that I'm glad I chose not to run.

It wasn't until later that semester that I noticed Gulley, which is so funny in hindsight because now Gulley is the type of person who lights up a room when she walks in. The party begins when she comes in, but I think she was a little more reserved back then, trying to figure out who she was and how she fit into the world. Our friendship really began when the Diamond Darlings drew names out of a hat to determine our Secret Santa recipients for the month leading up to Christmas. I opened a small piece of paper

that read “Amy Gulley” and had no idea I was basically unfolding a huge part of my future.

I spent the next month buying her little gifts as part of the Secret Santa exchange. I’m sad to say that some of these gifts involved using paint pens to draw baseballs on metal tins. The college me enjoyed getting her craft on. Truthfully, the college me enjoyed anything that didn’t involve studying or typing a paper on a Brother word processor or basically any activity that would have helped my grade point average.

There was even a day when I was walking through Post Oak Mall (This is the mall in College Station, although calling it a mall is kind of an insult to malls everywhere. It didn’t even have a Gap back in 1990. But it did have a Foley’s, a department store that sadly doesn’t even exist anymore.) and discovered Gulley working at the Ski and Sea Shop. I went in to visit with her for a minute and was drawn to this sweet girl with huge brown eyes, a smile that went on for days, and an easy laugh.

Which is why I was so thankful when we ended up sitting right next to each other at the Diamond Darlings Christmas formal a few days later. Back in the early ’90s, I was a girl who typically got excited about the prospect of an occasion that required a dress made by Gunne Sax with sleeves bigger than your head, but I had been dreading the Christmas formal. The boy I was dating at the time had a job that wouldn’t allow him the time off to be my date, and I had no interest in going without him, especially because I didn’t know the girls very well at that point and it felt pretty intimidating. Not to mention that the formal was being held at a hotel in Waco for reasons that are still not clear to me. Do you know what not one person in history has ever said without irony? “Let’s go to Waco to PARTY!”

But I had been informed by the captain of the Diamond

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Darlings (which is a real thing, by the way) that attendance at the formal was mandatory. So the guy I was dating arranged for his best friend to be my date, and since he lived in Waco at the time, it was easy enough for him to drive over and be my plus-one for the evening. I'm not sure why I agreed to this plan.

That's how I found myself having a truly miserable, awkward evening in Waco, Texas, with the exception of my awesome side ponytail and bangs that were teased to epic proportions. But then Gulley sat next to me because we were told to sit next to our Secret Santas, and we began to laugh and talk and, best of all, lament about our respective dates. She was there with a serious boyfriend who, unbeknownst to him, was on his way out of her life, and I was there with a boy I had virtually nothing in common with other than his best friend. Gulley and I spent that night bonding over whose date was worse, and I promise you that I won because my date was wearing a Christmas-themed sweater vest, and that's the nicest thing I can say.

As the famous line from *Casablanca* goes, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Of course there was no way my mind could have comprehended all that this friendship would become. There are probably only a handful of times in our lives when someone who will change us forever walks in—when we find someone we can love with our whole hearts, who will challenge us and shape us and make us feel like the world is safer and brighter just because they are in it. A person who loves us for exactly who we are, yet teaches us to be better because of who they are and how they live their life.

A person who, twenty-five years later, will listen to you cry on the night you drop off your daughter at soccer camp.

That's Gulley.

It just took me the first nineteen years of my life to find her.