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How It Started

Dear Addie,

I'm not sure I should be writing this.

But it feels like the right thing to do. Even if I don't know much about you besides your name.

Addie.

Is that short for something? Addison? Adeline? Adam? Addacadabra?

Anyway, hi, Addie. I'm Becca. Nice to meet you.

When you read this, please don't pass it around to all your friends while you laugh at how weird I am. Please? Good. Thank you.

Now, where should I start?

I guess when I got the magic box in the mail. That's when everything went bananas. Or maybe when I made

the wish? OMG, wait until I tell you about the scary blond woman!

Deep breath. I'm getting ahead of myself. You need to know *why* I made the wish in the first place. So let me start with what happened a week ago. Last Monday.

I was standing outside my brick elementary school with my (then) best friend, Harper Mehta. We live and go to school on the Upper West Side, which is a neighborhood in New York City.

The students always line up in the schoolyard before the first bell rings. That day, it was sunny and warm out, even though it was already October. All around us I could hear the sounds of the city: taxicabs honking, buses pulling up, people hurrying to the subway.

"Are you ready," I said to Harper, "to hear the plan for my birthday sleepover on Saturday?"

I was excited. Very excited. Harper always slept over on my birthday, and we always had the best time.

"Mm-hmm," Harper said, but she was looking at her phone.

"I bought white T-shirts, scrunchies, pillowcases, *and* pencil cases," I said. "And, of course, every tie-dye color. Blue, red, green, yellow, purple, pink . . ."

Harper glanced up. "That sounds like a lot for just the two of us."

“There is no such thing as too much tie-dye,” I said. I was wearing a tie-dyed sweatshirt right then. Harper and I had made matching ones over the summer. “And we’ll have cake, and stay up late, and do story-a-thon!” I smiled. Story-a-thon is when Harper and I each make up one sentence of a story until we get to the end. That was our favorite hangout activity.

Principal Bort was letting kids into the building super slowly. Harper and I stepped forward in the line.

“Well, um, about your birthday . . .” Harper began, and my shoulders clenched.

“What?” I asked.



“I can’t sleep over,” she said quickly. “I have to get up early on Sunday morning for a chess tournament.”

My heart sank. “Oh. Okay. You can’t skip it?”

“No,” Harper said. “But I’ll still come over on Saturday for cake and stuff.”

I felt queasy.

Harper and I met in kindergarten, when our moms arranged a playdate for us. Harper’s mom dropped her off at my apartment, and at first we just stared at each other, blinking awkwardly. Then my mom suggested that we play Legos. Harper and I built a Lego castle, and soon we invented a game we called Dragons & Wizards. From that day on, we were best friends. And for the next four years, we were in the same class. Until this year. Fifth grade. I was put in 5A, and Harper was put in 5B.

Imagine the sound I made when Principal Bort read out the class lists on the first day of school. I sounded like a bleating goat. Not that I’ve met many goats, since New York City doesn’t really have farms. I’m a little scared of goats, actually. And sheep. And birds. And most animals. But anyway. I made a strange sound. Because not being in Harper’s class was very upsetting.

I couldn’t believe that Harper wasn’t going to sleep over on my birthday. I tried to take deep breaths to calm down.

“Well, can you come over after school today?” I asked.

But she didn’t answer. She was waving excitedly to someone across the yard.

That someone was Georgette Dimopoulus, the purple-haired chess champion of the fifth grade.

Who was also a champion friend hogger.

Georgette is in 5B with Harper. One day Harper invited Georgette to play Dragons & Wizards with us at lunch, but after fifteen minutes, Georgette had convinced Harper that the game was babyish, and that we should play Two Square instead. So I agreed, whatever, but it’s Two Square, not Three Square, so one of us always sat out. It’s not the world’s best game for three people, now is it?

Georgette also convinced Harper to sign up for after-school chess. So then it was chess this, chess that, blah blah blah. Sometimes I imagined snapping all the tiny chess pieces in half, if you want to know the truth.

Georgette pushed into line behind us.

“Go on Friendstagram right now,” she told Harper. “Remember the kid who cried at the chess tournament last week? Someone posted a video of him sobbing!” She blew a bubble with her pink gum.

Harper’s eyes widened into saucers, and she began tapping at her phone screen. “No! Way! So embarrassing!”

“Such a crybaby.”

Ouch. Georgette isn't the nicest. Also, she and Harper are obsessed with Friendstagram, this app that I wasn't allowed to be on. I wasn't even allowed to have a phone. It was one of my mom's billion rules.

Harper and Georgette were giggling at the video when we reached the school doors.

Principal Bort shook his head at us. He's bald and has piercing dark eyes.

“Miss Singer,” he told me. “Your shoelaces are untied.”

“Sorry, Mr. Bort,” I said. I knelt down to retie my sneakers.

“Miss Mehta. Phone away. Immediately.”

“Sorry, Mr. Bort,” Harper said, stuffing her phone in her bag.

“Miss Dimopoulus. Get rid of your gum.”

He is a man of few words. But they are always harsh words.

While Georgette ran to the garbage can to throw out her gum, I walked into school with Harper.

“So can you?” I asked her. “Come over today?”

“I . . . I can't,” she said, hesitating. “I'm going to Georgette's.”

Did she invite me to go to Georgette's, too? No, she

did not. I guess that was fair since Georgette and I weren't exactly friends—we were just friends through Harper. We were friends-in-law. And I hadn't invited Georgette to my birthday sleepover. I didn't want to talk about Friendstagram and chess the whole time. My mom had said I could invite some of the other kids in my class. But I don't like big parties, and well, I wasn't really friends with anyone else besides Harper.

“I'll see you at lunch, though?” I asked her.

“Sure,” Harper said. Georgette came inside, and the two of them hurried up the stairs. I trailed behind, trying not to show how let down I felt.

When we reached the fifth-floor hallway, I watched Harper and Georgette disappear into the 5B classroom. I paused outside the 5A classroom door, my throat tight.

“Becca, are you going to come inside or *block* the door the *whole* time?”

My teacher, Ms. Michaels, was watching me from inside the classroom, her hands on her hips. She always wears thick winged black eyeliner. She also likes to emphasize every few words dramatically, like she's starring in a play.

“Sorry,” I said, but it ended up coming out as another bleating goat sound.

I went inside and took my seat in the last row of the class, next to Shep Harris.

Shep has shaggy brown hair and wears sweatpants and his school gym sweatshirt every day. He was bent over a notebook, drawing, as usual.

Elijah Weinberg sat on the other side of me. He was busy talking to his two best friends, Emma Ono and Elizabeth King, who sat right in front of us. Elijah, Emma, and Elizabeth call themselves the Three Es. They make up dances together at lunch and wear a lot of accessories. Rubber bracelets. Long necklaces. Rings. Sparkly barrettes. Colorful scarves. They always seemed to have a lot of fun, but I'd never hung out with them.

"Let's get to work, everyone!" Ms. Michaels said. "We have a *big* week—spelling quiz on *Wednesday* and math test on *Friday*, right after the *assembly*."

There was an excited murmur around the classroom. The Friday assembly is when they announce the Super Student of the Week. That honor usually goes to someone who's aced a test or won a chess tournament. Yes, Georgette has been Super Student. Twice. It's never been me. I am not really a student-of-the-week kind of kid.

"Willow," Ms. Michaels said to a girl in the front row,

“*please* put your book away and collect *everyone’s* math homework.”

I reached into my bag to get my multiplication worksheet, which I had done the night before.

Hmm. Where was it? I looked in the big pocket. I looked in the small pocket. I looked in the super-small pocket, which featured an impressive collection of gum wrappers and broken pencils.

The worksheet wasn’t there. I must have forgotten it at home. See? Not really a student of the week.

Shoot, I thought as Willow approached my row.

Shep handed her his assignment. Then Willow turned to me. Her dark brown hair was in a loose bun on her head, and she was wearing a white sweatshirt that said *One More Chapter* in green. Her earrings were pizza slices.

“I can’t find it,” I whispered to her. This was bad. Really bad. Ms. Michaels is not exactly understanding about missed homework.

Willow grimaced. “Oh no.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. I slowly, sadly raised my hand.

“Becca?” Ms. Michaels said.

“Um, I’m so, so, so sorry, but I think I forgot my assignment at home,” I said. “Can I bring it tomorrow?”

The room went silent.

“You *think* you forgot it, or you *did* forget it?” Ms. Michaels’s winged eyes narrowed.

“I did forget it,” I mumbled. I wished I could shrink and hide in my pencil case.



My teacher frowned. “I see. That seems very *careless*. And you expect me to let you bring it in *tomorrow*? Would that be *fair* to the other kids in the class?”

“Probably not. I’m sorry.” I hung my head.

“I’m *disappointed* in you, Becca,” Ms. Michaels added.

I felt my face flush. And my arms. Oh no. I knew what that meant.

I touched my cheek and felt a hive forming. My skin is really sensitive—and when I get stressed, I sometimes get a

stress rash, or hives, which look like little mosquito bites. They're itchy and hot and very embarrassing.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

I tried to calm myself down. That's what my doctor told me to do.

I just had to make it to lunch. Harper would make me feel better.

Ms. Michaels turned back to the whiteboard, and I sank into my seat, trying to disappear.

When it was finally time to eat, I grabbed my lunch bag and ran to the cafeteria.

Harper and Georgette were sitting together, eating grilled cheese sandwiches and french fries from the cafeteria. Yum. Mom had packed me tofu and broccoli. Yawn.

I sat down next to Harper.

"So I forgot my math homework—" I began.

"Shhh," Georgette interrupted me, dipping her french fry in ketchup. "I'm explaining a chess move."

"Oh. Sorry."

Georgette and Harper chattered on about thunderbolts and endgame sacrifices while I quietly ate my tofu and broccoli.

“What happened to your neck?” Georgette asked, finally acknowledging me. “Do you have chicken pox or something?” She scooted away from me.

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s just . . .”

“She gets this weird rash,” Harper said.

I felt myself blush. It *is* a weird rash. I know it’s weird. But did Harper have to call it weird in front of Georgette?

“But it’s not contagious or anything,” Harper added.

“Maybe you shouldn’t sit so close to us,” Georgette said, wrinkling her nose. “Just in case.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, my cheeks heating up even more.

I shifted over slightly and waited until Georgette and Harper were done eating and we could go outside. Once out the door, Georgette ran up ahead, but I put my hand on Harper’s arm to get her to wait a sec. I motioned her over to the area between the brick wall and where the Three Es were learning some sort of intricate dance that involved a lot of hand movements.

“Can we talk? Just us?” I asked Harper.

“But Georgette is waiting,” Harper said, fidgeting.

“I know, but I . . . well, I didn’t love that you called my rash weird.”

She blinked. “You call it weird all the time.”

"But that's different from you calling it weird in front of Georgette," I said, feeling a lump in my throat.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Can we go find her now?" Harper asked, glancing longingly toward Georgette.

"But I haven't talked to you all day," I said.

"We talked this morning," she said.

"I talked, you played on your phone," I muttered.

She narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?"

And then the words rushed out of me like vomit. "I just . . . Georgette gets you all day and I barely get to see you and I want to complain about Ms. Michaels! Can't we hang out just the two of us? Please? You're supposed to be my best friend, but lately you're not acting like it."

Harper glanced down at her hands. "Becca . . . look . . . this is hard to say."

My heart started to beat a million miles a minute, like I was running in gym class. "What? What's hard to say?"

And then she said it. I can't even write it, Addie.

I have to write it.

Here it comes.

She said: "I don't think I want to be best friends anymore."

There was silence. Time slowed down. A ball went whizzing by my head.

"You don't *think*?" I croaked out. "Or you *don't*?"

“I don’t,” she rushed to say, biting her thumbnail. “I’m sorry if this hurts your feelings, I really am. But since we started fifth grade, I just don’t consider you my best friend, and I want to be honest about that. We’re different than we used to be. We’re interested in different things. I like Friendstagram and chess and Two Square and plants—”

Plants? This was the first I’d heard about plants.

“—and I’m kind of over tie-dye and story-a-thon.”

My heart sank. “We don’t have to do tie-dye. Or story-a-thon.”

“You’re missing the point. We’re just not into the same things anymore. And it’s okay if we go different ways. My mom says it’s part of growing up.”

I didn’t know what to say. “But . . .” My voice trailed off. “But I’m not allowed on Friendstagram! I would be into it if I was allowed!”

“Still,” Harper said. She picked at her thumbnail. “We can be friends. Just not *best* friends.” Across the playground, Georgette was waving at us. At Harper.

“Are you going to be best friends with someone else?” I asked.

“Probably,” she said slowly.

“With Georgette?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“How could you choose Georgette over me? She’s not even nice! She bosses us around!” I could hear my voice rising. I hardly ever got mad at Harper, but I was starting to panic.

Harper crossed her arms. “She does not.”

“She won’t let us play Dragons & Wizards anymore! She makes you go to chess tournaments!”

“She doesn’t *make* me do anything. I like spending time with her.”

“I can’t believe you would choose her over me!” I yelled.

I realized that despite the dancing and chatting and balls whizzing around us, it seemed like everyone in the yard had stopped what they were doing and were watching me and Harper.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

“I’m sorry,” Harper said softly.

“But what about my birthday?” I asked.

“I can still come,” she said.

I imagined how uncomfortable I’d be the whole time, knowing she didn’t want to be there. Knowing she’d rather be playing chess or Two Square with Georgette. Or watering plants.

“Never mind,” I said, my heart breaking. “I don’t want to spend my birthday with you anymore. I don’t even know how I can be *regular* friends with you anymore.”

Harper opened her mouth, closed it, and then spoke. “Fine. If you don’t want to be friends, then we won’t be friends. I’m going to find Georgette now. Bye.”

Bye? BYE? I couldn’t believe it. Did my best friend of five years just end our best friendship by saying BYE? IN THE SCHOOLYARD? Really?!

The truth hit me in the face like freezing cold water: My best friend had dumped me. And I had no other friends.