

### Friends Like These

I'm still surprised at what Nicole said five minutes ago. She and Michelle have kept on talking while I've been quiet. Now Michelle is showing Nicole her new nail polish. Nicole says it looks like blood. Michelle says, "Whatever," but from then on she keeps her fingers arranged so that you can't see her nails.

They start making fun of the boys in our grade, who are playing kickball. "Nice catch, spazz!" Nicole screams at Danny. Everybody knows she likes him.

I finally interrupt their conversation. They're giggling hysterically because Danny gave Nicole the finger. "Hey," I say loudly. "Why didn't you guys call me?"

Michelle looks nervously at Nicole, who rolls her eyes. "God, Robin, whatever," she replies. "I'm sure me and Michelle are allowed to spend time by ourselves every once and a while. There's not, like, a law that says we have to always be together."

"Well, duh," I say back. "I just meant that every Saturday night since third grade we've all spent the night together, and I just thought it was weird that all of the sudden you guys are leaving me out."

I'm almost crying. This is so embarrassing. I try to stop. I know everybody on the playground has got to be looking at me. Plus there are middle school boys playing baseball practically right next to us. I am not going to cry in front of them. I take a deep breath.

"Of course you guys can spend time alone. I just don't see why you have to do it behind my back."

"It wasn't behind your back," Michelle mutters.

"Hello!" I say. "You know that whoever's turn it is to use their house always says something during the week. If they don't the other two just figure she can't have it because, like, her parents are in bad moods or they're having company or something. So, of course, Michelle, when you didn't say anything last week, I ASSUMED that we weren't spending the night Saturday. And now all of a sudden you guys tell me that Nicole just. . . oh my gosh. Michelle, are your mom and dad fighting again? And you just wanted Nicole over because her parents are divorced?" I touch her arm. "Is everything okay?"

Michelle looks at Nicole again, who sighs heavily. "Look, Robin," she tells me. "Me and Michelle have decided that we want to be popular in middle school next year. So we might not be hanging out with you as much."

We're all quiet for a really long time. I feel like they just punched me in the stomach. With red-nailed fists. For a few seconds, I can't breathe. Michelle is looking at the ground, crying. I can tell she's trying not to make any noise so that nobody will look at her. Nicole glances back over at Danny and the kickball players. She takes a jar of cherry lip gloss out of her pocket and puts some on with her ring finger.

I can't even think of something to say. I can't believe we've been best friends since kindergarten, and now they've just decided it's over. How can they do that? I feel numb, like all my feelings have been scooped out of my head. This is so weird. And I can't believe that Michelle is sitting there bawling when I'm the one who's just been dumped.

"Why?" I finally ask, after I'm pretty sure my voice won't shake.

Nicole has to tear her eyes away from precious Danny. "That's just the way it is," she explains. "We would've drifted apart anyway. This is just easier."

I look her straight in the eye. "For you."

Nicole runs a hand through her hair. "Well, yes, for us," she says defiantly. "But for you too. We can't be friends in middle school. We're too different."

"We've been best friends since kindergarten, Nicole! And we've always been different!" I'm trying really hard not to yell. I want to show them I'm cool, plus this is bad enough without everybody in the universe looking over here and wondering what's going on.

I'm getting on her nerves, I can tell. She looks at Michelle. "Am I going to have to do all the talking?" she asks. "I thought you said you would talk too."

"You guys already discussed this?" I am yelling now. Even though I'm really mad, I feel stupid because now everybody is looking at us. I lower my voice a little bit. "So that's why you had your secret little slumber party. You were planning how to dump your best friend."

I guess Nicole has given up on Michelle because she's looking back at me. "Okay, Robin. Here's the thing," she begins. "Like, okay. For one thing, we're trying out for cheerleading, and you're like, Miss Honor Roll of the Universe. And Michelle's parents are going to pay us this summer to watch her sisters so when we go school shopping we're going to get a bunch of cool clothes."

I put my hand up. I don't want to hear any more of her stupid reasons. "Look, guys. If you want to end five and a half years of friendship over crap like that, fine with me. I personally think that's retarded, but oh well. I'm sure I can find better friends than a couple of



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dumb cheerleaders.”

Michelle puts her hand on my shoulder. She’s still crying. “Robin, we can still hang out sometimes.”

I look at her hand (noticing that she has put her fingertips under a fold of my sleeve) until she moves it away. Then I look at Nicole. I speak really loud so everybody can hear. “By the way, Nicole, I hope the cool, popular friends you make in middle school don’t mind that you have to bring plastic sheets every time you spend the night with them because you wet the bed when you’re away from home.”

I don’t even stay to see her reaction. I whirl around and walk slowly through the stares, back into the school, with my head held high. Then I go to the girl’s bathroom, to the last stall, and cry until recess is over.

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