

What Exists Between GIRLFRIENDS

Pam Houston expounds on the
importance of female friends.



Pam's posse: Barb, Kae, Karen, and Tami after a hike up the Continental Divide

I'M NOT TOO PROUD TO ADMIT IT. I have never been able to get the man thing right. And when I say *man*, I mean the whole spectrum: boyfriend, husband, lover, fiancé, blind date, double date, even old friends I accidentally sleep with. You name it—the minute sexual tension is involved, it's only a matter of time until I screw it up. I console myself with two equally prototypical consistencies: I'm great at picking dogs and I'm great at choosing girlfriends.

Kelly J. is my oldest friend—28 years and counting. A computer put us together as college freshmen at a heavily prepped-out school called Denison University after we had each filled out lengthy questionnaires that determined that—because we didn't wear pink turtlenecks with green corduroys; and because when our roommate Sally told us she was having her “coming out” party at the Plaza, we thought it meant her parents must be amazingly progressive to so thoroughly embrace her

homosexuality; and because neither of us had any idea what being lavaliered meant but we both thought it probably had something to do with sex—we might help each other negotiate the Polo-clad masses.

We were middle-class girls at an upper-class school, and I wouldn't have survived without Kelly's big smile across the dining hall and encouraging notes in my mailbox.

I was there at her serenade when the boy who pinned her was too drunk to affix the pin, and I was there three years later—spring break—when she found out that he'd slept with some beach blanket Barbie at (where else but) Hilton Head.

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Years later, when I'd been too depressed to get out of bed for a month, Kelly hooked me up with her childhood friend-turned-therapist, and I began the therapeutic relationship that saved and improved my life. We've both had our share of ups and downs over three decades, mostly at the hands of men who make those fraternity boys look like amateurs, but now her kids call me Auntie Pam, and I look for excuses to go to Seattle to see them.

Betsy M. took a class I taught 12 years ago in Denver. She is beautiful and hilarious and more forgiving of my workaholic nature than anyone else in my life. She shares with me her beautiful daughter Sarah, who at 14 still thinks I am a cool enough godmother. Once, when Sarah was five and Betsy was broke, I went to Pottery Barn and bought her eight plates so she could have a dinner party and impress a man she thought she liked. Now she and that man have two more kids, a house in town, and a house in the mountains, and I feel as welcome to walk through those doors as I have any other doors in my life.

Allison D. lives in a house that is full of so much love that sometimes, when I am in a particularly bad way, she whirls some of it up into a kind of cosmic angel and sends it to look after me. She is the best pep-talk-giver in the known universe, and sometimes we both drive three hours just to have a one-hour lunch.

Tami A. attended the barbecue of an organic cattle rancher (who rejected me soundly—we call him the Beef-Cake) that took place in an open field on a relentlessly hot May day, even though it meant taking her brand-new sandals through cow pies. She also did all the talking at the emergency vet clinic the night my youngest wolfhound died in my arms and I was doing my best to understand the difference between a private and a group cremation.

Kae P. is my go-to person in any situation that requires a moral decision. She is kind, open-minded, and exceedingly fair. She also spent three days on her hands and knees helping me scrub ex-husband grime out of my kitchen (what we had always thought was a black-and-yellow pattern on the kitchen floor turned out not to have any black in it at all!).

Barb M. sent me flowers on a night I was feeling sorry for myself because I had no car and no food in the house except one rusty old can of Anderson's split pea soup and when I had decided to go ahead and eat it I realized I had no can opener. On the night the handsome hockey-playing environmental lawyer turned out to be married, Heather M. e-mailed me a digital photo of a tall doctor in her office who had a crush on me. And when a bunch of writers in Whitefish, Montana, accused me of being an elitist urban university snob (I live in the third least-populated county in America!) because I suggested that one way to increase their odds of being published was to actually write well, Lesley D. offered to come up there and kick some Montana ass.

A list like this would need pages to complete, and even then the details would describe only a sliver of what exists between girlfriends. It is that feeling when you see her waiting for you on the other side of airport security, or when you're riding in the car together and you can't agree on the interior temperature but you turn up the radio for all the same songs, or that terrible 2 a.m. when, blinded by snot and tears, you find her number on speed dial because no one in the world is allowed to see you like that except her.

Do me a favor. Call up your best girlfriend and tell her that you love her. Ask her to go hiking/kayaking/camping this weekend. Share a handful of gorp/a bottle of wine/a single iPod while you check out the view of the valley/the whale that keeps breaching/Orion's belt through the mesh of your tent. Your boyfriend will either admire your independence or get over it eventually. If he doesn't, it may be time to rethink him. [WZA](#)



Barb M. and Pam on the San Luis Pass in Colorado