

The Best of Friends

by Margaret I. Rostkowski

The Best of Friends

by Margaret Restkowski
江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco,
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto

All my thanks to my friends
Becky Reimer
Dixie Gaisford
Don Durkee
Judee Stanley

The Best of Friends

Copyright © 1989 by Margaret I. Rostkowski

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Printed in the United States of America. For information address Harper & Row Junior Books, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022.

Typography by Joyce Hopkins

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rostkowski, Margaret I.

The best of friends / by Margaret I. Rostkowski.

p. cm.

Summary: Three very different teenagers, once close friends, struggle to understand the changes in their relationships and the turmoil around them as the Vietnam War encroaches on their lives.

ISBN 0-06-025104-2 : \$. — ISBN 0-06-025105-0 (lib. bdg.) : \$

[1. Friendship—Fiction. 2. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975—Public opinion—Fiction.] I. Tide.

PZ7.R7237Be 1989

[Fic]—dc19

88-33077

CIP

AC

Contents

ONE

Spring Hike 1

TWO

Mr. Clean 12

THREE

Mr. Ice 24

FOUR

Peace Now 28

FIVE

History Class 38

SIX

Peach Palace 48

SEVEN

Night in the Stacks 58

EIGHT

The Hill 69

NINE

Night on the Porch 81

TEN

King of the Hill 98

ELEVEN

Newstime 106

TWELVE

Night at the Prom 112

THIRTEEN

Dog-Run Duty 124

FOURTEEN

Birthday Party 131

FIFTEEN

The Jump 138

SIXTEEN

Enlisting 149

SEVENTEEN

Noon on the Hill 153

EIGHTEEN

Jump #11 164

NINETEEN

Graduation 172

TWENTY

Night at the Trailhead 177

Spring Hike

Every year when the snow turned to mud and the light crept into the valley before six A.M., Sarah decided it was time to see spring from the mountains behind the house, time to talk Dan and Will into a hike to the top of Malan's Peak, where they could look out through the high spring sky, clear of cloud, all the way across the Great Salt Lake to the mountains of Nevada.

They'd done it since they were old enough to hike alone, since Dad taught Dan how to avoid rattlesnakes and Sarah to know the difference between poison ivy and horsemint. They always waited for Will at the bottom of the trail, and when he had panted up the hill on his bike, they would head up through the sagebrush and scrub oak, the dogs escorting them joyfully.

And now the three of them met at the trailhead again:

mud smell where patches of snow still melted onto the trail, whispers and rustles from the bushes, the young green of willows bending over the stream out of Taylor's Canyon, cool air slipping around Sarah's cheeks and down the collar of her jacket. And when Will turned off the motor of the truck, silence pouring over them. Quiet world of wet and rock and mountains coming alive to the west. Like every morning of all the springs they had come here.

The same. Except this year Will had left his bike at home under a year's worth of dust and had driven the truck. Too far to ride, he'd said, and Sarah hadn't argued. They were all here. Enough to be happy about, she knew. It had been touch-and-go. Will had worked the grill at Peach Palace until midnight and hadn't thought he could get out of bed by six A.M. And Dan had said he had things to do today and didn't have time for a hike. They'd only come for her, they both said, because she'd insisted.

As if the last seven years didn't matter to them. As if they'd forgotten they were graduating in a month and leaving, and that this time next year she'd have no one to climb with her, no one to help her count the golden eagles that sometimes blazed up into the air from the pine trees lining the canyon, catching and holding the spring light like low-flying stars.

Dan paced in front of the trucks, watching her as she tried to load the camera. He sighed when the film slipped out of her fingers for the second time. "I don't know why you bother, Sar. Every picture you take is a disaster."

He chucked three rocks onto the water tanks, then turned around and pounded his fists lightly on the hood of the truck, setting up a hollow rhythm that made Countess and Buff prick up their ears. "Get a move on, Sar. I haven't got all day."

Will leaned against the door of the truck, ruffling Buff's ears. "Lay off, Dan. What's the hurry?"

Dan looked over at him, one hand shading his eyes against the brightening air. "Just three tests and ten calculus problems." He closed his eyes a minute. "And I could be jumping right now." He stretched both arms up, fingers wide, and grinned over his shoulder at Will. "Just wait, man. You make that parachute ride down one time and you'll know what I'm talking about."

"Don't bet on it."

"I am. It'll happen." Dan pounded the hood of the truck, then pulled himself up onto it. "You start the paper for Quinn yet?"

Will shook his head. "Nope. But I'm thinking about it." He turned around and grinned at Sarah. "Plenty of time. Right, Sar?"

"Yeah, I guess. Darn, this is so . . ." She bent over the camera, slipping the end of the film into the narrow slot in the spool.

"Need some help?" Will crouched beside her.

"No, I've almost got it. Sorry to take so long."

"No sweat."

"Dad said I couldn't get a shot of the eagles because they move too fast. But I want to try." She twisted the

dial on the camera, listening for the smooth passage of the film around the spool.

"This his camera?"

"Yeah, his old one. It's a really good one, but he says I should stick to pictures of the dogs." She stood up and adjusted the camera strap around her neck. "OK. I'm ready."

Dan slid off the hood and Will slammed the door.

"OK, so let's not waste the morning." Dan vaulted over the fence at the trailhead, the dogs barking at his feet. Over his shoulder he yelled to Will. "Come on, Spencer. Get the lead out."

Will turned and grinned at Sarah. "Drill sergeant." Then he sprinted after Dan, shouting, "You're on!"

Sarah stood a moment, watching them disappear into the scrub oak, listening to their insults and catcalls as they headed up the trail. She'd never catch them. But she jumped across a mud patch and onto the trail. She didn't see them again until she got to where the trail opened out for a view over the valley, where they waited long enough for her to get a drink from Dan's canteen and to catch one breath before they took off again. She didn't hurry, but sat on a rock a minute to rest and rebraid her hair.

"You want me to wait, Sar?" Will called back to her.

She shook her head. "No, I'm OK."

She could have stayed up with them, but she never saw the point of making the climb into a race the way Dan did. And, of course, he usually won. As she stood up and

readjusted the camera strap, she wondered if Will let him win.

And then as she reached the top, the trees opened around her and she had to sit down a minute because the wideness of the sky made her dizzy. She closed her eyes, waiting for her stomach and hands and legs and heart to stop shaking. When she had calmed down and could breathe without gasping, she opened her eyes and saw Will spread-eagled on the rock, far back from the edge, eyes closed, chest heaving. And Dan sitting near the drop-off, arms hanging limply in front of him.

The only sound was her breathing and the clink of the dogs' tags as they snuffled around the boulders and scrub oak.

She stepped as close to the edge as she dared and looked down. Muddy trail, downtown, the high school, Will's truck, their house—all like perfect toys. Only the mountains to the west looked the same. She pushed her hair back and felt the breeze on her face. Maybe the eagles would come and perch on her hand and tell her about their winter in Mexico.

She found a flat rock to sit on and her breathing calmed. She was above the world, high with the birds. Nice to play at being a child again, even if at times it seemed they had left it all so far behind.

She looked at Dan and Will. Dad would say they both needed haircuts. Will's curls shaded his forehead and edged around his ears. Dan's hair fell straight to his collar.

Mom called them her blue-eyed boys. It fit. Will had been like part of the family for years.

Friends at school envied her for the easy way she and Will had with each other, the way he'd stop by her locker after school and tease her, the hours he spent at their house, eating Mom's cookies and watching TV. What they never understood was that it was Dan and Will, and Sarah only if she didn't get in the way. That's the way it had always been. But Will did smile at her when she came to sit by him in history class, and did little things to show he didn't mind having her around. Like waiting for her on the trail. She wished she'd taken him up on his offer to walk with her. Maybe on the way down.

"Hey, look." Dan was standing, boots edged out over the edge of the rock, pointing out over the valley.

"What?"

"A plane. It's circling. Must be jumpers."

She looked out over the valley. It was hard to see against the colors of the town and mountains. Then she saw the plane, already up, not high above the airfield west of town, but climbing, circling, tracing a spiral in the sky.

"Wish you were up there, Dan?" Will said from behind him.

Dan turned around and grinned at him. "Damn straight. Watching you get ready for your first jump."

Suddenly two dots fell from the plane and immediately exploded into blossoms of red and blue and white parachute. The plane circled and then released two more dots

that opened and spread out across the morning, dotting the pale sky.

As she watched from the top of the mountain, Sarah felt a bubble of excitement in her throat, and she wondered if this was what Dan felt when he jumped beneath that cloud of parachute. Just as she turned to ask him, the sky to the south cracked open and a swarm of helicopters rose from the valley, from the Air Force base, three, then four and five, hovering, dipping noses to each other, ripping open the air around them. They rose higher, even with the parachutes, and for a minute Sarah was sure they would tear into the fragile jumpers, but the choppers veered out to the west, black insect bodies scrambling up into the morning air.

"Wow, they're noisy," Sarah yelled, shading her eyes as she tried to follow the choppers into the light. "What are they doing around here?"

"Must be training out at the base," said Dan. "On their way to Vietnam."

"Look at 'em go," Will said. The helicopters were now only black dots above the mountains.

Dan ran one hand through his hair. "Idiots."

Will looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You know how many choppers get hit in Vietnam?" Dan said over his shoulder. "They're sitting ducks."

Will blew at the hair on his forehead. "Doesn't look any crazier than jumping out of an airplane."

"Yeah, well, at least I don't have five thousand Viet Cong shooting at me. That's the difference."

“Whatever you say.” Will turned away from the view of the valley and the parachutes, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets.

Sarah looked over her shoulder at Will. Trust Dan to ruin things.

“Hey, you two, I want to take your picture,” she said.

Dan looked around at her. “Why?”

She shrugged. “For posterity. Come on, stand together.”

Dan waved at Will. “Over here.”

“No.” Will stood up. “That’s too close to the edge.”

“Chicken.” Dan laughed. “It’s not far. Just don’t look down. Come on.” He jerked his head in the direction of the cliff.

Sarah fumbled with the snap on the camera case, sorry she had brought it up. Will stood rigid, hands deep in his pockets, as he looked up at Dan balancing on the edge of the rock.

“Hey, Spencer, we don’t have all morning.”

Sarah watched as Will edged over the rocks toward Dan and stood below him, not looking at him or out across the valley, but straight at the camera.

She smiled at him, then motioned to Dan. “Come on, get down by Will. You’re out of the picture.”

Dan sighed and made a face, then jumped down from the rock to stand by Will, taller by half a head, hands on his hips, easy in his long-legged body, fine light hair draping his forehead almost to his glasses.

Will looked like he did so often: serious, almost sad.

For a minute Sarah wanted to make him smile, tell him one of her silly unfunny jokes that he always laughed at anyway, but decided not to.

“OK, you guys, ready?” Planting her feet wide apart, making sure she was steady, she looked up at them over the camera, then back through the viewfinder. “One, two . . .” and she clicked the shutter.

Before she had time to wind the film, Will scrambled over the rocks to where she stood. “Now let me take one of you two.” He lifted the camera off her neck. “Where do you push?”

“Here. It’s all set.”

“Hey, don’t tell Mom or she’ll use it for a Christmas card.” Dan laughed, back on his perch at the lip of the rock. “You know how she is.”

Grabbing him by the elbow, Sarah pulled him down to stand by her. “I don’t like being up so high any more than Will does.”

“God, what a bunch of—”

To shut him up, Sarah held her hand in front of his face, fingers wide in the peace sign, just as Will pushed the shutter.

When Will lowered the camera, Dan grabbed it. “Now you two. Just like home movies. Everybody gets a turn.” He got down on one knee, while Will stepped over the rocks toward Sarah.

“Hey, you guys,” Dan called. “You look miserable. Look like you like each other a little bit.”

“You don’t ask much, do you, Dan?” said Will. Then

Sarah felt Will's arm slide around her shoulders and she stretched her arm around his waist. His red shirt felt warm under her hand, his belt tight against the muscles of his back, as she stood, almost leaning into him, not quite daring to.

"Hurry up, Dan! How hard can it be to take a picture?" she called.

"Cool it, this has to be perfect." Dan peered into the viewfinder, looked up at them, and grinned. "The two Mouseketeers. Minus their leader. Say cheese, guys." He snapped the shutter, then lowered the camera. "Should be perfect."

Before Sarah could move away, Will said, "Let's take one more." He kept his arm on her shoulder, so comfortable and warm against the cool breeze circling the rocks that she couldn't step away.

Dan squinted at them. "Of you two?"

"No, all three of us."

"Who's going to take it?"

"I know." Sarah reached for the camera. "Here, Dan, get in close. If we put our heads really close together, I'll . . . Here, you grab the other side, Will."

"Sar, you get in the middle . . ."

"No, Dan, you're tallest."

"What a weird idea."

"You think it'll work?"

"Yeah, someone at school did it. It'll be funny. Just don't move, anybody."

Dan in the middle, Sarah and Will each holding a

corner of the camera at arm's length, Sarah's finger on the shutter, no one breathing, all three wanting to laugh, holding on to one another, the shutter clicked.

"Done!" Dan shouted.

The air sang with his word, and the rocks in the canyon below them echoed it back to them through the morning.

Mr. Clean

Last November 11, his eighteenth birthday, Dan had been shaken awake at dawn by his father, who told him they were going out to the airfield. Before he was really awake, Dan was sitting in a classroom with three other guys learning about wind velocity and correct landing procedure. And after three hours of class they strapped him into a chute and pushed him out of an airplane. Ever since, if he wasn't jumping, he was thinking about it, dreaming himself into the open door of a plane, and into those seconds, those eternities, in the air.

At first the dreams had been nightmares, ones where he fell, loose and tumbling in the sky, head spinning hideously out of control. But, as the number of his jumps increased, tumbling became flying and his head sang, high