

Opinion: Reflections on true friendship

By Andrew O'Hagan, *New York Times*

Is childhood the golden era of friendship? And can you get those relationships back?

The other day, I took down from the shelf a beautiful novel by William Maxwell – “So Long, See You Tomorrow” – and I realized the title alone summons the unspoken bond, the constant availability, the relentless promise that friendship is when you are 12. My great friend at that age was Mark MacDonald. In those early, rain-soaked days on Scotland’s west coast, Mark was my constant companion and my secret weapon: Whatever happened at home, there would always be Mark to brighten the day and spit with style like River Phoenix did in “Stand by Me,” via a rolled-up tongue. We would be up at the crack of dawn to wander over the fields, scan the beaches for coins, climb the hills together and sit in the graveyard comparing our plans for world domination. Mark had Crohn’s disease; he was often in hospital, and we’d write to each other planning our adventures for the summer. He told me I was a good writer and I told him he was a great painter, before we disappeared from each other’s lives. I haven’t seen him in 30 years.

When I recently tried to find Mark again, he didn’t appear to exist. Like the boys in Maxwell’s novel, he seemed like a figment, or a fragile piece of memory that crumbles when you turn it in your hands. He wasn’t to be found at the old address I had for him in the seaside town of Saltcoats. His name is a popular one on Facebook, but none of the Marks I found was the one I knew, and he wasn’t on Twitter or Instagram either. None of the search engines reveal anything about Mark. I tried death certificates, fearing, as I have for a long time, that my old friend might have died.

I asked my mother if any of her friends had kept in touch with the family but none had. I could remember two of his sisters' names but they didn't show up on the internet either. When I went back to Scotland recently, I drove to the square where we once lived, and I looked up at the window of my old house, remembering how I used to shine a torch from there to Mark's bedroom. Two flashes meant good night. Three flashes meant see you tomorrow.

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