Bill Schermbrucker / MOTOR THERAPY

I met Maxwell Eastman in 1972, in the library of Tonawanda Community College, Lockport, N.Y. I remember this big guy in a denim shirt getting up to shake my hand, and holding it as he looked into my face with soft, marbled blue eyes. His teeth showed beneath his smile, his face a bit fat, mustache curling below his lips. His suede jacket seemed to smell faintly of marijuana. Within the first sentence or two, he laughed.

My wife and I had driven across the continent from Vancouver B.C., for a year's teaching exchange. I was 34, with long hair and a black beret; Christina was 19, in faded jeans, yellow gorilla stompers and a skimpy halter top that drew men's eyes. We'd been warned there were no apartments in Lockport, but we hadn't believed it. So we were stuck in the Crittenden Motel on Route 93, until Max offered us a room in his apartment, and we became friends.

Ask in Lockport today, and they will tell you we developed a special friendship, not entirely understood. Attraction of opposites? Not that simple. I think of my hat: Before we left Lockport to come home, the four of us went for a walk one day, and Christina suddenly reached up and took my old Kenya Regiment hat off my head and put it on Max's.

"What? Is this for me?" he said.

"Yes," said Christina.

"*Really*?"

"Of course!" I said, as though we had prearranged it. Actually, that hat was the one Kenyan thing I'd held onto, and Christina's giving it away on impulse shocked me. It took a while, but now I'm glad she did. Other events have superseded the giving of the hat, and anyway it suited him. Three years ago, when Max lay in delirium on his sickbed in Buffalo, I got the message to phone him. His daughter answered guardedly, "May I ask who's calling?" I said my name and she cried, "Oh thank God!" with a burst of emotion that quite astonished me.

That afternoon in 1972, Christina and I moved in to Max Eastman's two-bedroom apartment on the upper floor of a house in a gas station. We lugged our stuff up, and I said, "Max, what are all these dead flies doing in the stairwell?"

"Aren't they something?" He laughed his deep, prolonged chortle, and that's when I knew we would be friends.

Max cooked, and I drove out and bought some good wine. When dinner was ready, Max lit candles and put on the record player. "You know Tom Rush?" he asked, and we shook our heads. "Listen to this."

We paid attention to the words of "No Regrets." Outside, traffic was an occasional swish of air. Inside, the candle flames glowed ruby in our wineglasses. As the song ended, I saw that Max was crying.

"What's the matter, Max?" Christina asked.

"Gaad!" He sniffed deeply. "I'm sorry."

We talked about relationships gone wrong: his divorce, his three children living in Buffalo with their mother; my divorce, my three children. "Just about everybody I know's divorced," Max said.

"Not I!" said Christina.

"Yeah," said Max. "Here's to love!" He clinked his wineglass with ours, and Tom Rush began singing Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game." We talked till we were all exhausted. A channel of intimacy opened that night, and never closed.

We stayed a month with Max, then moved to a house in Millersport. Sunday mornings, Max and his girlfriend Valerie would come for cream scones and strawberry jam. We went to restaurants in Buffalo, art galleries, concerts, movies. The next May, our house owners returned from Florida, and by then Max had moved into half of an old brick farmhouse on Albion Road, and he invited us to spend the last month there. Sometimes the four of us would walk out back around the woodlot and pond, throwing sticks into the grass for the dog. Sometimes, Max and I would go and help John Yeoman, the farmer, with barn chores. The old man was not keen to have us around his cows, but one day he let me carry a bucket of milk across the slippery floor to the churn, and Max congratulated me with a wink. We invited Max and Valerie to visit us in Vancouver, the following summer. In the CN station, suddenly, there was my Kenya Regiment hat coming down the platform. We rented a cabin up at

Lac Lejeune and went fishing. At a gas station I picked up a red plastic gallon can, and exclaimed at the price. Max took the can out of my hand and paid for it. When they went home, I was surprised at my feelings. We had been in agreement on all the issues, from Watergate and the bombing of Cambodia to Trudeau's Just Society. But on the little stuff we fought. Should we take the short cut or the scenic route to Lac Lejeune? Go out to eat or stay home? Which movie? More than once I said privately to Christina, "Christ I'll be relieved when Max goes home!" But at the airport, watching his big, broad shoulders move away, still smelling his hug, I felt a pang.

Some letters passed between us. Little things would remind me of him. Once, Tom Rush came to town on my birthday, and Christina took me to hear him. "Play 'No Regrets'!" I called several times from our table in the dinner-theatre, and Tom Rush scowled at me, but at the end he announced, "This is for a friend," and plucked his guitar, and sang in his deep voice:

> I know your leaving's too long overdue
> For far too long I've had nothing new to show to you...

Afterwards, I found a phone booth. It was midnight here, three in the morning in Lockport, and I could hear thunder raging.

"You always seem to call when there's a storm," Max said.

"Did I wake you up? I should have waited till morning."

"Do what's in your heart!" he said. "I'm truly glad you called."

He did not tell me then that he had broken up with Valerie. I didn't tell him that Christina and I were having difficulties. Once, I went to Toronto for a conference, and took an extra day and visited Max in Lockport. We ate a meal, and filled one another in on the latest news. A year later Max phoned, and said he wanted to come out again to Vancouver, with Sonia, Valerie's best friend, who worked in the library with him. Oh brave new Me Generation, what a carousel!

We caught the ferry to Victoria, and the Butchart Gardens. We took my boat up Indian Arm. We dived into the clear water, and I remember his great shout of protest at the cold when we broke surface. Back in the house, we lived, as always, in the kitchen, drinking wine and telling stories. Then they were gone.

Year after year, why did we make those long hauls across the

continent, to plonk ourselves down across the table, only to start bitching? Could one not talk into the night and take day trips with somebody who lived closer? Oh Maxwell, you and your stubborn refusal to overlook any unresolved emotional issue! All your touchy-feely crap, right down to those haiku you went and wrote to reconcile yourself to dying:

A pear, mostly green
Sitting in the winter sun.
Through a door, the snow.

The flute speaks no words
But says that happy and sad
Are close together.

All due respect, my friend, but horseshit! How about some "rage against the dying of the light"? There is no opposing presence here to say my thoughts are wrong.

When Max and Sonia got married, they took sailing lessons, and used her parents' cash gift to buy a 25' sailboat they called "The Runcible Spoon." When I visited, we drove up to Lake Ontario to see it. Max seemed confident about sailing. "Sh!" he'd say, turning up the car radio. "Let's get the weather. Maybe we can sail up to Toronto."

Propped up on land for winter storage, "The Runcible Spoon" seemed a pretty substantial vessel, but I was glad when Sonia wrote later to say they'd sold it and bought a grand piano. I arrived one day on a surprise visit, hitch-hiked out to Yeomans' and was walking up the driveway, when I heard piano notes coming from the house. It was early spring, and the stench of manure in the cold air cut my nostrils, taking me back to childhood on African farms.

I opened the rickety side door, without knocking.

The Bach minuet abruptly stopped, and Max called out, "Who's this?"

"Hi Max."

He entered the kitchen, and stood for several seconds with his eyes widening and closing. He looked pale.

"What's going on?" I asked, at the kitchen table, but he resisted an answer. Then, he latched onto a thread and began telling me,

frowning, how he had gone to start his car, and it wouldn't turn over. He called the Head Librarian and said, "Maureen, my car's dead, I'm not sure when I'll be in." A few minutes later Maureen called back to say she'd spoken to the Dean, and Max was to take sick leave and get some help.

"So.... How long does this disability leave last? Have you gotten help?"

"Gaad, Alistair, I've been sitting here for four days, helping John with the chores, practicing piano and guitar."

"Let's go to New Hampshire," I said. "See Jed."

"I would *love* to see Jedediah," Max said. "But the College?"

"Not to worry," I said. "I'll call Nathan and tell him I'm taking care of it. He can tell the Dean."

I phoned my old ally in the English Department at TCC. I called Vancouver, and arranged for a colleague to cover my classes. We left a note for Sonia saying when we'd be back. As we climbed into his Saab, Max asked, "What did you tell Nathan?"

"I told him the doctor has prescribed motor therapy for you, and I am giving you a hand."

For the first time that day, Max laughed.

"How about the old road to Utica?" I said. "Then up through the Adirondacks."

"That'll take forever," he said.

" 'It's got to be the going, not the getting there, that's good.' "

"Harry Chapin," Max said, and laughed again. "Motor therapy! 'The doctor has prescribed motor therapy'!"

"Hey! My PhD. finally pays off!"

At first we spoke little. The sun was bright, the car ran well, and I felt the excitement of skipping out. But soon we were locked in argument. He told me that since his marriage to Sonia, his daughters wouldn't visit him. His son, yes, but not his daughters. He took them out for hamburgers.

"That's weird," I said. "Is it a Catholic thing?"

"What do you mean 'weird'? Why do you say 'Catholic'? Gaad, Alistair, you're one abrasive son of a bitch!"

"Look," I said, "children have their own lives. They notice what their parents *do* for them. They're not interested in reasons."

"What are you saying?"

I felt good because he was fighting. Earlier, in his kitchen, his face had opened and closed helplessly. Now, his grip on the wheel was firm, twisting back and forth. What is our life anyway but a continuous conversation, sometimes easy and sometimes not? We were arguing whether or not to go via the Ticonderoga ferry, when he suddenly cried "Shit!" whether at something in the road, or a missed appointment, or a spasm in his back muscles, I don't know. But I felt his energy then.

At Jed's house in Concord, we drank wine and talked late. Emily, Jed's wife, excused herself and went to bed. I asked Jed about his arrangements to have his daughter by his first wife come from England for a visit. Jed was evasive.

"Your daughter's *got* to know your feelings about this, Jed," I said. "No point pussyfooting around it: the mother thinks the ex-husband is nothing but an asshole, and so will the child. You've got to act to counter that impression."

Jed frowned.

"Alistair you're a fascist!" Max cried. "Jed's gotta do this, I gotta do that, my daughters have gotta come to my house."

"What's this?" Jed asked, and Max explained.

"*I* can understand that!" Jed said, his deep moral voice, sounding incongruously like Richard Nixon. "*I* can understand that Max's daughters might feel protective of their mother and not wish to come to the house of his new wife."

"What if they say no," Max asked. "Do I kidnap them?"

"People don't live forever," I said. "How long can you afford to postpone these relationships? Your eldest girl is what, sixteen?"

"*Sixteen*!" cried Jed. Clearly he had been thinking she was six or eight.

A look of disappointment came over Max's face. His unexpected ally had deserted. "Let's talk about something else," he said.

"Wait!" Jed insisted. "Let's see what the expert says."

I thought he was going to wake Emily, but he came back holding a letter. It was from me. He read out a paragraph in which I told Jed how one day my eldest son had preferred to work with his stepfather rather than come camping with me, and I had stood with my son on

the lawn and said, "Do whatever you decide to do, without apology to anyone."

I took the letter from Jed to read.

"Now Al-istairr," Jed said, imitating the Old Man we taught under in Africa, "Al-istairr, I want you to apologise to Max. Tell him his children can do whatever they want. Without apologizing to anyone. Including you!"

"Son of a bitch!" I said.

Around 3 a.m., when I lay down to sleep on the foamy under Jed's chipped grand piano in the study, I looked across, and saw Max Eastman lying totally relaxed on his back, with the Kenya Regiment hat on his head.

When Max next arrived in Vancouver, alone, my son Colin and I got into a shouting match at supper. Max scraped back his chair: "I wanna know just *where in the hell you think you get off,* telling me how to deal with my children, when you yell at your own son like that!"

"Colin can keep his end up," I said.

"That doesn't make it any less sick!"

After Max went home, my son told me that as they walked to the store together for ice-cream, Max said to him:

"Listen, Callin, here's my number in New York, and if you ever need to call, call collect."

Another year, driving from Boston to Toronto, I called Sonia at TCC from the Thruway. I knew they had split up. She told me how to get to the property Max had bought in Millersport. "Good for you, Max!" I cried, as I entered the greenhouse he was renovating to live in.

He took me out back to walk through several acres, wooded and leafy, with a pond. It was alive with birds and small animals. Then he put me to work stapling pink insulation to the walls.

"What made you suddenly decide to buy a piece of property?" I asked.

Max sat down and sighed. His big face started going through a succession of frowns and relaxations, and I thought I was going to get some Buddhist stuff. Instead he said:

"Nodal lymphoma."

"Cancer?"

"Yes."

"Well.... Are you going to let it kill you?"

He laughed. "No," he said. "I'm not thinking about dying."

After supper, and my latest stories from Vancouver, Max said, "You remember when you came, and I was depressed, and we visited Jed?"

"Motor therapy?"

"Yeah. You remember how I sometimes put on events in the library? Well, I put on this show of paintings by a local artist. We hung it, there was an opening, lunch-hour talk, visits from classes, so on. Afterwards, I realized *nobody* said *anything* to me about that show, good or bad. It was as though it never happened. Apparently, it made not a jot of difference to anybody's life. Not one single person. That was a very strange feeling."

"That's when —"

"Next day, the car wouldn't start."

In the summer of 1986, Max came to Vancouver for Expo. He stayed in our rec room, and spent time in meditation. He reestablished his bond with my son Colin, whose new name, Chuck, he accepted without a qualm. I was preoccupied, writing a book. By the time I took him to the airport, several visits had blurred into one, and I thought of him as a fixture.

Two years later, my new wife Laura and I rented a cottage on Skaha Lake, for a water-skiing holiday. On impulse, I called Max in Millersport, and invited him to join us.

"Water-ski? Gaad, Alistair, there's nothing I'd like better. Maybe I can come."

"Come!"

"Well. I might not be able to."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, shit, the thing has come back."

"*Drive* it away, Max. Water-skiing is so beautiful. Think about ballet man, just gliding over the water."

"I'll let you know," he said.

Jed called me a few days later to say Max was sick. Then Max called and said he definitely could not come water-skiing.

"Look," I said, "you told me once that you were not going to let this thing kill you. So just come!"

I handed the phone to Laura, and heard her say, "It doesn't help when people are denying."

When she hung up, she said, "Nobody's denying it around there. His daughter has quit her job to be with him. The whole family's there. He's at his first wife's place."

"Therese's?"

"Yes."

"Where's Sonia?"

"She's there all the time."

I tried to absorb this information while I slept.

In the morning, I said: "Max Eastman is such a one for feelings, you know, theatre of the self. He'll spend a year at this, people round his bedside, Anthea quitting her job, dramatic phone calls."

"Call and tell him!"

"No. If he decides to live, he'll fly out here."

Next night, when I got home, Laura said Jed had called, and would call again at 9. I ate supper and waited. Jed sounded shook-up. He was on the road home from visiting Max in Lockport, and finding it difficult to drive.

I said sternly, "You've done what you can. Life's for the living, man. Concentrate on getting home. Tomorrow you can write your feelings down."

Early next morning, Max Eastman died. At the end of the week, Sonia phoned us, and later sent a copy of the memorial service, including Max's four haiku. Jed wrote his letter. He thought it was too raw, but after a month he sent it. He described Max lying in an overheated room, naked on a sheepskin, recognizing people who leaned in to tell the dying man they loved him. He cried for music, and they put on Vivaldi. "No," he demanded, "rock and roll!" so they put on a Dylan record. But it had barely begun, when he shouted "Stop it! Take it off!" Although he was terminally weak, he was anxious to hear what people had to say to him. He listened attentively to their voices in the room, and on the phone.

"The pavement seemed straighter, flatter, blacker on the drive home," Jed wrote. "All the dimensions of life seemed to withdraw from their loveliness. Hot sun, black pavement, people running around...all seemed remotely bizarre; the cars, the people, the traffic lights, the

bricks and mortar and tin and sticks that people have erected.... All terribly silly, vain, and of no real importance."

Early next spring, I made it to Lockport once again. Sonia put on her camel-hair coat and took me out to Max's former property in Millersport. As she drove, she confessed, "You know, Alistair, when we had the boat, and Maxwell would be listening to the weather to see if we could go out across the lake, I always prayed it would be stormy!" She laughed, and sniffed back a tear. I took her hand and held it for a moment, and then we drove on.

At Millersport, we asked permission of the young man who lives there now to walk in back to the pond. There was a derelict wooden straight chair in the snow, overgrown with grass, facing the water. We stood beside it in silence.

"This is where we scattered his ashes," Sonia said. "Oh look!" she touched my arm. "They are still there."

I saw. Lying under water on decaying leaves, there was a little, irregular deposit of bone pellets. I took a picture. But the print shows no more than the bright surface of the pond and reflections of bare