

## Elizabeth Hay / THE FRIEND

She was thirty, a pale beautiful woman with long blonde hair and high cheekbones, small eyes, sensuous mouth, an air of serenity and loftiness — superiority — and under that, nervousness, insecurity, disappointment. She was tired. There was the young child who woke several times a night. There was Danny who painted till two in the morning then slid in beside her and coaxed her awake. There was her own passivity. She was always willing even though she had to get up early, and always resentful, but never resentful out loud. She complied. In conversation she was direct and Danny often took part in these conversations, but in bed, apparently, she said nothing. She felt him slide against her, felt his hand between her legs, its motion the reverse of a woman wiping herself, back to front instead of front to back. She smelled paint — the air of the poorly ventilated attic where he worked — and felt his energetic weariness and responded with a weary energy of her own.

He didn't speak. He didn't call her by any name (during the day he called her Moe more often than Maureen). He reached across her and with practised efficiency found the vaseline in the bedside drawer.

I met her one afternoon on the sidewalk outside the neighbourhood grocery store. It was sunny and it must have been warm — a Saturday in early June. Our section of New York was poor and Italian, and we looked very different from the dark women around us. The friendship began with that shorthand — shortcut to each other — an understanding that goes without saying. I had a small child too.

A week later, at her invitation, I walked the three blocks to her house and knocked on the front door. She opened a side door and called my name. "Beth," she said, "this way." She was dressed in a loose and colourful quilted top and linen pants. She looked composed and bohemian and from another class.

Inside there was very little furniture: a sofa, a chest, a rug, Danny's

paintings on the wall. He was there. A small man with Fred Astaire's face and an ingratiating smile. Once he started to talk, she splashed into the conversation. She commented on everything he said, changing it and making it convoluted out of what I supposed was a desire to be included. Only later did I realize how much she insisted on being the centre of attention, and how successfully she became the centre of mine.

We used to take our kids to the only playground within walking distance. It was part of a school yard, and marked the border between our neighbourhood and the next. The pavement shimmered with broken glass, the kids were wild and unattended. We pushed our two on the swings and kept each other company. She said she would be so mad if Danny got AIDS, and I thought about her choice of words — "so mad" — struck by the understatement.

I learned about sex from her the way girls learn about sex from each other. In this case the information came not in whispered conversations behind a hedge but more directly and personally than anything I might have imagined at the age of twelve.

In those days the hedge was high and green, and the soil below it dark — a setting that was at once private and natural and fenced off.

This time everything was in the open. I was the audience, the friend with stroller, a mild-mannered wide-eyed listener who learned that breastfeeding brought Maureen to the point of orgasm, that childbirth had made her vagina sloppy and loose, that anal sex hurt so much that she would sit on the toilet afterwards and brace herself against the stabs of pain.

We were in the playground (that sour, overused, wrongly used, hardly playful patch of pavement) and she said she was sore and told me why. When I protested on her behalf she said, "But I might have wanted it. I don't know. I think I did want it in some way."

I can't remember her hands, not here in this small cool room in another country and several years after the fact. I remember watching her do many things with her hands; yet I can't remember what they look like. They must be long, slender, pale unless tanned. But they don't come to mind the way a man's might and I suppose that's because she didn't touch me. Or is it because I became so adept at

keeping her at bay? I remember her lips, those dry thin Rock Hudson lips.

One evening we stood on the corner and she smiled her fleeting meaningful smiles and looked at me with what she called her northern eyes (they were blue and she cried easily) while her heartbreak of a husband put his arm around her. What will become of her I wondered, even after I found out.

She was standing next to the stove and I saw her go up in flames: the open gas jets, the tininess of the room, the proximity of the children — standing on chairs by the stove — and her hair. It slid down her front and fell down her back. She was making pancakes and they were obviously raw. She knew they were raw, predicted they would be, yet did nothing about it. Nor did I. I just poured on lots of syrup and said they were good.

I saw her go up in flames, or did I wish it?

In the beginning we saw each other almost every day and couldn't believe how much the friendship had improved our lives. A close, easy, intensity which lasted in that phase of its life for several months. My husband talked of moving — an apartment had come open in a building where we had friends — and I couldn't imagine moving away from Maureen.

It was a throwback to girlhood — the sort of miracle that occurs when you find a friend with whom you can talk about everything.

Maureen had grown up rich and poor. Her family was poor, but she was gifted and received scholarships to private schools. It was the private school look she'd fixed on me the first time we met, and the poor background she offered later. As a child she received nothing but praise, she said, from parents astonished by their good fortune: They had produced a beautiful and brilliant daughter in a larger context of everything going wrong: accidents, sudden deaths, mental illness.

Danny's private school adjoined hers. They met when they were twelve and he never tried to hide his various obsessions. She could never say that she had never known.

In the spring her mother came to visit. The street was torn up for



repairs, the weather prematurely hot, the air thick with dust. Maureen had spread a green cloth over the table and set a vase of cherry blossoms in the middle. I remember the shade of green and the lushness of the blossoms because everything about Maureen was usually scattered and in disarray.

Her mother was tall and more attractive in photographs than in person. In photographs she was still, in person she darted about, and there was something high-pitched and unrelenting about the way she moved. When she spoke she left the same impression — startling in her abnormality and yet apparently normal. She spoke in a rapid murmur as though after years of endless talking about the same thing she now made the sounds that people heard: they had stopped up their ears long ago.

She talked about Maureen. How precocious she had been as a child, reading by the age of four, and by the age of five memorizing whole books.

"I remember her reading a page, and I told her to go and read it to Daddy. And she said, 'with or without the paper?'"

Lots of children can read at five, even her brother was reading at five, but few have Maureen's stamina. She could read for hours, and adult books. I had to put Taylor Caldwell on the top shelf."

A photograph of the child was tacked to the wall in Danny's studio. She was seated in a chair and wearing one of those very short summer dresses we used to wear that ended well above bare round knees. Her face was unforgettable. It was more than beautiful. It had a direct, knowing, almost luminous look produced by astonishingly clear eyes and fair, fair skin. Already she knew enough not to smile.

"That's her," said Danny. "There she is."

The beautiful kernel of the beautiful woman.

She had always imagined bodies firmer than hers, but not substantially different. She had always imagined Danny with a boy.

I met the lover without realizing it. It was June again, and we were at their house in the country. A shaded house beside a stream — cool, green, quiet — the physical manifestation of the serenity I once thought she possessed. A phrase in a movie review: her wealth so old it had a patina. Maureen's tension so polished it had a veneer.

All weekend I picked her long hairs off my daughter's sweater and off my own. I picked them off the sheet on the bed. I picked blackberries and they left hair-like scratches on my hands.

My hands felt like hers. I looked down at my stained fingers and they seemed longer. I felt the places where her hands had been: changing diapers, buttoning shirts, deep in tofu and tahini, closing in on frogs which she caught with gusto. Swimming, no matter how cold.

I washed my hands and lost that feeling of being in contact with many things. Yet the landscape continued — the scratches if not the smells, the sight of her hands and hair.

An old painter came to visit. He parked his station wagon next to the house and followed Danny into his studio in the barn. Maureen and I went off with the kids to pick berries.

The day was hot and humid. There would be rain in the night and again in the morning. We followed a path through the woods and came to a stream. The kids splashed around, Maureen and I hung our legs over the bank. Her feet were long and slender, mine were wide and short. We sent ripples of water towards the kids.

She told me that Henry — the painter's name was Henry — was Danny's mentor, they had known each other for years and he was a terrible alcoholic. Then she leaned close and her shoulder touched mine. One night last summer Danny had come back from Henry's studio and confessed — confided — that he had let the old man blow him off. Can you believe it? And she laughed. Giddy — flushed — breathless — excited. A warm breeze blew a strand of her hair into my face. I brushed it away and it came back — ticklish, intimate, warm and animal-like. I didn't find it unpleasant, not at the time.

We brought the berries back to the house, and late in the afternoon the two men emerged and sat with us on the verandah. Henry was whiskery, gallant, shy. Maureen talked a great deal and laughed even more. Before dark, Henry drove away.

She knew. It all came out the next spring and she pretended to be horrified, but she knew.

That night sounds woke me: Danny's low murmur, Maureen's uninhibited cries. I listened for a long time. It must have occurred to me then that the more gay he was, the more she was aroused.

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I thought it was someone come to visit. But the second time I realized it was ice falling. At midday, icicles fall from the eavestrough into the deep snow below.

And the floor which I keep sweeping for crumbs? There are no crumbs. The sound comes from the old linoleum itself. It crackles in the cold.

Often I wake at one or two in the morning, overheated from the hot water bottle, the three blankets, the open sleeping bag spread on top. In my dreams I am taking an exam over and over again.

In the morning I go down in the socks I've worn all night to turn up the heat and raise the thin bamboo blind through which everyone can see us anyway. I make coffee, then scald milk in a hand-beaten copper pot with a long handle. In Quebec there is an expression for beating up egg whites: *monter en neige*. Milk foams up and snow rises.

Under the old linoleum old newspapers advertize an "equipped one bedroom at Lorne near Albert" for \$175. Beside the porch door the linoleum has broken away, and you can read mildew, dust, grit, *Ottawa Citizen*, 1979. The floor is a pattern of squares inset with triangles and curlicues in wheat shades of immature to ripe. Upstairs the colours are similar but faded; and flowers, petals.

During the eclipse I saw Maureen when I saw the moon. I saw my thumb inch across her pale white face.

I have no regrets about this. But I have many thoughts.

We pushed swings in the playground while late afternoon light licked at the broken glass on the pavement. New York's dangers were all around us, and so was Maureen's fake laugh. She pushed William high in the swing, and when he came back she let out a little trill.

It was the time of Hedda Nussbaum. We cut out the stories in the newspaper and passed them back and forth — photographs of Hedda's beaten face, robust husband, abused and dead daughter. It had been going on for so long. Hedda had been beaten for thirteen years, the child was seven years old.

In the playground, light licked at the broken glass and then the light died and we headed home, sometimes stopping first for tea at



her house. Her house always had a loose and welcoming atmosphere which hid the sharp edge of need against which I rubbed.

She began to call before breakfast. She dressed me with her voice, her worries, her anger, her malleability. Usually she was angry with Danny for staying up so late that he was useless all day, of no help in looking after William, while she continued to work to support them, to look after the little boy in the morning and evening, to have no time for herself. But when I expressed anger on her behalf she defended him . . . .

Similarly with the stomach pains. An ulcer, she suggested, then made light of the possibility when I took it seriously.

She often asked, "Is this all? Is this going to be my contribution?" She was referring to her brilliant past and her sorry present. She didn't like her job, didn't like the neighbourhood, kept talking about the men she could have married. Motherhood gave her something to excel at. She did everything for her son — dressed him, fed him, directed every moment of play. "Is this all right, sweetie? Is this? What about this? Then sweetie pie what do you want?"

Sweetie pie wanted what he got. His mother all to himself for a passionately abusive hour, then peace, affection. During his tantrums she embraced him and tried to distract him, the two of them behind a closed door. She would emerge and smile and shake her head. "That was short. You should see what they're like sometimes."

Even when Danny offered to look after him, even when he urged her to take a long walk, she refused. Walked, but briefly, back and forth on the same sidewalk, or up and down the same driveway. Then she returned out of a sense of responsibility to the child. But the child was fine.

At two years he still nursed four or five times a night, and her nipples were covered with scabs. "But the skin there heals so quickly," she said.

We moved to the other side of the city and the full force of it hit me. I remember bending down under the sink of our new apartment, still swallowing a mouthful of peanut butter, to cram SOS pads into the hole — against the mouse, taste of it, peanut butter in the trap. Feel of it, dry and coarse under my fingers. Look of it, out of the

corner of my eye a small dark slipper. Her hair always in her face, and the way I was rattling on her.

It got to the point where I knew the phone was going to ring before it rang. Instead of answering, I stood there counting. Thirty rings. Forty. Once I said to her, I think you called earlier, I was in the bathroom and the phone rang forever. Oh, she said, I'm sorry, I wasn't even paying attention. Then I saw the two of us: Maureen mesmerized by the act of picking up a phone and holding it for a time; and me, frantic with resentment about which I did nothing.

"Why is she so exhausting?" I asked my husband, then answered my own question. "She never stops talking and she always talks about the same thing."

But I wasn't satisfied with my answer. "She doesn't want solutions to her problems. That's what's so exhausting."

And yet that old wish — a real wish — to get along. I went to bed thinking about her, woke up thinking about her and something different yet related. The two mixed together in a single emotion. I had taken my daughter to play with a friend: Another girl was already there and they didn't want Annie to join them. I woke up thinking of my daughter's rejection, my own various rejections, and Maureen.

It seemed inevitable that he would leave her — clear that he was gay and inevitable that he would leave her. He was an artist. To further his art he would pursue his sexuality. But I was wrong. He didn't leave her, and nor did I.

Every six months he had another gay attack and talked, thought, drew penises. Every six months she reacted predictably and never tired of her reactions. Her persistence took on huge, saintly proportions.

I never initiated a visit or a call, but I didn't make a break. As yielding as she was — and she seemed to be all give — I was even more so, apparently.

Tensions accumulated — the panic as she continued to call and I continued to come when called, though each visit became more abrasive, more insulting, as though staged to show who cared least: You haven't called me, you never call me, you think you can make up for your inattention with this visit but I'll show you that I don't care either: the only reason I'm here is so that my son can play with your



daughter.

We walked along the river near her country place. William was on the good tricycle, my daughter was on the one that didn't work. Maureen said, "I don't think children should be forced to share. Do you? I think kids should share when they want to share."

Her son wouldn't give my daughter a turn the whole long two-hour walk beside the river — with me pointing out what? Honeysuckle. Yes, honeysuckle. Swathes of it among the rocks. And fishermen with strings of perch. I stared out over the river, unable to look at Maureen and not arguing; I couldn't find the words.

With each visit there was the memory of an earlier intimacy, and no interest in resurrecting it.

Better than nothing. Better than too much. And so it continued, until it spun lower.

The visit to the country marked my swing from blind acceptance to blind criticism, the natural conclusion of an unnaturally warm friendship. We were sitting on the mattress in Danny's studio in front of a wall-size mirror. Around us were his small successful paintings and his huge failures. He insisted on painting big, she said, because he was so small. "I really think so. It's just machismo."

How clear-eyed she was.

I rested my back against the mirror, Maureen faced it. She glanced at me, then the mirror, and each time she looked in the mirror she smiled slightly. Her son was there. He wandered off, and then it became clear that she was watching herself.

She told me she was pregnant again. It took two years to persuade Danny, "and now he's even more eager than I am," and she smiled at herself.

Danny got sick. I suppose he'd been sick for months, but I heard about it the next spring. Maureen called in tears. "The shoe has dropped," she said.

He was so sick that he had confessed to the doctors that he and Henry — old dissipated Henry whose cock had slipped into who knows what — had been screwing for the last five years. Maureen talked and wept for thirty minutes before I realized that she had no intention of leaving him, or he of leaving her. They would go on. The

only change, and this wasn't certain, was that they wouldn't sleep together. They would go to their country place in June and stay all summer.

I felt cheated, set up, used. "Look, you should do something," I said. "Make some change."

She said, "I know. But I don't want to precipitate anything. Now isn't the time."

She said it wasn't AIDS.

Her lips dried out like tangerine sections separated in the morning and left out all day. She nursed her children so long that her breasts turned into small apricots, and now I cannot hold an apricot in my hand and feel its soft loose skin, its soft non-weight, without thinking of small spent breasts — little dugs.

She caught hold of me, a silk scarf against an uneven wall, and clung.

Two years later I snuck away. In the weeks leading up to the move, I thought I might write to her afterwards, but in the days right before I knew I would not. In late August when the weather was cool and the evenings still long, we finished packing at nine and pulled away in the dark.

We turned right on Broadway and rode the traffic in dark slow motion out of the city, north along the Hudson, and home.

In Canada I thought about old friends who were new friends because I hadn't seen them for such a long time. And newer friends who were old friends because I'd left them behind in the other place. I noticed I had no landscape in which to set them. They were portraits in my mind (not satisfying portraits either because I couldn't remember parts of their bodies; their hands, for instance, wouldn't come to mind). They were emotion and episode divorced from time and place. Yet there was a time — the recent past, and a place — a big city across the border.

And here was I, where I had wanted to be for as long as I had left it — home — and it didn't register either. In other words, I discovered that I wasn't in a place. I was the place. I felt populated by old friends. They lived in my head amid my various broodings. Here they met

again and went through the same motions and different ones. Here they coupled in ways that hadn't occurred really. And here was I, disloyal but faithful, occupied by people I didn't want to see and didn't want to lose.

August came and went, September came and went, winter didn't come. It rained in November and it rained in December. In January a little snow fell, then more rain.

Winter came when I was asleep. One morning I looked out at frozen puddles and a small dusting of snow. It was very cold. I stepped carefully into the street and this is what I saw. I saw the landscape of friendship. I saw Sunday at four in the afternoon. I saw childhood panic. People looked familiar to me, yet they didn't say hello. I saw two people I hadn't seen in fifteen years — one was seated in a restaurant, the other skated by. I looked at them keenly and waited for recognition to burst upon them, but it didn't.

On the other hand, strangers claimed to recognize me. They said they had seen me before, some said precisely where. "It was at a conference two years ago." Or, "I saw you walk by every day with your husband last summer. You were walking quickly."

But last summer I had been somewhere else.

The connections were wistful, intangible, maddening. Memory tantalized and finally failed. Yet as much as memory failed, those odd unhinged conjunctures helped. Strange glimmerings and intense looks were better than nothing.

The last time I saw Maureen, she was wearing a black and white summer dress and her teeth were chattering. "Look at me," she said as she tried to talk, her mouth barely able to form the words, her lower jaw shaking. "It's not that cold."

We were in the old neighbourhood. The street was dark and narrow with shops on either side, and many people. I was asking my usual questions and she was doing her best to answer them.

"Look," she said again, and pointed to her lips which were shaking uncontrollably.

I nodded, drew my jacket tight, mentioned how much warmer it had been on the way to the cafe, my voice friendly enough but without the intonations of affection and interest, the rhythms of sympathy, the animation of friendship.



We entered the subway and felt warm again. She waited for my train to come, and tried to redeem herself and distance herself simultaneously. I asked about Danny and she answered. She went on and on. She talked about his job, her job, how little time each of them had for themselves. Almost before she finished, I asked about her children. Again she talked.

"I don't mean to brag," she said, helpless against the desire to brag, "but Victoria is so verbal."

Doing to her children and for herself what her mother had done to her and for herself.

"So verbal, so precocious. I don't say this to everyone." And she listed the words that Victoria already knew.

She still shivered occasionally. She must have known why I didn't call anymore, aware of the reasons while inventing others in a self-defence that was both pathetic and dignified. She never asked what went wrong. Never begged for explanations (dignified even in her begging: her persistence as she continued to call and extend invitations).

We stood in the subway station — one in a black and white dress, the other in a warm jacket — one hurt and pale, the other triumphant in the indifference which had taken so long to acquire. We appeared to be friends. But a close observer would have seen how static we were, rooted in a determination not to have a scene, not to allow the other to cause hurt. Standing, waiting for my train to come in.

