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## Elegiac Friendship: Notes on Loss

In the face of a true friend we see, so to speak, a second self.  
—Cicero, “On Friendship”

1

“I can lose anything!” At nine I bragged about my losses even though I was always severely punished for them — once spanked with a belt by my father (his heart wasn’t in it, but I’d been warned) for losing the keys to the apartment for the second time. I was also routinely chastised by my mother when I was a sullen adolescent — “I have something for twenty years. You have it for twenty minutes” — her anthem on the loss of the pearls and cashmere twin-set she’d allowed me to borrow once in a rare moment of benevolence.

I remember the punishments, the chiding. I don’t remember boasting. But my pride in my losing streak was one of my mother’s set pieces whenever she recalled my character flaws, long after I had left home. I can imagine making the claim though, in a moment of bravado, standing up to her rage. Maybe it was a disclaimer: I can’t help it; it’s not about you; I lose everything. Or shame.

2

Did this history explain my panic on losing a pair of gold earrings a few summers ago in a little house we owned then near Stony Brook? One

morning, just as I always did, I reached for the earrings on the bedside table where I had left them the night before, but they were not there. Vanished, evaporated. I stood there, bewildered, fearful, expecting—what? A punishment that never came.

Naturally, they were not any pair of earrings. They had been hand-made by my friend Naomi Schor's mother, Resia, who was an artist and a jeweler. My husband, a graduate school friend of Naomi, had bought them for me as a birthday present, at least thirty years earlier. The gift of the earrings marked a moment in my friendship with Naomi when our bond was new, and the two of us were engaged in a phase of intense identification, and competition, with each other, but also—this is harder to explain—*for* each other.

The earrings were shaped like the outline of a daisy with uneven edges that bore the maker's hand—thin, flat, and elegant, the gold flower perfectly covered the two asymmetrical sets of holes in my ear lobes. I always traveled with this pair because they were easy to wear—with anything—and comfortable. I am wearing them in my last, expired passport picture.

The losing score: one pair of earrings, three close friends: Naomi Schor in 2001, Carolyn Heilbrun in 2003, Diane Middlebrook in 2007.

### 3

The ancients thought friends indispensable to human life, indeed that a life without friends was not really worth living.

—Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*

### 4

Naomi and I had lived in Paris in the late sixties when we were in our twenties. She was doing research for her dissertation on the novels of Émile Zola; her boyfriend occasionally worked for the man I had just married. My husband had created a small seat-of-the-pants English language school for businessmen. One night the boyfriend and the husband had traveled out of town for a “gig,” as they liked to say, borrowing the vocabulary of musicians, pretending they weren't teachers of English, giving classes to French businessmen who worked in the suburbs for big American oil companies. “Gig” increased their sense of cool, of on-the-road visions. They were late getting home, probably out drinking at a Vin

et Charbons café in some fringy working-class neighborhood near the outskirts of Paris. Both were ardent Marxists, high on Mao.

When she phoned, worried about the whereabouts of her boyfriend, introducing herself, Naomi said we had met at one of the annual restaurant dinners my husband used to host for the teachers in his improvised school. I must have been too caught up in my role as the boss's wife to notice.

## 5

When we met face to face in New York, we were women between stories. I was no longer living in Paris, no longer the boss's wife, or anybody else's. Naomi no doubt had a new boyfriend, but the main connection between us was her appointment as assistant professor in Columbia's French department, where I was a beginning graduate student. She was younger than I by a couple of years—my sister's age, in fact. I was distinctly lower on the academic ladder, but, whereas my dissertation, Naomi always said, would be publishable (if I managed ever to write one, of course), her Yale dissertation, according to the *éminence grise* of the department, belonged to a past tense. She would have to start over. Naomi thought that judgment erased any advantage she might have over me in our future careers.

Deuce would have been the perfect score if only we had been playing tennis.

Naomi and I were desperately and equally ambitious about our careers as French scholars, though we specialized in the literature of different centuries: mine the eighteenth, hers the nineteenth. Our literary heroines were, of course, French and fated to meet disaster. Hers was Emma Bovary; mine the Marquise de Merteuil. Like them, we were alternately exalted and wounded in our twentieth-century love affairs.

Neither of us wanted to have more than the other. As long as we were both miserable, the balancing act worked. The difference of years and rank along with the history of our families mattered less than what we shared: we didn't have what we wanted. The gap between what we wanted and what we lacked—tenure, a relationship (with a man capable of commitment), a child (eventually)—seemed reducible only by a miracle in our favor. We didn't believe in miracles. On the other hand, we believed in each other.

## 6

Soon after we met, Naomi and I shopped together at a boutique called Charivari, on Broadway, in the heart of the Upper West Side. The store carried a limited number of brands (often French), and it was almost impossible not to find something to wear, including the holy grail of perfectly cut black pants. Because we were about the same size and height, we often bought variants of the same piece of clothing—the same sweater with different necklines, the same tunic in different colors—hers always more vivid (purple) than mine (beige). It was not about dressing like twins, it was a matter of sharing a taste. We did not want to be identical, and we spent long hours discussing how we were alike and yet not alike. In fact, that was our main subject.

We smiled enigmatically, though, when people asked us if we were sisters, especially once in 1975, when Naomi cut her long thick hair, had a very bad perm, and ended up with hair as frizzy as mine. This did not please her lover, who, later in an autobiographical revenge novel, described his disgust with our endless conversations—“lesbianizing” each other, as he put it.

“From the beginning,” Gail Caldwell writes in *Let’s Take the Long Way Home*, a friendship memoir, as she calls it, about Caroline Knapp, “there was something intangible and even spooky between us that could make strangers mistake us as sisters or lovers.”<sup>1</sup> Since Naomi and I each had a sister, our amusement at being taken for sisters was more about seeing the intimacy of our relationship reflected in the eyes of outsiders than wanting to be part of the same biological family.

I’ve never thought it a good idea to confuse friends with sisters, and we didn’t; at the same time I can remember feeling that there was something familial (reassuring but oddly exciting) about wearing the earrings that my friend’s mother had made.

## 7

Often you lose things and they reappear (not the gold earrings). The flooding relief at finding is as great as the gasping panic at losing.

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1. Gail Caldwell, *Let’s Take the Long Way Home: A Memoir of Friendship* (New York: Random House, 2010), 12.

I make a vow to be more mindful, inhabit the present, as they say in Buddhism. Pay attention to our humble, daily activities. I plant my intention, as the teacher urges at the beginning of yoga class. Dedicate our practice to someone important. I silently make the gesture and mean it. And then I lose my cell phone.

## 8

There is a certain solace in writing about loss because it's a way of coming to terms with mortality, the way Montaigne said that to philosophize is to learn to die. As long as you are doing the writing, you are rehearsing the losing; unlike the friend, you are not yet lost. You are the mourner, after all. But what happens when you start losing yourself? When, while contemplating the loss of your friend, you discover that your position, secured among the living, is unstable, unsure. You may have imagined yourself safely on the side of the living, and then suddenly, like me, you are on the verge, possibly, of disappearing yourself.

A few weeks after I began to write about the friends I had lost in the first decade of the twenty-first century, writing here to this very point, I was diagnosed with advanced stage lung cancer. As I struggled to understand what that meant—how long would I live, how would I live—I wanted to abandon this project. I had been writing from the place of the one who remained behind. Petrarch. Suddenly I was mourning myself.

I had been writing about the friends I missed; now I was forced to imagine that other friends would mourn me. Did that mean that I had joined my friends in the object position, and if so, was the difference between us merely a matter of timing? Was that all? No, not yet. Doubly split in two. I still wanted to be the subject; I wanted to be in charge of the story and I had lost control of the narrative.

Cancer, above all, destroys the ordinary divisions of time through which we take for granted the capacity—however illusory—of severing past from present, present from future. To write about the friends I had lost in the past, while losing the belief that my present was moving me into some kind of future, made me feel that I no longer had a place from which to write.

Cancer has moved me into a present that has no purchase on the future and no clear margin from the past. Cancer attracts clichés. Tell someone you have cancer and you cannot make plans for the future, and she will remind you that she could get hit by a bus while crossing the

street. True, but as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, beloved friend and former colleague, often remarked about her emigration into the world of cancer: we can all know that we are mortal, but to *realize*— yes, you’ve gotten the news— your proximity to death, that is the blow that changes the mind’s relation to temporality. As a patient you are forced into inhabiting a present without borders; like your cancer cells and the chemo that tries to circumvent their travel, by definition there are no inherent limits to cancer’s boundaries.

## 9

Probably the most famous line about modern friendship is Montaigne’s explanation of why he loved the friend lost to him, La Boétie, in his essay “Of Friendship”: “Because it was he, because it was I.”<sup>2</sup> I’m easily seduced by aphorism, and Montaigne’s is justly legendary. The opening of Caldwell’s memoir, expresses that sense of irreducible affinity between the two women: “It’s an old, old story. I had a friend and we shared everything, and then she died and so we shared that, too.”<sup>3</sup> But how to tell that story?<sup>4</sup> Friendship narratives, whatever their intensity, are difficult to plot; unless of course the relationship ends— either through a rupture, or through death. There’s nothing like death to offer the kind of closure that allows for shapely storytelling, formal legacy of elegy.

If death ends a friendship story, how does the story begin?

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2. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 139. I’m setting aside Montaigne’s conviction, echoing that of the ancients, that women were incapable of the “fellowship and communion” he admires between men, and also his horror at what he says passed for friendship among Greek men. Ivy Schweitzer’s scholarly study *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006) offers a sophisticated, feminist analysis of friendship’s canonical history, the male line. See in particular the chapter “Smoke and Mirrors,” which I have found helpful and illuminating.
  3. Caldwell, *Let’s Take the Long Way Home*, 3.
  4. Some recent examples of friendship narratives are Paul Lisicky, *Through the Narrow Door: A Memoir of Friendship* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2016); Susanna Sonnenberg, *She Matters: A Life in Friendship* (New York: Scribner, 2013); and Gail Caldwell, *Let’s Take the Long Way Home*. There is also Ann Patchett’s slightly earlier *Truth and Beauty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

10

“The two women were alone in the London flat.”<sup>5</sup> The first line of Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* launches a fictional point of departure from which to consider the mutual attachment at the heart of friendship. The novel staggered my imagination when I first read it in 1962.

What happens between two women alone? Virginia Woolf famously fantasized the plot in *A Room of One’s Own* through her invention of Chloe and Olivia as the heroines of the novel of the future.

“Both writers who lived alone, Caroline and I shared a general intractability at disrupting our routines,” in tandem or solitary, but always “shared or compared.”<sup>6</sup>

Caldwell prizes sharing as an act that is neither undermined, nor wounded by competition. “We had been friends for a couple of years,” Caldwell writes, calling up a precious memory of time spent on a lake, “and we had the competitive spirit that belongs to sisters, or adolescent girls — each of us wanted whatever prowess the other possessed.”<sup>7</sup>

Each of us wanted whatever X the other possessed. I can’t help but be astonished by this formulation, envious of it at the same time, since for me, as for many women, competition in friendships, like comparison, is the worn patch in the carpet, so bare it is easy to slip. Wanting what the other possessed for me always verged painfully on envy, even, or especially, when the other suffered from the matching disease, as Naomi and I did: we doubled our capacity for the emotion by mirroring it.

Comparison equals death, says a friend who, like me, cannot compare herself with another woman without losing in her own eyes. So therefore I have to resist comparing my friendships to theirs — Caldwell and Knapp’s — which, naturally, I can’t help doing. Since I wrote those lines, the friend with a gift for negative comparison died of ovarian cancer. When she received her diagnosis, we compared that too — between ourselves.

How can friendship’s narrative properties (what might they be?), unlike those of romance and marriage, become substantial enough to generate plot? What makes for a sustainable narrative beyond evoking the qualities of the other and the intensity of the affection? For Caldwell

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5. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 3.

6. Caldwell, *Let’s Take the Long Way Home*, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 7.

and Knapp what's shared is a passion first for dogs, doubled with another passion — first Knapp's then acquired by Caldwell, tutored by Knapp — for rowing, that give the book its particularity.

As a reader, hungry for a story of friendship between women as a way of assuaging my loss of women friends, I have to make a giant detour around the dogs and oars — skipping big chunks of narrative. But since I identify with the emotion threaded through the story, I imagine an analogy for myself by creating substitute passions, and it works.

## 11

### Dogs.

Growing up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, walking to and from school, I crisscrossed the streets in order to avoid encountering a dog. Given the number of (large) neighborhood specimens, I invariably ended up late for school or late home from school for lunch. I had inherited this fear from my father, who seemed ill at ease with any kind of animal and, in fact, inadvertently killed my goldfish one summer when I was away at camp by feeding them matzoh instead of fish food.

Rowing on a lake. Camp. Like swimming and canoeing, alien activities imposed on shivering Jewish city girls accustomed to overheated apartments. (Knapp was Jewish, spoiling my generalization, but maybe living in New England inured her to the cold.)

Despite my longstanding autobiographical limitations (tastes?), I am thrilled to read a story that takes as its center what happens between two women who are friends, even if I have to skirt my way around the dogs as I did when I was a child. And so I hang in, hooked on the love between the two women.

It would be truer to say that I envy their friendship.

I don't know about the rowing, but Carolyn Heilbrun (my friend Carolyn), dog lover par excellence, would have been entranced by the doggy bits. The attraction seemed irresistible, and she would stop as we walked on Broadway to engage with whatever dog we encountered. (She would no doubt have read Knapp's memoir *Pack of Two: The Intricate Bond Between People and Dogs* with relish.)<sup>8</sup>

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8. Caroline Knapp, *Pack of Two: The Intricate Bond Between People and Dogs* (New York: Delta, 1999).



12

When they are not dog-caring and rowing, Gail and Caroline are, by profession, writers, and that identification trumps the canine, though it is almost never center stage.

Because we had known of each other for a few years before we'd met, we had relied on that implicit assumption between writers of recognizing the other's achievement; in most relationships this commonality of purpose would more than suffice. But Caroline had never said anything directly about what I did or what she thought about how well I did it, though she had given me a copy of her memoir and asked repeatedly if I had liked it.<sup>9</sup>

Looking back, Gail, who had received a Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2001 (not mentioned in the memoir) revisits their relationship as writers and recalls a painful moment around the question of recognition: "Finally I blurted out, I have to ask you something difficult—I need to know what you think of my work."<sup>10</sup> Caroline is horrified to realize how her silence weighed on her friend and, as they walk and talk, they share their thoughts about "what a swampland this was: the world of envy and rivalry and self-doubt (between women, and writers, and women writers), about insecurity and power differentials."<sup>11</sup> Despite the comfort of hearing her work praised, and the relief that follows the confession, Gail is shocked by the exposure of her vulnerability and remembers her tears on the moment. Caroline asks what is wrong. Gail replies: "Oh no, . . . I need you."<sup>12</sup> But then, the next chapter opens on the mutual nature of the feeling: "She would say, I think, that the need was greater on her end."<sup>13</sup>

We don't wish to feel wanting in the category of need.

This admission of need startled me. Have I ever acknowledged that need of my friends? Heard it expressed? I needed my friends, as much as Gail and Caroline needed each other, but I cannot retrieve even a fragment of memory in which I articulated my need—in those words. Caldwell admits to feeling "unnerved" by her vulnerability, her exposure.

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9. Caldwell, *Let's Take the Long Way Home*, 27.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 28.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 29.

Certainly, I acted out the emotional connection — once leaving Naomi after a stay in Paris and crying uncontrollably as I descended the stairs — but somehow I never said it. I feel strange even admitting to the feeling now, or rather naming it.<sup>14</sup>

13

In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the first volume of her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir describes the moment she measured the power of her attachment to her classmate Elizabeth, known as Zaza. The new school year finds Simone unexpectedly morose, when Zaza approaches and starts a conversation. As they speak, Simone begins to feel an intense sensation, a complete upending of her previous values: “That’s what was wrong; I needed Zaza!”<sup>15</sup> The revelation comes as a shock to her nervous system.

I needed her presence to realize how much I needed her. This was a blinding revelation. All at once, conventions, routines, and the careful categorizing of emotions were swept away and I was overwhelmed by a flood of feeling that had no place in any code. I allowed myself to be uplifted by that wave of joy which went mounting inside me, as violent and fresh as a waterfaling cataract, as naked, beautiful, and bare as a granite cliff.<sup>16</sup>

From the vantage point of her fifties, Beauvoir records the experience with hyperbole verging on ecstasy unmediated by the notes of restraint or irony that run through the memoir and typically cap expressions of extreme emotion.

Until this moment, the writer explains in retrospect, she pictured herself as an isolate: “And if sometimes I thought I was an exceptional

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14. Confession, embarrassing: since writing this, I’ve been rereading pages and pages of letters between Naomi and me in which need is writ large — on both sides. In the next iteration of this project, I will have to revise memory.

15. Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (New York: HarperPerennial, 1974), 95. The first volume ends with Zaza’s death, a loss that haunts Beauvoir throughout the autobiography — and her life: “For a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death” (360). Some critics believe that Zaza’s death was the driving emotion behind *The Second Sex*.

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

young person, I no longer looked on myself as unique. . . . My self-sufficiency was tempered by feelings inspired by someone outside my family. I had the good fortune to find a friend.”<sup>17</sup> Zaza makes Simone feel less on her own. They talked, about everything, except themselves: “no girlish confidences.”<sup>18</sup> Over the years, the friendship will allow for greater intimacy, but what stands out in bold here is the strange contrast between the almost sexual, certainly erotic, effect of discovering the enormous passion in herself for a friend and the overwhelming power of the need.

## 14

Despite Montaigne’s “because” of ineffability, every friendship (even his with La Boétie) has something to do with timing — the age at which the friendship begins; childhood friends are different from friends met in adulthood — and, for lack of a better word, the moment (era, nation, culture) within historical time. Friendships (my friendships) formed in Second Wave feminism, for instance, were embarked upon self-consciously and deliberately in the crucible of work. This is what Woolf was getting at when she stuck the fictional heroines of the future female-authored novel in a laboratory, collaborating on a project to find a cure for pernicious anemia: mincing liver, no less. From 1929 to the stories of two women colleagues teaching in a French department in the 1970s, the leap is strangely small.

Laboratory, university setting, profession (not to mention dogs), friendship emerges not in a vacuum of Platonic ideal but in a medium — metaphor not out of place in the purview of a laboratory. Shared interests, we might say, like chemicals, catalyze the formation of friendship. It’s perhaps in that sense that Woolf remarks somewhat oddly of Chloe and Olivia’s fictional friendship that their shared laboratory experiments “will make their friendship more varied and lasting because it will be less personal.”<sup>19</sup> Not only feelings will supply the glue that holds a friendship together, but also work, common purpose, shared goals, what

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17. *Ibid.*, 91.

18. *Ibid.*, 93.

19. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1957), 88.

Adrienne Rich, glossing this story of affection between the women and taking it further, sees as “the creation of a common world.”<sup>20</sup>

## 15

The lively, intellectual correspondence between Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt is collected in a volume titled *Between Friends: 1949–1975* (edited by McCarthy’s biographer Carol Brightman at McCarthy’s urging).<sup>21</sup> The origins of their friendship have been captured in a well-known anecdote. At one of the *Partisan Review* parties in the 1940s, McCarthy made a quip about Hitler wanting to be loved by the French. Arendt took offense, said sharply that she had been interned in a camp, and that it was unacceptable to joke about the Holocaust. A few years later Arendt and McCarthy found themselves standing on a subway platform in Manhattan. Arendt approached McCarthy and said: “Let’s end this nonsense. We think so much alike.” McCarthy apologized for her remark; in turn Arendt admitted that she’d been sent to an internment camp in France, not a concentration camp. More than twenty-years of correspondence ensued, ended only by Arendt’s death at sixty-nine. McCarthy was devastated.<sup>22</sup>

“Alone” and “on the same side,” is how Deborah Nelson describes their relationship.<sup>23</sup> They made common cause against their critics, and that solidarity was crucial to their bond. In a letter that evokes the style of exchange between the two writers, McCarthy praises Arendt’s new book *Men in Dark Times* and notably the role friendship plays in the portraits: “workmanly friendship, of apprentices starting out with their bundle on a pole and doing a piece of the road together.”<sup>24</sup> Arendt replies she thought she was creating “silhouettes,” but agrees with McCarthy’s formulation, yes, “friendship in the sense of ‘doing a piece of the road together,’” but

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20. Adrienne Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women,” *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 209.

21. Carol Brightman, ed., *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975* (New York: Harvest, 1996), 225.

22. Deborah Nelson, “The Virtues of Heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and the Anesthetics of Empathy,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 86.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Brightman, *Between Friends*, 225.

specifies a key distinction for her: “friendship as distinguished from intimacy.”<sup>25</sup> Intimacy was not a preferred category of Arendt’s, and she had a strong sense of what the distance between people should be, even between her and Mary.

I’d be tempted to say that “doing a piece of the road together” is what characterized my relationship with Naomi in our apprentice days — the seventies really — as we moved into the hierarchy of the academy, though despite Arendt’s caveat, intimacy was always essential to the bond.

#### 16

Well before the coinage of “BFF,” friends have tended to see forever on the horizon. After all, why should friendships end, especially a “best” friendship? But they do, and while we don’t foresee the falling out or falling off when we begin, a symbolic crack in the friendship is hard to avoid; it often becomes a secret wound. The remedy would be to recognize and repair it in time, as Caldwell did with Knapp, voicing the hurt. I have not always known how to do that. And, not surprisingly, because my friendships were also entangled with work (and ambition), that’s where the trouble tended to crop up.

#### 17

Naomi finished the book she had to write in order to get tenure at Columbia, or elsewhere. One afternoon in the spring of 1977, she called me from Paris — she was often in Paris — to tell me she had received a contract from a prestigious university press. “Now, it’s your turn,” she said. My turn to write my book. I remember the scene absolutely: sitting at the long Spanish table that served then as my desk, looking up at the bookshelves above it, gazing out the window from my new apartment on 79th street, the same street, as it happened, where Naomi and her sister had grown up, and her mother, widowed for decades, still lived.

My turn. I had been flailing for five years, failing to transform my dissertation into a book, and soon I would be up for tenure — as Naomi would before me. The book had to happen. But how? I needed to be goaded into action.

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25. *Ibid.*, 232.

*Reader, I wrote my book because she wrote hers.*

Tenure at Columbia eluded both of us. Naomi went to Brown; I crossed the street to Barnard. Naomi would have the better, fancier career; I got to stay in New York.

Our friendship continued long distance — when long distance by phone still meant something expensive and planned, replacing shopping, lunch, and bad coffee at Tom's (before Seinfeld made it a neighborhood landmark). It held into the 1990s, although a certain fraying began in the mid-1980s with Naomi's heartbreaking, late miscarriage, the deepest unsettling of our shared fate until then.

Toward the end of the eighties, when I left Barnard for CUNY and a French connection for appointment in an English Program, the symmetry between us shattered further. Naomi disliked *Getting Personal*, the book that marked my turn into autobiographical criticism. She told me this as we walked along the coastline of Brittany, where we had gone for a therapeutic (French style) weekend spa. "We're not doing the same thing, anymore," she said sadly, almost mournfully. I didn't think I had lost the faith completely, after all, we were both still academics, still had read what we had read, dissected our relationships, measured our masochisms, compared our depressions. I was stung by her disdain, though, and worried if she was right. I swallowed the hurt. We could share a room, swim together in an evil-smelling thermal pool, but our books would move us in different directions.

Books became the "solvent power of discord," to borrow another metaphor from Cicero, that loosened the "binding force of friendship."<sup>26</sup>

The emotional seesaw of passionate attachment and equally intense disaffection between two women, friends since childhood, is brilliantly displayed in Elena Ferrante's fascinating suite of Neapolitan novels that have captivated many thousands of women readers. It's almost as though Ferrante was picking up the challenge in Lessing's novel to reveal the world through "the filter which is a woman's way of looking at life."<sup>27</sup> From the first volume of Ferrante's female-centered saga, the emotional complexities of friendship between women constellate almost every page.

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26. Cicero, "On Friendship."

27. Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, xvii.

18

“Depression killed Sylvia Plath,” my friend Diane Middlebrook wrote with trademark clarity in *Her Husband*, her joint biography of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.<sup>28</sup> Depression, I want to say, mine and Naomi’s, hopelessly entangled over the years, devastated our friendship. “Maybe you’re not a writer,” she said one day during a phone call in the mid-nineties when I admitted to struggling with one of my books. “A real writer”—meaning Proust or Flaubert, or her pernicious French lover. Indeed. But maybe I could still write something. My depression—always more silent, more withdrawn—made me vulnerable to her lashing out, what I took to be her unconscious cruelty. (It was her depression speaking, her mother would say later.) We continued to wound each other—with words, with silence, with anger. Finally, we parted in great pain, bitterly but also reluctantly. “I’m tired of placating you,” I said over brunch at Sarabeth’s. I feared her displeasure as I had feared my mother’s, mixing histories that should have been kept separate. “That was one of your greatest characteristics,” she said without irony. We had gone too far to rewind the reel, like the friends in volume three of Ferrante’s story *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*: “We had become for each other abstract entities. . . . We both needed new depth, body, and yet we were distant and couldn’t give it to each other.”<sup>29</sup>

19

Despite our rift, Naomi and I continued to mark each other’s birthdays. Birthdays are hard to forget. And then around 2000, we slowly started inching back to conversation. We met for the first time in many years at Naomi’s sister’s Chinatown loft for an open studio party. It was right after September 11. I had been photographing the posters of the missing in the downtown streets of lower Manhattan. I still had my camera in hand when Naomi entered with her new husband: I snapped the picture. It was the last one anyone would take of her. She was wearing red and smiling.

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28. Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, A Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2003), 211.

29. Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa, 2014), 315.

We met the next day at a former haunt of ours, Café Edgar, on the Upper West Side. We talked, almost as we had in the past, bringing ourselves up to date. She was struggling with a new book. I was trying to figure out mine. She had suffered a new illness, after liver disease and cancer, and was taking a blood thinner. I was still well, the well one, as I had always been. We decided to resume on email.

A few weeks later, Naomi complained about a headache. Shortly after, she died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

## 20

Naomi collected majolica plates. Before the rupture she gave me one decorated with a French maxim: *La fumée s'envole, l'amitié reste*. Smoke disappears, friendship remains. I had hung the plate on the wall when she gave it to me — when? I took it down after we stopped speaking. The irony of the message was too painful. After her death, I rehung the plate. It is starting to seem true again, that friendship remains, though in a past tense, in a story punctuated by beautiful highs, devastating lows.

After Naomi's death, to honor the years she spent teaching at Brown, the Pembroke Center created an archive of feminist theory, launched with the donation of her papers. Mine will be there as well one day. So our friendship will remain, archived under the theory that had been our lifeline in the earliest years of our relationship.

## 21

Carolyn Heilbrun wrote often and enthusiastically about friendship between women. In *Writing a Woman's Life*, arguably her most successful book, she takes inspiration from the relationship between Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, an intense friendship forged in the aftermath of World War I in England. Large chunks of Heilbrun's introduction to Vera Brittain's *Testament of Friendship*, the book dedicated to Winifred Holtby and their intense bonding, reappear verbatim in the pages of *Writing a Woman's Life*, seven years later.<sup>30</sup>

I think it's fair to say that Carolyn was in love with the two women — at least with their friendship, which she clearly envied. She was in love

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30. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 95–108.



with their love for each other: "Only death could halt the friendship and its constant and continuous dialogue; neither marriage, more distance, nor illness could have done so."<sup>31</sup> In a word, Carolyn declared, "The friendship of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby is as a public record, unique."<sup>32</sup> Still, she finds their imagination slightly imperfect, fashioned as it was "unconsciously" to a "male pattern," citing the way the two young women fantasized their match: "If you call yourself Rodney and me Peter," Holtby quipped, "it might almost be a glorified replica of some of our midnight conversations."<sup>33</sup>

With some fine tuning for history, Brittain and Holtby's affair of brains and writing became for Carolyn an attainable, consciously female model for late twentieth-century friendships. The "constant and continuous dialogue" between the two women so admired in the pages of *Testament of Friendship* was the key to Carolyn's friendship habits.<sup>34</sup> Shortly after we were introduced at Columbia toward the end of the 1970s we began the weekly dinners that continued until her suicide some twenty-five years later. Despite the disparity in academic rank and style—Carolyn a powerful senior colleague in English to my junior perch in French—we taught together and quibbled about our differences over raw fish, as she liked to describe our Japanese meals. I was not, however, her only regular dinner companion. Carolyn created her ideal relationship in pieces, often with younger women, connections made possible because of shared thinking about feminism.

Brittain writes the story of their friendship after Holtby's untimely death from Bright's disease (a chronic disease of the kidneys), and so once again the story of women's friendship bears the mark of elegy—and the burden of remembrance. In the midst of friendship it is hard to see a storyline. But maybe story is not what matters, at least not in memoirs that are also elegies, which *Testament* surely was.

"My life had made so much sense *alongside hers*," Caldwell writes in the wake of her friend's death, another elegy in prose, "grief is what tells you who you are alone."<sup>35</sup>

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31. *Ibid.*, 99.

32. *Ibid.*, 105.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 99.

35. Caldwell, *Let's Take the Long Way Home*, 3.

22

In November 2007, a month before she died, I visited Diane in London. She was extremely ill with a rare and devastating cancer, but still trying to make progress on her projected biography of Ovid. (I was also at the time, along with her daughter Leah, Diane's literary executor.) We sat at her elegant dining-room table, facing the garden and, for as long as she could sit without too much pain, we outlined together the shape of a dramatically truncated work. It seemed unlikely that Diane would ever be well enough to finish even this much shorter book, but she was not ready to give up, as neither of us would acknowledge, and I was willing to help sustain her in the desire to continue. After I returned to New York, Diane wrote me an email thanking me for the "gift" of my visit and "maybe most powerfully in the way it stirred me back to life in my mind." Her faith in me was the gift I in turn received from her.<sup>36</sup>

Diane and I were late-life friends. By the time we met, we were both sixty and launched in our writing lives. Our friendship took root at a conference on autobiography and biography held in Laramie, Wyoming, far from our usual settings. This was to be the third and last of my life-changing friendships, a friendship we both looked forward to creating despite our bi-coastal locations. Cancer changed our plans, but in the short duration of our time together, we had an intense meeting of the minds — though never without the intimacy that Arendt wished to foreclose.

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The last two lines from Elizabeth Bishop's famous poem "One Art" seem to offer consolation when we are overwhelmed with grief. The seductive refrain "The art of losing isn't too hard to master" suggests that if put into words, loss ultimately becomes bearable. The imperative of the last line — set in italics followed by an exclamation point — is appealing, especially to a writer: "though it may look like (*Write it!*) disaster." Yes, we think, we'll try and put the pain on paper. But of course the poet knows that the art of losing is hard to master, even rehearsed in words. "*Write it!*"

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36. *Feminist Studies* posthumously published one of the two completed chapters from this project as "20 March, 43 BCE: Ovid Is Born" *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 293–329.

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What then can I write in this present that draws me closer to the past tense of my dead friends, and simultaneously separate from the way—not long ago—I saw them? I have to create a fiction that keeps me at a distance not so much from them as from myself as I am now. But how can I return, even in writing, to the person I was before my cancer, while knowing this requires an art I will never master?

*Author's note:*

This essay is part of my feminist friendship archive project, "Missing Friends," at <http://nancykmiller.com>.