

# SMALL CHANGE

Elizabeth Hay



EMBLEM

McClelland & Stewart

“Tightly sprung stories, beautifully balanced, and eminently re-readable.”

— *Quill & Quill*

“This exceptional, well-paced collection of linked stories about women’s friendships has an extraordinarily intimate feel that’s propelled by the reader’s sense that he or she has either known or been the woman Hay portrays.”

— *Booklist*

“Beautiful, insightful studies of women and friendship....”

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“Hay brings together in [*Small Change*] the revelatory power of narrative, the analytic possibilities of the personal essay and memoir, the investigative discipline of journalism, and the sudden illumination of lyric, and as a result she seems able to pick up almost everything — everything said, and most of what is only whispered in a gesture or a look between friends.... Endlessly rewarding.... These stories are beautifully written and carefully honed.”

— *Malahat Review*

“Hay knows how to make a line breathe, and it’s possible to open the book at random to find sharp, almost electric, prose leap out and give off light.... Through sparkling prose, Hay is able to flesh out the quirky and individual gestures that make out relationships....”

— *Ottawa X Press*

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“In spare prose, the stories exert a quiet forcefulness and convey a sense of character, message, and plot without pretense or superficiality. A gifted storyteller, Hay has written a wise, penetrating, and memorable collection of stories that communicates the vulnerable nature of friendship....”

— *Library Journal*

“Stories that capture those details, moments, that someone less observant, less sensitive would miss. Language that flows as easily as water.”

— Jury citation, Governor General’s Literary Award

“Hay knows the dirt roads of the heart like her own back yard.”

— *Canadian Book Review Annual*

“One of Canada’s premier writers....”

— *Canadian Forum*

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**S M A L L**  
**C H A N G E**



**E L I Z A B E T H**  
**H A Y**



**EMBLEM**  
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*This book is for my mother, my daughter,  
and Sheila McCook*

Her failure lay within herself, in her abrupt pride, and sudden sharp intolerance, and her inability, when in certain moods, to accept the small change of friendship, even from those who she knew loved her deeply.

Noël Coward, *Present Indicative*

You have to be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time.

Toni Morrison, *Jazz*

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She was thirty, a pale beautiful woman with long blond 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 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 out loud. She complied. In conversation she was direct and Danny often took part, but in bed, apparently, she said nothing. She felt him slide against her, 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, commenting on everything he said and making 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 the school yard that 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 at once private, natural, and fenced off. This time everything was in the open. I was the audience, the friend with stroller, the mild-mannered wide-eyed listener who learned that breastfeeding brought her to the point of orgasm, that childbirth had made her vagina sloppy and loose, that anal sex hurt so much she would sit on the toilet afterwards, bracing 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 looked like. They must have been 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 holding her at bay? I remember her lips, those thin Rock Hudson lips.

One evening we stood on the corner and she smiled her fleeting meaningful smiles, looking 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 that 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 – but 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 enough to receive scholarships to private schools. It was the private school look she had 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 while everything else went wrong: car 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 the sight was so out of character: everything about Maureen was usually in scattered disarray.

Her mother was tall, and more attractive in photographs than in person. In photographs she was still, in person she darted about, high-strung, high-pitched, erratic. Her rapid murmur left the same impression: startling in its abnormality, yet apparently normal. 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. She said, ‘With or without the paper?’ Lots of children can read at five, even her sister 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 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 late summer, 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 fine sheen.

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, which 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. It was hot and humid. There would be rain in the night and again in the morning. We followed

path through the woods to a stream where the kids splashed about while Maureen and I dangled our feet 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 so close 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. Can you believe it? And she laughed – giddy – flushed – excited – and eager, it seemed, to impress me with her sexual openness and to console herself with the thought that she had impressed me. A warm breeze blew a strand of her hair into my face. I brushed it away and it came back – tickling, 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 to sit 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.



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 take 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. Quebec has an expression for beating up egg whites: *monter en neige*. Milk foams up and snow rises.

Under the old linoleum old newspapers advertise an “equipped one bedroom at Lome near Albert” for \$175. Beside the porch door the linoleum has broken away and you can reach mildew, dust, grit, *Ottawa Citizen*, May 1, 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 last month I saw Maureen when I saw the moon. I saw my thumb in shadow 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 of

the pavement. New York's dangers were all around us, as was Maureen's fake laugh. She pushed William high in the swing, then let out a little trill each time he came swooping back.

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. Often we stopped for tea at Maureen's. 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, dressing 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 a 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 she 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 would ask, "Is this all? Is this going to be my contribution?" She was referring to her brilliant past and her sorry present: her pedestrian job, the poor neighbourhood, her high maintenance husband when there were any number of men she could have married, and any number she said. 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 a tantrum she would hold him in her lap behind a closed door, then emerge half an hour later with a small smile. "That was a short one. 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 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, cram s.o.s pads into the hole – against the mouse, taste of it, peanut butter in the trap. Feel 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 ratting 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 told her I thought she had called earlier, I was in the bathroom and the phone rang forever. Oh, she said, I'm sorry, 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 at being swallowed whole.

“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 is 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 her friend Joyce, 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 therefore 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 neither 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 taking on huge, saintly proportions. As for me, 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, Danny and I were even more so.

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 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 would not 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.

We were sitting on the mattress on the floor of 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 is even more eager than I am,” smiling at herself in the mirror.

Danny got sick. I suppose he had been sick for months, but I heard about it in the 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 was 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 immediately before, I knew I would not. One night 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. And what I noticed was that 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 an 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 been away from 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 brooding. Here they met again, going 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.

September came and went, October came and went, winter didn't come. It rained in November, it rained again 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 dusted with 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 seated in a restaurant, the other skating by. I looked at them keenly, waiting for recognition to burst upon them, but it didn't.

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 Ted and I had been somewhere else.

The connections were wistful, intangible, maddening. Memory tantalized before it 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, 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, she was doing her best to answer them.

"Look," she said again, pointing 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 café, my voice friendly enough but without the intonations of affection and interest, the rhythms of sympathy, the animation of friendship. In the subway we felt warm again. She waited for my train to come, trying to redeem and at the same time distance herself. I asked about Danny and she answered. She talked about his job, her job, how little time each of them had for themselves. She went on and on. 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," listing the words that Victoria already knew.

She still shivered occasionally. She must have known why I didn't call any more, 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.



It's late. When snow falls at night this room is lighter because falling snow brightens the streetlight and again afterwards because the moon comes out and shines on the new snow. Movie sets use Styrofoam panels to extend the day. The same principle applies: a pulsing light between two sources of brightness: snow and moon, Styrofoam and sun, nightshirt and frypan. I learned about the fire in a letter from Maureen's older sister Jill.

"We started out at opposite points," Jill said to me once when we were talking about Maureen, "and now we've come together." She meant that my liking had turned to dislike and her dislike had softened.

Behind her glasses Jill's eyes were tentative and on hold. She was the one who seemed to know so little, yet knew everything. She knew about Danny's affair with Henry and her various flirtations, and she predicted how everything would end. What she predicted unfolded before her eyes.

One Sunday morning in June she was drinking coffee while reading a book in a small cafe in the Village. Jill was always reading, a professional disease, she said, it goes with being a librarian. Her visits to the Village were to see her two troubled sons and her various doctors. For as long as I knew her, she was solicitous, stoical, and ill.

Her table was beside a row of windows overlooking the street. For a moment she looked up, her eyes shifting past parking meters and cars, and saw Danny. He was at the corner with his arm around a pretty young woman. The light turned, they crossed the street and walked right past her window without seeing her.

She had to smile. Danny had done the unpredictable by doing the most predictable thing of all. She said to me, "I felt the way a novelist must feel when her characters come to life."

Danny's sweet young thing, as Jill called her, was a student painter who had gone to him for advice. Maureen reacted (I swear this is true) by taking up painting.



She gets up early while the others sleep, makes chamomile tea and drinks it with honey, then sits down at her work table beside the window. This is easier to imagine than what she paints. I suspect she paints picture after picture of the same empty bed.

Her skin absorbs paint. She takes to it as a dry wall, untouched for years, soaks up gallons after gallon of colour. Or a city in decline surrenders to the paintbrush and then the fire. Her hands go yellow, green, blue – a rainbow bruise extending up her wrists.

One afternoon she puts away freshly washed laundry and notices drops of blood on the white sheets. She looks at her palms and sees on her fingers splits as fine as paper cuts. That hasn't happened since she was a child. In those days she refused salves and creams, so every night her mother waited until she had fallen asleep, then snuck into her room and rubbed her hands with oil and her lips with Vaseline. Under her mother's shiny fingertip, Maureen's chapped lips moved like relaxed limbs. That was the first of the nightly Vaseline rituals.

Let's say it's two in the morning. Let's say the window is open and light from the street falls on the bed. Danny undresses. His face is all bone – teeth, nose, high forehead – but his body is shapely. Maureen has told me how fine his legs are, how fine his chest. His coat waves a little – uncertain top-heavy bloom – smooth and shiny tulip past its prime. Women scrub floors until their hands are the same colour and equally shiny.

Her panic is almost permanent now. She is awake, she wants to talk, but he hushes her. She has the children, which she wanted; they are together still and she wants that. He lies down beside her. Again she tries to talk. “I have no friends. No one ever calls -”

“Shhhh.”

The only man in her life. The only man who has known her since girlhood and has witnessed her in her glory. The panic: not that there is nothing she can do (she works, she earns, she raises children), but that there is nothing she can do well. A form of amnesia has taken over and she cannot remember how it was that she ever excelled.

She goes into Danny's studio. She often goes in to look at his work and to see what he has in the small fridge in the corner. This time his notebook is lying on top of the fridge. In her hands it falls open to a male nude asleep in a manner that affords no rest. She thinks of a udder unmilked for days, something unbearably heavy, and feels simultaneously aroused and sad. Even in sleep he has to lug this thing around. The drawing could be a Biblical representation of Lust. It is a good drawing too.

In some ways they are closer than ever. Even more than before, he confides his artistic ambitions and sexual doubts. She listens. She sits on the pale yellow sofa in their bare furnished living room and keeps track. Sometimes her mind wanders, sometimes she turns away in fatigue, but in general she keeps track.

“You're my best friend,” he says, and it would have consoled her once. Victoria is two, William is five. “I can tell you anything.”

Here she is, a woman who has tormented and aroused herself with the thought of young boys in her husband's bed, and what lovers does he take? An old sadsack of a drunk and a young woman. Where does that leave her?

“Where does that leave me?” she asks.

She sees him disappearing, yet her footsteps are the ones filling with sand, hers are the fingerprints vanishing off the wall. He will never leave the house, he will never leave his studio.

By the end of the summer she no longer wants to keep abreast of his every thought and she wants to tell someone in exactly those words. *I no longer want to keep abreast.* But no one calls.

She runs her hand along the back of the sofa, releasing old dust into the late afternoon light. She looks beyond the stirred and shining air, beyond the disturbances in her life (dust, beautiful spore-filled air; a potential for flowers) to the phone.



She doesn't remember, except intuitively, the nightly occurrence of fingers smoothing her lips, stroking the skin under her nose and the edges of her nostrils, but when her mother returns to apply ointments, she finds that she already knows about this comfort, has acquired the knowledge the way you learn a language by listening to a tape while you sleep. Her mother returns in September after the fire.

Maureen had risen early with the kids. She hadn't bothered to change out of her long-sleeved cotton T-shirt and was still wearing it at noon. Victoria was napping, the boy was playing in the living room. He was hungry.

Maureen went into the kitchen to make pancakes. Sun poured into the kitchen while she poured oil into an aluminum frypan. The oil shone, the pan shone, her white T-shirt shone. And because she was leaning into the stove, because she was so close to the gas jet, because the white of her shirt fed the hot white light of the pan and the light of the pan bounced back to her shirt and back to the pan and back to her shirt, and perhaps because grease spat onto her shirt, (no one ever fully understood), it caught fire.

Danny was in the bath. He always had a bath when he got up around noon. Sometimes he locked the door, sometimes he wore a Walkman. It depended on his mood. There was another bathroom in the basement, if Maureen or the kids needed to pee they went there. He liked the bath to be full and hot, and the music loud.

Maureen sprang away from the stove and flames shot up to her face. There was a sink right there. She knew there was a sink, she knew she needed water. Nevertheless, she fled the kitchen. Later she would say that she wanted to get as far away as possible from the stove, that was only natural.

She ran screaming into the living room. But Danny didn't hear.

She tore a piece of fabric off the wall, an old, dry, embroidered piece of fabric from Peru. She slapped it against her chest and it went up like kindling.

She banged on the bathroom door and still he didn't hear. He didn't hear her, or the fire alarm, or the boy's screams.

And so she ran at the door. She backed up (this would be the lasting image in the boy's head: his mother on fire charging a locked door) and ran at it with her shoulder, knocking it halfway off its hinges and somersaulting into the bathtub.

My old neighbours heard the ambulance. Laura heard it on her way home from the hairdresser's and told Clara. "She was wearing this sheet and he had his arm around her, and I says to myself, I says, what happened to the baby?"

It was half past noon on a Friday. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.



We used to sit outside in the evening, Laura, Clara, Cathy and I, under the shadow of Frank's window. We would hear the sound of the second-floor window being raised behind us, and stiffen. We never looked up. Laura looked up.

"It's your husband," she would say to Cathy. And our talk would die on our lips.

We stayed out there till early September in a long slow slide from bare arms to sweaters to jackets, as the streetlights came on earlier and earlier and the air cooled down. Frank would come out with his pursed lips and barely perceptible nod, his slicked-back arrogant looks, and stand on *his* stoop whose outer sidewalk we, as tenants, could use. He would walk down the street saving his jocularly for certain men and his smiles for certain young women.

Last night I dreamt about Frank. We laughed together. He was sitting across the table and reached for my bag of tortilla chips. I nodded, then poked him in the chest. "Now you owe me one," I said. He laughed, or at least he smiled. How strange that dreams can make such friendliness possible.

The poinsettia has died but I haven't pitched it yet. It sits on the table next to the wide window that overlooks the playground (Canadian and glass-free) and the complicated and expensive play structure that dominates it. A memorial to simple childhood. May it rest.

Laura's words whenever she referred to her daughter. "I fed my daughter – may she rest – puddings and cakes and candy all the time. Never did no harm," and she emptied her pockets of sweets into my daughter's eager hands. Laura's daughter died in a diabetic coma at the age of forty-two.

Itiptoed up the stairs to avoid Laura for one reason and Frank for another. To avoid the punishing excesses of Laura's company (the mountains of macaroni and gravy she forced upon me) and to avoid any contact with Frank, of whom I had an unreasoning dread. But why unreasoning? It's too bad I was so afraid of him, but it wasn't unreasonable. I have never had Ted's capacity – as natural and pervasive as dew – to ignore people.

We were sitting in Laura's kitchen. Laura and I were at the kitchen table, Clara was in the rocking chair talking about her second pregnancy forty years ago. She craved apples, she said. In those days an apple tree grew in Laura's backyard, but Clara was new to the country, and shy, and didn't ask. As time went on and she continued to forgo the apple, she became convinced the baby would be "marked" in some way. She gave birth and to her horror the baby's face – as babies' faces often are – was streaked with red. She thought it was the apple.

Eat everything you crave, said Laura. If you don't, the baby will get marks.

Yes, she said. My aunt had this longing for wine and she always sat like this (she rested her cheek in the palm of her hand), and my niece was born with a wine hand on her face.

I was wearing one of Maureen's pregnancy dresses – a pink sundress with three small buttons at the back, the top one of which kept catching my hair, pulling my head gradually back and reminding me of the Ferris wheel. She was seventeen when it happened. After she extricated her – cutting away long blond hair wound so tightly around the cable that her head arched back – she had a bald spot the size of a fifty-cent piece.

In her dresses I wore her. Or she wore me? Which? She was covering my body, but I was inside her dress. People confused us with each other. One morning the newspaper vendor gave me a message about a possible babysitter, thinking he was giving a message to her.

Another morning I showered, then reached into the closet for one of her dresses. The right sleeve had come loose. I got out needle and thread and spent ten minutes mending it. The dress was mauve and white, striped and long. While I mended I read a story in the paper.

about a woman who had carried her sewing into the living room, her needle in one hand, what she was sewing in the other, and accidentally knocked against the doorway and drove the needle into her heart.

I miscarried that afternoon, and two months later Maureen was telling me she was pregnant.



There is a process in friendship of becoming the other person, and of erasing yourself and the other person in the process. You see the friend turn away, and in that moment you stop seeing the friend and see only yourself as someone turned away from.

I was never able to keep all of her in my mind at once, the person I had liked and the person I came to dislike. I remember standing beside her in the Korean fruit store while she bent down to smell a hyacinth in a pot, her long unwashed hair swinging into her face and mingling with the other smell – one sweet and otherworldly, the other salty and human. The smell of spring and the smell of panic.

Whenever her son whimpered in the night, she left Danny's side and lay down beside him till morning. She slept poorly because of the narrow bed and because of dreams in which young men appeared, intent on following her and eager to make love. She would wake with tears at the contrast between what she might have had, and what she had.

Her mother cornered me in the playground. Another visit, almost the same time of year as April, and the wind kept blowing her words away. She couldn't understand why Maureen's talents had borne so little fruit. If only she had more time. "She is so jealous," she said, "of the time you have to write."

In that moment I felt a cool wind of ill will blow against my skin – just enough to open up my own storehouse of negativity. I remembered the Russian tale I had read with such a sense of recognition. A peasant was given the chance to choose anything he wanted so long as his neighbour got twice as much. He thought and thought, and finally chose to have one of his eyes put out.

What was the word Maureen used as we went upstairs, the German word for joy and another's sorrow?

"I don't mean that," she said. "Not that dramatic. But, yes, I'm jealous of anybody's time, especially my husband's," and she laughed.

We were halfway up the stairs, she turned around to speak to me, and there was a small smile on her face. The Germans have a word for it.

I walked back home and looked out the window at Clara's garden next door. It was one of the most beautiful gardens I had ever seen. A narrow sidewalk, two steps, and where the steps rose, a low, roughly made stone wall. Beyond the wall under the magnolia small stones separated semi-circles of ground. It was a poor, graceful, hardworking garden that would produce abundantly all summer long. I opened the window and in surged the smell of laundry soap from down the street. A last snow flurry, a late spring.

A day later it surprised me how much her comments still bothered me. Bothered me more as I didn't hear from her, as I deliberately left the house early and unplugged the phone when

I came home, so that I couldn't hear from her. Then walked down the block looking for her the distance.

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What saved her was the lanolin she always rubbed into her nipples after nursing the children. She made a habit of spreading it around her chest and in the end it protected her skin from the fire. Jill wrote that she healed very quickly. In a few months she was probably an older version of the wedding snapshot taken when they were twenty-two. Danny and a friend of his had their arms around her thin shoulders, she was looking down at the ground, she was smiling (unlike the child who knew enough not to smile), and her hair was cropped close to her head. It formed a soft helmet, and yes, she looked like a boy.

Soon after we moved here, I picked up a small book about Cézanne. This was in September. I opened the book to dry landscapes and cool still lifes, to late summer and early fall, to the pleasure and pain of seasonal change, the detachment of weather. This is the detachment we seek and usually fail to find in friendships – an unbegrudging, clear-eyed, undemanding and infinitely interesting and natural presence.

Here were pears on a table, apples in a bowl, a flowered pitcher, a leafy piece of fabric. Everything gave the impression of being aware of every other thing but in a way that transcends the human.

I began to read the biographical notes and came upon the description of Cézanne's friendship with Zola, a deep and long friendship that began in Aix in 1852 when Cézanne was thirteen, and ended in 1886 when Zola published a novel about a painter who hanged himself in front of the painting he couldn't complete. Everyone knew the painter was Cézanne.

I reread the paragraph about the end of their friendship. "Although he spoke of it to no one, it could be seen that Cézanne's grief was bitter and irremediable. Perhaps it was partly because of the sincere compassion expressed in the novel that Cézanne's grief was so inconsolable."

I wondered how sincere Zola's compassion was. I wondered how it was known that Cézanne's grief was inconsolable if he spoke of it to no one, and how it was known that he spoke of it to no one. I wondered about Zola's ulterior motives – his desire to hurt an old friend, his competitiveness, his honesty, his dishonesty. The book said that Zola had moved away from his Impressionist friends and no longer believed in them, having been their most valiant champion. But my main interest was Cézanne and the way he dealt with the discovery that his oldest and dearest friend considered him a failure and used him as subject matter in his book.

No more letters passed between them, apparently. There were no more greetings, and they did not meet again.

In 1886 Cézanne was forty-seven. His friendship with Zola had lasted more than thirty years. The first time Zola left for Paris and Cézanne remained in Aix, they were about twenty. Cézanne wrote to him: "Ever since you left I am tormented by grief. This is the truth. You would not recognize me. I feel heavy, stupid and slow."

The book has two self-portraits: an unfinished sketch in 1880 when he was forty-one, hair bald, heavy forehead, dark beard, large face; then *Cézanne in a Soft Hat* ten years later, several years after the break with Zola and several years in the making. His nose and chin are more pointed than broad; his beard is white and grey; the colours of his coat, hat, and jacket are repeated in the colours of the wall; and he seems less massive – flimsier and more decorative. He is known for his persistence in the face of doubts and for how slowly he painted.

In early October we were beside a river with two friends. The woman was telling us the old friends of theirs had just moved away. They had moved away one morning, and in the afternoon she had walked past the empty house and couldn't believe how relieved she felt. She laughed about it and went on talking, compelled to tell us, her new friends, about the old friends.

She said it was the woman in the couple who had pulled away, and she had never understood why. Simply, the invitations stopped, the Christmas gifts ended, various courtesies vanished. With their disappearance arrived her confusion and sense of hurt, so that when she walked her dog past their house she was never sure whether the woman came down the steps because she wanted to say hello, or because she felt she had to.

She said, "I talked a lot about work with him, maybe she felt left out. And then she went through a lot of changes herself and got her own friends."

But none of these reasons was sufficient to explain a change so drastic, and she knew it.

She peeled a peach as she told the story. She avoided the words *dropped* or *dumped* or *rejected*. She said only that she didn't understand, that once there had been steady contact and then there was none, that whenever they saw each other they all enjoyed themselves, but afterwards there was nothing.

The peach was from the market, carried in a knapsack, a little bruised and one of eight. She peeled another, her fingers curving around the fruit, picking at the peel with her fingernails, then pulling it back. We sat on a blanket on the grass and ate tomatoes, bread, cheese, the peaches, a sausage. We ate with our hands and shared a napkin.

My friend dealt with being rejected by understanding and not understanding, stating and understating, avoiding certain things but staying true to the general picture. Her husband was impatient. He couldn't be bothered, he said, worrying about such things.

This is the refreshing thing about men. They don't brood so luxuriously about friendships gone wrong. They think about them very little, it seems, and talk about them less. Cézanne, for instance.

Ted said, "It's hard when one person wants the friendship and another doesn't. People change."

But that only rubbed salt in the wound. Our friend wasn't saying they didn't want her, she was saying they seemed to enjoy her company and this was the source of her confusion. She was unable to give up the hope that she was liked.

I was thinking about her again this morning when I peeled a peach. I used the fingers of my left hand, picking the skin loose at the top as you pick one page free from the page below.

I was thinking about a conversation with Maureen. We were in a park and it was warm, might have been late spring or early fall. We were sitting on a stone wall and she was distributing food to the kids. (She was always much more prepared than I, never leaving the house without a variety of snacks and drinks.) She could not believe, she said, that certain friends with whom she had been incredibly close had faded away – she mentioned a roommate in university – yet she admitted it was so with tight lips, and I knew she foresaw



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