THE FRIEND

A NOVEL

SIGRID NUNEZ

ALSO BY SIGRID NUNEZ

A Feather on the Breath of God
Naked Sleeper
Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury
For Rouenna
The Last of Her Kind
Salvation City
Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag

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SIGRID NUNEZ

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You have to realize that you cannot hope to console yourself for your grief by writing.

Natalia Ginzburg, “My Vocation”

You will see a large chest, standing in the middle of the floor, and upon it a dog seated, with a pair of eyes as large as teacups. But you need not be at all afraid of him.

Hans Christian Andersen, “The Tinderbox”

The question any novel is really trying to answer is, Is life worth living?

Nicholson Baker, “The Art of Fiction No. 212,” *The Paris Review*

PART ONE

During the 1980s, in California, a large number of Cambodian women went to their doctors with the same complaint: they could not see. The women were all war refugees. Before fleeing their homeland, they had witnessed the atrocities for which the Khmer Rouge, which had been in power from 1975 to 1979, was well known. Many of the women had been raped or tortured or otherwise brutalized. Most had seen family members murdered in front of them. One woman, who never again saw her husband and three children after soldiers came and took them away, said that she had lost her sight after having cried every day for four years. She was not the only one who appeared to have cried herself blind. Others suffered from blurred or partial vision, their eyes troubled by shadows and pains.

The doctors who examined the women—about a hundred and fifty in all—found that their eyes were normal. Further tests showed that their brains were normal as well. If the women were telling the truth—and there were some who doubted this, who thought the women might be malingering because they wanted attention or were hoping to collect disability—the only explanation was psychosomatic blindness.

In other words, the women's minds, forced to take in so much horror and unable to take more, had managed to turn out the lights.

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This was the last thing you and I talked about while you were still alive. After, only your email with a list of books you thought might be helpful to me in my research. And, because it was the season, best wishes for the new year.

• • •

There were two errors in your obituary. The date you moved from London to New York: off by one year. Misspelling of the maiden name of Wife One. Small errors, which were later corrected, but which we all knew would have annoyed the hell out of you.

But at your memorial I overheard something that would have amused you:
I wish I could pray.
What's stopping you?
He is.

Would have, would have. The dead dwell in the conditional, tense of the unreal. But there is also the extraordinary sense that you have become omniscient, that nothing we do or think or feel can be kept from you. The extraordinary sense that you are reading these words, that you know what they'll say even before I write them.

• • •

It's true that if you cry hard enough for long enough you can end up with blurred vision.

I was lying down, it was the middle of the day, but I was in bed. All the crying had given me a headache, I'd had a throbbing headache for days. I got up and went to look out the window. It was winter yet, it was cold by the window, there was a draft. But it felt good—as it felt good to press my forehead against the icy glass. I kept blinking, but my eyes wouldn't clear. I thought of the women who'd cried themselves blind. I blinked and blinked, fear rising. Then I saw you. You were wearing your brown vintage bomber jacket, the one that was too tight—and looked only better on you for that—and your hair was dark and thick and long. Which is how I knew that we had to be back in time. Way back. Almost thirty years.

Where were you going? Nowhere in particular. No errand, no appointment. Just strolling along, hands in pockets, savoring the street. It was your thing. *If I can't walk, I can't write.* You would work in the morning, and at a certain point, which always came, when it seemed you were incapable of writing a simple sentence, you would go out and walk for miles. Cursed were the days when bad weather prevented this (which rarely happened, though, because you didn't mind cold or rain, only a real storm could thwart you). When you came back you would sit down again to work, trying to hold on to the rhythm that had been established while walking. And the better you succeeded at that, the better the writing.

Because it's all about the rhythm, you said. Good sentences start with a beat.

• • •

You posted an essay, "How to Be a Flâneur," on the custom of urban strolling and loitering and its place in literary culture. You caught some flak for questioning whether there could really be such a thing as a flâneuse. You didn't think it was possible for a woman to wander the streets in the same spirit and

manner as a man. A female pedestrian was subject to constant disruptions: stares, comments, catcalls, gropes. A woman was raised to be always on guard: Was this guy walking too close? Was that guy following her? How, then, could she ever relax enough to experience the loss of sense of self, the joy of pure being that was the ideal of true flânerie?

You concluded that, for women, the equivalent was probably shopping—specifically, the kind of browsing people do when they're not looking to buy something.

I didn't think you were wrong about any of this. I've known plenty of women who brace themselves whenever they leave the house, even a few who try to avoid leaving the house. Of course, a woman has only to wait until she's a certain age, when she becomes invisible, and—problem solved.

And note how you used the word *women* when what you really meant was young women.

Lately I've done a lot of walking but no writing. I missed my deadline. Was given a compassionate extension. Missed that deadline, too. Now the editor thinks I'm malingering.

• • •

I was not the only one who made the mistake of thinking that, because it was something you talked about a lot, it was something you wouldn't do. And after all, you were not the unhappiest person we knew. You were not the most depressed (think of G, of D, or T-R). You were not even—strange as it now sounds to say—the most suicidal.

Because of the timing, so near the start of the year, it was possible to think that it had been a resolution.

• • •

One of those times when you talked about it, you said that what would stop you was your students. Naturally, you were concerned about the effect such an example might have on them. Nevertheless, we thought nothing of it when you quit teaching last year, even though we knew that you liked teaching and that you needed the money.

Another time you said that, for a person who had reached a certain age, it could be a rational decision, a perfectly sound choice, a solution even. Unlike when a young person commits suicide, which could never be anything but a mistake.

• • •

Once, you cracked us up with the line *I think I'd prefer a novella of a life*.

• • •

Stevie Smith calling Death the only god who must come when he's called tickled you pink, as did the various ways people have said that were it not for suicide they could not go on.

• • •

Walking with Samuel Beckett one fine spring morning, a friend of his asked, Doesn't a day like this make you glad to be alive? I wouldn't go as far as that, Beckett said.

• • •

And weren't you the one who told us that Ted Bundy once manned a phone for a suicide prevention center?

Ted Bundy.

Hi. My name is Ted and I'm here to listen. Talk to me.

• • •

That there was to be a memorial took us by surprise. We who had heard you say that you would never want any such thing, the very idea was repugnant to you. Did Wife Three simply choose to ignore this? Was it because you'd failed to put it in writing? Like most suicides, you did not leave a note. I have never understood why it is called a *note*. There must be some who don't keep it short.

In German they call it an *Abschiedsbrief*: a farewell letter. (Better.)

• • •

Your wish to be cremated had been respected, at least, and there was no funeral, no sitting shivah. The obituary stressed your atheism. *Between religion and knowledge, he said, a person must choose knowledge*.

What a preposterous thing for anyone who knows anything about Jewish history to say, one comment read.

• • •

By the time the memorial took place the shock had worn off. People distracted themselves with speculation about what it would be like to have all the wives in one room. Not to mention the girlfriends (all of whom, the joke went, wouldn't fit in one room).

Except for the slideshow loop, with its hammering reminder of lost beauty, lost youth, it was not very different from other literary gatherings. People

mingling at the reception were heard talking about money, literary prizes as reparations, and the latest *die, author, die* review. Decorum in this instance meant no tears. People used the opportunity to network and catch up. Gossip and head-shaking over Wife Two's oversharing in memoriam piece (and now the rumor that she's turning it into a book).

Wife Three, it must be said, looked radiant, though it was a cold radiance like that of a blade. Treat me like an object of pity, her bearing announced, hint that I was somehow to blame, and I will cut you.

I was touched when she asked me how my writing was going.

Can't wait to read it, she said untruthfully.

I'm not sure I'm going to finish it, I said.

Oh, but you know he would have wanted you to finish. (*Would have*.)

That disconcerting habit she has of slowly shaking her head while speaking, as if simultaneously denying every word she says.

Someone semi-famous approached. Before turning away she said, Is it okay if I call you?

I left early. On my way out I heard someone say, I hope there are more people than this at *my* memorial.

And: Now he's officially a dead white male.

Is it true that the literary world is mined with hatred, a battlefield rimmed with snipers where jealousies and rivalries are always being played out? asked the NPR interviewer of the distinguished author. Who allowed that it was. There's a lot of envy and enmity, the author said. And he tried to explain: It's like a sinking raft that too many people are trying to get onto. So any push you can deliver makes the raft a little higher for you.

If reading really does increase empathy, as we are constantly being told that it does, it appears that writing takes some away.

• • •

At a conference once, you startled the packed audience by saying, Where do all you people get the idea that being a writer is a wonderful thing? Not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness, Simenon said writing was. Georges Simenon, who wrote hundreds of novels under his own name, hundreds more under two dozen pen names, and who, at the time of his retirement, was the bestselling author in the world. Now, that's a lot of unhappiness.

Who boasted of having fucked no fewer than ten thousand women, many if not most of them prostitutes, and who called himself a feminist. Who had for a literary mentor none less than Colette and for a mistress none less than Josephine Baker, though he was said to have ended that affair because it interfered too much with work, slowing that year's novel production down to a lousy twelve. Who, asked what had made him a novelist, replied, My hatred for my mother. (That's a lot of hatred.)

Simenon the flâneur: All my books have come to me while walking.

He had a daughter, who was psychotically in love with him. When she was a little girl she asked for a wedding ring, which he gave her. She had the ring enlarged to fit her finger as she grew. When she was twenty-five, she shot herself.

Q. Where does a young Parisienne get a gun?

A. From a gunsmith she read about in one of Papa's novels.

• • •

One day, in 1974, in the same university classroom where I sometimes teach, a poet announced to the workshop she was teaching that semester: I may not be here next week. Later, at home, she put on her mother's old fur coat and, with a glass of vodka in hand, shut herself in her garage.

The mother's old fur coat is the kind of detail writing teachers like to point out to students, one of those telling details—like how Simenon's daughter got her gun—that are found in abundance in life but are mostly absent from student fiction.

The poet got into her car, a vintage 1967 tomato-red Cougar, and turned on the ignition.

• • •

In the first writing course I ever taught, after I'd emphasized the importance of detail, a student raised his hand and said, I totally disagree. If you want a lot of details, you should watch television.

A comment I would come to see was not really as dumb as it seemed.

The same student also accused me (his words were *writers like you*) of trying to scare other people by making writing seem much harder than it was.

Why would we want to do that? I asked.

Oh come on, he said. Isn't it obvious? The pie is only so large.

• • •

My own first writing teacher used to tell her students that if there was anything else they could do with their lives instead of becoming writers, any other profession, they should do it.

• • •

Last night, in the Union Square station, a man was playing "La Vie en Rose" on a flute, *molto giocoso*. Lately I've become vulnerable to earworms, and sure enough the song, in the flutist's peppy rendition, has been pestering me all day.

They say the way to get rid of an earworm is to listen a couple of times to the whole song through. I listened to the most famous version, by Edith Piaf, of course, who wrote the lyrics and first performed the song in 1945. Now it's the Little Sparrow's strange, bleating, soul-of-France voice that won't stop.

Also in the Union Square station, a man with a sign: Homeless Toothless Diabethee. That's a good one, a commuter said as he tossed change into the man's paper cup.

• • •

Sometimes when I'm on the computer a window pops up: Are you writing a book?

• • •

What does Wife Three want to talk to me about? I am not as curious as you might expect. If there had been a letter or some message from you, surely I'd be in possession of it by now. She may be planning some other kind of memorial, a collection of written remembrances, say, and if that's the case she will again be doing something you said you did not want.

I dread the meeting, not because I dislike her (I don't), but because I don't want to be part of any of these rites.

And I don't want to talk about you. Our relationship was a somewhat unusual one, not always easy for others to grasp. I never asked, and so never knew, what you told any of your wives about us. I was always grateful that, though Wife Three was never my friend like Wife One, at least she was not my enemy like Wife Two.

It was not her fault that your marriage entailed adjustments to your friendships, that is what marriages do. You and I were closest when you were between wives, periods that never lasted long, because you were, to an almost pathological degree, incapable of being alone. You once told me that, with few exceptions, such as when you were traveling on business, on book tour for example (and not always even then), you hadn't slept a night alone in forty years. Between wives, there was always some girlfriend. Between girlfriends there were one-night stands. (There were also what you liked to call drive-bys, but those did not involve sleep.)

A pause here to confess, not without shame: I never heard the news that you'd fallen in love without experiencing a pang, nor could I suppress a surge of joy each time I heard that you were breaking up with someone.

I don't want to talk about you, or to hear others talk about you. It's a cliché, of course: we talk about the dead in order to remember them, in order to keep them, in the only way we can, alive. But I have found that the more people say about you, for example those who spoke at the memorial—people who loved

you, people who knew you well, people who are very good with words—the further you seem to slip away, the more like a hologram you become.

• • •

I am relieved that at least I am not invited to your house. (It is still *your house*.) Not that I have any particularly strong associations with the place, having been there only two or three times in the several years that it was your home. I do remember well my first visit, not long after you'd moved in, when I got a tour of the brownstone, admiring its built-in bookcases and handsome rugs laid over aged walnut floors, and being reminded how essentially bourgeois contemporary writers are. Once, over a superb dinner at another writer's house, someone brought up Flaubert's famous rule about living like a bourgeois and thinking like a demigod, though I've never seen how that wild man's own life could be said much to resemble that of any ordinary bourgeois. Nowadays (the table agreed) the feckless bohemian had all but ceased to exist, replaced by the hipster known for his knowingness, his consumer savvy, his palate and other cultivated tastes. And fair or not, asserted our host, opening a third bottle of wine, many writers today admitted to feelings of embarrassment and even shame about what they do.

You who had moved there decades before the boom were disheartened to see Brooklyn become a brand and wondered at the fact that your own neighborhood had become as hard to write about as it was to write about the sixties counterculture: no matter how earnest one set out to be, the ink of parody seeped through.

As famous as Flaubert's words are Virginia Woolf's: *One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.* Point taken. But the starving artist wasn't always a myth, and how many thinkers have lived like paupers, or gone to paupers' graves.

Woolf names Flaubert with Keats as men of genius who suffered fiercely because of the world's indifference to them. But what do you suppose Flaubert would have made of her—he who said all female artists are sluts? Both created characters who take their own lives, as would Woolf herself.

• • •

There was a time—quite a long time, it was—when you and I saw each other almost every day. But in the past few years we might have been living in different countries instead of only different boroughs, staying in touch regularly but mainly through email. In all of last year we met more often by chance, at a party or a reading or some other event, than by plan.

So why am I so afraid to set foot in your house?