

HOME IS WHERE YOUR BEST FRIEND IS

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Lisbeth Firmin, "Two Young Women," Chinatown, 2014. Image courtesy the artist and C24 Gallery, New York, photo by Richard Walker

I knew from my best friend's right eyebrow that something was wrong. You know how that is? How you can know a person's face so well that a brow scrunch is a bullhorn to your soul? We need to talk, Alison's was saying, and I slid into high alert, ready to slay childhood demons or smack-talk her enemies or grapple with the generational trauma of low-rise jeans making a comeback.

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“You okay?” I asked. It was a dumb question. When was the last time anyone on planet Earth had really been okay? Fifteen months of the pandemic had tucked us so deeply inside our own heads that just leaving our apartments meant slipping into a waking dream. Everything looked familiar but also eerily different: storefronts taped up, sidewalks empty, public gathering spaces sealed from use. Behind us in Prospect Park, Brooklyn kids played baseball because everyone was trying to pretend things were getting back to normal. Behind them, parents sat masked on the sidelines because nothing was. Alison and I stood a baby hippo’s distance apart because that was what you did that summer when you really loved someone. You gave her space.

“I think we are moving,” she said.

I nodded. My go-to when I’m caught off guard is to pretend I’ve already gotten the entire itinerary for life. But my gut sank. Alison and I had lived six blocks away for 12 years and six subway stops away for the 10 years before that. That’s 22 years of navigating bad bosses, life choices, weird Pap smears, and possible haircuts. Twenty-two years of grabbing minutes here and hours there, of bumping into each other by accident and running for each other when things got bad. Moving sounded bad. Moving sounded like at least 10 subway stops.

“To North Carolina,” she added.

Sometimes in life, you surprise yourself, pivoting from intense pain to find wisdom and clarity you did not know you possessed. This was not that moment for me. I mean, I tried. I made my voice bright, free-associated all the great things that come with moving out of New York—Closet space! Gardens! Not knowing when your neighbors might be making more neighbors!—but inside I had gone cold, my body clapped with grief that I still haven’t quite shaken more than a year later.

I cringe when I write that. I know how silly it sounds, especially in a moment when so many have lost so much. A best friend moving to another state is hardly a tragedy. But even something about this—the smallness of it, how easy it should be to get over, given the state of the world—has left me unmoored. I walk down streets I have lived on for decades in a dull panic, unsure of when I will ever feel at home again.

The thing is, we were girls together in this city. We drank on tar-hot rooftops here, worked four jobs at a time here, could not afford dinners here, and told ourselves someday we would be writers here. We cried through 9/11 here, found our partners here, had babies here, and lost fathers a whole plane ride away from here. In March of 2020, we hugged each other “goodbye for now” and did not touch each other for a full year afterward here. We made hard choices and lived with them here. Yes, the city was always changing, but we were changing with it. And I think some part of me really believed that when it finally felt safe to really go out again, we would do it together. We would refind all those girls we were in this city and introduce them to the women we’ve become. But now, her being gone has drawn a circle around a truth I have tried to keep hidden from myself: I don’t really know what home is without her in it.

I know it sounds ridiculous. My partner and our son are here. The apartment we fought to afford and hold on to is here. We’re lifers in this place, and if I’m ever in any doubt, my family is quick to remind me that we love this city, from its prickly skyline to its pizza rats. And they are right. But also, they are not my best friend.

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A best friend is a different kind of home entirely, one that reveals itself to be more miraculous with the passing of time. Even the words *best* and *friend* feel like they should have outgrown each other—too youthful, too indulgent, too clinging to something that should have expired with girlhood. But they are the only ones I know that can capture the bewildering magic of being loved as your fullest self just because. Because your girl pulls up. Because she listens. Because she sees your most complicated self and does not flinch. Because she understands you before you are ready or willing to understand yourself and has your back when you forget how to have your own. Because against all odds, she remains. There's no contract you sign with your best friend that you'll stay together forever, until death do you part; there's just this daily fact of loving each other and showing up.

Alison and I promised to keep showing up for each other when she left. So far we have, and I know us; we will. We will go on our scheduled walk-and-talks, where she calls me from a winding lane in a forest and I answer from the Gowanus Canal. We will tell each other the things we cannot tell anyone else. We will listen extra hard. But it's not the same as walking past the shitty new place on the corner together and remembering when it was the banger bar where we celebrated her birthday, next to the coffee shop where we wrote our first books, right by the bodega where we scored our drunk snacks. There's no substitute for that bone-deep knowing, accrued over millions of footsteps along the same road.

These days, I've been reaching out, going on new-friend dates, sitting on benches with women I don't know. I want to say it's going really well, but the truth is, a lot of times it is awkward. None of us are used to being physically close to people yet, much less extending ourselves toward strangers. But also, I love us in these moments. I love the me that reaches out and the them that shows up. I love our pauses, our questions, our tentative looks, wondering who we might become together. There is something so tender and wild about realizing that we are all lost girls in this moment, looking for a home in one another.

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