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Excerpt

From *All Things Consoled*

Written by **Elizabeth Hay**

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All Things Consoled by Elizabeth Hay

From Elizabeth Hay, one of Canada's beloved novelists, comes a startling and beautiful memoir about the drama of her parents' end, and the longer drama of being their daughter. Winner of the 2018 Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction. Shortlisted for the 2019 RBC...

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My mother came home the next day. The residence doctor dropped by in the afternoon, sturdy, energetic, reassuring. We had learned he was from Aberdeen, a fact that only

endeared him further to my parents, for the Hays traced their origins back to the same part of Scotland. My mother greeted him cheerfully, and he said, “So you’ve come back.”

She had. She had come back to us.

Then once again, around the middle of March, she lost her words and twenty-four hours later showed no signs of recovering them. “I’m thinking—throne—thinking—th.” Starting on a word with an opening sound like “th,” she could not escape it, any more than a month earlier she had been able to escape “window—whether.”

After I got her lying down, I went into the living room to talk to Dad, who was staring out one of the windows that overlooked the road and the canal beyond. Without turning, he said, “I don’t think she’s suffering, she’s just lost.” He choked up, as he did so very easily, before going on. “We just have to hope, or maybe hope is the wrong word. If she doesn’t make it, maybe it’s for the best.”

The next day, “It’s snowing snowing snowing snowing,” she said, as we sat on a bench in the glowing sunshine.

Certain words were no problem for her: *yes, okay, right, super, thank you, well, son of a gun, really*. Over the telephone, I told Sochi about the automatic responses that still issued loud and clear from her grandmother. Sochi laughed and remarked that they were all affirmatives; someone else’s might have been *shit, goddammit* and *fuck*. My mother’s “son of a gun” was as close as she came to an expletive and it was always said with good humour.

Then the next morning, when I walked out of the late-winter sunshine into their living room, exclaiming what a

beautiful day it was, my mother stopped me in my tracks by replying from the chesterfield, “Yes, it is a beautiful day.”

Lazarus was back from the land of the mute. Open in her lap was the book I had brought to them several days before about Shackleton’s Antarctic expedition, and now she said how interesting she thought it was. Sitting beside her, washed over by relief and excitement, I flipped to the page with the photograph of ice flowers, delicate white rosettes blanketing the surface of newly frozen sea water on February 16th, 1915—four years before she and my father were born. I told her about seeing them in patches on the canal last winter and on a pond at the arboretum. And we made conversation. “Your words have come back!” She nodded and smiled and talked, and everything she said made sense.

But Dad was less excited by her recovery than he was upset with her for having wet the bed. “And who is going to wash the sheets?” he wanted to know. I asked him what happened to the diaper I had helped her into before leaving the night before. Well, in getting her into her nightgown, he had taken it off. Then immediately on the offensive again, he lit into me about her bone-strengthening medication. Had she had it or not?

“A nurse is supposed to give it to her early Sunday morning,” I said, “which is today.”

“You haven’t answered my question!” he thundered, only to back off a heartbeat later. “All right,” he admitted. “Somebody came in and gave it to her.” Only to blast me again, “But then she fell asleep! She’s not supposed to fall asleep after she gets it!”

He took things hard and he made them harder. There would come a day when he declared that the nursing care in this place wasn't "worth coon shit."

I liked "coon shit." Never in a million years would I have imagined those words coming out of his mouth. We went down for coffee, and then Mom and I went outside into the open air and abundant sunshine while he remained behind in the library reading *Maclean's*.

In the flooding light we walked to the corner. "Did you have wrens nesting in the garden in London last spring?" I asked her.

"I am forced to confess that I do not remember," she said, speaking in her old formal way. Her teachers at Renfrew Collegiate had been sticklers for grammar and well-formed sentences, and my mother had been an excellent student.

"What was it like for you, the last couple of days, when you couldn't find your words?"

"It was unsettling. But it's been unsettling for a while."

We walked on. I asked her what she was thinking about.

"I'm thinking about what the future holds."

"Are you worried about that?"

She said something vague about no one knowing what the future holds, or perhaps I said that.

I had pulled from the wastebasket in their rooms another of her efforts at a letter, one she had been working on someday before, wanting it, she said, to be "a reasonable letter from a reasonable person." She intended to have it do yeoman's service for all of the friends she hadn't yet written to.

There must be a way in the English Landwich to say to your English speaking friends a great deal more emphatic? I've tried many ways but the best I've managed is

*Thank you so very much from all of us
The Hays*

Around this time, I remember her taking several bananas—the three on the counter and the one from inside their little fridge—and lining them up on the seat of her walker, then pushing her walker into the living room. I didn't follow for a moment, washing dishes in their kitchenette. Then when I went into the living room, the bananas were nowhere in sight. "Where are they, Mom? Dad, did you see what Mom did with the bananas?"

"Sure I did."

"Where are they?" Looking around.

"Well, just don't sit on the chesterfield," he said.

I checked under the cushions and there they were: fourbananas lined up in a row.

They reminded me of characters out of Beckett. A pair of solitaires who had always headed out to the studio, in my mother's case, or downstairs to his study, in my father's (each to his own lair) were now sharing two rooms. They were like the aged parents trapped in dustbins in *Endgame*. Like Laurel and Hardy in another fine mess. Or like old Joshua Smallweed in *Bleak House* throwing cushions at his imbecile

wife.

“Oh the weather,” my mother said to me, “the weather now is the pits of wet roses.” She had been reading in the newspaper, she said, about a woman in her thirties “who came down under the overburden of blankets and probably isn’t going to live.”

Her turns of phrase rather confirmed my view that poetry issues from the holes in our head, that whatever faculty produces the startling contractions and coinages and leaps in logic that we call poetry is also available on an unconscious and uncontrollable level to someone suffering dementia. One morning on the telephone, ever solicitous about my sleep, she asked, “How did you severe the night?” Blending the words “fare,” “survive” and “persevere” so deftly that a lifetime of labour in the sleep mines got summoned up and summed up. “Dad’s behind a shave,” she added, “but I think he’ll come to the phone.”

Later, when I went over to see them, “Do you know what I had for breakfast?” she said to me.

“What?”

She leaned forward. “Too *much*.”

But that was her sense of humour. Like her abundant hair, it was her lasting glory.




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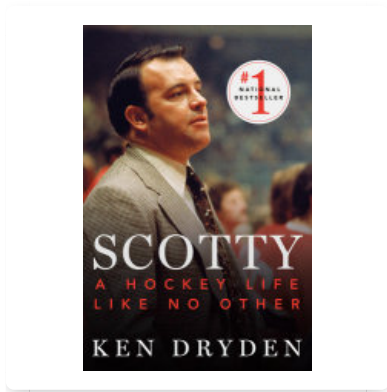
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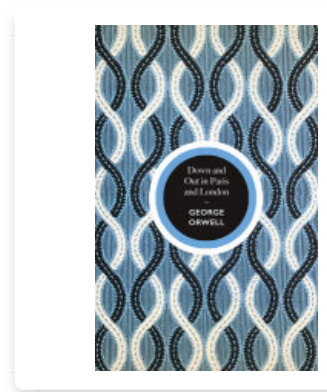
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