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Mother love

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An enduring friendship

Close since childhood, Katy, 74, and Elsbeth, 75, have supported each other through life's winding road **T05**

TWO OF US

Elsbeth, left, and Katy's route takes them past houses where they used to babysit, the park where they played tennis with and against each other and the church where they both attended Brownies.



LUIS MORA

Friend of my youth

Close since growing up in Rosedale, Elsbeth, 75, and Katy, 74, have been through it all together. **Emily Waugh** joins their daily stroll

“Each of these women has shown me that motherhood is hard and humbling, wonderful and hilarious and much more manageable if you have a friend who you can talk to about it.”

“Oh, that’s a nice smell.”
“What is that? It’s floral.”
“It’s damp. It’s damp floral.”
“Maybe it’s this stuff?”
“It smells like the cottage after a rain.”
My mom, Katy Waugh, and her best friend, Elsbeth Tupker, are sniffing around a roadside hedge, trying to trace the source of a peaty smell that has drifted across their path on one of their almost daily walks together during the pandemic. These exchanges are so natural that it isn’t clear if the duo are fully aware that they’re talking to each other — it’s almost like an externalized inner monologue shared between them. Their near-symbiotic communion makes sense: Katy and Elsbeth have been friends since 1954, when Elsbeth’s family moved from the Netherlands to a house just down the street from Katy’s family of three girls on Highland Avenue in Rosedale. Katy, now 74, walks with a subtly uneven gait, a relic of surgery on the foot she broke riding her new bike down an icy street on her 23rd birthday. Elsbeth’s faint limp betrays distressed knees, the left one a replacement from about 12 years ago. She turns 76 this month. They keep up a good pace, one on the sidewalk, the other on the road, swapping positions occasionally to accommodate an oncoming walker or to realign the speaker with the listener’s “good” ear. One of their favourite outings retraces their childhood walks to Whitney Public School across the orange steel bridge where the school bully and his bike gang used to stage their

infamous “road blocks.” The route takes them past houses where they used to babysit, the park where they played tennis with and against each other and the church where they both attended Brownies. The two women’s stories are so deeply woven into our family history that I had assumed that Elsbeth’s friendship with my mom had always been this deep, this essential. But now that I’m a parent myself, I’m starting to understand that this version of their relationship took root as a mutual support system to get them through the lonely, occasionally infuriating days of single parenthood after both women divorced in their mid-thirties. For Katy, Elsbeth was the stand-in “other parent” she could call after my sister and I were in bed to vent about what ingrates we had been at dinner or to seek affirmation when she was questioning herself as a mother. Elsbeth describes Katy as a partner who filled an empty spot all those years. She smiles about having to correct assumptions that they were actual partners and how she was once mistakenly invited to a work dinner as Katy’s special “guest.” Elsbeth is fearless, says Katy, and “lives in the absolute moment.” She fixes things — she’s the only person who could get the red pot-bellied Weber barbecue going at our family cottage. And she pushes Katy to take risks: to drive on through a violent Newfoundland storm or to hurl herself off a rope swing into a river gorge on a bike trip in Vermont. Or was it somewhere along the Rideau River? “Come on, Katy!” from

Elsbeth means “just do it already.” Katy, says Elsbeth, is a generous listener and an entertaining talker who has always made Elsbeth laugh. Katy doesn’t like to budge much, geographically or otherwise. (She still lives just six kilometres from the house where she grew up.) But she has opened up entire worlds to Elsbeth by introducing her to new streams of reading and to her huge network of friends. Both women are now grandmothers, with six grandchildren, ages four to 15, between them. (Elsbeth prefers the Dutch “oma,” while Katy is called “amma,” her eldest granddaughter’s early mispronunciation of “grandma.”) The friends have travelled together, raised children and grandchildren,

said goodbye to their parents, laughed and cried through job changes and retirement. They intuitively understand what the other needs. After the funeral of Elsbeth’s beloved sister, Katy sat beside her friend, sharing Elsbeth’s bare grief, while everyone else in the room gave her a wide berth. Each of these women has shown me that motherhood is hard and humbling, wonderful and hilarious — and much more manageable if you have a friend who you can talk to about it. “Today is Wednesday?” Katy asks, as they reach their parked cars. “Yes.” “So we are on for tomorrow?” “Let’s do it.”

Follow the magnolias

Katy and Elsbeth’s 45-minute winding garden walk along the hilly shores of ancient Lake Iroquois

The Magnolia Route, as Katy and Elsbeth call it, begins at the corner of Davenport Road and Shaw Street, the base of Toronto’s original shoreline 13,000 years ago. Start by heading up Bracondale Hill, wind east on Hillcrest Drive, past Hillcrest park and its views of the city. Then (carefully!) cross Christie Street and head up the concrete staircase leading to Braemore Gardens, one of Toronto’s rare breaks with its relentless grid. From there, continue up the Christie hill and head east on Tyrell Avenue. Next, go through the gates of Wychwood Park, a 19th-century artist colony turned private enclave — a magical collection of old Toronto houses, soaring trees and the Taddle Creek pond where walkers might see swans, a red-tailed hawk’s nest or local kids playing shinny on the frozen surface in winter. After a loop around the park road, head back along Tyrell Ave and then down the hill to Davenport