

CASE STUDY 27

FRIENDS OF THE HEART

Communication Between Long-Term Friends

Mary E. Rohlfig

KEY WORDS

■
friendship
familial bonds
sex differences in friendship
cross-sex friendship

Sophie had stood alone in her father's now-empty house for close to fifteen minutes. Knowing she'd never return to this place again, she wanted to allow herself time to experience the feelings of relief and sadness pulsing through her heart and gut. She visualized her father as she had often seen him during her annual visits "back home"—seated at the kitchen table, bathed in a low light, smoking cigarette after cigarette. She remembered the ever-present stacks of now discarded magazines and newspaper clippings he piled neatly on the floor near his feet. As she blinked back the tears filling her eyes, she turned one last time to look out the window overlooking the creek and meadow, where just this morning she had seen three deer grazing in the knee-high grass. She had tried futilely to remember the names her father had given each one, remembering how nearly every time he had called her, he'd talk endlessly about them, and how she almost invariably would tune him out. Now, she wished she'd paid closer attention and knew which was which. Realizing that this thought, too, was hopeless, she dropped her face into her hands and sobbed.

This was the moment of finality she had both longed for and feared. The house sparkled. The furniture, clothing, cookware, books, and memorabilia had all been packed up, tossed away, or carted off by the auctioneer. There was nothing left but the memories. The smells her father had filled his home with were already fading, and soon they too would also be replaced by those of the new owners. Nothing would ever be as it had been, and she simultaneously ached to bring her father back and struggled to let him go. Dabbing at the tears that had begun to flow less freely, Sophie knew there was nothing now to do but go on. She sighed and said aloud, "That's it." Quickly and definitively she strode to the back door, opening and shutting it tightly behind her.

Stepping outside, Sophie squinted and blinked as her moist eyes adjusted to the bright sun. She saw Jay leaning comfortably against the driver's door of the rented moving truck parked in the driveway. She noticed that at his feet were three stubbed cigarette butts. "Now's a good time to quit that nasty habit," she called out as cheerfully as she could. "We have 2,000 miles of highway ahead of us, and you are NOT going to smoke in that truck!"

"Screw you," Jay muttered sarcastically. "You ex-smoking, holier than thou, Miss Thing. I can't believe, after all I'm doing for you, you won't let me smoke in the truck. I'm warning you, it's going to take us three weeks to get back to Oregon, because we're going to have to stop every thirty miles so I can have a fix." Sophie laughed and, as she did, she made a noise like a horse. "There you go, snorting already." Jay shook his head in mock disgust. He reached toward her to take her suitcase. "You think I'm kidding? This provokes a lot of anxiety for me, Sophie. Driving and smoking go together like Brandy and Monica. One is no good without the other."

NOTES

Sophie had walked around to the passenger door of the truck and Jay noticed that she was tugging at the locked handle to let herself in. He pulled the keys from his pocket and tossed them in a high arc over the cab of the truck to her. Sophie snatched the keys from the air, unlocked the door, and started to get in. "Nice catch, Willie Mays," Jay said appreciatively.

"Let's go, Thelma," she mockingly demanded. "Time to get this show on the road."

Jay tossed his cigarette on the driveway and climbed up into the driver's seat. As he did, he said, "Shut up, Louise," referring to Beverly's parting comments as she saw them off at the airport just four days before. As they hugged, Beverly had warned Jay, "Now don't go pulling any Thelma and Louise crap out there. Don't stop at bars, don't blow up any oil trucks, and for God's sake, don't go near any cliffs." The comment had humored them for the last three days. As they cleaned out Sophie's father's house, they had frequently referred to one another as Thelma and Louise.

While Jay adjusted the mirrors and got acquainted with the rental truck, Sophie poured herself a cup of coffee from the thermos. She ran her finger along the cassette tapes in a large wooden box between them on the seat until she located just the one she wanted. As she put the tape into the player, Jay started the engine. "Don't even think about playing Laura Nyro," he muttered. "I have not had enough coffee for that yet."

"You can't even see the tape; how do you know what I picked out?" she asked incredulously. As the engine began to purr, the first strains of a Laura Nyro song played loudly through the speakers. Sophie stared at Jay, waiting for his answer.

After a moment, he said, "Well, let's see. Maybe cause I've known you for, what? thirteen long, painful years? Maybe cause your girlfriend warned me that you have some weird ritual that requires you start road trips by playing Laura Nyro to 'bless the trip.' Maybe your musical taste is more predictable than a 'Lethal Weapon' movie? Gee, Sophie, I don't know; how could I have known?" He revved the motor and barked, "Now pour me a cup of coffee, woman, and let's blow this popsicle stand." Sophie laughed as she filled his request and then pretended to nearly spill the cup in his lap as she handed him the steaming mug. "So help me, I'll kill you," Jay sneered as he took the cup from her.

Jay took a sip then placed the cup on the dashboard. He leaned toward the stereo and lowered the volume. Gently placing his hand on her knee, he looked at Sophie and asked, "You ready?" Sophie smiled weakly and nodded her head. "You sure?" She looked away, knowing if she kept his gaze a second more she would burst into tears. "OK," Jay said, realizing this was the moment. "Thelma" he yelled, as he turned up the stereo to a near deafening-volume, "let's drive off this cliff!"

NOTES

Maneuvering the long, overloaded truck out of the driveway and onto the street, Jay began to sing along, and Sophie couldn't suppress a smile. Just minutes before she had been ready to break down, but now she was light-hearted and excited. Besides Beverly—who couldn't come along since she was just two weeks into the new school year in a new position—Sophie could imagine no one she'd rather be with than Jay. "Hey, wait a minute," she said watching her father's house disappear behind them in the side mirror. "Did you call me 'Thelma,' Thelma?" Jay nodded affirmatively. "I thought I was Louise and you were Thelma. We need to get this straight."

Jay beamed at her. "Tell you the truth, Louise, I don't know which one's which. You be whoever you need to be. You be Cher, I'll be Sonny. Hell, you be Sonny, I'll be Cher."

Sophie grew amused thinking that they often delighted themselves arguing over some trivial pop culture tidbit and the great lengths each would go to to prove the other wrong. They had dubbed these disagreements their "culture culture" wars. She recalled how they had gotten into it at parties over who had written this song or who had directed that movie. Invariably they cleared the room and found themselves alone. "Well," Jay would say at such moments, "we've once again run off the competition with our superior knowledge of all things popular and all things cultural."

For the first few hours of the trip, they rarely spoke, but Jay could tell that Sophie was restless. He noticed her open the glove box to retrieve the insurance and rental agreement, which she dropped to the floor. Cursing, she scooped them up and fished a rubber band from her pocket to bind the papers together before putting them back. Next, she placed the box of cassettes on her lap and began organizing each tape so their titles faced the same direction. Satisfied, she deliberately placed the box squarely between them before reaching under the seat to fetch the road atlas. This she set neatly on top of the tape box. Seeming to have run out of chores, she momentarily leaned back in her seat, then quickly jerked forward to adjust the balance of the speakers. With the sound just right, she settled in again, but not for long. Once more she opened the glove box, this time removing a crisp, new pocket notebook and pen. Shifting in the seat to face Jay, she asked, "How many miles have we gone?"

He squinted at the odometer and shrugged his shoulders. "Eighty miles? One hundred? I don't know."

Sophie admonished him. "Jay, look at the odometer. What's it say?"

Jay looked crossly at her. "It reads," he said elongating the word to indicate that she had misspoken, "1982 and six-tenths of a mile." Sophie sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Didn't you zero out the odometer?" Jay shrugged again. Perturbed, Sophie whined, "Jay, I need to keep track of this shit."

NOTES

"What?" he asked. "What are you keeping track of?"

Sophie made no attempt to hide her irritation. "The miles, the gas, the hotel bills, how much we spend on food. That's what!"

Exasperated, Jay asked, "Why? Who cares how many miles we go, how much gas we use, or what the rooms cost? Don't go anal on me." He looked away from Sophie to avoid her glare.

Sophie responded, "I'm not anal. I have to keep track to be reimbursed. You know how my brothers are." Jay was unconvinced. The two times he'd met Ron, he seemed like an easy going guy, albeit tough to get to know. Her older brother, Mike, lived in California and had never ventured to Oregon to see his sister, nor had she ever gone to see him. He didn't think Mike or Ron would be counting pennies under the circumstances. After all, she had saved them both a lot of grief by taking on the task of dealing with their father's house and belongings.

Sophie yanked open the glove box and tossed the notebook inside. She remained silent as they drove west on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, passing one farm after another. Jay considered apologizing, but he wasn't sure why. He knew Sophie was trying to maintain her generally jovial demeanor, but the events of the last three weeks were beginning to wear on her. Although she'd sworn she could handle the aftermath of her father's death alone and claimed that she would relish "driving solo" in the rental truck across country, Jay had insisted on coming along. No way would he or Bev let Sophie face all the emotional and physical work that had to be done by herself. Since he was between jobs, he was the best choice to accompany her. Jay knew, though, that Sophie was too proud to admit she needed him, so instead, when they talked about the trip, he would say the main reason he was coming along was so that he could visit the east coast with someone who had grown up there.

In their thirteen years of friendship, Sophie and Jay had been through a great deal. They first met when Jay was 26, and Sophie was 25 years old. When Sophie missed a college class both were enrolled in, Jay offered Sophie his notes. He invited her to his house to get them, and they instantly became friends. Sophie liked to say that had they been heterosexual, theirs would have been a classic case of love at first sight.

As Jay got to know Sophie better, he revealed that his lover, Zach, had recently died of complications from AIDS. Ever since his death, Jay had remained single and celibate, telling anyone who asked that Zach had been his "one and only" and that he couldn't be "replaced." As the years passed, Sophie came to believe Jay's reluctance to become involved romantically with anyone new was a means of protecting himself from ever being hurt so deeply again. A few years back, she had begun to encourage him to date, and she worked up the courage, finally, to tell him what she thought was at the root of his long spell of solitude.

NOTES

Doing so had been a mistake. Jay stormed out of Sophie and Bev's house halfway through the birthday dinner they had prepared in his honor. He accused them of meddling in his life and told them both to "fuck off!" For three weeks he refused to return their calls, and once, when Sophie stopped by his house to try to talk things out, he told her, through the closed door, to leave him alone. She stood outside his door, telling him how much he meant to her and how deeply she missed his friendship. Realizing he was not going to let her in, she finally walked away, unsure that she'd ever see him again. Then, a week later, he stopped by her work and asked her to lunch. As she tried again to apologize, he cut her short. "You did that already. Don't belabor the point." After that, Sophie never raised the issue with Jay again.

As he drove, Jay remembered how five years into their friendship, Sophie had faced her first real heartbreak when her lover left her for another woman. When she told Jay that what she missed most was having someone to say good-night to, he called every night for the next six months to "tuck" her in. He happily stopped doing so when, one night, Beverly answered the phone. He had known Bev for years and had long thought that she and Sophie would make a great couple. Now that the two of them had been going strong for seven years, he knew he'd been right.

Jay looked over at his friend. He noticed how tired Sophie looked, and he asked if she wanted to move the tapes and lie down on the seat to sleep. She shook her head and continued staring out the window.

Sophie had known for years that her father's health was fragile; still, she was shocked when he died. Three days before his death, she had phoned to tell him that she and Bev were off for a week-long hike in the wilderness. When she asked how he was, he said he was "a little under the weather" but it was "no big deal." As they bid each other good-bye, he told her to have a great time and to send his love to Bev. While Sophie and Bev were hiking in the Cascade mountains, Sophie's father had "slipped away," due to a massive infection in his lungs.

Sophie's big brother, Mike, was the first to hear of their father's death, and after two days of failing to reach his sister, Ron advised Mike to call Jay to find out where they were. Jay told Mike that Sophie and Bev weren't due home for four days and that they were 30 miles from a phone. He volunteered to hike in where he thought they would be to tell Sophie what had happened, but Mike refused Jay's offer, thinking it best that they enjoy their trip. Their father had been cremated and there would be no funeral. Mike was assured that their father's attorney could handle the other details. Since none of the children wished to return to Pennsylvania and live in the home their father had bought after their parents' divorce, all that remained to be done was for the house to be cleaned out and put up for sale.

NOTES

Talking with Mike, Jay understood why Sophie found him so difficult to connect with. While Mike was friendly, he was terse and officious, offering no hint that he felt much sadness about his father's death. Mike, Sophie said, thought their father had "lacked ambition" and was to blame for their parents' divorce. In his eyes, their father was not a "real" man. Despite knowing all of this, Jay thought it odd that Mike could be so cool. Before their conversation, he'd always thought Sophie was too hard on her brother. After talking with Mike, he understood why she was.

Sophie loved her brothers, but she was not as close to either of them as she was to most of her good friends. Mike's values, it seemed to her, were exactly opposite of her own. He was a staunch and vocal conservative whose conversations were frequently laced with sexist and racist remarks. He'd been married three times, and each wife was younger than the last. On those rare occasions when they spoke, Mike used financial terms to answer her questions about how he was. Sophie, on the other hand, didn't much care about money. She didn't make much at the women's shelter, but Beverly had a well-paying job as a school administrator. They had plenty. Still, Sophie thought Mike believed she was less than successful in life. That she was a lesbian also didn't sit well with him, and it hurt that he never asked about Bev. Jay knew Sophie thought Mike was a bigot and, that although she tried to dismiss him, she was hurt by Mike's disapproval of her.

Ron, Sophie's younger brother was nearly ten years her junior. He respected and looked up to Sophie, but since he and his girlfriend lived three hours away, the siblings got together to visit only once or twice a year. Sophie felt closer to Ron, but he had been only eight years old when she left home for good. In her mind, it was as though they had grown up in two different families.

Hoping to break the silence that had engulfed them, Jay turned on the radio. He noticed that Sophie was tapping her foot to the beat of the song. He'd known her for over a decade, and felt more comfortable with her than anyone else, but he realized that it wasn't until he made this trip back to where she had been born and raised that he felt he had a handle on her life. He asked Sophie about her favorite places here in the east, what she had done as a teenager, and what it was like, at eighteen years of age, to drive cross-country alone to go to college in Oregon. Sophie warmed to the questions, providing details she had never before shared with Jay. She was animated as they made their first stop for food and gas, and she told him a funny story about traveling with her family when she was ten, and how at this very Howard Johnson's, her mother had absent-mindedly driven off without Mike before he returned from the men's room. It wasn't until they were three miles down the road that Sophie realized Mike wasn't in the car. When she did, she cried and screamed loudly for her parents to go back to get him.

After they ate and filled the truck with gas, Sophie took over driving and Jay curled into a fetal position, using his wadded up sweatshirt as a make-shift

NOTES

pillow. Sophie drove for close to four hours when she realized that she was too sleepy to go any further. She pulled off the Turnpike and drove to the nearest hotel. As she parked the truck, Jay awoke and asked her what was going on. She told him it was time to stop for the day. Jay rubbed his eyes and looked at the hotel sign. "Let me wake up, and I'll go in and register with you," he said quietly as he tried with little success to flatten his mussed hair. Stretching his mouth so as to regain feeling in his face, he asked what time it was. Sophie told him and he asked, "Have I really been asleep that long?"

"Yes. Thelma," Sophie answered. "And by the way, you're fabulous company on a road trip. Your insightful remarks, pointed questions, and generally interesting patter are really making the miles fly by, pal."

Jay blinked his eyes and rubbed them, "I'm sorry. I should have stayed awake to talk to you." He yawned and stretched his arms. "I just couldn't. These last few days have been rough on this old queen. Packing this truck and carrying all that heavy furniture is more labor than I'm used to. You would have done better bringing some big, butch dyke, my darling." Sophie laughed at him as he continued, "Now, when we get to Oregon and start trying to figure out how to mix your dad's furniture with that funky, Bohemian, college student decor of yours and Bev's, I'll be a real Martha Stewart. At the moment, though, I'm just a warm body."

Sophie stroked his hair, helping to smooth down a stray strand or two he'd missed. She then reached up to the dashboard and grabbed Jay's cigarettes. She shook one loose from the pack and put it between her lips. "Got a light?" she asked. Saying nothing, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his lighter. Sophie took it from him and lit the cigarette. He noticed that, although she had quit two years ago, she didn't cough as she inhaled. Before handing it to him, she took another drag. Exhaling, she said, "This will help you wake up."

Jay was genuinely confused and quickly turned to roll down the window so the smoke could escape. "I thought this was a nonsmoking truck."

"It was. I can't ask you to go all day without smoking. You stay here and enjoy it." Before he could thank her, she had opened the door and jumped out.

After showering, writing postcards, and clicking through the channels on the television, Jay popped up from his bed and announced, "I'm going to get a six pack and some burgers for us. Please take advantage of my absence to call your sweetie and do that kissy face thing. I don't want to be subjected to that crap."

Sophie smiled at him as he walked to the door. "Wait," she said. "I have to tell you something." Jay turned back to look at her. She continued, "I've been a jerk today. I just . . . I just . . . oh, Jay, how can I repay you? You're so good to me. You've been such a huge help these last few days. I could never have got all that done without you."

When it appeared that she might tear up, Jay cut her off. "Sophie, you know I despise this kind of verbalized sentimentality. Stop it before I vomit."

NOTES

"No," she said seriously. "Most of time I honor your inability to link words to feelings. Just shut up, and hear me out." Jay rolled his eyes and sat down. As he did, she said simply, "I love you, friend."

Jay sat looking at her, expecting Sophie to continue. Realizing that she was through talking, he exclaimed, "That's it? That's all you have to say to me?" They began to chuckle. "You are so incompetent as a woman sometimes, Sophie." Standing to leave, he said, "So, that was the big heart to heart? I can't believe you. You're pathetic."

As he opened the door, he turned back to her. "Tell me again, which am I? Thelma or Louise?" She shrugged, unable to recall. "OK, well, whichever one slept with Brad Pitt is the one I'm going to be, got it?" As he walked out the door, he called over his shoulder, "I love you, too, Sophie. And when you call Bev, tell her I only thought about killing you twice today."

She knew he wouldn't hear her but called after him anyway. "You have to love me, I'm your best friend, Thelma!"

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND REFLECTION

1. What qualities define a friend?
2. How do friendships differ from relationships with family, neighbors, and co-workers?
3. Some researchers have claimed that men and women enact friendship in different ways. Can you see differences in how Sophie and Jay express their feelings of friendship for each other?
4. Many people believe that men and women cannot have successful friendships. What has been your experience with cross-sex friendships? How do those friendships differ from ones you have with same-sex friends?
5. Do long-term friends communicate differently than short-term friends do?

REFERENCES

- Adams, R. G., & Blieszner, R. (1989). *Older adult friendship: Structure and process*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bell, R. R. (1981). *Worlds of friendship*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rohlfing, M. E. (1995). "Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore?" An exploration of the under-studied phenomenon of long-distance relationships. In J. T. Wood

NOTES

& S. Duck (Eds.), *Under-studied relationships: Off the beaten track* (pp. 173–196). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rose, S. (1984). How friendships end: Patterns among young adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1, 267–277.

Wood, J. T., & Inman, C. C. (1993). In a different mode: Masculine styles of communicating closeness. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 21, 279–295.