

MY FRIEND ANNA

Pearl Winkworth

I was eleven when Anna showed up.

She wasn't loud or bossy like the other girls. She was gentle and neat, quiet and careful. She craved order. She craved calm. And she liked me best when I was trying harder.

At first, she came only for lunch. She'd sit beside me and wrinkle her nose at the mess on my tray. "You don't really need all of that," she whispered, soft, like a secret. So I left a little behind. Just enough to feel clean. We grew close fast. She walked with me to school, humming little rules into my ear. She smiled when I made it through the day on less. She was proud when my clothes hung looser. She said I was learning how to be light.

While others shared stories and laughter, I talked to Anna. She was always there, making the world quieter, sharper, precise. She trimmed away the noise, the cravings, the chaos. People said I was changing. Said I looked tired, pale, distant. I smiled and said I was fine, great, even. Because I had Anna. And Anna made me feel in control.

By fourteen, Anna had moved in completely. She planned my days, chose my clothes, and measured my hours. She taught me how to vanish without leaving. She made me disciplined, elegant even. Warmth, softness, hunger, they were messy things I no longer needed. Anna helped me be sharp.

Sometimes she was cold. Quiet when I slipped, when I dared to want. I'd crawl back, ashamed, and she'd welcome me with a knowing smile. I mistook her approval for love.

But then, something shifted. My world shrank. My heartbeat echoed in the silence. The wind felt heavy when I stood too fast. I avoided mirrors. Friends saw less and less of me, and more and more of my anger.

One morning, I woke to find it was just me and Anna. Everyone else was gone.

So, I tried something different. I added a little back, just a little. Anna frowned, but I ignored her. I let a hug linger. I said yes to sweetness, even though it scared me. I felt everything: guilt, fear, joy. Anna hated that.

Sometimes, Anna left.

Like a ghost slipping through walls, she vanished into sunlight, leaving warmth, noise, trembling hope. For a while, I breathed without her whisper at my back. I tasted life's softness, its chaos, its mess, its laughter. I almost forgot what silence sounded like.

But Anna never truly disappears.

She returns like winter's chill, creeping through cracks, settling deep in bone. Her touch is cold but burns, an ache sharpening with every breath. One evening, she returned without asking, folding around me like a second skin. Tighter than before. She pressed against my ribs until my heartbeat slowed, until my thoughts grew faint and far away.

Her hands were ice. Her grip is relentless. She spoke little. Held me in a hollow quiet where the world stopped spinning and edges blurred. In that silence, I slipped, fading into the shadow she cast. My skin thinned like paper, my voice a whisper lost to the wind. I unraveled, thread by thread, fading to nothing.

Anna was no friend now. She was a cage of frost and silence, cold, unyielding. I wanted to fight, scream, run, but her grip was stronger than my will. Deep inside, a small spark flickered, a fragile call for help. But the silence was louder. Slowly, inevitably, Anna pulled me under until my breath became a faint echo, my heart a quiet hush.

The world grew distant. Colors dimmed. Sounds faded. Even pain, that sharp reminder of life, dulled like a fading star. I was shrinking, slipping beyond reach. My bones whispered secrets no one else could hear. My eyes reflected a hollow I could no longer fill.

I dreamed of escaping, but the cage was my own skin.

And then, the stillness swallowed me whole.

No tears left to cry. No whispers left to speak. Only the cold, quiet space where Anna waited—waiting to hold me forever.

And then, nothing.