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Elizabeth Triumphant

By Landon Y. Jones

After a Harrowing Spring, a Revitalized Taylor Talks About Her Health, Her Passions and Her War Against AIDS

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In the airy living room of her brick-and-shingle house tucked into a hillside in Los Angeles's Bel Air enclave, Elizabeth Taylor settles into an armchair, adjusting the shoulders of a lime-green sweater worn casually over black slacks and black high-heeled boots. Sunlight streams through fingertip-high windows into a room that is as informal as one can be that has a Frans Hals portrait over the fireplace. Elsewhere the walls are glowing with fine oils—a Rouault, a Pissarro—a collection that reflects Elizabeth's upbringing as the daughter of an art dealer. A needlepoint pillow on a chair states a credo IT'S NOT THE HAVING/ IT'S THE GETTING that its owner has lived up to on both counts.

On a coffee table is an enormous geode, a kind of geological pearl that grows in limestones and shales. People with fanciful imaginations used to think that similar concretions were oddly shaped creatures that had been turned into stone. But this one has been split open like a walnut to reveal its heart of glittering lavender crystals.

It has been a year dressed in mourning for Taylor, 58. In February and March she lost two of her best friends, Malcolm Forbes and Halston. Her intensive fund-raising for the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR) continued to confront her daily with the disease's terrible toll. Then, in April, she was told that she was dying.

"They all thought at first it was just a bad flu and sinusitis," she says, now in good health, good humor and ready to talk about the day she checked herself and her long medical history into L.A.'s Daniel Freeman Marina Hospital. She'd been fighting a low-grade fever all spring, she explains, "but when I was in the hospital it developed into a viral pneumonia, a rare kind. They wanted to do an open-lung biopsy, which is big surgery. They cut you open from here"—her hand draws a line that swoops down her chest—"to here. And I just didn't want any more surgery in my life. But then they came in and told me that I was lying there a dying woman, and if I procrastinated any longer, it would no longer be my decision. They'd have to put me on life support, and perhaps I'd be there for the rest of my life. Which might not be very long."

Taylor still grows quietly emotional talking about the second near-fatal illness of her life. (The first was a bout with pneumonia in 1961 that required a tracheotomy to save her.) At her side in the hospital were her older brother, Howard, 61, and her four children—Michael, 37, and Christopher Wilding, 35, Liza Todd Tivey, 33, and

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intensive care. So I let them do the open-lung biopsy, and I went on life support, which helped me recover my strength. I remember passing the crucial time. I was still in intensive care and still had a fever of 105 and was slightly out of my mind. But I remember saying, "Thank you, God."

Eight months later, Taylor is newly fit (she lost 30 lbs. in the hospital) and is busily preparing to finish 1990 not with a question mark but with a month of exclamation points. Last week was the Manhattan gala for AmFAR on World AIDS Day. This week she is planning to auction her prized 1889 Van Gogh, *View of the Asylum and the Chapel at Saint-Remy*, at Christie's in London. That should reap her an estimated \$16 million to \$22 million for what she calls "estate reasons"—among them, no doubt, her eighth grandchild, expected this month from Liza.

At the same time she's also getting ready to launch a new round of skin care and other cosmetic products under her Elizabeth Taylor's Passion imprimatur, enlarging a business that has grown to \$100 million in retail sales since its debut in 1987. The marketing strategy calls for an expanded House of Taylor label to make her Chesebrough-Pond's answer to Estée Lauder and Helena Rubinstein—a plan so far unimpeded by a lawsuit from former lover Henry Wynberg, who's taking Elizabeth to court this week charging that he originally had the brainstorm for her Passion fragrance line. "Don't even ask me to talk about it," Elizabeth says, wrinkling her nose with distaste.

At home the woman who rode a horse to fame 46 years ago in *National Velvet* is still surrounded by animals. There's Nellie, the collie that Charles Bronson presented to her last year for her charitable work, and there is Max, a baby parrot she is hand-feeding. Max's predecessor in parrothood, Alvin, lived with Elizabeth for 10 years before he died this fall. In her store-appearance promotions for Passion, Elizabeth delighted customers by turning on her Maggie the Cat Southern accent and describing Alvin as "my main man, my little green man, and for three years the only man who has been privy to my bedroom."

In his last two years, though, Alvin was sharing at least some room with Larry Fortensky, the 38-year-old former construction worker Elizabeth met at the Betty Ford Center in 1988. It was Larry who gave Elizabeth her most improbable get-well pet, Marina, a miniature goat who now roams the yard and greets visitors with little watchgoat noises. "She's named after the first hospital I was in, at Marina del Rey," Elizabeth recalls. "She was just a baby, and Larry smuggled her in in a little cardboard box. I thought it was a cake, but it was a tiny goat."

Fortensky is the man who has supported Elizabeth faithfully in her efforts to cleanse herself of pills and alcohol. He attends AA meetings with Elizabeth and otherwise supports her in ways that might explain her response when fans ask if she's seeing "a poor boy" now. "A poor boy?" she purrs, in her honeyed magnolia accent. "No boy is poor if he's rich at heart." Marriage, though, is out. "I think I've outgrown that," she says. "In today's society you don't need to be married. You don't need to tidy up. Not at my age, anyway."

Her pride in her sobriety also explains the \$20 million lawsuit she directed at the *National Enquirer* after it claimed this summer that she was drinking in the hospital. "They went a little too far, and I finally got sick of it," she says. "They went into long, laborious detail about how I'd been drunk in the hospital, and the doctors had me on a suicide watch, and all this rubbish. This was completely untrue. It hurt me, and it has hurt others who believed in me. I've received thousands of letters from people who said, 'We've looked up to you. How could you?' I felt betrayed, and I felt I was betraying others. People kept saying, 'Well, why don't you sue?' So finally I did—not for the money, but really for the principle of it."

The same sense of indignation has made Taylor a genuine heroine in the battle against AIDS. Her involvement with AmFAR, which has contributed \$28 million to various AIDS causes, began in 1984 when she was asked to host the first AIDS fund-raising dinner ever. She then ran into "seven months of absolute and abject rejection" before finding supporters. "I thought, 'This is unbelievable what is going on. People aren't aware of the problem because of the stigma.' And I personally was very aware of the stigma because of the reaction people were giving me."

When her friend Rock Hudson later became sick, she says, "I was already involved in it before any of us knew what was the matter with Rock. Then, of course, I found out and visited him. When I spoke with his doctors, I learned more and more about the disease. And that just made me angry. It was my anger that involved me with AIDS, and it still is. Nobody asks for this disease. Nobody deserves it. We're all as innocent as babies in the eyes of God."

Dr. Mathilde Krim, the biologist and with Elizabeth the founding co-chairwoman of AmFAR, credits Taylor with helping bring AIDS awareness into the mainstream. "At the time, very few people were willing to speak up publicly for this cause," she says. "Elizabeth said she wanted to be head of it. Elizabeth is a smart, sincere, compassionate woman who commands enormous respect and prestige with the public. No one can match her."

Taylor's escort to last year's World AIDS Day fund-raiser was her friend Malcolm Forbes, who had already given her a \$1 million check for AmFAR. His death just a few months later left her with a grief she still feels. "I loved him. He loved me," she says firmly. "I miss him enormously. He knew how to give joy, and he loved to share. He was the least stingy soul I've ever met." Elizabeth still bristles at speculation that Forbes was bisexual. "It's nobody's business what Malcolm's sexual preferences were," she says. "It's nobody's concern. I respected him, which means I respected his choices, all the way around. We knew each other very well."

She feels a different sadness about the death of Halston this year from AIDS. "I didn't know until the last year," she says. "We all thought it was something else. So many people who are sick with AIDS don't want people to know because of the stigma involved. And that's sad. They're not allowed the dignity afforded someone who is dying. How dare we take that away from anyone?"

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through the same dark, dark hour that we went through in 1984.") On a visit to Thailand last year, she raised \$ 1 million at a single dinner for pediatric AIDS—and was shocked by her visits to hospitals. "AIDS is rampant there, but the stigma is such that they will not acknowledge the disease exists," she says. "In all of Bangkok there are something like 30 accepted AIDS patients. I said I'd like to visit privately some of them, and they looked at me like I was out of my mind. Then they took me to a hospital where there were only three patients. One of them was unconscious. When I shook hands with the other two patients, their mouths just fell open. They thought you could catch it just by shaking hands or embracing."

Sally Morrison, an AmFAR official, recalls that visit as "an extraordinary example of what this woman can do to enlighten people's consciousness. They knew exactly who she was. And just one picture of her touching these men says, 'It's okay to touch someone with AIDS.' In some parts of the world, people are so backward they don't even know this."

Last April Taylor testified before Congress on behalf of a bill that appropriated \$875 million for emergency AIDS care in areas hardest hit by the epidemic. It was eventually known as the Ryan White bill—though Taylor's support of the legislation began when it bore the less resonant but still worthy name of Kennedy-Hatch. (Taylor met Ryan White in 1986 and, at his mother Jeanne's request, has contributed to a forthcoming memorial book for him.) Taylor, however, breaks into self-deprecating laughter at the notion that she performs good works. "It sounds like I'm out there with a little white uniform on. I've got to polish my halo off!"

The only credit she will give herself is her ability to stick with the problem. "Like anything, you really have to focus yourself," she says. "Otherwise you want to be able to help, but I can't dilute myself, because if you subtract yourself into too many pieces, you're not true to any one of them. It doesn't mean that I don't believe in a lot of things or think that they're not right. I can just focus on one thing at a time."

Remarkably, for a person who has been in show business nearly a half-century, Taylor remains steadfastly close to her family and her friends. Her mother, Sara, now 94, lives in Palm Springs. Sons Michael and Christopher live in L.A. with their families; daughters Liza and Maria are back East. Elizabeth particularly enjoys visits with Michael's teenage girls, Naomi, 15, and Leyla, 19. ("We sit and talk about boys and other sundry and interesting things.") Other evenings she and Larry see friends like R.J. Wagner, George Hamilton and Carole Bayer Sager.

Her oldest friend, though, is actor Roddy McDowall, who met her when they were both child stars in 1943's *Lassie Come Home*. "She's almost 60 and has been acting for nearly 50 of those years," he observes. "I give her enormous credit that somebody with that position in the limelight can still be as sensitive as she is now. She has had extreme privilege, but she is not isolated from human reactions. She is compassionate and empathetic. And she has a wonderful sense of humor. I really love her." McDowall pauses for a moment and adds: "She can be tough with people, but she is honest with herself and true to what she is. She never cops a plea."

Elizabeth says she has found a source of spiritual strength. It dates from when she almost died of pneumonia in London in 1961. "I had a near-death, out-of-body experience," she says. "But nobody talked about that 30 years ago, because you felt crazier than a bedbug if you did. I saw the light and the tunnel. And there was somebody who was deceased and making me go back. It's extraordinary. So vivid. I wasn't drawing in any oxygen because my lungs were filled with garbage and blood, which I was coughing up. I knew that if I did go into unconsciousness I'd be dead. So I was fighting to hang on to the brink of consciousness with all my life. Maybe it was just obstinacy, but I did not want to die. And I used every trick in the book to stay alive, to the point of consciously making myself stay awake to keep breathing. That was a deliberate, painful effort. I suppose in a way it disciplined me. I've had sort of an uncanny ability all my life to be able to pull myself back from the avalanche just in time. I think I'm very realistic."

Close calls notwithstanding, Taylor feels no regrets. "I think regrets are a waste of time. You can learn from past mistakes, but the point is really to reflect back. You can't change the past. You can only change yourself. I have always felt that I have to live my life the way I should."

That goes particularly for her current passion. "When I first started doing the work I did for AIDS," she says, "it was very unpopular. A lot of people told me I'd be badly burned by it, that it was very undignified. And I didn't give a hoot what people thought about it then, and I don't now. It's just that there has to be something done about it. I want to do all I can because I have to live with me."

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