CREATURE COMFORTS

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Four years ago I sold my home and left a stimulating, lucrative job in Melbourne, Australia, to move to a touristy island in Florida and take care of my nonagenarian parents. Nicole, my partner of twelve years, stayed behind. She visited me for six months, and I returned to see her a few times, but really we were just tortuously breaking up. So, at fifty-four, more or less divorced from my more-or-less spouse, I'm living in a place I left at the age of twelve and spending most of my time and all of my energy caring for the people who raised me, who are now increasingly demented and needy.

At first the rewards for my self-sacrifice seemed abundant. I had nowhere to live but happened into a luxurious rental directly on the beach at a trifling price. I had no car, but someone I'd just met gave me a ten-speed bike. My parents said they were glad to have me living so close, and sometimes they took me out for dinner.

But, four years later, the rewards have evaporated. My feet hurt, and often I feel a phantom pressure on my breastbone. I cry a lot, day and night and even in my sleep. I've bought the smallest house on the island — 688 cluttered square feet. I am earning less than one-tenth my previous income. With no reason to think that anything will improve, I assume that my life will only get worse.

Both my parents are in good physical health. They live in their own home, and most days I am there with them. I shop for them and help them pay bills and balance their checkbooks. I cook omelets and soups and fish and stir-fries and make pots of tea. I call caregivers and nurses and occasionally my parents' few surviving friends, most of whom live in England and Australia, where my parents lived before I was born. I mix my mother and father shandies of Sprite and India Pale Ale and I blend "elder cocktails" of pinot grigio cut with fruit-flavored Ensure. I refill prescriptions and organize pillboxes and proffer medications with cups of water. I drive my parents to appointments with cardiologists, dermatologists, podiatrists, and general practitioners; to hardware stores and hair appointments; and occasionally, for fun, to the beach.

There are routines within routines. Every Wednesday the word HAIR appears on my parents' wall calendar in the 11:00 AM slot. So at 10:30 I pick up my mother to take her to get her hair done.

She has been going to the same hairdresser at the same time to get the same hairstyle for decades. If only she'd invested the money she has spent on her hair over the years, my parents — and I! — could own a cottage in a pretty English village, or possibly even a fashionable flat in London, but instead she has had a headful of pretty ash-blond waves my whole life. At ninety-four she never goes out without lipstick and eyeliner.

On Wednesday I enter my parents' dark, overheated house and find my mother perched doll-like in a too-big recliner, wearing a lavender cashmere tunic I have never seen before and a long white cotton scarf.

I kiss her cheek. "You look pretty in that," I say.

"This?" she replies. "Do I? Had it for donkey's years. Is it cold out? Do I need a jacket?"

"I don't think it's cold," I say, "but you will."

"I've got my jacket," she says. She means a thick white cardigan, one of about twenty she owns. She starts to get up by inching toward the edge of the seat until both feet arrive on the carpet. "Where's my stick?" she asks.

"It's right here."

She pushes off from the chair, and finally she is standing, holding the chair, and murmuring, "It might be cold, but I've got my jacket. Have I got everything?"

"Yes," I say. "You've got your bag and your stick and your cardigan, and I've got another jacket for you in the car."

"Is it cold?" she says. "I've got my jacket." She clutches it to her chest along with her bag. She looks toward the door and considers the distance. She takes one step, then stops. "Do I have everything? Is it cold out there?"

Six months ago I stopped taking the antidepressant that for decades had prevented my suicidal thoughts. I went off the drug because I wanted freedom from its side effects: headaches, sleepiness, and weight gain. Also I wanted to have an orgasm that was more significant than the effort it required. Mostly, though, I wanted to fully experience my feelings, to stop living a chemically altered life. I wanted to live naturally. So, naturally, I've been feeling bad. I've created a life that would bum out Chuckles the Clown.

Though I've certainly been depressed before (despite the medications), I've never felt so consistently and purely sad. I'm also lonely. The past two years is the longest I've ever been single. I haven't even exchanged a flirtatious glance with anyone since Nicole and I broke up. When friends suggest I look for romance, it's as if they are advising me to win the state lottery. Even if I could find someone whom I wanted to, say, *kiss*, I can't imagine that she or he would have any interest in a resentful, overweight woman whose main goal in life is to clean up her kitchen.

Taking care of my aging parents is the right thing to do. I don't regret the decision. But when I came here in 2010, I never imagined that I'd have to stay nearly five years. I'm afraid that, on my mother's ninety-seventh birthday, I'll be saying that I never imagined I'd have to stay *seven* years.

Both my parents appear to be immortal. My father's doctor, who has been seeing him for decades, says, "Your dad is going to live forever."

I lose my patience more often with my mother, even though I love her more than I do my father, with whom I had a terrible relationship until Parkinson's took away his hard edges. Now and then my mother asks me where my father is and where my father has gone and what time is it and where's Daddy and what day is it and on and on every few minutes until I snap, "I don't *know* where he is! Stop asking me!" I apologize swiftly: "I'm sorry. I don't want to speak to you like that. Please forgive me." By the time I've finished, she's forgotten what I'm apologizing for. People with Alzheimer's don't bear grudges.

Sometimes my parents' existence seems so joyless, and the parent-free life I'd like to be living so enticing, that I pray they will die. Then I feel wicked and cancel those prayers and ask instead for more strength, patience, and love. And while my parents continue not to die — have not even started dying — I am striving to make each day as good for them as possible. It's heartening when I can get either one of them to laugh. Maybe once a week I manage to get both parents to the beach, where my father — a finalist for England's Olympics team in 1948 — swims out farther and stays in longer than anyone else. My mother sits on a bench near the car and watches him, and when he comes back dripping to sit by her on the bench and share an ale-and-Sprite shandy, she claps for him.

But the pleasure lasts only as long as a can of soft drink and a bottle of beer divided among three plastic cups, while the loneliness and sadness — my parents' and my own — stretch endlessly into the future. Losses are continual: elderly relatives and friends go into rest homes or die. My parents have ever less ability to do anything for themselves. And I keep getting fatter and more self-pitying. Sometimes I eat Ben & Jerry's Heath Bar Crunch while soaking my feet in an ice bath and planning how to lose weight.

The care of my parents is not left entirely to me. I have a sister who has paid for some professional caregiving and who comes down to Florida two or three times a year and grants me a week of respite. She also urges me to resume my antidepressant regimen. Both she and my brother, who lives in England, have advised me to drink more.

I try not to alienate friends by rehashing my angst. Knowing that there is no one less fun than a miserable, middle-class, middle-aged lesbian (with bisexual lapses) who resents the world for oppressing her, I isolate myself often, or else I pretend to be coping. The best advice I've received was from my friend Amanda, who lost her mother last year. When I complained of frustration with my mother, she told me, "Just try to enjoy her." When people I don't know tell me how lucky I am to have both parents still alive, I say nothing. When people say my parents are lucky that I live so close, I want to scream: *I don't live close! My real life is ten thousand miles away!*

I feel like a single mother, but the difference is that babies grow up and eventually go to kindergarten and school and college, whereas old people grow ever more dependent, and there is ever less hope for anything other than a peaceful death.

During a particularly harrowing period last spring, I went to sleep in tears, praying desperately for help. Early the next morning I woke up with an insight from a dream: If I don't do anything to nurture joy, I'm not going to have any. I might not have any even if I *do* make an effort, but without the effort, there will be only despair.

Soon after that, I initiated efforts to court joy, including:

1) going to yoga classes on the beach;
2) attending the Episcopal church;
3) growing herbs and fruit trees;
4) reciting affirmations; and
5) adopting a cat.

Here is how those turned out:

1) I feel fat and unfit doing any yoga beyond the corpse pose.

2) I'm too self-conscious to receive, let alone return, the smiles, hugs, and lunch invitations from my fellow Episcopalians.

3) The soil in my tiny yard is sandy, and the climate is too hot for six months of the year to grow anything except rosemary.

4) The affirmations — "I have many close friends; I'm well in body and spirit" — only blunt the blade of my depression.

5) My new cat, Milly, hid from me for seven weeks.

At the shelter, where I was the only person looking at hundreds of adult cats, all slated for death, the long-haired calico lay limp in my lap and let me stroke her. She seemed depressed and despairing, like me. I brought her home, where she immediately dashed under a low love seat. There she stayed, flat on her stomach in the dark. She did not appear to drink the water nor eat the food I put out for her. The only evidence of her ongoing digestion was, after a week, two pale-brown deposits on the carpet that looked more like dried shitake mushrooms than feces. I couldn't even see her unless I shone a flashlight into the dark recesses beneath the love seat, at which she closed her eyes and mewed. I could barely remember what she looked like. The reason I knew she was there was that when I lay down on my side next to the couch — which I did for more than an hour daily, crooning to her, reassuring her, and proffering cat food in my hand — I would sense a slight, aversive movement.

Though I'm a vegetarian, I held out bits of fish from my parents' meals, and many varieties of commercial cat food, all of which she seemed to ignore. One day I bought a roast chicken and dismembered it, and Milly came close enough to sniff at the warm meat. I felt her whiskers brush my palm.

Gradually I raised the height of the love seat by putting books under its feet, adding a paperback beneath each foot every day until Milly could crouch in a normal position to feed. After several weeks of such coaxing, Milly's whole dusty body emerged for a few seconds at dinnertime. She looked like a Norwegian forest cat, a plush calico whose coloring made her appear to be wearing a white stole. Her personality emerged, too, and once she'd liberated herself from the couch-cave, she started hopping into my bed.

She reminded me of Nicole. They both have innocent, light-colored eyes, small chins, and dubious expressions. Both cat and woman are slightly, but charmingly, overweight. Both are shy. I realized, as I stroked my new bed partner and told her how lovely she was, that I was using the same tone of voice I had once used with Nicole.

Milly is not my first cat. On my eighth birthday I got Puffy, a blue-cream Persian who suckled my ear and lived until I was twenty-eight. And in my mid-thirties I "rescued" a stray black-and-white kitten from a park in Ohio and named her Hope. She went with me to Alabama, then California, and finally Australia. I loved those cats and others, but I felt I understood Milly better. I thought, as the months went by, that we were growing very close. That's when she started peeing on my bed.

First it happened every two weeks, then more often — sometimes several days in a row. I got used to waking in the middle of the night, stripping the sheets, and putting on new ones. I had the mattress professionally cleaned and bought two waterproof mattress protectors, so I could rotate them. I consulted friends, vets, and even a kind of cat whisperer, who told me that Milly wanted to be recognized as more than just a cute little animal: she wanted to be respected as the intelligent, mature, complex being she is. (Also, she said, I'd blown it that time when Milly had tried to bring a live lizard into my bed and I'd chased her away.)

A few nights later, I was woken mid-dream by the sound of a young girl's voice saying, "Look at me! It's important that you *look* at me." Startled awake, I raised my head and found Milly sitting three feet away, staring into my eyes.

After that I started looking at Milly differently. Instead of just telling her how sweet she was, I began praising her for being strong and brave, wise and kind.

Of course, the voice of the small child could have been my own, and its message — "*Look* at me" — could have been a lament left over from childhood regarding a father whose eyes rarely met mine. And, of course, I am reassuring myself that I, too, am strong, brave, et cetera. But since I started to show respect for Milly, she has never again peed where she shouldn't.

She and I now eat, play, and sleep together. Most nights she comes into my bedroom, announcing herself with a variety of mews and chirrups and purrs. It's like being visited by a choir of cats. She jumps on the bed and lets herself fall onto my face and neck, so that we end up pressed together. I pet her and murmur muffled endearments into her fur. Sometimes I say, "I love you." I spend an inordinate amount of time holding her, which is my only reliable source of physical affection and tenderness.

It has occurred to me that I'd like to try this with a human being: to hold and consciously love someone, to feel that love through my body as much as I can. For me the physical act of making love has often been psychologically fraught. I'm always wondering if the other person is truly comfortable, relaxed, and in love — and if *I* am. My intimacy with Milly is far less urgent and more peaceful. If she's not into the petting, she hops off the bed: no hard feelings.

I'm embarrassed that I am turning into a woman whose only sensory and emotional outlet is her cat. But, despite going off antidepressants in hopes of a reinvigorated libido, I have zero interest in sex of any kind. I no longer even have sexual dreams. But I don't mind. I am reaching menopause and understand that a declining sex drive is common at this stage of life.

So for now Milly is my antidepressant, my meditation, my respite. Lying still with her, I close my eyes, breathe as deeply as I can with my nose full of fur, and will myself to relax. Focusing on her, I forget about my parents, my feet, my weight, and the weird pressure in my chest. This technique may not be as reliable an antidepressant as Prozac, but at least there are no side effects — except, once, a buzzing at the back of my neck. Maybe I'm learning how to purr. ■