

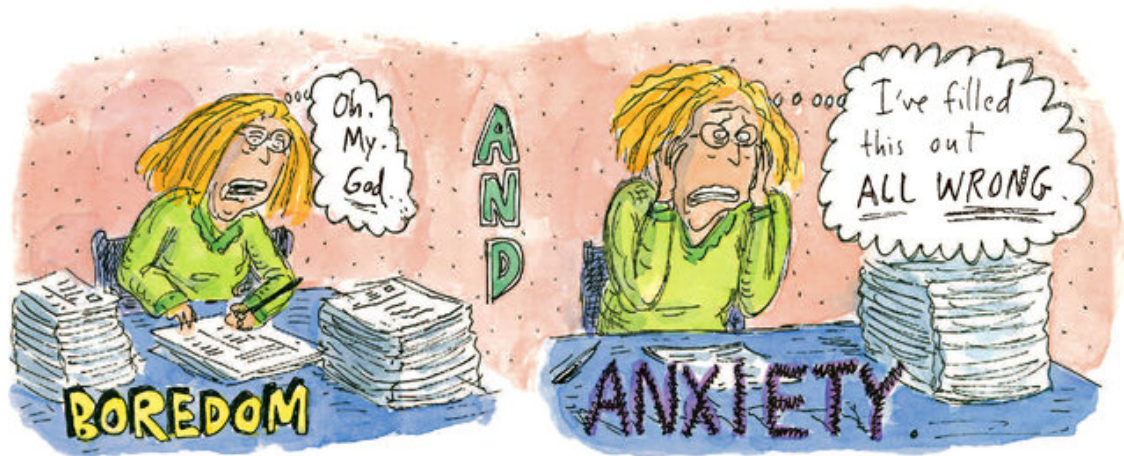
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Drawn From Life

Roz Chast's 'Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?'

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By Alex Witchell



Cracking up: Roz Chast's graphic memoir finds the humor and heartache in being her parents' sole caretaker during their final years.

Image from "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?"

Roz Here is some well-considered advice from Roz Chast on "How to Prepare for Very, Very Advanced Old Age":

"Make sure to scrimp and save every penny of your precious earnings. . . . And when your scrimpings run out:

- 1) Go into your children's scrimpings, and/or
- 2) Play and win the lottery, and/or
- 3) Apply for a Guggenheim, and/or
- 4) Start smoking, and/or

5) Take hemlock.”

If you read this list and laughed ruefully, chances are you have parents who are living (if that’s what you call it) forever, costing a fortune and driving you insane. If not, you are probably young enough to have parents who are white-water rafting, eating Greek yogurt and driving you insane.

Never fear. Your day will come.

Chast’s cartoons have appeared in *The New Yorker* since 1978, where her muse, and her beat, is anxiety. Her signature wavy-lined drawings pulsate with emotion and hope as her words cut straight to hopeless reality. A classic Chast cartoon shows a joyous man bursting into song, specifically, the refrain of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’.” The caption reads, “In Deep Denial.”

“Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” is Chast’s graphic memoir of her parents’ final years: Her father, George, died at 95; her mother, Elizabeth, at 97. This is a beautiful book, deeply felt, both scorchingly honest about what it feels like to love and care for a mother who has never loved you back, at least never the way you had wanted, and achingly wistful about a gentle father who could never break free of his domineering wife and ride to his daughter’s rescue. It veers between being laugh-out-loud funny and so devastating I had to take periodic timeouts.

Cartoons, as it happens, are tailor-made for the absurdities of old age, illness and dementia, the odd dramas and grinding repetition expertly illustrated by copious exclamation points, capital letters and antic drawings. They also limit the opportunity for navel gazing and self-pity, trapping you in the surreal moments themselves. The recurring, maniacally angry face of Chast’s mother, which Chast eventually mimics, is one I have seen in my own mirror all too often.

Chast was an only child raised in Brooklyn — though, technically, that is not quite true. Family lore has it that when Elizabeth was pregnant the first time, she climbed a step stool to change a light bulb because George had a phobia about climbing step stools. Afterward, she hemorrhaged, was confined to bed rest and delivered the baby at 7½ months. Her infant girl lived a day before she died. The actual cause, Chast writes, was probably placenta previa, though the light bulb remained the defining aspect of the story.

Self-recrimination and grief visited Elizabeth for the rest of her life, as they did her husband and daughter. There’s a certain place in hell-on-earth for children who follow a deceased sibling: Chast was the blank slate for her father’s crippling fears and for her mother’s rage. Elizabeth worked as an assistant elementary school principal, and her terrible anger, when

directed toward students, was what she herself termed “a blast from Chast.” Her daughter writes of herself and her father, who taught high school French and Spanish: “The words we both dreaded were, ‘I’m going to blow my top!’”

So it’s no surprise Elizabeth was averse to discussing death. She and George were both 93 before they agreed to write a will. They met in childhood, growing up two blocks from each other in East Harlem: “Aside from World War II, work, illness and going to the bathroom, they did everything together. But the concept of . . . ‘being happy’ — that was for modern people or movie stars. I.e., degenerates.” Chast’s mother exclaims: “Elizabeth Taylor! Seven husbands. Oy gevalt.”

“They were a tight little unit,” Chast writes over the drawing of her parents sitting happily on the couch. “Codependent?” Elizabeth asks. “Of *course* we’re codependent!” George chimes in, “Thank GOD!!!”

When Chast, pregnant, moved from Manhattan to Connecticut with her husband and 3-year-old son, her parents were 78 and still lived in the Brooklyn apartment where she grew up. They lasted a good long time in remarkable shape, though George gradually suffered memory loss. When they reached 93, their woes multiplied. Chast catalogs all the stations of the aging cross here: shoddy housekeeping, denial, Life Alert, denial, accidents. Elizabeth climbed a ladder to search for something in her closet, fell backward and hit her head. When she returned home from the hospital, she fell again, this time while getting dressed. “My father couldn’t pick her up. . . . He left their apartment to find a neighbor and somehow got lost in the building.” The cartoon shows him scared and surrounded by doors — 2-A, 4-K, 5-H, all sneering.

Chast moved them into “the Place” in Connecticut near her home, and is honest about how much she hated this responsibility. She draws herself fantasizing, “Maybe they’ll both die at the same time in their sleep. . . . And I’ll NEVER have to ‘deal!’”

She deftly captures the social order of “the Place,” which she says was “like the high school cafeteria, but with old people.” She draws her parents approaching a large, empty table where one woman sits. “These seats are all reserved,” the woman informs them. The reason, Chast discovers, is that Elizabeth was considered overbearing and George talked too much. “They were out of practice with socializing. They had been each other’s only mirrors for too long.”

George dies first. After a bone breaks in his hip, he refuses physical therapy and wastes away. Elizabeth’s decline was inevitable, although it dragged on for two more brutal years. Mentally acute until then, she tells her daughter, “I feel like my brains are melting.” Chast was blessed to find Goodie, a Jamaican woman, to be her mother’s full-time aide. “Even so, I felt guilty not to be ‘doing the dirty work’ myself,” she writes. The drawing beneath this

statement shows Chast haplessly telling Goodie, “Guess I’ll go home now and DRAW!”

Chast cleans out the Brooklyn apartment, and her photographs of her parents’ belongings are priceless, including the “museum of old Schick shavers.” Cheapness is fear’s most symbiotic partner, forging a paralysis that can last a lifetime — because buying, or doing, anything new is just too expensive, financially and emotionally. If you didn’t grow up with it, don’t try to understand it. You never will.

After Elizabeth died, Chast writes, “I was alone with my mother’s body for a while. I drew her. I didn’t know what else to do.”

I was moved by that. And by Chast’s writing in her epilogue, “I’m still working things out with my mother.” I recalled Elizabeth’s lifelong criticism of George, how he walked around “with his feelers out,” too often worried about the things he said and how people responded. His daughter has been lucky enough to make her own feelers her life’s work. No one has perfect parents and no one can write a perfect book about her relationship to them. But Chast has come close.

CAN’T WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING MORE PLEASANT?

A Memoir

By Roz Chast

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