

WHAT ELSE BUT GRACE

not well, but better

BY

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Any fool can handle a crisis; it's the day to day that wears you down.

Anton Chekhov, Russian playwright and country doctor

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Memoir Now

I am writing a memoir because I think I'm losing my mind. When I was teaching as an adjunct professor, my students' names would morph and I would be forced to call them by one another's names, which they minded. This happens to the children I nanny for now; they get mad when I call them by the dogs' names. It's the frustration I feel when my dog forgets where her leash is. She has two, so there's really no excuse for that kind of carelessness. It may just be the kind of loss that comes from city life and country life and suburban life. There's just this loss that happens to middle-aged people, people with children and/or pets, people who live on earth and people with more than thirty years of debilitating, progressive chronic illness behind them.

I didn't plan to write a memoir until I was at least seventy. This would be after the Pulitzer Prize for drama. I've written a dozen plays or so by then, but they can't all be Pulitzer prize winners. I'm happiest about the Obie, the Off-Broadway awards. I live on the income from a few movies that have been made. Or one, even. There is some teaching - special seminars with people who really want to study writing, and who, maybe, want to study with me.

My husband (or perhaps he's just a gentleman friend) and I live in a small house on Cape Cod and tend an English cottage-style garden. In the evenings, we walk our plot of land, listen for the crunches and squeaks the night creatures make as they take over the property. The dogs walk near us, but not too near, exploring, and letting these night creatures know they'll be around. This man and I hold hands. We talk ourselves to sleep, still full of secrets and ideas.

Our home has original pumpkin pine on the floor, hand-made quilts piled and hung everywhere. The windows are sparsely decorated to let in the light, and to keep the land in view.

If I go to town during the day, I come back with a bit of gossip; he does the same when he goes. It's just storytelling; there's no viciousness in it. After a morning run in the nearby woods, the dog snoozes nearby while I work, and I've long given up on keeping her off the quilts. There's one on the bottom of the bed that has some tears in it; that's hers. We've been through some scares; the man has had prostate cancer, but it was caught early and cured. He has a stent in his heart. As for me, I am always, always, always sick. We're used to it. We made it through the bulk of our lives together intact, not bitter, and we have love. So it's time to write the memoir.

Except it's not, because I'm not 70, or near it. I'm 48, and if I make it to 50, it'll be a miracle.

Recently, I almost killed my dog. Grace is a beautiful Maltese poodle mix, though there's something else in there, I think. Bichon? She is probably an African white dwarf giraffe. I have her hair cut short by our groomer, so she looks like a lamb. People stop us all the time to ask what she is. I tell them, yes, she's part sheep. At two, she's about 18 pounds with floppy, fluffy ears and brown vampire eyes.

For a dog purchase, white was a dumb choice. She's at the park or in the garden or at some other dirty spot every day, so she's always filthy. She likes to dig holes. She digs until she can fit her whole body in the hole. I read or write or garden, look up to check on her, or just sit and watch her do this thing she excels at. She glances around from time to time, suddenly territorial, because, really, it's a great hole and it's *her* hole. Fun for her, fun for me, till this filthy creature wants to come into my home.

Before I got her, my apartment was ready for its *Country Living* close-up. I pour over magazines like that. I cut out pictures of rooms I like and keep them in a photo album. In my

home, which is decorated seasonally, there are fresh flowers in vintage McCoy vases, white bureaus (butter cream white, painted the same color as the walls), a white office armoire that was built to fit that space, and a matching wooden file cabinet with multiple drawers to keep the clutter down. There is a hand-made white and periwinkle blue bookcase from, probably, the '30s, white beaded or embroidered or quilted pillows...white as far as the eye can see, which is not very far. It's a 427 square feet studio in the Brighton area of Boston.

In the 16-foot kitchen, a red and white plaid tablecloth that belonged to my friend Suzanne's grandmother is neatly hemmed and tacked with red buttons for a valance. There's a bright red hand-made shelf whose legs are made of empty spools of thread held together on a dowel. 1940's-era white and red aluminum-ware sits near the stove and on top of the refrigerator. The bathroom, working off of the white and black log cabin pattern floor tile, is done in white, with a jacquard pattern lace shower curtain and a sequined white window curtain and vintage crystals hanging from a plant hanger. I keep the blinds half-open to let the soft north east light in.

Into the middle of this comes Grace. Grace has usually found something disgusting to roll in. Dog pee is easiest to get at, goose poop sticks best, and spreads nicely on her coat and leaves a deep green stain even after it's wiped. She's so curly it's impossible to really brush it out, but I wipe her down as best I can and think of myself as a lesser person because I don't want my dog to be dirty, even though it's her birthright. We negotiate this all the time, and I'm trying really hard. My first priority is her health, but my second priority is my sanity and, then, third, my décor.

We live near the Cleveland Circle Reservoir, which is a state park. There, I let her off her leash because, after lots and lots of training, she comes right back when I call her. I like to give her as much "dog" time as possible, and I'm most content when watching her enjoy herself, but

when I see her dive towards the ground, long graceful neck first, I know she's got something dead.

"Leave it!" I call, but she's too far gone. Somewhere inside that goofy little house pet, there's a wolf that needs to cover its tracks so its enemies cannot track it. The best I can do is to get it away from her. I hobble over. I wear a cast on my right leg. There's no point in it, meaning that nothing is healing in there, but it's too awful to walk without it. She's rolling in a mouse's little corpse, transported. Using a stick, I pop it away from her, knock it as close to the water as possible. She gets a good scolding for not listening, but I can see in her eyes that she can't help herself. And I think, Fair enough. That was a really good corpse.

- Would you like to go to a shelter? I ask her, but she doesn't get the joke. Or maybe she does, and she knows I'm too far gone; nothing could make me lose her now, except for my own carelessness and extraordinary level of distraction brought on by intractable fatigue, terrible pain, the 12 or so diseases I have acquired and the 27 medications I take.

On the afternoon that she was almost killed, we headed out in our usual discombobulated state. Our friend Moxie, a shih tsu/bichon mix, was with us. First, I went back for my scarf. Then, for my crochet, in case I had time to work on it later. Then for my Transportation Access Pass - a discounted pass for the disabled passengers on the Boston transport line. I locked the door, then the two dogs waited patiently in the hallway while I unlocked the door another time and go back in for some water. After going back one more time for dog treats, we headed out. I asked the trainer if that would make the dog crazy - this "six trips back in" all the time, but she told me that dogs get used to what they are used to. Grace doesn't know some people make it out the door on one try (show-offs).

Right before we left, I had checked my temperature. Slightly elevated. My right ankle and foot were throbbing, though I'd taken one and a half Percocet half an hour earlier. Sometimes, it takes at least an hour to help. Some days, it just doesn't get through. My glasses felt as if they were crooked. Some days they are, and other days it's my eyes that are off. Fairly often, the left eye blanks out completely for ten minutes, and I have to walk around winking till I'm back to two eyes.

Grace and I live on the fourth floor of a twenty-eight-unit apartment building which, thanks to me, I must admit, has a lovely garden in the courtyard where there used to be a trash heap. The only problem with the area is that it is perilously close to the colleges. It makes for a lot of drunken late-night parties. Grace only barks at shopping carts, garbage bags and drunken college boys. She loves drunk college girls; they're sloppy and emotional with her: she's the most *gorgeous* dog in the world; she looks like a *muppet*; they miss their own dogs *so much*, ohmygod, etc. She spots them a mile away and topples onto the sidewalk for a belly rub. It's not a bad neighborhood, though, and it's good for me, as it's close to transportation of every kind, which is nice when each step hurts. I hit our cranky old elevator button and we get in.

As the elevator groans to a start, I lean against the wall and close my eyes for a moment. I'm already tired, wondering what the fever is about, wondering when, if, I'll get the cast off, because snow is coming, and it only has a bit of foam at the toe. I'm worn out already, though I haven't done much, so there's no particular reason for my terrible fatigue, except that I'm always terribly fatigued, and I have several hours of baby-sitting ahead. All I've done so far today is call doctors and medical personnel.

Can I get the TENS unit (a small neuroblocker that can distract the brain from a pain source) from the dealer now that the insurance company has finally approved it? Can the folks at

Faulkner pain clinic send a fax to my primary care physician with the notes from the last visit, at which time we discussed a narcotic patch that would deliver more consistent pain relief than the up and down all day of Percocet and Tylenol? Does anyone have any free samples of Lamictal, because, somehow, I lost them (not the bottle, just the pills) and my insurance doesn't have a replacement policy.

Like that. That's normal for a Monday.

Perhaps it was the two red leashes that caused the problem. I'm not sure, but, I didn't see that Grace's leash was not completely inside the elevator until it was too late. Awkwardly, I swooped down to grab it, but the elevator was already moving. Her leash was dragged by the elevator's motion to the side of its door. She was swept up and dragged all the way up to the top of the door. She was dangling by her neck, her head smashed against the corner of the elevator. I screamed and reached for her. She was too high for me to get at her collar. I tried to loosen the hook but couldn't. I'm only five foot zero, and I'm not a good jumper. I jammed her up, trying to ease the pressure on her neck so she wouldn't be strangled. She yelped. She was dying. Her neck was broken.

I had time to picture us in the elevator, me holding her lifeless body, keening. Two years of my life, and a love that surprises me every day. More work than I could have guessed at. In some ways, the most extraordinary gamble I've ever taken, and had won beyond deserving, and I could not reach her. I didn't have the time or the presence of mind to hit the emergency stop button, or I thought it would just make it worse. I can't claim either one for sure. I did nothing useful while my little love, *ma bahby geeerl*, died just above me.

When I was sure I had lost her, the elevator hit bottom, the door opened and the two of us tumbled out. We hit the floor of the lobby somehow touching each other. I landed hard, she landed beside me, nearly beneath me, then she popped up and ran to me. We rolled on each other, all paws and hands. I grabbed her. She had a bit of blood on her neck where the clasp from the collar had dug in. She jumped away from me and ran all over the lobby. When she noticed that I was crying, she came over and licked at my face, which is what she usually does if I'm crying, even if she's the one who made me cry by being annoying or not peeing within a reasonable time frame at 11:00 pm on a freezing cold night.

After a moment, I ran her outside, thinking she needed fresh air. My neighbor was on the garden wall. I tried to tell my neighbor what happened while Gracie crawled up on my shoulder, her parrot spot, her safe zone. She's entirely too tall to fit up there, so it looks ridiculous. I could feel Grace's heart racing against my neck as I rocked and kissed her through her little sweater (she hates sweaters).

I tried to move her to my lap so I could get a look at her, but she refused to come down off my shoulder, wriggling up higher whenever I tried to lower her. My neighbor was petting her, checking her legs and body for lumps and breaks.

- Gracie's fine. She's not hurt.

It began to seem that my neighbor might be right. I couldn't see Grace's face, but I could feel her, and she was alive. She was clinging to me for comfort, not knowing I'd been the problem. The leash was too high, too thick; I was too short, too weak. I was sore the next day, but she probably was, too. She was not still crying the next day, but I was.

Over thirty years ago, I came down with, or came up with, systemic lupus erythematosus, (SLE), or lupus. It's a still little-understood autoimmune disease: my immune system attacks any healthy tissue it suspects is a problem, even though there's no problem and it's my own tissue. It's a chronic inflammatory disease with no cure, and little effective treatment. The treatment for it now - steroids, mainly - is about what it was when I got sick. It's about what it was when Flannery O'Connor, one of my favorite writers and a personal hero, died of lupus in 1964.