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## The Lesson is Love.

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I don't believe anyone knows how to have a perfectly functioning, completely fulfilling multi-year relationship, let alone one that lasts multi-decades as Sam and mine has. You can decide to make rules to help navigate the rough patches, so things will go more smoothly, as partners often do. You can choose to attempt the cliché commandment of never going to bed angry. Seems like a fairy story to believe that's possible, because I've never been able to avoid that. It's a great goal, of course, but the reality, I find, is quite the opposite.



©2019 Robin AF Olson. Sam and I a very long time ago at the Brazil Festival in NYC.

There have been so many nights I've laid in bed, with my back turned against my annoying-other while an angry silence seeps into the covers. We both pretend to sleep, proving our defiance to the other that nothing bothers us so greatly that we can't simply fall asleep. My fear: *I'm often so wound up as I lay there, at the zenith of anger and anxiety, that the least little thing will cause me to fly out of the bed into yet another rage, my truth (IT DOES BOTHER ME!) revealed.* Then he will win. He always falls asleep before I do. This time I will win. I work hard to tamp my feelings down. I won't lose this round, too. I won't. I will go to bed angry. I WILL fall asleep!

There have been many horrible words said, accusations volleyed, declarations, and threats made over the years. There have been many times when one or both of us have given up on the relationship, followed by a painful, heavy silence that fills every corner of the house. It can last for weeks.

During this hiatus, we begin a choreographed dance, one that requires no partner. As one person enters a room, the other leaves. The goal is to avoid each other while still in the same house. We can't afford to move out, so we pretend we just live with a ghost.

If alerted by the footfalls of said shimmering spirit, we linger in place a few moments longer so as not to cross paths with the fearsome "apparition."

I understand why this happens, but am at a loss for how to right the ship. Yes, we have communication problems exacerbated

by stress. The past few years, especially 2018, have been cursed with one thing after another. Last summer, we almost lost our home. The power got shut off once. It's never happened to me in my entire life. It broke me. We should be better off by this point in our lives.

More than a few times last year, we weren't sure about how we were going to feed ourselves. Add to that the pressure of operating a non-profit rescue and caring for dozens of cats, with never, ever, a vacation in nearly twenty years, and you can see why this relationship could be doomed to fail. S-T-R-E-S-S.

M-O-N-E-Y

Yet here we are twenty five years later. Sam and I broke up a few times. It wasn't a perfect run. We dated other people during the early years, but we always seemed to find our way back to each other. I don't know why. We're very different. Sam says we have an unbreakable "*heart connection*." I'm not sure what to say. Maybe it's because he never gave up on us, when I have so many times before.

Just as we've both been re-thinking what our future might hold, whether or not we care to continue being partners, something happened that slapped us both upside the head. I'm reminded of a line Cher utters in one of my favorite films, "*Moonstruck*." [1] She scolds her newly minted lover, Nicholas Cage, to stop worrying about what anyone thinks about their feelings for each other and to go with his heart. In her words; "*Snap out of it!*"

**Well, we got a wakeup call all right.**

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***"My heart aches badly from missing Sam. I've been crying a lot. I can't even show him my tears. He has too much on his plate. I have to be strong for him."***

Though there has been anger and so many things gone unsaid, there's always been a basic goodness, respect, a kindness that tips the scale in the opposite direction in our relationship. Perhaps the passage of all these years, all these challenges, has given me a gift of understanding that can be summed up in another cliché: *You don't know what you have until it's gone.*

**Mercifully, Sam is NOT dead, but...**

Last September, Sam's mother fell. It was the middle of the night. She was in her New York City, upper west side, rent-controlled, two-bedroom apartment. She passed out for hours after she fell. When she awoke in the hallway, she realized her arm was injured. She was too weak to stand. She wore an alert button on a chain around her neck, but didn't press it because a month before she'd set it off unknowingly and her door was broken down to get to her. She was fine, but the landlord pitched a fit. She was terrified they'd break in again and she'd get into trouble. So at 5 AM, she called Sam, her only son, who lives nearly two hours away, to come get her.

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This isn't the first time something like this has happened. She's had many chances to call for help locally, but always turned to Sam-and it's not because they have such a close relationship.

Years before "*the fall*," she called the morning we were due to visit her. We had planned to arrive early in the afternoon to celebrate my birthday and Sam's daughter's birthday. Instead, she called demanding we come now and not wait. She sounded very odd. She wouldn't say why we had to hurry, just that we needed to get there right away.

We alerted Sam's daughter since she lived a bit closer, but she had to travel on two subways, then walk a good way to get to her grandmother's apartment. Odds were that we still might get there first. All we knew is something was wrong.

**His daughter arrived a few minutes ahead of us as Sam was parking the car. She called Sam. I could hear speaking, her voice at an alarmed pitch, even though Sam held the phone to his ear. She found her grandmother lying on the sofa in a pool of blood. She'd slit up her forearms, trying to kill herself. His daughter didn't know what to do.**

Once we got into the apartment, I assessed the situation. My mother had been an Emergency Medical Technician when I was a teenager and I'd helped her study for her exams. I ended up learning a lot of basic first aid and I knew that Sam would be too distraught to think clearly, so I took over.

I calmly spoke to his mom and asked to see what she'd done. She was pale as a sheet, her flimsy bathrobe covered in gore. She lifted her left arm. It was wrapped in a blood-soaked towel. I gingerly removed the towel and saw the blood was already clotting. It must have been done hours before, but there was a great amount of blood on her and all over the furniture. I could smell it's dank odor.

She told us she cut herself to stop the pain. Her hip hurt so badly. She'd broken it a few years before and it was surgically

repaired, instead of getting a new hip. She couldn't bear the pain so she decided to end her life. I don't know why she didn't tell her doctor or Sam or any of us she was hurting, or why she let it go on for so long that she felt suicidal. I hate to say this, but after all these years I have to wonder if she wanted attention. Her cuts were bad, but not bad enough to require stitches.

It had been a miserable winter, with towering snowfalls keeping Sam from visiting her. She'd become basically housebound, too afraid of falling on the ice and injuring herself. Perhaps the isolation got to her, but she never said a word about it. While I was tending to her, she said she changed her mind about wanting to die after she made the first cuts and didn't know what to do.

Again, she never called 9-1-1, who could have been there in moments, she called Sam who was 90 miles away.

So I called for an ambulance. The EMTs arrived shockingly fast, along with 3 cops who began interviewing each of us, trying to sort out if any of us were the culprits-which really pissed me off. They were also talking about his mom as if she wasn't there. It was terribly rude.

As the EMTs worked on Sam's mom, they got to the point where they needed to transfer her to a gurney. All the cops were watching. She was in a BATHROBE, that's it. It had to be removed due to all the blood on it. They had dress her in a clean gown before they left. I shouted over their chatting to be quiet and give the poor woman some respect and to turn away and keep their voices down. They stepped back and gave me dirty looks, but I didn't care. At the time, I felt it was disrespectful to treat her that way. Now I'm not sure I have the same opinion as I once did.

**We were in the hospital for about 17 hours waiting for her to be admitted into the Psych Ward. She didn't need stitches, just good bandaging. She probably said she was sorry, but by then I was so angry I didn't want to say more. Happy Birthday to me.**

I get it. She's in pain, but she wasn't just suddenly in pain and suddenly couldn't do anything about it. She knew we would be there. She also KNEW my father killed himself. Did she have any thought for what her granddaughter went through finding her? **You look at this woman and think she's a nice old lady, but I'm not buying that any more. You can be a selfish, self-centered person in your youth, just as easily as you can still be one when you're old.**

But still, I was raised to be a good girl. I got to work once we could leave the hospital and spent many days scrubbing down her apartment by myself. I didn't feel it was right to have her son or granddaughter see all that blood. It was everywhere...in the bathroom, on the sofa, on the table, on the mail, drops in the hallway and on top of that the apartment itself was a pit. So I got to work and cleaned that, too. I never saw such grime in my life, in addition to all the bodily fluids. I wanted Sam's mom to come home to a nice, clean place. She'd be on antidepressants for a time, during the months she was hospitalized after her suicide attempt and for some time after that, but I knew that a better environment would help her find some joy again. She was also getting a new hip.

I tried to move on from that experience. She apologized to me and thanked me for what I did, but I could never truly forgive her. I also had a suspicion she was pulling these emergencies because her circle of friends and family were dying off and she had few left. She didn't do her physical therapy so she became more and more homebound and more and more reliant on Sam to take her to the doctor or take her to a museum or take her to the park for a walk to get some air.

**All this time she knew we were struggling to pay the bills and find more clients or bigger projects so we could make ends meet. She knew it blew Sam's entire day to run her to the eye doctor. She lives in NEW YORK CITY. She can get transport anywhere she wants, any time. She has a doorman (a nice lady named Iris). But no. Sam has to take her. At first I never said a word, but it kept going on while poor Sam was struggling to be a good son and risking losing his clients in the meantime.**

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So Sam raced to his mom's apartment once again. He got her up, checked out her injured elbow, and sat her on her bed. He asked her if she wanted to go to the hospital. Does anyone ever say YES to that?

She told him she felt tired. I texted Sam and asked him to get her hydrated. Maybe she had low blood sugar? After over 15 years dealing with sick cats I figured many of the same things applied to humans: check her temp, get her hydrated, check her pupils (*did she have a stroke?*), can she smile evenly, can she hold out her arms in front of her at the same angle or is she having odd mobility issues, slurring her words, etc.

He decided to let her rest awhile while he got some food for them at a take-out Chinese restaurant nearby. Sam was cross-eyed from lack of sleep, no food and stress. He figured she was all right for the few minutes it took to get lunch and maybe it would help perk his mother up to eat something. She was sleeping when he returned, but a few hours later she woke up. She began talking gibberish. This woman has always been sharp as a tack, even if her body is bent and weak. When he told me what was going on, I strongly urged him to call for help.

His mother would spend the better part of the next four days in the ER before they knew what was going on. Sam would spend most of that time by her side in the same clothes, with barely a bite to eat, or a sip of much needed coffee.

**She was septic. That's why she passed out. It was very serious. They were working on locating the source of the blood poisoning, but in the meantime she had to be on a special monitor that was only located in the ER. She rested as Sam sat in a daze watching groups of injured,**

## **drunk, crazy people file in and out of the Emergency Department at St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital.**

It turns out she had a Urinary Tract Infection. I've had that once. It was so uncomfortable I can't understand how she didn't know she had one. It was so bad it was making her body a toxic mess. She's 89 years old. She only has so much ability to fight this off. Her blood pressure was low and the sepsis was making her breathing ragged and fast. We feared that maybe "*this was it.*" We had to prepare ourselves for what might happen next. Suddenly I felt bad for vilifying her.

I couldn't go to the city to see Sam's mom. I had 22 cats to care for and some of them are sick or elderly. It's not like I can get a pet sitter and take off. It's just too complicated and takes far longer than most pet sitters could handle, especially in an emergency with no advance reservation. My job was to hold down the fort for the time being.

And so began a painful, time consuming nightmare for Sam with repercussions that couldn't help but effect me and the cats, too. Sam traveled back and forth to New York City every other day for the next two months to spend a few minutes visiting with his mother and to get updates on how she was doing. I made sure he was constantly bringing her treats or books to help her pass the time. I don't know how he did it and still found a way to work.

Except the staff at St Luke's and, then at Amsterdam House, where his mom was in rehab, were terrible. They **never** called us even though Sam begged for updates. I don't know if he EVER spoke with a doctor. His mother wasn't even sure what they were doing to her. Sam has all the legal documents to oversee his mother's health care. It's not as if he was a stranger trying to get top secret medical information. They just were too busy to bother and information was few and far between. One day she was in the hospital, the next at the Amsterdam House across the street (*which was a miserable pit-please don't let me ever go to a place like that!*). There was no medical reason to keep her in the hospital after the first month, but she was too weak to go home. I did visit her a few times, but once I saw her in rehab I knew it was unlikely she was ever going to be strong enough to go back to her apartment.

What do we do now? None of us have much money and certainly not anything like what we'd need for her to be in assisted living. What little I could find was \$5000 or MORE a month. It all depended on if she needed HOME care or HEALTH care. Home care is general help around the house, cleaning, cooking, laundry. The care-person could give a bath or shower, help with "toileting" (*yikes*), be a companion. Health care was much bigger bucks.

Sam and I began having difficult conversations. What if she moved in with us? Could we provide for her? Could we do it if someone came in to help her get bathed and check her vitals? I'd have to lose two of my three foster rooms. I'd have to empty out our guest room, which is my one space where no cats are allowed so I can safely store family heirlooms somewhere. Sure, I could get a storage space, but it would take more money that we don't have, more time away from billable hours having to pack her up, pack up our stuff, move it all, move her in, and we'd lose our privacy completely because we live in a wide open, contemporary house.

**My biggest fear of all-would she trip over or step on and kill one of our cats. They always flop at our feet. We step out of the way. She can't. She can't do stairs. We could put her in the guest room and she'd have the guest bath down the hall. I'd have to find placements for some of my foster cats, which I really do not want to do. I might even have to shutter doing rescue at all. How much work would it take to provide care for this woman? How much of our lives do we have to sacrifice for her? This is a person who has never treated me like a family member, someone who has been polite and friendly, but that's about it. Now I have to face she may move in one day.**

We had more questions than answers, but there was one thing that was starting to become more clear. Sam and I were working like a well-oiled machine. I made a big "*to do*" list on Google sheets. We talked and talked and talked about options and how we could make this or that work, all while not having a shred of an idea on what was going on with his mom. Sam made calls, did research. We had meeting after meeting about what to do.

Since Sam had to be gone so much, I took over more of the responsibilities at home. I also tried to help make it easier for Sam to come home and focus on his clients and nothing else (*okay he had to give my cat, Spencer, fluids, but that was it*). I wasn't going to be a bitch about this even though it was screwing our lives up big time. I knew it wasn't forever. **We repeated our newly minted motto: "*It's just for now, not forever.*"**

That's how Sam worked up enough strength to keep going back and forth to the city even though his car was making loud clunking sounds and he couldn't afford to get it fixed. He just had to hope it would make the trip (*which drove me crazy with anxiety every time he left the house---would he make it there? Would he make it home?*).

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**Then late in October, the call came we both feared. A social worker called to say that Sam's mom was being released the NEXT DAY and that could he come get her.**

### **THE NEXT DAY?!!**

**Once again, I shouldn't be surprised this happened. The staff at Amsterdam house didn't give a shit. They did what they were supposed to do according to some bullshit rules we weren't privy to, instead of be thoughtful or caring or smart. Time was up. We weren't getting a**

**reasonable warning she was being released. It was THEIR choice. Sam's mom's health coverage HAD NOT run out. They didn't feel they could do any more for her so they were letting her go. Our hand was forced.**

With no notice, we both knew that Sam was going to have to move in with his mother until we could sort out what to do next. She could not live alone. We both got to work trying to figure out what Sam would need so he could live and do his work in NYC. Then we had to figure out how we were going to get the apartment cleaned up and ready in time.

The next morning, the social worker called again; this time a reprieve. Sam's mother had a bloody nose. They were going to keep her for another day or two and run some blood work. They moved her over to the Emergency Department at St. Luke's. *Really? The E.D. for a bloody nose? Okay.* We had a few more days. We could get better prepared. She had another urinary tract infection!

So I did a mad shopping trip at Target getting bedding and other items for Sam. The cashier, who had no filter on his thoughts, went on and on about the items I was purchasing as he scanned and bagged each one. He wanted to know what all of it was for. I explained that I was helping my boyfriend move out. He found it very entertaining. I was polite, but behind my stiff smile, I wanted to reach across the counter and smack him for being so inconsiderate.

The next day, Sam and I bee-lined down to NYC and started cleaning yet again. **For seven hours I cleaned non-stop and all that I got done was Sam's childhood bedroom was clean enough for him to be able to move in.** Sam got busy scrubbing the grime out of the kitchen and we both handled as much of everything else that we could tackle. The place was a mess even though I've periodically cleaned. It just wasn't enough.

**It was good that we were so busy, because every time I had a few moments to think, the realization hit me; Sam was moving out in another day or two. I would have to take care of all the cats alone, including giving my cat, Spencer fluids. Not a big deal unless you understand that I hate sticking my 17-yr old cat and I'm so anxious about it, I feared Spencer would react badly. If I failed him it could prematurely end his life. NO PRESSURE!**

I'd also have to take care of the housekeeping, do all the things Sam used to do, plus work, plus try to keep Kitten Associates going.

**I was going to live ALONE for the first time in 15 years.**

It was going to suck for both of us.

By Saturday, October 27th, we knew that Sunday was going to be the big day. Sam would have to head out to drive to NYC to pick his mother up and bring her back to her apartment. It was the official start to us living apart. That night we held each other tight, while the cats seemed to sense what was going on, most of them were huddled on the bed with us, too. I didn't know how I was going to sleep without him there. I confessed that even though I've lived in our house for over 25 years, it creeps me out to be here alone at night. The cats always seem to get spooked by something I can't see. I used to like being on my own. I didn't know how I'd fare now.

Sam admitted that he didn't want to leave. He was starting to realize that although he'd been mighty unhappy lately, the idea of moving away made him start to see that it wasn't all bad. A surprising amount of tenderness blossomed between us as we talked about our fears that night. He hadn't lived in his mom's apartment for over 30 years. How would he adjust to being back in the City?

It was time. Sunday morning. I kept myself busy, fussing with the contents of Sam's trunk. Did he have everything he needed? We'd already moved a lot of items into the apartment. This was the last load. He'd let me organize and pack up all his stuff into as few armloads of items as possible. I love to organize things, plus it kept me out of his hair. He'd be stuck using street parking, which meant he'd have to follow the ever-changing rules that required cars be moved every day or so from one side of the street to the other. It was a huge pain in the ass. Even finding a spot near the apartment building was a crapshoot. I hoped he'd get a spot close by so he wouldn't have to take a long back-breaking walk to get his belongings to his mom's place.

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There have been many times I wished Sam would drive away and never come back and now he was doing just that. I didn't want him to go. He promised he'd come visit as soon as he could, but it would only be for a few hours, tops. He was going to be New Yorker now. I didn't know when I'd see him again. I had to suck it up. I had to be strong.

**As Sam pulled his red Subaru out of the garage, I walked up the gravel driveway to the mailbox to get the mail. He was starting to make his way out of the driveway and would pass right by me as I walked back down towards the house. As our paths met, he rolled down the window for one last kiss goodbye. I saw the look on his face, I'm sure my expression mirrored his own grief and heartache. I tried to smile. I gave him a quick kiss. I said rarely uttered words; "I love you." He said nothing back. (He later told me he was so choked up he was speechless.) I walked away as fast as I could.**

**I heard the sound of gravel crunching under his tires stop. It meant that Sam's car was at the top of the driveway, turning onto the paved road. I couldn't look back. I made it into the house and shut the door behind me before I fell to my knees and burst into tears.**

**Sam was gone.**

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**Sam's been gone for nearly five months. It hasn't been easy for either of us, but we're both finding something surprising in all this difficulty: we've re-kindled what we lost so long ago. Love.**

We can't get in each other's hair. We see each other usually once a week. Sam can even stay overnight some times. Our visits are filled with errands, but it's ok. Sam got a huge project and that took a tremendous amount of stress off us because they pay their bills. His car is fixed. He even got his broken tooth taken care of. Though Sam is worn down from his mother being "his mother" (*like using her wheelchair to ram into his bedroom door at 7:30 AM to wake him up so he can get her coffee and her New York Times newspaper*), he also has admitted something I never thought I'd hear. He misses our home in the woods. He appreciates our life here and even having a garage to park in. He never was a big fan of living in Sandy Hook because he was used to being able to walk to a café, have coffee, and watch the world go by or pop into a museum or be surrounded by culture. That's all wonderful and I enjoy it, too, but I always felt he lived here just to be with me. Now he sees his life from afar. It wasn't so bad after all. He no longer feels smothered by it.

**And I'm doing well, too. Okay, I talk to myself a lot. I'm not often around humans, but that's fine with me. I worked up the courage to give Spencer fluids and now I'm a champ at doing it.** A few of our foster kittens have been adopted so I'm down to a more manageable number of cats, but it still takes way too much out of my day to clean, make cat food, give fluids and meds, and just keep an eye on each of the cats, then work, etc.



©2018 Robin AF Olson. *Petunia and her mom, Gracie were part of the first kitty-family I ever fostered 15 years ago. This is my last photo of her before we had to put her down.*

**There have been darker times, too.** Especially when one night in early December, my 15-yr old cat, Petunia slipped trying to make an easy jump onto her cat tree. She was usually not happy being picked up, but this time I decided to do it. As I reached under her to lift her, the second I put my hand on her ribcage I felt a huge, hard mass. The next day Dr Larry did x-rays. Petunia was loaded with cancer. It was terribly shocking and heartbreaking. She was supposed to see a specialist the following week to have a challenging dental procedure done. She'd just had an exam the month before-no sign of any masses. I had no idea she was so sick, so fast.

**I had to put her down. Petunia was too far gone to even try steroids or chemo. I had to help her pass without Sam there to say goodbye. Sam couldn't make it. I hated his mother for keeping us apart, yet again, as I held Petunia in my arms for the last time.**



©2018 Robin AF Olson. Goodbye my sweet girl.

**But the gift this lesson has taught us is that we do still love each other.** Sam has been incredibly sweet and attentive. It's not like before, when I felt like we were two strangers living in the same place, or worse, just roommates. It's surprising that those warm feelings are still there. They were always there, we just needed some space and time apart to re-appreciate our relationship.

Sam's mother just turned 90 years old. We have no idea when Sam will come home again. Part of me is afraid it will go back to the way it was when he returns, part of me wants this separation to keep going. It's been so romantic. I missed that feeling of longing, but I also miss the warmth of his body next to mine, hugs, the smile on his face when he looks at me. He's happy to see me again. It fills my soul.

We got to see what life is like without the other one in it. I'm left feeling both terrified and grateful for this lesson. One day we really will be separated forever. I'm not being dramatic, I'm being factual. One day we won't have another chance or another day. Before that day comes, we need to cherish what we have, right here, right now, and focus on the love we have that has kept us together all these years.



©2018 Robin AF Olson. Sam and I take a break to have lunch by Long Island Sound to celebrate his birthday last June.

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