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The Long Road Home

Sat, 2020-04-18 14:42 — Robin Olson

I'm in a hamster-wheel, spinning, spinning, spinning. Every day is the same, every moment a repeat of the previous. That's how my life has felt these past eighteen months.

My partner, Sam, moved to New York City to care for his mother, after she'd fallen and it was discovered she was severely septic. She was hospitalized for over a month. Sam went to see her every other day, at first. The 90-mile drive from our home in Connecticut could be brutal. If he chose the wrong time of day, if the weather was poor, or there was a car accident, the 90-minute drive could stretch into many hours. Then add another crap-shoot-ETA to make it a round-trip meant most of the day was spent driving. How was Sam supposed to make a living? How were we supposed to have a relationship or manage our home if he was gone all the time?

After that first month, the hospital moved his mom across the street to a rehab facility and Sam continued making the trip to NYC to see her. Even though he was exhausted, and our finances were taking a hit, was by her side. Without warning, the rehab released her. We had to scramble, not sure what to do with her because she wouldn't get the care she needed to live independently in her apartment, and Medicare would only provide a health care aide for so long.

We made the painful decision for Sam to move in with his mom to save on travel time, and so he could look after her until we figured some things out. We knew his mom did NOT want to go to rehab ever again or into a nursing home. I had to agree. The rehab place was out of a David Lynch film but, not in a quirky, entertaining way. Sam had to set up shop in his former childhood bedroom, where he'd try to work. We bought him a new twin bed, but there was nothing money could buy to help him feel comfortable returning to that apartment.

We hoped it would only be "for now." I feel awful saying that we all thought, *even his mom said as much*, that she wouldn't be with us much longer. If that was the case, then Sam should maximize his time with her and I'd stay in Connecticut to continue to operate our non-profit rescue, [Kitten Associates](#) ^[1], take care of our 9 cats, continue working as a freelance graphic designer, and take care of the house.

It was going to be tough on both of us, but frankly, in a lot of ways, it was a welcome break. We hadn't been getting along that well for years. The constant stress on our relationship, never having a vacation in over 10 years, never even having a break for a weekend away, turned us into hamsters, spinning away in our wheels. We did what was expected of us and everything else fell to the wayside.

Our feelings for each other waxed and waned, but it eventually got so bad before Sam left, that I slept in the foster room with the cats for months rather than be anywhere near him. It got so bad I began taking a hard look at what I could do with my finances, where I could move, what sorts of home I could afford. The answer was pretty bleak. I wanted to leave, but I just couldn't do it without seriously risking becoming homeless.

Sam's mom falling ill helped us shift gears. The first few months of being apart most of the time, began to open our eyes. We started to see what the other brought to the table, how we depended on each other, and that no matter how bad things got, we still had a heart-connection.

I remember the morning Sam left. It was late October 2018. I had just walked up our steep gravel driveway to check the mailbox and was now heading back towards the house. Sam was driving slowly up the driveway to exit at the street and begin his journey. We met halfway.

I looked at Sam as he rolled down the window of his car. I told him I loved him (*not something I easily do*). It felt like my whole world was crumbling without his support, but there was also a sense of being grateful he was leaving. We really needed a break. The only problem was, neither of us knew when it would end.

I choked back tears as Sam and I had our final kiss goodbye, but there was also a pang of guilt. I felt relieved. Finally. The balloon of stress popped. Time for peace and quiet. At first, I even enjoyed the solitude and freedom.

This was my “before” life, life before the COVID19 pandemic [2] changed everyone’s world. Life for the past year and a half without Sam became a deep, dark rut. Feed the cats. Clean up after the cats. Make cat food. Run cats to the vet. Try to figure out what was going on with the cats. Medicate the cats. Do more test to the sick cats. Euthanize one cat. Weep hysterically over losing my cat Spencer months later, but as bad as it was, who could have predicted what would happen next?

I tried to keep the house tidy. I did some work here and there. I put seeds out for the birds. I fed myself (*not very well since it was just me to feed*). Though there was a sense of relief to be away from Sam, over the months there was a softening of feelings between us.

In a way, we travelled back in time to the days when we didn’t live together, when we only saw each other on weekends. Sam lived in Brooklyn with his young daughter. I lived in Connecticut. With shared custody of his daughter, Sam couldn’t see me very often. It was perfect because we were only together when we both had time to have fun. We never had to do the laundry or cut the grass or take the recycling to the dump. We went to the movies. We went out to dinner. We stayed in hotels and had..ummm...a nice evening.

While it wasn’t exactly the same, our communication was what was familiar. We spent more time texting or talking on the phone. We missed each other. We were kinder to each other. We realized we’d been taking the other for granted for a long time.

Meanwhile, Sam struggled to care for his mother. She was 89 and physically, she was in poor shape. Mentally she was still sharp as a tack, which wasn’t always so wonderful. She’d rudely point out to Sam that his belly was getting big (*her words: fat*). **She’d climb into her wheelchair, roll it to the next bedroom where Sam fitfully slept, then rammed the door with the wheelchair and yelled at him; “Where is my coffee and New York Times?”**

It was only 7:30 AM.

We both were overwhelmed by our own responsibilities. I would have a melt down about once a month. Sam did his best to come home and help out, but he could only stay a day or two. Once I stopped only thinking about myself, I began to see how my complaining left him with absolutely no space for him to manage the stress he was facing. I had to work on being more compassionate and have faith it would be okay one day. He was flirting with having a nervous breakdown from the stress. I couldn’t add to that. A few months ago, I began seeing a therapist so I could learn to communicate better.

You have to understand that Sam did not have a great relationship with his mom. He was a dutiful son, but where there should be love in his heart, was only resentment. His mother never let him talk about the fact that his dad abandoned them when he was a kid. She never asked him how he was doing or seemed to care. I get it. She was a single woman with a child, trying to make a living in New York City in the 1960s and her entire family was in Arkansas (*and weren't too thrilled with their rebellious daughter*). It couldn’t have been easy. Sam was not in an environment where there was much, if any, love. His mother was angry, frustrated, probably scared.

She would get home from work and didn’t have much left to give to her son. He had to keep his head down, stay out of trouble. I don’t know how Sam managed to not go completely down a road that would land him in jail. He’s done a tremendous amount of work on himself over the years. I’m lucky. I get the good guy. I get the guy who cares about others, more than himself. The guy who is completely devoted to the people he cares about. While he may have reluctance to open his heart, we all do. *It’s scary*. But he leans in and cuts through that.

I’m proud of him, but having to face your mom, who you’re not the biggest fan of, day after day...that’s tough.

As the months passed, we both sagged in our misery and raged in our frustrations. We couldn’t travel anywhere together and it was very difficult for either of us to travel on our own. We just worked, did what was asked of us, did our best. We were both fed up, resentful and emotionally exhausted. We prayed for a break, even if it was just a few days away, but Sam’s mother continued to beat the odds (yes, it’s a nice way of saying she didn’t die) .

In January of this year, Sam’s mother turned 91. We were in the midst of building an apartment in our basement for her so she could live with us. The plans were done, we had a contractor. With an apartment it meant Sam could come home full-time. The plan had been to start sooner, but we decided to put it off until after winter was over. His mother had been mostly stable (*with a few more UTI/septic scares*) so we thought we could delay the starting date.

In late February, Sam flew to Denver for a business trip. To say he was at the end of his rope being away from home and caring for his mother was an understatement. It meant I wouldn’t see him for two weeks, instead of the usual week separation.

I told Sam to have a good time, to take a few extra days if he could to just have a break. I was miserable, but knowing he had a chance to be happy made me feel better. He had someone caring for his mother all day long and she had been able to be on her own at night. It would be fine, right?

Sam got sick.

Sam was barely in Denver before he started to feel awful.

He was sick in a way he had never been before. He had a fever, deep cough, terrible body aches, was vomiting. He hurt so badly he could not sleep. Though he laid in bed for 10 hours, he slept for 2.

He complained bitterly about the awful hotel he was in. It was too far from any amenities and he didn't have a rental car. I started to reach out to friends in the area to see if they could bring him to a doctor, but Sam couldn't go. There was no time. His flight left at 5 AM.

I asked him to change his trip home and extend it out so he could recover. He tried. The airlines were not cooperative at all. The new flight would be \$600 more and be a 10 hour trip instead of 7 hours (*and that was bad enough as it was*). It didn't help that the hotel was horrible. Why stay?

I tried to convince Sam to at least not go back to New York City-not go back to the apartment. *"Go to a hotel."* I said. *"Stay away from your mother."*

It made sense, but Sam was out-of-his-mind-sick and did what we both knew was wrong. The next day he flew to New York. He barely made the drive from the LaGuardia to his mom's apartment. I don't know how he made it he was so ill. He knew his health care aide would take care of his mother. He was going to hole up in his room and try to sleep. His mind was spinning. He was so ill he couldn't deal with *"one more thing"* and collapsed into bed. I had to wait and hope from afar that I'd hear from him soon. **It was torture not being able to go to him and bring him home, but he warned me to stay away.**

I know we're going to get a lot of grief about this, but that was **BEFORE** social distancing, **before COVID19** was spreading across the United States (*or so we thought because we now know it was already here in ever-building force*). He also knows not to touch things and he stayed clear of other people. He traveled with his hand sanitizer. He did his best to not make a bad situation a lot worse. Let's not forget, clearly someone else on the outgoing flight didn't take any precautions because Sam got sick from them.

News of COVID19 was just coming to the forefront. We were both worried about Sam's mom but initially figured he only had *"the Flu."*

Sam refused to come home; protecting me from getting sick. His home health care aide took care of his mom while Sam tried to recover. I begged him to go to urgent care and get tested for flu. He went, complaining that they didn't take his insurance and that the Doctor would not test him saying that tests were only about 70% reliable and back then there was no discussion of testing for COVID19 at all. He was told he had the flu and go home with some medications and rest. Meanwhile, I was ordering and shipping out everything I could think of to help Sam get better, teas, homeopathy, cookies (*of course*), cold medicine, vitamins.

We don't know what Sam had, but his mother got sick, too. Thankfully Sam was able to get her Tamiflu quickly and he felt she did recover a few days later. **We thought the worst was over.**

March 5, 2020. Sam had a horrifically painful toothache. With his immune system tanked from the flu, his face became swollen and hot from a simmering infection filling the right side of his sinuses with pus. I offered to get him a referral to a dentist in NYC. It was barely two weeks since he'd first gotten sick and it wasn't really safe for him to come home.

But Sam was exhausted and in pain and missed the cats and missed me and was just "done." Sam was "done" in a way I never heard in his voice before. I did everything I could to support him from afar-to soothe him and remind him it would be okay. We just had to stay strong. A little while longer. Sam decided to come home. He would see Dr. David, and me, and the cats, if only for an afternoon.

Since his mother had gotten the flu, she had become weakened to the point where she could not make it to her commode. Sam had to hold her over the chamber pot and she often couldn't aim very well. He got the bulk of her mess on his shoes. Sam was doing load after load of laundry while he was still sick. We both realized his mother needed more care than he and his aide could provide. **We knew as soon as he was feeling better that we would have to find a nursing home placement for his mother until we could finish the basement apartment.**

So Sam drove home. It was the first time I'd seen him in weeks. His face was grey. It was swelled up on the right side. Though he was happy to see me, I could tell he needed a lot more than a few hours at home. He needed sleep— good sleep, not tossing and turning while having to get up every few hours to tend to his mother. It was the first time I was really worried about him having a far worse medical problem than a toothache. He still had a lingering cough. What was next?

Maybe he would have a nervous breakdown or maybe he'd have a stroke. All I knew was this couldn't go on any longer. It had been too big of a price to pay-on our relationship, on Sam's health, on our souls.

The infection was very serious. Dr. David suggested Sam see a dental surgeon so they could sedate him, but Sam knew he couldn't wait. The tooth had an old root canal repair that finally failed. An infection had spread to the point where Sam would have to be on 4 doses of antibiotics a day for weeks to combat it.

He also had to have his tooth removed.

Sam held my hand during the procedure, but he was too afraid to squeeze it when the pain radiated into his head. Instead he waved his other hand, indicating when the pain was too much. It was awful. The infection prevented the numbing medication from working well. The tooth broke into a few pieces, so Dr. David had to dig and twist and yank the rest out. It took an eternity.

Once the tooth was out, Sam was exhausted. He said the pain was so bad he almost cried. There was no way he could go back to his mom's that night. She'd have to fend for herself. He spoke to the aide with a wad of gauze in his mouth. She would hold down the fort, at least during normal business hours. **I know he struggled so much with the guilt of needing to be there versus wanting to be home and just rest. We both knew that things could go sideways, but with any luck he'd be back in New York soon and all would be well.**

The aide took over the next day and Sam, reluctantly left late that afternoon, making the long drive to New York City. The aide was leaving the apartment as Sam arrived. She said things were status quo and that his mom was resting. Okay, maybe things would finally calm down now.

About an hour later his mom woke up. Sam went in to her room to check on her. She was making funny sounds. He texted me about it, saying maybe he should get his mom to the Doctor the next day. I reminded him that when his mother got septic, she stopped making sense and to call 9-1-1 right away. I got a bit bossy with him about it, knowing he was reluctant because his mother was terrified of being hospitalized again and would be reluctant to go.

Sam dialed 9-1-1. Two ambulances and a fire truck showed up. One crew came into the apartment, assessing the situation. They put his mom onto a specialized chair (instead of a gurney because the elevator in the apartment building was too small for a full bed). Sam was right behind them. Just as they got into the elevator, his mom collapsed. The EMTs tried to revive her, then began doing CPR in the entryway to the building. They continued as they loaded her into the ambulance and drove the mile or so to the hospital. I'm not even sure how Sam got there.

There's a special room right outside the ambulance bay where the EMTs and Doctors could continue their efforts to revive Sam's mom, so they didn't have to stop doing CPR...but she didn't wake up.

Sam texted me about 30 minutes later: "She's gone. No cell service here."

At 12:05 AM on March 7th, Sam's mother was pronounced dead from a cardiac arrest.

It was a rough night. Sam was in shock, stunned at how fast his mother died after being stable for so long. He didn't want me to come to New York. He needed time to process what happened. I wanted to offer my support in some way so I stayed up most of the night making a spreadsheet/to do list of everything we were going to have to do. Twisted as it may be, I was glad my parents had died years before because I already knew a lot of what had to happen next and focusing on work kept me from falling apart.

I found a funeral home and contacted them. I began figuring out how we'd have a service, where it would be, who would cater it, what Sam needed to do (*get a haircut, buy a suit, call her church...*). Sam went back to the apartment in a daze.

The reality began to sink in. It was over. His mother was gone. No more worrying about her. No more criticism. No more uncomfortable silences. Though over the past twenty years she constantly called Sam to race to her side for one thing after another, at all hours to care for her, even after he finally move in with her, she never appreciated it. I know she just died. I should be more compassionate, but a flood gate of other emotions rose to the surface, too.

She never welcomed me into the family. She was friendly and seemed sweet and we got along, but I never felt included. Strangely enough, Sam didn't feel included either. He had a painful relationship with his mother and it was over now. He was a dutiful son to the very end. No one could have asked for more.

He could come home. For good. Soon.

Sam coming home wasn't in the way we had hoped. We wanted his mom to be with us, in her own space within our home, but it didn't happen. We felt badly about it, but mixed in with the sadness was guilt. We felt relieved, and struggling under that was a small, fragile seedling of joy.

We. Were. Free.

We would have a proper memorial service. We would clean out her apartment. We would say goodbye with all the love and respect we could muster, and then we would go on a fucking vacation, soon.

But then COVID19 came to town.

We were able to follow Sam's mother's wishes by having her cremated. We were working on contacting her friends and getting the memorial service worked out, but the news was scary. COVID19 was showing up beyond China and Italy. It was in the United States. It was in New York City. Schools were starting to close in NY and our home state of Connecticut. Social distancing wasn't the norm, but we both realized we couldn't have a memorial service.

It seemed completely unfathomable, not only disrespectful, to not have a funeral, but most of his mother's friends were elderly, in the high-risk group. I felt like a horrible person for even suggesting such an idea, but more and more people in NYC were getting sick.

We were probably one of the first families that could not have a funeral service for a loved one.

We just couldn't risk it. We cancelled the plans for the service and promised ourselves that we would build a memorial web site for her for now. That maybe in a month or two we could have a proper service. We'd have to wait and see.

So we focused on getting the apartment cleared out, but Sam was heartsick and felt rushed. I could tell that he needed time to be alone with his feelings and that meant spending more time in New York to sort through what was left of the 50 years of stuff his mom had accumulated. I offered to go, to help speed up the process, but more and more people were getting sick so he urged me to stay home.

Meanwhile, Sam's work as a web developer ramped up beyond imagination. He barely had time to grieve. One of his clients is a multi-billion dollar hospital group and of course they had a lot that needed to be done.

We kept at it as best we could. We were two days away from the movers arriving when we found out a building resident had COVID19. Sam had just been there the day before, trying to get things finalized. He came home that night and we talked. We were still allowed to come and go from the city, but social distancing was beginning as more of the tri-state area was tightening travel restrictions. Moving was considered "essential" so we could move, but...*was it worth it?* The tenant with the COVID19 was in quarantine, but that didn't mean the rest of the building was safe to be in. **At the time it didn't even occur to us that Sam might have had COVID19 already.**

If we didn't clear the apartment, it meant the contents were in jeopardy. It meant paying a very expensive rent for who knows how long. It meant this wasn't over, as much as we wanted it to be. It also meant we were risking our lives and the lives of the movers to be in such close contact.

It wasn't worth it. We postponed the move and let the contents be. Maybe the landlord will cut us a break. I doubt it. It doesn't matter. We have to be safe, first and foremost. The building Super thanked us for canceling. I think we were all relieved.

So Sam came home, truly home. Our short-lived feelings of freedom and joy have been replaced by frustration and anger. We both know that as crazy as all of this is, at least we're together again. There are so many ways this could have gone so so so badly...his mother could have survived, but would have had to go to a nursing home where she might have died from COVID alone. **She might have been stable, but Sam would have had to continue to care for her, then not not been able to come home AT ALL...FOR MONTHS or LONGER.**

Maybe I sound like the most heartless person in the world, but I'm grateful things happened the way they did. If it was her time, then Sam's mom did us a favor. Neither of us wanted her to pass like that, but if it had been even a few days later, we would have had a very tough time even getting her cremated! I can't believe we live in a country where that is an issue! I can't believe we couldn't have a funeral. It feels as if she didn't really die. She's still in Manhattan. She'll probably call to ask Sam to help her with something soon.

Sam and I went for a walk around the neighborhood not long after his mother died. We were both listening to podcasts, soaking up some sun as we walked along. We reached an area where the unruly road finally flattens out and there being only a few trees, the sky really opened up. Sam touched my shoulder to get my attention. He pointed upwards towards a huge bird soaring overhead. We stopped to watch it for a moment.

The curious thing about it was it was circling us, watching from above. I've walked this same path over a thousand times and I've never had a bird circle me. We realized it was a juvenile eagle, not yet emblazoned with a cap of white feathers. It began to fly away, so we continued our walk. A moment later it returned, flying lower, still circling. I was amazed by the sheer size of the beautiful raptor. I wondered aloud if it was a sign from his mother. Maybe she was saying thank you for caring for her or that she loved us or that maybe she forgave us for being happy to be together again.

And what's life like under "stay home, stay safe" after not even being around each other for nearly two years? I'm cooking. I'm baking. I'm looking after Sam. He's helping me take care of the cats. We bought a new bed just before the big lockdown, finally trashing our 19-yr old wreck of a mattress so we're finally getting decent sleep. Though we had to give up on our very short-lived dreams of going on a vacation or moving away, we're together, and we're friends again, and we learned a valuable lesson. We DO matter to each other. We still want to be together. In fact, I think that's been the theme of our entire, multi-decade relationship. We want to be together, but the timing has often been flat out terrible, yet somehow we never let it stop us.

This morning I felt lousy. I felt hot, feverish. I've had a mild cough for weeks, but no idea why. I admitted to Sam I was feeling

funky and he took a step towards me to feel my forehead, but I stepped back, not wanting him to be close to me if I was getting sick. Fear made my gut twist. We were busy doing our morning cat feeding/chores, but I excused myself to go take my temperature.

It was low, too low, like I have an infection or something else. I took my temperature again and it was about the same. I was relieved that I didn't have a fever, but maybe a low grade temperature was a concern? Did I have COVID19? Probably not, but how Sam and I are coping was illustrated moments later when he came into the bedroom looking very stressed.

He furiously motioned with his hands, making a gesture as if he was taking his temperature, at the same time he struggled to get the words out fast enough. He finally blurted out; "*What was the result? Do you have a fever?*" I shook my head no and he quickly came over to me a grabbed my hand.

I've never seen him so animated before. He had tears in his eyes as he said; "I've dealt with terrible things in my life, I was in New York City on 9|11, the tragedy here in Sandy Hook, I saw my mother die...but this (he locked eyes with me)...you...I could not take it if...

I cut him off. I couldn't bear to hear the words. There was so much love and grief and sincerity and passion in his words that I couldn't let Sam finish because I would completely fall apart if I heard them. I felt the same way, too, about him. We'd been on a very long journey, finding our way back to each other, and today we reached that destination.

We're home, at last. Now we even have to stay home, it's the law. Through all these trials, we at least made it this far. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. **I don't know if we will fall ill or die or if Sam already had COVID19 and is immune.** *We think that might be the case, and one day he'll get an antibody test and we'll know for certain.*

Although my day-to-day life still has a hamster-wheel quality to it, it's a good thing. I enjoy seeing Sam every day. We now have a wild turkey that comes to visit when I feed the other birds. He makes me laugh because he "gobbles" aloud and he knows I'll stop what I'm doing and get him some sunflower seeds to nibble on. While I still have to care for my often-annoying cats, I finally have the space in my heart to cherish the comfort they give me, too. I have a great life, even if I never get to go on vacation for another ten years. **I have what matters.**

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Comments

Sat, 2020-04-18 17:53 — Gini Saville (not verified)

So happy for you & Sam, Robin ^[8]

❤️❤️😊 So happy for you & Sam, Robin.....Love your blog and follow you and your 9 kids on FB daily!!!!

Sun, 2020-04-19 22:58 — Cindy (not verified)

Beautifully written! ^[9]

Beautifully written! Beautifully lived! Congratulations!

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