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The Thing No One Wants to Talk About

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[Update 2016. It's been a wild ride the past 12 months, one that shook me to the core and made me face some big health problems. I'm down about 55 pounds (and counting). I go for long walks, beyond any distance I ever could have achieved before. The mysterious pain was never fully diagnosed, but it's mostly gone. There's a lot more about my struggles on my most recent [birthday post](#).^[1] For now, I feel better than I have in at least 20 years and I'm determined not to slip back down that slope into poor health. My wish for all of you is that if you need to face your health-related demons, do it. Life's too short to ignore it, then find yourself on a guerny in a hospital when you could have done something about preventing it.]

It was just another morning feeding routine I do twice a day with the foster cats. I carried their food and a few plates up the stairs to the second floor of my house. Their room is at the end of the hallway. As I reached the top stair I started to feel a pressure in my chest, then a stinging radiating pain from my lungs, into both sides of my neck, down into my shoulders. My head was already throbbing from a headache, but now it was worse. I felt palpitations. I knew if I didn't drop what I was carrying and sit down I was going to be in trouble.

I got to my bed and sat down on the edge of it, trying to calm my nerves. Slowly I felt the pain subside enough to feel like I could stand. I could hear the cats crying and banging on the door to their room. I was already late feeding them so I had to get up.

The cats always crowd around me as I enter the room, anxious to be the first to lick at their food. I shuffled my feet so I wouldn't step on any of them, then began to lower the trays to the floor. Something didn't feel right. The pressure and pain began to return. I sat down on the bed in the foster room, my chest was heaving. Something was very wrong with me.



©2015 Robin AF Olson. *Just another day...or the first sign of trouble.*

For the past few weeks I've been suffering a lot with these mysterious searing aches and pains. Hey, I'm no spring chicken any more. It's to be expected. The thing is, with the ease of looking up symptoms on the internet it's lead me to believe that I need to see a Doctor or two and right away, please. **Am I going to have a heart attack?**

So I went to the Doctor. I did the easiest thing I could. I had Sam schlep me to Urgent Care hoping that they'd agree to my assessment of the situation: that due to my sedentary life, the stress of running a cat rescue, not having a vacation in years, needing a bigger bed so there's actually room for two adults and a few giant cats to sleep on, was the root cause of my woes.

The Doctor, who was rather charming and silly, shrugged when I told him my symptoms in detail. He didn't think it was my heart. My ECG looked normal, maybe, though maybe there was a "q-wave" in there (*that could be a sign of trouble*), but maybe there wasn't. For the first time in my life a Doctor said to me; "I really don't know what's the matter with you. You should probably follow up with a PCP."

So I left the clinic with more questions than answers. I feared I was going to have a heart attack at any moment. The signs for women are subtle and range from pain in the back, neck, chest, jaw, down the arms, pressure on the chest and more. I had most of those symptoms. I have a very tragic family history of heart issues and strokes. I have to face the fact that perhaps all this sitting around and carrying extra weight on my bones has caught up with me.

It also made me think about the thing no one ever wants to talk about: *Death*.

It's amusing perhaps, that my Mother spoke to me about death. She was very matter of fact about it and got a bit terse with me if I pushed back, not wanting to have the discussion. My stomach would flip flop when she brought it up. I couldn't imagine my life without her in it. I hoped I'd have her around as long as I was around. She didn't smoke or drink so she had that going for her. **Maybe losing her could be put off for some other day.**

She wanted me to know what to do if I ever needed to make a decision for her if she was incapacitated. She wanted me to know she'd written her Last Will & Testament and where I could find it and who her lawyer was. She told me where the bank statements and investments were. She'd even quiz me about those things from time to time. She prepared me for many things, but in the end she never prepared me for what to do if she lied to me about her health problems. She died of heart failure, unexpectedly and I was the one to find her dead on the floor. **At least during the worst grief of my life, I knew where the papers were and I knew what she wanted done.**



©2006 Robin AF Olson. Mother.

We all want to live forever, but we won't. Though it's emotionally draining we have to face it and we SHOULD prepare for our inevitable demise. That way it not only ensures that how we want to spend our final days will be respected (*if there's a chance for that to happen*), **it also respects those who are left behind; the people we love.**

That's why I realized if something bad happened to me, not being married would mean my brother, who I have no relationship with, would make the decisions about my care. Sam couldn't even visit me in the hospital. The thought made me feel even sicker. I don't know what's going on with me and as much as I hope I will have many more years to go, it's not a certainty.

So I started the paperwork for a Living Will and other Advance Directives. The forms were very easy to find online for my state and by the way, you don't even need a Lawyer (*though you will need a Notary*) for these directives. It made me think about the "what ifs" I may face one day. I didn't want to imagine myself in a situation where I was in a coma with no chance of recovery, but I had to. I had to think about what I would want. Would I want to live if life only meant breathing while attached to a machine and maybe some sort of low brain-stem level awareness of the world? **How would it be if I couldn't care for myself, even scratch a simple itch? I couldn't even be with cats anymore or smile at a joke. I would be a burden to Sam both financially and emotionally. So let me fly free.**

Running a cat rescue has forced me to look at death more often than I'd care to, but in those lessons my choice is clear. I do not want to live if I have no brain function and if I cannot be saved.

I knew I could designate Sam to be the person to make that choice for me, but I also needed to assign an "alternate" if Sam could not or would not make the choice. The answer wasn't tough to come by but it did surprise and sadden me. Most people would turn to a family member, but I have none that would be appropriate. I realized that I only have a very few friends I've even known long enough to trust with this responsibility. When I made my choice I asked Sam if was okay with him because it was someone I used to have a relationship with. Thankfully Sam was fine with my choice and even agreed with it. I'd known this person for a big chunk of my life and was still friends with him. I trusted him, now literally with my life. **I had to call and ask his permission to include him in this paperwork and I felt like asking this of someone required having one**

of the most intimate and soul-opening discussions of my life.

I was scared to ask him, not knowing how he might take the request, but his answer gutted me with his simply put reply; **“Thank you for this gift. Of course I will do this for you.”** I guess the comedian in me was on a lunch break because I couldn't make a joke about how now he could unplug me after all the times I caused him grief.

Without saying the words, I knew that we still loved and cared about each other, but in a way that was not disrespectful to our mates. We both were willing to talk about that thing called *Death* and both stick our toes into the pool of ever-shifting “what ifs.” **The beautiful thing I didn't expect was the lingering feeling that this was the right thing to do and once done I could relax.** I told myself that I have to keep facing situations that are difficult. I've done it for all my foster cats for over a decade and now I need to do it for myself.

I saw another Doctor today. She hates cats but I told her if she didn't go on about why I'd still like her. She listened to my description of what I think is going on and what I'm experiencing. She asked many questions about my odd (*to me*) symptoms. I didn't get a diagnosis, only next steps. She wants me to get my heart checked out more thoroughly so that means an echo/stress test. It's more sensitive and better suited to test a woman's heart, but the insurance company may deny the request. If that happens I'm not sure what I will do. **(GOOD NEWS: I just found out I don't need approval and I can have the test done after the 4th of July holiday is over).**

Tomorrow morning I'm having a lot of blood tests done to rule out things that scare the crap out of me. The blood tests will be looking for diabetes (*no surprise, but darn it I'm sure I don't have symptoms*), high cholesterol, and just like so many of my foster cats, they'll check my organ function, blood issues, and a surprise—Vitamin D deficiency. I guess if it's really bad it can effect your heart and all sorts of other things, too and lots of people have it and don't even know. Since I live almost like a Vampire, it might not surprise me to find out I'm low in that particular tank.



©2003 Robin AF Olson. *As usual, everything is a joke, even with my mother in the hospital. Notice the line up of the magazine with my mom's chest.*

Since she couldn't weigh in on what was going on with me, I asked what I should do until all these tests are done. **She replied I should not exert myself to the point of feeling pain and take it easy.** On the drive home, I realized that Sam's birthday is in a few days and we're supposed to go to see his family in New York City. I can't go. I can't risk having to walk too strenuously and in the city that's a lot of what makes up every visit. With not being able to do much I haven't been able to even plan something for Sam but this really was the pits.

Inasmuch a I want to get back to working long hours and lifting cats, heavy bags of cat litter, trays of cat food, I can't. My body has told me something and for once I need to listen and respect it. I need to have a better relationship with my body instead of knowing it's just “there.” If my body tells me I need rest and to stop, then I'm going to do that. With respect will come understanding and the desire to do something that has always challenged me: to love myself and not always put others first.

This may be the last post I'm going to write before I have some answers. I don't feel too badly right now. I'm trying not to be scared. **Facing your own mortality is no picnic, but if you want to have a chance to squeeze out as many good years as you can, you have to do it.**

So please, get your Last Will & Testament written, get your health proxy set up, maybe organize your paperwork and let a few people, including your doctor and lawyer know what you're up to. Have the discussion with your family. Don't be shy. It's tough to talk about this, but better to have it out in the open than hidden away because when your time comes no one will know what you wanted to have done and it could lead to all sorts of legal and family issues.

And after you have your affairs in order, you can forget about it and talk about something everyone likes to talk about (except my Doctor) — **cats**.



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