



ROZ CHAST

[CARTOONIST, AUTHOR]

"I WASN'T A GREAT CARETAKER
AND THEY WEREN'T GREAT AT BEING TAKEN CARE OF."

Lessons learned from her parents' deaths:

It's really scary

It's highway robbery

Forget about saving for your own old age and instead buy a drawer full of cashmere sweaters

Roz Chast sheepishly approaches the front desk of the Hotel Nikko in San Francisco to reveal that she has [wince] locked her card key in the room. I have not met her yet—I am waiting near the desk to catch a glimpse of the New Yorker cartoonist as she emerges from the elevator—but overhearing this makes me smile. It's classic Chast. If she were to draw the scene, her hair would be frazzled, her eyes crossed, exclamation points and swirls would encircle her head to emphasize her self-deprecation. The real-life Roz really is the sincere, baffled observer she depicts in her cartoons.

After talking with her in a quiet corner of the hotel lobby for almost two hours, even more appealing aspects of her personality were revealed. For one: she changes voices. Many of her impressions sound like enthusiastic salesmen of the 1950s and poke fun at her very challenging upbringing by two older and incredibly quirky parents—the voices are a coping mechanism for Chast, who was an only child. And,

unlike some interviewees, who want to portray themselves in their most flattering light, she cusses unapologetically. Not what you'd expect from a contributor to a highbrow literary mag and resident of a staid Connecticut suburb.

All of these traits flow through Chast's clever hand, resulting in some fourteen books, ranging from compilations of her New Yorker cartoons to several children's books, one of which is a hilarious romp through the alphabet with Steve Martin. Her latest book, a memoir, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, was a finalist for a National Book Award. In it, Chast focuses solely on her parents, a couple who "aside from WWII, work, illness and going to the bathroom did everything together." Only here her parents—longtime favorite subjects, who have appeared in countless depictions since she published her first cartoon in the New Yorker, in 1978—have the spotlight all to themselves. Chast chronicles their not-too-pleasant journey from the mere inconveniences of old age to their messy and prolonged deaths. Granted, this is an unlikely subject for what are, in essence, cartoons. But it's exactly that treatment that makes Chast's graphic chronicle palatable. Death is no laughing matter, yet somehow her illustrations and honest, compassionate, and funny narrative see the reader through.

Chast's book tours for the memoir have attracted legions of fellow baby boomers who show up ready to unload their own experiences in elder care. The book is practically a cautionary tale for a generation, yet of course applicable to everyone whose parents will eventually die, as parents eventually tend to do. She offers little advice except to face up to what's coming down the pike, a sentiment summed up in the ironic inscription she penned in my review copy: "This will never happen to us."
—Joanne Furio

I. WHY THEY TURNED OUT THAT WAY

THE BELIEVER: At the beginning of the book, you mention that your parents had lost a child before you were born. That explains a lot—like why they were such helicopter parents and germaphobes.

ROZ CHAST: Losing a child is devastating. Their first child was born at seven and a half months. She lived for a day and died, and my mother almost died in the process as well. I'm sure that experience affected them, more than I was probably

aware of, and affected how I was brought up and their relationship with me.

BLVR: When did you start including your parents in your cartoons?

RC: Probably pretty early on. Even before I was doing cartoons professionally.

BLVR: What was so appealing about your parents as subjects?

RC: Sometimes they were funny without knowing it. And they were fun to draw. A lot of people think of the older couple I draw as my parents, but I think they're also not just my specific parents but a certain kind of parent figure, you know?

When I was younger I was very self-conscious of them because they were so different for so many different reasons from my friends' parents. They spoke differently—no Brooklyn accents. They were "educators." Also, they dressed differently. They wore these strange, really old-fashioned sorts of clothes. I don't even know where my mother found these blouses. They buttoned up the back. She had this hairstyle that I think she had worn since the '30s, with a kind of curl on the forehead. My father always wore—I think of them as "man pants." I don't even know what they were made of. Maybe they were a wool blend. They had this crease down the front and it would have a cuff and he would wear them with "man shoes." Until the end of his life, I never saw him wear sneakers. He discovered the joy of Velcro sneakers at that point because they were easy on, easy off, and they gave him some cushioning on his feet. My parents were very traditional and did not look at fashion. They did not seem to be aware of what other people wore or that it was not 1948 anymore. Which is partly why it was fun for me to draw them.

Same thing with their apartment. I remember in college going to visit a girl who lived on Long Island. I felt like I was at the World's Fair, like [1950s broadcaster voice] "Future Pavilion!" There was this big suburban kitchen. The idea of keeping appliances out on the counter because they had a big kitchen—they had, like, a blender that was always out—was like a miracle. They had a microwave oven! Oh my god! My parents never had a microwave oven. Maybe the Jetsons, or rich people, had a microwave oven, but not my parents.

There were aspects of their anti-inquisitiveness that were

admirable. Now I feel like there's so much encouragement to buy buy buy. You get these catalogs that say [*smoky sales voice*], "Isn't it time to change your table linens? Get new table linens for every season! Redecorate your house for fall!" Are you fucking nuts? Who does that?

BLVR: I'm so glad to hear you curse. You can take the girl out of Brooklyn...

RC: Oh, yeah. What's really bad is if you're in a supermarket in Connecticut and you are holding a container of orange juice and it's wet on the outside and it slips out of your hands and falls on the floor and you just yell out, "Fuck!," and you see people turn around, looking.

BLVR: I loved your cartoon about a napkin-folding class in Connecticut. Was that real?

RC: Absolutely. Here's the thing: you need big starched linen napkins to do it right. It's a whole operation.

BLVR: Your father carried around a cartoon about not understanding the cartoons in the *New Yorker*. They didn't see their behavior as being funny. How do you think they would have responded to a book documenting their final years?

RC: I don't think my mother would have liked it. And I don't know how my father would feel. It might have not been

something that they would find funny. And it *wasn't* all funny, you know.

BLVR: And they didn't get some cartoons about themselves, anyway.

RC: That's true. David Remnick said that he had read somewhere that the worst thing for a parent is to have a child who's a writer. When you write or draw it's not always going to be a Hallmark-card version of things. You have to write about what's interesting to you and what you want to write about. My relationship with my parents was complicated for a lot of reasons. I am grateful to them and I love them and they also drove me bananas. There was a lot of ambivalence.

BLVR: Joan Didion also said something about writers being willing to sell somebody out.

RC: We will betray you. You can't pass it through all of these filters—once you go down that rabbit hole, like, "I can't write about this because of this." I mean, I don't go out of my way to write anything that is hurtful. I didn't write this book to settle a score, but I also wanted to be truthful, so I don't think it would have made sense if I hadn't been. It would have been fiction, like a really bad TV movie of the week. [*TV announcer voice*] "Oh, there were oodles of troubles, but at the end I came to my mother's bedside and we embraced!" It doesn't always happen like that.

BLVR: You illustrate your wonderful relationship with your father, who took you out for a malted. You seemed to have a greater rapport with him than with your mother.

RC: We had many malteds together. We would go to Morty and Eddie's [a "candy store" in Brooklyn] and get a malted or a malted and a grilled cheese and we'd share. [*Sighs*] Yeah...

BLVR: Your mother, though, was "fierce," and dominated you and your father, who have similar, meeker personalities. Clearly he was your favorite.

RC: He was. He was a very sweet and generally mild person who adored my mother and relied on her, and she loved the



fact that he admired her and adored her. They were really very united in this thing.

BLVR: How did being an only child affect your observations of your parents?

RC: When you're an only child you have no one to bounce your impressions off of. You don't even know that that's what people do, that that's what siblings do. They talk about their parents and sometimes make fun of them. I think that's partly why I was not such a happy camper growing up. It was like I was living with these people and didn't talk to them about other people, or with other people about them. There's an aspect of being an only child where you don't even know what people talk about. I certainly didn't. It was always very stressful to talk to other people.

BLVR: It's surprising that your parents, who were educated, were naive when it came to discussing finances and death. They never asked about the cost of the assisted living and you never told them. Can you explain that?

RC: Yeah, they were very, very naive. They didn't want to know. It was a very unpleasant and scary topic. When they went into assisted living I pretty much took over most of the day-to-day logistics. I bought them furniture. I don't even know if they knew that their room didn't come with furniture. When they first went in, my father asked me if they would still have to pay taxes. I took over handling their pensions, paying their bills, handling their taxes, etc.

Some of it was maybe generational, this uncomfortableness with money. When their apartment building went co-op, they continued to rent their apartment, which was rent-stabilized. They were exempt from having to buy in because of their ages. They didn't like the responsibility of ownership. When we bought our house, my mother said to me, "One thing: never borrow money from a bank. Daddy and I can loan you twenty or thirty thousand dollars." They had *no* idea how much houses cost or how mortgages worked, or the tax advantages of having a mortgage. Plus how could you live without a super on the premises? The idea of having to call a plumber was just unacceptable.

READINGS FOR SPACE TOURISTS II: THE STORIES OF PAUL SCHEERBART

If you're afraid of heights, the work of this nineteenth-century German author can help: he had an almost purely vertical imagination. Paul Scheerbart's writing tends to revolve around the construction of enormous glass high-rises open to the sky. It's a kind of paper architecture. (The early Bauhaus considered him a pioneer in their cult of sunlight and altitude, gave him the posthumous nickname "Glas papa," and built a rocket-shaped pavilion in his honor.) In the novella *Gray Cloth*, for example, an architect named Krug circumnavigates the globe in a crystal zeppelin, directing the construction of increasingly ambitious buildings through a code of searchlights to masons on the

ground. His plans include a pyramidal "World Spa" terraced into Mount Kinabalu, the highest peak in Borneo, and a residential settlement off the coast of Oman consisting of rotating, transparent villas suspended in the air from huge cranes.

Often, Scheerbart simply forgoes the Babel-building and pitches his fiction directly into outer space. No clunky nineteenth-century conveyances are used—no steam-powered balloons or supercannons. His characters are transported by sheer goodwill to places where (it's surprising to learn) contemplating Earth is the main recreational activity. The sun tourists in the short story "World Brilliance"

use high-resolution opera glasses that allow them to pick out terrestrial details, from storks on the masts of ships down to pedestrians in parks. In *The Great Revolution*, the Lunarians build thousands of telescopes in the moon's craters and fix them on Earth, until they finally decide to train their sights elsewhere out of disgust at human activity.

But of all Scheerbart's writings it's *The Perpetual Motion Machine* that most concentrates his fantasy life, fusing both his drive to build upward and his desire to look down from outer space. The book—part autobiographical account, part speculative exercise—details his own attempt to tap a source of peaceable cosmic energy from his

II. SAVING FOR DEATH

BLVR: The title of the book is about *not* talking about something unpleasant. Why did you want to talk about it?

RC: I didn't want to talk about it, but I also know that unless there's a sudden illness or an air conditioner falls on my head, this is the direction that I'm going in, that most of us are going in. And I feel—and maybe this is a very baby boomerish kind of thing—that boomers have not been afraid of trying to do things differently, even if we failed, you know? I didn't blindly follow the child-rearing practices of my parents. When people would say [*in a Southern accent*], "Well, my daddy beat me and his daddy beat him and now I'm beating my children!," I'd think, No. Maybe there is a better way to teach my kids right from wrong? To be a parent where it's not yelling or screaming? You try to improve things. You talk to other people, read stuff. I think it's maybe good to bring things more out in the open, to have this last part of life be an acceptable topic of conversation.

I'm hoping that by the time I get to that last stage, things will be better. Maybe it's not possible. Maybe it will be worse.

I don't know. I'm not a soapbox person. I mean, I don't know *shit* about this subject. But we don't do very well in this society with people who are old. If you are not strong and productive and mentally with it, people don't want to look at you or even think about you. If you have disabilities, if you are infirm in some way, or sick, you're pretty much on your own. If you're in the workplace and you have an older parent and you want to take some time off to care for them, you're not cut a lot of slack. And as far as the money thing goes, talk about black comedy! It's like the blackest comedy of all. And I've heard things. My parents were *lucky*. I mean, they saved for it and pretty much broke even. I've heard some terrible stories about "the end."

BLVR: What kinds of things did you hear?

RC: I was talking to somebody a few days ago whose parents are in their eighties. They went to an assisted-living place voluntarily. To get into this place, they had to pay \$450,000. On top of that, they still had to pay \$5,000 a month for the rest of their lives. They had some money, but they had to sell

laundry room in Berlin. For close to three years he worked there on a small-scale machine to be powered by Earth's gravitational pull. Success turns on imagining oneself, he says, "beyond our own atmosphere, and from that point observing the very remarkable work of attraction exerted by our planet."

Scheerbart knew the project was thermodynamically impossible. He even welcomed its failure, since he assumed a working machine would inevitably be weaponized. Earth dwellers are, as he puts it, "vermin."

But his utopianism was as stubborn as it was skeptical. In fact, it's the total nonsense of the project that alone kept him tinkering and writing—nonsense being for him the only honest way anyone has of conjuring utopia

on such a hopeless planet. Out of near nihilism, he unfolds a series of giddy hypotheticals for making Earth more view-worthy. If he could just get the machine to function, it could become the prototype for a fleet of gigantic geo-resurfacing vehicles. Thousands of them might be put to work rearranging mountain chains in rhythmical patterns, or constructing "boulevards of light" across the desert, made up of colossal beacons pointing skyward.

In the century since the book's publication, a number of monumental land-art projects have in fact been realized. There's the minimalist picture plane of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty; and, on a less pristine note, we now have the island archipelago of The World in Dubai. Compared with

Scheerbart's projects, however, these are relatively modest in their fly-over appeal. They were constructed with the airplane in mind. Scheerbart's target audiences are the Martians and the Venusians. Earth, he says in *The Perpetual Motion Machine*, should be "lit up like a star" as a sign of interplanetary hospitality. It's a vision of grandiose humility, in which the industrial-era ambition to conquer the skies is flipped into the purely benign. The key to cosmic reconciliation is building on the ground as if seeing Earth from outer space—a POV that makes for the most far-reaching architecture imaginable. "What will the inhabitants of other worlds say," he writes, "as they observe the night-side of the planet so fabulously illuminated!" ★

their house, they had to totally liquidate everything. These places want all your assets. They want everything, everything, everything. And if her parents died within a year of going to the place, the place still kept the \$450,000.

BLVR: Those numbers are mind-boggling.

RC: It's highway robbery. That's a cliché, I know, but it's taking advantage of people. You just get so completely screwed. These places know that they have the emotional upper hand. So I do want to bring the money aspect out into the open. If you think it really matters that you're saving for your old age or your children or anything like that, that's a laugh. You might as well just, like, buy a drawer full of cashmere sweaters, because it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all.

BLVR: The cashmere sweaters—that was a cautionary tale your mother told.

RC: It was about a couple she knew whose daughter bought "a drawer full of cashmere sweaters" five minutes after her parents put her in charge of their finances.

BLVR: Even your parents, who had pensions and scrimped their entire lives, were running out of money. It cost \$14,000 a month to care for your mother alone at the end. How has that affected your post-retirement plans?

RC: I'm never going to retire. I don't know. It's really scary.

BLVR: A checker at Costco?

RC: Yeah, I think so. CVS, probably. It's closer to my house. I'll be a greeter at CVS for tips.

BLVR: Your mother's hospitalization reveals the extent of your father's dementia, which had been hidden by their close relationship. I found their codependency endearing—did you?

RC: It was a mix. I mean, it was endearing. They were OK with being codependent. That was natural to them. They were from another generation where you wanted that. The idea of [*singsong voice*] "I am my own person!" was foreign to

them. My husband and I travel separately sometimes, which was something they never really got. They did depend utterly on each other, unquestionably. In some ways, it's kind of fantastic. I'll never have that kind of relationship with anyone. But maybe there are aspects of it that are terrible, because they were so much more merged than most people I know.

III. THE STUFF

BLVR: Before you closed up their apartment, you started going through your parents' belongings, quickly became overwhelmed, and ended up getting the super to clear most of it out. What did you end up salvaging?

RC: I did save a few things—this box of letters they had written to each other during World War II. That was incredible. My father wrote my mother sometimes two or three times a day. Almost every single day there was a letter. And the photo albums. Some stuff off the walls. Not much.

I found all the clothes I had been sending from Lands' End or L.L. Bean like "the good daughter." I would worry about my father and those mystery-blend man pants. I found out his size from my mother and got him some corduroy pants that were warmer. And I found them all in plastic bags, totally unworn. So I didn't take any of that. I just thought, Oh, just give it to the super, whatever. There was very little that I wanted, because it's just stuff, stuff, stuff.

BLVR: How do you approach acquiring things now?

RC: I haven't turned into a total ascetic, by any means, but I have enough knickknacks to last a lifetime. Going to a secondhand shop no longer holds the same charm that it once did for me. I look at old lamps and placemats from the '50s or '60s and think: Agghhhh.

BLVR: Your book almost served as a *What to Expect* for the children of elderly parents. Did you ever imagine it would be perceived that way?

RC: No. In fact, I feel like there's two actual pieces of advice that I have and that's it. One is that an elder lawyer was very helpful—I didn't know there was such a thing as an elder lawyer—and the other is about keeping a notebook. I'm such a disorganized person, the notebook was the best

thing. If you're the caretaker, you're going to need access more often than you think to information like your parents' social security numbers; what medications they're taking; the pharmacy they use; the name and phone number of the person you talked to about some pension or whatever problem; and if there's an issue that needs to be untangled, what stage of the untangling you're at; care agency numbers; names and phone numbers of their neighbors just in case; etc. All this stuff that you have to keep on top of. Having it all written down and organized in a notebook helped me feel a little less at sixes and sevens about everything. Other than that, everybody's situation is so different and their relationship with their parents is so different that's really the only concrete advice that I feel comfortable giving.

IV. THE MEDIUM AS MESSAGE

BLVR: Your father's tear-filled face yelling "Elizabeth!" upon seeing her return from the hospital is the only time you devote a single page to an event. Why?

RC: He was so happy to see her. It was like an explosion of happiness and relief and joy and tears at just seeing his beloved Elizabeth again. It was heartbreaking.

BLVR: Three types of artwork appear in the book: cartoons, sketches, and photos. Did you decide to photograph the hoarding at your parents' apartment because it was the most journalistic? Readers might think you were exaggerating if you drew pocketbooks taking up an entire double bed, the Crazy Closet, and stacks of empty egg crates in the fridge.

RC: I think there was a kind of childish part of me that was like, "Look, I'm not making up the cheese-tainer. Yes! It was really patched with masking tape. Yes! There were really empty stacks of egg crates in the refrigerator." But at the time I was doing it, I wasn't thinking of putting them in a book. I was doing it for myself, because it was a way for me to remember it. I didn't want to save the objects, but the photos were a good way to remember them.

BLVR: At one point you uncharacteristically explode at your father, use the *f*-word, and immediately feel guilty. How did you envision yourself as a caregiver and how was the reality different?



From *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* Image © 2014 by Roz Chast, courtesy of Bloomsbury USA.

RC: I was hoping that I would be much better at it than I was. I was hoping for all of those things that you imagine, where you are going to be this incredibly kind and patient person who would minister to these people who took care of me when I was a baby, who would be so sympathetic to how much pain they were probably often in and how much suffering they were going through, and with my father's dementia, that I would have nothing but patience, and that possibly I would even take them into our house or even build an addition onto our house. It didn't play out like that.

BLVR: You admit that you resented taking care of your mother, but also felt guilty and jealous of her friendship with "a complete stranger," Goodie, her West Indian caregiver.

THE CRAFT TALK

by Rae Armantrout

So that the best thing you could do, it seemed, was climb inside the machine that was language and feel what it wanted or was capable of doing at any point, steering only occasionally.

The best thing was to let language speak its piece while standing inside it—not like a knight in armor exactly, not like a mascot in a chicken suit.

The best thing was to create in the reader or listener an uncertainty as to where the voice she heard was coming from so as to frighten her a little.

Why should I want to frighten her?

RC: From what I have heard, this often happens. The person bonds with their caretaker. They talk to them more than they talk to their children. I think maybe my mother was trying to protect me. I felt very guilty for many reasons, not only because I wasn't doing the job of caring for my mother myself. Like, once again, the job of wiping somebody's bottom is left up to women and women of color. Why isn't some forty-year-old white man doing it? Why aren't they doing these jobs generally? No. They're at Google or doing finance.

BLVR: When your mother was in her final stages, you told her that "it's OK to let go."

RC: The hospice people suggested it.

BLVR: Were you worried that it might hasten her death?

RC: Maybe. But it was her second time in hospice, and I didn't understand what was going on or what was going to happen and it scared the bejesus out of me. She wasn't talking. She wasn't eating. She was subsisting on Ensure. She was incontinent. Mostly she slept. I didn't know if I was going to have to move her to an actual nursing home, and if so, whether the move would kill her. I wondered if I was going to have

to go into my husband's and my savings, because she was coming to the end of hers. Periodically I'd get a call from a caretaker who'd say my mother was dying and I would rush there to find she had stabilized. This went on for months. It was an awful, stressful, and sad time.

Is it compassionate or not to say, "It's OK to let go"? That is a very common phrase in hospice. Isn't it like saying "Here's your hat, what's your hurry"? I wish there was no reason to say "It's OK to let go." It would be "Please don't let go, please stay, don't die, never die. If you could just will yourself to stay alive. I love you so much, you must stay with me forever and ever." But what's the logic of that? Then you have people alive for, what? A hundred years in a kind of suspended animation?

BLVR: You try to reconcile your feelings toward your mother, saying, "I wish we could have been better friends." But she, in essence, blows you off. Do you think there's this cultural tendency to push for closure, but even at the end we're the same people—imperfect, albeit with the best of intentions?

RC: I don't think she meant to be mean. She was who she was. I probably should have had that conversation with her way earlier. ★