

## Life cycles: Pulling up old roots to let new ones grow

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CONNIE JENKINS , The Saratogian  
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Worse. Over the past four years, worse has proved to be a bottomless pit that we've mined at all levels. Worse has meant not eating, confusion, depression. It's been not being able to find the way back to her room. This time, it's double pneumonia and refusing food and water.

As the person with the power of attorney and health care proxy - as the daughter - I'm the one the nursing home staff looks to for an answer. I have to say what Mom would choose, not what I want. I turned down the short-term solution of a feeding tube.

"She'd hate it," I said. "She wouldn't want anything like that."

Amid the slow grief of letting go of my 81-year-old mother, I'm buying my first house. The sorrow and excitement are inextricably mingled.

Buying a house offers the chance for roots as well as the simple pleasures of a cat, a garden and walls painted the color I choose.

"How long have you been there?" a friend from college inquired suspiciously when he called one day to check why I hadn't been in touch.

An older friend nodded in approval: "Sounds like you're settling down."

"Check out the neighbors," my sister-in-law advised. "Make sure they aren't weird."

It didn't look like Mom would make it to Christmas, so I made a quick trip home to northern New York the day after the nurse called. Mom was delighted to see me, though obviously weak and tired. She drifted off to sleep a few minutes after I arrived. I sat there, watching, until she woke up.

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"Oh, you're still here. Is there something you want?" she asked me cordially.

The days were a flurry of work, uninspired Christmas shopping, a mountain of forms, mortgage meetings and packing. I wrote my mother's obituary and mailed it to my older brother to submit to the paper when the time came. My stomach churned every time the phone rang.

"Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death," Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote in "On Death and Dying."

My mother wasn't dead, but with her dementia, her world has shrunk over the past four years to her bed and the chair next to it.

"She doesn't want to live," my aunt said. "You were good to her when it meant something, when she could remember. Don't feel one bit guilty when she dies."

As my birthday passed in mid-December and the house closing was coming up, I made long lists of things to do, buy and remember. Re-key the locks; order a new water heater; sign up for the STAR tax exemption; look for solar lights; get a flag; learn about gardening. I decided to make a compost pile and get a clothesline.

My house is about the same age as I am. I figure I've earned every one of my gray hairs, so the house is entitled to its creaks.

The garage is another story. Each blade of grass in my grandfather's back yard stood as orderly as an Army formation. He would be as appalled as I was to see that the back wall of my garage is not only unsided but unpainted, raw to the weather. I'll paint it the first warm day of spring.

I stifle a giggle as the mortgage people warn me, "It's up to you to maintain the property."

For years, I collected magazine photos of houses and floor plans that I liked. I dreamed of interesting Victorian homes, cottages by the sea, '20s bungalows - all with writer's nooks. A home is a refuge from the outside world. I want light, flowers, friends and music in mine.

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"Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration," Charles Dickens wrote.

When my mother dies, my old family home will be a memory that helps shape my new one.

Christmas holds power, even for a lapsed Catholic, and I was graced with a miracle this year. Mom beat the pneumonia and began taking fluids again. She still refuses all food, but she always loved Christmas, and I'm grateful she didn't die then.

I moved into my house on Dec. 27.

"You can't stay in a rut," my aunt said, calling from Florida to congratulate me. "I'm glad you got it."

The new house is already warm with memories. My mother is there whenever music is on, and her favorite flowers, cosmos, will sway in my garden this summer. Like my grandmother, I hum a tune when I bake. I think of my stepfather every time I grab a hammer from the toolbox he made me 20 Christmases ago. My aunt's old curtains hang in my windows.

The snow falling outside quietly softens all edges. I want to finish this story before I get to the ending that's surely coming.

Connie Jenkins is city editor of The Saratogian.

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