Many glad to help shoulder some of parents' burden

VIVIAN GREENBERG
Growing Old Along with Me

Jack Robertson, an 84-year-old widower, fell, breaking a leg and several ribs while getting out of the tub. Although he knew for quite some time that he was too unsteady to bathe alone, he decided not to share this information with a son who lived nearby.

Jack knew that his son would have been more than willing to come by and give a hand. But, after his wife died, Jack resolved never to be a burden to his children.

Most of us elders feel as Jack Robertson does. Knowing how busy our children's lives are, we think twice about getting into their hair. We'd rather be martyrs than bother them with our calls for extra help or some attention. Besides, the last thing we want is to shoo them out of our lives with daily recitations of our complaints.

Yet, the reality is that we DO need our children to help out, give care or emotional support. If we don't let them know, for example, that we've been falling or that we're too depressed to cook or that we can't balance our check book, we're taking the burden business in risky directions. We could end up like Jack Robertson. And none of us wants nor can we afford this outcome.

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It is a fact that most children want to give care. More than just duty, they see it as a small way to say thank you to us for all we did for them. Many also see it as a way to make up for some of the grief they caused us when they were young. Giving care is a way to say, "I've come of age. I'm now a dependable adult instead of an irresponsible kid."

A comment made by Jack's son, Gary, was typical of this sentiment: "I somehow felt cheated that Dad never told me of his difficulty. What he did was to treat me like a child. He didn't give me a chance to show him as a grown man how much I care."

So, in a real sense we do ourselves AND our children a deep disservice when we get carried away with the "I don't want to be a burden" script.

But how do we draw the line between what is necessary help and what is not? Between being too independent and too dependent?

The line is a difficult one to draw.

While most of the responsibility in drawing it is ours, our children can help immensely. They must honestly tell us of their limits. They must talk to us, as adults, matter-of-factly, about what they can and cannot do. Rest assured, we will listen, and as adults, we will respect the realities of their lives. Indeed, without their forthrightness, the line will be shaky.

As for what WE might do, following are a few guidelines.

First, we are not being a burden by letting our children know about our medical problems. We do become a burden, however, when we think that because we've given them this knowledge we now have the right to call them every time we are in the throes of some new ache or upset.

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Second, we must not jump to the phone every time we have a chore we would like them to do. We must pause, asking ourselves if someone other than a child can do the job. If it's marketing, laundry or some cooking, perhaps a neighbor, friend or paid helper will suffice. If, on the other hand, it's shopping for clothing or going to the doctor or to the bank, we may want the personal closeness of a child.

Third, we are not being a burden when we share our financial situation with our children. They must know about our assets, insurance and thoughts on long-term care. Their advice may be the best we can have.

Last, we must be sensitive to our children's needs. Though they are genuinely committed to our welfare, we must recognize that we cannot always be first on their list of priorities. Rather than take for granted that they can do this or that, we should ask first. Besides, their purpose in being here is not solely to take care of us.

While finding the balance between asking for too much and not enough is the obvious concern, there is much more at stake. What is in the ante is our relationship with our children. We want to finish well with them; and they want the same.

When all is said and done, both generations yearn for the same thing: warm, affectionate connection with each other. If we keep this in mind when we, together, draw the line, then columns like this one will not be necessary.

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EASY READING
David Finkle

'Palace of Tears' built on the promise of true love

With "The Palace of Tears" (Delacorte, 176 pages, $19.95), Alev Lytle Croutier puts a new-age spin on the story of Scheherazade — and does it rather nicely. The homage is not oblique — within a 15-page span in her fairy tale, she makes allusion to Sindbad, 1,001 and Scheherazade herself — but it's a welcome little paean to "The Thousand and One Nights" (also known as "The Arabian Nights' Entertainment"), that sultry collection of tales of love and destiny. Moreover, it's the perfect Valentine's Day gift for a suitor trying to telegraph an ardent *je-vous-aime* message to the intended.

The story is, as its predecessors were, simple. It is the mid 1800s, and Casimir de Chateauneuf, a rich but discontented vintner, has discovered a miniature portrait in a shop on Paris' elegant Rue de Rivoli. It sits in the section of the store devoted to Orientalia, and it features the head of a woman; one eye is blue, the other yellow.

Chateauneuf is married, the father of three boys. He also has an enthusiastic mistress. Nonetheless, he determines that the woman in the painting is meant to be his one true love and he sets out to locate her. A first trip to the East goes badly, but when he returns to Paris and ingratiates himself with Napoleon's chatelaine, Empress Eugénie, it is contrived that he should return to the Ottoman Empire and, as fate would conveniently have it, he soon finds himself in the presence of the woman for whom he was born.

She is Kukla, also known as La Poupee, a "living doll," a child without family who'd been brought up by the Sultana. Specifically, she has been raised in a harem, and as such, might have been expected to remain uneducated, isolated from male society. (Let me interject here that the Turkish-born Croutier's depiction of the harem — a subject about which there are many misconceptions and prejudices — can be assumed to be authoritative, as she is also the author of "Harem: The World Behind the Veil.") But the Sultana had encouraged her education and Kukla learned to read and to speak French. A journey that took her out of the harem also introduced her to the opposite sex and she subsequently dreamt about a man — a particular man — with whom she knew she would fall in love. He is, of course, Chateauneuf.

It gives nothing away to reveal that the two do find each other and, after surmounting the requisite fairy-tale obstacles littering the path of true love, are united. Their union reifies what is perhaps literature's oldest romantic myth: that in this world there is only one person meant for us, and that there is reason to believe we will find that person. Swoon. Lives the soul who does not, however sheepishly, wish it were so?

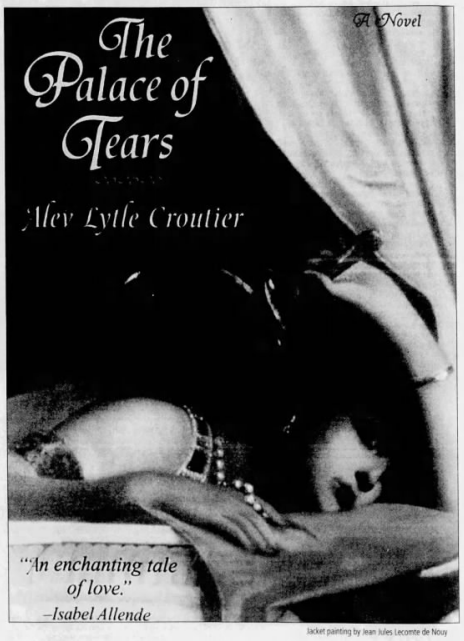
That said, Croutier has not simply churned out a happily-ever-after piece with "The Palace of Tears," but has constructed an artful marriage of the fantastic and the realistic. We do not leave Chateauneuf and La Poupee locked in the throes of early connubial bliss but last see them when they are well into middle age, when they are rather more comfortably than passionately settled. They live . . . relatively happily ever after.

The element of realism comes out of the fact that Croutier has based her characters on her great-great-grandparents (which does indeed mean that she is descended from the vintner Chateauneufs — of Chateauneuf-du-Pape fame). And there are several other real-life personages she sends romping through her book, including Ferdinand de Lesseps (who, you probably recall, was involved in the building of both the Suez and Panama canals) and the aforementioned Empress Eugénie. But Croutier enjoys toying with the facts — and with us — keeping us confused as to where those facts end and the fiction begins. She writes in a foreword, "Not only the characters and the events but also the historical facts have been sacrificed to the story." To which she adds, "Do not believe a word of it." A word of . . . which part, exactly?

The richness and beauty of Croutier's tale emerge where story and history intersect; de Lesseps' presence is exemplary. His significance to the 19th century cannot be overestimated, for it was his vision that permitted connections between continents, and therefore peoples, on a scale never before possible. De Lesseps' occasional appearances here remind us that the European Chateauneuf can find La Poupee, his soul mate, even though she is in the East. More simply put, their relationship is a metaphor for East-West harmony.

If "The Palace of Tears" can convince us that finding our one true love is within the realm of possibility, is it really so surprising that it also leaves us optimistic about world peace? What a remarkable little book.

David Finkle (FinkleDR@aol.com) writes on books and the arts.



Jacket painting by Jean Jules Lecomte de Nouy

ESCAPE

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stories, equally terse, give one a sense, as a reviewer in England observed, of things deliberately omitted. But what is left sticks in the memory like Velcro.

The title story, which takes place in Van Diemen's Land, now Tasmania, is fewer than 20 pages, yet Fitzgerald manages to get us wildly interested in its three people: the minister's daughter, Alice; the housekeeper, Mrs. Watson, who was sentenced to Van Diemen's Land for seven years but now has her ticket of leave; and an escaped convict who calls himself Savage. Fitzgerald sketches these characters with the deftest and most minimal of strokes, unobtrusively imparting a great deal of information about life in the town of Hobart, the penal system, and the poverty of parsonages. The end comes as quite a surprise.

"The Prescription," set in Istanbul, is only nine pages long. In this piece, Fitzgerald spins a tense, exotic tale, again with a surprise ending.

Other stories are located in the English countryside, an island off the coast of Scotland, and in Brittany. My favorite, "At Hiruharama," takes place in New Zealand. Like the other stories, it has at least one character who is so outlandish that only a writer as skilled as Penelope Fitzgerald could carry it off.

I will miss her terribly.

Ann Waldron, who lives in Princeton, is the author of "Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance," and of "Eudora," a biography of Eudora Welty.

HOURS

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Even evenings alone were measured
by who wasn't there. Desire & Need,
how they sat down with him,
helped like untrained helpers
arranged the hours that followed.
Evening was their time.

He remembered, of course, the lovely hours —
the body's sudden holidays, prolonged fiestas
of the mind. He rewound and rewound.

Stephen Dunn is a private poet who listens for the quiet voices. A poem that describes his burial of the family cat echoes two poems by John Updike about burying the family dog. Dunn captures the same sadness and nostalgia that characterize Updike's painful experience, and the inevitable difficulty of putting it into words:

What
we're mostly faced with are these privacies,
inconsequential to all but us.

It's Dunn's willingness to face his privacies that makes them consequential to the rest of us.

Don Harrell is a writer living in New York.

BEST SELLERS

The New York Times

FICTION

1 **A Day Late and a Dollar Short**, by Terry McMillan. (Viking, $25.95)
2 **A Darkness More Than Night**, by Michael Connelly. (Little, Brown, $25.95)
3 **From the Corner of His Eye**, by Dean Koontz. (Bantam, $26.95)
4 **The First Counsel**, by Brad Meltzer. (Warner, $25.95)
5 **Special Ops**, by W.E.B. Griffin. (Putnam, $25.95)
6 **The Mark**, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. (Tyndale, $22.99)
7 **Lost and Found**, by Jayne Ann Krentz. (Putnam, $23.95)
8 **Hidden Passions: Secrets From the Diaries of Tabitha Lenox**, (Harper Entertainment, $25)
9 **Protect and Defend**, Richard North Patterson. (Knopf, $26.95)
10 **Roses are Red**, by James Patterson. (Little, Brown, $26.95)

NON-FICTION

1 **An Hour Before Daylight**, by Jimmy Carter. (Simon & Schuster, $26)
2 **Ice Bound**, by Jeri Nielsen with Maryanne Vollers. (Talk Miramax/Hyperion, $23.95)
3 **The O'Reilly Factor**, by Bill O'Reilly. (Broadway, $23)
4 **Tuesdays With Morrie**, by Mitch Albom. (Doubleday, $19.95)
5 **The Darwin Awards**, by Wendy Northcutt. (Dutton, $16.95)
6 **Maestro**, by Bob Woodward. (Simon & Schuster, $25)
7 **An Invitation to the White House**, by Hillary Rodham Clinton (Simon & Schuster, $35)
8 **Nothing Like it in the World**, by Stephen E. Ambrose (Simon & Schuster, $28)
9 **Founding Brothers**, by Joseph J. Ellis. (Knopf, $26)
10 **It's Not About the Bike**, by Lance Armstrong with Sally Jenkins. (Putnam, $24.95)