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Vivian Lawry

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Getting Along Fine

by Vivian Lawry

You've come home for your regular monthly visit. Everything is the same as usual except that you've taken five vacation days, so this time it is for a week instead of a weekend, and you've brought your eighty-four-year-old mother-in-law with you for a visit. But everything else is as usual, the house a shambles and the children floating free. There are tumbleweeds of cat hair under the furniture, and you see that the cats have clawed the sheer curtains again and scratched the arms of the sofa—the new sofa. Your husband kisses you on the cheek and says, "Hello, my dear." Your daughters say nothing because they won't be home till later.

Your husband and mother-in-law sit on the screened back porch to talk, but you can't stand the disorder everywhere. You stretch the sheer curtains in all directions, working the pulled threads back into the weave. You use a crochet hook and a darning needle to draw the ends of broken threads on the sofa to the inside, trying to make the surface smooth again. Things look better. They always do. But each time, there's a little more damage that you cannot repair. You wonder why your husband doesn't use the spray you bought to repel cats. When you see the claw tracks on the leather recliner, you feel a spurt of fury because he lets them ruin expensive furniture.

The fury smolders as you restore order to the kitchen cupboards and wash the fingerprints off the woodwork. But you keep a lid on it, telling yourself he is doing the best it is in his nature to do.

The children's rooms seem to look worse every time you see them. But you do nothing to separate the piles of dirty clothes from the clean ones, to remove the small mountains of candy wrappers. Their bedrooms are their private spaces. You and your husband had decided that years ago.

The two of you discussed everything about how to rear the children, of course, and both of you

agreed that you knew what was best. You strove to be consistent and reasonable and fair. You knew better than to tell a child she *had* to do something that it was not in your power actually to make her do. At meals, you served each person some of everything, but you never said, "You are going to sit there till you eat every bit of that eggplant and kasha." Instead you said, "You know the contingencies: if you really don't want to finish, fine. But no dessert and nothing else to eat until breakfast." You were the one who set their weekly chores. When the children agitated for a pet, you had said, "I don't want to take care of a pet."

They said, "You won't have to take care of it. We'll take care of it."

You said, "I don't want to nag you to take care of it, either."

"You won't have to nag us," they said.

"Okay," you'd said. "Here's the deal. If any one of you will do all her chores for a whole month without being nagged or reminded, you can get a cat." That had ended the conversation for many months. But when the oldest and the youngest took out sheets of paper, numbered the days down the side and listed their chores across the top, posted copies on the refrigerator and on their bedroom mirror, you'd known there'd be a pet in the house soon. You were pleased. And secretly amused that they'd chosen February for their test month.

You provided the discipline and guidance. He always supported your decisions. It had worked well: the children had lots of friends, they charmed adults, they didn't do drugs or go to wild parties, and they had dinner with the family. As they got older, they became ever-more interesting, each so different from her sisters: the oldest disciplined, organized, responsible—a typical firstborn; the middle child gregarious and popular, courageous and stubborn; the youngest introverted and moody, creative, and exceptionally intelligent. When you



took the job two years ago, you were supremely confident in the strength of your marriage and the adjustment of your children. Your mate had always been completely egalitarian, sharing the housework and childcare, respectful of your career. At seventeen, thirteen, and eleven, the girls were going their separate ways anyway and didn't need you on a daily basis.

But two years into your commuter marriage, your daughters no longer take their turns cooking the family dinner one night a week because he says it's easier just to do it himself than to nag them to do it. As often as not, they don't all sit down to eat together. You think, "Keeping any discipline with children takes effort. But they *need* it." You stifle the urge to screech words like these because, after all, you are the one who took a job in another state, leaving him to cope alone, day in and day out. Besides, no one complains. But they never write and seldom phone, either. There came a birthday when you got no presents, no cards, and no calls. "But my whole family's always been casual that way," you'd said, as much to yourself as to your colleague.

When people ask how it's going, you joke, "The good news is they're getting along fine without me. The bad news is, they're getting along *fine*—without me!" But things have come undone. Even though you had been the source of structure, consistency, and discipline, you'd assumed that in your absence, he would take over at least some of that. You did not intend to leave a void, a hole in which your children could be lost.

It is worst—or at least, most obvious—with your middle daughter, the most strong-willed. Every phone call home scares you. She didn't come home for dinner when expected, or stayed overnight with her girlfriend without calling home, or rode home on her bicycle at midnight, five miles along a state road, with no lights on her bike. He tells you these things casually and seems to take no decisive action. Your ulcers get worse and you sleep poorly, but there seems to be nothing you can do about her from long distance. So you make sure they have school clothes and annual checkups

with doctors and dentists and silently blame him for endangering your beloved children, though nothing disastrous happens. You tell yourself they are survivors, like you, and pull the thought around you like a blanket.

When you come home, nothing special happens. There is no celebration, no killing of the fatted calf. It's as if you'd been gone hours rather than weeks. He goes to the office. The girls go to school, to track practice, to the movies. You retrieve your clothes and jewelry from their rooms, make space for your set of towels in the bathroom. You rub teak oil into the dining room table, trying desperately to put your house in order, knowing every fix is temporary, angry that nothing ever stays done.

It is the morning after you arrived home for this visit. Your husband is at work, the children at school. About 9:00 a passerby knocks at the front door. "There's a cat lying in the street. It's been hit by a car. Do you have a cat?"

You rush out and find Cleo on the far side of the street, her head near the curb—eyes glazed, bleeding from her mouth, probably with internal injuries as well. She's been hit from her blind side. She's limp and broken, but she's *breathing*. You grab a towel and wrap her up. Your mother-in-law holds her while you drive headlong to the veterinarian. The towel is damp and you curse yourself for not getting a dry one, a warmer one. The veterinarian says your mother-in-law can stay but that you must leave the examination room; your sobbing is making Cleo worse. You always thought you would be calm in a crisis. So now you slump into the molded plastic chair, look through the waiting people holding their cats or dogs, and wonder at your tears. The family didn't get Cleo till three months before you left. It isn't like she's even your cat. The veterinarian comes out. "She has a broken jaw and a broken hip. She's in shock. We can't tell more till she's stable." You go home to wait, dreading having to tell the family. Your mother-in-law seems completely unmoved.

You remind yourself that this cat is tough. She was hit once before, only a month after you left, and that time she lost her left eye and her right ear,



her jaw mended crooked, and it was months before the abscesses healed. But heal she did, and she was as normal as a cat could be afterwards. When the veterinarian calls to say that Cleo is dead, you weep uncontrollably. Your five-foot-tall mother-in-law is stoic and says you are overreacting. The children cry, too, and it's especially hard on your middle daughter.

You cry almost constantly. You can't help it. You wake in the night and your pillow is wet. You think obsessively about what else you might have done—a dry towel, putting her in a box or basket for support, talking to her in a soothing voice. Your

husband is confused and doesn't know what to say. You are angry that he cannot comfort you. The weeping goes on for days, till finally your tears dissolve the curtain of anger hiding the fearful truth: you were *there*, you did everything that could be done, and the cat died anyway. You can't take care of a goddamned *cat*, for Christ's sake, how can you hope to protect your children? How can you expect *him* to keep them safe? You weep for their vulnerability. You weep for your lost illusions. You weep for all the tears to come.

