Roz Chast, a *New Yorker* cartoonist since 1978, is the author of the graphic memoir “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?,” which will be published in May.
CAN'T WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING MORE PLEASANT?

My parents and I never discussed DEATH...

So... do you guys ever think about THINGS?

What kind of things?

You know... THINGS.

PLANS?

I HAVE NO IDEA! WHAT YOU GUYS WANT!

Let's say something HAPPENED.

Hey, heh, good one.

AM I THE ONLY SANE PERSON HERE??


Later that same day.

Whew!

Whew!
I was quite aware that my parents had had tough lives—way, way tougher than mine.

You don't know what trouble IS!

I had heard the stories my whole life—about how their parents had come over from Russia at the turn of the century with NOTHING...

...about how my maternal grandfather had been an engineer in Russia, but how, between his inability to speak English and his being Jewish, he wound up barely being able to support five kids and his wife working as a presser in the garment district.

and how bitter and angry he was; and how my grandmother washed clothes for other people.

and how even sadder my father's family was. His mother was one of nine children.

Not only was she the only girl but she was also the only one of her siblings to survive the Russian cholera epidemic.

Then, in a forest, her father had his throat cut "from ear to ear" by "bandits."

I don't know what happened to her mother. But she came to New York, married my paternal grandfather, and had just one child, my father; by Cesarean section, in 1912...

...a horrible ordeal that involved, according to my mother, "opening her up from her neck to her you-know-what."

Between their one bad thing—after another lives and the Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust, in which they both lost family—

it was amazing that they weren't crazier than they were.

Who could blame them for not wanting to talk about death?

Let's discuss a more pleasant subject.
My parents referred to each other, without any irony, as "soul mates." The rocks in his head match the holes in mine! Ditto! 

They were born eleven days apart...

George
March 23, 1912

Elizabeth
April 3, 1912

...and they grew up two blocks apart in East Harlem, New York City, Tenements! We had nothing.

They were in the same fifth-grade class. He was the fat boy in the back of the room. Yep!

They never dated, much less anything else’d, anyone besides each other. We were too poor! Plus, we lived with our parents until we were married.

Aside from W.W.II, work, illness, and going to the bathroom, they did everything together. I’m going to Wald-baums. Hold it! I’m coming, too.

My mother even washed my father’s hair for him. It’s not as if they never fought, because they did.

Don’t sit sideways. You’re twisting your kishkas.

But the concept of looking for "something better," or "being happy"—that was for modern people or movie stars. I.e., degenerates. Elizabeth Taylor! Seven husbands! Oy gevalt.

They were a tight little unit. "Codependent"? Of course we’re codependent! Thank GOD!!!

Maybe they believed that if they just held on to each other, really tightly, for eternity nothing would ever change.

Why roil the waters? Why rock the boat? Why rattle the cage?
I visited them for the first time in years at their apartment in Brooklyn, where I grew up. What I noticed first was the level of **GRIME**.

**WHAT IS GRIME?**

It's not ordinary dust, or a greasy stovetop that hasn't been cleaned in a week or two. It's more of a coating - something that happens when people haven't cleaned in a really long time.

One thing my mother always told me when I was growing up was:

**You have to DUST!**

If you don't, the dust gets into all the **interfaces** of the furniture and **BREAKS IT ALL APART!!!**

It was clear that she had stopped worrying about that.

**BUT WHAT DO YOU DO?**

If you pick up a sponge and start cleaning...

If you don't, the dust gets into all the **interfaces** of the furniture and **BREAKS IT ALL APART!!!**

**Look at me!**

It's **PERFECT DAUGHTER!**

... it will not necessarily be perceived as helpful. The person you're trying to help might even feel insulted, or embarrassed.

**Put that down.**

**Leave that alone.**

**Daddy and I are FINE.**

Don't upset your mother. Don't touch that.

I wasn't great as a caretaker, and they weren't great at being taken care of.
By 2002, they were 90. It was hard not to notice that every time I came to see them the grime had grown thicker...

The piles of newspapers, magazines, and junk mail had grown larger...

...and they themselves had grown trailer.

I could see that they were slowly leaving the sphere of TV-commercial old age...

- SPRY!
- TOTALLY INDEPENDENT!
- JUST LIKE A NORMAL ADULT.
- BUT WITH SILVER HAIR!

...and moving into the part of old age that was scarier, harder to talk about, and not a part of this culture.

Extend human life span to 140!!!

Something was coming down the Pike.

It's no accident that most consumer ads are pitched to people in their 20s and 30s.

I'm going to take up golf and tennis, so I'm going to need a lot of NEW STUFF!

Let's redecorate the house!

For one thing, they are less likely to have gone through the transformative process of cleaning out their deceased parents' stuff.

Once you go through that, you can never look at YOUR stuff in the same way.

You start to look at your stuff a little... POSTMORTEMISTICALLY.

One day, my kids...

If you've lived more than two decades as a consumer, you probably have quite the accumulation, even if you're not a hoarder. SIGH!

An ergonomic garlic press and throw pillows and those stupid sunflower dessert plates and seven travel alarm clocks and eight nail clippers and a colander and a flat iron and three old laptops and barbells and a set of FUCKING BOCCÉ BALLS, and patio furniture and an autoharp, for God's sake, and your old flute from high school and a zillion books and towels and sheets and a wok you never used...
My parents weren't hoarders, quite. Nevertheless, no one could deny that the Depression had had an effect on their shopping habits:

LOOK! These stockings are 80% off! You can afford full-price stockings, Mom. Yes, but... THEY'RE GIVING THESE AWAY!!!

That's because the only sizes left are extra-extra-extra-extra petite and QUINTUPLE QUEEN!

And who wears "AVOCADO" or "LOBSTER BISQUE" stockings?

Let's see... I could open up four pairs of extra-extra-extra petite and sew them all together...

Doesn't that defeat the purpose? Why don't you just buy ONE pair of what you need at full price?

14 x $2.99 = $41.86
9 x $5 = $45
$44.86

Hmm...

What about the color?

Dye 'em with RIT.

Maybe I'll get one pair of Quintuple Queen and make three pairs out of it! YES!

And if worse comes to worst, I'll make Daddy a vest out of them.

Elizabeth, this is the most beautiful vest in the entire universe!

This is all wrong, Mom. Waste not, want not!
Besides their aversion to talking about “unpleasant topics,” they also had trust issues.

Remember the Mellmans?

Before they died, they signed all their money over to their daughter.

Yeah, thanks!

Next thing you know, she puts them in a nursing home...

Off you go.

...and she buys a draweuf of cashmere sweaters!

I tried to get them to accept even a little bit of help from outside.

We don't need any help!

They didn't want any strangers in the apartment.

We have many valuable things—like the books.

No, no, no.

My mother insisted that no grocery store in Brooklyn delivered.

No, no, no.

Occasionally, one of their neighbors helped out.

I'm going to the store. Can I pick anything up for you?

But the grime and disorder were worse than ever, way beyond anything a mere “hiding up” could fix...

And it was only getting worse. A friend of mine said,

You have found the source of the river!

But anytime I mentioned “assisted living” the reaction was extremely negative.

SUNSET GARDENS

END-OF-THE-TRAIL ACRES

FINAL BRISE REST HOME

RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

 ANTIQUE BOX OF SANITARY NAPKINS IN TIMES OF卍

EBAY.
Somehow, they were able to see through the euphemisms.

Finally, I got them to move to a “Place.”

The first few months were fairly uneventful, although sometimes I had the feeling that my dad was less than 100% enthusiastic.

I knew it wasn’t a “hellhole.” But even a top-of-the-middle-of-the-line, or bottom-of-the-top-of-the-line, Place is still an institution. And institutions have RULES.

My mother never called it a “hellhole,” but she had opinions.

I’m sure it wasn’t easy, but they were adjusting.

Your father had an egg in his pocket all day yesterday. Thank GOD, it turned out to be hard-boiled.
A TYPICAL AFTERNOON AT THE PLACE

Look, Dad, I brought you a cheese Danish.
My FAVORITE!

Honey? Care to share this with me?

No, because I ate my lunch, unlike some people...

...who were so busy socializing that they neglected their lunch...

...which is why some people are hungry NOW!!!

I'll cut it into quarters. That way, if you change your mind, you can have some.

As I just told you: I'M STILL FULL FROM LUNCH.

Then I'll cut it in half...

...and I'll eat ONE half...

...and put the other half away for later!

WATCH. He'll forget and eat both halves...

...and then some people won't be hungry for DINNER!

I don't get why you're the boss of Dad's Danish ingestion.

Actually, your mother's right. She's a brilliant woman. Thank you, Elizabeth!
Here's what I used to think happened at "the end":

One day, Old Mrs. McGillicuddy felt unwell, and she took to her bed. She stayed there for, oh, about three or four weeks, growing weaker by the day. One night, she developed something called a "death rattle," and soon after that she died.

R.I.P.
OLD MRS.
M. GILLICUDY

What I was starting to understand was that the middle panel was sometimes a lot more painful, humiliating, long-lasting, complicated, and hideously expensive.

A few months after arriving at The Place, my father broke his hip. When he developed painful bedsores that would not heal, he told my mother that he wanted to "pack it in." He was tired of the work of staying alive and tired of the pain. My mother did not care for his defeatist attitude.

I told Daddy he was coming with me to 100 if I had to drag him KICKING AND SCREAMING!!!

He entered hospice, which my mother didn't particularly approve of, either.

So, the hospice lady has started coming around. She's very nice, but I told her, I don't want anyone coming around with a LONG, SAD FACE...

I want POSITIVE THINKING!!! Not a bunch of people standing around singing "Kumbaya."
Shortly after my father died, my mother began a long, slow decline. The Place suggested that I get around-the-clock care, so I hired two nurses. Each would do a twelve-hour shift. My money worries increased. Besides the monthly rent at The Place and the two nurses, there was her medication, and there were all those supplies she needed: bed pads, Depends, extra pads to wear inside the Depends, latex gloves for the nurses, Ensure, baby wipes...

A couple of weeks into the around-the-clock care, hospice, etc., I went to see my mother at The Place, filled with dread and fearing the worst.

Instead, she was sitting on the couch with one of the private nurses, a middle-aged woman from Jamaica named Goodie. She was fully dressed. She was wearing shoes. She was eating a tuna sandwich.

I knew her retreat from the abyss should have filled me with joy, or at least relief. However, what I felt when I saw her was closer to:

Ooo! Where in the Five Stages of Death, is EAT TUNA SANDWICH??!

I had sort of adjusted to the idea that she was dying, and this was THROWING ME OFF.
Goodie was smart and strong-willed and a good match for my mother.

Do not worry, Ross.
Everything will be O.K.

Even so, I felt guilty not to be doing the "dirty work" myself.

And, once again, one of society's least-wanted jobs was being done by a minority woman. I felt guilty about this, too...

Guess I'll go home now and DRAW!

...but relieved...
At least she's in good hands.

...and jealous...
She gets along better with Goodie than she does with me!

...and grateful.
Thank you, Mom and Dad, for having the foresight to save up for this.

On the floor of my closet, along with shoes, old photo albums, wrapping paper, a sewing machine, a shelf of old sleep T-shirts, an iron, a carton of my kids' art work, and some other miscellaneous stuff, are two special boxes.

One holds my father's cremains.
The other box holds my mother's.

My father's box is inside a navy-blue velvet drawstring bag, which I placed inside the ancient Channel 13 bag that he took everywhere.

My mother's box is inside a maroon velvet drawstring bag. It is "en plein air."

Until I figure out a better place for them, they're staying in my closet.

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