CAREGIVING WITH CATHER: AGING, ILLNESS, DIMINISHMENT, AND DYING IN MODERN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

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Diminishment, and Dying

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Willa Cather (1873-1947) explores aging, illness, caregiving, diminishment and dying in several of her novels and short stories. In her mid-50s, when she hit her literary stride, Cather felt personally concerned with these issues and sensitive to the memories of the deficient caregiving she had performed in her younger years. These six Cather novels and two short stories: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932), and "Neighbor Rosicky" (1932), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) discuss the burdens of caregiving, the ways caregivers cope, the diminishment of the mind or the body, and issues of dependence. In answer to the questions and concerns she raises in these works, Cather examines and resolves her fears (and ours) with her novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather depicts the ideal scenario and tools necessary for managing the aging, dying, caregiving periods of life.

Through the fictional works of Willa Cather and a variety of social science, psychological, and medical texts, in this dissertation, I explore how the processes of aging, being ill, diminishing, and dying can be done well—with acceptance, grace, and joy. Included in the final chapter is my personal testimony as a caregiver, where I reconcile my experience, embrace the human condition, relieve my psyche of fear, and find the elusive meaning in suffering.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my partner and husband, Don Bailey; my dear friend, Adam Farron; and to my dissertation committee, Dr. Laura Winters and Dr. Liana Piehler. Don, Adam, Laura, and Liana: I thank you for your guidance, support, and thoughtful feedback during this endeavor.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DCFA	*Death Comes for the Archbishop*
LL	*A Lost Lady*
MME	*My Mortal Enemy*
OP	*O Pioneers!*
PH	*The Professor's House*
SSG	*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*
SOTR	*Shadows on the Rock*

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather (1873-1947) explores aging, illness, caregiving, and dying in several of her novels and short stories. In her mid-50s, when she hit her literary stride, Cather felt personally concerned with these issues and sensitive to the memories of the deficient caregiving she had performed in her younger years. These six Cather novels and two short stories: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932), and "Neighbor Rosicky" (1932), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) discuss the burdens of caregiving, the ways caregivers cope, the diminishment of the mind or the body, and issues of dependence. In answer to the questions and concerns she raises in these works, Cather examines and resolves her fears (and ours) with her novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather depicts the ideal scenario and tools necessary for managing the aging, dying, caregiving periods of life.

Cather's Responses to Aging, Illness, and Death

After forty, aging and dying are natural processes to consider. In her later writings, Cather spends much time contemplating these processes. In her essay "The Person I was in the Beginning: Willa Cather on Growing Old" Jo Ann Middleton writes that "all of Cather's late novels and stories can be read as seminal texts on the fears and realities we all face as we, too, confront old age" (25). Additionally, in her essay "Willa Cather and the Coming of Old Age," Ann Romines discusses Cather's personal experiences with aging, illness, and the death of her parents. Cather's father died in 1928 and her mother became ill shortly after his death. Despite the fact that her mother suffered from a

prolonged illness, which lasted over three years, Cather felt guilty about the care she provided and her absences. Romines writes:

> Willa Cather's concern, anxiety, revulsion, and grief at the circumstances of her mother's last years are apparent in the double signals of her behavior in those years. She paid for her mother's sanitarium care and visited her in California for three consecutive springs, but she also scheduled a five-month trip to Europe during her mother's illness, made long stays at her inaccessible vacation house on Grand Manan Island, and at least once lied to friends, exaggerating (from six weeks to four months) the length of her stay with her mother—a telling clue that Cather felt uncomfortable with her own behavior during these stressful years. (395)

Cather's mother experienced a difficult end of life. Witnessing a long and complex death inspired more questions and counter examples for Cather, but not necessarily a resolution to the question of how to die well. The death of her parents and her own aging process provided Cather with material to explore, through a variety of characterizations, in her writing.

After World War I, a youth culture developed in America and the question of old age became a national debate. Society's changes produced ideological shifts. By the 1930s, Cather believed that older individuals were no longer valued as they were previously. Additionally, Cather grappled with the traditional gender models of aging. As Romines explains, "For Cather, in her fifties, such standardized heterosexual cultural narratives must have seemed an obstacle to the fictional exploration of her own aging

experiences" (397). Romines points to Barbara MacDonald's voice to remind readers that "to read later Cather as a familial guide to age would be an even more dangerously regressive mythologizing act" (Romines 398). This partly explains why Cather feels it necessary to explore dying through male characterizations. At the time, a female characterization would be too limiting. To take a female character out of the patriarchal home and create an ideal death may have seemed a stretch.

Cather's personal writings also illuminate her attitudes regarding death. Cather writes a sympathy letter to the poet, playwright, and novelist Zoë Akins that contains advice, lamentations, and optimism. Dated November 21, 1932, this letter appears in the long-awaited collection of Willa Cather letters entitled *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* published in 2013 and edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout. Through the epistolary form, Cather attempts to console her friend or acquaintance—the closeness of their relationship is unclear—upon the sudden death of her husband, Hugo Rumbold. Within the margins of this letter, Cather reveals that she is suffering from an eye infection and moving to an apartment at 570 Park Avenue. This letter displays in equal parts Cather's perfunctory sympathy and brisk motivational advice.

As a novelist steeped in realism and modernism, Cather surprises readers with the encouraging and dismissive tone of her sympathy note. In the first paragraph, she writes, "What a dreadful shock for you, to have a big strong man go out like that!. . . . Wasn't it fortunate that you had that jolly honeymoon together in Mexico, since this was going to happen?" (474). This exclamatory statement and question seem to express judgment

rather than comfort. Cather suggests that Akins should count her blessings and be glad for the limited time she had with Hugo. Perhaps the Depression influenced this mindset?

Cather continues by ruminating about death in general. She writes, "It's a brutal fact, Zoë, that after one is 45, it simply rains death, all about one, and after you've passed fifty, the storm grows fiercer" (474). Death becomes an accepted, almost neutral, fact that one lives with before death occurs. As the aging process escalates, so does the number of deaths. Referring to her reading of the obituaries, Cather states that the news of friends' and acquaintances' deaths are the quotidian.

In paragraph three, Cather dispenses advice. She suggests that Zoë maintain her activities and routine. If Zoë mourns too much, she will be lonely. She also advises Zoë not to drink too much, although Cather realizes that it's easy to do when a person is in shock. In a gossipy turn, Cather admonishes that "no ordinary human being can keep up with Jobyna [Howland] without disastrous results. I'm <u>not</u> knocking Jobyna, but she is rather spacious in capacity, as she is in size" (474). At the end of paragraph three, Cather "wishes" she could "run out to see you for a week," but then provides descriptions of her own affairs and minor illness that prevent her from visiting. This information seems self-preoccupied and at odds with a sympathy letter.

With an optimistic closing, Cather redeems herself by including some more thoughtful encouragement. She writes, "But something rather nice does happen in the mind as one grows older. If it hasn't begun with you yet, keep your courage, <u>it will happen</u>. A kind of golden light comes as compensation for many losses" (474). A golden light sounds lovely, and as a reader I am intrigued by this description. I wonder how and

where and in what form this light will appear. Upon receiving this letter, during the mourning of her husband's death, Zoë probably wonders the same.

James Woodress's *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* is the essential Willa Cather biography. Published in 1987, it remains a key text for Cather scholars. Chapter 20 "Obscure Destinies" references Cather's letter to Zoë Akins and her period (early 1930s) of mortality reflections. For Cather, the beginning of the 1930s marked the death of her mother, several relocations, and limited writing. In this chapter, Woodress traces these events and outlines Cather's corresponding works.

Woodress's interpretations in *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* create the Cather with which most scholars are familiar. Prior to Woodress's biography, E.K. Brown wrote a Cather Biography in 1953. Each new biography benefits, as time passes, by more primary material becoming available. Since her death in the late 1940s, Cather's letters have been restricted. Writing in the late 1980s, Woodress was not allowed to publish or quote directly from any of Cather's letters. In 2013, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* were published, thus allowing for a fuller portrait of Cather's writing style and personality. Readers could now form their own opinions about Cather.

The way Woodress writes about Zoë Akins and Willa Cather's old friendship comes as a surprise after reading Cather's letter to Akins. The letter, a condolence note (previously discussed, written by Cather to Akins upon the sudden death of her husband), seems flip and remote. This one epistolary sample would cause readers to question the accuracy of Woodress's interpretation of Cather. Having only analyzed the one letter, it is impossible to either confirm or refute Woodress's opinions of Cather.

In Chapter 20, Woodress refers to the Zoë Akins letter from 1932, at several points, without mentioning the death of Akins's husband or the sympathy it was supposed to express. Woodress relates the letter to Akins as a means for Cather to process her own mother's death (which occurred a year prior). Several pages later in the same chapter, Woodress refers to the Akins letter again in response to Cather's mindset when writing "Neighbor Rosicky" and "Old Mrs. Harris." He writes, "Cather wrote Akins at this time that biologically speaking, life was rather a failure, but something rather nice happens in the mind as one grows older. A kind of golden light comes as a compensation for many losses" (444). Throughout this chapter and the length of the text, Woodress treats Cather kindly. He does not seem to judge his subject and if he does, it is with mild reproach. However, it seems possible that Woodress's earnest interpretation has obscured Cather's friendship with Akins. Perhaps the tone of Cather's letter belies a dimension of liveliness and playfulness with Akins that is glossed over in Woodress's biography.

Within each chapter, to explore Cather's response to aging, illness, and death, I plan to use seminal works by James Woodress and Cather's own letters. Woodress published his Cather biography in 1989; this book was his expansion upon a previous essay, published in 1970, entitled "Willa Cather: Her Life and Art." Woodress had increased access to primary sources about Cather via Bernice Slote (who died in 1983 and had spent her life collecting materials for the definitive Cather biography) (xv). Woodress states that while writing this biography, he had changed many of his opinions about Cather. In this biography, he considers issues of lesbianism, sexual orientation, and

feminist criticism, as well as Cather's personality, beliefs, prejudices, aspirations, and sources of joy and pain (xvi).

Additionally, in this dissertation, I will use Cather's letters that appear in Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout's 2013 collection *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. For public inspection, these long-awaited letters present Willa Cather in her own words. While no secrets or surprises emerge from this collection, readers no longer need to rely on scholars' interpretations. The Willa Cather between these pages is slightly different, perhaps more human, from the persona others have created.

Embedded in certain chapters will be a discussion of Literary Realism, Romance, and Modernism and Cather's place within each of these movements. To define and consider Literary Realism, Romance, and Modernism, I will use works by Susan J. Rosowski, Katie Owens-Murphy, Merrill Maguire Skaggs, Hermione Lee, Richard H. Millington, Melissa J. Homestead, and Guy J. Reynolds. Using contemporary literary criticism and scientific, sociological, spiritual, and psychological texts about the aging process, the analysis of the six novels (*O Pioneers!*, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl)* and two short stories ("Old Mrs. Harris" and "Neighbor Rosicky") will follow in mostly chronological order of composition with some grouping by themes. For some of these novels, other lenses from medical humanities (Benjamin J. Oldfield and David S. Jones' "Language of the Heart: The Biomedical and the Metaphorical in American Fiction"), critiques of feminist theory (Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism)*, economics (Zhongxiu He's "Poverty as Myra's Mortal Enemy"), and racial identity (Toni

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination)* will be applied. At the core of my argument resides Cather's masterpiece, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which will be presented last in Chapter 9.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather creates a legend centered upon the life of Bishop Latour. This novel is a narrative with a collection of inset stories. Initially, the plot seems elusive, but with further reflection the plot could be construed as Bishop Latour's adult life culminating in a dignified and graceful death. Cather offers Bishop Latour, a man of contemplation, refinement, and beauty, to her readers as an example of a life well lived. Perhaps the well-lived life allows a peaceful death? Bishop Latour's end of life, which Cather devises before her parents' illnesses and deaths, represents the ideal dying scenario.

To tie together the discussion of aging in America to Cather's fiction, the second part of Chapter 9 will concern the "Life Review" and making meaning through art and caring for plants, animals, and others. I will reference a seminar I attended at Drew University on September 23, 2016, "Becoming a Spiritual Elder: Exploring Life's Passages with Grace and Glory." In this workshop, led by Rabbi Debra Smith, participants explored the aging journey, examined mortality, and conducted a "life repair." Additionally, participants focused on forgiveness and healing work, raising questions about the purpose and meaning of life, voicing fears about losing independence and the inevitability of death. Eventually the workshop discussion turned to developing a way to be a Spiritual Guide and Wisdom Keeper for others. Woven into this section will be texts such as Jon Kay's *Folk Art & Aging*, Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*, and others.

Chapter 10 will trace my own personal experience as a caregiver and reveal how reflecting on Cather's literature focusing on caregiving, suffering, and death have helped me through the caregiving process. A long, drawn-out illness followed by a difficult death can cause trauma for family and caregivers close to the suffering patient. In *Being Mortal*, Gawande finds that in order for family and caregivers to avoid depression in the aftermath of death certain conversations need to happen with the dying person beforehand. Gawande reserves the end of his last chapter to tell the story about his father's death. He incorporates memoir into his non-fiction study about aging, illness, and death in modern America. Cather writes novel after novel in the wake of her mother's death in order to sort out her feelings and exorcise the trauma from her psyche. While Cather's intentions are to also create art, through writing, she is nevertheless processing her experience. Following Cather and Gawande, I plan to tell my own story, briefly, for the same purpose as Gawande and Cather. I outline my experience of caring for my mother during a long, tortuous illness with the purpose being to share in the human condition, relieve my psyche of fear, and find meaning in suffering.

As I personally approach turning forty this summer, and as a caregiver to my elderly parents (my mother has been struggling with pancreatic cancer for the past two years), these themes of aging, illness, and dying constantly occupy my mind. Reading Cather has been a comfort and a guide. Tracing the history of aging and the development of elder care has been illuminating. These works have informed my personal interactions with my parents, my husband (as I think about our future), and my children (as I guide them towards opportunities to be with and appreciate seniors in the community). Cather

had a sense of what was needed to enjoy a good life through until the end. Through the use of Cather's writings, this dissertation should prove to reinvigorate the conversation and provide a humanistic and multidisciplinary approach to the discussion of aging, illness, and dying in modern America.

Chapter 2

O PIONEERS!:

MULTIGENERATIONAL LIVING

Multigenerational living seems like a straightforward answer to caring for older members of society; however, it is actually a complicated endeavor and only works under certain circumstances. Published in 1913, *O Pioneers!* is an early work by Cather with a strong female protagonist and daughter, Alexandra, who embodies the American spirit of pioneering and an elderly unorthodox man named Ivar who lives on Alexandra's farm. Since its publication, critics have analyzed and assigned meanings to this early work by Cather. Much criticism connects this novel with inheritance, biblical, environmental (ownership of land/rights to land), and immigration/assimilation themes. This chapter will first present some of this key criticism, and then discuss aspects of caregiving in *O Pioneers!* Ultimately, as some critics suggest, Alexandra can be interpreted to represent the caregiver of the land. Yet, Cather grounds this lofty interpretation with characters, like Ivar and minor companion characters like Mrs. Lee, who inform readers about aspects of aging, older adults' needs for personal agency, illness, and multigenerational living.

In *O Pioneers!* Cather provides three distinct scenarios that depict multigenerational living and caregiving. They are: Mrs. Lee living with her family, the contrary example of Mrs. Lee's self-direction and contentment while visiting Alexandra, and Ivar and Alexandra's mutually beneficial cohabitation. While Mrs. Lee lives with her daughter and son-in-law, roles are reversed and she finds that neither does she determine the rules of the house nor does she have the freedom to do as she pleases. Mrs. Lee finds

it difficult to conform to American standards, while her daughter and son-in-law feel the pressures of these standards and the guilt the standards produce when Mrs. Lee refuses compliance. As a result, Mrs. Lee feels most at home in Alexandra's house where she can exercise personal autonomy and where Alexandra has no expectations or standards of how Mrs. Lee should conduct herself as an older Americanized woman.

To summarize *O Pioneers!*, the family's patriarch, John Bergson, a homesteader of Swedish descent, attempts to tame Nebraska's land through farming. This novel, sometimes thought to be a romantic pastoral depiction of farming in the prairie, tells Alexandra's story: her managing of the family farm, after her father's death; helping to raise her younger brother, Emil; and her ongoing relationship with Carl Linstrum. Despite the family having three boys, as the eldest, Alexandra learns farming from her father: "It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors" (*OP* 149). The two older boys, Lou and Oscar, work hard physically, but they lack the mental acuity to run the farm successfully. So, the family farm and its operation are entrusted to Alexandra. Alexandra befriends and takes care of her brother's mother-in-law, Mrs. Lee, as well as Ivar, her homeless neighbor who lives off of and within the land—in a cave dug out of the side of a hill. These two elderly characters' depth and significance emerge through their inabilities to conform as Cather portrays the benefits and difficulties of multigenerational living.

As *O Pioneers!* received positive reviews, Cather confessed that the landscape and the people inspired her writing of this novel. In a spring 1913 letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Cather notes that Sergeant locates the novel's "weak spot," which is its

lack of a skeleton (Jewell and Stout 175). Cather writes, “The modelling is not bold. But the country itself has no skeleton—no rocks or ridges. It’s a fluid black soil that runs through your fingers, composed not by the decay of big vegetation but of the light ashes of grass.” Unlike the American South, the Midwestern prairie is not hardened or twisted, but “soft, and somehow that influences the mood in which one writes of it—and so the very structure of the story” (175). In a letter thanking one of her critics, Cather continues to explain her reasoning behind *O Pioneers!* On December 6, 1915, Cather writes to H.W. Boynton referencing his review of *O Pioneers!* and she states, “In that review you suggested some feeling on your part that the cow-puncher’s experience of the West was not the only experience possible there, and you seemed to feel that one might give some truthful account of life in a new country” (Jewell and Stout 211). In her “romantic and lyric attachment” of the Nebraskan countryside and its Norwegian community, Cather provides readers with a woman’s viewpoint and account of her life on the farm (Jewell and Stout 309). Through her deep immersion into conveying an American scene, Cather recreates the complexities of mental illness, aging, caregiving, and multigenerational living within *O Pioneers!*.

In her study of Cather entitled *Double Lives*, Hermione Lee states that *O Pioneers!* is partly about inheritance. She says, “Cather is always interested in the division of family characteristics” (106). While Lee assigns the family characteristics to each of the Bergson siblings, it is Alexandra’s inheritance, as a woman and a Swede, to notice and provide care to these fellow Scandinavians. Additionally, Lee states that *O Pioneers!* is also partly a celebration and elegy about pioneering and the past, which is gone (115). Mrs.

Lee and Ivar are the remnants tied to the land. Fulfilling her inheritance, Alexandra provides care to both Mrs. Lee and Ivar.

As willing or reluctant pioneers, Mrs. Lee's and Ivar's identities from their countries of origin remain intact, yet they now live in America. A.S. Byatt references not only the celebration but also the loss in her introduction to a Virago reprint of Cather's *O Pioneers!*. Byatt compares Cather to Virgil; her *O Pioneers!* is a national epic and a novel displaying classical attributes. Byatt states that Cather's "sense of the European origin of her cultural roots, of continuities, as well as gaps, between the Old World and the New" informs this novel (199). By becoming pioneers, immigrants further loosen ties to countries of origin. Survival requires assimilation and while "old world" ways may continue, the new way of life takes precedence. Farming and managing daily life ties neighbors to each other.

Byatt recognizes this particular criticism surrounding *O Pioneers!* in which the characters are drawn as pastoral or idealized. Byatt writes that critics argue about Cather's presentation of Alexandra as an "Earth Mother or Corn Goddess" rather than a real woman (199). Many of the qualities Cather infuses in Alexandra are definitely worth striving for: morality, humility, patience, intelligence, decisiveness, and open heartedness. However, Alexandra lacks certain traits of individuality like sexuality or the perusal of other personal desires. Many would argue that Marie, Frank Shabata's wife and Emil Bergson's friend and love interest, has enough sexuality for them both. Lee argues that for every Cather character there is also a double or opposite. Lee writes, "[Cather's] fictions are of split selves and doublings" (16). Through Alexandra and Marie, Cather

offers two portraits of two entirely different women. Women neither are all the same nor do they all want the same things in life.

In an essay examining *O Pioneers!* two diverging female plots are illuminated in this novel to reflect Cather's modernist technique. Sara Stoeckl writes that Cather, in the spirit of modernism—to make it new—she "creates two female bildungsroman plots;" one for Marie and one for Alexandra, and "subsumes Marie's traditional version with Alexandra's new, hybrid one" (374). Cather also includes a third bildungsroman plot about the Nebraska prairie—a reflection of new modern art (375). These bildungsroman plots trace the development of Marie, Alexandra, and the prairie. Cather deconstructs the bildungsroman form and "creates something of a pastiche. . . , with overlapping and intermingling variations on *Bildung* plots, themes, and allusions" (390). While scholars often critique *O Pioneers!* for its pastoral aspects, Stoeckl asserts that it is a thoroughly modernist work. Aside from Cather's portrayal of a female pioneer and landowner, with personal agency and no children or husband to contend with, Cather's take on the bildungsroman genre situates this novel in modernism.

Other criticism from this period presents Alexandra not as a caregiver to the elders in the community, but as an enforcer of Mrs. Lee's assimilation, and focuses on the complications of ordering a landscape and excluding Native Americans from the frontier narrative. Melissa Ryan's 2003 essay, "The Enclosure of America: Civilization and Confinement in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!"* outlines the ways Cather's novel portrays a "disciplin[g] of the wilderness" and ethnic conflict (112-13). Ryan notes that Cather's treatment of both Mrs. Lee and Old Ivar reveal a forced Americanization with threatening

undertones. She writes, “One sign of progress on the Divide is the enclosure of Old Mrs. Lee’s feet in shoes…Alexandra finds Mrs. Lee’s subjection to social nicety more amusing than disturbing” (112). Through the mention of Alexandra’s brother Lou, the “conspicuously Americanized” son-in-law of Mrs. Lee, Ryan acknowledges the pressures for Mrs. Lee to conform (112). However, in her analysis, Ryan presents Alexandra as complicit in Mrs. Lee’s assimilation rather than sympathetic to or respectful of her orientation and age.

Additionally, Ryan suggests further hostilities towards Old Ivar. She writes, “This conflict between the old world and the new is more pointed in the case of Old Ivar, the eccentric Norwegian characterized by his intolerance of fire-arms, intense but idiosyncratic religiosity, and deep sympathy with the natural world” (112). Since he has no familial relations, Alexandra takes him in. Unlike Mrs. Lee, Ivar is not required to wear shoes. Ivar’s issues are larger; he suffers from seizures / episodes / visions / hallucinations. He lives deeply within nature and communicates with animals on a spiritual level. Alexandra’s brothers think Ivar is mentally unstable and possibly dangerous; they want to send him to an asylum (115). In response, Alexandra jokes that her home is an “asylum for old-time people” (112). She is undeterred by her brothers and invites Ivar to live on her farm. Ryan concludes that Alexandra is a responsible party in “Cather’s complex motif of enclosure” (113). Ryan believes that Alexandra’s treatment of Ivar, and Mrs. Lee, is no better than that of her Americanized brothers.

Due to age, illness, life’s circumstances and/or individual beliefs, Ivar expresses an unconventional wisdom. Jessica G. Rabin discusses biblical influences on Cather and

provides an alternative view of Ivar in her 2007 essay "'Two or Three Human Stories' *O Pioneers!* and the Old Testament." Rabin asserts that looking carefully "at structure, characterization, theme, motif, and genre in *O Pioneers!* reveals that the Old Testament is, to a large extent, that which 'is felt upon the page without being specifically named there'" (90). Cather does not make direct references to biblical stories in *O Pioneers!*, yet their influence is apparent. Cather borrows the envelope structure, which appears in the Psalms and various passages of biblical prose. The envelope structure as defined by Frank Kermode is a "formal organizing device…in which the borders of a poetic or narrative unit are marked by repetition, at the end, of salient terms, phrases or clauses that appear at the beginning" (91). Cather repeats elements of her story in different ways. Repetition as a structuring device is "a hallmark of Cather's modernism, and it is equally characteristic of biblical prose" (91). By considering biblical influence in *O Pioneers!*, a new layer of this novel emerges.

Ivar, according to Rabin's analysis, is not simply an elderly, ill, eccentric man. Rather, he is both a prophet and caregiver of Alexandra. Rabin writes that Ivar resembles "Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Joel, all post-Exilic prophets who personally experience displacement and alienation" (92). Through threats of imprisonment and prophecy as performance Rabin finds connections between Ivar, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. To the confusion and annoyance of his neighbors, Ivar's religious leanings are similar to Joel's—individualistic and non-conformist (93). After tragedy strikes with the murder of Marie and Emil, like the post-Exilic prophets, Ivar acts as Alexandra's caregiver. He comforts her with his presence: "He looks after both her

physical well-being and her psychological needs, fetching her by wagon from the graveyard during a storm" (*OP* 94). He assures Alexandra that Emil and Marie are in Paradise before he prepares her ginger tea (*OP* 276). The character of Ivar functions on both symbolic and practical levels.

Reading Mrs. Lee and Ivar from a current perspective and with an understanding of aging allows for a different character analysis. Where Ryan indicates that they are symbols of non-conformity against an over-exuberant force to Americanize, I argue that they are both exerting their natural desires and individuality in respect to where they are on the lifeline. Their behavior seems to have less to do with fitting into American society and more to do with their personal preferences, declining physical and mental health, and decreased ability to change; these are hallmarks of the aging process. While their decisions and desires at times may seem contrary or strange, Mrs. Lee and Ivar work to adapt to their surroundings and situations in a manner that makes sense to them.

Mrs. Lee's refusal to wear shoes may emanate from a physical discomfort or exertion of personal agency. As people age, due to a lifetime of use, a variety of foot ailments typically occur. Gerontologists agree that when examining an elderly patient it is essential to check their feet. The foot's condition provides information about overall health, possible illnesses, and stability. Falling is a major concern in geriatric health: "Footwear in elderly individuals may also influence the risk of falling" (Karlsson 755). Alexandra thinks that Mrs. Lee does not like to wear shoes because of old world customs. Mrs. Lee did not wear shoes in the old country, nor did many pioneering neighbors until recently. However, there may be other reasons to consider. Mrs. Lee lives with her

daughter and son-in-law and every year she visits Alexandra, a family member only through marriage, and she is treated very well. In reference to Mrs. Lee's visits, Cather writes, "She enjoyed the liberty Alexandra gave her" (230). While Alexandra and Mrs. Lee speak in Swedish, like in the old country, most of the pleasures and freedoms she enjoys at Alexandra's house are universal.

Decision making in a household with adult children and elderly parents can be a source of tension in multigenerational living. Mrs. Lee likes to have control over the temperature in her room, decide what kind of night clothes to wear for bed, reminisce about her childhood and tell stories, work on sewing a quilt, and drink a nightcap (*OP* 230). Mrs. Lee would like to enjoy these freedoms at her daughter's home. As Gawande writes, "cohabitation required adjustment. Everyone soon discovered the reasons that generations prefer living apart" (83). When Mrs. Lee moves in with her daughter and son-in-law, she may not have been expecting the role changes. Where she was once the parent, she is now treated more like the child. She no longer sets or has input into the rules or codes of the household. She must adapt to their ways, which at this point in her life is a challenge.

In the early 1900s, when Cather was writing *O Pioneers!*, aside from living with family, the only option for the elderly was the asylum—a harsh, prison-like environment. Unlike Mrs. Lee who has family to live with, after Ivar loses his homestead many of the local folks would prefer that he be brought to the asylum, but Alexandra takes him in: "He dislikes human habitations, so Alexandra fitted him up a room in the barn, where he is very comfortable, being near the horses" (*OP* 180). Ivar's former profession was

tending to animals; he was a spiritual doctor—of sorts—for horses. Because Alexandra honors his preference to live outdoors and his former profession, Ivar is more comfortable in his home than is Mrs. Lee in hers.

An alternative interpretation of Ivar's preference to live outdoors asserts his empathy towards nature as a living being. In his 2002 essay, "Religion and Ecology on the Divide: Ivar's Monasticism in *O Pioneers!*," Matthias Schubnell asserts that Cather intentionally models Ivar "on the early monastic desert Christians who sought a new spiritual vision through solitude and closeness to nature" (41). Schubnell also believes that Cather intended Ivar to serve as prophet voicing "environmental ethics and social tolerance" (41). Ivar's solitary pursuits, avoidance of temptations, and kindness towards animals and the land support Schubnell's premise. Ivar's relationship to animals is reciprocal and not based on power or domination (43). Schubnell cites the scene of the suffering mare in *O Pioneers!* where Ivar's love and empathy is so "profound that he becomes the creature…extending the idea of kinship to all forms of life" (43). Ivar's connection to and respect for the land and all living beings places him at the moral center of this novel (48). Ivar is no longer a peripheral character.

Ivar can also represent an alternative model of positive, self-directed aging. Alexandra and Ivar experience a more successful multi-generational living arrangement than Mrs. Lee and her daughter. Alexandra's brother attempts to persuade her to send Ivar to the asylum, which Alexandra refuses to do. Ivar asks Alexandra to reconsider. Ivar worries that his "spells" may be dangerous. Regardless, Alexandra will not be dissuaded. She says to Ivar, "Like as not they will be wanting to take me to Hastings

[asylum] because I have built a silo; and then I may take you with me. But at present I need you here" (183). Alexandra needs Ivar. He has a purpose and a role on her farm. She respects his preferences, and in areas where she requires adjustment (such as expecting him to wash his feet every night), they are able to compromise (Ivar is not required to wear shoes). As Rabin suggests, after the tragedy of Emil and Marie's murders, Ivar experiences a brief role reversal through caring for and comforting Alexandra. This multigenerational living situation particularly works better than Mrs. Lee's because Ivar and Alexandra are not related. Alexandra is not Ivar's child; there are no parent-child role reversals happening. Their roles and expectations are clearly defined.

In addition to Ivar enjoying a purpose, being close to nature, experiencing compromise, maintaining his dignity, and living with security, he also appreciates Alexandra's company. Ivar, a creature who prefers animals to humans and who has spent considerable time away from society, benefits from having access to human interactions. Cather writes, "As Ivar talked, his gloom lifted. Alexandra had found that she could often break his fasts and long penances by talking to him and letting him pour out the thoughts that troubled him. Sympathy always cleared his mind, and ridicule was poison to him" (183). Alexandra serves as a sounding board and sympathetic listener to Ivar. She treats him with respect and kindness and perhaps also distance, which allow their multi-generational cohabitation to work well.

Guilt is never expressed in Ivar and Alexandra's relationship. They each benefit mutually from their living arrangement. While Mrs. Lee's daughter and son-in-law feel a sense of familial duty to take her in, with this duty come standards. Mrs. Lee's daughter

cannot allow her mother to walk around barefoot. What would the neighbors think? A shabby Mrs. Lee would reflect poorly on her daughter and son-in-law. Neighbors might assign judgment to their treatment of Mrs. Lee. It would be the daughter and son-in-law's fault rather than a reflection of Mrs. Lee's preferences and exercise of her free will. This concept of adult child guilt that Cather introduces in *O Pioneers!* surrounds most adult child relationships involving parental caregiving. Guilt can cloud the ill person and their adult child's relationship. Assuaging their own guilt may motivate adult children, while preventing them from honoring parental wishes and respecting personal agency.

Cather depicts the management of Ivar's illness by Alexandra providing support, without hindering his independence, quality of life, or purpose. While not clearly stated as schizophrenia, Ivar's illness may be assumed to be this form of psychosis. In Alana Iglewicz, Thomas W. Meeks, and Dilip V. Jeste's 2011 article, "New Wine in Old Bottle: Late-life Psychosis," they write, "As the aging population rapidly grows, the proportion of older adults with schizophrenia is expected to increase in an unprecedented fashion" (296). In one study these doctors reviewed, they find that aging is not "associated with progressive worsening in well-being, psychopathology, or functioning" (297). Additionally, they find that a considerable number of adults with schizophrenia drive, live independently, and are employed (or have been "employed at least half of their adult lives after their schizophrenia was diagnosed") (298). Additionally, "Employment can add meaning and quality to life and many middle-aged and older adults with schizophrenia, often to many people's surprise, desire to work or volunteer" (307). Also surprisingly, they refute the idea of people with schizophrenia as being isolated:

"Historically, older adults with schizophrenia were often assumed to be socially isolated. A study comparing middle-aged and older adults with schizophrenia with healthy subjects challenges this belief . . . 97% had regular contact with family or friends and 62% had been married at some point in their lives" (299). Through Alexandra's caregiving, Ivar thrives in his old age; he enjoys employment, a purpose, a spiritual connection to animals, and an unconventional home. These conditions ward off isolation.

Alexandra experiences multigenerational living with Ivar, a non-family member, with seemingly better results than her brother and sister-in-law experience with Mrs. Lee. She invites Ivar to move into her barn and respects his personal eccentricities and individuality. Their communication is direct, which allows for a clearer set of expectations to emerge in their relationship. Alexandra and Ivar respect each other, which enables a certain detachment to develop, while not negating caring attitudes towards each other. At moments in the narrative, they provide care for each other.

The burdens in these particular caregiving relationships emerge partly from societal expectations. With Mrs. Lee, her daughter and son-in-law want her to behave a certain way, so that they will be accepted in the community. With Alexandra, it is her brothers who believe that Ivar is strange and could be a danger. Additionally, they believe that by associating with Ivar, Alexandra's reputation will further suffer. She is already thought to be peculiar, because she is an unmarried female landowner and farmer. The perceptions of society, while at times a motivating influence to care for the elderly, can also create much tension in the caregiving dynamic.

Multigenerational living, as a concept, seems like the solution to caring for older members of the community; however, it only works well under certain conditions. In *O Pioneers!* Cather expresses her love for a particular land and its people. Love typically motivates the multigenerational cohabitation between adult child and elderly parent, yet it is often not enough to sustain a mutually beneficial living arrangement. As Cather conveys, even in the early 1900s without the distractions and stresses of twenty-first century living, multigenerational living, in the same house, between an adult child, their spouse and child(ren), and their parent is often unsatisfactory and conflict ridden. While she is safe and provided for, Mrs. Lee's overall quality of life satisfaction is limited. She lacks personal agency in her daughter's house and must abide by rules set for her. Considering both sides, it seems necessary for Mrs. Lee's daughter to have rules, yet offensive for her to force her mother to follow them. In fact, it can over time infantilize Mrs. Lee, causing regression and diminished mental and physical health. In Ivar's case, it would seem, with his illness, that he should require more intense caregiving. If he had children, perhaps that may have occurred. However, Cather's treatment of Ivar and Mrs. Lee poses the question of whether that heightened caregiving was the best solution. Would Ivar have been able to live with dignity, purpose, and joy had his fictitious children forced him to move into their house, wear shoes, and interact with animals in a straightforward, non-spiritual way? This scenario would certainly be harmful for Ivar. While some critics may deem *O Pioneers!* as romantic, pastoral, or in, negative terms, as exclusionary or forceful in American assimilation, with these minor yet important

characters in *O Pioneers!*, Cather provides realistic and modern scenarios of multigenerational living.

Chapter 3

A LOST LADY:

THE BURDENS OF CAREGIVING FOR AN OLDER SPOUSE

In *A Lost Lady*, Cather shows the challenges of multigenerational living and illuminates relationship inequalities when one spouse is much older than the other. The Captain has an accident, retires, suffers from two strokes, becomes infirm, experiences cognitive decline, and dies, all while his wife is still on the early side of middle age. While Marian proves herself to be a devoted and loving wife, she still has needs for company, entertainment, sex, intellectual stimulation, and exercise. The Captain requires more sleep, while Marian requires more stimulation. The strain of caregiving permits bad habits to develop, such as Marian's overindulgence in alcohol and extramarital affairs and the Captain's complicity. In many ways, both the Captain and Marian are motivated and reacting out of fear. Caregiving becomes much more challenging when it feels like an endless endeavor. Yet Marian accepts, adjusts, and continues to live. Cather subtly exposes the complexities of multigenerational living with an older, ill spouse while participating in long-term caregiving. The portrait of Marian Forrester, which Cather writes about in her letters and she seeks to create, succeeds on many levels; however, Cather particularly captures relevant current issues of the aging population, chronic long-term illness, home care, and indeterminate caregiving.

Representing a spousal multigenerational living situation and the challenges of caregiving, *A Lost Lady* depicts a husband-wife scenario with Marian Forrester, a vibrant, charming woman, caring for her older husband Captain Forrester and their home. Set in the late 1800s in the Colorado landscape, Cather weaves a retirement tale about Captain

Forrester, former railroad developer, and his much younger wife (twenty-five years younger). Their home in Sweet Water, Colorado ("a town of which great things were expected") was once a place they lived for only a few months out of the year, but after Captain Forrester's fall from a horse, it becomes their permanent residence (*LL* 6). The story opens with twelve-year-old Niel Herbert, Judge Pommeroy's nephew, asking if he and his friends, other boys from town (and from various socioeconomic classes) could fish in their marsh and picnic on the banks. Niel admires both Mr. and Mrs. Forester and is infatuated with aspects of Mrs. Forester. This novel tells about Captain Forrester's infirmity, Marian Forrester's caregiving, her place in society, and their relationship with each other and with the community. Within this novel, Cather explores the plight of the primary caregiver, which includes unsuccessful coping strategies, feelings of isolation and hopelessness, relationship to time, and personal adjustment. The role of primary caregiver is a task most people will need to perform during their lifetime, and Cather's *A Lost Lady* provides much to consider.

A Lost Lady describes Marian Forrester's daily life and challenges as a full-time caregiver to her husband. As Cather expresses, her intention in writing this novel was to create a "living" portrait of Marian Forrester. Critics and Cather alike believe she achieves this goal (Jewell and Stout 352). In a letter to Alfred A. Knopf, on November 21, 1922, Cather writes, "This story [*A Lost Lady*] is an example of what I mean; it's a little, lawless un-machine made thing—not very good construction, but the woman lives—that's all I want. I don't care about the frame work—I'll make any kind of net that will get, and hold, her alive" (Jewell and Stout 329). While this novel provides a deep and

focused view of Marian Forrester—as a woman, as a lady, as a friend, as a wife—it also provides insights into her psyche as caregiver.

Aside from the caregiving themes of this text, many critics find multiple meanings in *A Lost Lady*, and a variety of interpretations that can be applied to Marian Forrester. Merrill Maguire Skaggs writes in *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather* that *A Lost Lady*'s main theme is power: "Finally, the central theme of *A Lost Lady* is power, and how the two sexes most normally exercise it" (49). For Marian Forrester's power lies in her sexuality, while Captain Forrester's power lies in his money: "In this novel, in order to exercise with greatest impact that sexual power which is the source of Marian Forrester's joy in living, she needs not only men who can respond to her but also money" (54). Skaggs adds to her argument by describing Captain Forrester's strengths, which first attracted Marian to him; they are his "vigorous masculinity, his age and reliability" (55). Their courtship begins when Captain Forrester rescues Marian from a hiking fall, in which she has broken both of her legs, and carries her down the mountain. Early on in this novel, Captain Forrester assumes the caregiving role to Marian, nursing her through her leg operations and recovery (55). At this point in his life, Captain Forrester is a powerful man. Through their individual methods, the Captain exerts his power, while Marian utilizes her power, and a balance or harmony within the relationship is achieved.

Additionally, Skaggs asserts that the sexual standards for men and women were unequal. Marian Forrester is an imperfect character. After the Captain's illness and infirmity, her sexual needs are met through affairs with Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters:

"All elements of society condemn Marian's extramarital sexual activity," while Ellinger's reputation never suffers (55-56). Finances become a source of anxiety, when Captain Forrester pays off debts, at the bank where he is president, so that investors stay solvent. Having lost financial security and sexual power with the Captain, years later, after Marian's affair with Ellinger, she has a sexual liaison with Ivy Peters. Displaying viciousness since childhood, Ivy Peters represents a coarse, boorish character harboring resentment towards the wealthier inhabitants of Sweet Water, such as the Forresters. Through Marian's affair with Ivy Peters, "Cather forces us, through him, to acknowledge that strong female sexuality cannot be refined to 'proper' boundaries by any class system" (57). Skaggs notes that neither the Captain nor Marian blames the other for their situation or for how they have changed (59). Ultimately, though, the Captain and Marian's relationship anchor is love and old-fashioned elegance expressed through caregiving.

By creating a twenty-five-year age difference between Marian and Captain Forrester, Cather provides a view into a multigenerational living situation involving a husband and wife. While Captain Forrester's exact age is never revealed, readers can assume he is between the ages of sixty and seventy when he suffers from his first stroke. Therefore, if we assume that Marian is thirty and Captain Forrester is fifty-five during the early years of their marriage, then the age difference is not typically an issue. As spouses, they can enjoy activities together, whether they include outdoor adventures, traveling, or entertaining guests. In reference to Marian, Cather writes, "She was an excitement that came and went with summer. She and her husband always spent the winter in Denver and

Colorado Springs—left Sweet Water soon after Thanksgiving and did not return until the first of May" (*LL* 16). However, when the Captain suffers a fall from his horse, and illness arrives, the circumstances and the relationship evolve into something neither may be prepared to accept. The Captain's career ends, bringing about a retirement of sorts, while Marian is still in the prime of her life.

Retirement for the Captain, initiated by his accident, brings about physical changes; nevertheless, he is still able to enjoy some former pastimes: "He had grown much heavier, seemed encumbered by his own bulk, and never suggested taking a contract for the railroad again" (*LL* 16). Despite walking with a cane, the Captain still gardens and takes care of his roses. Cather writes that the Captain "was able to work in his garden, trimmed his snowball bushes and lilac hedges, devoted a great deal of time to growing roses" (*LL* 16). Marian and the Captain continue to travel and only spend part of their time in Sweet Water. However, as the town of Sweet Water begins to falter financially, this development affects the Forresters. Partly due to economics and the Captain's health, Sweet Water eventually becomes their full-time residence.

Even in the descriptions of Marian Forrester, post-Captain Forrester's accident, readers understand that she is quite beautiful and charming—Cather creates a portrait of a woman at the height of her beauty and in the prime of her life. Cather describes Marian, after entering Judge Pommeroy's office to issue a dinner invitation, "The frosty air had brought no colour to her cheeks,—her skin had always the fragrant, crystalline whiteness of white lilacs. Mrs. Forrester looked at one, and one knew that she was bewitching" (*LL* 18). Marian's physical appearance and mannerisms please most men: "There could be no

negative encounter, however slight, with Mrs. Forrester. If she merely bowed to you, merely looked at you, it constituted a personal relation" (*LL* 18). While some criticism, such as Chad Trevitte's essay "Cather's *A Lost Lady* and the Disenchantment of Art," has compared Marian Forrester to a work of art, Cather purposefully depicts her as a lovely, beguiling woman with the ability to attract and sustain the attention of males of all ages.

Full of vitality, Marian confides to Niel her worries about Captain Forrester's diminishment. She asks Niel, "Do you think he is looking any worse, Niel? It frightens me to see him getting a little uncertain. But there, we must believe in good luck!" (*LL* 21). While she ends her question with an optimistic pronouncement, Marian's fears about Captain Forrester are apparent. Marian's asking Niel about the Captain's condition suggests the need to share these experiences for support. She continues to speculate to Niel as to the best course of care for Captain Forrester. Marian says, "A winter in the country may do him good" (*LL* 21). She asks Niel to look out for the Captain when they are in town and she relays an incident from the previous winter when the Captain had a bit too much to drink and fell: "There was no ice, he didn't slip. It was simply because he was unsteady," confides Marian (*LL* 21). As Gwande asserts in *Being Mortal*, the elderly need to be careful of falling. Marian rightfully feels concern about the Captain's potential to fall again.

While her concern for Captain Forrester becomes apparent in Chapter 3, after a dinner party one evening, Marian is already serving as Captain Forrester's caregiver: "Mrs. Forrester went to help the Captain divest himself of his frock coat, and put it away for him. Ever since he was hurt he had to be propped on high pillows at night, and he

slept in a narrow iron bed, in the alcove which had formerly been his wife's dressing-room" (*LL* 31). After a person experiences an injury or illness like Captain Forrester's, nighttime sleeping can take on new challenges. Captain Forrester sleeps in a small bed, so that he may change positions as often as necessary to find comfort and the least amount of pain. He willingly vacates the master bedroom and bed, so that his wife may have a peaceful night of sleep. The heavy curtain drawn between the alcove and the big bedroom allows for a muffling of noise and privacy. As the Captain continues to undress, "he breathed heavily and sighed, as if he were very tired. He fumbled with his studs, then blew on his fingers and tried again. His wife came to his aid and quickly unbuttoned everything. He did not thank her in words, but submitted gratefully" (*LL* 31). By his submission, Cather indicates the Captain's acceptance of his situation. He is not angry, perhaps a touch frustrated at his own limitations, but he does not yell at or get angry with Marian. Providing care for the Captain, while not an easy task, is perhaps a bit less daunting because of his acceptance. Captain Forrester's infirmity redefines their relationship: physically and symbolically.

Cather does not reveal all the new aspects of the Forrester's redefined relationship. Readers wonder if the Captain and Marian discuss sex outside of the marriage; however, given the period it seems unlikely. On a sleigh ride to cut cedar boughs, with Frank Ellinger, Marian cautions him to be careful about their affair and she reflects upon her age. Frank Ellinger states that Marian won't allow him to send her love letters, because it's too risky. Marian replies, "So it is, and foolish. But now you needn't be so careful. Not too careful! She laughed softly. 'When I'm off in the country for a whole winter,

alone, and growing older, I like to… ,' she put her hand on his, "to be reminded of pleasanter things" (*LL* 35). The affair with Frank Ellinger may be a diversion, a break from her daily caregiving duties and a way to free herself from boredom. Marian realizes that she is getting older and isn't ready to accept a state of celibacy that her marriage offers. Having an affair, while definitely not a healthy coping mechanism, provides a sense of escape and anticipation. Marian while tending to her wifely duties can indulge memories and fantasies about her encounters with Frank Ellinger. Biologically, Marian is in the prime of her life, where the enjoyment of sex is a natural endeavor. Cather's Marian is a complex character morally. While Marian tries to serve the higher needs of her husband and remain loyal in a sense, she also discreetly attempts to have her physical needs met. While her methods are imperfect, Marian is practicing a form of self-care, which is integral when providing long-term care for a loved one.

Moments of hopelessness and despair can accompany caregiving. After Marian and Frank's afternoon together, they return to the sled and he asks about cutting down the cedar boughs. Marian replies softly, "It doesn't matter." Frank realizes that it does matter. If they do not return with the cedar boughs suspicions will arise. He takes his ax and cuts the boughs; when he returns to the sled, Marian directs, "'Drive slowly,' she murmured, as if she were talking in her sleep. 'It doesn't matter if we are late for dinner. Nothing matters'" (*LL* 36). Feeling that pleasant moments are fleeting and the necessity of returning to the daily routines of caregiving can invoke a sense of resignation. When despair arrives, a caregiver may ask, when will this all end? The feeling that nothing matters can be a sign of approaching depression.

Another sign of poor coping in the caregiving dynamic is the abuse of substances or alcohol. One wintery afternoon, Niel gathers the Forresters' mail for them and brings it to their house. Once in the sitting-room, Captain Forrester informs Niel that Marian has a headache and is upstairs resting. Eventually, Marian descends and enters the room in her dressing gown. Her husband asks if she slept and Marian replies that she rested. She directs Niel to stand closer to her by the fire, so he will dry off. In doing so, Niel smells alcohol on Marian: "When she stopped beside him to feel his clothes, he smelled a sharp odour of spirits. Was she ill, he wondered, or merely so bored that she had been trying to dull herself?" (*LL* 40). Niel's assessment of Marian seems correct; her boredom at being cooped up in the house may have enticed her to start drinking in the afternoon. Marian regains her gaiety, after she dresses and eats some tea and toast. She says, "'Niel has brought back my appetite. I ate no lunch to-day,' turning to the body, 'I've been shut up too long. Is there anything in the papers?'" (*LL* 41). Marian, isolated from the community and society, longs for lively human interaction.

Without a reprieve from the isolation, Marian turns to drink for solace. Niel's presence rejuvenates her spirit. Caregivers need friends to talk with, or to simply interact with them. Marian asks what's in the papers; her interest in the outside world needs to be fed so she doesn't succumb to maladaptive behaviors like drinking. Later in this scene, the Captain reflects that to him both Niel and Marian seem about the same age. While he may not be able to do anything to assist their situation, the Captain at least understands that his younger wife has needs. As his caregiver, she needs other human companionship, rest at times, and outlets to the outside world.

After Mr. Forrester falls asleep, Marian suggests that she and Niel play outside and run down the hill. Cather contrasts Marian's youthful spirit and energy against Mr. Forrester's sleepiness. Marian laments to Niel that they will probably stay in Sweet Water the following winter and the one after that: "There was fear, unmistakable fright in her voice" (*LL* 42). Marian appears to have a different vision of what she foresees for her future. It's healthy for Marian to voice her fears to Niel. She then tells him that she needs more exercise; she never learned to skate as a child and now her ankles are weak. She loves to dance in the winter and that is what they did in Colorado Springs. Marian says, "I've always danced in the winter, there's plenty of dancing at Colorado Springs. You wouldn't believe how I miss it. I shall dance till I'm eighty…I'll be the waltzing grandmother! It's good for me, I need it" (*LL* 42). Identifying her own needs, as a caregiver, is necessary for a healthy state of mind and body. Oftentimes, when caring for an ill loved one, a caregiver can become so exhausted that they become physically and/or mentally ill.

Soon after Captain Forrester's decision to turn over their money and savings to take care of the depositors of the bank where he is president, he suffers a stroke. The depositors are hard-working men and "Captain Forrester had stood firm that not one of the depositors should lose a dollar" (*LL* 50). Unfortunately, the stress of the situation causes Captain Forrester to have a stroke. However, "A stroke could not finish a man like Daniel Forrester. He was kept in bed for three weeks, and Niel helped Mrs. Forrester and Ben Keezer take care of him" (*LL* 52). Niel, an ever present figure in the Forrester household during this period, realizes that "he never saw Mrs. Forrester alone,—scarcely

saw her at all, indeed. With so much to attend to, she became abstracted, almost impersonal…When Mrs. Forrester was not in the Captain's room, or in the kitchen preparing special foods for him, she was at her desk" (*LL* 52). Mrs. Forrester, like most spouses who become the primary caregiver, is forced through circumstances to not only attend to Captain Forrester's physical needs—his bathing, his nutrition, his movements—but also must sort through household affairs—paying bills, answering correspondences, keeping track of schedules and calendars. It is a daunting task, where the caregiver may seem in constant motion attending to all the various new duties.

After three weeks, the Captain regains his mobility and Marian her sense of self. The damage from the stroke leaves the Captain physically altered. The Captain's left foot and arm are most affected: "Though he recovered his speech, it was thick and clouded; some words he could not pronounce distinctly,—slid over them, dropped out a syllable. Therefore he avoided talking even more than was his habit. The doctor said that unless another brain lesion occurred, he might get on comfortably for some years" (*LL* 55). While the Captain's prognosis is optimistic, it raises new questions regarding his long-term care.

After the initial outburst of help during his most acute stage post stroke, Marian now must figure out how to proceed on her own: "Niel knew that she faced the winter with terror, but he had never seen her more in command of herself,—or more the mistress of her own house than now, when she was preparing to become the servant of it" (*LL* 55). Through Niel, Cather voices the mindset and realizations caregivers must accept before they reorient themselves into their new role. Becoming the servant of a house is an

especially apt way to describe the experience of caregiving for a spouse or loved one in the same home. While she summons the command and fortitude, Marian redefines her role within the household. She must be fully in charge and make the decisions necessary for both the Captain's wellbeing and her own.

That summer, Niel departs for architecture school in Boston, and after a two-year absence he returns to the Forresters and finds them changed. On his train back to Sweet Water, he runs into Ivy Peters, now a lawyer, who fills him in on the Captain's health. Ivy relays, "He's only about half there. . . seems contented enough. . . . She takes good care of him, I'll say that for her. . . . She seeks consolation, always did, you know. . . too much French brandy. . . but she never neglects him. I don't blame her. Real work comes hard on her" (*LL* 58). Ivy states that caregiving is challenging work and it is not easy for Marian. Unable to cope in a healthy manner, Marian is still drinking more than she should. She ponders certain behaviors of the Captain, probably never voicing them before she asks: "Niel, can you understand it? He isn't childish, as some people say, but he will sit and watch that thing hour after hour. How can anybody like to see time visibly devoured? We are all used to seeing clocks go round, but why does he want to see that shadow creep on that stone?" (*LL* 62). Perhaps the Captain is aware of his own mortality and watching the sundial helps him to regulate his days. Just as Marian is aware of time passing and aging, she finds it more helpful not to think about time. Regardless, Cather includes these symbolic parallel or mutual examples related to time to indicate the duality—time is both a blessing and a curse.

With the household under control, Marian processes her fears and emotions, and then the Captain suffers another stroke. One of the unfortunate realities with long-term or chronic illness is not knowing when the patient will get better, get worse, or die. The uncertainty can be destabilizing: "Soon afterward, when Captain Forrester had another stroke, Mrs. Beasley and Molly Tucker and their friends were perfectly agreed that it was a judgment upon his wife. No judgment could have been crueler. Under the care of him, now that he was helpless. Mrs. Forrester quite went to pieces" (*LL* 77). When illness gets worse, it is common for the caregiver to fall apart emotionally. Caregiving can be an exhausting task. How can a singular caregiver provide round-the-clock care? It is physically and emotionally impossible. Unfortunately, the Forresters have no family close by to rely upon and, after Niel leaves for school, whatever extra help is available must be paid for. The financial aspects of long-term care can be considerable. Cather weaves this story about a couple living in an adopted state with no children or family to mention. Aside from one or two friends, and a hired helper, they are completely alone and must be self-reliant.

After the second stroke, aside from the physical damage, the Captain shows aspects of cognitive decline and emotional disturbance. According to the National Stroke Association, when parts of the brain are injured during a stroke, a patient can be left feeling anxious or depressed. Niel notices "that often when Mrs. Forrester was about her work, the Captain would call to her, 'Maidy, Maidy,' and she would reply, 'Yes, Mr. Forrester,' from wherever she happed to be, but without coming to him,—as if she knew that when he called to her in that tone he was not asking for anything. He wanted to know

if she were near, perhaps; or, perhaps, he merely liked to call her name and hear her answer" (*LL* 80). Marian's presence comforts the Captain. Just knowing that she is close by calms him and satisfies his fears.

The realization that caregiving may be endless is a challenge that requires a caregiver's acceptance and adaptation. While it is difficult, Marian adjusts to and gracefully endures her role as Captain Forrester's primary and long-term caregiver. In a 2015 study conducted in Japan entitled "Experiences of 'Endless' Caregiving of Impaired Elderly at Home by Family Caregivers: A Qualitative Study," the authors, Kazue Sakakibara, Mai Kabayama and Mikiko Ito, state that "regarding the caregiving period—especially a prolonged period—the long-term effects of providing care on the lives of caregivers, as experienced by the caregivers themselves, have not yet been fully elucidated" (2). Long-term caregiving can limit caregiver freedom and cause them to feel isolated—as Cather's Marian felt. Additionally, the authors acknowledge that caregiving requires so much time, energy, and resources, which increases the risk of "physical and mental disorders among caregivers" (2). The notion that caregiving may continue past caregivers' expectations must be addressed and processed by the caregiver. Despite the emotional ties caregivers experience with the person they are caring for, the idea that "the caregiver and care recipient share the destiny of aging and dying" can serve as a motivator and validation for caregivers (9). The results of this study indicate evidence that it is necessary "for caregivers to be able to live their lives proactively after having accepted the caregiving role. The caregiving experience should permit living one's own

life for not only impaired elderly but also primary caregivers" (10). In *A Lost Lady*, Marian, despite societal expectations and judgment, attempts this.

After Captain Forrester's death, Cather pointedly considers the influence of a long illness upon a marriage: "For years Niel and his uncle, the Dalzells and all her friends, had thought of the Captain as a drag upon his wife; a care that drained her and dimmed her and kept her from being all that she might be" (*LL* 86). Society assumes that the burdens of caregiving create more loss than gains for a caregiver. Cather continues, "But without him, she was like a ship without ballast, driven hither and thither by every wind. She was flighty and perverse. She seemed to have lost her faculty of discrimination; her power of easily and graciously keeping everyone in his proper place" (*LL* 86). Caregiving changes Marian; she is no longer the "lady" she was once considered. In the wake of grief, people can lose their bearings, re-evaluate rules and codes of conduct, and slowly morph into a new version of who they once were. In the end, Marian leaves Sweet Water and remarries a wealthy man. She never forgets her first husband, as they had a deep respect and love for each other. Every year, for Decoration Day, she sends a check to have flowers placed on the Captain's grave (*LL* 98). After she passes away, her husband sends a check to continue the tradition in Marian's memory. The care Marian gave, she received in return. Niel says, "So we may feel sure she was well cared for, to the very end" (*LL* 98). While the caregiving Marian provides to Captain Forrester and their home is hard, long work, it does not break her spirit. Marian continues to live and love again after the Captain's death. Through her sending flowers every year, she honors the Captain, the life they had together, and the wisdom it produced.

Chapter 4

THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE:

THE DISORIENTATION AND TRANSITION OF MEN IN MIDDLE AGE

While Chapters 1 and 2 examine multigenerational dynamics in living situations, marriage, and caregiving, Chapter 3 pivots to the distinct masculine experience of aging and the transition into midlife. In *The Professor's House*, Cather deftly portrays Godfrey St. Peter's psychological torment as he grapples with disillusionment, detribalization, and depression while he attempts to reconcile this next phase of his life. St. Peter worries that joy and delight may no longer be accessible to him. In this novel, Cather creates a portrayal of masculine aging that can serve as a guide to the midlife transition and the caregiving that it requires.

Throughout this novel Augusta, the St. Peter family's longtime seamstress, subtly serves as a practical and spiritual caregiver to St. Peter. At the end of *The Professor's House,* St. Peter's savior from the gas heater is Augusta, who represents faith and kindness. Augusta pulls an unconscious St. Peter from the gas-filled room and nurses him both physically and psychologically. A caregiver from experience and possibly through predisposition, Augusta demonstrates peaceful acceptance of reality that contrasts with St. Peter's suffering and provides perspective. Nevertheless, while Cather does not offer a tidy outward conclusion to *The Professor's House*, she presents St. Peter transitioning through midlife and achieving several realizations.

St. Peter's discoveries are applicable in the current day, and these discoveries need to be included in the current aging conversation. Men of a certain age will relate to St. Peter's clarity about himself, the aging process, the future, and the necessity of

detachment. However, the mainstream portrayal of the masculine midlife transition is typically farcical and offensive. If more men knew what to expect with the feelings of a midlife transition and had more support during this period, they might be better prepared to handle this change with less reaction and more acceptance.

Cather explores the difficulties of masculine middle age in *The Professor's House*. In a 1924 letter to Zoe Akins, Cather, around 51 years old, compares the beginning half of her first draft of *The Professor's House* to an unsavory treat. She writes, "It's not very sweet or 'appealing'—any diabetic patient could take it with safety!" (Jewell and Stout 360). A year later, Cather ponders the success of *The Professor's House* in a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in October of 1925. She writes, "I thought it a nasty grim little tale, but the reviewers seem to think it's a cross-word puzzle. It's certainly not my 'favorite' of my own books" (Jewell and Stout 375). Later in the same letter Cather asks, "As to that 'middle-aged' novel doesn't everyone have it sometimes?" (Jewell and Stout 375). While Cather confirms that *The Professor's House* delves into themes surrounding middle-age, she seems unaware that in this novel she accurately traces a man's, in this case St. Peter's, midlife crisis. Perhaps Cather's own gender identity explorations, and her ability to identify with both masculine and feminine feelings, enable her to express the masculine midlife transition so adroitly.

In 1978, Daniel J. Levinson published the study of adult development entitled *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. In the hopes of clarifying middle age, from "a vague interim period, defined primarily in negative terms," Levinson and his collaborators seek to define the "developmental perspective on adulthood in men" (*Preface* x). Decades after

Cather writes about St. Peter, Levinson creates a psychological paradigm to understand the masculine experience in midlife. He writes, "The study reflected in part my intellectual interest in the possibility of adult development. The choice of topic also reflected a personal concern: at 46, I wanted to study the transition into middle age in order to understand what I had been going through myself" (*Preface* x). Levinson states that he soon learned he was not alone in wanting to understand his transition: "There is a growing desire in our society to see adulthood as something more than a long, featureless stretch of years with childhood at one end and senility at the other" (*Preface* x). In order to argue that St. Peter serves as an early American model of a masculine midlife crisis, I will include in this analysis of *The Professor's House* Levinson's text *The Seasons of a Man's Life*.

Despite being published thirty-nine years ago, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* remains a classic (yet not well known) text on masculine development and life stages. In Jesse Bering's 2011 article for the *Scientific American* blog entitled "Half Dead: Men and the 'Midlife Crisis,'" he references the work of psychoanalyst Elliott Jacques (who in 1965 originated the term "midlife crisis"), Daniel Levinson (Yale researcher and author) and Erik Erikson (lifespan developmentalist). Bering writes, "Levinson felt that midlife crises were actually more common than not and appeared like clockwork between the ages of 40 to 45" ("Half Dead"). For most men, introspection naturally arises during the period of midlife. Bering continues, "For Levinson, such crises were characterized primarily by a stark, painful 'de-illusionment' process stemming from the individual's unavoidable comparison between his youthful dreams and his sobering present reality"

("Half Dead"). Cather presents St. Peter's de-illusionment as it affects his work, marriage, relationships, and future. Bering asserts that since the late 1970s other psychologists have unsuccessfully tried to "validate" the masculine midlife crisis "with actual data" ("Half Dead"). Nevertheless, the masculine midlife crisis "remains so integral to Western notions of men's development" and this "still gives it currency, since such social scripts—even if they're not grounded in biologic functioning—can sometimes have dramatic effects" ("Half Dead"). Years before these researchers, therapists, and writers began their work on masculine development, in *The Professor's House* Cather creates an astute portrait of St. Peter's masculine midlife transition and crisis.

The Professor's House, set in a post-World War I Midwestern college town, introduces readers to Godfrey St. Peter, chair of European History at Hamilton College. Along with his wife Lillian's daughters Rosamond and Kathleen and their respective husbands, Louie Marsellus and Scott McGregor, St. Peter approaches a new phase of life with misgivings. The middle section of this novel presents an inset story detailing Tom Outland's life, discovery, and relationship to friend, teacher, and pseudo father figure, St. Peter. Before Tom's death in World War I, he proposes to Rosamond. They are engaged when he dies. When Rosamond meets Louie Marsellus, an electrical engineer, he sees the potential in Tom's invention and patents the "bulkheaded vacuum that is revolutionizing aviation" (*PH* 121). As a result, they receive a windfall of money. Along with new sons-in-law that change family dynamics, St. Peter and Lillian have recently built a house, which is ready for their habitation; however, St. Peter struggles with vacating his old office and garden to which he has grown deeply attached. Cather infuses this novel with

themes of change, economics, and consumer consumption. While these themes' relevance persist, as I stated previously, I will explore change as it relates to St. Peter's aging and midlife discoveries and development.

Early in *The Professor's House*, St. Peter muses about death and aging. A few pages into the first chapter, St. Peter describes his former empty rental house as dead. He continues with this descriptor when he considers the sewing forms up in his attic office that he shares with the sewing woman, Augusta: "It was a dead, opaque, lumpy solidity, like chunks of putty, or tightly packed sawdust—very disappointing to the tactile sense, yet somehow always fooling you again" (*PH* 107). As he sits in his chair, looking at his papers, Augusta arrives to move her sewing forms, threads, fabric and needles to the new house. St. Peter, staying on in the empty house to finish some writing, will not allow her to take the sewing forms, as he has personified and grown accustomed to them. Over the course of their sharing this room (on alternating shifts), their work has commingled. St. Peter says, "I see we shall have some difficulty in separating our life work, Augusta. We've kept our papers together a long while now" (*PH* 110). As much as St. Peter may have tried to stay out of certain aspects of the domestic sphere, his life's work, the multi-volume set of *Spanish Adventurers* texts, are entangled with the sewing patterns used to make dresses for his wife and daughters through their life stages. Augusta responds, "Yes, Professor. When I first came to sew for Mrs. St. Peter, I never thought I should grow grey in her service" (*PH* 110). Surprised by her confession, St. Peter wonders what Augusta had thought her future might have held. Noticing the grey streaks in her hair, St. Peter responds, "Well, well, we mustn't think mournfully of it, Augusta. Life doesn't turn out

for any of us as we plan" (*PH* 110). Through this statement, Cather hints at St. Peter's dissatisfaction and a level of reality. Initially, Augusta seems like a minor character, but she eventually serves Cather's larger purposes both as a voice of reason and morality and as a saving grace and reflects Levinson's idea of a female peer relationship in St. Peter's life.

As part of his midlife transition, St. Peter must reconcile aspects of youth in his self with aspects of his current age. Levinson asserts "a major developmental task of the Mid-life Transition is to confront the Young and the Old within oneself and seek new ways of being Young/Old" (210). St. Peter's orientation veers towards youth and certain activities that remind him of his boyhood. As a professor, he interacts with numerous young people throughout the academic year: "He would willingly have cut down on his university work, would willingly have given his students chaff and sawdust—many instructors had nothing else to give them and got on very well—but his misfortune was that he loved youth—he was weak to it, it kindled him" (*PH* 113). St. Peter describes himself as a "servant" to any young mind, in the classroom that displays critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, or opposition (*PH* 113). Unsurprisingly, one of the most significant relationships of St. Peter's life was with his former student, Tom Outland. Additionally, having loved and lived near Lake Michigan as a child, St. Peter chooses his professorship in Hamilton based on the college being near a lake. St. Peter believes that "the great fact in life, the always possible escape from dullness, was the lake. . . . You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free" (*PH* 114). Teaching young men and swimming or merely just gazing at the lake gives St. Peter a deep sense of pleasure and

fulfillment. However, Levinson argues that "A man must give up certain of his former youthful qualities—some with regret, some with relief or satisfaction—while retaining and transforming other qualities that he can integrate into his new life. And he must find positive meaning of being 'older'" (210). St. Peter remains dedicated to the lake during the course of this novel, and readers can assume that he continues to instruct at the university; nevertheless, other aspects of St. Peter's personality change as he grapples with the young/old dichotomy within himself.

During a man's midlife transition, if he is married, the marriage usually undergoes review and possible revisions. On the surface the relationship between St. Peter and his wife, Lillian, seems amicable; however, underneath simmers mild discontent. The morning after a small dinner party comprised of mostly family, Lillian confronts St. Peter and admonishes him for his behavior. Lillian, unhappy with St. Peter, asks, "How can you let yourself be ungracious in your own house?" (*PH* 124). He replies with surprise and says that he didn't think he said anything wrong last night. Lillian replies, "Nor anything aright, that I heard. Your disapproving silence can kill the life of any company" (*PH* 124). In the section entitled "Modifying the Marriage," Levinson writes, "Sometimes it is the wife who takes the initiative in reappraising the marriage. Being freer of familial responsibilities in her late thirties or early forties, she seeks to expand her own horizons and start new enterprises outside the home" (257). Lillian chastises St. Peter for his treatment of Louie and suggests that St. Peter can't be satisfied. He is unhappy when Louie talks about his own life and disgusted when he shows too much enthusiasm for St. Peter's life. St. Peter declares, "I have no enthusiasm for being a father-in-law" (*PH* 125).

Lillian believes it's because he did not get the son-in-law that he really wanted—Tom Outland (*PH* 126). There is still jealousy on Lillian's side about St. Peter's relationship with Tom. Nevertheless, Cather portrays St. Peter, at the dinner and during the discussion with Lillian, as slightly disagreeable. He is neither trying to please everyone nor creating pretense that he himself is happy. Levinson states, "a man who feels that his own youthfulness is in jeopardy may be more threatened than pleased by his wife's invitation to modify their lives" (257). As Lillian becomes more assertive and independent in her words and actions, St. Peter begins to falter.

As his midlife transition progresses, St. Peter desires to resolve former grievances. In a mindset seemingly contrary to the one he exercises with his family, a conciliatory St. Peter attempts to repair a relationship with a colleague. Perhaps sensing the need for masculine friendship with a contemporary, St. Peter spots Professor Horace Langtry walking to church on Sunday morning and tries to start a conversation. Professor Langtry avoids St. Peter by turning in to an alley. St. Peter catches up to him and comments on the growth of the elm trees. He says, "Good morning, Langtry. These elms are becoming real trees at last. They've changed a good deal since we first came here" (*PH* 128). Langtry responds that he hasn't noticed the trees' maturation. St. Peter then changes tactics, but Langtry does not warm to his attempts at friendliness. After they part ways, St. Peter wonders why "Langtry didn't see the absurdity of their long grudge. They had always been directly opposed in matters of university policy, until it had almost become a part of their professional duties to outwit and cramp each other" (*PH* 129). However, so much time has passed since they first came to Hamilton that it seems unnecessary to

continue their rivalry. St. Peter thinks, "What was the use of keeping up the feud? They had both come there young men, fighting for their places and their lives; now they were not very young anymore; they would neither of them, probably, ever hold a better position. Couldn't Langtry see it was a draw, that they had both been beaten?" (*PH* 130). Levinson explains the role of work within a man's life during this transition. He writes, "No matter how well or poorly he has done with the ambitions of his thirties, he is likely to experience a letdown in the Mid-life Transition. . . . It is no longer crucial to climb another rung on the ladder—to write another book, get another promotion, earn more of the rewards that meant so much in the past" (214). With the changes to his house and his family structure, St. Peter seems to recognize certain realities of aging. At work, he is moving from a competitive stage, a transition from a youthful to middle age masculinity, into a steady position and he desires a more peaceful relationship, perhaps even friendship with his rival. The jockeying for power at the university has lost its appeal. Unfortunately, he doesn't make much progress with Professor Langtry and his inability to rectify this relationship adds to St. Peter's discontent.

Along with autumn's arrival comes St. Peter's increasing sense of disillusionment. As September and October pass in *The Professor's House*, Cather develops the family relationships to highlight the sisters' rivalry, the mutual dislike between the two sons-in-law, Lillian's deep involvement with both her sons-in-law, and St. Peter's growing sense of displacement. The money Rosamond and Louie receive from Tom's invention causes a rift in the family, because they are ostentatious about their spending and purchases. As Lillian actively attempts to keep peace between the daughters and their husbands, St.

Peter remains neutral and deals with the situation by continuing to remove himself from it. In one argument between Lillian and St. Peter, she asks him not to go to his old study, because it will be freezing from the snowstorm that just blew through. Lillian states, "It was very different when the house below was heated. That stove isn't safe when you keep the window open. A gust of wind might blow it out at any moment, and if you were at work you'd never notice until you were half poisoned by gas" (*PH* 154). She continues to implore him, saying that he will get a terrible headache. St. Peter replies that he has had headaches before and he will be fine. Lillian asks, "How can you be so perverse? You know things are different now, and you ought to take more care of your health." St. Peter replies, "Why so? It's not worth half so much as it was then" (*PH* 154). While Lillian ascribes value to St. Peter's life and his future (or their future together), St. Peter feels that aging diminishes and disorients. Perhaps that is why he is holding on so tightly to their old house; there he felt purposeful and needed, and the family dynamics and structure were simpler. Their old house represents his youth, from which he now must separate.

A greater empathy emerges from St. Peter during his midlife transition. Furthering St. Peter's discontent and complicating Rosamond, Kitty, and their husbands' rivalry are two situations in which friends and colleagues suffer financial setbacks. Kitty visits St. Peter to discuss Augusta's financial investment loss. Augusta had asked Louie for financial advice about investing, which she didn't heed and ended up losing a substantial sum of money. Kitty wants the family to help Augusta financially, to which St. Peter agrees, but Rosamond will not help. Rosamond believes that Augusta should have

listened to Louie's advice. In the middle of this situation, St. Peter must mediate between his two daughters. Then Dr. Crane's wife visits St. Peter to discuss her husband's contribution to Tom's invention and seeks compensation. Again, St. Peter is placed in the middle. After Mrs. Crane insinuates that St. Peter has benefitted from Tom's money, St. Peter replies, "But, my dear Mrs. Crane, how can I share with you what I haven't got? Tom willed his estate and royalties in a perfectly regular way. The fact that he named my daughter as his sole beneficiary doesn't affect me, any more than if he had named some relative of his own" (*PH* 179). The conversation with Mrs. Crane concludes poorly and, after dinner, St. Peter walks to the physics lab to talk with Dr. Crane. Their conversation ends unresolved. As St. Peter walks home, through the park, the world seems sad (*PH* 189). He surveys his surroundings and thinks, "the lake-shore country flat and heavy, Hamilton small and tight and airless. The university, his new house, his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a sea-sick man" (*PH* 189). St. Peter comparing his life to imprisonment indicates an increasing awareness of his feelings. Levinson adds, "A Man's sensitivity to the increase in others' misfortune and suffering is accentuated by his own entry into the Mid-life Transition. He notices these problems more in others, and resonates to them with greater feeling, partly because he is starting to come to terms with his own mortality" (214). Cather's inclusion of these details creates the subtle tension and awareness brewing within St. Peter.

St. Peter's midlife transition attracts attention. Levinson writes, "During the Mid-life Transition, we often learn by going through intense periods of suffering, confusion,

rage against other and ourselves, grief over lost opportunities and lost parts of the self" (225). While Levinson's focus is on the masculine, this idea can be applied universally. After the winter semester ends, St. Peter takes a trip to Chicago with Rosamond; he travels by himself back to Hamilton and on the train, he encounters Scott. Seeing his father-in-law in a relaxed, almost asleep position concerns Scott and he thinks that St. Peter looks ill. Cather writes, "Scott sat down beside him and tried to interest him in one subject after another, without success. It occurred to him that he had never before seen the Professor when he seemed absolutely flattened out and listless" (*PH* 191). For the first time, Scott becomes aware of St. Peter's mortality. Scott thinks, "The old chap needs rest…Rosamond's run him to death in Chicago…I'm going to tell Kitty that we must look out for her father a little" (*PH* 191). Scott's initial intention to take care of St. Peter emanates from positive motivations. However, his thinking continues to follow the path back to the rivalry with the Marselluses. Scott concludes, "The Marselluses have no mercy, and Lillian has always taken it for granted that he was as strong as three men" (*PH* 191). Aging and the midlife transition have been creeping into St. Peter's life for the past year. With their arrival seems to be a loss of vitality and the presence of some new emotions, particularly weariness and escape fantasies.

Like Scott, Lillian believes something is amiss with St. Peter. Lillian finally realizes the extent of St. Peter's exhaustion, when he declines the invitation for the family trip to France that Louie has planned for the four of them. In a telling remark between spouses, Lillian says, "You are not old enough for the pose you take. That's what puzzles me. For so many years, you never seemed to grow at all older, though I did. Two years

ago you were an impetuous young man. Now you save yourself in everything" (*PH* 197). Lillian laments that St. Peter's natural orientation is warmth and affection and now he's avoiding people and situations. She asks, "Why is it, Godfrey?. . . . It's in your mind, your mood. Something has come over you" (*PH* 197). St. Peter responds that he doesn't quite know. He says, "I can't altogether tell myself, Lillian. . . . It's the feeling that I've put a great deal behind me, where I can't go back to it again—and I don't really wish to go back. . . . And now I seem to be tremendously tired" (*PH* 197). Before he leaves the room to go to bed, he assures Lillian that his energy will return, but for now he needs quiet and calm. St. Peter's suffering and confusion requires much energy and accounts for his exhaustion.

St. Peter's actions symbolize his conflicting feelings about aging and losing his youth. After Lillian and the Marselluses leave for France, St. Peter moves back into his former house and reflects about fate. Good luck has blessed him and he realizes that if he had his life to live over, he might not be so lucky: "He had two romances; one of the heart, which filled his life for many years, and a second of the mind—of the imagination. Just when the morning brightness of the world was wearing off for him, along came Outland and brought him a kind of second youth" (*PH* 255). Tom's presence in St. Peter's life was considerable. St. Peter still mourns the loss of Tom and in his memories, he idealizes him.

St. Peter spends two summer months daydreaming. Until this point his mind was always actively engaged in working or sleeping: "He had no twilight stage. But now he enjoyed this half-awake loafing with his brain as if it were a new sense, arriving late, like

wisdom teeth" (*PH* 258). He daydreams about the lost boy of his youth: "This boy and he had meant, back in those faraway days, to live some sort of life together and to share good and bad fortune. . . . After he met Lillian Ornsley, St. Peter forgot that boy had ever lived" (*PH* 259). Young adulthood takes him on a different journey towards work, marriage, children, scholarship, and away from himself: "The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water" (*PH* 260). Through all his reminiscences, St. Peter realizes how disconnected he feels from his life. He feels indifferent to it. He begins to sense his life ending (*PH* 261). He wonders if he will be alive in the fall.

Surprisingly, St. Peter's feelings about death are a normal part of the midlife transition. Levinson writes, "A man in the Mid-life Transition is troubled by his seemingly imminent death. He is beset even more by the anxiety that he will not be able to make his future better than his past" (217). St. Peter experiences the physical and emotional disruption of this anxiety. However, the family doctor examines St. Peter and declares him in perfect health. The doctor asks St. Peter about his sleep habits, his diet, and his mind. All St. Peter can respond with is that he is very tired; he sleeps well, perhaps too much. St. Peter says that his mind is fine, but he is low in energy and prefers to be doing nothing (*PH* 262). The doctor asserts that's what St. Peter should be doing. He says, "There's nothing the matter with you. Follow your inclination" (*PH* 262). Sometimes highly active, productive people need permission to rest, to practice self-care. They can't make this decision on their own. The doctor gives St. Peter this permission. However, St. Peter does not share with the doctor his belief that his life will end shortly.

St. Peter thinks, "One doesn't mention such things. The feeling that he was near the conclusion of his life was an instinctive conviction, such as we have when we waken in the dark and know it is near morning" (*PH* 262). The preoccupation with death occurs during the masculine midlife transition because the impossibility of immortality becomes understood: "At mid-life, the growing recognition of mortality collides with the powerful wish for immortality and the many illusions that help to maintain it. A man's fear that he is not immortal is expressed in his preoccupation with bodily decline and his fantasies of imminent death" (Levinson 215). In his anxious, transitioning state, St. Peter believes or fantasizes that death approaches.

Detribalization, also, accounts for aspects of St. Peter's behavior during his midlife transition. Levinson writes, "As a man becomes more individuated and more oriented to the Self, a process of 'detribalization' occurs. He becomes more critical of the tribe—the particular groups, institutions and traditions that have the greatest significance for him, the social matrix to which he is most attached" (242). As the family's return from abroad looms, despite his increasing exhaustion, St. Peter must decide where to live—in his old house or new one: "He couldn't make himself believe that he was ever going to live in the new house again. He didn't belong there" (*PH* 264). Lying down on the old sofa in his old study, he thinks about death in a new way, not with the former fear it previously inspired but with gratefulness for the "eternal solitude" that it offers (*PH* 265). Death is "a release from every obligation, from every form of effort. It was the Truth" (*PH* 265). He realizes that he dreads his family's return and cannot fathom living together with them: "He could not live with his family again—not even with Lillian.

Especially not with Lillian!" (*PH* 266). Sitting at his desk, St. Peter reviews his life and understands that now he wants to run away from everything that he once "intensely cared for" (*PH* 266). As evening approaches, it turns cold and stormy, St. Peter lights the gas fire and falls asleep on his sofa. When he wakes the room is dark and full of gas; he feels sick and confused. In this state, he wrestles with the decision to get up and open the window. He ponders the notion of accident versus suicide and what his responsibility to his own life is in this situation.

While Cather ends this chapter in suspense, the final chapter opens with St. Peter waking up to Augusta's care and ministrations. Augusta reveals that she heard St. Peter fall upon entering the house. She says, "You were stupefied, but you must have got up and tried to get to the door before you were overcome. I was on the second floor when I heard you fall" (*PH* 269). St. Peter feels happy to have Augusta's comfort. He reevaluates his relationship with her and finds a purity and truth in it that is different from the characteristics of his relationships with his family. Levinson would argue that one of St. Peter's developmental gains during his midlife transition is an integration of Masculine/Feminine polarity, which allows this relationship evolvement he experiences with Augusta. Levinson writes, "the Mid-life Transition opens the possibility for change in the character of a man's *love* relationship with peer women" (237). As a middle-aged man, St. Peter "can now reclaim the qualities he formerly denied in himself and projected onto women. He can begin to recognize that various archetypal figures—the inspiring muse, the tender lover, the one who nurtures the young—are in actuality parts of himself" (Levinson 237). This realization enables St. Peter to fully love Augusta for herself.

Another midlife transition of St. Peter revolves around the attachment / separateness polarity. He confesses to himself that he doesn't "feel any obligations toward his family" (*PH* 270). He had given his wife his best years and his daughters no longer need him, although they greatly desire his attentions still. Levinson explains that men in St. Peter's position no longer feel attached to their environment and the people in their life: "A person is separate when he is primarily involved in his inner world—a world of imagination, fantasy, play. . . . Separateness fosters individual growth and creative adaptation" (239). St. Peter surmises that the life mistake he was trying to decipher, earlier in the day, is merely "an attitude of mind" and: "He had never learned to live without delight. . . . Theoretically he knew that life is possible, may be even pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs. But it had never occurred to him that he might have to live like that" (*PH* 271). This startling realization, yet a necessary one, concludes St. Peter's midlife transition. As Levinson confirms, "During the Mid-Life Transition, a man needs to reduce his heavy involvement in the external world. To do the work of reappraisal and de-illusionment, he must turn inward" (241). St. Peter resolves that he can reunite with his family—he doubts they will recognize that he is different—and face the future. He emerges from his transition with many developmental gains: a better understanding of the self, a resolve about aging, a new mindset to cope with the future, a certain detachment, and a preparedness for the next chapter of his life.

Cather concludes *The Professor's House* with St. Peter understanding that his psychological journey to midlife is a challenging but necessary process. Cather's vague ending, to *The Professor's House,* reflects continuities between fiction and reality; her

protagonist, St. Peter, fights an internal battle and wins. While much has changed, to those that know him, St. Peter will most likely appear the same. In this novel, Cather seems to suggest that aging is a process (and, in St. Peter's, case a battle) that requires fortitude, thought, and a measure of faith.

Chapter 5

MY MORTAL ENEMY:

SUFFERING CAUSED BY PRIVILEGE AND ILLNESS

In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather connects cancer to intense physical and psychological suffering. As Cather depicts in *A Lost Lady,* but she portrays slightly differently in *My Mortal Enemy*, caregiving requires a collective effort. Chapter 5 will consider the history of cancer as a modern disease in America; the effects of relationship dysfunction on a long-term marriage; the examination of the self, forgiveness, the role of silence and religion as sanctuaries during terminal illness; and methods of caregivers' self-care. By looking at this novel through the lens of aging in modern America, we will see how Cather provides readers with a sober meditation on illness's effects on marriage, with a particular emphasis on the insidious nature of cancer.

In *My Mortal Enemy,* the main character, Myra Henshawe, marries unconventionally and employs both charm and sarcasm liberally. Myra, a short, substantial woman with a black pompadour hairstyle complete with white streaks, and a double chin that she tries to minimize, has an angry laugh. As the narrator notes, "Any stupidity made Myra laugh" (536). The plot of this novel revolves around a forbidden marriage between two young people, Myra and Oswald, and traces their marriage through middle to old age, illness, and death. The story is mostly told through the voice of Nellie Birdseye, the third person narrator, who, in her idealistic youth, believes Myra and Oswald's story to be a great romance.

Cather's choice of the provocative title *My Mortal Enemy* for this novel requires readers to ponder the enemy's identity—is it Myra, Oswald, cancer, or all three? In

academic circles, the debates surrounding the meaning of *My Mortal Enemy*'s title persist. Myra, towards the end of her illness, cries out, asking why she has to die with her mortal enemy. Who is Myra's mortal enemy? In a letter to Mrs. Frank L. Grippen, dated January 14, 1931, Cather attempts to clarify. She writes, "I think I can enlighten your perplexity. Myra Henshaw [in *My Mortal Enemy*] before her death came to consider Oswald as her "mortal enemy";—she came to believe that anything loved selfishly and fiercely and extravagantly became the enemy of one's soul's peace" (Jewell and Stout 438). However, as Cather, perhaps unintentionally, writes an enlightening case study of the male midlife transition in *The Professor's House*, she also writes a descriptive and accurate cancer novella in *My Mortal Enemy*. Regardless of whether Oswald or illness represents Myra's mortal enemy, Myra's cancer leads her to certain life discoveries and resolutions.

In 1926, the same year that Cather published *My Mortal Enemy*, cancer deaths in America increased significantly. In Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (2010), he writes, "By 1926, cancer had become the nation's second most common killer, just behind heart disease" (24). The same year, articles appeared in *Life* and *The New York Times* citing studies and research about cancer statistics and calling for action (24). After a decade of debate in Congress, in August of 1937, President Roosevelt signed the National Cancer Institute Act: "The act created a new scientific unit called the National Cancer Institute (NCI), designed to coordinate cancer research and education" (25). With World War II intensifying, the nation's priorities changed and focus shifted from cancer to the war (26). By the late 1940s, "The social outcry about cancer drifted into silence. After the brief flurry of attention in the

press, cancer again became the great unmentionable, the whispered-about disease that no one spoke about publicly" (26). Cancer, by mid-century, became infused with judgment.

Cancer reflects the pathos of modernity, and as such Cather creates Myra to reflect this idea. Mukherjee writes, "Cancer. . . is riddled with more contemporary images. The cancer cell is a desperate individualist" (38). Cancer travels, it expands and invades; "It lives desperately, inventively, fiercely, territorially, cannily, and defensively" (38). Mukherjee describes a cancer cell as "an astonishing perversion of the normal cell" (38). Mukherjee reflects that when he started writing this text it began as a history of cancer. However, he notes: "it felt, inescapably, as if I were writing not about some*thing* but about some*one.* My subject daily morphed into something that resembled an individual—an enigmatic, if somewhat deranged, image in a mirror" (39). While Mukherjee personifies cancer in his biography, his description of cancer also reminds readers of Cather's Myra—who while suffering from cancer also embodies cancer's qualities in her personality.

Through her larger-than-life personality, Myra creates drama and bewilderment. Upon first meeting Myra at her Aunt Lydia's house, when she is fifteen, Nellie Birdseye is not only confused by Myra but also desperate for her favor. Nellie thinks, "By the time her husband came in I had begun to think she was going to like me. I wanted her to, but I felt I didn't have half a chance with her; her charming, fluent voice, her clear light enunciation bewildered me." As a young woman, when Myra elopes with Oswald, and forfeits her uncle's inheritance, she becomes legendary. Amongst Nellie's family, on holidays or at dinners, Myra is typically a topic of conversation (*MME* 533). Nellie

continues to describe her first meeting with Myra, "And I was never sure whether she was making fun of me or of the thing we were talking about" (*MME* 535). Feeling intrigued, yet uncomfortable, Nellie looks forward to Myra's husband's arrival. Skaggs writes in *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather*, "Myra's treatment of others can volley so swiftly from warmth to icy disdain that she seems to keep Nellie constantly off-balance" (93). For young Nellie, Myra represents an unknown and destabilizing force.

In Nellie's youthful innocence, she conjures a great romance between Oswald and Myra. Oswald's arrival and his greeting of Myra perplexes Nellie. Unaccustomed to romance, Nellie narrates, "He came into the room and without taking off his overcoat and went directly up to his wife, who rose and kissed him" (*MME* 535). Nellie states that Myra is clearly delighted to see Oswald and "his presence gave her lively personal pleasure" (*MME* 535). Nellie believes their display and reaction to each other is unusual for two people who have been married for a long time. However, early on in Nellie's acquaintance with Myra and Oswald, she observes a dysfunctional episode between them. Described by Nellie as kind hearted, Oswald apologizes to the ladies for being late. He explains that he could not find his clothes. Myra laughs and explains that she gave away his shirts to the janitor's son, because they "bulge in front" (*MME* 535). Taken aback, Oswald clarifies, "You gave away my six new shirts?" Myra confirms that she did, because she does not like him to wear poorly fitting clothes. In response, Oswald looks at Myra "with amusement, incredulity, and bitterness" (*MME* 536). Myra's action of giving away her husband's new shirts seems odd, frivolous, impulsive, and controlling. She

seems to have crossed a boundary by making decisions about her husband's personal property without his input or consent. Yet, he doesn't reprimand Myra or prolong the exchange, but turns to Nellie to converse. Oswald displays warmth and friendliness to Nellie. She feels at ease with him as opposed to Myra, who makes Nellie anxious (*MME* 536). Skaggs references Nellie's reliability as a narrator, when she analyzes Nellie's last name: "*Birdseye* reminds us that our narrator passes us information about the Henshawe story tinted by her own vision. And birds see from only one eye at a time—with less broad synthesis than humans are thought to achieve" (94-95). Myra's strong and complicated personality positions her as a force in her relationships. Nellie's perplexing feelings about Myra allow her to narrate in a straightforward manner. Nellie states what she sees or hears about Myra without analysis, thus allowing the reader to experience Myra's full personality in all its positive and negative aspects from Nellie's point of view, which as Skaggs points out may not be comprehensive.

Myra grows up with many material privileges, but several emotional disadvantages. Myra, an orphan since early childhood, is taken in and raised by her great-uncle, John Driscoll. Driscoll is very wealthy and overindulges Myra—his only niece and ward. Nellie narrates, "Myra, as my aunt often said, had everything: dresses and jewels, a fine riding horse, a Steinway piano. Her uncle took her back to Ireland with him, one summer, and had her painted by a famous painter" (*MME* 537). Myra and her uncle's feelings towards each other were mutual. She was "fond" of him and "Myra's good looks and high spirits gratified the old man's pride. Her wit was of the kind that he could understand, native and racy, and none too squeamish" (*MME* 537). It isn't until Myra

meets Oswald that she and her uncle disagree. Due to a long-simmering grudge between Myra's uncle and Oswald's father, Driscoll forbids Myra from seeing Oswald. Over the course of two years, while Oswald studies at Harvard, they continue to write to each other. Oswald eventually writes to Driscoll asking for Myra's hand in marriage, which Driscoll refuses. He tells Myra, "If she married young Henshawe, he would cut her off without a penny. He could do so, because he had never adopted her. If she did not, she would inherit two-thirds of his property" (*MME* 538). Drawing God's wrath against poverty into his argument, Driscoll advises Myra on the importance of money in this earthly life. In a highly romantic gesture, Myra leaves her uncle's house on a snowy night to elope with Oswald. Driscoll never changes his mind and upon his death does not leave Myra a penny from his estate.

Nellie, in her hopefulness, asks her aunt if Myra and Oswald are wildly happy, as she feels they must be due to the intensity of their romance and the dramatics of their elopement. Surprisingly and disappointingly, her aunt responds, "Happy? Oh, yes! As happy as most people" (*MME* 539). Cather shows that Driscoll, while he provides for young Myra financially, lacks emotional depth and uses his money as a source of control. Myra receives many luxuries growing up in his house, but most likely other areas of her psyche, such as her emotional and spiritual growth receive inattention. Having learned how to wield power through money or possessions from her uncle, Myra's giving away of Oswald's shirts can be viewed as a dysfunctional form of marital control.

Another emotional deficit Myra suffers from is her inability to forgive. After Nellie first meets Oswald and Myra, it is decided that she and her Aunt Lydia will visit

them in New York City for Christmas. During this visit, while out with Myra, Nellie sees a man who resembles a writer she recognizes from the magazines and asks Myra to confirm his identity. Myra confirms that the gentleman is a writer and a former friend of hers. Myra says, "He used to be a friend of mine. That's a sad phrase, isn't it? But there was a time when he could have stood by Oswald in a difficulty—and he didn't. He passed it up. Wasn't there. I've never forgiven him" (*MME* 553). Nellie regrets pointing out the man. For the remainder of the day, even at the theater, Myra ruminates about him. Nellie can feel Myra's bitterness and suffering. Myra replays the incident with her former friend in her mind. Nellie thinks, "She was going over it all again; arguing, accusing, denouncing" (*MME* 554). As they exit the theater, Myra says to Nellie, "It's all very well to tell us to forgive our enemies; our enemies can never hurt us very much. But oh, what about forgiving our friends?. . . . [T]hat's where the rub comes!" (*MME* 554). Forgiveness is a challenging task, but necessary for emotional growth. Forgiveness can be an antidote to bitterness and suffering. Like other skills, forgiveness is a learned behavior and a conscious decision. For some, like Myra, holding a grudge is psychologically easier than forgiveness.

Dishonesty and suspicion hang over Oswald and Myra's marriage. In a Christmas exchange between Oswald and Aunt Lydia, Oswald asks Lydia to participate in deception. A young woman had given him topaz cufflinks that he wants to keep and wear; however, he knows the gift to be inappropriate and Myra would be jealous and angry. So, he asks Lydia to present the cuff links to him as a Christmas gift. After thinking it over, Lydia agrees to give Oswald the cufflinks. In another episode, after New Year's Day, Nellie

arrives at the Henshawes' home and witnesses a heated argument over a key. Myra yells at Oswald, "How dare you lie to me, Oswald? How dare you? They told me at your bank that this wasn't a bank key, though it looks like one" (*MME* 556). Myra exits the room and Nellie feels confused and afraid. She describes the atmosphere: "The air was still and cold like the air in a refrigerating-room. What I felt was fear; I was afraid to look or speak or move. Everything about me seemed evil" (*MME* 556). Unkindness and unreasonableness fills the air. Two days after, in a dramatic move, Myra departs for Pittsburgh via the train Nellie and Aunt Lydia are on, to temporarily separate from Oswald. Upon her exit from the carriage, Myra informs Lydia that she knows about the cufflinks. Myra says scornfully, "Oh, Liddy dear, you needn't have perjured yourself for those yellow cuff-buttons. I was sure to find out, I always do. I don't hold it against you, but it's disgusting in a man to lie for personal decorations" (*MME* 558). Unfortunately, deception and drama characterize Myra and Oswald's relationship.

Hard times occur during the ten years between Nellie's visit to New York City and her reunion with the Henshawes. In almost poverty, Nellie accepts a college teaching position for meager wages and unknowingly moves into the same West-coast hotel where the Henshawes live. As she walks downstairs to the hotel's restaurant for dinner one evening, she spots Oswald. Looking much older and very tired, Oswald, excited to see Nellie, informs her of Myra's condition. He says, "She is ill, my poor Myra. Oh, very ill! But we must not speak of that, nor seem to know it" (*MME* 560). He entreats Nellie to come up to their room to visit. Upon entering, Nellie sees that Myra is in a wheel-chair. Nellie thinks, "She looked strong and broken, generous and tyrannical, a witty and rather

wicked old woman, who hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its absurdities" (*MME* 563). Shortly during their conversation, the Henshawes' upstairs neighbors return and Myra begins to complain bitterly about the noises they make. Oswald doesn't notice the noise until Myra turns to her husband and exclaims, "There they are, those animals!" (*MME* 563). Nellie suggests that they ask the neighbors to be quiet, but Oswald states that it only makes them behave worse. They are unfeeling people (*MME* 564). Myra laments their poverty, "Oh, that's the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy of such pigs! Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity" (*MME* 564). Myra's irritability may be linked to the pain caused by her illness. She seems particularly bothered by the sounds from upstairs and the condition of their apartment. Complaining provides an outlet for her to express her physical and emotional discomfort.

Oswald serves as Myra's primary caregiver. Still working Monday through Saturday, every day Oswald rises early to bathe Myra, make her bed, organize her room, and prepare breakfast. Breakfast is the only meal they share together and with the upstairs neighbors still sleeping and quiet it is usually a pleasant time. Then Oswald washes the breakfast dishes and dresses for work: "As a special favour from his company he was allowed to take two hours at noon, on account of his sick wife. He came home, brought her lunch from below, then hurried back to his office" (*MME* 565). Cather does not indicate how Myra spends most of her day; however, Nellie visits often and brings Myra cakes or flowers to delight her. Skaggs addresses Oswald as caregiver, stating, "Oswald cares for Myra so steadfastly that he becomes Nellie's model of constancy" (97). While

Oswald may have personal failings in other areas of his life, as all humans do, his dedication to and patience with Myra are key components of caregiving.

As Myra's cancer grows, her interactions with the outside world decrease. With the assistance of her wheelchair or cane, Myra makes tea every afternoon and it is during tea-time that Nellie usually visits. These visits are pleasant for Nellie and Myra. Just having Nellie's company and sharing a cup of tea or enjoying some lovely flowers provides Myra comfort and a reprieve from her illness. Nellie narrates that the people upstairs are usually out during her visits, "When they were in and active, it was too painful to witness Mrs. Henshawe's suffering. She was acutely sensitive to sound and light" (*MME* 565). Whereas once she loved having a variety of interesting friends, Myra's social circle is now limited to her husband and Nellie. At the end of life, an ill patient may typically prefer to only see a small, select group of either close family or friends.

Silence provides a sanctuary for Myra. It eases her pain and discomfort. One afternoon, Nellie arranges a carriage ride along the shore. As they arrive at a cliff, Myra wants to get out of the carriage, sit under the tree, and enjoy the view. Nellie and the driver help Myra out, wrap her in the blanket, and set a trunk under the tree for her to lean against. Nellie walks along the shore alone, because she knows Myra wants solitude. When Nellie returns Myra says, "I've had such a beautiful hour, dear; or has it been longer? Light and silence; they heal all one's wounds—all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence. I find I don't miss clever talk, the kind I always used to have about me, when I can have silence" (*MME* 566). Silence relieves Myra's suffering. Myra confides

to Nellie that she would love to come back to this cliff at dawn, which is a forgiving time. She says, "When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution" (*MME* 567). Upon their return to the hotel, silence shatters when the neighbors begin to walk about, which causes Myra distress.

During a long, complicated illness, perhaps due to feelings of desperation, patients may often confess to a caregiver, their shortcomings, fears, and hopes for the future. During this incident, Myra confesses her personal failings. Before her confession, Myra begs Oswald to take her away from the hotel. She says to Oswald, "You ought to get me away from this, Oswald. If I were on my feet, and you laid low, I wouldn't let you be despised and trampled upon" (*MME* 567). As Nellie and Oswald attempt to comfort Myra, she tells them "We've destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away" (*MME* 567). Oswald pleads with her not to talk like this in front of Nellie. He assures her that they were happy. He says, "That was reality, just as much as this" (*MME* 567). Oswald has not lost his perspective. While their situation is dire, with Myra's illness and their poverty, Oswald knows that they had a life together that while imperfect was also beautiful in its own way. Myra, casting off her life, responds, "We were never really happy. I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success and a place in the world. Now I'm old and ill and a fright, but among my own kind I'd still have my circle;. . . . Go away, please, both of you, and leave me!" (*MME* 568). In her frustration, Myra turns her anger on Oswald. She demands that he and Nellie leave her alone.

Oswald bears the brunt of Myra's lashing out due to pain. Primary caregivers are typically privy to the physical, mental, and emotional changes the ill person is experiencing. Since they are usually present, caregivers can become the patient's target of frustrations and anger. Oswald tells Nellie, "It's apt to be like this, when she has enjoyed something and gone beyond her strength. There are times when she can't have anyone near her. It was worse before you came" (*MME* 568). He confesses that Myra has locked him out of their apartment for days at a time: "It seems strange—a woman of such generous friendships. It's as if she had used up that part of herself. It's a great strain on me when she shuts herself up like that. I'm afraid she'll harm herself in some way" (*MME* 568). When a chronically or terminally ill person experiences extreme mood swings and behaves erratically, it can create greater stresses for the caregiver and damage the relationship.

To return to the theme of self-care, to maintain his sanity, Oswald seeks companionship outside of his marriage. The next morning Nellie sees Oswald dining with a young girl who also lives at the hotel. A bright young woman working on a newspaper, Nellie can tell that she admires Oswald and he thinks highly of her. Nellie describes the girl as being, "always on the watch to catch a moment with Oswald, to get him to talk to her about music, or German poetry, or about the actors and writers he had known" (*MME* 569). The young girl's pleasure in being with Oswald gives him encouragement. Nellie considers, "Perhaps that was one of the things that kept him up to the mark in his dress and manner. Among people he never looked apologetic or crushed. He still wore his

topaz sleeve-buttons" (*MME* 569). Outside of their caregiving duties, caregivers need to have other outlets for friendship, conversation, and enjoyment.

Reflecting upon aging to Nellie, Myra believes that people become more of who they have always been. Sensitivities, likes, dislikes, attitudes, and behaviors all become entrenched and magnified during the aging process. Myra, knowing what it is like to feel loneliness and disappointment, says, "Yes, and because as we grow old we become more and more the stuff our forebears put into us. I can feel his [her uncle's] savagery strengthen in me" (*MME* 571). If her uncle were alive, she would ask for his forgiveness. Aging has intensified Myra's personality and her reactions.

Despite her awareness of her flaws and the strain of her cancer, Myra's duplicity and imperious nature continue to dominate her relationships. She asks Nellie to find her glove that contains money hidden from Oswald. She admits, "Oswald, of course, doesn't know the extent of my resources. We've often needed a hundred dollars or two so bitter bad; he wouldn't understand. But that is money I keep for unearthly purposes; the needs of this world don't touch it" (*MME* 572). Myra wants Nellie to bring a coin to St. Joseph's Church and ask Father Fay to say a mass for her friend, Helena Modjeska, Countess Bozenta-Chlapowska. During this exchange, Nellie quietly asks Myra why she is so tough on Oswald. With slow tears rolling down her face, Myra admits she cannot be sentimental about the past, when the truth is she's disappointed (*MME* 573). Myra tells Nellie that she and Oswald are lovers and enemies. She says, "Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him. Perhaps that's it. When there are children, that feeling goes through natural changes. But when it remains so personal. . . something gives way in one.

In age we lose everything; even the power to love" (*MME* 574). With that sentiment, which Cather assigns specifically to Myra, Myra's sadness and truthfulness turns to scorn. She becomes angry with Nellie for speaking out of turn and defending Oswald. Myra sends Nellie away and asks her to not visit for a while (*MME* 574).

Eventually, Myra's illness intensifies as she enters the final stage of dying. In early summer, Myra starts to fail. Her cancer is growing into a major organ and her doctor thinks she will only live a few more weeks, possibly a month. Myra's pain intensifies and the nerves pressing in her back require her to take opiates. Mukherjee writes, "Opiates, used liberally and compassionately on cancer patients, did not cause addiction, deterioration, and suicide; instead, they relieved the punishing cycle of anxiety, pain, and despair" (226). Nellie narrates, "At first we had two nurses, but Myra hated the night nurse so intensely that we dismissed her, and, as my school was closed for the summer, I took turns with Oswald in watching over her at night" (*MME* 575). Myra's communication begins to lessen: "She talked very little after this last stage of her illness began; she no longer complained or lamented, but toward Oswald her manner became strange and dark. She had certain illusions; the noise overhead she now attributed entirely to her husband" (*MME* 576). Terminally ill people who are in pain and are taking heavy pain medication can experience confusion and fear. They may not recognize the people they once knew and loved. And, if they do, they may become skeptical of them.

As her illness progresses, as a coping mechanism, Myra outwardly turns to religion. She embraces her Catholicism and needs a talisman, like the "ebony crucifix with an ivory Christ," for comfort (*MME* 575). She fears judgment and the afterlife.

Nellie tells, “During those days and nights when she talked so little, one felt that Myra’s mind was busy all the while—that it was even abnormally active, and occasionally one got a clue to what occupied it” (*MME* 576). Myra ponders the idea of seeking and finding in religion. Nellie clarifies, “She seemed to say that in other searchings it might be the object of the quest that brought satisfaction, or it might be something incidental that one got on the way; but in religion, desire was fulfillment, it was the seeking itself that rewarded” (*MME* 577). Myra may be unsure what her fate will be when death approaches; however, her religion provides some peace.

Similar to birth, death is experienced by the person alone. Myra poses this question to the room and the universe: “Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?” (*MME* 577). In a final dramatic act, Myra leaves her deathbed, and dies under the tree by the cliff while looking out at the morning sea (*MME* 579). Cather does not clarify if Myra’s mortal enemy is herself, or her husband, Oswald. Readers can assume either. Myra decides and orchestrates her death; she does it alone seeking the redemption of a new day. Regardless of her reasons, taking control over the setting and time of her death provides Myra with some control and peace.

Cancer allows Cather to present Myra as a dramatic, tortured, and grasping soul from beginning to end. With Myra, Cather creates another strong, dominating character with a troubled marriage and relationships. Myra is hyper-focused on her own situation, comfort, and devoid of deep friendships; nevertheless, lacking in emotional intelligence, Myra remains true to herself in the end. At end-of-life, Myra continues to be a bitter

woman with a signature move of walking out on the people closest to her. She shuts people out both physically and emotionally when she feels hurt.

Before approaches to cancer treatment shifted radically, Cather includes aspects of care and pain relief in *My Mortal Enemy.* At least a few decades before the emergence of palliative care and before hospice was "resurrected" in America, Myra receives opiates and nursing services (Mukherjee 225). Although it is unclear how much Myra's main caregiver, Oswald, has actually damaged her during the course of their lives, Cather hints that he may have been an adulterer. He seems to manage her illness without falling into caregiver burnout, like Marian Forrester. Devoted, he cares for Myra's physical and emotional wellbeing. He bathes and dresses her and prepares her breakfast; he reminds her that they were once happy and he believes it.

Caregiving without respite is impossible to maintain. The major difference between Marian (in *A Lost Lady)* and Oswald is that Oswald has work, outside of the home, which provides a respite from the daily tasks of caregiving. While he comes home at lunchtime to bring Myra lunch, Oswald's work provides an escape and a balance to his caregiving duties. Oswald also derives appreciation and friendship from the young woman journalist in his hotel. If Oswald didn't have to work and needed to be by Myra's side from morning to night, *My Mortal Enemy* would be a much different story.

To understand cancer's effects, multiple viewpoints and details are necessary. Nellie, the birdlike narrator, gathers pieces of the Henshawes' story and drops these crumbs for readers to consider. Nellie tells readers a dramatic story of romance, marriage, disappointments, dysfunction, poverty, and cancer. However, Cather provides earlier

portraits of the Myra and Oswald's life in New York City to create a full picture, since Nellie can only provide certain insights. Cancer strains Oswald and Myra's marriage; however, their poverty forces Oswald to work, which in turn saves him from caregiver burnout. Cancer, like Myra, as research and science states is complicated. As Mukherjee suggests, cancer is a "desperate individualist," which is how Cather describes Myra.

Chapter 6

SHADOWS ON THE ROCK:

A YEAR OF AGING

Cather wrote *Shadows on the Rock* during her mother's illness and after her father's death; these life experiences illuminated for her the complexities of dying in the modern world. During this period, certain social structures were changing or in the process of being eliminated. Through the historical setting, the reality Cather presents in *Shadows on the Rock* allows her to think about and try to understand dying. Throughout this novel, she constructs inset stories to illuminate ideas such as honoring caregiving inheritance, how empathy emerges, the complexities of being present as one ages, ageism in employment, financial worries during older age, and how age and integrity produce wisdom. As Middleton states in "The Person I Was in the Beginning: Willa Cather on Growing Old," Cather's later work revolves around her explorations of aging, and through the different format and content of *Shadows on the Rock* Cather places a necessary distance between her personal experiences and her art (25).

With *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather presents a microcosm where readers can follow the developments and changes in the community and the characters; through this construction, Cather shows how much aging, illness, diminishment and dying can occur during the course of one year. Chapter 6 will address inheritance and levels of caregiving, losing the will to live, suffering from illness as a means to teach compassion, the drawbacks of modernity, ageism in employment, and the necessity of authenticity. Using a historical setting, Quebec City in 1667, Cather explores contemporary issues of her day

surrounding aging, illness, diminishment, and death—these issues maintain relevance for readers today.

In *Shadows on the Rock,* Cather provides an account of Euclide Auclair and Cécile's lives as colonists, which unfold in accordance with the natural rhythms of the season. Through her use of gaps, fragmentation, and change in views and circumstances around aging, Cather constructs a modernist storytelling of dying in *Shadows on the Rock*. Cather explores the lives of the philosopher apothecary Euclide Auclair and his twelve-year-old, daughter Cécile. The Auclairs—Euclide, his wife, and Cécile—arrived in Quebec eight years prior to the novel's beginning. Auclair "had come over with the Count de Frontenac. . . as his apothecary and physician" (*SOTR* 478). Before Auclair's wife and Cécile's mother dies, when Cécile is ten, she instructs Cécile on all domestic matters, so Cécile is prepared to take care of her father. The last chapter culminates in the death of Count Frontenac. Only in the Epilogue and concluding chapter, Cather offers a fifteen-year glimpse into Cécile's future.

Writing *Shadows on the Rock* steadied Cather during a difficult personal period. Cather penned a note to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in June 1931, describing that researching and finding details about the way the people lived in seventeenth century Quebec helped her to hold her life together (Jewell and Stout 445). It was during the writing of this novel and shortly after its publication that her mother succumbed to illness and died. Six days before her mother's death, in an August 25, 1931 letter responding to Wilbur Cross's review, Cather clarifies her form and process. She writes, "The text was mainly anacoluthon, so to speak, but the meaning was clear. I took the incomplete air and

tried to give it what would correspond to a sympathetic musical setting; tried to develop it into a prose composition not too conclusive, not too definite; a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking" (Jewell and Stout 451). This method of thinking that Cather references helped her to cope with her mother's illness. Her writing triggered creative thinking, which kept her mentally and emotionally afloat. On October 14, 1931, Cather responds to Fanny Butcher's sympathy card, writing: "I was so glad to get your card from Aix-les-Bains. . . . Since then life has been a tough pull. A long illness does not prepare one for the end of it" (Jewell and Stout 457). While the writing of *Shadows on the Rock* provided a mental escape from worrying about her mother's health, it is clear that Cather pondered themes of aging, illness, and death throughout the novel.

Within the setting of *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather includes living and dying imagery in the natural landscape's description. She writes, "On the opposite shore of the river, just across from the proud rock of Quebec, the black pine forest came down to the water's edge; and on the west, behind the town, the forest stretched no living man knew how far" (*SOTR* 467). Unexplored territory exists and it represents the terrifying unknown. Cather continues, "That was the dead, sealed world of the vegetable kingdom, an uncharted continent choked with interlocking trees, living, dead, half-dead, their roots in bogs and swamps, strangling each other in a slow agony that had lasted for centuries" (*SOTR* 467). The personification of the trees' violence towards each other suggests conflict and war. Perhaps Cather suggests parallels between this landscape and colonialism: "The forest was suffocation, annihilation; there European man was quickly

swallowed up in silence, distance, mould, black mud, and the stinging swarms of insect life that bred in it. The only avenue of escape was along the river" (*SOTR* 467). The forest symbolizes danger and death, while the river suggests freedom and life. The river acts as a "highway" for travelers to embrace the sun, approach the ocean, and enjoy community (*SOTR* 467). Through the waterways, life in Quebec is sustained.

Like Alexandra in *O Pioneers,* Cécile inherits caregiving duties. As a twelve-year-old, Cécile watches over her father's shop, cooks the daily meals, and cleans the house. Additionally, she cares for a disabled man named Blinker and a young, neglected boy named Jacques. Typically, after dinner Auclair returns to his shop in the front of their home and makes entries in the ledger. In the meantime, Cécile washes the dishes and feeds Blinker: "Through the small panes of glass a face was looking in, —a terrifying face, but one that she expected" (*SOTR* 472). Unwillingly, Blinker enters their kitchen to receive his soup from Cécile. Blinker's face contains multiple scars, an uneven jaw, and crossed eyes: "This poor mis-shapen fellow worked next door, tended the oven fires for Nicholas Pigeon, the baker. . . . His wages were the baker's old clothes, two pairs of boots a year, a pint of red wine daily, and all the bread he could eat" (*SOTR* 472). Unfortunately, the baker and his wife have a large family and cannot afford to feed Blinker. So Cécile feeds him dinner and in return Blinker carries the pails of dirty dishwater and kitchen scraps down the hill and empties them into the river. Upon his return, Cécile pours him a small glass of brandy. When Cécile finishes in the kitchen and picks up her candle, that signals to Blinker that he should depart: "Since this happened every night, Cécile thought nothing of it. Her mother had begun to look out for Blinker a

little before she became so ill, and he was one of the cares the daughter had inherited" (*SOTR* 473). Without any question or consideration, good-natured, mature beyond her years, Cécile assumes responsibility for Blinker. Through her mother's instruction and example, Cécile provides levels of caregiving to her father and community.

Sharing similarities with Ivar in *O Pioneers!*, Blinker lives in a cave, behaves non-violently, and his appearance and manners inspire unwarranted fear from the community: "He had a cave up in the rocky cliff behind the bakery, where he kept his chest,—he slept there in mild weather. . . . Many people were afraid of him, felt that he must have crooked thoughts behind such crooked eyes" (*SOTR* 473). Blinker's disability marks him as an outsider in the community. During the period when Cather was writing this novel, people with disabilities were viewed with apprehension and not afforded the same rights as able-bodied people. Thankfully, the Auclairs and the baker's family accept Blinker: "The baker said he could never discover how the fellow made a living at home, or why he had come out to Canada. Many unserviceable men had come, to be sure, but they were usually adventurers who disliked honest work" (*SOTR* 473). The baker speculates that these "unserviceable men" want to fight the Iroquois, trap beavers for their skins, or hunt in the forest, but Blinker has neither held nor shot a gun: "He had such a horror of the forest that he would not even go into the near-by woods to help fell trees for firewood, and his fear of Indians was one of the bywords of Mountain Hill" (*SOTR* 473). Blinker's presence in Quebec is a mystery. Outside the realm of social norms, but within the sphere of respectability, Blinker receives care from Cécile and the baker. Unlike Alexandra's cohabitation with Ivar, Cécile, still a child, following her mother's

guidance, can only offer a daily meal. Similar to Alexandra and Ivar, though, Cécile and Blinker have a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Cécile's childhood, while set in 1600s Quebec, in some respects implies a more modern childhood happening during the twentieth century in America. Cather writes: "It was only in the evening that her father had time to talk to her. All day he was compounding remedies, or visiting the sick, or making notes for a work on the medicinal properties of Canadian plants which he meant to publish after his return to Paris" (*SOTR* 474). The shape of employment in modern America changed during the 1920s-30s, and the separation of child from parent during the workday became typical. By the time she reaches twelve years old, Cécile is considered an adult in miniature. While Auclair expects to send Cécile back to France to live with her aunt to finish her education, Cécile's daily life in Quebec consists of a mix of being a child with adult work responsibilities and a caregiver to her father and others.

In the weeks before her death, Cécile's mother provides detailed instructions to Cécile on how to take care of her father. Madame Auclair says, "Your father has a delicate appetite, . . . and the food here is coarse. If it is not very carefully prepared, he will not eat and will fall ill" (*SOTR* 478). She then advises about the linens and Auclair's sensitivity to wool. She sets the schedule for changing the bed linens, cautions against washing them in the winter, and advises that they be ironed after their laundering in April. Madame Auclair realizes the heaviness of her requests, but believes that Auclair's happiness relies on "order and regularity" and Cécile, herself, will grow to love and feel pride in her duties (*SOTR* 479). This is her legacy that Madame Auclair bestows on

Cécile. As a colonist, dying far from her homeland, Madame Auclair thinks, "The sense of 'our way,'—that was what she longed to leave with her daughter" (*SOTR* 479). While she will not return home, and forfeits choice in where she dies, Madame Auclair at least can control the domestic setting so that it resembles her Paris home. This familiarity provides her with peace during her end of life.

In service to the Count, Auclair enjoys a warm yet professional relationship with him. Auclair's father acts as the Count's apothecary in Paris, while Auclair is a young boy. Following in his father's profession, Auclair and his family travel to Quebec with the Count at his request. Auclair tells Cécile, "Yes, he was a fine figure of a man forty years ago, but even more restless and hasty than he is now. I remember he asked me if I wanted to be a soldier, and when I told him that I meant to be an apothecary like my father, he laughed and gave me a silver piece" (*SOTR* 476). As Auclair and Cécile stroll outside after dinner, they pass the Count's Château and Auclair informs Cécile of the Count's troubles. He says, "Ah, the Count has many things to trouble him. The King has not been very generous in rewarding his services in the last campaign. Besides, he is old, and the old do not sleep much" (*SOTR* 476). Early in this novel, Auclair hints that the Count's problems are caused by aging. Money can be a cause of concern during one's entire lifetime; however, it is particularly vital when planning to retire or decrease working hours. Elusive or problematic sleep can compound a person's worries and affect their health.

Circumstances, when he is seventy years old, cause the Count to consider leaving France. Experiencing financial constraints and loneliness, the Count thinks that returning

to Canada may be the solution: “The Count was out of favour at Versailles, his estate on the Indre had run down during his absence in Canada, and he had not the means to repair it, so he now spent a good deal of time in the house next door” (*SOTR* 483). This benefits the Auclairs; the Count also returns to them their ten years of rent, which they had paid to the Count’s agent. Additionally, at seventy, the Count finds that many of his acquaintances have died and he feels lonely: “Time hung heavy on his hands, and he often sent for Euclide to come to him in a professional capacity,—a flimsy pretext, for, though past sixty, the Count was in robust health” (*SOTR* 483). For an older person, like the Count, feeling time passing can cause anxiety. He can neither afford nor is he ready for a life of rest and relaxation. Still dreaming of explorations, the Count accepts the opportunity presented by the King to return to Canada as Governor General (*SOTR* 484). The Count entreats Euclide to come with him as his personal physician: “The Count was then seventy years old, and he was as eager to be gone as a young man setting off on his first campaign” (*SOTR* 484). While also in financial hardship, with the Count’s impending departure and selling of his townhouse, the continuance of Auclair’s shop falls into question. Auclair’s wife encourages him to accept the Count’s proposal. Not ready to accept his age and still inclined towards adventure, the Count remains engaged with and inspired by life.

In another seemingly social commentary on aging and poverty, Cather includes, in Book Two, an inset story about Bichet, a character from Auclair’s youth. One November evening, Cécile reminds her father about having a mass said for Bichet on the anniversary of his hanging. Auclair replies that he will have the mass said on November

10. When Auclair was a boy, living at home with his parents and grandparents, Bichet lodged in their cellar. Bichet's trade, as a poor knife-grinder, required that he walk all over the city: "But he could never have kept himself in shoes, having to walk so much, if your grandfather had not given him his old ones. He paid us nothing for his lodging, of course" (*SOTR* 522). Bichet set up a bed in the dry area of the cellar and on cold evenings, Auclair's grandmother warmed bricks for Bichet to put in between his blankets. Also, "She often saved a cup of hot soup and a piece of bread for the old man and let him eat them in the warm kitchen, for he was very neat and cleanly" (*SOTR* 522). Even young Auclair assisted in the care of old Bichet. By helping to deliver medicines, Auclair earned a little money, of which he would give some to Bichet. Auclair reflects that Bichet was "a kind man, gentle to creatures below him,—for there were those even worse off" (*SOTR* 522). In an error of judgment, one night, Bichet stole two brass pots, which had been left in an abandoned house. Bichet was caught and confessed to his crime; however, the officers forced further untrue confessions from him. Auclair and his father spoke on Bichet's behalf, to no avail. With the prison overcrowded, Bichet was hanged the next morning. Disillusioned by this event, Auclair's asthmatic grandmother lost her will to live: "She said she had no wish to live longer in a world where such cruelties could happen" (*SOTR* 523). Cécile wonders why the King would allow this to happen, but Auclair explains that it is the Law. The Law protects property, but Auclair ponders that it places too much emphasis on protection of property rather than forgiveness.

Cather also meditates on sorrow and aging in this description of Cécile observing All Souls' Day. For the entire day, Cécile attends a variety of services to pray for her

mother. While she herself is not sorrowful, she understands the face she must present to show her respect—eyes cast downward and quiet voice: "At twelve years it is impossible to be sad on holy days, even on a day of sorrow; at that age the dark things, death, bereavement, suffering, have only a dramatic value,—seem but strong and moving colours in the grey stretch of time" (*SOTR* 524). For Cécile, this ritual is almost a form of make believe or play: "On such solemn days all the stories of the rock came to life for Cécile; the shades of the early martyrs and great missionaries drew close about her" (*SOTR* 524). When life holds so much promise, possibility, or delight, as it does in youth, for Cécile maintaining sadness is a challenge. The stories, rather than add to sorrow, cause Cécile to feel more joy and excitement at being alive. Cather makes the distinction in this passage that even children who experience loss, like Cécile, retain innocence, wonder, and resiliency. The young can only be sad for so long before they need to get back to living.

While the older people of Quebec feel sadness on All Souls' Day, because of homelands elsewhere or deceased relatives, the only other group capable of expressing joy are the sisters in the convent: "The Ursulines and the Hospitalières, indeed were scarcely exiles" (*SOTR* 526). Once they became religious women, their families became the "Holy Family, the saints and martyrs, the glorious company of the Apostles, the heavenly host" (*SOTR* 526). From Cather's description, the sisters inspire and display aspirational attributes: "Courageous these Sisters were, accepting good and ill fortune with high spirit,—with humour, even. They never vulgarly exaggerated hardships and dangers. They had no hours of nostalgia, for they were quite as near the realities of their

lives in Quebec as in Dieppe or Tours" (*SOTR* 526). Cather cites the sisters and Cécile as examples of living in the present and being fully immersed in the moment. For the non-devout adult, living in the present is a challenge and too much time ruminating on the past or thinking about the future leads to suffering. While Cather presents this idea through a Christian lens, it is a universal idea woven into many religions as well as the psychological construct of mindfulness.

At the beginning of Book Three entitled *The Long Winter*, Cather introduces a vignette that displays the tension of modernity and employment ageism. Set during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, the new Bishop, Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier, a handsome young forty-four-year-old, visits Auclair's shop under the pretense of inquiring about the health of the former Bishop, Monseigneur de Laval. He asks Auclair, "Have you by any chance seen Monseigneur de Laval of late? . . . I am deeply concerned about his health" (*SOTR* 538). Auclair responds that he has not seen him since Christmas Eve mass, but believes Laval to be in decent health. Saint-Vallier replies that he worries about Laval's leg ulcers and expresses the idea that it would make sense for Auclair to attempt a cauterization. Auclair explains that it will not work and it has already been tried, two years ago. Saint-Vallier counters with a question for Auclair, "You are very advanced in your theories of medicine, are you not, Monsier Auclair?" (*SOTR* 539). Auclair clarifies that he is not—actually he is quite old-fashioned. He says, "I think the methods of the last century better than those of the present time" (*SOTR* 539). They then debate the universal discussion of progress versus change. Auclair states, "Change is not always progress, Monseigneur" (*SOTR* 539). After Monseigneur departs, Auclair reflects

that since his appointment as the new Bishop, Saint-Vallier's mission has been to dismantle Laval's training system and other programs that he originated. Cather includes this detail to reflect a pattern that often happens.

The conflict between change and judgment marks the new Bishop's administration. Auclair does not like Monseigneur Saint-Vallier and thinks him unfit for his position: "He did not doubt the young Bishop's piety, but he very much doubted his judgment. He was rash and precipitate, he was volatile" (*SOTR* 541). Auclair believes Saint-Vallier does not often consider the costs of his changes or think through his projects. Auclair thinks that Saint-Vallier "liked to reorganize and change things for the sake of change, to make a fine gesture. He destroyed the old before he had clearly thought out the new" (*SOTR* 541). At the beginning of his appointment, Saint-Vallier charms the community by his generosity and charity; however, he returns to France and old Bishop Laval is left to contend with Saint-Vallier's debts. It seems to Laval, who had recommended Saint-Vallier for the post, that in fact, Saint-Vallier works directly against everything Laval had accomplished. Laval had built a "Seminary unique and specially fitted to the needs of the colony," which Saint-Vallier dismantles (*SOTR* 540). Eventually, the King of France realizes that Saint-Vallier performs poorly as the Bishop, and unable to demote him, the King detains him in France for many years. This allows Laval to resume the duties he, at one point, happily passed to Saint-Vallier.

Through this vignette Cather explores the idea of change as progress and its myriad of consequences. Expected to retire his post as Bishop, Laval promotes young Saint-Vallier. Saint-Vallier gains the appointment and then in an ironic twist, proceeds to

undo all the programs his main supporter and advocate had put in place. At first, his charm garners community support, but then his miscalculated actions cause disruption without any progress. His administration is an example of change for no reason. The changes he implements do not prove beneficial. Eventually, the situation stabilizes because Laval steps in to fulfill Saint-Vallier's duties. Cather makes an argument for consideration rather than impulsive actions. She champions the elderly for their experience and wisdom. She also ponders change and asserts that it may be the trend, but it may not always be the best.

Through the telling of Blinker's history, Cather asserts the idea that suffering from illness teaches compassion. Sometime during the month of April, Cécile becomes ill with a cold and fever. Auclair cares for her and sets her to rest, while he manages the cooking. He nurses her with sassafras tea and hot mustard footbaths. Cécile enjoys the rest from her responsibilities. One evening, after Blinker completes his duties, he finds Auclair cleaning up in the kitchen and asks him to prescribe a sleeping aid. Surprised, Auclair prods further, believes Blinker to be in good health, and asks him if perhaps something is troubling him. Reluctantly, Blinker tells Auclair his history as a torturer in the King's prison at Rouen (*SOTR* 565). Forced into this service by his father, who was also a torturer, Blinker recounts a specific incident that haunts him. He once tortured a woman into confessing to her son's murder, only to find out that the son still lived. The woman was put to death. Blinker realized that she was innocent and he wonders how many others were also innocent. Simultaneously, his lower jaw started to fracture and crumble: "For weeks he never lay down, but walked the floor all night" (*SOTR* 566). He

began to see ghosts in his mind: “This was the first time he had ever suffered great pain, and ghosts began to haunt him. The faces of people he had put to torture rose before him, faces he had long forgotten” (*SOTR* 566). While he managed to escape his service, and start anew in Quebec, Blinker’s conscience is not clear. Overcome with emotion, by his confession, Blinker hangs his head in his hands. Auclair assures Blinker that his confession and repentance will free him. He also tells Blinker, “Your sickness was a good chance for you, my poor fellow. Suffering teaches us compassion” (*SOTR* 567). As Auclair tucks Cécile into bed, he sees that she has been crying. While she could not hear Blinker’s exact works, she could feel his distress. In his assurance that Blinker will be fine, Auclair compares him to Queen Dido—“Having known misery, I have learned to pity the miserable” (*SOTR* 568). Meaning can be found in illness. Suffering can produce both mental and emotional learning. Compassion is a learned behavior. Blinker’s suffering has taught him empathy.

In a later confessional scene, Cather portrays wisdom of age and integrity. One autumnal afternoon in October, Bishop Laval overhears Cécile crying and offers his assistance. Cécile feels “a longing to confide in him. She had never been intimidated by his deep-set, burning eyes or his big nose. She always felt a kind of majesty in his grimness and poverty” (*SOTR* 610). Bishop Laval’s poverty displays his integrity. Cécile continues to ponder Bishop Laval, “Seventy-four years of age and much crippled by his infirmities, going about in a rusty old cassock, he yet commanded one’s admiration in a way that the new Bishop, with all his personal elegance, did not” (*SOTR* 610). Despite his age and his disabilities, he inspires respect. Cécile also reflects upon the depth of his faith

and recognizes that it is deeper than most; his faith emanates from his presence. While sitting next to him on the bench, feeling comfort Cécile admits that, "His nature was so strong of its kind, and different from that of anyone else she knew" (*SOTR* 611). This poignant scene reflects an ideal; a young person seeking an answer finds it in the company and words of an elder. In this instance, with age comes wisdom.

Book Six, *The Dying Count*, opens at the end of October with the Count hopeful for word from the King about a new post: "All summer the Count had been waiting for his release from office, had confidently expected a letter summoning him to return to France to fill some post worthy of his past services" (*SOTR* 613). Having arrived in Canada, nine years prior, with the mandate to help Canada, the Count believes he has fulfilled his mission: "The fur trade was completely demoralized, and the Iroquois were murdering French colonists in the very outskirts of Montreal. The Count had accomplished his task. He had chastised the Indians, restored peace and order, secured safety of trade" (*SOTR* 613). Now, at seventy-eight years old, he wants to return to France. To no avail, the Count requests repeatedly for the King to recall him. Also, the King, aside from sending the Count "the Cross of St. Louis," has not recognized the Count's contributions to either Canada or the Crown (*SOTR* 613). Feeling undervalued and unappreciated, the Count realizes that if he does not return to France then Auclair doesn't, either.

The Count, intuiting his future, informs Auclair of the King's wishes. He states that when the last ships of the season arrive, he believes they would contain a letter with his recall. Unfortunately, he tells Auclair "the Minister sends me a letter concerning the

peace of Rijwijk, but ignores my petition for recall. He assures me of his Majesty's esteem, and of his desire to reward my services more substantially in the future" (*SOTR* 614). While the King's words imply one notion, his actions indicate another. Reflecting on the length of his future, the Count continues, "The future, for a man of my age, is an inconsiderable matter. His Majesty prefers that I shall die in Quebec" (*SOTR* 614). No longer under any illusions of returning home, the Count embraces his reality. Canada will be where his earthly existence ends and he is put to rest.

With the Count's request to the King, Cather provides a contemporary view of employment and aging, where elderly people are often disregarded. The King may view the Count, at seventy-eight years old, as irrelevant and unworthy of an answer. Or, the King may think he can ignore the Count until he fades away and can be replaced. The Count is not afforded the respect of a man who has served the King well into old age. He is also denied the opportunity to decide where he would like to die. Without the King's support, the Count must remain in Quebec. The Count has neither the option to retire nor the option to return home. He works right up until his dying process begins.

Loyalty marks Auclair's relationship with the Count. The Count releases Auclair from his patronage and offers him money so that he and Cécile can return home. After Auclair refuses the Count's offer, the Count tells Auclair, "But you have your daughter's future to consider. At the present moment, I can in some degree assure you another start in the world. But if I terminate my days here, you will be adrift, and I doubt you will ever get home at all" (*SOTR* 616). The Count admonishes Auclair for his practicality, which causes Auclair brief embarrassment; however, he remains firm in his desire to remain in

Quebec until his patron departs. Touched by and dismissive of Auclair's loyalty, the Count remembers a story from many years ago.

Throughout his adulthood, the Count has come to rely on Auclair's attention and admiration. The story reflects the required admiration that fuels the Count's relationship with Auclair: "When the apothecary left the chamber, the Count looked after him with a shrug, and a smile in which there was both contempt and kindness" (*SOTR* 616). The Count thinks about a particular time when he returned to France from war and "nearly ruined himself providing a new coach and horses and liveries to make a suitable re-entrance in the world" (*SOTR* 616). However, when he drove in his new coach to Paris to present himself, no one took notice. They were as dismissive as they had always been. Later that afternoon, as he crossed the bridge towards home he spied the first admirers of his carriage and horses. The old man and young boy looked familiar, and the Count recognized that they were his tenants "who lived in the pharmacy next to his stables" (*SOTR* 617). While the Count has spent much of his time and money trying to impress, upon remembering this incident with Auclair, he now understands something deeper about both himself and Auclair.

Aside from a vivid dream of returning to a house from his youth with his nurse, Noemi—the only woman who truly loved him—the Count begins to understand his deterioration through changes in his physicality. The Count reflects that "Of late the physical sureness and sufficiency he had known all his life had changed to a sense of limitation and uncertainty. He had no wish to prolong this state" (*SOTR* 619). The Count states that there is "no one in this world whom he would be sorry to leave." He dislikes

his wife, his son is already dead, and his relationship to Auclair is practical and on his part, not one of affection. He is ready to die and "die here alone, without pretence and mockery, with no troop of expectant relatives about his bed. The world was not what he had thought it at twenty—or even forty" (*SOTR* 619). Like Auclair's grandmother at her end-of-life, disillusionment fills the Count. He is not a spiritual man and values money and finery over love and authentic relationships. The Count is alone; the institution he has served loyally—the French Kingdom—will not provide for his retirement or return home. His faith resides in money and consumption rather than in modesty or community. Still, he believes that upon death, he will face God's judgment.

After a short decline, the Count dies as he lived—as a man alone to himself. One night, he slips into a coma and a group of neighbors and religious people congregate at his bedside. After a few hours, the Count wakes and lifts "his eyebrows haughtily, as if to demand why his privacy was thus invaded" (*SOTR* 629). He sees the nuns praying and realizes that it is time for him to die: "The challenge left his face,—a dignified calm succeeded it. . . . [H]e made a gesture with his left hand, indicating that he wished everyone to draw back from his bed" (*SOTR* 630). The Count succeeds in dying alone.

Through a fragmented format, Cather weaves a tale about aging and dying in *Shadows on the Rock.* Ann Romines writes that it "is more modern in technique, relying on modernist fragmentation and complexity. Especially in its narration of women's aging, this novel evidences, as Cather said, a structure of 'anacoluthon' (*"On Shadows on the Rock,"* 966) that signifies by gaps, absences, and distance" (409). While *Shadows on the Rock* happens over the course of one year, Cather leaves much out. Yet, if one of

Cather's goals in this novel is to explore aging and dying in modern society, she provides a realistic portrait of the Count, as an example of a disillusioned, modern man succumbing to his fate. The Count faces financial difficulties, employment issues, and lack of authentic relationships. Therefore, he dies with more complexity and less resolve. He works until his end and finds he is without love; his friendship with Auclair is not one of equals. Auclair provides a service, which the Count accepts and pays for. Auclair also serves as a balm to the Count's ego providing him with appreciation and admiration as the need arises. Disallowed to return home, to symbolize his conflict and separation, his physical body will be divided upon death and burial. His heart will go to France, while his body is buried in Quebec.

Chapter 7

"NEIGHBOBR ROSICKY" AND "OLD MRS. HARRIS": WISDOM OF AGE

In two of Cather's short stories, "Neighbor Rosicky" and "Old Mrs. Harris," she creates ideal father and grandmother characters; infuses these stories with realism; and portrays aging, illness, diminishment, and death with wisdom and acceptance. Both Rosicky and Mrs. Harris have lived and seen a lot; they love their families, they are in possession of kind and generous natures, and they are deeply satisfied with simplicity. Their dispositions differ; Rosicky emanates playfulness and respectability, while Mrs. Harris seems serious and dignified. While both display devotion to their children, Mrs. Harris finds her adult children to be disappointing and multi-generational living problematic, yet her grandchildren fulfill her completely. These two characters embrace the notion of sacrifice for the good of the group. They easily set aside their individual needs/desires to benefit the larger group, typically their family or community. This minimizing of their personal needs may reflect some of Cather's opinions about American capitalism during this period. The caregivers Cather assigns to both Rosicky and Mrs. Harris may seem surprising since they are neither all family members nor paid workers (such as a nurse or housekeeper). Neighbor Rosicky receives care from his Doctor; his wife; and his new daughter-in-law, Polly. Mrs. Harris has an even more eclectic group of caregivers, who are the former slave, Mandy; her foreign neighbor, Mrs. Rosen; and her young twin grandsons, Albert and Adelbert. While neither Rosicky nor Mrs. Harris suffers long in their illness, Cather provides them each with a variety of caregivers, which suggests that illness and death requires collective support.

These two short stories were published in 1932, after the death of Cather's mother, in a collection of three stories entitled *Obscure Destinies.* In July of 1931, Cather writes to Alfred A. Knopf to suggest (and it is unclear whether she was being completely serious) that if he doesn't like *Obscure Destinies* as a title, then perhaps he would like *Out West* better, since the three stories "are all western stories" with "Mrs. Harris" taking place in Colorado, "Neighbor Rosicky" being set in Nebraska, and "Two Friends" in Kansas (Jewell and Stout 449). While the regional reference of *Out West* clarifies the stories' locations, as a title *Obscure Destinies* hints at the depth and complexities contained within these stories. Her use of the word *destinies* implies aspects of life that are beyond human control. While Cather writes in a September 1931 letter to Alfred A. Knopf that "Two Friends" is the best short story she has ever written, this chapter will focus on "Neigbor Rosicky" and "Old Mrs. Harris" as they portray the complexities of aging, illness, diminishment, and death not only during the early twentieth century in America but also as they provide insights into caregiving and end of life that are applicable today.

A Bohemian farmer, "Neighbor Rosicky" raises his family, loves his wife, and enjoys his life as an immigrant in Nebraska. With a family of five sons and one daughter, Anton Rosicky and his wife, Mary, own and work their land. Neither rich nor poor, the Rosicky family has enough; Mary and Anton employ thriftiness when necessary, and indulge when appropriate. Rosicky's eldest, Rudolph, recently married an American girl, Polly, from town. Rudolph's serious disposition and long working hours on the farm leave Polly to cope with homemaking and isolation. At the center of the story resides Rosicky, who worries about Rudolph and Polly and intends to help them enjoy their life

together. The story begins with sixty-five-year-old Rosicky at his doctor's office hearing that his heart is failing.

Despite aging and illness, Rosicky's character and disposition display equanimity. As his doctor relays the diagnosis and cautions Rosicky against heavy work, rather than being frightened Rosicky seems entertained: "The old farmer looked up at the Doctor with a gleam of amusement in his queer triangular-shaped eyes" (587). While Rosicky's face appears slightly etched with age and weather, he does not look ill: "Rosicky's face had the habit of looking interested,—suggested a contented disposition and a reflective quality that was gay rather than grave. This gave him a certain detachment, the easy manner of an onlooker and observer" (587). Partially asking and partially stating the inevitable, Rosicky says to the doctor, "I can't make my heart go no longer'n it wants to, can I, Doctor Ed?" (588). The doctor believes Rosicky could live another five or six years, if Rosicky takes care (588). Rosicky protests when the Doctor tells him to help his wife around the house and in the kitchen. After leaving the Doctor's office, Rosicky calmly and happily continues with his errands in town. He chats and jokes with the shop girl, while she measures out fabric for his wife, Mary, and when he hears the bill's total, he asks her to put in some candy with the fabric as a surprise for Mary. Rosicky interacts with the world calmly and happily.

Along with Mary, Rosicky creates an almost perfect family—loving, easy going, and kind. With admiration, the doctor reveals Rosicky's familial blessings. He says, "My Lord, Rosicky, you are one of the few men I know who has a family he can get some comfort out of; happy dispositions, never quarrel among themselves, and they treat you

right. I want to see you live a few years and enjoy them" (588). While Cather doesn't write much about sibling relationships, with this statement, she acknowledges the rarity in any period of finding a family as cohesive and kind as Rosicky's. The Doctor asks about Rosicky's eldest son, Rudolph, and his bride, Polly. Rosicky tells him that they are doing fine; Rudolph, trying to be his own man, rents some nearby land for farming. At first, unsure of his wife's ability to accept an American daughter-in-law, Rosicky felt hesitant; now he feels unequivocal pleasure in Polly's spunk and style. A supportive family acts as a balm against bad news and hardship. A belief in his family and a level of faith can also account for Rosicky's calm manner when he hears the diagnosis from the Doctor.

Rosicky and Mary's love is not limited to family. Having known Rosicky since childhood, Doctor Burleigh feels warmth for both him and Mrs. Rosicky. A poor country boy before becoming a doctor, Doctor Burleigh recognizes that the Rosicky family's kindness and acceptance are unique. Looking at his stethoscope with irritation, the Doctor wishes "it had been telling tales about some other man's heart, some old man who didn't look the Doctor in the eye so knowingly, or hold out such a warm brown hand when he said good-bye" (589). Rosicky understands and accepts his fate; his heart may not last much longer. Yet, he does not fall apart upon hearing this news, but continues in his pleasant way.

Displaying hospitality provides a sense of pride, security, and purpose to Mary and Rosicky. The Doctor continues to reflect upon the Rosickys' hospitality. After a long winter's birth in a dirty home overrun with children, Doctor Burleigh refuses their

breakfast and drives over to the Rosicky farm for a morning meal: “He didn’t know another farm-house where a man could get such a warm welcome, and such good strong coffee with rich cream” (589). All the Rosicky family welcomes him into their kitchen. The five boys and Josephine pitch in with putting his horse in the barn, hanging up his coat, and setting an extra place for him at the table: “With Mary, to feed creatures was the natural expression of affection,—her chickens, the calves, her big hungry boys. It was a rare pleasure to feed a young man whom she seldom saw and of whom she was as proud as if he belonged to her” (590). Like Rosicky’s, Mary’s kindness and pleasure in other people and their success dominates her character. Having also known him since he was a child, she is so proud of Doctor Burleigh and takes a motherly interest in him.

Rosicky’s generosity does not produce financial success. For all of their kind ways and giving dispositions, the Rosicky family’s financial success is limited: “Sometimes the Doctor heard the gossipers in the drugstore wondering why Rosicky didn’t get on faster. He was industrious, and so were his boys, but they were rather free and easy, weren’t pushers, and they didn’t always show good judgment” (592). While Rosicky partially achieves the American dream of owning land and being debt free financially, there has never been much extra to save. Even in young adulthood, Rosicky’s ability to save is impeded by his generosity or self-indulgence. He could never withhold a loan for a friend (598). Doctor Burleigh ponders the Rosicky family’s generosity and warmth and thinks that maybe it’s impossible to “enjoy your life and put it in the bank, too” (592). In capitalistic America, Cather connects personal virtues to financial stability. In their article entitled, “Languages of the Heart: The Biomedical and the Metaphorical in

American Fiction," Benjamin J. Oldfield and David S. Jones argue that heart disease in "Neighbor Rosicky" symbolizes "a valiant, if futile, struggle to realize an unreachable American dream" (432). While beautiful, too much of a giving spirit can cause affect personal and financial health.

In a mindset unlike either St. Peter's or Myra's, Rosicky does not fear death. As Rosicky leaves town and drives back to his farm, in the wagon, he passes the graveyard at the edge of his property and reflects on death in a practical and positive way: "It was a nice graveyard, Rosicky reflected, sort of snug and homelike, not cramped or mournful,—a big sweep all around it. . . . And it was so near home" (593-94). Rosicky looks at the graveyard and then towards his own house and pledges that he will follow the Doctor's instructions; he will look after himself: "He was awful fond of his place, he admitted. He wasn't anxious to leave it. And it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hayfield" (594). Neighbors and friends are buried in the graveyard and this knowledge comforts Rosicky. Rosicky knows that when he dies, he will be in good company and remain physically close to his family.

Cather assigns a modern mindset to Rosicky, and his approach to life embodies acceptance. At home, Mary and Rosicky discuss his Doctor's visit. Rosicky's place is set at the table, for him to enjoy coffee and warm cake. Eating lunch in town seems a luxury that Rosicky neither enjoys nor can afford. As Mary asks Rosicky what the Doctor says, he jokes with her instead: "'He said I was to tell you some compliments, but I forgot 'em.' Rosicky's eyes twinkled" (595). Feeling exasperated, Mary persists in finding out his diagnosis. After several more questions, she starts to lose her patience and Rosicky

finally tells her what is wrong with his heart. In response, “Mary wanted to jump up, but she sat still. She admired the way he never under any circumstances raised his voice or spoke roughly. He was city-bred, and she was country-bred; she often said she wanted her boys to have their papa’s nice ways” (595). Mary respects Rosicky’s self-control and emotional stability. His consistency is the cornerstone of their lives together.

Cather portrays a different type of marital relationship through Mary and Rosicky’s marriage, which embodies cherishing, common values, and clear direction around their mutual goals. As Mary considers the diagnosis, she looks at Rosicky across the table and reflects on their marriage and family. A fact Mary hardly considers is the fifteen-year age difference between Rosicky and herself. While older, Rosicky appears neither old nor ill: “Mary sat watching him intently, trying to find any change in his face. It is hard to see anyone who has become like your own body to you” (596). It is as if, by seeing him every day for the past thirty years, Mary’s ability to see Rosicky’s physical change is hindered. On this day, she looks him over carefully and notices his thinning hair; his forehead lines; his sunburned, but firm neck; and his curved back: “They had been shipmates on a rough voyage and had stood by each other in trying times. Life had gone well with them because, at bottom, they had the same ideas about life” (596). They shared their beliefs through understanding, “without discussion” (596). Mary recognizes that their life consists of challenges and gentleness, especially on Rosicky’s part, which is exactly what she wants from her husband: “They had been at one accord not to hurry through life, not to be always skimping and saving” (596). If it was better for their children to drink cream rather than to profit by selling it to the creamery agent, as their

neighbors had, then so be it (597). Their family's health and well-being remain firmly at the center of their lives.

As an older parent, Rosicky experiences increased enjoyment of his children. Untypical at the time when Cather writes this story, by starting his family after thirty-five years old, Rosicky appreciates and enjoys his six children: "He had almost a grandfather's indulgence for them. He had never had to worry about any of them—except, just now, a little about Rudolph" (600). He owns a Ford car, which he mostly lets his children use to drive into town on Saturday nights to go to the movies. However, lately he feels anxious about the loneliness of Rudolph's wife, Polly, on the farm. Afraid that Polly's unhappiness will get worse, Rosicky decides that instead of letting the boys and Josephine take the car into town this Saturday, he will drive it over to Rudolph and Polly's for them to enjoy. He tells the family at breakfast, "Listen, boys; Polly ain't lookin' so good. I don't like to see nobody lookin' sad. It comes hard fur a town girl to be a farmer's wife. I don't want no trouble to start in Rudolph's family. When it starts, it ain't so easy to stop. An American girl don't git used to our ways all at once" (601). Mary agrees with Rosicky's decision to loan the car to Rudolph and Polly for a period. Disappointed, the boys support the new arrangement. Rosicky's concern and empathy for Polly is remarkable; his ability to understand people emanates from his intense observing and listening with complete attention.

While traditional, Rosicky also embraces and behaves in modern and romantic ways. He drives over to Polly and Rudolph's house to play a pseudo-cupid. He knows they need a night out in town to refresh their relationship. He believes in the benefits of

play and lightheartedness. With a formal and somewhat cold greeting from Polly, Rosicky comes into their house and offers the car. She declines and tells him that she is too tired and still has work to finish. Not to be deterred, Rosicky tells her, "You won't feel so tired after you ride in de air a ways. It's a nice clear night, an' it ain't cold. You go an' fix yourself up, Polly, an' I'll wash de dishes an' leave everything nice fur you" (602). Surprised and a slightly embarrassed, Polly responds, "I couldn't let you do that, Mr. Rosicky. I wouldn't think of it" (602). Rosicky takes an apron off the hook, guides Polly toward her bedroom, remarks that he's cleaned a kitchen many times before, tells her to dress up nice, and that he is going to look out for her: "That kind, reassuring grip on her elbows, the old man's funny bright eyes, make Polly want to drop her head on his shoulder for a second" (602). After a tearful admission of loneliness, Polly relents and Rosicky begins to clean the kitchen. Rosicky's thoughtful act would not have occurred to most people. In Rosicky's mind, it is not solely women's work to clean a kitchen or patch a pair of pants. Cather balances Rosicky's masculine and feminine traits; this results in his character blending traditionalism, modernism, and romance.

The owning of land is fundamental to Rosicky's wellbeing. Rosicky believes that without land a man is merely a wage-earner, "a slave, all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing" (604). Having lived, worked, and experienced the harsh conditions—hunger and poverty of city life—in London and New York, Rosicky believes in the kindness of nature. Even while the weather conditions of the winter contradict his belief, and the crops are doing poorly, Rosicky knows that the farm is the best option:

> It seemed to Rosicky that for good, honest boys like his, the worst they could do on the farm was better than the best they would be likely to do in the city. . . . What Rosicky really hoped for his boys was that they could get through the world without ever knowing much about the cruelty of human beings. (613)

He knows that neither he nor Mary has readied them for that reality. Their lives on the farm are pastoral; in spite of difficult times, when the crops fail, Rosicky and Mary's resiliency and equanimity shepherds the family through with ease.

Striving for the American Dream, as Oldfield and Jones suggest, so his boys will experience financial security, Rosicky suffers his first heart attack. Oldfield and Jones write, "The presence of CAD (Coronary Artery Disease) in American fiction at this time suggests a growing familiarity with these narratives, especially of laborers struck down as they struggled to get by in a competitive economy" (431). A dry spring arrives; while worrying about the alfalfa crop failing because of Russian thistle, and with the boys busy planting corn, Rosicky disobeys the Doctor's orders and begins raking the thistles. Shortly after he finishes, he feels a pain in his chest: "He started for the house, bending lower with every step. The cramp in his chest was shutting him up like a jack-knife" (614). Polly sees him from the house and comes running to support Rosicky. Polly gets him into the house and onto the bed, where she tends to Rosicky with hot compresses. After the pain subsides, Polly wants to call over to Rosicky's house, but he stops her. He says, "Don't telephone, Polly. It ain't no use to scare my wife. It's nice and quiet here, an' if I ain't too much trouble to you, just let me lay still till I feel like myself" (615). Rosicky entreats Polly to sit and talk with him while he rests.

During this episode of caregiving, Polly and Rosicky's relationship deepens. Rosicky apologizes for scaring her with his episode; he intuits that she may be pregnant. Polly confirms that she is newly pregnant and Rosicky is the first to know. Polly takes Rosicky's hand and he tells her that he wants to meet his grandchild. Polly realizes that "nobody in the world, not her mother, not Rudolph, or anyone, really loved her as much as old Rosicky did. It perplexed her. . . . It was as if Rosicky had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for colour" (616). Polly gives Rosicky her love in return. While she holds his hand, she continues to think, "You saw it in his eyes,—perhaps that was why they were merry. You felt it in his hands, too" (616). Touch is so important during illness; it conveys so much meaning and transfers energy between people. Both Polly and Rosicky derive benefits from their hands being clasped in each other's. Physical contact eases emotional and physical pain and greatly benefits ill people. Perhaps through holding his hand, Polly gives Rosicky the strength to live for another day.

With the conflict resolved, the question of Polly's character having been answered the day before, Rosicky's last deed is complete. Returning home later that day, and after sleeping well, the next morning feeling better, Rosicky begins mending some clothes as he meditates on Polly's character. Rosicky believes that Polly's caregiving and gentleness reflect her "tender heart" (617). He has the proof he needs that Rudolph and Polly's marriage will survive: "But now he knew Polly would make a fine woman after the foolishness wore off. Either a woman had the sweetness at her heart or she didn't" (617). Shortly after this realization, Rosicky suffers another heart attack and dies immediately.

Rosicky's wisdom springs from a full life and accepting disposition. His relatively quick period between diagnosis and death provides time for Rosicky to sort out Polly and Rudolph's relationship, but not enough for much else. Rosicky labors until the end, so while he balances his life for play and work, he is not free of obligations at the end.

While Cather portrays Rosicky as a lovable protagonist and character, he suffers minimally and his role as a man and patriarch ensures a decent ending. However, when Cather revisits this topic and structure four years later in her story "Old Mrs. Harris," Mrs. Harris is no less worthy than Rosicky; yet as a poor woman, even though she is the family matriarch, her ending is less than ideal. While she suffers some physical and emotional pain, her composure never falters. Like Rosicky, Mrs. Harris manages her life with a wise acceptance and experiences a similar fate—a relatively quick death. Unlike Rosicky, she lacks authority in her living situation, which results in her guarded demeanor and her diminished capacity for joy.

The neighbor Mrs. David Rosen believes that Mrs. Harris deserves better. The story begins with her looking out the window to see when Mrs. Harris's daughter, the "handsome" Victoria, will leave (619). She intends to have some time alone with Mrs. Harris. In preparation, Mrs. Rosen bakes a coffee-cake and fills her French press coffee pot, so she can run next door the moment Victoria exits. When the time comes, Mrs. Rosen finds Mrs. Harris in her overcrowded room standing "with her feet wide apart, in an attitude of profound weariness. She started guiltily as the visitor entered" (620). Mrs. Harris tells Mrs. Rosen that she just missed Victoria, but Mrs. Rosen replies that it's Mrs. Harris that she's come to see. She ushers Mrs. Harris into her rocker, sets down her tray,

and breaks off pieces of coffee-cake: “The old lady did not seem pleased,—seemed uncertain and apprehensive, indeed. But she was not fussy or fidgety. She had the kind of quiet, intensely quiet, dignity that comes from complete resignation to the chances of life” (620). Mrs. Harris feels uncomfortable by Mrs. Rosen’s visit and attention. She knows it would upset her daughter.

Mrs. Harris knows her place in the household and does not want to overstep her station. Mrs. Harris serves as both housekeeper and grandmother in Victoria’s house. While embraced by the love of her grandchildren (Vickie the eldest, the twins: Adelbert and Albert, Ronald, and baby Hughie) there is a distinction in the family’s hierarchy. Mrs. Harris eats after the family, sleeps in a common room without privacy, and manages the house and children. Mrs. Rosen suspects this discrepancy and it disgusts her. Mrs. Rosen knows that in the past, when she has brought over cake for Mrs. Harris, she merely saved it for her daughter, Victoria. This time, Mrs. Rosen promises herself that she will watch Mrs. Harris eat the cake with the hope that it delights Mrs. Harris. Unfortunately, this does not occur: “Receiving a visitor alone, unsupervised by her daughter, having cake and coffee that should properly be saved for Victoria, was all so irregular that Mrs. Harris could not enjoy it” (621). Mrs. Harris plays a role in Victoria’s house and she does not assert or insert herself into the center, which she believes is Victoria’s space. Mrs. Rosen believes that Mrs. Harris’s family, The Templetons, do not give Mrs. Harris the respect and admiration that she deserves.

It baffles Mrs. Rosen that Mrs. Harris, such an impeccable and interesting character, is not revered and adored by her family. She thinks, “The old lady was always

impressive, . . . —one could not say why. Perhaps it was the way she held her head,—so simply, unprotesting and unprotected" (621). Mrs. Harris's eyes display a seriousness and consideration. Mrs. Rosen describes Mrs. Harris as being noble like a lion. She notices that in Mrs. Harris there's "an absence of self-consciousness, vanity, preoccupation—something absolute" (622). While Mrs. Rosen does not describe Mrs. Harris as sad, she thinks Mrs. Harris's "drooping" mouth indicates resignation. Not much for laughing, when Mrs. Harris does laugh, she is merely being polite. The only time Mrs. Rosen observes true happiness in Mrs. Harris is when her "grandchildren were about, tumbling over her, asking for cookies, teasing her to read to them" (622). Mrs. Rosen misses a key element in Mrs. Harris's situation. Mrs. Harris's reticence and strict adherence to the decided upon order emanates from a fear of losing her place within Victoria's household. As an elderly, poor woman, she has no other housing options. If Mrs. Harris were to upset Victoria to the point of being asked to leave, where would she go?

Despite her neat and sturdy appearance, Mrs. Harris ails. Due to Mrs. Rosen's visit earlier in the day, Mrs. Harris does not rest, as she usually does, during the mid-afternoon. Consequently, cooking dinner that evening presents a greater challenge. Mrs. Harris "had to drive herself harder than usual. Mandy, the bound girl they had brought with them from the South, noticed that the old lady was uncertain and short of breath" (625). After the family finishes dinner, Mrs. Harris sits at the table, but can barely eat. She sleeps a little, while Mandy cleans the dishes. The children ask Mrs. Harris to read to them, and she obliges, but when Vickie, the eldest, enters, Mrs. Harris asks her to take over. Shortly after, Mrs. Harris nods off and Vickie shepherds the children upstairs for

bed. Mrs. Harris wakes and prepares for sleep: “Grandmother’s room, between the kitchen and the dining-room, was rather like a passage-way; but now that the children were upstairs and Victoria was off enjoying herself somewhere, Mrs. Harris could be sure of enough privacy to undress” (627). Even after a long day, Mrs. Harris must wait for the rest of the household to vacate the main floor so that she may go to sleep. She bears her lack of privacy with grace and acceptance, but her failing health requires more opportunities for rest.

Mandy, one level below Mrs. Harris in the familial hierarchy, acts as one of Mrs. Harris’s caregivers. After Mrs. Harris finishes dressing for bed, Mandy approaches and asks if Mrs. Harris would like a foot rub. Gratefully, Mrs. Harris exclaims that she would most appreciate having her feet rubbed: “For the first time in the long day the old woman’s low composure broke a little” (627). Not wanting water sloshed on the floor, Victoria’s rule requires Mandy and Mrs. Harris to use the basin, for the footbath, in the kitchen. After Mrs. Harris sits, Mandy removes her garters, stockings, and slippers. Surprised Mandy says, “Oh, Miz’ Harris, your feet an’ legs is swelled terrible tonight!” (627). Mrs. Harris replies that they feel swollen and Mandy responds empathetically.

Despite having nothing, Mandy gives freely and with great compassion. Hiding her exhaustion, Mandy gently rubs Mrs. Harris’s legs. Mrs. Harris reflects that Mandy provides her with “this greatest solace of the day; it was something that Mandy gave, who had nothing else to give. If there could be a comparison in absolutes, Mandy was the needier of the two,—but she was younger” (627). Cather at the end of the paragraph writes that Mandy’s gift to Mrs. Harris is “one of the oldest rites of compassion” (627).

Mandy provides the comfort that should seemingly come from Mrs. Harris's daughter Victoria. Regardless, Mandy's care infuses Mrs. Harris with the strength she needs to continue living.

Like Mrs. Lee in *O Pioneers!*, but to a more extreme level, with the relationship between Mrs. Harris and her daughter, Victoria, Cather provides another example of multigenerational living gone awry. At this point in the story, it is a challenge to not categorize Victoria as a mostly vain, selfish, and callous character. She seems indifferent to the care and comfort of her mother. Having a lounge with slats and a sliver of a mattress, instead of a bed, Mrs. Harris creates a "little comforter" out of an old and tattered, yet soft sweater Mrs. Rosen gave her last summer (628). As usual, Mrs. Rosen offers Mrs. Harris the sweater that her nephew left behind, after his visit, when they are alone. Mrs. Harris accepts the sweater and hides it under her apron until she can slip it under her mattress: "She knew Mrs. Rosen understood how it was; that Victoria couldn't bear to have anything come into the house that was not for her to dispose of" (628). When not joined by the family cat, Blue Boy, Mrs. Harris relies on the sweater for comfort; it "had become the dearest" of her scant possessions (628). "It was kinder to her, she used to think, as she wrapped it about her middle, than any of her own children had been" (628). Realistically, Mrs. Harris knows that Victoria's treatment of her lacks consideration, yet she accepts her fate as part of Victoria's household.

Mrs. Harris does not believe she has the personal agency or free will to choose her future. Cather writes, "Victoria had never once thought it possible that Ma should not go wherever she and the children went, and Mrs. Harris had never thought it possible" (628-

29). Victoria's family leaves Tennessee in hopes of securing a better financial situation in Colorado. While Mrs. Harris misses her old home, garden, neighbors, and yard in Tennessee, "the road had led westward, and" she "didn't believe that women, especially old women, could say when or where they would stop. They were tied to the chariot of young life, and had to go where it went, because they were needed" (629). Mrs. Harris should not be pitied; she believes and accepts her situation and would not seek to leave it. While her attitude reflects the norms of the time, it is also a common feeling among elderly today; their mental and physical diminishment, even if slight, can stymie decision making capacity and the feeling of personal power/autonomy.

Additionally, for middle-aged and elderly women, like Mrs. Harris, a feeling of invisibility occurs. Whether it is through an internal feeling or external experiences, as women age and lose their bloom of youth, society disregards their presence. As Mrs. Harris wakes and dresses for the day, she puts everything away—nothing stays out: "As soon as she was dressed, she made her bed, folding her nightgown and nightcap under the pillow, the sweater under the mattress" (629). Mrs. Harris keeps her living area so that appears to never be touched: "Her soap she kept in a tin tobacco-box; the children's soap was in a crockery saucer. If her soap or towel got mixed up with the children's, Victoria was always sharp about it" (629). Making sure the children's and Mrs. Harris's soaps are separate indicates Mrs. Harris's place outside Victoria's immediate family. Cather writes, "The little rented house was much too small for the family, and Mrs. Harris and her 'things' were almost required to be invisible" (630). Victoria's reasoning for Mrs. Harris's possession to be orderly and out of sight seems reasonable, because the house is

so cramped. However, she allows the children to drop their school satchels and coats anywhere. She allows their existence to be seen, even if the result is a chaotic, disorderly home, while Mrs. Harris's presence must be invisible.

Adding to the complexity of intergenerational living arrangements is the mother daughter dynamic between Mrs. Harris and Victoria, which suggests that the elder be unobtrusive, so the younger can garner all the attention. The question arises—why can't they both exist equally and independently? While Mrs. Harris's presence must be inconspicuous, the fine looks and charm of her daughter Victoria serve as a social currency. At the Methodist lawn party, the Templeton children notice, admire, and watch their mother in her "new dotted Swiss, with many ruffles, all edged with black ribbon, and wide ruffly sleeves" (641). Mr. Rosen pays attention to Victoria, as well; he helps her to a chair and drapes a scarf over her shoulders, so she will not get a chill. As her children watch, the twins particularly think "how much prettier their mother was than any of the other women, and how becoming her new dress was. The children got as much satisfaction as Mrs. Harris out of Victoria's good looks" (642). A woman's physical appearance bears a certain weight on her ability to be seen by the rest of society.

To clarify the relationship between Victoria and Mrs. Harris, Cather explains that it emanates from regional differences. As assumed in the West, with its pioneer spirit, rather than learning domestic skills and helping in the home, young girls in the South are expected to be "carefree and foolish" (644). Therefore, "when the foolish girl married and began to have children, everything else must give way to that. She must be humoured and given the best of everything, because having children was hard on a woman, and it

was the most important thing in the world" (644). In Tennessee, the common situation is for an older woman to manage her daughter's house and while they remain in the background, these older women have much agency over their domain (645). Unfortunately, when they moved from Tennessee to Colorado, Mrs. Harris gave up her home, which she owned and where she and the Templeton family lived, and she lost all the extra help that assisted them back home. Cather compares the South to a feudal society, and describes Colorado as a democracy, "where every man was as good as his neighbour and out to prove it" (646). Interestingly, in this section, Cather sheds light on the differences in the elderly mother and adult daughter relationship, which can manifest in a variety of formats according to region.

While Mrs. Harris's living situation seems unfair and depressing, it is largely of her own making and in alignment with her values. Keeping up appearances remains an important aspect of Mrs. Harris's life: "Her life was hard now, to be sure, since the family went on increasing and Mr. Templeton's means went on decreasing; but she certainly valued respectability above personal comfort, and she could go on a way yet if they always had a cool pleasant parlour, with Victoria properly dressed to receive visitors" (646). In Mrs. Harris's mind, Victoria is special, a unique creature, and for the neighbors to think of her as anything less than extraordinary equals failure (646). Mrs. Harris also values being part of a group, over individual preference (647). Mrs. Harris's family, particularly her grandchildren, give her enough pleasure, optimism, and purpose.

Mrs. Harris's philosophy of suffering emerges with the death of the cat, Blue Boy. When Blue Boy doesn't show up for his breakfast milk, one morning, Mrs. Harris sends

Mandy to search for him. Mandy finds Blue Boy in the barn "retching and choking" with his eyes "filled up with rhume" (648). Mrs. Harris realizes that Blue Boy has distemper. With the help of Albert, Mrs. Harris moves the cat to the coal-shed; they make a nest for Blue Boy out of hay and a bit of old carpet. Mrs. Harris stays to watch over Blue Boy and later in the day, when the children return, Albert asks Grandma Harris why their good cat has to suffer. Mrs. Harris replies, "Everything that's alive has got to suffer" (649). As a highly respected yet informally trained nurse, back in Tennessee, Mrs. Harris had seen much illness and death—among young and old. When Blue Boy passes that evening, Victoria tells the family that Mr. Templeton will call upon the refuse man in the morning for Blue Boy's removal. Full of resentment, Mrs. Harris chastises the twins and insists that they bury Blue Boy properly. Mrs. Harris's relationship to Blue Boy and her reaction to the plan for him to be thrown out with the trash reveals her deep reverence for life and death. While the cat's death serves as foreshadowing of Mrs. Harris's own death, her reaction to the discarding of his body and insistence on a proper burial also indicate one of her own fears about dying. Like the outdoor cat, when Mrs. Harris dies, in her poverty, will she be treated the same way?

In her quest for friendship with Mrs. Harris and in a surprising way, Mrs. Rosen provides care to Mrs. Harris and eases her psychological suffering. After Vickie's acceptance into Michigan University and the realization that the family doesn't have enough money to send her, despite the partial scholarship, Mrs. Harris's health begins to fail. She calls upon Mrs. Rosen to ask if Vickie can borrow the three hundred dollars from Mr. Rosen. Mrs. Rosen tells Mrs. Harris that Mr. Rosen will do it for her. She says,

"You know I care more about the old folks than the young" (662). On the verge of tears, Mrs. Harris thanks Mrs. Rosen deeply. Mrs. Rosen replies that she hopes they are "old friends" now and she would do anything for Mrs. Harris (662-63). While they are relatively new friends, Mrs. Rosen's feelings for and actions on behalf of Mrs. Harris provide Mrs. Harris with great comfort. This scene in "Old Mrs. Harris" addresses several aspects of aging in modern America that the elderly experience and can negatively impact their health, such as forming new friendships and sorting through financial issues.

While she leads a life of generous and uncomplaining caregiving, when it is her turn Mrs. Harris receives care back. Between Mandy, Mrs. Rosen, and the twins, in Mrs. Harris's final days, she is tended to. When Mrs. Harris experiences a dizzy spell or feels nauseous, Mandy makes Mrs. Harris either sit or lie down. Mandy provides Mrs. Harris with physical comfort and respite from her duties: "Mandy had to manage the house herself that day, and she was not at all sorry. There wasn't a great deal of variety in her life, and she felt very important taking Mrs. Harris's place, giving the children their dinner, and carrying a plate of milk toast to Mrs. Templeton" (667-68). Despite her excitement about her change in duties for the day, Mandy worries about Mrs. Harris. She suggests to the children that someone should watch over their grandmother.

The twins, Albert and Adelbert, provide Grandma Harris with emotional care. As Adelbert finishes their raking, Albert tends to Grandma: "It seemed to him his grandmother looked pretty sick. He watched her while Mandy gave her toast-water with whisky in it, and thought he would like to make the room look a little nicer" (668). As his

grandmother sleeps, Albert hangs up all the hats and coats, and rearranges the room so it looks neat. He brings his grandmother a cool glass of water and one of his best Sunday linen handkerchiefs for her to mop her brow. He asks if he can read to her, and eventually Adelbert returns home. After Adelbert fetches Grandma a drink, he sits by her side with Albert: "Grandmother was perfectly happy. She and the twins were about the same age; they had in common all the realest and truest things. The years between them and her, it seemed to Mrs. Harris, were full of trouble and unimportant. The twins and Ronald and Hughie were important" (669). Typically, a hardworking and content woman, Grandma Harris towards her end remains so. She feels the strong kinship and connection between herself and the children. While hallucinations are common at end of life, Cather doesn't depict visions, but rather Grandma Harris feels the beginnings of an afterlife, a preview of her reward—a sense of peacefulness and wholeness.

Mrs. Harris gives herself over to death, when the circumstances are right, and orchestrates her ending. Mandy, her main caregiver, ushers Mrs. Harris through her final evening on earth. Knowing the end is near, Mrs. Harris tells Mandy her time is up. Mandy responds by providing more comfort. She tries to warm Mrs. Harris's legs to no relief. Mrs. Harris's mind traces over her past and she remembers mostly pleasant scenes from Tennessee. By most of the family not knowing that Mrs. Harris is on her deathbed, appearances do not have to be maintained and she can die in peace. Eventually, Victoria and Vickie, who are both preoccupied with their own situations—the day before, Victoria unhappily finds out she is pregnant again and Vickie worries about preparing for the university and her departure—realize that Mrs. Harris is dying. Moving an already

unconscious Mrs. Harris to Victoria's bed, they redress her in a fine nightgown, call Mr. Templeton home, and begin to alert the neighbors: "But Grandmother was out of it all, never knew that she was the object of so much attention and excitement. She died a little while after Mr. Templeton got home" (672). Mrs. Harris embraces death as a natural part of life.

In the last paragraph, Cather mixes fiction with possibly her own personal history. Cather issues a reprimand to either herself or her readers or both. In reference to Victoria and Vickie's focus on themselves, Cather writes, "When they are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers" (672). Hopefully, though, they will realize that in their youth, they were heartless and unrelenting in their desires (672). With age, self-reflection, and suffering come wisdom and acceptance.

Chapter 8

SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL:

PHYSICAL DISABILITY, PAIN, AND ANGER

Cather tackles the complexities of slavery and physical disability in her last completed novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl.* Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* provides an illustration of psychological brokenness coupled with physical diminishment. Set before the Civil War in 1856 Virginia, this novel presents a story about a family, divided by their views on slavery, unraveling and coming back together. Compared to the treatment of caregiving in Cather's other novels, aspects of caregiving in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are at the same time both straightforward yet complicated and possibly flawed. This chapter will explore slavery, disabilities, pain, racism, psychological suffering, acceptance, and death. Readers can extract from this novel, through Cather's characterization of Sapphira, that an ill and disabled person can still be a force. Decades before disabled Americans received legislation protecting and providing for their rights and abilities, Cather presents Sapphira as a powerful woman directing the course of her life. While Sapphira could be considered the villain of this novel, Cather unequivocally guarantees that Sapphira is not viewed as a victim.

Before delving into Cather and her text, it is necessary to situate slavery and racism in America's health care history and current practices. While some critics argue that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* may be the weakest or most problematic in Cather's canon, it continues to inform and remain relevant because the novel focuses on race, disability, illness, death, caregivers, power, and inequalities. In a 2016 article from *The New England Journal of Medicine*, entitled "Structural Racism and Supporting Black

Lives—The Role of Health Professionals," doctors Rachel R. Hardeman, Eduardo M. Medina, and Katy B. Kozhimannil acknowledge structural racism as a major cause in the numerous untimely and violent deaths of black Americans. They define structural racism as "a confluence of institutions, culture, history, ideology, and codified practices that generate and perpetuate inequity among racial and ethnic groups" and they state that it "is the common denominator of the violence that is cutting lives short in the United States" (2113). In medical literature, references to racism are typically avoided; however, these doctors assert, "health care professionals have an individual and a collective responsibility to understand the historical roots of contemporary health disparities" (2113-14). Still today there are inherent misconceptions about the biological differences between whites and blacks: "A study published earlier this year revealed that 50% of white medical students and residents hold false beliefs about biologic difference between black and white people" (2114). Before the Civil War, doctors believed that slaves' health conditions were due to their "biologic inferiority" and their poor living conditions were not a contributor to their health status. Previously, the medical community discussed race, but not racism. The three authors ask, "When a person's race is ascertained and used in measurement, is it merely an indicator for race, or does it mask or mark racism? (2114). They conclude that the solution to improving black and minority health care resides in reforming the clinical and research "focus from race to racism" (2114). Collectively shifting the perspective in health care from the majority to the marginalized will improve the glaring inequalities still present in twenty-first century medicine.

The history of segregated health care for black Americans began during slavery. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* among numerous inequalities and inhumanity, Cather also depicts differences in health care, on the farm, for the slaves versus the white members of the family—specifically Sapphira. In her 2001 essay "Race, Ethnicity and Quality of Care: Inequalities and Incentives," which appears in the *American Journal of Law & Medicine*, Sidney D. Watson writes, "Racially segregated medical care arose during slavery times when every major plantation had a hospital where Black women cared for the slave laborers" (210). When slavery ended, the Jim Crow laws prevented blacks from using the health care system, which was only for whites. At that time, most hospitals only admitted white people and when a few hospitals did allow black patients, it was on a very limited basis. These hospitals accepted few black patients and "segregated them on 'colored' floors, and labeled sheets, gowns, and even thermometers as 'white' or 'colored'" (Watson 211). Through grant money, the federal government supported this segregation, and many white doctors refuse to treat black patients (211). The inequalities apparent in America's health care system today began during slavery and persist because of slavery's complex and insidious influence on race relations and a false hierarchy.

Out of necessity, two health care systems emerged—one for whites and one for blacks. Watson writes, "African-Americans had their own medical and nursing schools. Some Black communities built their own hospitals. Everywhere, the shortage of doctors meant that Black women and their folk remedies remained an important source of care" (211). While these achievements were a "source of community pride and mutual support" having a separate system denied the black community access to advanced medical

technologies as well as "basic care like physician services and sanitary child birthing facilities" (211). It also reinforced the dehumanization of African-Americans. In this system, white doctors and nurses consciously or unconsciously accepted that African-Americans did not deserve the same care as their white patients.

The two-race health care system faced scrutiny and dismantling during the civil rights movement. Watson states, "Initially, Black physicians sought admitting privileges to treat their Black patients at the better funded and better-equipped white hospitals" (212). In some instances, this tactic worked in cities like New York or Chicago. Interestingly, most hospitals were privately funded, and therefore somewhat immune to "local politics" and "Constitutional prohibitions" (212). While integrating public schools caused much controversy and drama, since hospitals were private institutions their integration occurred "quickly, quietly, and voluntarily" and "The 1963 ruling in *Simkins v. Moses H. Cone Memorial Hospital* is health care's *Brown v. Board of Education.* The decision declared segregated health care in private, federally funded Hill-Burton hospitals to be unconstitutional" (213). Watson argues, "the hospital desegregation story shows how the judicious use of financial incentives can bring about profound systemic change in health care. It also shows how civil rights concerns get waylaid when financial considerations create incentives to avoid minority patients" (214). On July 1, 1966 (also the initiation of Medicare), over 92 percent of American hospitals integrated whites and blacks into their facilities (Watson 215). Economic incentive of new federal money, plus the lack of political pressure due to the private nature of hospitals, enabled the desegregation of American hospitals. Writing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* some twenty

years before hospital desegregation, Cather adeptly portrays one example of slavery, on a Virginia farm, and the numerous discrepancies between blacks and whites, while highlighting white privilege in nineteenth century American health care.

During the writing of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather in her mid-sixties suffered from illness and deaths of two friends. In Part Eleven of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather,* Jewell and Stout write, "Working on it was essentially a retreat into memory, a way to find comfort as death and war clouded her world. And yet the novel is by no means a comfortable, sentimental book. It is a complex story of danger, injustice, and fear" (577). Cather resurrects an intense memory from childhood, writes it first as the Epilogue and then begins to construct the rest of the novel. In the summer of 1940, Cather writes to her brother, Roscoe Cather:

> The story was going strong and I was full of enthusiasm for it when Douglass died. After that I did not work any more at all for four months. Then Isabelle died. When I went back to the manuscript, I was almost a different person. I had lost my keen interest in the story. I have done all I can to mend that break in the story, and to make the latter part like the first, but the break will always be there. (Jewell and Stout 586)

Cather's own sadness and mourning hangs like a pall over her, while she writes this novel. Cather admits *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is "technically the most difficult book" she's written; its structure is experimental (Jewell and Stout 587). In another letter to Roscoe, Cather tells him, "Every word in the scene of Nancy's Return is true, my boy, even the weather. The excitement of that actual occurrence seemed to change me from a baby into

a thinking being. For years I had wanted to write that actual scene, but I could never see a way to use it except in a personal autobiography, and I hate autobiographies" (591). Cather models Rachel after her grandmother and the post-mistress after her great-aunt (592).

Cather presents Sapphira's strong personality and physical disability in the first chapter. This novel begins with Henry walking up the hill to breakfast and then arguing with Sapphira about selling Nancy to a neighbor. Henry forbids it, and Sapphira insinuates that it is because Nancy is his illegitimate daughter. Jealous of Henry's kind treatment of Nancy, Sapphira decides she will remove Nancy from her house. Cather reveals at the end of this first chapter that Sapphira is in a wheelchair. Cather writes, "The Mistress had dropsy and was unable to walk. She could still stand erect to receive visitors: her dresses touched the floor and concealed the deformity of her feet and ankles. She was four years older than her husband—and hated it" (*SSG* 783). Sapphira is a capable and exacting woman, and the marital duties are divided equally between her and her husband. Her husband manages the mill, while she manages the farm. Sapphira's inability to walk does not prevent her from leading her life.

Through family expectations and forced slave labor, Sapphira has an abundance of caregivers, who enable her to lead the life she desires. Cather constructs Sapphira's daughter, Rachel Blake—an older looking thirty-six (or thirty-seven) year old woman, mother, and daughter—as the main caregiver in this novel. Rachel, in alignment with her father's views against slavery, also shares his physical characteristics and looks most like him. After the earlier breakfast, Sapphira sees Rachel walking past the Mill House

towards the negro quarters: “Mrs. Blake took the path leading back to the negro cabins. She must stop to see Aunt Jezebel, the oldest of the Colbert negroes, who had been failing for some time. Mrs. Blake was always called where there was illness” (*SSG* 784). Rachel’s nursing skills are better than the local doctor’s. In addition to her healing skills, ill patients respond favorably to Rachel’s kind disposition and comforting ways. Rachel’s appearance, nature, ideology, and purpose are in direct opposition to her mother’s.

Sapphira’s belief in the hierarchy extends to caregiving. Upon learning that Aunt Jezebel is sleeping, Rachel humbly enters the main house through the servant’s door in the back. As she walks towards her mother’s room she hears Sapphira’s contemptuous angry voice. Sapphira yells at Nancy, “Take it down this minute! You know how to do it right.” Rachel then hears a “smacking sound, three times: the wooden back of a hairbrush striking someone’s cheek or arm” (*SSG* 784). As Rachel enters the room, Nancy hurries out silently. Indirectly, Sapphira tells Rachel that she has arrived too early. Rachel replies, “Yes, I’m earlier than I calculated. I stopped to see old Jezebel, but she was asleep, so I came right on in.” Sapphira smiles, amused by Rachel’s characteristic behavior. She thinks, “Sooner than disturb a sick negro woman, Rachel had come in to disturb her at her dressing, when it was understood she did not welcome visits from anyone. How like Rachel!” (*SSG* 785). Sapphira views Rachel’s early arrival as an annoying intrusion. She believes that as mistress of the house, she deserves greater consideration than her dying elder, Jezebel.

Early on in this novel, Cather reveals that Rachel treats everyone in the same manner—kindly and with respect—regardless of race or economics. Sapphira does the

same; however, she holds herself higher than everyone. Her husband, daughter, servants are all included in the hierarchy Sapphira abides by. Happily marrying Rachel off at seventeen, Sapphira has always felt that Rachel is rebellious and difficult. Even now, Rachel does not own any slaves and disapproves of slavery (*SSG* 786). Sapphira feels this to be an affront. Additionally, Sapphira disagrees with Rachel's poverty and faith; she believes that the people Rachel worships with are too common: "Rachel was poor, and it was not much use to give her things. Whatever she had she took where it was needed most; and Mrs. Colbert certainly didn't intend to keep the whole mountain" (*SSG* 799). Rachel and Sapphira embrace different ideologies and methods of personal conduct, yet Cather allows them to maintain a friendly, if distant, relationship.

Sapphira's diminished ability to dress herself requires her to submit to caregiving. In a tender scene between Sapphira and her "parlour maid" Till, it becomes apparent that Sapphira's disability requires her to receive substantial care: "Till set about dressing her mistress; took off the morning jacket and slipped a starched white petticoat and a cashmere dress over Mrs. Colbert's head." Till says, "Don't raise yourself up, Miss Sapphy. I'll pull everything down when you has to rise." While being dressed, Sapphira tells Till that she would like to wear the "new kid-leather shoes" despite them causing pain (*SSG* 796). Till replies, "Now just you wear the cloth slippers and be easy, Miss Sapphy. Let me wear the kid shoes round the house a few days more an' break 'em in for you" (*SSG* 796). Looking at her swollen legs, Sapphira jokes, "Hush, Till. You mustn't baby me" (*SSG* 796). Sapphira and Till's exchange suggests a caring and compassionate relationship between the two women. Sapphira would never consider Till a friend; she is

a slave whose purpose is to serve Sapphira's household. Yet, this scene portrays Sapphira's humanity (when it comes to her own health and vulnerability) and hints at a concealed fragility.

Cather balances Sapphira's coolness towards Rachel and meanness towards others with kindness towards her two granddaughters. On Sapphira's way to the post office, she passes her daughter's house, empty of Rachel, since she was called to look after a sick neighbor during the night; the two girls run out of the house excited to see their grandmother. Sapphira asks if they would like to go for a ride in her carriage to the post office. Happily, Betty and Mary jump into the carriage. Sapphira refers to the elder granddaughter by a term of endearment—Molly. Cather writes, "Her real name was Mary, but since she promised to be a pretty girl, her grandmother had taken a fancy to her and called her Molly. It was understood that this name was Mrs. Colbert's special privilege; her mother and schoolmates called her Mary" (*SSG* 798). After the visit to the post office, Sapphira buys a pound of candy from the country store, which she gives to her granddaughters as she drops them off at home. Betty and Mary, unaccustomed to the wealth that their mother experienced while growing up under Sapphira's roof, are pleased by Sapphira's carriage and gift of candy. Mary even wishes that her schoolmates could see her riding in the carriage. While it is a brief visit, Sapphira seems to enjoy her granddaughters' company. The girls are well mannered and treat Sapphira with the respect that she expects.

The suffering Sapphira's experiences from her illness, while unpleasant and debilitating at times, do not prompt her to act immorally; her behavior throughout her

adulthood and affliction remains consistent. Through this depiction of the relationship with her granddaughters, Sapphira seems capable of love; however, her distorted nature settled in years ago, before her dropsy occurred. Early on in Book II, Till reveals her history at the Mill Farm, "When Sapphira married her off to Jefferson, who was so much older, and whose incapacities were well known among the darkies, Till accepted this arrangement with perfect dignity. How much it hurt her pride no one ever knew; perhaps she did not know herself" (*SSG* 818). Jefferson is sterile, so he and Till would never have children together. Till continues, "Perhaps the strongest desire of her life was to be 'respectable and well-placed.' Mrs. Matchem had taught her to value position. It was the right thing for a parlour maid and lady's maid to be always presentable and trim of figure" (*SSG* 818). Taking her responsibility of discretion and loyalty to the extreme, Till conceals the identity of Nancy's father from readers. Among the household and community, speculation places paternity on either the Cuban painter who did the family portraits, or one of Henry Colbert's brothers—Guy or Jacob. Inhumanely, Sapphira marries Till to an infertile man, thus denying her children. Adding further insult, Till is possibly raped or coerced into sex by either the painter or a Colbert brother. The act results in a child, Nancy, and to a certain degree Till loses respectability. Sapphira's control extends to every aspect of her farm, including her slaves' ability to procreate and their safety from physical and sexual abuse.

According to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, one of the problematic aspects of this novel is Till's relationship with Sapphira. Till is Sapphira's main caregiver. While wrestling with the moral issue of

slavery and racism, Cather writes this novel from a majority perspective, thus appropriating the black experience. Morrison writes, "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (17). Cather creates Sapphira and Till to illustrate the power of the white mistress and the devotion of her household slave. Yet, this portrayal emerges from a white person's lens or means of viewing the world. Morrison ponders key questions about Till in this text, such as her loyalty to her mistress over her own daughter, Nancy. At one point in the novel, a frustrated Sapphira decides that she will invite her nefarious nephew to visit, knowing that he will attempt to have sex with Nancy. In Sapphira's mind this will cause the moral Henry to no longer view Nancy as an innocent young girl and will result in his rejection of Nancy and possibly a renewed interest in Sapphira. As Morrison writes, Sapphira's reason for this plan and her expected results are murky: "The purpose of arranging the rape of her young servant is to reclaim, for purposes not made clear, the full attentions of her husband" (19). Morrison also highlights Till's reactions to Nancy's situation as improbable and offensive; Till is Nancy's mother and aside from a brief reference to Nancy's safety after her escape, Cather seems oblivious to this fact. She writes:

> Because Till's loyalty to and responsibility for her mistress is so primary, it never occurs and need not occur to Sapphira that Till might be hurt or alarmed by the violence planned for her only child. That assumption is based on another—that slave women are not mothers; they are "natally dead," with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents. (21)

Cather's construction of Till—her excessive devotion to Sapphira in contrast to her seemingly meek acceptance of her daughter Nancy's rape and escape—lacks motherly credibility.

Morrison draws parallels to the disabled body serving as imprisonment. While Nancy escapes, thus changing her status to fugitive, Sapphira is also a fugitive, "committed to escape: from the possibility of developing her own adult personality and her own sensibilities; from her femaleness; from motherhood; from the community of women; from her body" (Morrison 26). Morrison develops the argument that Sapphira's bodily cares are tended to by her slaves, so she must live vicariously through them: "In this way she escapes her illness, decay, confinement, anonymity, and physical powerlessness" (26). Sapphira derives everything from her slaves. Morrison concludes, "The surrogate black bodies become her hands and feet, her fantasies of sexual ravish and intimacy with her husband, and, not inconsiderably, her sole source of love" (26). Skaggs agrees with Morrison's assessment in *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather*, "Given the subtle ripples, however, one of the novel's central ironies is that the slaves love best their arbitrary and autocratic Ole Miss Sapphira, not her Baptist daughter, Rachel" (174). Like her slaves, Sapphira is neither physically nor emotionally free. Sapphira's love for her slaves, who also serve as her caregivers, is based on a power system of domination and dysfunction.

To turn back to the text, despite her infirmity, Sapphira's ability to observe is not hindered and her jealously rears when she sees her husband talking privately to young Nancy. It is this event that solidifies Sapphira's rape plan for Nancy. Prior to this event,

in a scene of kindness and respect, Sapphira visits Jezebel, who is near death, and talks with her compassionately. Upon Jezebel's death, Sapphira arranges an inclusive and abundant funeral for Jezebel's distant relatives, the community of slaves, neighbors, and the estate. It is during the walk from the graveyard that Sapphira catches a glimpse of Henry talking to Nancy. Sapphira describes, "The girl was in an attitude of dejection, her head hanging down, her hands clasped together, and the Master, whatever he was saying, was speaking very earnestly, with affectionate solicitude" (*SSG* 836). From this scene Sapphira surmises that she is witnessing a very personal conversation: "Whatever he was pressing upon that girl, he was not speaking as master to servant; there was nothing to suggest that special sort of kindliness permissible under such circumstances. He was not uttering condolences. . . . He had forgotten himself" (*SSG* 836). It's unclear what upsets Sapphira more: the fact that Henry may have feelings for Nancy—be they paternal or otherwise—or that he deviates from the hierarchy of her social codes. As Morrison states, Sapphira's imaginations, delusions, and luxury of time all fuel her desperation and fugitive status. The slaves are hers to manipulate, control, and embody.

While angry and hurt by this episode, Sapphira reflects upon her own caregiving. Similarly, her father had also been disabled and in pain as he aged: "She wished she had been kinder to him in the years when he was crippled and often in pain. She wished she had shown him a little tenderness. His eyes used to ask for it sometimes, she remembered" (*SSG* 836). Sapphira's remembering and intuiting her father's emotional needs displays a hidden sensitivity. Unfortunately, Sapphira's inability to act upon this information and follow her inclination never allows her to express deeper feelings with

her father. She continues to reflect, "She had been solicitous and resolutely cheerful; kept him up to the mark, saw that his body servant neglected nothing. But she knew there was something he wanted more than he wanted clean linen every morning, or to have his tea just as he liked it" (*SSG* 837). Emotionally, Sapphira could only provide the basic level of practical care. Cheerfulness provided a shield from deeper connection or communication:

> She had never given in to him, never humoured his weakness. In those days she had not known the meaning of illness. To be crippled and incapacitated, not to come and go at will, to be left out of things as if one were in one's dotage—she had no realization of what that felt like, none at all. Invalids were to be kept clean and comfortable, greeted cheerily; that was their life. (*SSG* 837)

Through her own experiences with disability, feeling left out, imprisonment within her body, Sapphira can now emphasize with her father. She no longer sees illness or disability as an intolerable weakness.

According to Skaggs, Sapphira earns her eventual, self-directed, and beautiful death. Skaggs writes, "Though debilitated and even deformed by her illness, 'She would make her death easy for everyone, because she would meet it with that composure which. . . [Henry] had sometimes called heartlessness, but which now seemed to him strength'" (177). Sapphira dies at home, surrounded by her daughter Rachel, and husband, Henry, in the place she loves best. At her end of life, Sapphira expresses something akin to remorse when she says to Henry, "We would all do better if we had our lives to live over again" (*SSG* 926). Henry refutes Sapphira and tells her that she's good in her own way. Skaggs believes that "Cather insists that we see Sapphira as a woman whose

selfishness most enviably preserves and sustains her" (177). Despite her character flaws and immoral behavior, Sapphira has a peaceful death. Sapphira is not punished on her deathbed.

Does Sapphira deserve a peaceful death? From multiple perspectives, critics would argue that she does not. This ending confounds; by allowing Sapphira, a contradictory character who leans mostly towards evil, a peaceful death Cather seems to suggest that morality can't be ascribed to a person based on their end of life suffering. Many good people suffer deeply during the dying stages, just as many corrupt individuals do as well. Suffering is inevitable; it affects everyone at some point in life. Where Sapphira differs is how she manages her suffering. That is Cather's point: at the end Sapphira has reached a state of acceptance, which enables her to let go with dignity. A peaceful, good death requires acceptance.

Cather's treatment of illness, aging, diminishment and death in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is complicated by the numerous social issues she presents in the novel: slavery, abolition, rape, family, farming, gender, poverty, social classes, religion, and regionalism. Sapphira's infirmity magnifies a complex and imperfect character. Anchored in an inhumane ideology, Sapphira displays a collection of emotions: misguided loyalty, kindness, jealousy, and anger. Eventually, her disability teaches her empathy, but she applies it selectively. Completely opposite Sapphira in most every way, Sapphira's daughter, Rachel, provides the balance, perspective, and justice in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl.*

Sapphira's psychological suffering runs deep in her character. Sapphira was raised with a set of beliefs and a method of comportment that are fundamentally inhumane. It is only through her own personal experience that she is able to understand empathy. As a complex and imperfect character, even though she may understand another's pain, Sapphira does not always feel compelled to act compassionately. However, Cather provides Sapphira with a key insight—illness and disability do not equal weakness. It is only through her disability that Sapphira gains humanity and a greater understanding of the human condition. Finally, Cather does not equate a good death with merit. Leading a decent life does not ensure a death free of suffering. Suffering is a part of life and will occur at some point (often at many points) on a person's lifeline. Cather implies that creating a good death requires elements of personal agency—Sapphira chooses who is with her when she dies and her location, her beloved Mill farm—and acceptance. Understanding and embracing that the end has come allows for a peaceful death. (Cather examines and endorses these themes in greater detail in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.) However, whatever happens to Sapphira in the afterlife is anyone's guess.

Chapter 9

DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP:

HOW TO LIVE AND DIE WELL

Contrary to the fact that it was not the last published of the works discussed, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is discussed last in this dissertation. Cather wrote this novel after *My Mortal Enemy*, but before *Shadows on the Rock*, "Old Mrs. Harris," "Neighbor Rosicky," and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl.* She completed and published this novel before the illness and death of either of her parents. Cather's positive and optimistic mindset and outlook, while writing this novel, embrace an ideal. While the four works of fiction—*Shadows on the Rock*, "Old Mrs. Harris," "Neighbor Rosicky," and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—that arrive after *Death Comes for the Archbishop* provide a more realistic view of aging, illness, diminishment, and death, it is through this novel that readers can find inspiration and guidance towards creating a life and a death that is more than merely satisfactory.

Published in 1927, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a beautifully epic narrative centered on the work and friendship of Father Joseph Vaillant and Bishop Jean Marie Latour. In *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather*, Skaggs writes in reference to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that it "became one of the nation's masterworks of triumphant serenity" (Skaggs 112). The novel begins twice, with the Prologue and then Book One. The Prologue is set in Rome, with three Cardinals and an American Bishop dining and discussing together the promotion of a parish priest by the name of Jean Marie Latour to become a Bishop in New Mexico. Book One opens with Cather's Cubist word painting description of the desert and boyhood friends, Father

Vaillant riding alongside Bishop Latour: "The two rode into Santa Fé together, claiming it for the glory of God" (*DCFA* 288). Spanning four decades, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a tapestry of tableaus and inset stories. Cather eschews a plot in favor of creating a complete narrative of fully lived lives and their inevitable, yet graceful deaths. This novel reflects Gawande's distinction that a good death should not be the goal. Rather, a good life all the way to the end is the goal (245). While Cather chooses to characterize her protagonists as religious men, the characteristics they embody and experiences they create to manage the aging, dying, and caregiving process are attainable. Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour's roles as clergymen do not preclude the novel from offering numerous insights to non-cleric adults on how to live and die well.

Cather experienced much joy during the writing of *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* In a letter to literary agent Paul Revere Reynolds, Cather clarifies:

> This story is not a love story, any more than "Robinson Crusoe" is; it is simply not that sort of story at all. It is concerned with the picturesque conditions of life in the Southwest, just at the time that New Mexico was taken over from Old Mexico, and with the experiences of two Catholic missionaries who were sent there to bring order out of the mixture of Indian and Spanish and Mexican superstitions. (Jewell and Stout 378)

While this novel is not a love story in the traditional sense, the elements of love between the characters, and the author's experience of writing it, suggest otherwise. In an August 1926 letter to Louise Guerber Burroughs, sent during her stay at The MacDowell Colony, an artist retreat in New Hampshire, Cather writes, "I'm enjoying the Bishop again, after

weeks of separation—its [sic] like a ball where you have to dance for hours with other partners and then come back to the real one" (Jewell and Stout 384). In another letter, Cather describes the writing of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a return to the classic. In an October 1926 letter to Fanny Butcher, Cather writes, "I do hope you'll like my Archbishop, Fanny. . . . It's an altogether new kind for me, but how I loved doing it! It was as if one had always played modern composers, and at last had the time and control to practice Bach awhile. Modest comparison!" (Jewell and Stout 389). It is clear from Cather's letters that the process alone—writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—satisfies her deeply. On a personal level, Cather uses writing (her life's work) to create meaning and joy in her life. Her joyful process informs this idealistic tale of living and dying.

As religious men, Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour are needed. They are the ultimate caregivers in Cather's works. Whether they are performing rites, ceremonies, or confessions, or visiting a sick community member, they are called upon:

> Cherry Creek was full of saloons and gambling-rooms; and among all the wanderers and wastrels were many honest men, hundreds of good Catholics, and not one priest. The young men were adrift in a lawless society without spiritual guidance. The old men died from exposure to mountain pneumonia, with no one to give them the last rites of the Church. (*DCFA* 426)

Without a structured legal system to govern, the Catholic religion is necessary for order to be instituted and maintained: "This new and populous community must, for the present, the Kansas Bishop wrote, be accounted under Father Latour's jurisdiction" (*DCFA* 426).

After Bishop Latour reads this letter to Father Vaillant, they decide together that Father Vaillant will be the priest to go to Cherry Creek to assist and instruct the inhabitants. It is a religious call for the missionary, and a practical one for care and education. The men in Cherry Creek are not keeping the mountain water clean and as a result, they are dying. Father Vaillant is expected not only to provide spiritual guidance and religious rituals but also to show them proper and practical ways of living.

While there is a need for their knowledge and services, Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour have their own life's purpose. Father Vaillant does not meekly agree to go to Cherry Creek, but says, "So, now I must begin speaking English again! I can start tomorrow if you wish it" (*DCFA* 427). He is enthusiastic and ready to embrace a new challenge. If Father Vaillant is the man of action in this narrative, then Bishop Latour is the man of contemplation, refinement, and art: "The Bishop sat down on a boulder, still looking up at the cliff…this hill confronted me as it confronts us now, and I knew instantly that it was my Cathedral" (*DCFA* 423). Within his scope of service, Bishop Latour demonstrates personal agency. Cather writes, "Not so very long, I hope. I should like to complete it before I die—if God so wills. I wish to leave nothing to chance, or the mercy of American builders" (*DCFA* 423). Like Father Vaillant, who heartily heeds the call to Cherry Creek, Bishop Latour is filled with a purpose to build his Cathedral.

Through their friendship, Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour experience love and attachment. Cather writes of Bishop Latour, "As a Bishop, he could only approve Father Vaillant's eagerness to be gone, and the enthusiasm with which he turned to hardships of a new kind. But as a man, he was a little hurt that his old comrade should leave him

without one regret" (*DCFA* 429). It is natural to form attachments, but for religious missionary men, attachments are counterproductive. The church would decree that their only attachments should be to God and his word. However, Bishop Latour further contemplates, "He seemed to know, as if it had been revealed to him, that this was a final break; that their lives would part here, and that they would never work together again" (*DCFA* 429). The Bishop's feeling is correct. The work partnership between Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour is over. Father Vaillant returns "to visit his old friends, whenever his busy life permitted. But his destiny was fulfilled in the cold, steely Colorado Rockies, which he never loved as he did the blue mountains of the South" (*DCFA* 433). Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant have a profound love for each other, which is demonstrated by their ability to each allow the other to exercise his own free will.

In the yin and yang of Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour's relationship, the opposite of attachment is detachment and they employ both components in their relationship. While Bishop Latour feels his pain over Father Vaillant's departure, he allows him to go. He does not cling tightly to Father Vaillant, but practices loving detachment. Consequently, Father Vaillant is free to choose his path:

> The two priests talked until a late hour. There was Arizona to be considered; somebody must be found to continue Father Vaillant's work there. Of all the countries he knew, that desert and its yellow people were the dearest to him. But it was the discipline of his life to break ties; to say farewell and move on into the unknown. (*DCFA* 427)

Detachment is a discipline and Father Vaillant moves on often, but he loves and is loved. As proof, at Father Vaillant's funeral, dying men travel considerable distances to pay their respects: "It was one more instance of the extraordinary personal devotion that Father Joseph had so often aroused and retained so long, in red men and yellow men and white" (*DCFA* 453). Just as attachment is essential in love, so is detachment. There is a balance and in any relationship, one person may (in this case Bishop Latour) feel a greater attachment, but remaining centered in love (for Father Vaillant) creates space to detach. The power and control components of a relationship are then negated, thus allowing love and life to flow.

Bishop Latour detaches freely, but it is not easy and he is not immune to loneliness. He acknowledges his personal loss, "Now it came over him in a flash, how the Bishop had held him aloof from his activities; it was a hard thing for Father Latour to let him go: the loneliness of his position had begun to weigh upon him" (*DCFA* 430). A partnership, especially where there is shared work and beliefs, can feel like a marriage, of sorts. Cather uses two mules that work together as symbols of Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant. Bishop Latour says, "But if you take Contento, I will ask you to take Angelica as well. They have a great affection for each other; why separate them indefinitely? One could not explain to them. They have worked long together" (*DCFA* 431). Indeed, in a long partnership or marriage, to remove one partner from the equation can be detrimental to the other. Without the ability to detach, loneliness can fester and both partners (or mules) may falter. Cather writes, "Father Vaillant made no reply. He stood looking intently at the pages of his letter. The Bishop saw a drop of water splash down upon the

violet script and spread. He turned quickly and went out through the arched doorway" (*DCFA* 431). What Cather portrays in words and thoughts from Bishop Latour, she shows in action from Father Vaillant—the tear dropping from his eye. Contento and Angelica represent Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant's partnership—a loving, steady, purposeful, and continuous walk through the desert. In asking Father Vaillant to take both mules, Bishop Latour expresses the depth of his true feelings to Father Vaillant. This expression of feelings is key to letting the emotion pass.

Cather illustrates that Bishop Latour's loneliness is ameliorated quickly by his deep spiritual beliefs. He finds comfort in God:

> But when he entered his study, he seemed to come back to reality, to the sense of a Presence awaiting him. The curtain of the arched doorway had scarcely fallen behind him when that feeling of personal loneliness was gone, and a sense of loss was replaced by a sense of restoration. (*DCFA* 432)

God, or a greater being, is there for Bishop Latour to soothe him in his time of distress: "He sat down before his desk, deep in reflection. It was just this solitariness of love in which a priest's life could be like his Master's. It was not a solitude of atrophy, of negation, but of perpetual flowering" (*DCFA* 432). The Presence cures loneliness with the reminder of constant growth. Grace is everywhere; it is perpetually in motion.

In Cather's other novels, such as *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy*, aging is difficult and something to fight against. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, aging is acknowledged and accepted: "'Well, we are getting older, Jean,' he said abruptly, after a short silence. The Bishop smiled. 'Ah, yes. We are not young men

any more. One of these departures will be the last.' Father Vaillant nodded. 'Whenever God wills. I am ready'" (*DCFA* 435). Death is inevitable, and Father Vaillant is at peace with this fact. Cather writes:

> He rose and began to pace the floor, addressing his friend without looking at him. "But it has not been so bad, Jean? We have done the things we used to plan to do, long ago, when we were Seminarians,—at least some of them. To fulfill the dreams of one's youth; that is the best that can happen to a man. No worldly success can take the place of that." (*DCFA* 435)

Cather seems to be saying that it is impossible and probably not worthwhile to strive for it all. Yet to be content to achieve one or two childhood dreams makes a life worthy, and makes aging more palatable.

Cather also alludes to physical locations having the power to reinvigorate and put a pause on aging. Bishop Latour reflects that: "In New Mexico he always awoke a young man; not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older" (*DCFA* 443). A good night's sleep and waking in the right atmosphere can bring back the feelings of youth. Sometimes returning to a special place can change an outlook: "Beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, the charm of noble women, the graces of art, could not make up to him for the loss of those lighthearted mornings of the desert, for that wind that made one a boy again" (*DCFA* 443). The wind and the desert are so powerful that they evoke deep memories that allow Bishop Latour to feel the past in the present.

As the aging process continues, Bishop Latour successfully considers his retirement, recreation, and new connections. Retirement, recreation, and forming new connections are typically challenging for people as they age, but Cather allows Bishop Latour to embrace these three topics quite simply: "In his retirement Father Latour's principal work was the training of the new missionary priests who arrived from France" (*DCFA* 438). While he is no longer required to perform the sum of his previous duties, Bishop Latour is still needed and useful. He has a lesser amount of work to perform, but it is important work to be done. Additionally, "Father Latour's recreation was his garden. He grew such fruit as was hardly to be found even in the old orchards of California; cherries and apricots, apples and quinces, and the peerless pears of France—even the most delicate varieties" (*DCFA* 438). Like Rosicky from Cather's "Neighbor Rosicky," Bishop Latour knows that recreation is important—just as hard work is essential, so is having the time to relax. Bishop Latour pours his energy and love into his garden: "He often quoted to his students that passage from their fellow Auvergnat, Pascal: that Man was lost and saved in a garden" (*DCFA* 438). For Bishop Latour, there is a spiritual component to gardening: the garden is productive and the fruit nourishes. He moves his body in the garden and the repetitive work is conducive to prayer or meditation. In his heart and mind, God is present in the garden. Recreation that is spiritual can sustain a soul creatively, emotionally, and physically.

Another form of recreation that nourishes a soul spiritually, like gardening, cooking, or writing, is the creation of art. Just as Bishop Latour would like to build a cathedral of Santa Fé as part of his legacy, the elderly population clearly benefits from

similar creative pursuits that allow reflection. In his 2017 text, *Folk Art & Aging: Life-Story Objects and Their Makers*, Jon Kay interviews several senior citizens in Indiana who make memory woodcarvings, rugs, and paintings to reflect their personal narratives. In the Introduction, Kay writes, "Although some people make art throughout their lives, many gerontologists recognize that old age is often the creative age" (3). As Kay explores folk art (and it is key to note that "unlike other genres of art where the elderly may be the exception, elders play a prominent role in creating and maintaining many folk arts" [3]), he focuses on "the connection between life review, personal experience narratives, and the material objects that elders make" (5). In Chapter 3, Kay presents Marian Sykes and her hooked rugs—a craft she learned at 80 years old and has been practicing ever since. He writes:

> Since every piece is the culmination of months of reminiscing, sketching, and hooking, her creative process merges remembered stories with their visual representations, which produces a unified narrative. Because the maker must choose what to put in and what to leave out, the story show in her artwork is more limited and fixed than the tales she offers orally. Because these pictorial texts reduce complex storylines and themes to their essential narrative components, the maker augments her rugs through oral narration, providing viewers with additional facts and descriptive digressions contextually shaped by her audience's interest and/or the occasion of the sharing. (49)

As an orphan in Chicago, Marian experienced a difficult childhood, difficult and she suffered. However, her hooked rugs display happy scenes from her own children's

childhoods and their family adventures. Marian feels comfort while making the rugs and the rugs act as tools for her to show and tell her stories to family and friends (Kay 50). Kay writes, "Marian's projects, . . . are not just about creating art, they are about reworking and making sense of the past. Current memory research reveals that the practice of retrieving autobiographical memories is a type of problem-solving process through which seniors select, change, and reorganize information to meet the specific needs of their current situations (Staudinger 2001:150)" (Kay 50). Making rugs allows Marian to be independent and process her life story. Working on the happy images "takes a little sting out of the bad" (Kay 53). Through the displaying and sharing of her rugs, Marian tells her stories and interacts with family and makes new friends.

Cather knows that forming new connections is difficult for adults, but it can be next to impossible for older adults. New connections are essential to living, especially after a friend or partner's departure. Bishop Latour could not continue to thrive without a new friend:

> In the year 1885 there came to New Mexico a young Seminarian, Bernard Ducrot, who became like a son to Father Latour. Bernard was handsome in person and of an unusual mentality, had in himself the fineness to reverence all that was fine in his venerable Superior. He anticipated Father Latour's every wish, shared his reflections, cherished his reminiscences. (*DCFA* 439)

In many ways, Bernard reminds Bishop Latour of himself as a young man, or possibly the child he never had. As an elder, Bishop Latour has much wisdom to pass along.

Bernard symbolizes the importance of having someone in life to pass this wisdom along to. Every aging person needs a "Bernard" in life to ward off isolation.

Passing along wisdom and spiritual guidance seems obligatory for a clergyman like Bishop Latour; however, this opportunity is available for all. In a Fall 2016 Drew University seminar entitled "Becoming a Spiritual Elder: Exploring Life's Passages with Grace & Glory," Rabbi Debra Smith provided a framework for thinking about oneself and the aging process and relating these reflections to spirituality and the transference of wisdom. After exploring some texts from the Bible, the Mishnah, and contemporary texts, Rabbi Smith defines what it means to be an Elder:

> An Elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection to the future. An Elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy and pleasure, and her or his birthright to these remains intact. Moreover, an Elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and to formulate this into a legacy for future generations. (Smith 11)

To arrive at this realization requires personal reflection about your ideal elder, your fears about aging, your dreams for the future, identifying the significant and severest teachers in your life, remembering the significant actions in your life, praying or journaling about forgiveness, and writing a Spiritual Ethical Will (Smith 18). Ultimately, being a Spiritual Elder is a choice and a path that any older person can pursue.

Just as forming new connections and becoming a Spiritual Elder adds quality to life, reflecting on the deaths of those that passed can have the effect of bringing further

closeness and peace. Bishop Latour writes a letter to Father Vaillant's sister, Philomène, after Father Vaillant's death: "*Since your brother was called to his reward, 'I feel nearer to him than before. For many years Duty separated us, but death has brought us together. The time is not for distant when I shall join him. Meanwhile, I am enjoying to the full that period of reflection which is the happiest conclusion to a life of action"*" (*DCFA* 437). Bishop Latour refers to death as a reward, which reflects his positive attitude about the end of life on earth. Rather than remembering Father Vaillant in a way that is untrue to his memories, Bishop Latour creates a perpetual image of a strong, vital Father Vaillant:

> Curiously, Father Latour could never feel that he had actually been present at Father Joseph's funeral—or rather, he could not believe that Father Joseph was there. The shriveled little old man in the coffin, scarcely larger than a monkey—that had nothing to do with Father Vaillant. He could see Joseph as clearly as he could see Bernard, but always as he was when they first came to New Mexico. (*DCFA* 452)

The Father Vaillant that Bishop Latour chooses to remember is the younger man full of promise, potential, strength, faith, and great action. The grotesque comparison to a monkey is not Father Vaillant, but the remains of his physical body devoid of a soul.

When death comes calling, Bishop Latour prepares himself emotionally and physically. Cather writes, "After arriving home, Father Latour went at once to bed. During the night he slept badly and felt feverish. . . . After keeping quietly to his bed for a few days, the Bishop called young Bernard to him one morning and said: 'Bernard, will you ride into Santa Fé to-day and see the Archbishop for me. Ask him whether it will be

quite convenient if I return to occupy my study in his house for a short time. *Je voudrais mourir a Santa Fé*'" (*DCFA* 439). Knowing that he will feel most at peace in Santa Fé, Bishop Latour makes plans for himself. His sense of personal agency is still intact and he can return to the place he loves: "I will go at once, Father. But you should not be discouraged; one does not die of a cold.' The old man smiled. 'I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived'" (*DCFA* 440). The best scenario of a life well lived is to have a long and meaningful life. Bishop Latour recognizes that his time of death is near, and that his life has been lived. He does not regret past mistakes, follies, or human deficiencies, but embraces the fullness of his time on earth:

> The next morning Father Latour wakened with a grateful sense of nearness to his Cathedral—which would also be his tomb. He felt safe under its shadow: like a boat come back to harbour, lying under its own sea-wall. He was in his old study; the Sisters had sent a little iron bed from the school for him, and their finest linens and blankets. He felt a great content at being here, where he had come as a young man and where he had done his work. (*DCFA* 442)

Bishop Latour is able to return to his Cathedral and all that symbolizes for him the best parts of his life.

During his last days, Father Latour reflects upon his life. Cather writes:

> During those last weeks of the Bishop's life he thought very little about death: it was the Past he was leaving. The future would take care of itself. . . . More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself. This

> conviction, he believed, was something apart from his religious life; it was an enlightenment that came to him as a man, a human creature. (*DCFA* 453)

Despite his years of training and experience and his deep spiritual beliefs, Bishop Latour learns that the physical life on earth is an illusion of the mind. Life extends beyond the Ego experience: "And he noticed that he judged conduct differently now; his own and that of others. The mistakes of his life seemed unimportant; accidents that had occurred *en route,* like the shipwreck in Galveston harbour, or the runway in which he was hurt when he was first on his way to New Mexico in search of his Bishopric" (*DCFA* 453). Bishop Latour realizes that these mistakes and human behavior are meaningless and can be reconciled as supremely unimportant: "But in reality the Bishop was not there at all; he was standing in a tip-tilted green field among his native mountains, and he was trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay. He was trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest; and the time was short" (*DCFA* 459). Bishop Latour is being called home.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather gives readers a love story about caregiving, aging, and dying. Skaggs writes that Cather "seeks and finds the confidence in human potential which gathers to a greatness in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" (Skaggs 113). Using men of a religious order to portray kindness, thoughtfulness, gentleness, and action, Cather creates an opportunity for beauty in caregiving, aging, and dying to emerge. Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour are called to service, yet their personal agency guides them towards full well-lived lives. Cather illustrates a balance

between beliefs and actions. Rather than deny the aging process, both men identify and accept it. In friendship, which Cather suggests could be a symbol for a partnership (or marriage), there is love, but no ownership. Outside of their religious parameters, Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour are free agents. In their relationship, there is attachment and detachment, both equally necessary.

The loneliness that follows detachment is a natural part of life. During the second half of life loneliness may feel more pronounced, but Cather provides God and Bernard for Bishop Latour's comfort. With limited mobility and without new connections, the inevitable isolation could occur. New connections, for an older person, are also vital to keep the wheels of wisdom spinning and to transfer knowledge from an elder to a younger person. Cather raises the issue of place and many older or ill people, unfortunately, do not always have the option of returning to a place they love. However, Cather seems to be suggesting, as she does in Myra's ride to the ocean with Nellie in *My Mortal Enemy*, that if it is possible a caregiver should facilitate the journey for the dying person. Returning to a loved place can provide peace and closure for the person making a transition to death.

Finally, Cather considers retirement, recreation, and reflection at the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* Retirement, when it is chosen and embraced, is a much more successful endeavor than when it is forced and resisted. Cather shows that Bishop Latour is still needed and wanted as a teacher. For recreation, Bishop Latour keeps a garden and it is a source of joy, exercise, and an access point to the divine. While most of the elderly are not part of any clergy, the Jon Kay's Folk Art example serves as one contemporary

method for older people to practice the themes Cather presents through these characters. In *Folk Art & Aging*, Kay offers current examples of seniors creating folk art; this process elicits life reviewing, storytelling, and transferring wisdom. As Bishop Latour is on the brink of death, he realizes much of life is about the Ego and he lets go. He reflects upon life being more than the physical presence on Earth and his reward is waiting for him in heaven. In death, there will be a reunion amongst friends and family.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather provides a sketched-out map for living out the last days on Earth. The beginning scene of Cubist confusion in the desert, Cather sorts out with clarity at the end. The components of what constitutes a life well lived: accepting the aging and retirement process, finding meaningful recreations, undertaking the life review, transferring wisdom, making new connections, returning to a loved place (if only for a moment or short time) to feel the past and lost youth, and letting go of past mistakes, judgments, and Ego, are all laid out in the light of the Santa Fé sky.

Chapter 10

PROCESSING THE CAREGIVING EXPERIENCE & CONCLUSION

I hung up the phone feeling sad and a bit hopeless. My mother was in the hospital again. For the past two years, she has been ill with pancreatic cancer. It's been a traumatic two years. From reading works by authors, caregivers, physicians, researchers, and humanists who write about illness and dying, I understand that my experience is common (and increasingly more of the new normal)—the desire to preserve life and its quality and seek more time is reflexive. There have been bright spots, during this time, but overall, it's been a very long, complicated period—both emotionally and physically. While my mother has suffered the most, my father, her primary caregiver, has suffered, as well; he has alternatively de-compensated or acted out—he is often easily angered, overly concerned with his own needs, or conjuring up illnesses that require attention. He is most likely reacting out of fear—the thought of life without his partner of forty-plus years terrifies him.

With my father's poor coping skills, I do the best I can to keep the peace and help my parents fulfill their needs. My older brother lives in Buffalo, NY, with his wife and family. He has two girls, five and three years old, and a newborn son. Up until this December 2016, we had mostly stopped communicating. My mother's illness, my parents' codependence, and their conscious (or unconscious) strategies to play my brother and me against each other all contributed to this dysfunction. Unfortunately, in some homes (like the one I grew up in) with children of both genders, it still seems that daughters are expected to accept the responsibility and manage the care of aging parents.

In Willa Cather, I found a companion, knowing that she, too, dealt with this issue and thought intensely about the aging-dying-living well question.

My husband and I moved my parents up to Morristown three years ago. After my father's retirement thirteen years ago and his and my mother's move from Long Island to Hardy, Virginia, it became clear as my father's anxieties increased that my mother wanted to move back north. She asked me for my help and I gave it. I orchestrated their entire move. Unfortunately, during the packing process, I learned that they had become hoarders. I knew that since they moved to Virginia, not knowing anyone, they had often spent time at antique stores (which my father loved and my mother hated) and auctions (another activity that my father enjoyed, because being the highest bidder felt like winning). Over the course of a decade, they had managed to fill their basement with "treasures" that they couldn't take to their much smaller house in New Jersey.

They left a sprawling three-bedroom house on twenty acres in rural Virginia and moved into a one-bedroom ranch on a little over a half an acre in a dense neighborhood of Morristown. The new neighborhood was filled with well-kept houses, sidewalks, community playing fields, a pool, countless dogs, children, teenagers, and other senior citizens. My father took this move as a loss. My mother, on the other hand, was delighted; she could finally find decent Parmesan cheese, bagels, matzos, and Martinson coffee again. My husband exclaimed that this was great; we would finally have family close by. Unfortunately, our fantasy of them being enjoyable, fun loving, in-laws never materialized. The reality has been much different. Thankfully, my parents have embraced my stepchildren as their own, and that has been a saving grace.

Almost exactly a year after they moved to Morristown, in May 2015, my mother started having stomach issues. She thought she had developed Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and I was surprised during Mother's Day lunch that she barely ate anything. My mother was a life-long smoker (despite knowing the health warnings; she smoked while pregnant with me and refused to acknowledge the connection between my premature birth and her smoking). She has also been extremely overweight, perhaps obese for most of her life. She had a brief period, when she met my father, and had just started smoking, when she attained a healthy weight. In a strange twist of fate, being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer has caused her to lose a tremendous amount of weight and realize a life-long goal. In reality, she now looks emaciated and gaunt—her fragile bones protrude and sometimes it hurts to look at her.

By June 2015, unable to contemplate a world without my mother, at this point in my life, and desperate for her to get better, I called in every favor available. My pathologist friend, working at Greenwich hospital, had reviewed all of my mother's records and my best friend's sister, a PR specialist for New York Presbyterian, was able to secure us an appointment with one of the most skilled pancreatic cancer surgeons in the country. The surgeon would only agree to perform the Whipple surgery on my mother if she agreed to quit smoking. On June 15, at 6:00am, I took both my parents into the city for my mother's surgery. It took the entire day, and my father and I were finally allowed to see her at 8:00pm that evening. When she woke, she was beside herself, screaming with intense pain. She had a morphine drip with a button that she could push every 15 minutes for help with the pain. My father, at this point, resembled a deer in headlights

and appeared beyond worn out. I had arranged for him to stay at a hotel that was over the bridge on the New Jersey side. There was a shuttle between the hotel and the hospital. The scene with my mother was too much. So, I ended up bringing him downstairs and putting him on the shuttle bus. I returned to my mother and helped her push the morphine button for the next two hours. Around midnight I returned to my home in New Jersey. Believing with the surgery complete, we were halfway there; I now know that it was only the beginning of the longest two years of my life.

Over the course of the two weeks that my mother was in the hospital, my father slowly fell apart. The day after the surgery, he took an afternoon shuttle to the hospital and spent the later part of the day with my mother. Coordinating care for my nine-year-old daughter and my mother meant that I was up the next day at 5:00am to travel back to the city to spend a few hours with her. Late that evening, back at his hotel, my father called me to say he wasn't feeling well. He wanted to go to the hospital. Incredulous, I told him that I couldn't take him (it was past midnight and I was home alone with my daughter. My husband had left that day for a business trip). I called him an Uber and he was driven to the nearest hospital. Hours later he called saying that he had been released. Unsurprisingly the doctors found nothing wrong with him, so I called him another Uber to drive him back to his hotel.

The next day, I called a second cousin, a psychiatrist, to ask for advice. She suggested that my dad was feeling disoriented by being away from home and that perhaps he should return to their house to stay. The next day, I met my dad at the hospital and asked him if he wanted to return home. He did want to go home, but it presented a whole

new set of complexities—like how to get him back and forth to see my mother in northern Manhattan. He was unable to drive in hectic New York City traffic and for him, to take the train to the subway seemed a laborious endeavor, so I set up a car service for him to be driven daily to and from the hospital. Somehow, we managed to visit my mother, while she recuperated from major surgery. During her hospital stay, she developed an infection, which required antibiotics. One day, the hospital served salmon, which made her sick and she refused to eat salmon again for almost two years.

During this time, I tried to keep family updated, but I did not speak to my brother. He did not call my mother the night before her surgery and I dialed him furiously as she was in pre-op. When I finally got through to him, I passed off the phone to my mother, so she could talk to him. Disappointment has been my main feeling towards him during this period. My parents make excuses that he's ill equipped to talk about his feelings or to help. He's busy with his own family or work. Their coddling of him is unfortunate, because ultimately it deprives him of participating and maturing in a necessary way. However, I wonder if when the time comes for he and his wife to provide care to her parents (who are much younger and currently healthy), will he provide the active engagement and support to his wife and her parents (as my husband has done for me)? I hope he will. Perhaps the caregiving of my parents has been assigned to me all along?

After my mother's two weeks convalescence at NY Presbyterian, she came home and began a summer of recovery. For the next month and a half, a rotation of nurses, physical therapists, and nutritionists occupied my parents' days. Additionally, a social worker, named Jean Marie (from Morristown hospital), and an energy healer, named

Michael (from a private practice in Chatham) checked in on my mother several times a week. Since most of her gastrointestinal tract had been removed and resituated during surgery, she needed a vacuum pump, which was attached to her stomach so that the wound could heal from the inside out. To enable digestion, she required a variety of medicines to help replenish nutrients and enzymes. My mother received phenomenal care; being a strong woman, she rebounded quickly. They were some tough weeks, though.

My father felt agitated and overwhelmed by all the foot traffic. So many people were coming and going each day. My mother's care and medicines changed several times a week, and while we were both instructed on them, most of the facilitation fell to him. His anxiety rose and as did his hypochondria. I found myself in the midst of caring for my mother, with her complicated protocols, while setting up doctor's appointments for my father's phantom illnesses. He was highly volatile and my mother and brother always indulged his pessimism and paranoia. My normal state is one of balanced optimism and my typical mode of operating is to get "things" done and challenge irrationality, but in this instance, it was all too much and I gave in and took him to his general practitioner, who ran blood work, examined him, and found nothing.

Eventually, my mother started to heal and my father began to calm down. The summer days passed and I spent most of my time shuttling between summer camp, classes at Drew University, and my parents' house. In mid-August, my mother was well enough to visit my brother and his family in upstate New York. He and his wife had rented a cabin on the Finger Lakes for a week. My parents drove up there, but were so exhausted from the drive and their lives that they really didn't enjoy the summer-lake-

grandchildren experience that was being offered to them. Additionally, neither my brother nor his wife once mentioned my mother's illness, surgery, recovery, etc. "Even to ask how you are feeling?" I asked her after they returned home. "No," she replied, before quickly pivoting to excuses that they are not like me and they can't handle strong emotions or talking about illness.

I tried to be realistic about my mother's pancreatic cancer diagnosis. I researched the stages of the disease and knew what to expect. Not expecting her to live for two years post diagnosis, I was always open to discussing the afterlife and deeper spiritual issues. My mother, a former Catholic, but mostly a deeply agnostic person who believes if there is a god, he's a wrathful one, returned to her childhood faith. She pulled out her bible, rosary beads, and bought a religious iconic statue figurine. I half expected her to fill their house with incense, but that would trigger my father's allergies.

During this period, my parents started going to church and found a small Lutheran church that they felt comfortable attending. In some ways, it was a social outlet and they met a few people from the community. The Pastor's sermons are typically kind with a slight bent towards social issues, justice, and progress. He seems genuinely interested in my parents, their story, and their wellbeing.

That fall my husband, on a mission to help my mother with the smoking withdrawal, set about visiting her with the intention of helping her come to terms with her new reality and develop a non-smoking habit. My mother not only enjoyed the attention but also embraced the debate his Socratic approach afforded her. For every statement he made, she had a rebuttal. My husband was surprised by the contrariness of her mind. I

could only respond, “she’s a woman who will do what she wants to do despite any and all evidence that it may be harmful.” She was such a passionate smoker. Growing up, I went on anti-smoking crusades in our house, making signs and begging her to quit. Only when I hid her cigarettes did she react with either a threat to call my father or an attempt to hit me with the wooden spoon. Afraid of the punishment, I would relent and give her the cigarettes back.

In September, my mother started on chemotherapy, and by Thanksgiving she wasn’t feeling well enough to travel. During this time, we started to prepare for Christmas. She had started to feel some pain, but she was looking forward to the holiday and seeing all the family. My mother’s birthday is on Christmas Eve, so in addition to the holiday festivities, we celebrate her birthday. Knowing that my mother wanted my brother and his family to visit and to celebrate with my extended family, I tried to do everything she asked for and give her the best birthday and Christmas ever. Unfortunately, by Christmas her pain had increased; she hadn’t addressed the pain with her doctor, so she was suffering in silence (somewhat). She spent most of the holiday wrapped in a blanket, trying, through her pain, to participate.

It wasn’t until early January that she finally admitted the extent of her pain. My dad and I took her to her oncologist, who ordered some tests and prescribed OxyContin, which didn’t seem to help. He told us that she had multiple spinal fractures. After a few weeks of trying the OxyContin, we returned to her oncologist and requested a referral for a pain specialist. We saw the pain specialist who prescribed morphine. Finding the right dosage, we learned, was up to my mother, my father, and myself. Based on my mother’s

pain ranking, we would determine how much morphine to give her. It was a mess. For January, February, and early March, my dad and I were either under-medicating her (so she was still crying in pain) or over-medicating her (where she was out of her mind either talking nonsense, sleeping, or behaving strangely).

One night my father had a difficult time waking her from a nap; frightened, he called me. It was Saturday night, so my daughter was at her dad's in Brooklyn and my husband, stepson, and myself were finishing dinner. We drove over to my parents' house and while my husband and stepson talked with my father, I assessed the situation with my mother. She wasn't making any sense, so I called her doctor and left a message with the answering service that it was an emergency. A few minutes later, the doctor called and we discussed the situation. It seems that my mother had become "narcotized" from too much morphine. We tried to decrease how much morphine we gave her, but she was always in so much pain. Restless, she needed to constantly change positions to find relief.

Her pain continued and due to the high dosage of morphine, she eventually lost much of her cognitive skills. She could no longer write or speak clearly. She would pull imaginary paper clips out of the palm of her hand and give them either to my father, my daughter or myself. Each day was a trial. She could not be left alone. One day she turned the stove on and left the kitchen. Thankfully, shortly afterwards, my father found the stove top on and turned if off before anyone was hurt. I realized something needed to happen and I asked my dad if I should find a part-time caregiver that could come for a few hours each week to watch my mother, while he ran errands or took a break. Reluctantly, he agreed and we discussed it with my mother.

The next week, we started with a private service that came to their house two to three mornings a week, for two to three hours, to help my mother do the tasks she normally would complete, such as making a shopping list, or cleaning out the refrigerator. While my father agreed to the help, he was not happy with the arrangement and was fearful that the aide might steal from them or break something in the house. So, many of my mother's tasks, like balancing the checkbook, paying bills, or using the washing machine to do laundry, went unfulfilled. Either my dad or myself completed these tasks and the aides' role became more social and they provided companionship to my mother.

My mother's pain and condition continued to worsen, and at her next visit to the oncologist for chemotherapy, with her legs swollen and unable to move her bowels, we decided she needed to be admitted. Unfortunately, that was the simple decision. The complexities arose when we needed to decide if she was to receive acute or hospice care—two completely different types of care with their own sets of protocols and outcomes. She started on acute care, but seeing her struggle, I pushed that she be changed to hospice care, so that she could have more pain management. That was a mistake, because she quickly declined dramatically. The pain medication seemed to sedate her, so that she went into a semi-coma. After a few days of her in and out of consciousness, we were convinced she was dying. The hospital, not wanting a death in their ward, pushed us to take her home. Panicked, my dad asked how he was supposed to care for her, when right now she was completely immobile with tubes coming out of each orifice. With hospice, she was entitled to some assistance (pain management, wound dressing, a hospital bed at home), but we needed to hire a full-time caregiving service.

With a home health care service and schedule in place and Medicare approval, via ambulance, my mother came home. On my daughter's tenth birthday, after a very early visit with my comatose mother at the hospital, then an early birthday breakfast with my daughter at home, we arrived at my parents' house at the same time as the ambulance. My mother was wheeled in a stretcher into the house, and deposited in the front room where the hospital bed had been set up. The next day, convinced she was dying, my father and I visited a funeral home. We dropped off clothing for her to be buried in, selected prayers and readings for the service, and decided that a nice luncheon at a restaurant afterwards would be what she wanted. With tearful faces, we returned home to my mother and her nursing aide. The next day was the day before Easter. My parents' pastor visited the house, gave my father and me communion, and my mother last rites. As my husband and stepchildren arrived to pick up my dad and me for dinner, my mother awoke. Seeing us dressed up, and possibly frightened and definitely confused, by being in a hospital bed in the den with a nursing aide she had never met, she asked where we were going. We told her we were heading out to a restaurant, but would be back soon. While we probably should have stayed with her, my dad had expressed an intense desire to go out to dinner. Balancing both of their needs has always been difficult. I didn't know what to do, but when my mother began issuing orders for us to bring her back a steak, I figured we should go. For my husband, stepchildren, and father, Easter was still coming. My daughter was in Brooklyn with her dad. Collectively, these family members have been steady reminders that there are life events to mark and occasions to celebrate. Life is a process, and it continues despite whatever else a person may be occupied with.

Thus began another intense period of recovery. For the next three months, my mother worked hard to heal from a bedsore (which emerged after only a week in the hospital), regain control of her bowels and bladder, exercise her body to rebuild muscles, and recapture her mind. During this period, I was at their house every day trying to assist and put out symbolic fires of my father's creation. A slew of health care workers came to their house daily. Their house was assessed for safety. Their master bathroom needed to be refitted with grab bars and a higher toilet bowl—none of this would be covered by insurance. Worries about all the costs associated with this recovery pushed my dad over the edge. He was often irritated and irrational. I tried to get him to leave the house, but his fears about the numerous health care workers coming into his home and stealing or breaking something intensified. On top of this, my mother's attitude was trying. She demanded new, complicated, or exotic foods/meals daily. With her Easter miracle of "rising from the dead," her appetite returned tenfold. She was unsatisfied by simple meals, recommended by the nutritionist, of eggs or turkey sandwiches. In one day, she might insist that either my father or I bring her a freshly baked bagel for breakfast, Eggplant Parmesan from Nonna's for lunch, a Dairy Queen shake, and ribs for dinner. These requests pushed me over the edge.

Eventually, my mother pulled through with a fierce determination. Along with numerous birthday celebrations and family dinners together throughout the year with my parents, we pursued another opinion at Manhattan's Memorial Sloan Kettering regarding my mother's pancreatic cancer, and she resumed chemotherapy at Morristown's Cancer Center. The next twelve months were marked by a trip that I took with my parents, and

daughter to Vermont in June; my brother and his family visiting my parents in August (I needed a break from my parents and I wasn't really engaged with my brother, so I took my daughter hiking in Maine during their visit); my parents, aunt, uncle, daughter, and myself having dinner together and going to a concert in Morristown in September; Halloween events in October and trick or treating in my parents' neighborhood; Thanksgiving with my dad's side of the family at my aunt's house on Long Island; all-month-long Christmas festivities/activities together; my dad's hiatal hernia surgery in February; my parents' trip to Virginia Beach for the wedding of my cousin, Tom, where on March 22 my mother had two major seizures and needed to be ambulanced to the hospital, where she stayed for several days. She returned home to Morristown via ambulance and was back in their front room, in a hospital bed, for close to four weeks. The parade of physical therapists, occupational therapists, nurses, aides, nutritionists, energy healers, and social workers resumed. Due to his hiatal hernia surgery, my dad could not lift or assist my mother at all, so we hired full time nursing aides again. It was another dark time.

Over two years later, my mother, with the assistance of my father, a cane, a multitude of conventional medications, chemotherapy, medical marijuana, and an energy healer, continues to live. Some days she thrives (this July, she travelled with me to pick up my daughter from sleep away camp in Pennsylvania and was so pleasant and fun) and other days are a struggle (yesterday, after a chemotherapy treatment she couldn't breathe and needed to go to the emergency room. Numerous hours later, after receiving oxygen, CAT scan, and x-ray she returned home). Throughout these past two years, while she has

been ill, I have been thinking about or writing this dissertation. As I stated earlier, Cather's works have comforted and guided me during this time. Additionally, the non-fiction works that I include in this dissertation also reveal several pieces of essential information in the aging-illness-dying paradigm (for example: the elderly and falling are a deadly combination, and depression can emerge during pivotal points in the aging process), but the main lesson I have learned is that older people need to maintain their sense of personal agency and purpose. This information changes how I interact with my parents. Even if I feel that they should follow my advice or solution, I no longer push. Their ability to make decisions and choose their path ultimately adds to their quality of life—if not the quantity.

Conclusion

Death is conclusive, but dying, like living, is a process. As I get older, I am more interested in the process than the end result. Understanding what a "well-lived life" means has fascinated and evolved for me, as I've progressed during my lifetime. Aging, being ill, diminishing, and dying are also processes that I seek to comprehend, so that I may do them well—with acceptance, grace, and joy. Through the fictional works of Willa Cather and a variety of social science, psychological, and medical texts, I have created this dissertation to explore these topics. Cather is considered to be a modernist in the literary canon, writing during the early twentieth century, yet many decades later Cather's work still reflects the current issues encapsulating the aging-dying process in America. Her fiction gives readers many different scenarios to consider. Cather's fiction,

specifically the novels and short stories presented in this paper, can ultimately help caregivers during periods of crisis to find comfort and consolation.

Cather, at middle age, sought to find answers to the aging-dying process—as she like all of us grew older; dealt with sickness; cared for her parents; struggled through her mother's long illness; experienced the deaths of close, intimate friends; renewed her spirituality; and found joy and peace in her major creative endeavor—writing. As Cather approached midlife, American policymakers realized that the aging population needs to be addressed. Cather personally grappled with this issue as she thought through the care of her parents.

As Cather suggests in *O Pioneers!* and *Shadows on the Rock*, Alexandra and Cécile inherit caregiving duties. As a female adult child, I find that I've inherited caregiving duties, as well. However, caregivers can either be paid service providers, like Doctor Burleigh in "Neighbor Rosicky," or unpaid family members, friends, or community members. Caregiving is an important role open to all. In a deeply touching scene from "Old Mrs. Harris," one of her young twin grandsons provides the very end-of-life care and comfort Mrs. Harris needs to die peacefully.

Increasingly, the primary caregiver for the terminally ill patient is their spouse or partner. In *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather provides examples of this dynamic. *A Lost Lady'*s Marian Forrester, a younger wife to her much older spouse, without outside employment cares for her husband through several strokes and health setbacks. Cather explores the concept of time in this novel: Marian feels it acutely, and she feels isolated and hopeless thinking that this period in her life will not end. On the other hand,

My Mortal Enemy's Oswald cares for his wife, Myra, as she battles cancer and her personal demons. Oswald must work to support their diminished lifestyle and while his life is difficult and strenuous, having employment to go to and the ability to engage with acquaintances outside the home provides sanity and perspective on his situation.

Adult children of the terminally ill or elderly are another segment of caregivers that will need direction. Most people are not equipped to discuss finances or have end-of-life discussions with parents. Cather's example of Mrs. Lee in *O Pioneers!* implies that having your mother move in with you and your family may not be the best scenario for all parties involved. *The Professor's House* shows St. Peter's daughters and their husbands reacting with entreaties for St. Peter to join them and be an essential part of their lives, while he struggles through his midlife transition and depression. Seeing St. Peter at a low point of exhaustion and sensing some diminishment, St. Peter's son-in-law, Scott, thinks angrily that his wife's sister and her husband have caused St. Peter's overexertion. He realizes they will not have St. Peter forever. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* due to differing ideologies and lifestyles, Rachel cares for her intensely independent mother, Sapphira, with more detachment and less guilt. Primarily due to Sapphira's owning of slaves, Rachel limits her degree of involvement in her mother's life. Within this novel, Cather also highlights the racial discrepancies in health care and illness between blacks and whites, which still informs the American health care system today.

In the midst of these works, Cather presents the adventures of Father Vaillant and Bishop Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* She writes an optimistic tale of aging, illness, diminishment, and death that identifies the key components to enjoying a good

retirement and end of life period. These elements begin with finding and nurturing a partnership or marriage of joyful and uplifting attachment tempered with loving detachment, and the realization that each partner has their own path, goals, and mission to achieve while on earth. Next comes the importance of understanding that aging is inevitable and should be embraced because with it typically comes wisdom. Unlike Count Frontenac in *Shadow on the Rock* who works and worries about his employment until his very end, Bishop Latour enjoys a conclusion to formal employment. Yet, he still mentors new students and forms new friendships through his connections to the church and his community. As a spiritual man, Bishop Latour reflects, prays, and meditates throughout the day; his connection to the divine is well established throughout his life. However, these activities are open to all and through practice (including the life review narratives, and other creative endeavors like folk art) can create meaning and understanding of a life. While Bishop Latour chooses to return to a beloved home for his death, even taking a trip to a beautiful place, like Myra's visit to the seashore, can ease the transition towards death. Cather's characters age and meander through major life transitions; they embrace caregiving duties with dedication, even if the results produce isolation and hopelessness; they find meaningful partnerships, friendships, and forms of recreation that nourish the creative spirit; they become ill and reconcile relationships with others and themselves; and they experience death with all its complexities and simplicities and connections to another place. With these texts and characters, Cather never presents death as a punishment; she describes death as either a release from suffering or a reward.

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