

FOREVER YOUNG
Sandra Tsing Loh's
father kept himself in
shape into his eighties
with calisthenics on
the beach in California



ALL ABOUT
MY FATHER

I'll miss him when he's gone

She loves him, of course, but tending to her 90-something father is pushing the American writer **Sandra Tsing Loh** to her limit. A frank and funny account of parental care





PUSH OFF, GRANDPA
Sandra Tsing Loh (left) worries that her father's expensive old age is robbing his own grandchildren. Below: sunning himself in his prime



Recently a colleague asked me, in the most cursory way, as we were waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, how I was. To my surprise, in a motion as automatic as the reflex of a mussel being poked, my body bent double and I heard myself screaming: "I want my father to die!"

Startled, my colleague asked what I meant. "What I mean, Rob, is that even if, while howling like a banshee, I tore my 91-year-old father limb from limb with my own hands in the town square, I believe no jury of my peers would convict me. Indeed, if they knew all the facts, I believe any group of sensible, sane individuals would actually roll up their shirtsleeves and pitch in."

As I hyperventilated over the coffeemaker, scattering packets of sweetener and trying to unclaw my curled fingers, I realised it had finally happened: at 49, I had become a Kafka character. I am thinking of *The Judgment*, in which the protagonist's supposedly old and frail father suddenly kicks off his bedclothes with surprisingly energetic — even girlish — legs and delivers a speech so horrifying, so unexpected, and so perfectly calculated to destroy his son's spirit, that his son immediately jumps off a bridge.

Clearly, my nonagenarian father and I have what have come to be known as "issues", which I will expand on shortly. By way of introduction, however, let us begin by considering Jane Gross, the author of the recent memoir *A Bittersweet Season*, an ultra-responsible daughter who undertook the care of her mother. Like the typical family carer (who is, statistics suggest, a woman of about 50), Gross worked full-time, but (atypically)

she was unencumbered by spouse or children, and had the help of a child-free brother, a calm, clear-headed sort given to greeting his sister with a quiet, reassuring "The eagle has landed". What could go wrong?

Plenty. As Gross describes it, "In the space of three years... my mother's ferocious independence gave way to utter reliance on her two adult children. Aches and pains became major health problems; half-hearted attention no longer sufficed, and managing her needs from afar became impossible... We were flattened by the enormous demands on our time, energy and bank accounts; the disruption to our professional and personal lives; the fear that our time in this parallel universe would never end and the guilt for wishing it would..."

It is a world we will all soon get to know well, argues Gross: owing to medical advances, cancer deaths now peak at 65 and kill off just 20% of older people in the US, while deaths due to organ failure peak at about 75 and kill off just another 25%, so the norm for seniors is becoming a long, drawn-out death after 85, requiring ever-increasing assistance for such simple daily activities as eating, bathing, and moving. This is currently the case for approximately 40% of Americans older than 85, the country's fastest-growing demographic, which is projected to more than double by 2035, from about 5m to 11.5m. At that point,

'I'LL GET YOUR PAPA TO 100!' HIS NURSE, THOMAS, SAYS CHEERFULLY

here comes the next wave — 77m of the youngest Baby Boomers will be turning 70... The picture is similar in Britain, where the over-80 population is expected to double to 5m in the next 20 years.

My father's old age began so well. Back in his seventies, to prepare for his sunset years, this Chinese widower had taken the precaution of procuring (after some stunning misfires) his retirement plan: an obedient Chinese-immigrant wife, almost 20 years younger than himself, who, in exchange for citizenship, would — unlike American women — accept the distinctly non-feminist role of cutting up his fruit and massaging his bunions. In addition to doing all that, said Chinese wife, Alice, helped my dad run the informal Craigslist-peopled boarding house he had turned our family home into, for which her reward would be a generous inheritance upon his death, and the right to live in the house

until hers. It is a measure of my dad's frugality that he didn't even buy health insurance for Alice until she turned 65 — he rolled the statistical dice against the premiums, and won! With \$2,000 a month from his tenants, on top of a welfare cheque for \$1,500, he and Alice were actually making money. What with their habit of taking buses everywhere and a shared love of foraging for food in skips, they could star in their own reality show about thrift.

This is not to say my father has been completely "well". After age 78, if you asked him "How are you?" he would exclaim: "I'm dying!" At his 80th-birthday party, when he tremulously lifted his centimetre of red wine while watching my girlfriends dance, I mourned his visible frailty. At 82, he was passing out on bus benches, hitting his head, causing his doctors to insist on a pacemaker (which he refused). By 85, battling Parkinson's, he was still hobbling down to the beach to



attempt rickety calisthenics. By 89, he was so slow, like a clock winding down, that never mind going to the beach, one morning he couldn't even get out of bed. That was when he called me, in fear and confusion, for help. A pulse-pounding hour-long drive later, arriving at his bedside, I found to my panic that I could not rouse him. He lay in that waxy, inert, folded-up pose that looks unmistakably like death (I had seen it when my mother died, of early Alzheimer's, at 69). "This is it — it's really it — Papa's dead," I wept over the phone, long-distance, to my sister. And I remember, as the dust motes danced in the familiar golden light of our family home, how my sister and I found ourselves observing to each other how we were sad... and yet oddly at peace.

Yes, my history with this man has been checkered: in my childhood, he had been cruelly cheap (no Christmas, no heat); in my teens, he had been unforgivably mean to my mother; in my twenties, I rebelled and fled; in my thirties, I softened and we became wry friends — why not, he couldn't harm me now; in my forties, sensing that these were the last days of a fading elder, the memories of whom I would reflect on with increasing nostalgia,

the door opened for real affection, even a kind of gratitude. In short, there was real grief now at seeing my father go, but I was a big girl — actually, a middle-aged woman — and, chin up, I would get through it.

I called the paramedics, who carted him to the emergency room. An hour later, the surprisingly benign diagnosis — simple dehydration. With a sudden angry snort, my father woke up. I won't say I wish I had hit him over the head with a frying pan to finish the job when it seemed we were so, so close. But I will say that when my dad woke up that day, my problems really began. Because what this episode made clear was that, while nothing was wrong with my dad, although he was 89 — 89! — something was wrong with Alice, who was supposed to be taking care of him. Her penchant for gibbering Chinese was not, as we'd imagined, a symptom of her English skills plateauing after 15 years in America, but of the early or middle stages of dementia. This I hadn't expected: as I remind you, she is much younger than my father at... drumroll... 72.

So now, aside from neglecting my father, the formerly mild-mannered Alice is starting to disturb the tenants: waving butcher knives, hurling their things into the street. (What a fun life they're having: my father believes some of the more sturdy renters can pitch in and "help shower" him. Best to think twice before renting a room off Craigslist!) Alice is increasingly found wandering at 2am on freeways 50 miles away, to be brought home by police officers and firemen (your tax dollars at work!). And, in contrast to her formerly frugal ways, Alice no longer understands money. She once withdrew \$13,000, went to a bank in Chinatown, and purchased a useless universal life-insurance policy, an event she cannot recall.

My father does not want Alice to move to assisted living, however, because he enjoys her cooking. So the solution for Alice is a full-time Mandarin-speaking female companion. At \$5,000 a month, this service is a relative bargain if it keeps Alice from withdrawing, and flinging to the winds, her next \$50,000. Meanwhile, armed with his own capable full-time Filipino male nurse (another \$5,000 a month), my father has roared back with formidable energy. As long as he's hydrated, it appears that no bacterium can fell him — remember, he has been eating out of skips (we're talking expired sushi) for decades. So now I have a wheelchair-bound but extremely active 91-year-old who greatly enjoys getting bathed and diapered and fed ice cream ➤➤➤

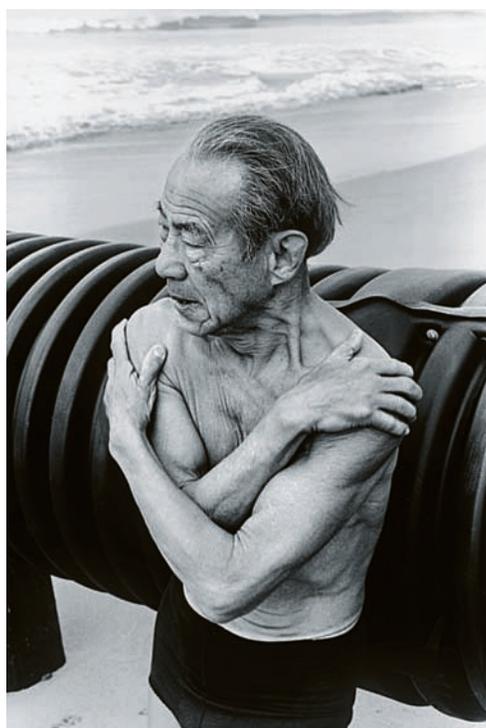
and crashing UCLA science lectures and, oh, by the way — every day he calls me now: he wants sex. He proudly needs only 1/16th of a Viagra pill for sex. Because Alice is no longer complying (she is unfortunately not quite that crazy), my father has started to proposition her nurse, trying to grab her breasts, begging her to touch him. Which he can't do himself, as he can barely clasp his hand around a spoon.

But there's more. My father's care demands an ever-changing flotilla of immigrant carers, of whom the chief one is Thomas. Because my father is so difficult, it's not atypical for new carers to quit before noon. The miraculously tolerant Thomas is the only nurse who has stuck with my father, which means that my sister, brother and I basically work for Thomas. We've co-signed on an apartment for him and his wife and four children; we've fixed up a car for him, and increased his pay to \$6,500 for overnight stays.

We do all this because Thomas does an excellent job, always trying to raise the standard of my dad's care. Which is a good thing. Or is it? "I will get your Papa to 100!" Thomas says with cheerful reassurance. Oh my God — how could he say such a horrible thing? I am hyperventilating again. Never mind the question of whether, given that they have total freedom and no responsibilities, we are indulging our elders in the same way my generation has been indulging our overly entitled children. I rant to myself: he is taking everything! He is taking all the money. He's taken

years of my life (sitting in doctors' offices, in pharmacies, in waiting rooms). With his horrid, selfish behaviour, he's chewed through every shred of my sentimental affection for him. In fact, he's destroyed my belief in "family" as a thing that buoys one up. Quite the opposite: family is like the piano around Holly Hunter's ankle, dragging me implacably down.

I have to ensure Hilton-level care for my barely Travelodge father, the giant baby, as well as for his carer, the big-baby nurse, all caught up with the high-pitched drama of feeding and diapering and massaging. That's right: my family is throwing all our money away on our 91-year-old dad, leaving nothing for my sweet and helpless little daughters, who, in the end, represent me! So, on top of everything else he has taken from me, he has taken away my sense of self, because at age



LUST FOR LIFE
In his nineties,
Tsing Loh's father likes
ice cream and sex

The paradox is, I can't miss the good things about my father while he is alive, but I will of course miss him... when he is dead. By the same token — and perhaps this is the curious blessing — if my mother were alive today (what would she be, 84?), she would be driving me insane! But then, inevitably, comes yet another day. Inspired by my Buddhist stationery, what I decide I will let go of today is any of the previous ideas I had about future planning — the college tuition fees, paying off the house, putting together some kind of retirement...

Then again, in the new America, shouldn't wealth be re-equalised from generation to generation? Is it not fitting that the Loh family's nest egg should be used to put not our children but Thomas's through college? ("I will get your Papa to 100!") Is that really the worst use of this money? Indeed, I muse slyly, unlike my own Western daughters — jazz shoes and drawing pads (how useless!) spilling out of their bags — Thomas's children will buckle down and get real degrees, leading to real jobs: doctor, engineer, or, most lucrative of all... *geriatric nurse*. So I feel a little calmer, as I deliver my raft of pills. And I find it is a rare calm day at my father's home: Thomas has the house smelling soapy, white sheets cover

sagging couches, vases hold artificial flowers, medications are arranged on various bureaus in proud and almost spectacular displays.

WE'RE INDULGING OUR ELDERS LIKE OUR OVERLY ENTITLED CHILDREN

the progression of signs on his law-office door: COOPER; COOPER & COOPER; COOPER, COOPER & COOPER; COOPER, COOPER, COOPER & COOPER; COOPER, COOPER & COOPER; COOPER & COOPER; COOPER).

Their relationship eventually drew the interest of a publisher — did Cooper want to write a book about his father? As Cooper recalls, "It would be foolish to refuse her offer because... well, because money was involved, but also because the rest of my family was gone for ever and Dad was all I had left, though I wasn't sure what constituted 'all'. Or 'Dad' for that matter." He quotes from John Cheever's short story *Reunion*: "My father," thinks the son, "was my future and my doom." The memoir concludes with a wonderful Forest Lawn cemetery scene (his father's punchy epitaph: *You finally got me*).

For today, Alice is medicated and so content. She serves a mysterious dish that — aside from being wildly spicy — is edible. My father's hair has never been more poofy—or black. He, too, is vaguely fragrant. Could be his lucky day. *Sex*.

I have to acknowledge, too, that in traditional China, with its notions of filial responsibility, my elders would be living with me in my home, or I in theirs. So the beautiful oh-so-Western thing is that, for today, I can drive away. And as I drive down the highway, I realise that because things are not actually terrible (no cops, no paramedics, no \$13,000 bank withdrawals), today qualifies as a fabulous day. I can no longer think of my dad as my "father". But I recognise in him something as familiar to me as myself. To the end, stubborn, babyish, life-loving, he doesn't want to go to rehab, no, no, no ■