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GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

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Janice Turner examines the challenges adult children face in caring for their elderly parents.

- 1 In Tate Britain is a painting by the Victorian artist George Elgar Hicks of a woman ministering tenderly to her invalid father titled *Comfort of Old Age*. The work is the final panel of Hicks's triptych* *Woman's Mission*. The first panel, *Guide of Childhood*, in which the same figure teaches her little boy to walk, has been lost. But the second panel also hangs at the Tate in London: *Companion of Manhood* shows our heroine consoling her husband after ghastly news. In all three panels, Hicks depicted "woman" in her three guises – mother, wife, daughter – and in her ideal state: the selfless provider of guidance, solace and care. 5
- 2 I have spent a long time in the first two panels of the triptych: a partner/wife for 30 years, a mother for 21. (My two sons are grown and pretty much gone.) And I have seen, in the course of my adult life, enormous progress in those two domains. Now I have reached the third panel, the trickiest bit of the triptych. My 93-year-old mother is 200 miles away in Doncaster, and since my father died, five years ago, she has been living alone. She is – I must stress – admirable, independent, uncomplaining and tough. A stoic. Someone who doesn't mourn her lost faculties but relishes what she can still do. However, almost everyone she ever knew is dead, and I am her only child: her principal *Comfort of Old Age*. 10 15
- 3 After finally having wrestled her into (almost) daily care, I returned to London to find a letter of indictment. As a *Times* columnist, I have faced my fair share of barbs. But this letter, I must say, particularly stung. It was from a man who lives in Cheshire (he had supplied his name and address), and he wanted me to know what a terrible person I am. "I have been puzzled when reading your column over the past months how you have been able to leave your mother – whose serious health issues you have used as copy... to holiday in Mexico, East Anglia and Norway." I was "selfish and self-regarding", and I should be ashamed. 20
- 4 I was once again reminded when my children were young and I was a magazine editor. The judgement shown through the pursed lips from older relatives and the subsequent guilt-tripping. At best, my kindest kin manifested a befuddlement: why bother having kids if you work full-time? So let me warn you that just when you're free from being judged as a mother, you'll be judged as a daughter. It is the last chance for reactionary types who resent women's career success, or just their freedom to live how they choose, to have a dig. Look at this selfish woman, weekendening in East Anglia when she should be a *Comfort of Old Age*. 25
- 5 The truth is I don't want to be a full-time carer, any more than I wanted to be a full-time mother. And I don't want to live with my ma any more than she wants to live with me. Now that I've served out my parenting years, I want to do other things with my life besides looking after people. Why can't I follow the rest of northern European society which has evolved an individualism that often transcends notions of family and duty? 30
- 6 Members of the baby-boomer generation recoil at living with their parents. We spent our teenage years trying to escape. What if your upbringing featured divorce, personality clashes, arguments, abuse? What if, like me, you left your working-class culture for a completely different life – what if you have little in common? Or your widowed father now expects you to run around after him like a skivvy, just as he did your mum? You can reject your roots for your entire adulthood, then your parents' frailty yanks you home. It tears up my heart. Yet it is complicated. What if you live far from your home town: should you be expected to return? My unmarried aunt came back after an interesting single life to live with my grandmother until her death. Her siblings didn't thank her for this sacrifice. Indeed, without the status of marriage, she was treated with disdain. 35 40

**A triptych refers to a set of three associated artistic works intended to be appreciated together.*

- 7 Largely, our elderly also do not want to be infantilised by their children, or bossed around by their daughters-in-law. (The claim that Indian parents are “revered” is undermined by rampant elder abuse.) My ma wants to watch TV and eat her favourite food, not feel she is in the way. “I like to please myself,” is her refrain. Her home of almost 50 years is her shell: her central fear is of being too ill to stay. Despite the much-discussed return of “multigenerational living”, the most popular British solution is the “granny annex”, where an old person maintains autonomy behind her own front door. We must also remember that they are the ones who will be moving. And, this can be difficult emotionally. They will be watching as their belongings are readied for donation. They are the ones leaving their homes for communal living arrangements in unfamiliar cities. Surely, it’s not as simple as just “come live with me then?” 45 50 55
- 8 Yet politicians of left and right wing are always telling us that the solution to our screwed-up social-care system is the family for different reasons. Left-wing leaders dislike the “care industry” because caring for others cannot be totted up according to a calculus of cost and returns. Right-wing politicians, on the other hand, worry that we will not care for our parents as unquestioningly as we do our children. In practice, these all amount to the same thing: women, chiefly daughters and daughters-in-law, toiling away unpaid. 60
- 9 Compared to looking after my ma, tending to children seems simpler and more exuberant, although the parallels are striking. From stair gates to stairlifts; from pushchairs to wheelchairs; the incontinence provision; the helplessness. But raising children is largely a cheerful, upward trajectory. Elderly care is an uneven descent towards some hidden, grim crevasse. There is no boasting, no showing cute snaps on your phone. You learn not to mention geriatric travails. People either look uncomfortable or bored. 65
- 10 And like our parents, it will be our turn soon. Worse, we are living longer, often fading out in medically preserved decrepitude over many years. I can’t understand why both as individuals and as a society we refuse to plan. Well, actually I can. It’s horrible and also as my mother always says: “When it happens, it happens.” 70
- 11 Yet there is so much we could do. Provide more comprehensive funding of social care. Develop friendship schemes and clubs, so the elderly aren’t so dependent on faraway children. Rip up the care-home model in which the elderly are objects in a chair.
- 12 Above all, we must redraw that final panel of the triptych. Don’t wield the family as a glib solution. Instead, acknowledge that it is hard, heart-rending work, being a Comfort of Old Age. 75

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