

Dad's dead, Mom's comatose: All you can do (mostly) is laugh

Like many boomers, Nancy Bachrach was thrust overnight into becoming a caregiver for her parent. Bachrach's odyssey began after a freak accident 26 years ago that killed her father and left her mother comatose.



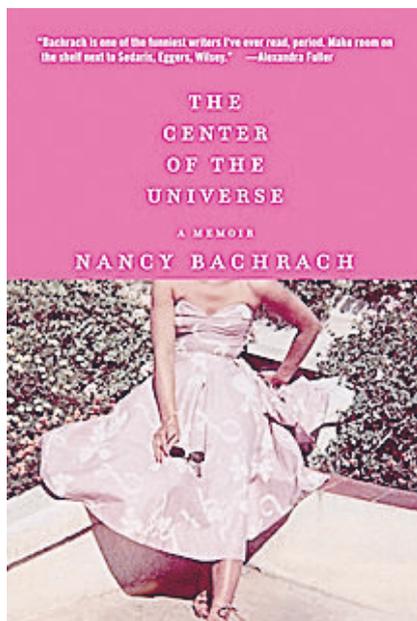
Bachrach

The details are in her new memoir that includes graphic descriptions of her mother's mental illness, family dysfunction and a harrowing childhood.

So if you read "The Center of the Universe," be forewarned: You're going to laugh.

The accident at the crux of Bachrach's memoir occurred in 1983, when a faulty generator aboard her parents' boat spewed carbon monoxide. When authorities arrived, her father, Mort, was dead. But her mother, Lola, still had a very slight pulse.

Bachrach, then an advertising executive living in Paris, got the early morning call everyone dreads. Her brother told her to come home and prepare for a double funeral. Bachrach handles this dark situation with black humor: "How do I prepare for a double funeral? Pack two



of everything?" This is indicative of the tone of the book, which is funny rather than funereal.

Shortly after the accident, Lola was well enough to be sent home from the hospital into Bachrach's care. "For a while, she seemed normal," Bachrach says. "Then the bizarre behavior began." This included Lola trying to put her hand into a running garbage disposal. Like many

family caregivers, Bachrach realized she couldn't leave her mother alone for a minute. "You can't get away at all," Bachrach says.

Bachrach's description of her caregiving role will resonate with many boomers. While she was able to provide the necessities to keep her mother alive, she says she was a "failure" at providing daughterly companionship. "I wasn't capable of it," she says.

Her mother kept getting worse, finally sliding into a "zombielike" condition that forced the family to put her into a rehabilitation hospital. "She was diagnosed as suffering a nervous breakdown," Bachrach says. The diagnosis was made in part because Lola had a long history of mental illness. "Today, it would be diagnosed as Alzheimer's."

But the diagnosis was wrong. In fact, it was the carbon monoxide that caused Lola's brain to short circuit. Slowly, Lola recovered, left the hospital and resumed her life. Lola, now 82, lives independently in a Florida condo. And in the ultimate of ironies, the carbon monoxide poisoning had some positive fallout for her brain.

"It cured her mental illness," Bachrach says, quickly adding with a laugh, "but don't try this at home."

The object of your affection . . . no, not your partner or spouse. That thing you've saved for, dreamed about for years, but put off buying until the kids were grown. Is it finally yours, or are you still waiting, still hoping? If you have it, finally, was it worth the wait? Do you enjoy it more now than you would have if

you had it in your possession years earlier? Tell us about that special object. Write to Act2 Editor, Newsday Newsroom, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250. E-mail act2@newsday.com. Include your name, address and phone numbers. Send comments, story suggestions and letters for possible publication.



Health care: Ch. 13 to broadcast program offering reform analysis

If you're confused about what the health care reform bill being bandied about in Washington means to boomers and seniors, you may want to watch WNET/13 Thursday.

The 90-minute "Report on Health Care Reform" will air 9-10:30 p.m. and is a joint production of three PBS shows: "Now on PBS," "Tavis Smiley" and "Nightly Business Report." The program will offer analysis of how the government proposals will affect our lifestyles. Especially important will be a look at what the proposed reforms will mean for the sandwich generation — boomers responsible for the health needs of their aging parents and grown children.

ask the expert

Where he can avoid common-law marriage

THE PROBLEM I'm considering living with a woman I've been dating. I don't want to marry but do want to live with her in either New York or Florida. At what point would each of those states consider us married?

THE EXPERT Sandra M. Radna, attorney, Manhattan and Smithtown

THE RULES A "common law marriage" is legally recognized when a couple, after living together and holding themselves out as husband and wife, is deemed to be married even though there was no marriage license or wedding ceremony. A legal action would then be



Sandra M. Radna

needed to dissolve such a marriage. Common law marriages are recognized in the District of Columbia and some states, including Alabama, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, New Hampshire (for inheritance only), Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode

Island, South Carolina, Texas and Utah. New York and Florida do not recognize such marriages.

HOW IT WORKS If you live together in New York or Florida but have not obtained a marriage license and had a wedding ceremony, you will not be legally married and will not have acquired marital rights and responsibilities. However, if a valid common law marriage was created in another state where common law marriages are recognized, both New York and Florida will recognize that marriage. The parties would have the legal rights of a legally married

couple, and a legal action would be necessary to dissolve such a marriage, even if it was originally created in another state. **THE RESULTS** If you simply wish to live with the woman you have been dating but do not wish to be married, you may do so in New York and Florida without the arrangement becoming a common law marriage; no legal action would be necessary to end the relationship. But be aware that a legal marriage is required to receive Social Security benefits or pension plan payments if one companion dies.

— RONALD E. ROEL

Day at the museum: Go to one or more — free

There's a free day of cultural activities to enjoy next Saturday, and if you want to take full advantage, grab some comfortable shoes and gas up the car.

As part of Smithsonian magazine's Fifth Annual Museum Day, museums around the country are offering free admission Sept. 26. More than 100 museums in New York are taking part, including 11 on Long Island. But you need an admission card to get in.

To download and print your admission card, go to microsite.smithsonianmag.com/museumday/admission.html. If you don't have access to a computer or printer, your local library should be able to help you.

As for the Long Island museums, they stretch 100 miles from Montauk Point (Lighthouse Museum) to Port Washington (Polish American Museum). Scores of museums in New York City are also participating. For a full list of museums, go to microsite.smithsonianmag.com/museumday/venue.html.

TO ASK THE EXPERT: Do you have a question on Act 2 life? Send it to act2@newsday.com or write Act 2 — Ask the Expert, Business Desk, Newsday, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250. Include your name, address and daytime phone number. Advice in this column is offered as general guidance. Check with your own advisers for details on your specific needs.