

Outside the Lines: In Praise of Coloring Books

By Audrey Ferber

At five in the morning, I stand in the cold garage of our newly rented, downsized house. After too many bathroom trips, too many temperature adjustments, window open, window closed, feet covered, feet outside blanket, and my recurring COVID dream, a close friend barring me from her home, I give up on sleep. I need to find my favorite photo of my husband, Jerry.

Twenty or 30 boxes I'll never unpack line the periphery. "Jerry's Books," "Japanese Prints"—each box saddens me in its own way. He used to read. We used to travel. But I'm convinced that if I find the photo from our first vacation together, if I see him the way he looked 35 years ago, when he was 53 and I was 36, before the diabetic foot wounds, before congestive heart failure, before dementia, if I see him leaning out of the frame, a red Italian handkerchief tied rakishly around his neck, every inch of him inclined towards me, life won't feel so hard.

I tear at a box labeled PHOTOS. My nail breaks but the tape doesn't give. I get the next box opened, but they are the wrong photos, Jerry's grandson at six with missing front teeth, my father at a shoeshine stand in the 1930s. I'm reaching toward another box when bright colors in the bottom of a clear bin labeled "Audrey's Office" catch my eye. I unearth three adult coloring books, *Mendhi Designs*, *Folk Art Coloring Book* and *Nature Mandalas*, given to me by a friend before a weekend retreat.

My knees burn from squatting and the garbage pails reek. My ankles knock, icy cold. I put off the search for the Jerry I fell in love with until another day. Next time, I'll organize a stool to sit on and a box cutter. I'll wear socks. But I need to remember we started out hopeful. I need to see the younger, healthier, passionate Jerry, the more perfect way we used to be.

Later in the morning, I bring the coloring books upstairs to the dining room where Jerry is eating breakfast with Shella, one of his health aides. She's four foot eleven with streaked, waist-length hair, cheetah print leggings and a very loud voice.

"Hello dollink," Jerry greets me. "It's my beautiful wife."

It's a good day. Sometimes, he is silent, vacant, unable to make eye contact. When he is locked in, I am locked out.

"Look at what I found! Coloring books!" I sound too enthusiastic, trying too hard to engineer a response.

I spread the books and an old box of colored pencils in front of him on the table. His days consist of breakfast, newspaper, lunch, television and puzzles, each punctuated by a long nap. But he reaches for a coloring book and opens it immediately as if it is exactly what's he's been

hungry for. He turns the pages slowly from first to last, savoring them as if he's reading a book.

"I love coloring!" Shella booms.

I do not. By the age of eight, I considered coloring books "babyish," not what "real artists" did. And the adult supposedly "therapeutic" versions strained my eyes and cricked my neck. But I'm happy for Shella's enthusiasm and Jerry's interest.

I email Jerry's daughter and tell her about her dad's new hobby. We were a family of lavish gift-givers, but illness has confined him to home and reduced his formerly natty wardrobe to sweatpants, diabetes socks and horrible blocks of black foam and Velcro called post-surgery shoes. He barely walks. He does still like hats, but our gift options have narrowed.

Soon, the *Sssnakes Coloring Book* and *The Tattoo Coloring Book* chosen by Jerry's daughter arrive with a box of "JOLLY SUPERSTICKS X-BIG," fat oily pencils that glide on the page and shimmer like wet paint.

In just days, Shella completes two cavorting carp, a hooded cobra and a complicated Scandinavian folk pattern. She masters shading with the SUPERSTICKS and puts the metallic glitter markers I find on a trip to the drugstore to expert use. She signs and dates each of her works.

I abandon my Balinese shadow puppet. The purple necklace looks awful with the peach pantaloons and there's no way to erase. I begin a complicated Hamsa, the symbol of protection, but I can't sit still. I need to order groceries online. I need to arrange a Zoom with Jerry's cardiologist. I need to order more adult diapers and find a site that still has nitrile gloves. Before COVID, before gloves became PPE, we took their availability for granted. Shella and I should change the bandages on Jerry's foot wounds—cut three new crescent-shaped felt pads for each foot to offload pressure, clean the wounds with saline solution, cover them with collagen sprinkled gauze, wrap the foot and leg to the knee with Kerlix, then compress it all with Ace bandages. A few years ago, I'd never heard the word Kerlix and thought collagen was something vain people injected to plump their lips.

Jer is not exactly coloring but continues to study the pages with great interest. I wonder if the time he lingers corresponds to the time it used to take him to read a page, a baked-in brain-body memory. Occasionally, he lifts a pencil and colors in part of a set of lips, then on another page, half of a snake's tongue, and on another, a small corner of a paisley design. I decide not to view his flitting as a deficit but rather as a wider perception, a new expanded vision that allows him to conflate small sections from different pages into one large whole.

A few days later, Shella holds up another success, a perfectly rendered Japanese doll. "When are you going to finish one, Jer?" she asks him.

"Yes, finish one." I chime in.

"Finish! Finish! Finish!" Shella chants.

“He’s a man of many starts,” I say. “A man of false starts. Performance anxiety! Fear of completion!”

“Aw, you two are making fun of me.” Jerry says in a goofy voice, that sounds for a moment like his old self.

I wonder if he’s heard the anger, the frustration, the sadness in my voice, but his face looks placid. We’re too much together since COVID. I miss riffing with my friends.

I hover behind his chair, my head on his shoulder, leaning over his page. “Try one of these.” I brush the dry old pencils aside and line the SUPERSTICKS in front of him, a few of the glitter markers too. “They’re going to be easier for you to hold.”

He ignores me and reaches for one of the old pencils, silver white, the color of his hair, barely visible on the page.

I grab the Carmine SUPERSTICK and color a deep patch on his mermaid’s tail. “See? Isn’t that better?”

He shakes his head no, a quick shudder that knocks me back. My mark on his page screams like a red wound. I’ve gone too far. I’ve intruded. If someone added their sentences to my essay, I’d chop off their hands.

I retreat to the kitchen. If I was a little bossy and controlling in our relationship before, Jerry’s illness has worsened the tendency. It’s easy to be parental when living with someone with dementia. I need to decide everything, exercise judgment for us both. His doctor has suggested regular bathroom times to lessen accidents and no more of his favorite quiz show with dinner. He can no longer eat and watch television, do any two things at once. The changes, my control over him, are both demeaning and filled with love.

I boil water for tea and my eyes water too. I wanted coloring to transform Jerry. I wanted his pictures to be bold, vivid and loud, the Jerry he used to be. Not these faint scratches from far away.

The next morning, I open the dining room window to a sweet, perfectly balanced breeze. Jerry sits at the table with his coloring books. Shella is in another room folding laundry. I would be lost without Jerry’s aides, but this moment feels luxurious, like old times, the two of us together, alone.

“Hi sweetheart.” I kiss the top of his head. “Did you sleep well?”

No response.

“Looks like a nice day,” I try again.

He studies a page of *SSSSNAKES*, lost to me, somewhere else. I take a few pictures of him with my phone. His puppy soft hair shot through with sunlight. A mint green colored pencil

upside down in his hand. A close-up of his face: his still perfect straight nose, the half-moon pouches beneath his eyes webbed with blue veins. A face I love.

“Dementia moves in only one direction,” his doctors have told me. “It only gets worse.”

Photos freeze moments in time. But life has not stood still. He’s withered, I’ve fattened. His medical equipment and my reading glasses litter every room in the house. I’ll find the photo of Jerry somewhere in the garage and marvel at how beautiful he was, at the electricity that picture still arouses in me. But the photos I shoot today show a younger, less afflicted Jerry than the next ones I’ll take. I turn my phone and shoot a selfie. Sometime in the future, I’ll look back and these will be the good days.

I open to my Hamsa. There is only some background left to color. I lift my gold marker, but instead of completing it with a few swipes, I begin a pattern of tiny dots. Rows and rows and rows of them will be needed to cover the page.

“The way you wear your hat...” Ella F. croons from the speaker.

I don’t want us to finish.

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