

OLD AND LONELY IN SUBURBIA

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I visited my father in the South Bay the other day. My mother is off traveling for a few weeks, and I had been looking forward to a long, cozy chat with my beloved father. And to the quiet, Zen-like comfort of his lovingly planted garden. I wanted to be his carefree little girl just for the day.

Instead, I got snow monkeys. Snow monkeys? Well, I'll explain later. But at that point, the innocent child in me was instantly replaced by the outraged urban designer.

I'll start at the beginning.

My father is 81 years old. Up until 15 years ago, he had worked for decades in downtown San Francisco. Every day was a gift. The hysterical antics of the street mimes. The elegance of Union Square shops. The talented and not-so-talented street musicians at lunch time. The colors and textures of the street vendors' wares.

Even the street people were dear to him. Like the quiet madness of the woman who for years cleaned the sidewalk cracks of Market Street with a knife.

His life was full. But in an instant it was gone. That instant was his retirement.

He now sits at home alone in San Carlos most of the time. And that home, like most of those built in the postwar decades in California, makes it difficult for those like him to feel connected to others -- unless, of course, you're not at home during the day.

It is surrounded for miles by other tract homes, emptied most of the day by commuting workers. It is located on a steep hill, providing wonderful views, but unfortunately not wonderful access for my slightly wobbly father.

There are no stores or cafes nearby. His large and once immaculately tended garden is now a constant reminder of his declining abilities.

My mother, on the other hand, is 75 and gainfully employed four days a week. On her vacations, she travels to Europe.

She meets friends downtown for lunch a few days a week, visits the gym every other day and drives a snazzy little sports car. She has a good life.

My parents have a completely different perspective of where they live. My mother wants nothing more than to stay in her beautiful home, the home that holds important memories of her children and is filled with the mementos of her life.

My father wants to move to an apartment downtown (what some urban designers call ``naturally occurring retirement communities").

He needs some help cooking and cleaning and gardening -- or, rather, he needs a smaller house to clean and a smaller garden to tend. And he wants to be on flat ground near stores. Most of all, he wants to be around people.

My mother shudders with horror at the thought of moving. My father feels unneeded and unwanted. He keeps talking about snow monkeys.

OK, now I'll describe the snow monkeys. It seems that this particular group of monkeys makes its home in the highest peaks of the highest mountains in Japan.

They are a particularly cohesive community, staying together for generations. They share tasks and support each other.

But at some point, according to meticulous researchers, an elderly monkey sees that he is no longer useful to his community. He has done all he can do, except for one thing. His last gift to his fellow monkeys is to walk away so that he will not be a burden to them.

He makes no good-byes but just disappears into the brush and is no longer seen or heard from again.

My father says he can relate to the elderly snow monkeys and thinks it may be his time to walk away. And I am delirious with sadness.

Please, Dad, don't walk away from us just yet. I see your eyes light up when you are engaged in political debate. I see the care with which you place a particular stone in your garden.

I admire your passionate and lifelong concern for the less fortunate, and am moved by how much you are moved by the exquisite voice of Andrea Bocelli. Don't you know how much society still needs your spirit?

I know, and I also know that all it would take for my father to once again see his own value is to be around other people. All kinds of people.

As an urban designer I believe that if my parents had been living downtown for the last few decades, my father might have been able to age more happily and gracefully.

Like the old Italian women clothed in black sitting on street benches, he would have been a spirited witness to the everyday wonders -- and messiness -- of life.

Once driving became difficult for him, he would have still been able to walk to the grocery store, chatting to others along the way.

And my mother wouldn't have had to move away from her beloved home at one of the happiest times in her life.

I'm hoping that my parents find a reasonable compromise. But how many others like my father are out there in the soulless and eerie quietness of the suburbs, desperately wanting to be more of a participant in life?

How many still valuable older people are getting ready to walk away from the rest of us? Would they stay a little longer if they were surrounded by people who listened to them and who wanted to be listened to?

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