

Old Grammie

Category: Dementia

written by Colleen T. Fogarty | March 31, 2025

Leaning forward in her chair, wispy gray hair standing up from her head, fire in her eyes, she's swatting at me with her cane and muttering in Polish. I know to not get too close. This is my step-great-grandmother, but we never called her that. She was "Old Grammie" to us.

Old Grammie immigrated from Poland to Connecticut as a teen where she married a farmer and had six children. She spent her adulthood at their dairy farm, working hard as a wife, mother and dairywoman.

As a young child she would tell us stories of the "old country" and the farm. When it was too difficult for her to live alone, she moved in with her son and daughter-in-law—my maternal grandmother.

My maternal grandmother, "Grammie" to all of us grandchildren, was a steady presence in my life; I saw her at least weekly. Old Grammie lived there, too.

Over time, Old Grammie went from living semi-independently in their house, participating in daily chores, to sitting in her armchair in the far corner of the living room. That became her "zone"—an area that held her chair, a walker and cane, and TV tray table with her glasses, water and a snack.

Eventually she required assistance with eating, bathing, grooming and using the toilet. As Old Grammie's function declined, my grandmother's caregiving duties expanded. Whenever I visited, Old Grammie was in her chair, neatly dressed in her housecoat with her soft gray hair combed out.

Finally, Old Grammie was too unsafe to stay home alone, tying my grandmother to the house. To allow her to get her own hair done or go grocery shopping, she would sometimes hire me, a young teen, to "Old Grammie-sit." Old Grammie would sit in her brown chair, often quietly resting. I ensured that she got tea and lunch and helped her to the bathroom. Occasionally, she would become agitated, muttering in Polish, sometimes brandishing the cane.

I never remember my grandmother complaining, despite the full residential care she provided. As an adult, I can only imagine how freeing those breaks to leave the house must have felt.

Now after thirty years as a practicing physician, I reflect on the families I've cared for whose loved one entered the journey of dementia, and the caregiving required as their loved one faded away. I now marvel at my grandmother's dedication to her mother-in-law. I'm grateful I had the opportunity to take a small role in helping her.

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