

KISSING TOMATOES

Granny moves in with the newlyweds. Along with her suitcases comes Alzheimer's.

By

Helen Hudson

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some grandmothers are a vague blur; a name you know, but with a face you can't quite recall. When you were a kid, they faithfully remembered your birthdays with Hallmark cards and a few dollar bills. They phoned you once a year on Christmas and always hurried to hang up because it was "long distance." Others you visited occasionally but only under duress when dragged by your parents. You couldn't wait to get home where you could actually sit on the couch without mussing the plastic cover on top.

If you were really lucky, though, you had a grandmother like mine. She was your best friend. The wall above my desk is filled with photographs of my Granny, Jo, taken during the thirteen years she lived with my husband and me. Granny moved in with us in 1982, when we were newlyweds. Along with her suitcases she also brought Alzheimer's, a disease that wasn't on anyone's lips at the time.

We made quite a threesome in the pictures: a young couple with an old, white-haired lady always in tow. There we were: crammed into the kid-sized seats of a bumper-car ride, watching the Red Sox from the Fenway bleachers, going to church Easter Sunday, walking barefoot on the beach, shooting pool in a smoky bar and just clowning around at home. My favorite photo, though, is one that neither John nor I are in: Granny is holding our newborn daughter.

I would like you to see her as I did but that is not possible: my eyes were muted always by an immense and unconditional love. Besides, few see us as we really are—they only know the way we are with them. So, I have chosen to begin these chapters with Granny's own quotes; words of advice she gave me when I was growing up in her home in the 1960's. She was appointed my legal guardian when I was 13. My mother had been declared "mentally unfit," by the Arizona Superior Court, and would later be diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

Despite having lived her own share of heartaches, Granny was willing to take on mine. At the time, she was a high school guidance counselor and brought her wisdom home. 16 years later, when I began caring for her, many of her early sayings would re-echo in her own ears—now coming back from me. Of course, by then in her dementia-addled state, none of them would be recognizable to her at all. Since you weren't lucky enough to know my Granny Jo, and her wise counsel was so wholly a part of who she was, I share those words now with you.

CHAPTER ONE

“If you think you can do it, try it. Then you’ll know for sure.”

Certain moments stick themselves into your head and refuse to let go. Some are so historically sad, that you remember just where you were when they happened: like the day my 6th grade teacher burst into tears and said to our class, “President Kennedy has just been shot.” Others are so magical, like your first kiss that you can’t help but smile when you recall them. But some are just so downright weird that you rewind them over and over again in your head. It’s as if by reliving the moment you might finally make some sense out of it. With Alzheimer’s though, it just never happens.

That was the case a few days after Granny first moved in with us. I had decided to take her grocery shopping. It would be her first real outing since she arrived. Until then, John and I had taken turns keeping an eye on her. When you’ve been told, ‘Your grandmother has been talking to the TV set, and the TV set was turned OFF,’ you keep her on a short leash. Granny was so eager to finally get out of the house that she was waiting by the car before I could get my purse.

At the market, I set her loose in the produce department; her favorite.

“Now just pick out everything that looks good to you,” I said, “and I’ll be right back with the cart.”

Granny slowly walked over to the grapes and began picking through them. She loved grapes. I paused for a moment to watch her. Her long, willowy figure and white hair were so familiar to my eyes. For years I had seen her bent over like this, daintily choosing just the right fruits and vegetables. It was she who had told me that those ugly, old, spotted bananas “were riper, sweeter, and easier to digest.” And it was also she who informed me, “You never need to poke a cantaloupe. Merely smell the end where it was picked. You’ll know.”

She seemed just fine, so I hustled to the dairy aisle and grabbed some milk. I was gone only a few minutes. Returning, I noticed several shoppers had stopped in their tracks and were staring in the same direction. Following their stares, I found myself looking right at my very own, eighty-two year-old Grandmother. She was holding a large, ripe, red tomato high up in the air above her head.

“I shall choose you!” she said in a theatrical voice strangely reminiscent of Bob Barker on “Let’s Make A Deal.” Then, to my gaping astonishment, she placed a firm, deliberate, smack-like kiss right in the center of that tomato.

Judging from the onlookers, this wasn’t the first piece of fruit Granny had christened in this manner. Now sane people do not talk to fruits and vegetables--let alone kiss them! Certainly not my grandmother, whose lifelong modesty and discretion were her very trademarks! Startled by her uncharacteristic behavior, I kept her close at my side for the remainder of our shopping. With one hand pushing the cart and the other clasping hers tightly, I felt as jumpy and harried as a mother with a toddler in tow.

I filled the basket high with her favorite foods: fresh fruits and vegetables, cartons of yogurt, soups, Ak-Mak crackers, cream cheese, and ice cream. The flavor never mattered. She liked anything sweet. Granny had been a vegetarian for years, but I didn't realize that she had been eating almost no protein. Not only was it difficult for her to chew but she also no longer cooked. While living alone, her typical dinner had often been carrot juice, a small, green salad and a piece of fruit. She did eat meat on holidays, and even though it was barely September, I decided to buy a large turkey.

"So, what do we need for your famous stuffing?" I asked, thinking she would enjoy making something familiar.

"Stuffing?" she asked looking uncertain.

"For Mr. Big Bird here," I laughed, pointing at the turkey.

Granny looked down at the pink bird and then back up at me.

"Why would you stuff that thing?" she huffed. "It looks big enough already."

"Now, Granny," I chided, "You have stuffed a turkey every Christmas and Thanksgiving since I was a little girl. Not only that, sometimes you used to make me plain, old stuffing for dinner!"

She gave me an incredulous look.

"Your memory must not be very good," she scowled, staring back at the turkey.

Undaunted, I picked out the parsley, sage, onion, celery, raisins, butter, walnuts and rice and we walked happily arm-in-arm down the aisles. Just being out and about seemed to rekindle her spirits. I noticed that Granny gave a big smile to every shopper who passed by. It was out of character for her normal reticence, but at least she was connecting.

At home, she asked to help put away the groceries. I was thrilled to see her actually taking some initiative. However, as she put the crackers in the freezer and the ice cream in the cupboard, it was clear that she no longer remembered where things went. Since she thought she was really helping, I didn't say a word, but merely trailed after her re-doing everything. After dinner, I helped her into her pajamas, watched as she brushed her teeth and tucked her into bed. She seemed better and I slept peacefully.

The next morning, I came into the kitchen and found what can only be described as the mess a two year-old makes, when left alone too long. All of the food that we had bought the day before had been taken out of its place. The turkey was torn out of its plastic wrapper and sat thawing on the counter. Rivulets of blood were already dripping onto the floor making puddles. An apple was jammed where its head should have been, and balanced on top of the bird was an entire stick of rapidly, softening butter.

Something had been sprinkled along the counters, but I couldn't tell what. Salt? Sugar? Several cans of soup were lying in various corners of the kitchen as if someone had been rolling them around. There were stacks of crackers in little clumps everywhere I looked. Amidst the chaos, was a trail of raisins that ran from the counters, down across the kitchen floor and ended up in the living room. The ice cream carton was out, opened, shaped into a peak and already turning soft. She had been at this for hours!

“What have you done?” I said, my voice much louder than I had intended.

“I have created the world,” she replied calmly.

“What?” I said.

“These are the Chinese people,” she said, pointing to the raisins. “They have been terribly oppressed and are going in different directions.”

“Then what’s that?” I asked, pointing to the turkey.

“God,” she said firmly. “And He does not like what He sees.”

I did not like what I saw either and immediately began cleaning up the mess. Grandmother started to cry.

“You’re ruining my picture of the world!” she sobbed.

John, hearing the commotion, came in to see what the fuss was about. His eyes widened at the mess on the floor.

“What are you up to, Josephine?” he questioned far more calmly than I had.

She re-explained what she had done.

“Oh, I see,” said John taking this all in. “The crackers are the pygmy huts. The raisins are the Chinese people and the ice cream is a snow-capped mountain.”

“Yes!” she exclaimed calming down, as if someone finally understood her.

“Well, you’ve done a lovely job, Jo, but if we don’t put the ice cream away now, we won’t be able to have any for dinner.”

“Okay,” Granny said a little uncertainly. “But don’t disturb the Chinese people.”

“We won’t,” said John casting a glance my way.

Over the next several weeks we discovered why Granny would only eat soft foods: her dentures didn’t fit and had rubbed raw sores along her gums. No wonder she preferred only applesauce or ice cream. We had her dentures fixed and until she could chew again, I served her yogurt with every meal. Very quickly, and obviously, her behavior began to normalize. She initiated conversations, took care of her own grooming and helped around the house again.

For a while she was almost back to her old self. Almost. One afternoon, I found the front door wide open. Grandmother had left the house without me hearing her. Quickly, I looked up and down the block. No sight of her. Frantically, I started running up the street behind us. I finally spotted her at the front door of a house around the corner. A man, naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist, was shaking his head at her. As I drew closer, I heard her insist, “This is my house! Let me in!” His dark hair, coupled with her poor eyesight, must have led her to believe that he was John. The poor, half-naked fellow was too perplexed to be angry. His confusion turned to relief the moment he saw me running up the driveway. I apologized and led her back home.

“I must be confused,” she confided. “I was sure that was our house.”

After that, John and I took shifts leaving the house and tried as often as possible never to leave her alone. I ran errands when he came home from work after the stock market closed. We had rented an unfurnished, two-bedroom house in Encinitas, just north of San Diego. We were in a development of same-looking, single-story houses, east of Highway 5; a community with

sidewalks, Hondas in the garage, and postage stamp front lawns; the perfect starter home for our “new family.”

Granny’s daughter, Jane, lived nearby. Though she had considered having Jo live with her, it would have proved difficult, if not impossible. She was a high school teacher and Granny would have been alone all day. The last thing someone with dementia needed was solitude.

I immediately began making our new home cozy. I filled the rooms with Granny’s lifetime belongings until it almost resembled the home of thirty years she had left. The transition was easy: As newlyweds, we had only purchased a king bed, small dresser, bookcase and desk. I tried hard to re-create her ‘old’ bedroom: her father’s maple bed, along with her cherry desk and dresser set fit perfectly. Under her rusting, wrought iron lamps, I arranged her yellowed, lace doilies, as she had once placed them. Granny’s upright piano, which I had taken lessons on as a child, now sat in the living room.

John and I consulted her throughout the move. We had to. Despite her mostly shy and diffident manner in public, she had definite opinions about where everything should go, especially in her own house. When I put the flowered chair too close to the striped sofa, she shook her head in disgust, just like she did whenever I wore some “horrible” outfit. I knew exactly what she was going to say:

“I used to be an art major at Smith, you know. I understand color and have a proper sense of balance and proportion.”

It took the movers less than an hour to get everything in. It took us about ten more to get everything to Granny’s satisfaction.

“No, John. Over here,” she directed. “Good. Nope. Nope. One more inch to the left. Yes, dear. That’s it.”

John patiently moved and re-moved lamps, chairs and furniture until they were, “Just right!” Granny was pleased when we finished. Everything was familiar to her now. Although, instead of a newlywed pad, John said our house resembled, “something out of the fifties like my parents would have lived in.”

The only problem making Granny really comfortable was the temperature: She was constantly cold. Even in summer, she wore long pants and a sweater, complaining often about the “cool breeze.” We had always liked the windows open, even in winter. She ran around shutting them tightly as soon as she spied one open.

After several days of being sweaty and miserable we compromised: John and I wore T-shirts and shorts and kept the heat at 70. Our bedroom window remained open but with our door closed. Granny dressed warmly to move about the house. When she was in her bedroom, she turned on the small electric heater we purchased for her. We now had two completely different climates under the same roof; a harbinger of things to come.

I took Granny on daily walks around our neighborhood so that she would know just where she lived. It was pointless to have her remember the street name or number on our mailbox. She didn’t see well and they all looked the same to her. However, Granny had her own, clever ways

of imprinting her moorings: Our house was, “the one with the red flowers to the left of the door, and across the street from the dirty-looking dog with the funny bark.”

Life inside our house, though, continued to be chaotic. One evening while I was rehearsing, John called me in a panic.

“You’d better get home right away.”

Five minutes later I pulled in the driveway. The front door was wide open. Inside, crawling on her hands and knees, was what looked to be an old, Arab woman with a cowl around her head; the kind you might see in a marketplace being forced to do penance for some horrible sin. She was babbling in what sounded like a foreign language.

As I stepped inside, Granny, wearing only her terrycloth bathrobe, began crawling towards me. She was not babbling at all, but making “oink” sounds like a pig! Over her head, she had draped a pair of large, blue, silk underwear. From the bottom of this get-up, dangled two shoelaces tied up in knots. Affixed over her nose were several pieces of Kleenex that resembled a surgical mask. She had tucked them up under her glasses, so that every time she breathed, the white tissues flapped up and down. Around her neck she had hung a stretched-out, wire hanger. It looked like a noose. The thing that I found most odd, and yet most normal about her appearance, was that Granny had tied her favorite blue scarf neatly around her throat. At its center, she had pinned her best brooch.

“What are you doing, Grandmother?” I said with both shock and embarrassment at what I was witnessing.

“Oink. I am God,” she muttered. “I am carrying the sins of the world around my neck. Oink.”

I was too nonplussed to think of anything intelligent to say, so I got down on my hands and knees and oinked right back at her. She liked this game. We crawled around, “oinking” for several minutes. Suddenly, she stood up and took off the hanger.

‘Thank God, it’s over,’ I thought to myself.

Nope. Granny walked to the hall closet, donned a black hat and took out her umbrella. Using it as a cane, she pretended to be a blind man and started shuffling right out the front door.

We immediately took her to the doctor. He said that she was suffering from, “senile dementia.” He described it as ‘the natural course of aging,’ and said it was like a “hardening of the arteries in the brain.” Of course, 20 years later, scientists now know that there is nothing ‘natural’ about Alzheimer’s at all. It is in fact a brain disease caused by amyloid plaques which completely destroy brain cells. However, despite his misguided diagnosis, that doctor did give us one great piece of advice: Keep your sense of humor.

Interestingly, the term “Alzheimer’s,” would not be used to describe Grandmother’s condition for another five years. Although the disease itself was discovered in 1906 by Alois Alzheimer, the scientific world did not actively begin researching it until the 1980s. In hindsight, Granny was already manifesting signs of what is now called the “moderately severe” stage.

The doctor also prescribed water pills for her edema. Her ankles were badly swollen, but we hadn’t noticed it. Even thin, loose socks left their deep line marks on her legs. She also took digitalis for a heart arrhythmia. I figured these medications coupled with the vitamins and

calcium supplements I began giving her would keep her healthy and kicking for a few more years.

As wacky and confused as Grandmother seemed to be at the time, she had so many lucid moments that it was difficult to know when she was 'normal' and when she was suffering from 'dementia.' It wouldn't be uncommon for her to ask to read John's newspaper after dinner and an hour later not remember how to brush her teeth. Scientists now know that this is part of the conundrum of the disease. Some days the neurons are firing and others they just go cold.

Despite her odd and erratic behavior, her personal writings often reflected cogency. During this period she wrote a letter to one of her best friends, which she never sent. I found it folded among her things several years after she passed away:

. . . When I moved to Buzz's I was suffering from a bad case of disorientation from the experience of leaving my home and friends of so many years. I had a very strange ten months there which I am sure disturbed Buzz and Dixie very much because my behavior was peculiar. . . I was partly in a strange world and partly myself looking on. . . I spent quite a bit of time wandering outside which you can see would be disarming. Inside, I sent money to the Republicans for which I received some recognition which I didn't understand at all. . . I made patterns out of things and followed voices that nobody else heard. . . Finally, the family decided I wasn't happy and John and Helen agreed to take me for a while. Perhaps being with Helen steadied me and I have felt normal after these first few weeks of adjustment. I have never told anybody these experiences before. . .

After the doctor's diagnosis, I decided that Granny needed a more structured routine. So, every morning I now insist that she make her bed, brush her teeth, get dressed and come to breakfast. Her household chores were to keep her room neat, with clothes hung properly and shoes put away, and to help set the table. I treated her like a child and even sent her back to her room if her bed weren't made. She seemed to quite enjoy the attention.

Life ran very smoothly for several months. Granny liked the routine. She was eating well and her edema was gone. She was constantly active with us, whether going to church or the beach. In fact, people who met her during that time thought she was perfectly normal. When she joined a bible study group and I mentioned to the older woman in charge that Granny "has dementia," she laughed. "Oh, honey," she reassured me, "That's just old age. We all have a little memory loss."

This reaction from others would continue for years. That is the great deception with the disease. The plaques that begin to encroach on the brain, causing synaptic failure, do so in a haphazard way. That is why no one reacts the same way or in the same time frame. There is no clear cut beginning or end to the progression. It is tantamount to giving a two year-old finger paint. One just never knows what will end up on the canvas or most certainly, how it will look when they are finished.

However, in 1982 we were not thinking of what was actually happening inside of Granny's head. We were just thrilled that she had so improved from the day she had first moved in with us.

Her mind was so sharp and clear again that we could now play bridge and Scrabble together! Many nights after dinner, the three of us were either deeply engrossed in three-handed bridge or digging through the Dictionary for challenging Scrabble words:

“‘Hot’ and ‘heart,’” I said confidently, using all of my tiles.

“Hmm,” she replied carefully looking at her letters. Then, with one deft swoop, she laid out all seven of them against my ‘t’ and spelled, “Flippant!”

I was thrilled the first time she beat me. She was my granny again!

Well, not quite. One afternoon, I arrived to find the entire house covered in Kleenex; white Kleenex as far as the eye could see – on the chairs, draped across the sofa, atop the piano, over the TV, and even balanced on the lampshades. It looked like a summer cottage does when cloaked for the approach of winter. Granny was in her bedroom, trying to place yet another Kleenex on the doorknob. It wouldn’t stay put.

“Granny,” I smiled. “What are you up to now?”

“I am protecting the house from evil spirits,” she confided in a whisper.

“With Kleenex?” I laughed.

“Oh, yes,” she said quite seriously. “It is white. That is the color of purity.”

“Well, where are these spirits?” I asked her, pretending to go along.

“You can’t see them,” she said. “But they are everywhere. Especially in the TV.”

As I stood there trying to think of something clever to say, she carefully placed a Kleenex on top of her head.

“That’s a good place for it,” I said. “Cuz right now you’ve got some weird little spirits in your head that we need to get rid of. In fact, here, I’ll put another one up there just to be extra sure.”

This seemed to please her so much that I put one on top of my own head. We made dinner together that night trying to keep our tissues in place. However, after she went to bed, I took the few remaining Kleenex boxes and hid them in our bedroom closet. Evil spirits or not, I did not plan to leave temptation in Granny’s way if I could help it.

We had found a ‘balance;’ a precarious one, but a balance nonetheless. The best part was that the three of us had become a family in every sense of the word. Our Christmas card picture that first year showed John and me standing in front of the art museum, with Granny squeezed in between us.

At a time when all of our “thirty something,” friends were having babies, we had Grandmother. Life in our house was busy with the patter of big feet, not little ones. By the time the first year flew by, John and I were both confident to forge ahead and keep her with us. Granny was already fitting into our lives as neatly as a child, and our good times together far outweighed the frustrations. We had tried what we thought we could do and had succeeded – at least for the present – but I couldn’t help but compare it with the past and the grandmother I had known then.