



# **GRANDMA'S SECRETS**

*thoughts about her life and her future  
that she's too scared to tell her children*

Old age. It happens to all of us eventually. It sneaks up on us, catches us unawares. Our abilities wind down until we can't quite manage like we used to. Or a crisis – illness, or the loss of a partner – suddenly turn our lives upside-down.

Most of us, fortunately, have loving families who want to care for us ... may even arrange for us to move in with them. Seems so logical. One big, happy family!

And occasionally, living together works wonderfully.

But more often – as Grandma found out – it can be (gulp!) a DISASTER!

**N**ow, this may come as a bit of a shock. But no matter how much we love each other, or how good our intentions, when grandma (or grandpa) moves in, things easily turn to custard. And once-happy families can come seriously unstuck.

Surprised? Well, put yourself in Grandma's shoes ...

The house is sold and you're living with your daughter's family. Everything's new and exciting. Everyone's happy. The children are thoughtful and quieter than usual. You get to go with them on family outings. You feel protected: *"I'm living with my daughter and son-in-law – see how much they care!"*

At first it's like a holiday. But, gradually, things start to change. The kids get noisier and run around like they own the place. They're no longer thoughtful, and they've woken up to the fact that you're not in charge. They may even play you off against their parents.

You start missing your privacy. And so does your family. They can't argue freely – and if they did you'd probably feel it was your fault. You get the urge to have a hot bath at four in the afternoon, or sit on the couch with dinner, or have a lazy

night in front of TV – but this wouldn't fit in with family routines. Tiny things, for sure ... but tiny things can make all the difference.

How are you feeling NOW about moving in with your family?

**A**ucklander **Cass Duncan** spent 35 years caring for the elderly – in private and public hospitals, plus her own rest-home. After a prolonged battle with multiple sclerosis, Cass herself passed away in 2007 – but not before she'd published a booklet. *'Silent Suffering'* (the inspiration for this Grapevine article) was based on 500 interviews with elderly men and women and their families, many of whom have had thoughts and fears just like Grandma's – secrets they were afraid to share with their families.

Here's what some of them told Cass ...

- *"I found the family going out more and more without me, saying it'd be 'too strenuous' for me, or they'd be 'back too late', or there wasn't room in the car. Then I overheard, 'No, we can't go because we can't take Nana.'"*
- *"I felt the urge to help around the home, but it quickly became a chore ... expected of me. Then, if I did something one day but not the next, my daughter would*

get upset. It was like I had become the housemaid.”

- “When the family had friends over, they sometimes liked to discuss matters that were private, but they could hardly ask me to leave the room, could they? So resentment set in.”
- “I suddenly realised that whatever I did, it could be taken as interfering. Even saying, ‘That fabric would look lovely as curtains in the bedroom’, could imply that I didn’t like their décor.”
- “One day, I just shifted a mat and my daughter-in-law nearly threw a fit. I felt I’d betrayed her somehow. I do love her, but we have our moments.”
- “If I needed to be on my own and went to my room, my daughter would think I was upset or sulking. I know we become intolerant as we grow older, but the noise the teenagers make is unbearable. It doesn’t make things easy.”
- “Every time I opened my mouth, I seemed to say the wrong thing, and the intolerance on both sides was terrible. So I moved out. Now we’re closer than we’ve ever been. I didn’t realise you could be so lonely with family.”
- “I’d hide the car-keys just to get back at my daughter. I hid my grandson’s school shirts and was amused at the panic. I’d deliberately criticise or disagree or start fights – it was better than being ignored. I was so lonely and miserable. I even used to kick the cat!”
- “Some people are happy living with their family, pottering around in the house, but I found that I was only washing dishes and feeling eternally grateful for their sacrifice in having me live with them. Really, we have nothing in common. Me and my children are decades apart.”

**T**here are two sides to every story, of course. It’s not just Grandma and her elderly friends who have secrets ...

- “I felt it was my duty to look after Mum, but I didn’t realise it would be so hard. I’ve had feelings that were so violent they really disgusted me. I wished she’d die. She was ruining my life. My marriage broke up because of the stress, and I hated her.”
- “I denied that anything was wrong with Mum living with me, but it wasn’t true. We did have problems, and certainly I had silent tears. One day I’ll feel strong enough to ask Mum what she thought about it all.”

**S**hocking stuff? Well, maybe. But think about it: each of us has certain values ... certain levels of tolerance, patience and control. And when our privacy gets invaded or our buttons get pushed, we do and say things we normally wouldn’t dream of.

Push us far enough and we can start abusing each other emotionally: ignoring, belittling, being nasty, saying things that hurt. Push us further, and even *physical* abuse is possible – on *both* sides.

Of course, no one *means* to do this. Grandma feels devastated after she deliberately causes trouble – and her children are equally shocked when they’re rude to Grandma. It’s just that, well, “*having Grandma come and stay*” can be trickier than we thought.

It’s often the woman of the house – struggling to meet everyone’s needs – who feels the stress most. And Grandma can easily add to that stress without realizing it. By niggling and complaining, or constantly referring to her other



of the misery they caused, mentioning only the love and gratitude they felt for their care-givers.

### **GRUMPY OLD DAD: ONE SON'S STORY**

**M**y father never seemed happy with my sister. He was always moaning about something. So my wife and I arranged for him to move in with us.

“Dad settled in readily, but gradually his demands grew. He wanted us to sit and talk with him every minute, and resented us watching TV. He’d make snide remarks about what we were doing.

“After a few tense months, everyone was on edge. The kids preferred spending time with their friends to avoid the tension. And I’d lie in bed promising

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“wonderful” children (whom she may hardly ever see!) ... she can leave her caregivers feeling unloved and inadequate.

“Many people I interviewed,” wrote Cass, “told me how it had destroyed their marriages, sometimes after only two years – and some had lived in this distressed state for 20 years or more!”

Why do some elderly parents prove so hard to live with? Cass observed: “Because their lives become meaningless and boring. When you’re the one who has to advise them, house them, feed and protect them, they come to depend on you for life, company, entertainment – and to absorb their frustrations!”

Yet they were often completely unaware

myself that I’d try being more patient.

“Then he took to wanting tea in the middle of the night. The poor old guy couldn’t sleep. So I suggested a thermos flask. But, no way! A cup of tea had to be made properly or not at all. So one of us stayed up until 11:00pm to give him his cuppa – and if we heard him any other time during the night, we’d get up and make him another one.

“I remember sitting there one morning when Dad got up – knowing what was going to happen, and starting to rage. The scowl was there as his hand slid over the warm teapot, and he muttered, ‘Aren’t we going to get any breakfast here today?’ That always got me going.

**“I**resented his continual demands and the guilt-trips. The quality of our lives – and his – was plummeting. So after 18 months, we decided he needed rest-home care.

“While arrangements were being made, my guilt deepened, and every day his snide remarks cut me more and more. One day I found myself sneaking up to his door to listen and thinking, *‘Oh hell, he’s still breathing!’*”

“That episode will make me feel guilty for the rest of my life. I was just so depressed. I felt we’d lost control.

“We visited several rest-homes, and finally, against Dad’s will, we placed him in one. Our whole family had mixed feelings: hurt, sadness, even grief – but, at the same time, utter relief! For the first time in months, the stress had gone. We were all learning to love Dad again.

“He claimed he hated every minute in the rest-home, and he certainly made us feel guilty. But we checked with staff who told us he was always chirpy till we got there – then, as soon as we arrived, he’d start complaining. Matron told us this was pretty common. The residents often put their family on guilt-trips when they come to visit – but once they had gone, they were quite happy again, oblivious to the hurt and tears and misery they’d caused during the visit.

“One Christmas, we took Dad home for the day and he never let up about the terrible thing I had done by dumping him. I was getting used to being the rotten son by now, and didn’t mind as much. But it still hurt. We had dinner, and then Dad suddenly announced, ‘I want to go home now.’ We nearly fainted. He *wanted* to go back to the rest-home!

“Although he never admitted it, he really rather enjoyed being there. Matron was right. He probably went back and told her what a rotten day he’d had with us!”

## **MUM & ALZHEIMER’S: ANNE’S STORY**

**“M**um lived in the South Island, but we’d all shifted to Auckland. So, after much persuasion, she sold up and put her money into a granny-flat on our property, still doing everything in her power to maintain a life of her own.

“I started to notice things were going downhill when she couldn’t find objects she’d put away. At first we all thought it was just absent-mindedness, but as more and more things went missing we could see something was wrong.

“Mum was getting obsessive, always packing and unpacking. One day she set a tea-towel on fire. Luckily we were there at the time. So we insisted that she eat with us. Afterwards, I’d walk her back to the flat, and check again, later, to see that she was all tucked in and warm and the TV off.

“Mum deteriorated. She put lighter clothes on when it was freezing, forgot the children’s names, didn’t want to get out of bed, didn’t want anybody assisting her with bathing. Then only three minutes after a huge argument she’d say, *‘Well, let’s get the body up and moving ...’* as though nothing had happened.

“The next few months were a nightmare. Mum was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. We were shattered but absolutely determined to nurse her to the end. It was hard to believe this once-strong, wonderful mother was now so confused – almost violent at times.



“Finally, we saw the district nurse who arranged day-care at a hospital. Mum was driven there at 9:00 in the morning and got picked up at 4:30. I’d take the opportunity to straighten the flat and take out everything that was dangerous. (She had broken ornaments wrapped in sheets, soap powder in the pantry, and jewellery on the bottom of her bird’s cage.)

“Day-care gave us enormous relief, but 4:30pm wasn’t the end of the day. And when we decided to ignore her and let her tire herself out, she’d go over to the gate, screaming, ‘Help, help! Save me from these people!’

“My poor darling mother didn’t respond to any drugs they gave her. She really needed expert care. The only thing we could do was to put her into a confined environment where she

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“One evening, after a very hectic day with Mum who wanted to go out with her underclothes over her dress, I broke down and cried. I realised I was beginning to hate her. I was so tired – it was worse than living with 10 children. Mum had been a very intelligent, capable person, and to see her sitting there with three skirts on and five cardigans just freaked me out.

“I’d read about abuse of the elderly and now felt I was guilty of this. She’d ask, ‘What day is it today, dear?’ After answering 30 times, I’d scream at her, and then she’d get upset and want to go away. Of course, she couldn’t, because she’d just get lost again.

couldn’t hurt herself. We were lucky to find an ideal vacancy in a rest-home. So we took her there (telling her lies to get her into the car). She trusted no one, not even me.

“I sobbed all the way home – partly from guilt, and partly with relief. I felt I’d let her down, betrayed her. But I had come to dread waking up every day.

“Now, when I go to visit her, she’s usually in a confused state, often with her belongings packed, wandering out of someone’s room. Still, most of the 26 patients are like that, and I take my hat off to those wonderful nurses. Sometimes, after coming back from seeing Mum,

I think of the many nights that I cried silently after being so nasty. I didn't realise then it was stress, but my sense of duty almost destroyed us.

"Now that the stress has gone, I sit with her for ages and take her in a wheelchair through the park. Our lives are back to normal, and I love her so much."

### **CRANKY OLD FRED: A VERY DETERMINED MAN**

"Alice and I built a house which got too big for us. Although I didn't relish living in a pensioner flat, we moved in, and Alice rather liked it. It was smaller and not much work – but darn boring.

"During Christmas Alice had a stroke and was in hospital for six weeks. I wasn't strong enough to lift her, so it was suggested




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we move in with Jenny, our daughter, and her husband Mike for a while.

"For three months we all got on famously, so we decided to sell our flat and stay permanently with Jenny. Then Alice had another stroke and couldn't talk, and she began getting more and more demanding.

"I don't know what happened, really, but little niggly things started to get on my nerves. For example, the district nurses used to come and bathe her, but we were never sure when. Then I'd have to wait for Mike to get home to put Alice to bed. And sometimes when there were delays in moving her, her bladder

would fail, which was very distressing for everyone.

"Jenny, God bless her, was a saint, but she found it very frustrating that Alice couldn't express herself in words. With Jenny working and running the house, she got tired and growled now and then – and I'd have a go at her: *'Don't talk to your mother like that!'*

"Eventually, a word, a look or even a grunt from family members would get an angry reaction from me. Jenny and Mike never once asked us to leave, but one Saturday I blew up, shouting, *'That's it! We're off!'*

They were speechless. You could've

heard a pin drop. And Mike said, *'Dad, don't be daft. We're sorry. It's just so hard.'*

"Looking back, we can laugh about it, but we weren't laughing then. Alice was in bed, so I yelled at Jenny, *'Look after your mother!'* and stormed out.

"I went down to the beach and thought, *'Well Fred, you've done it this time. What now?'*

"I bought a paper and decided we would rent a flat and start afresh – goodness knows how! But looking through the pages, I noticed rest-home vacancies. I'd heard some dreadful things about them, but I sat for a long time, maybe two hours, weighing up the consequences. Then, very set in my mind, I went home to Jenny.

"I don't think they'd moved from the moment I'd left. They were so ashen-faced, I thought Alice had died. Mike patted me on the back and apologised. Jenny grabbed me and started crying and said how sorry they were. But I gently sat her down. *'How's this for an idea?'* I asked. *'This is the situation. Alice needs special treatment, but we don't want to be separated. We've tried living here, but I don't want to interfere with your lives. So now we're going to try something else – but I'll need your help. There's a rest-home about five kilometres from here. I want you, Mike, to take me to have a look ...'*

"The rest-home had 35 residents. It looked neat and tidy, and was very warm when we went in. The vibes were great. Most of the residents were having tea, and the menu looked good. I even got a nod and a smile from strangers.

"We got the financial details, and went back quite impressed. When Jenny saw

it, she was really excited. So we moved in four days later. Alice didn't – or couldn't – say much, but I could tell that she was far more relaxed at the rest-home than at Jenny's.

"Our whole lives have changed. The nurses shower Alice and look after her bodily needs. They're so obliging and kind that even a cranky old bloke like me enjoys it. Some days I read to Alice. If she has a bad day, I feed her and tuck her up at night in our little room, and then watch TV. I've got earphones, so I can stay up as late as I like without disturbing anyone.

"Because I'm mobile, I can go for walks, help in the garden, go on conducted tours or arranged outings. And while I'm out, I don't have to worry about Alice because the staff are there. Our whole quality of life has improved. It's like being in a hotel!"

## Lesson #1: NEVER LOSE THE POWER TO CHOOSE

**M**ake sure you never ever lose your power of choice!" wrote Cass. Remember:

- You're still an independent person with the same human rights as any other adult – your age doesn't strip these from you.
- You're free to *choose* where you live.
- You have the right to participate fully in all discussions and decisions regarding your living arrangements and care.
- You have the right to the fullest information about what services are available to you in your own home and in sheltered accommodation such as a rest-home.
- It's your duty to weigh up your options

and choose the one you can best cope with. Even if it's wrong, it's still *your choice* – and, if one option doesn't work, try another.

"I firmly believe," said Cass, "that people should stay in their own homes until it becomes impossible to manage even with all the help available. Call us what you will: old people, geriatrics, senior citizens, whatever: it all amounts to the same thing. We've matured and ripened with valuable experience, and our status is the biggest compliment life can give us.

## **Lesson #2: STAY INTERESTING**

**T**ake trips if you're able. Try new hobbies. Keep a garden. Use your local library. Check the noticeboard




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for news of local groups and activities. Start a project. Write, paint or take up photography.

Think about and write down all your dreams, expectations and wants in life. Tick each one off as it's achieved, and try to accomplish others on your list.

Use your community hall for group activities. Support your local kindergarten. Make toys for a craft-shop nearby. Offer your services to local schools to be interviewed by children about the old days. Offer to organise crafts. Be an active part of the community.

And if you feel like it, enjoy doing *nothing*, just reading and remembering.

This is your choice and your privilege. Remember, life doesn't come to you – you've got to go out and get it!

## **Lesson #3: KEEP LEARNING**

**A**re things changing too fast? Does the world seem too complicated? Well, don't let yourself be brushed aside. Fight the tendency to be left behind. Stay in touch. Keep up.

Make the effort to learn new technologies. Ask someone – your children or grandchildren – to teach you how to work cellphones, or DVDs, or computers. You'll probably be surprised how simple it is – and you'll get a sneaky thrill at mastering something new.

## Lesson #4: KEEP MOVING

**T**he choice is yours: you can sit down and become boring, stiff, immobile and dependent ... or you can fight to remain alert, agile and active.

Immobility may sound restful – but it can be agony. Keeping fit means retaining the ability to knit, do carpentry, reach into the top cupboard, stroll to the shops, play bowls ... in short, to stay in control of your day-to-day life, and *enjoy* it!

Be aware of your body ... and keep it moving. That generates enthusiasm and guards against apathy and depression. By exercising regularly – even 10 minutes a day! – you ensure quality living in the future.

## Lesson #5: DON'T SAY YOU'RE COPING IF YOU'RE NOT

**A**dmit that you're getting older, and allow yourself the privilege of doing less. Recognise that you can no longer manage like you used to. Know your limits, and be aware of the stress these may place on the people who love you.

Don't let your reluctance to change trap you in a situation where you can't cope.

There are lots of alternatives to consider – home help, a smaller house, a pensioner's flat, a granny-flat, a retirement village, a rest-home. You're not alone. There's a huge network of help available ... and there's no shame in admitting that you need it.

Family, friends, neighbours, doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, social workers, Home Care, Meals-On-Wheels, Age Concern, Grey Power, the 60's-Up Movement, your local Citizens Advice Bureau – all these people have your welfare at heart. And their skills and resources can vastly improve your quality of life.

Finally, don't wait till there's a crisis. Take control earlier rather than later. Look ahead. Discuss it now. Make some plans.

As Cass Duncan wrote, "Once you take the first step, a whole new world can open up!"

KEEPERS OF THE VINE



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HAVE YOUR SAY!**



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Thanks so much – John Cooney (founder/editor)

