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SundayReview | OPINION

Mean Girls in the Retirement Home

By JENNIFER WEINER JAN. 17, 2015

ABOUT 18 months ago, my 97-year-old grandmother went out to dinner with some friends. As Nanna got out of the car, she tripped over her friend Shirley’s cane, fell to the pavement and came down hard on her elbow. Back at home, she headed to the kitchen to get some dessert — “and my left leg just crumpled.”

At the hospital, the doctors ordered X-rays, but couldn’t see anything wrong. After two weeks of therapy, Nanna was sent home, but she’d made up her mind. After 30 years of living in Florida, 28 of them as a widow, and most of those spent insisting that the only way she’d go back to her native Michigan was “in a box,” Nanna asked her older daughter, my Aunt Marlene, to find her a sunny place near Detroit.

Last summer, she moved into an independent living facility with access to a range of services and activities. She has her own apartment, with a kitchen, but can eat her meals in a dining hall. After giving her a few days to unpack and settle in, I got her on the phone. How was it going?

“Well,” Nanna began. Her apartment was lovely. The food was just fine, and there were all kinds of classes and courses to while away the hours. “Have you made any friends?” I asked, in the same chipper tone I used when my younger child returned from her first day at kindergarten.

There was a pause. Then: “They won’t let me sit at their table!” Nanna cried.

“Wait, what? Who won’t let you sit at their table?”

“You try to sit and they say, ‘That seat is taken!’ ”

“Oh, my God,” I said, instantly thrust into a painful flashback of junior high, when I walked into the cafeteria and was greeted with the sight of leather purses looped across the chair backs and the sound of one girl with dramatically plucked eyebrows announcing, “Those seats are taken!” I hadn’t known enough to carry a purse. I had a lunchbox. (And it would take me another decade to figure out the eyebrow thing.)

“And just try to get into a bridge game,” Nanna continued. “They’ll talk about bridge, and you’ll say, ‘Oh, I play,’ and they’ll tell you, ‘Sorry, we’re not looking for anyone.’”

“Mean girls!” I said. “There are mean girls in your home!”

“It’s not a home,” Nanna said sharply.

I considered. “Here’s my advice,” I said. “Find a bridge foursome. Figure out which one of them looks weak. Then hover.”

When I was young and innocent — say, last summer — the idea of 90-year-olds in pecking orders, picking on those at the bottom, was a joke. Everyone knew that the real danger to the elderly came from unscrupulous relatives, con artists or abusive caregivers. We’ve all heard sad tales of senior citizens being beaten, starved or neglected by the people paid — usually underpaid — to care for them.

The notion that a threat to seniors is their peers is somewhat new, and usually played for laughs. It goes against a truism handed down from mothers to daughters for generations: This, too, shall pass. Mean girls are not girls, or mean, forever. High school doesn’t last forever, everyone grows up. But Nanna’s experience suggests otherwise. It says that the cruel, like the poor, are always with us, that mean girls stay mean — they just start wearing support hose and dentures.

A recent Cornell University study by Karl Pillemer proves the point, showing that aggression among residents in nursing homes is widespread and “extremely high rates of conflict and violence” are common. According to the study’s news release, one in five residents was involved in at least one “negative and aggressive encounter” with another resident during a four-week period. Sixteen percent were cursed or yelled at; 6 percent were hit, kicked or bitten; 1 percent were victims of “sexual incidents, such as exposing one’s genitals, touching other residents, or attempting to gain sexual favors;” and 10.5 percent dealt with other residents’ entering their rooms uninvited, or rummaging through their belongings.

Whether you’re brawling on the playground or battling over the best seats in chair-cercize, bad behavior is constant, and the rituals for trying to get in with the in-crowd don’t change much. Nanna’s quest for “the Cadillac of walkers,” a \$400 number not

covered by Medicare, mirrored my search a decade ago for the nearly thousand-dollar Bugaboo that would signal to my urban-mommy cohort that I belonged.

What transforms with age are the criteria for judgment: not looks, not wealth, not the once-coveted ability to drive at night. When you get to be Nanna's age, you're reduced to a number — the younger the better. Even in a residence for the elderly, the 80-somethings will still be cold to the 95-year-olds. Now 99, my Nanna is completely cognizant of what's going on. Her memory, both short- and long-term, is excellent. But once her new neighbors heard her age, they knew they didn't want her at their table.

"My question is, are they rude? Are they nasty? Or is it that she's not hearing, or is interpreting something that's not really something? I can't tell," says Aunt Marlene. "I think there's definitely cliques. I don't know if there's a way to alleviate the feeling of being left out. At 99, do you end up with a group? Does that happen? I don't know. At first I thought, it just takes time. Now I wonder — maybe this is the way it is. Maybe you can't expect anything else."

Bad behavior doesn't change. Nor does the response from the ones on the sidelines, watching and hoping for the best. Even with lowered expectations, it's hard. I fret about my first grader getting shut out of the four-square game or my sixth grader sitting alone at lunch. My mom and her sister wonder if their mother is suffering the same kind of isolation, exclusion and loneliness; the pain of having outlived every single one of your contemporaries, of having lots to say and no one to listen.

Nanna tries. Every day, she takes a class: Yiddish, current events, even iPad 101. She gets dressed up for dinner, with a pretty scarf, a new sweater. She's gotten to know her neighbors, table-mates, even the one who forgets her name between one dinner and the next, and she's joined a mah-jongg game — "even though I haven't played in years." The ledge outside her front door is home to a little stuffed bear, dressed in University of Michigan regalia, a hopeful sentry, and maybe a conversation starter.

I try, too. Over Thanksgiving, we celebrated Nanna's 99th birthday, with all 12 of her great-grandchildren on hand to tour the new apartment. Down in the lobby, my 6-year-old, Phoebe, and I met a beautifully dressed, immaculately made-up woman sitting on a bench with a cane, waiting for her niece to take her to Thanksgiving dinner at 5. It was 2. "Do you want to see my kitty?" she asked, and my daughter happily agreed. I learned that, like Nanna, the woman had moved in over the summer, was a Michigan native, and seemed sharp and aware. Feeling like a guy at a bar — another echo of another acceptance-and-rejection ritual — I asked for her number.

Then Phoebe and I took the elevator back up to Nanna’s apartment, where the refrigerator door is covered with pictures of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and I announced, “Nanna, I think I made you a friend.”

Jennifer Weiner is the author of the novels “Good in Bed” and “All Fall Down.”

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