



Life with Bert

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President and C.E.O.

Cousin Bertha, my mom's cousin, was in and out of our family life when I was a child. Sometimes my grandmother, her aunt, stayed with her for periods of time;

sometimes Bertha lived with us, eventually staying to help my grandma out after she had a series of strokes.

Originally an X-ray technician, Bert enjoyed the horse races. First she married a fellow who wasted her savings at the track. Later she settled into life with her second husband, Spec, who worked for the Santa Anita Racetrack, and they had many happy years shuttling between Southern California and the Pacific Northwest with the racing seasons.

A dozen years ago, Spec dropped dead of a heart attack. Bert was left on her own at age 75. As time went on, dementia set in. She periodically forgot to take her medication, becoming dizzy and sometimes falling. After breaking her wrist, paramedics took her to the hospital and doctors refused to release her to go home, sending her instead to a nursing home. In a three-person room, with no kids and only a brother who is himself not well, and thus with no one to claim her, Bert called our family to help her out.

And so it came to pass that for the past few months, Bert has been living in our guest room, as I work on straightening out her tangled finances and finding an assisted living residence for her. Caregivers come in to help her 12 hours a day during the week, and she is with my husband Rod and me on the weekends.

Having this tall, 88-year-old redhead around has been both enlightening and entertaining. I have learned a great deal about the perils of being elderly and alone. There is, of course, the danger of being swindled. In the year before I came on the scene, Cousin Bert had sent several untraceable Moneygrams of \$5,000 each to a scamster who we have yet to identify.

The costs of not planning for one's elder years are also obvious, in the sequence of events that led her to be removed from her home. If one waits too long to make prudent living arrangements, one can quickly lose control over one's decisions.

But more important, Bertha provides quite a bit of levity around the house. Her short-term memory loss leads to interesting conversations that go something like this:

"Where is my room?" Right there, dear (we are sitting in the kitchen, which is next to her bedroom). "How will I find it?" Just go through that door and it's right there. "I'm concerned I won't be able to find my room." Look, Bert – here it is, right here. "Will you be staying overnight?" Yes, Bert, we live here. "Will you be able to find your way back in the morning?" Dear, we live here and we'll be right here all night. And so on.

Sometimes she knows who we are, sometimes not. She often says, "The people around here are very nice." I gather that means us, and feel pleased. This balances out the times when she walks cheerily into our bedroom at 7 a.m. on Sunday morning when my husband and I are still sleeping.

Bert has a good sense of humor, and sometimes it's difficult to tell whether that or the dementia is the source of her witticisms. One day, she was watching me polish a pair of black shoes. We have a tuxedo cat, mostly black but with a couple of white spots on his back. Tux walked by and Bert commented, "Somebody ought to polish out those spots!"

And then there are the caregivers, a husband and wife team who take turns with Bertha each day, doing a great job helping her to bathe and dress, taking her to the senior center for lunch, to the hairdresser and the doctor. They turn out to belong to an evangelical religion. One evening, when I asked Bertha how her day had gone, she said brightly "I went to a funeral today!" Baffled, because she knows no one other than our family in Northern California, and suspecting she imagined this, I questioned whether she really did attend a funeral. Well, there was a dead woman in the room, Bert insisted.

I turned to the caregivers, who confirmed that they had taken her to a service for one of their co-religionists. We had a discussion about appropriate activities for Bertha during the hours they are responsible for her, and since then there have been no more funerals.

It's been an adventure having Cousin Bert around, and as the time approaches for her to go to an assisted living home, I am thinking how much we will miss her! Ω

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