Friedbert Stohner

Is Grandma Going To Stay with Us Forever?

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With illustrations by Thomas Müller

Grandmas Story or When you get lost in your own life

The plan was that Grandma would move in with Klara's family just until her broken foot is healed. But something is wrong: Is Grandma just scatter-brained, or is there something else behind her strange behaviour? Soon it becomes clear: Grandma is suffering from dementia. Everyone has to adapt to a new daily routine; it's confusing and sad, but also comical with some heart-warming moments. Because, although Grandma's illness is progressive, something still remains of her old, highly individual personality, her wit and her charm. The family's year together touches everyone's heart, but also provides comfort, because everyone learns that it's possible to treat a person with dignity, even if they have dementia.

Friedbert Stohner, born in 1951, lives in Altlussheim am Rhein. After many years in the publishing industry, he now devotes himself to writing.

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'An upbeat but deeply moving story of a family pulling together in the face of dementia and death. And about how inherent human dignity is an absolute – even for those who no longer think as clearly as they used to.'

Marianne Koch (medical doctor)

Sample Translation
translation by Rebecca Heier (heierrebecca@gmail.com)

1

It never even crossed my mind that Gran might be staying with us long-term. Anton, my little brother, was the one who brought it up. Mom and Dad had told us it would take about four or five weeks for those tricky breaks in her foot to heal. Still, when four or five weeks stretched into six or seven, I wasn't at all surprised. After all, Gran was over eighty, and I'd seen the x-rays: Before the operation, it looked as though someone, starting at the heel, had smashed her foot into pieces, and afterwards, it was as if they'd re-assembled the pieces and screwed them in tight.

And all Gran did was walk straight ahead off the last step of her cellar stairs, as if she'd already reached the bottom. She didn't even fall – she just banged into the shelf of home-canned goods and knocked off a jar of cherry jam onto her foot. That was what really hurt at first, she said later, and not until she wanted to walk back up the stairs did she notice she couldn't because she wasn't able to step on her other foot, the one that the cherry jam didn't fall on.

So Gran went crawling up the stairs and through the hallway into the living room to the telephone; from there she called Dad and told him she'd had a little accident, and right away he pedaled over to her house. After all, he works from home and Gran lived just two streets away. White as a sheet she was, Dad said that evening at the dinner table, and when she wouldn't even let him touch the swollen foot, he called the ambulance.

"Why didn't Gran just call the ambulance herself?" my little brother Anton wanted to know.

"I asked her that, too," Dad answered

"So what'd she say?" Mom asked.

"Well, she thought it wasn't all that bad," Dad answered.

"After she'd crawled on her hands and knees up the cellar stairs?"

Mom raised her eyebrows the way she does sometimes when Anton or I tell her something she doesn't believe, and Dad shrugged his shoulders. That's exactly what Anton and I always do, too, but it doesn't help one bit because that's when she really starts to grill you.

"Oh, come on, Robert! She's a trained nurse, she knows what's up when a foot hurts so much you can't even step on it. And why'd she call you from the landline, anyway? She said she was always going to carry her mobile with her in the house, just in case something happened."

"She *did* have it," Dad said quietly.

He said nothing more, and the rest of us just sat there in silence for quite a while, twirling our spaghetti around our forks, chewing, swallowing. Obviously, Dad hadn't told us all the details, and obviously, Mom really wanted to hear all the details. Of course she could have raised her eyebrows again, but she didn't need to. Instead, she just did what she always does with Anton and me when she wants us to fess up: she bided her time.

"She had the phone in the pocket of her cardigan, and when I asked her about it, she was so embarrassed that at first she didn't even want to admit it," Dad told us after he'd wiped his mouth with his napkin and taken a sip of water."Unfortunately, a corner of it was sticking out of the pocket, and just as she was going to tuck it in out of sight, I must have given her the evil eye or something – anyway, from then on she was so offended that she didn't speak a word to me until the ambulance crew showed up. The paramedic said the reason she didn't use the phone could have been because of the shock. They've seen that more than a few times, he said, with these old folks who are so out of it when something happens that they forget they're carrying one."

"'*Old folks who are so out of it'* – and she heard that?" Mom asked.

"Yes," said Dad, and burst out laughing. "But let me tell you, I have absolutely no doubt that from now on, Young Mister Paramedic will be choosing his words a lot more carefully!"

"Let me guess!" said Mom, as she started laughing, too. "She told him how your father, in

all his forty years as a general practitioner, never once said anything the least bit thoughtless or impolite to any of his patients because one word, just *one* word, mind you, can ruin an entire course of therapy."

"That's what she started out with, and by the time the poor guy was sliding the ambulance door shut, she was to the part about how, back in those difficult days when my dad was trying to establish his practice, for a long time no patients came because he refused to write a prescription for some sort of pills right off the bat. No idea how far she'd gotten by the time they pulled up to the hospital – I had to pack her bag first and then come back here and get the car – but I suspect I know why they knocked her out with a general anesthetic for the operation rather than use a local."

Because that's what they did, and afterwards, when Dad was allowed to go see her, she still wasn't awake. He told us that, but first we laughed ourselves silly over his comment about the anesthesia.

Or rather – Mom, Dad and I laughed ourselves silly. Anton just looked solemnly from one face to the other, and when we'd settled down again, all he said was:

"You guys are mean."

I don't know how to explain it, but sometimes it seems to me that Anton can only think in a straight line about certain things. When you're talking about how to behave and how not to behave, for instance. When something bad happens, like a broken foot or when someone has to go to the hospital, for example, then it's bad, and to him, there's absolutely nothing to laugh about. And if somebody *does* laugh, then it's mean. That's kind of the way my little brother ticks – but, okay, I admit the joke about Gran's anesthesia wasn't exactly nice.

"You are so right, sweetheart," Mom said, reaching around the corner of the table to give Anton a hug. "But sometimes it helps to look at serious things in a lighthearted way, you know?"

"Our joking around here isn't hurting Gran one bit," said Dad, even though he did have a

somewhat guilty look on his face.

"And besides, she likes to make those kinds of jokes, too," I pointed out, jumping to Mom and Dad's defense.

Because it was true, and we'd even come up with a name for them: Gran jokes. For instance, one time when we came back from a day trip, Dad forgot he still had our bikes up on the roof carrier and just started driving into the garage. He didn't get very far, of course, but the two adult bikes were still wrecked, and when we told Gran about it, she said that actually, he'd been lucky. "Oh? How's that?" Dad asked, and she said: "Well, just imagine if it'd been the other way around, with the bikes on the bottom – your car would be wrecked now!"

That was Gran's sense of humor, and Anton didn't really need to be reminded of it. But he still had that solemn look on his face and just asked:

"So how long does she have to stay in the hospital?"

"Not that long," said Dad. "Only a few days, until they're sure she's recovered from the operation. And after that ..."

Dad paused for a bit, as if he first had to think about what came after that, but Mom finished his speech.

"After that she'll move in with us for a while," she said. "She won't be able to get along by herself in that big house of hers, not with a foot that's just been operated on."

So that was it. That's how it all started, and after Gran had been living with us for quite a lot longer than four or five weeks, we were having spaghetti for dinner again. I remember, because Gran always told us that Grandpa insisted on eating his spaghetti like the Italians do – just twirling it onto the fork, without a spoon – even at noon, when he had office hours after lunch. And every time, every single time, he splattered that bright red tomato sauce on his white doctor's coat, which of course he then had to change so the patients wouldn't think it was blood from someone he'd

treated beforehand. And again that evening she told us the story, and then Anton suddenly asked:

"So is Gran going to stay with us forever?"

2

For a moment Mom and Dad looked as if they thought Anton was whining, but then he asked so innocently, "What's wrong?" that they knew they'd misjudged him. It was simply another case of his asking straight-out what was on his mind, and it seemed they (Mom and Dad, that is) didn't want to answer straight-out. Or at least not right then. But they didn't even have to, because Gran herself took on that job.

"Well, of *course* not," she said. "I'm already packed, and I called a taxi to pick me up after dinner."

Mom and Dad thought that was supposed to be one of her jokes, and they laughed. As it turned out, though, it was no joke.

But here I should probably back up and tell how things had been going in the weeks that Gran had already spent with us.

She'd moved in, just as Dad had predicted, a couple of days after the operation; her foot with the cobbled-together bones was stuck in a sort of plastic boot with a wide slit in front, and the first thing she had to do was learn to walk with the crutches the hospital gave her. Luckily, we have a guest room with its own bathroom on the ground level, and Dad's office is right next to it. I've already mentioned that he works at home; he writes children's books, actually, and we shouldn't always be bugging him, but when we really need him for something, it's no big deal. Gran probably interrupted him a little too often, but he never complained about it, and she never had to call him twice. That I know, because the sound carried all the way upstairs where Anton and I have our

rooms. Gran had once worked as a nurse, but until she met Grandpa, she'd also been taking voice lessons because she was thinking of becoming an opera singer, and she still had that beautiful – but also really loud – opera singer voice. And whenever she called, "Robert, could you come here, please?!" it kind of scared me.

Gran was soon able to get to her easy chair by herself, but for longer distances, like to the dining table in the living room, for quite some time it was better if two of us helped her – one on either side – instead of her using crutches. I don't know how how many weeks it took before she could crutch into the living room, taking teeny-tiny steps, but it was at least five, I bet. She still looked so wobbly you could hardly stand to watch her, but she was determined to do it on her own, so Dad simply moved the umbrella stand away from the front door, just to be on the safe side, and nagged Anton and me about remembering to put our shoes under the entryway bench, especially Anton, since mine were usually there anyway (well, okay: sometimes).

And that worked great – right up until the day our organic produce box was delivered. After signing for it, Dad set it on the bench because he was in the middle of a phone call on his office phone and wanted to finish up before carrying the box into the kitchen. But the conversation lasted a lot longer than he thought, and the fact that Gran picked exactly that space of time to go into the living room to watch TV – well, that was just bad luck. The box was a little wider than the bench, you see, or maybe it was just on there crooked, but whatever – Gran snagged a crutch on it. I don't know exactly what happened after that. I just heard this clattering and commotion drifting up to my room and right after that, Gran's loud voice.

"Rooobert!" she yelled, and not five seconds later: "For Pete's sake, are you deaf?"

"Coming!" came Dad's reply, and then he must have gone out of the room and seen Gran. "For heaven's sake, Mother!" was the next thing I heard him say.

I raced over to the staircase and from up above, saw Gran sitting on the entryway bench. Or,

more accurately, sitting in the vegetable box on the entryway bench. On the floor in front of her lay the crutches, and Dad came running down the hallway to her.

"What happened?" He took Gran by the shoulders.

"Nothing," she said. "I just wanted to see what it was like to sit on a crate of tomatoes."

Because there were a lot of them in the box, as I saw after Dad helped Gran to her feet. But by then it was more like mashed tomatoes, and some of the glop was dripping from the seat of Gran's apricot-colored jogging pants.

"Careful of your foot!" said Dad as Gran, without so much as a glance at her crutches, pushed by him to support herself with both hands on the opposite wall.

"You should have been thinking of my foot when you put this idiotic box in my way!" she scolded, feeling her way along the wall to her room.

In the meantime, I'd hurried down the stairs. No idea if Gran had stuck her hands in the tomato glop or had tried to wipe it off her pants after the accident; either way, there it was, wherever she felt her way along the wall – a pattern of red handprints that got fainter and fainter the closer she got to the door of her room. The walls in our house are all painted white, and I still remember how much prettier the hallway looked with the colorful handprint pattern.

I had no clue what was going through Dad's mind. He'd picked up Gran's crutches and was standing there as if he needed a good hard pinch to revive him. Not until Gran had rounded the corner into her room did he turn to me, and I saw that his eyes were glittering. Honestly, I still don't know what kind of glittering that was. I even asked him: "Are you laughing or crying?" But he simply waved me off and walked down to Gran's room.

I carried the box into the kitchen and mopped up the floor in the hallway; I decided to leave the handprint pattern and just picked the tomato seeds and a few shreds of red peel off the walls. When, shortly after that, Mom came home from work and Anton from school, the three of us tried

to save what was left of the tomatoes. It was enough for exactly five bowls of not especially thick soup for dinner, but everything was fine with Gran and her foot, and of course that was the main thing.

"And did you soak the pants right away?" asked Mom as she ladled soup into the bowls.

"They're still in the sink," said Gran, sitting at the table already dressed in her nightgown and a bathrobe. "And I made sure not to put in any detergent."

"No?" Mom asked.

"No," said Gran. "I figured you'd all want to eat tomato soup again tomorrow."

This time it was definitely tears of laughter that glittered in Dad's eyes, and the rest of us laughed, too. Even Anton! We cracked up, and when we were finally able to continue eating, Anton, of all people, said:

"Won't be much thinner than the one today!"

I thought I hadn't heard right, and neither did Mom and Dad. We must have looked at him as if he were an alien.

"What's wrong now? Aren't I allowed to make a Gran joke once in a while, too?" he asked defensively.

Then we all busted out laughing again, and by the time we were able to hold our spoons straight enough to finish eating, the soup was cold.

That was the tomato incident, and it happened in July, about two, three weeks before summer vacation. Gran had moved in with us in May, right after her birthday, which is easy to remember because it's on May 1st. Over two months in all, and up until then she seemed totally normal to me, no different from the Gran I'd always known.

The dinner when Anton asked if she was going to stay forever was the Saturday of the first week of vacation, and actually, nothing had changed in that time. So, just like Mom and Dad, I first

thought the bit about having packed and called a taxi was a joke. But with me it was more of a grin than a laugh, because it wasn't really hilarious or anything. The only one who didn't even crack a smile was Anton.

Then the doorbell rang and Gran looked around the table.

"That must be the taxi," she said. "Thank you all very much. I've enjoyed my stay."

3

If a strand of spaghetti had fallen to the floor at that moment, I think you would have heard it splat. Then the doorbell rang a second time, and Gran was getting up from the table when Dad laid his hand on her arm and very calmly told her there was no need to rush, he'd go tell the driver to wait.

"After all, an old woman is not an express train!" he called over his shoulder as he entered the hallway, and Gran nodded and sighed.

"Gran jokes" isn't the only term we thought up; we also have "Gran sayings," and the line about the old woman and the express train is an example.

By the time the bell rang a third time, Dad was already opening the door. He must have gone outside, because we could hear voices but couldn't make out the words. After a pause, Dad came back into the hall. Then a voice said, "Would you happen to have the exact amount?" and Dad said, "No problem!"

Which meant he must have paid the taxi driver, and I thought: Huh!? You don't pay taxi drivers until you get to where you're going!

My little brother must have thought exactly the same thing, except unlike me, he just came right out with it. When Dad closed the door, Anton loudly announced, "He sent the taxi away!"

Sometimes Mom can sense when Anton's on the verge of blurting out something that would

be better kept to himself and she discreetly lifts a finger to her lips. But just then she was probably wondering, same as I was, what Dad was going to tell Gran now. Anyway, the moment slipped past, and by the time she got her finger to her lips Anton was already mid-blurt: "What? It's true!..."

"Yes, dear!" sighed Mom, and the strange thing was, she wasn't looking at him, but at Gran. And any other time, Mom *always* looks at whoever she's talking to.

But stranger still was that Gran didn't make a peep. When actually, she should have been complaining: "What on earth were you thinking of, sending my taxi away!" or something like that. Instead, she just sat there looking like someone whose mind has drifted off to a faraway place, totally oblivious to what's going on around her. Kids in school look like that sometimes, too, when they're asked a question and at first don't even register that they're the ones meant.When that happens to *me* it's *so* embarrassing, and afterwards I always think, Geez, I hope I didn't look as dopey as the others always do. Mrs. Huetlein, my teacher in elementary school, had a name for that face: the scared squirrel look. She meant it jokingly, of course, but I don't think there's a better description, even when you're being serious. And that's exactly the look Gran had on her face now – the scared squirrel look.

Then Dad spoke to her, very calmly, the way he had when the doorbell rang.

"The taxi driver said he was really sorry," he said, laying his hand on her arm as he sat down, "but he had another fare lined up and couldn't wait that long. And by the way, he wasn't expecting to transport a lot of luggage."

"He wasn't?" Gran asked, still wearing that scared squirrel look.

"No," said Dad. "And if it's okay with you, we'd like you to stay here for a little bit longer, and tomorrow we can think about how we're going to get you and your things back home as soon as possible. There's no great rush, is there?"

"No," said Gran, and shook her head. "No," she repeated, and once again it was a little like

it is in school, when one of those squirrels recovers their senses and that scared look is erased, just like that. Gran even smiled, and as if she wanted to prove that she was her old self again, she said, "After all, an old woman is not an express train."

I don't know how often I'd heard that saying of hers; often enough, in any case, to not really find it funny anymore, and even if Dad had used it beforehand, then for sure it was only to flatter her so she'd sit tight and not make trouble. Because honestly, sometimes Gran could really get on my nerves with those sayings of hers.

But not this time – not at all! Just the opposite: I was so glad she was just like always that I had to stand up and give her a hug. Very carefully, of course, so that I didn't accidentally step on her feet. Everything was ok again, and there was only one tiny corner of my mind that contained a thin shred of a thought, one that couldn't be as easily wiped away as a shred of tomato skin on the wall in the hallway.

Or actually, it was more of a feeling than a thought, a feeling that something about what had just happened was a little eerie.

5

It wasn't even that late when they came in and sat down on the bed.

"It's about Gran, isn't it?" I asked, and they both nodded.

"Maybe you two haven't picked up on it," Dad began, "but your grandmother has changed in these past few months."

"We have," said Anton.

"You have what?"

"We've picked up on it," said Anton. "Or at least *I* have."

"Me too," I said. "I thought it was kind of funny today, for instance, the way she looked when the taxi left. Or even a little spooky."

"But *I* noticed it a long time ago," said Anton.

"Aha," Mom joined in. "And *how* long ago?"

She seemed a little surprised, and Dad too, I guess, because they gave each other the same well-whaddaya-know look and shrugged their shoulders.

"Last winter already, when Dad said she didn't need to go out and shovel snow because they'd already agreed that *he* would do the shoveling," Anton said, and I remembered. It was a Sunday morning and snow had fallen during the night. Dad had called Gran after the weather report on Saturday evening and said he'd be there early to shovel the sidewalk, and Anton had voluntarily gotten up early too because he wanted to build Gran a snowman in her front yard. When he and Dad got there she already had half the sidewalk done and was totally out of breath.

"And *what* did you notice?" Dad wanted to know.

"That she had that same look on her face as today after you sent the taxi away," said Anton.

"Like a scared squirrel," I said.

Mom and Dad looked a little puzzled for a second, but then they remembered my old teacher from elementary school. Or at least Mom did.

"That's what Mrs. Huetlein always said when she caught one of you daydreaming, right?" she asked, and I nodded.

"And afterwards it was exactly the same as today," Anton continued.

"And how is that?" Dad asked.

"That all at once, Gran was the same as ever. I built the snowman, and when we came in she made this really serious face and said, 'The snowman is backwards!' And I asked, 'What do you mean, backwards?' and she said, 'Because now I'll always have to look at his fat rear end!'"

That part Dad could remember, as well as how Anton didn't find the joke at all funny and was even kind of miffed, because of course he'd built the snowman with the showy side facing the street. But Dad hadn't noticed the odd look on Gran's face when they were all out on the sidewalk.

"Nope, not at all," he said. And after a couple beats: "You know, we ..." He paused for another second and looked at Mom. "...the two of us have been talking for quite some time about what's wrong with Gran. Or if anything's actually *wrong* with her; maybe it's just a case of her

getting older and less able to do certain things. Take that time when she was shoveling snow – I just thought: Yup, that's my mom! You tell her she doesn't need to do something, and then, wouldn't you know, she goes ahead and does it so you don't think she can't! That's the way she's been my whole life, and for me, the only thing different about that morning was that she didn't cuss me out for making such a big deal out of a few shovelfuls of snow."

The way Dad explained things, it all sounded perfectly logical, but then I thought of the tomato incident. Gran had most certainly proved that she hadn't forgotten how to cuss him out, and Dad, of course, had been right there beside her, a witness to the whole scene. But he wasn't finished talking.

"So anyway, what we wanted to tell you is …," he said, pausing yet again, " – and it took me a little longer than your mother to see it – but we're both agreed that sometimes Gran is a little disoriented, and sometimes she realizes it and sometimes she doesn't. What it's like for her when she *doesn't* realize it, no one knows. Maybe it's like when someone loses their way in the forest, and so long as they don't notice it, they just go whistling on their way. But when they *do* notice it, maybe they get really frightened and freeze up at first..."

"Or look like a scared squirrel," Mom chipped in.

"Exactly," said Dad. "The difference is just that Gran isn't lost in the forest, she's..., how can I put this...?"

Dad had to stop and think, but not Anton.

"She's lost in her own life," he said.

Just in case I haven't mentioned it: Anton is almost ten now, but he was still only eight back then and going into the third grade after summer vacation. And an eight-year-old pipsqueak just doesn't talk that way! Or at least not a normal one. At the time, I was already eleven, but even now, when I'm almost thirteen, I'd never be able to come up with anything like that. In books you read

that people's mouths drop open when they see or hear something they themselves aren't capable of. I'd never seen such people in real life, but now, here they were, two of them sitting right on my bed: my parents. And it took awhile before they shut their mouths again. And another moment until Dad put his hand on Anton's shoulder and asked if he could use that sentence if he ever wrote a book about an elderly person in this situation.

"Sure," Anton answered. "But maybe I'll write one myself."

We talked about things some more, and Anton and I wanted to know if we should treat Gran differently now somehow, but Mom and Dad said that wasn't necessary.

"Just act the way you always do," said Mom.

"We-e-ell, maybe just a *little* bit more well-behaved," joked Dad before becoming serious again. "No, just kidding. We want you to know what's going on, but we think it wouldn't do anyone any good if we suddenly started treating Gran as if she'd lost her marbles."

"But we can still all be sure to watch out that nothing happens to her," said Mom.

"Yes, of course," Dad agreed.

And my contribution: "For example, we can all agree not to put any vegetable boxes in her way."

Afterwards, the mood was almost cheerful as good-nights were said and good-night kisses were given, and not until the others were out of the room did I remember that I'd wanted to ask if Gran really had been all packed and ready to leave, because in the meantime, quite a lot of stuff had collected in her room. Well, okay, I thought, I can ask that at breakfast.

And then I must have fallen asleep practically right away, because next morning the lamp on my bedside table was still on.