

MARY C. WATERS

THE LEXICON OF OLD

Gerontology (n.) [Gk *geras* old age] *The branch of medical science that deals with diseases and phenomena associated with old age and aging.*

ONE SUMMER MY SISTER and I were sent to stay with my Great Auntie Olga and Great Uncle Ignatz. They lived in a creaky four-room shack in the small beach town of Capitola, California, an hour's drive over the Santa Cruz mountains. The house smelled of salt water, driftwood and corned beef and cabbage. Our job—Julie was nine and I was eight—was to keep our aunt and uncle company and to help them out with household tasks. In return, we had the freedom to play at the beach for hours.

My great aunt and uncle were the oldest people I knew. Auntie Olga was an imposing woman. Her ample bosom strained against the buttons of her house dress, whose floral pattern had long since faded to a sallow pink. Her grey hair was swept into a bun, thick elastic stockings bound her varicose veins, and her shoes had holes cut in their sides to ease the pain of her bunions. Uncle Ig wore baggy black pants held up by suspenders and, indoors and out, he shuffled around in a pair of dilapidated slippers, showing his blotched, reddened ankles. Ig always said a gruff good morning, but otherwise went about his day in bent silence.

ADL, Activities of Daily Living (np.) [L. *agere* to do; OE *dæglic* daily and *lifgende* living] *Routine activities that people do without needing assistance. In the elderly, an individual's ability to perform ADLs determines what type of long-term care is needed.*

Every morning after breakfast Auntie Olga pulled out the card table and set it up in the living room. She taught us card games and chewed Chicklets while we waited for the morning fog to lift. When the haze finally dissolved into ribbons of grey and we could catch a glimpse of blue, we put on our bathing suits, grabbed towels and sandwiches, and headed for the beach.

Then Auntie Olga would station herself in her rocking chair. She wielded her knitting needles for hours on end, teasing skeins of yarn into socks, sweaters and shawls. From the living-room window she could catch sight of us when we returned. As we stepped onto the path leading to the porch, wet bathing suits clinging to our bodies, she flung the door open. Fists on hips, she commanded “Get the hose.” Her Czech accent made her warnings dire. Our sun-baked bodies trembled as the cold water hammered our scalps, streamed down our necks, sliced between our bathing suits and skin, and shot down our arms, legs and feet.

Arthritis (n) [L. *arthro* joint] *A chronic disease characterized by inflammation of one or more joints, resulting in stiffness and pain. Often associated with aging.*

My Uncle Ig could no longer bend down. But he grew beautiful flowers in hundreds of rusted-out coffee cans lining waist-high planks resting on sawhorses. The planks and sawhorses took up every inch of space in the small front and back yards, which shimmered with shades of blue, pink, orange, scarlet, yellow and violet—a universe of colour that never ceased to delight me.

Every day Uncle Ig dragged out the hose and stepped from row to row, lovingly watering each plant. I remember the fuchsias; my sister remembers the roses.

Presbyosmia (n) [G. *presby* old; *osme* odor] *A decrease in the sense of smell; associated with aging.*

Auntie Olga, a formidable cook, was renowned for her biscuits. When she came to visit, we begged her to make them. She would mix the dough, cut the biscuits, tuck them away in the oven, and she knew, with millisecond accuracy, when they were done. Now she would open the oven door a crack and ask: “Do these biscuits smell done to you?” You could hear the click of her dentures when she talked.

Dementia (n) [L. *dēmentia* madness] *Severe impairment or loss of intellectual capacity due to loss of or damage to neurons in the brain.*

Auntie Olga clipped coupons. She clipped from the newspaper and flyers that came in the mail and from ads hung on the doorknob. Saturday

mornings she would sit us down with her grocery list and a stack of coupons. “Go to Grady’s first and get me four cans of tomato paste. Shouldn’t be more than 13 cents a can with the coupon. Then go to Save-Mart and pick up a jar of mayonnaise. It’s 5 cents off this week. You know where Coast Grocery is—they have fryers on sale. Get me two. Then you’ll be close to Adelaide’s. It’s just beyond the trestle. I need the five-pound bag of russet potatoes on sale. Here’s the list and the coupons. Don’t lose them. You’re big girls, you can carry everything.”

“She’s crazy,” said Julie. “All morning, all this walking, just to save not even 25 cents.” “Yeah, she’s crazy,” I said.

Presbyopia (n) [G. *presby* old; *ops* eye] *A decrease in the ability to focus on near objects due to loss of elasticity of the lens; associated with aging.*

After dinner, when the table had been cleared and the oilcloth meticulously wiped, my uncle opened the cabinet under the kitchen counter. The cabinet was filled with fat binders, spines carefully labeled: Afghanistan—Czechoslovakia; Denmark—Guatemala. The binders held my uncle’s treasured stamp collection. He would select a binder, place it on the table, sit squarely in front of it, and open it with great reverence. Julie and I would gaze at the miniature images of coronations, weddings, battles, composers, architectural wonders, and flags. We could look, but never touch.

Sometimes Uncle Ig would open a translucent envelope and remove a stamp. Holding the magnifying glass to one eye, he examined the stamp carefully, then paged through the book. Still holding the lens, he used his free hand to position the stamp with a little glued hinge, aligning it perfectly in the dotted rectangle on the page.

Broken Heart (n) [OE *brecan* to break; violently separate into parts; OE *heorte* heart, the organ that pumps blood.] *An acute or chronic heart condition resulting from tragedy and characterized by deep pain; the likelihood of occurrence increases with aging.*

Olga and Ignatz Kohner had three children: Paul, Herbert and Helen. When Paul was a toddler, he fell into a bucket of scalding water that my aunt had set on the floor for mopping. He died from the burns.

Herbert married Anna and they had one child, Sandra. Herbert died of a massive heart attack at the age of 31.

Helen became a nurse. She worked long hours in a San Francisco hospital during World War II. She stole amphetamines from the ward, became addicted and in 1948, at the age of 35, suffered a nervous breakdown. She was sent to Agnews State mental hospital, where she was electro-shocked, sterilized and lobotomized. Helen lived out the rest of her days in the hospital and died at 57.

Poverty (n) [L. *pauper* posor] *Having little or no money or means of support.*

The pear orchard was my great aunt and uncle's only source of income during the Depression. "You plant pears for your heirs," my aunt would say. On other occasions she would remark bitterly, "Eisenhower sold us down the river."

Osteoporosis (n) [G. *osteo* bone; *pór(os)*, passage + *-osis*] *Thinning of the bones with a resulting predisposition to fractures; a condition most often associated with aging.*

Multiple fractures. The fragile bones of family. The bones of hope planted in the pear orchard in the lush Santa Clara valley.

Secret (n) [L. *secretus* to separate, distinguish] *Something kept from the knowledge of others or shared confidentially with a few. The accumulation of secrets accelerates the aging process and may contribute to dementia.*

My sister remembers peering at Auntie Olga through a crack in the bedroom door. She wore a shawl and lit two candles and seemed to be praying, but in a language Julie didn't understand. Neither of us remembers my aunt or uncle uttering the words Shabbat, Passover, or High Holy Days. I don't think we would have understood. Our education was thoroughly and exclusively Catholic; we never suspected we were anything else.

Death (n) [ME *deeth* death] *A permanent cessation of all vital functions; loss of life.*

I was 16 when my Great Uncle Ignatz died at 86. Auntie Olga immediately sold his stamp collection. Her decision brought me no small upset. I regarded it as greedy and grasping, an act disrespectful of my uncle's memory.

Later, I understood. Living on my own, I found myself turning out pockets in search of a quarter. And I anxiously clipped my own coupons.

Auntie Olga outlived Uncle Ig by 17 years. We saw her occasionally, when my family went to Capitola or when my father drove over the mountains and brought her back to visit.

Auntie Olga passed her last years in a nursing home in Capitola. From time to time, my mother and I would visit. She was bedridden toward the end. "How long does it take to die?" she once asked my mother.