

## A Roommate for Life

Our father had lived at a large and beautiful retirement home for six months. He was losing his memory quickly and really didn't belong in a large building with long hallways, robust social activities, and especially the dining room, which offered no assistance. He struggled daily, even hourly, to cover up his dementia, and most of the time, he ate alone. My dad was the most gregarious person in the world. He always loved baseball and a good cold beer at mealtime. Now, he had no beer, no friends, and no one to whom he made sense. He spent most of his time wondering where he was, alone in his studio apartment. He was living in the most glamorous place in town, and he had absolutely no quality of life.



The inevitable time finally came to move him into a community where they offered secure memory care. We were going to have to move him quickly, and availability was limited. Of course, I wanted the best for him: a beautiful private room, walking paths, lots of windows...his own furniture. The director showed us the only available room, a large studio with two beds and two chairs in it. One of these chairs happened to be occupied by another gentleman. "There is no way my father is going to have a shared room," I said. "My father hasn't had a roommate since the army!"

The director looked at me, and very gently, after a long pause, she said, "You know, your father has never lived alone. He lived in his mother's house...then got married to your mom and lived with her for 55 years. Even during the war, he was never alone. No wonder he is frightened and not doing well. He is probably lonely and looking for an old friend. I believe a shared suite would be perfect for him." I was not going for it. My father had lived in the lap of luxury forever...a large home on a golf course in Florida. I was feeling so guilty and so sad. His whole grand life was coming down to this...a roommate in an old folk's home. There were only two choices in front of us: either that shared room or my living room sofa...so the choice was evident. "It will do for now," I

(over)

said, “until a private suite opens up.” My husband and I took him there the next day. I kept thinking...what would I tell him? How will I explain the other man? What if they hate each other? What if, what if, what if?

Daddy walked into the building, smiled at everyone, shook hands, laughed at a few of his own bad jokes, and found the path to 103A. We had gone the day before and set up his part of the room nicely, with all his own things. We urged him in, and there was Leonard...the roommate. I held my breath. “What are you doing here?” Daddy asked him. The rest, as they say, is history.

He got the best care, and twice as much of it. Every time the staff went to help Leonard, they checked in on Dad. Whenever activities began, Leonard urged my dad to go with him. They talked about the war, complained about their aches and pains, and accused each other of everything from stealing to smoking. They always made sure the other had a sweater, and neither was ever late for a meal again. It was perfect, and Leonard was the best and the last friend my father ever remembered having.

So, what I learned from that very special woman is that there is little to be gained from living in a room by yourself at 85. Companionship is vital to our spirit. We were not put on this earth to be alone. The director knew that well before I did. She gave my father the greatest gift, and one we all hope for: quality of life until the end.

-Nancy Werner