



## A Smile at Twilight

**Robert Loyst**

**Wayne Yetman**

**Stephanie Jermyn Woods, Photographer**

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*Two seniors form a special friendship despite the challenges of dementia in this charmingly offbeat memoir.*

In his first book, *A Smile at Twilight* (written with Wayne Yetman), Robert Loyst gives a candid account of the joys and difficulties he encountered when helping care for Poppy, an Alzheimer's patient he assisted through a Toronto-based "Seniors Helping Seniors" organization.

When retired sales executive Loyst needs a new project to fill his time, his wife suggests the seniors' volunteer program. He is placed with Marlena Lang, nicknamed Poppy, a well-traveled, intellectual eighty-year-old widow who is gradually succumbing to Alzheimer's. Four other volunteers had found Poppy too difficult, so Loyst is the program's last hope. Through conversations in the car as he drives her to errands and activities, he learns snatches of her history. They especially connect over animals and food. Her memory declines, and he eventually has to make most decisions for her.

It's an appealing sort of "opposites attract" or "odd couple" scenario: Poppy is a perfectionist with a foul mouth and a withering glare of disapproval, while Loyst describes himself as "more of a take-it-as-it-comes type of guy." The book chronicles their increasing dependence on each other. Time spent with Poppy ultimately takes over most of Loyst's leisure hours.

The authors depict Poppy as full of internal contradictions: she is still logical at times, but also becomes paranoid about having strangers (her full-time caregivers) in her home; she studied horticulture at Cornell and did further studies in medieval history after her husband's death, yet trusts men to be more intelligent. "She was the only person I ever met who could be rude to you with perfect manners," Loyst recalls pithily.

Food is a strong theme throughout the memoir. Poppy loved cooking; she ordered her steaks rare and, coming from Maine, knew a lot about seafood. The authors use food as a linking metaphor that powerfully charts Poppy's decline. As her confusion grows, she starts mixing up foodstuffs and has to hand over the task of writing a shopping list to Loyst. Her stubborn sense of superiority comes through in her correction of his spelling—specifically, of food words: "croissant," "strudel," and wine names.

The story seems to end rather suddenly when Poppy is moved into a nursing home. Some may be disappointed that the story therefore has no sense of closure, but Loyst is true to his experience and doesn't fabricate a sugar-coated conclusion. He wraps up with helpfully generalized tips for dealing with dementia sufferers.

Those who have family members or friends who are struggling with Alzheimer's will probably benefit most from this memoir, but readers of *Still Alice* or other dementia-themed novels might also enjoy trying this real-life story.

REBECCA FOSTER (January 14, 2016)

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