First Lady of Longevity: A glimpse into the active mind of the oldest women in the world

Profile of Marie Louise Meilleur. Shelley Page is a Citizen writer.

(From The Ottawa Citizen, Sunday, January 25, 1998) A photo caption in The First Lady of Longevity (Jan. 11) stated that Marie Louise Meilleur is a resident of Corbeil, Que. In fact, as the story made clear, Corbeil is in Ontario. *****

Whole kingdoms of people and their possessions have vanished off this Earth, but not from Marie Louise Meilleur's memory. In a sterile room, a prison to all but her mind, the oldest women in the world sits in a life raft-sized easy chair and she talks. She talks about her life as though everything she ever was, she is again.

She is the babe born 117 years ago, when Sir John A. Macdonald was still Canada's prime minister; she is the slight child who adopts a calf in early spring in 1886 and winces when it is grown and slaughtered; the daddy's girl who gnaws on the pork he rolls and packs in salt; the sturdy woman who gives birth to 12 babies, then as a midwife delivers dozens more; the self-sufficient woman who marries a fisherman, then a lumberjack, both of whom seem to never make it home; the matriarch counts 308 descendants. And she is the grand old dame, having lived so long she has found herself in the Guinness Book of Records.

Those at her nursing home guard her as if she were fine china, aware if she were to tumble, there would be doctors and intensive care, and undoubtedly death.

When she is only in the present, painfully aware of her cold hands, frigid feet, her blind eyes and collapsed face, which looks hawkish because her skin is stretched so tight, she tells those who stoop to listen: I am the woman who God forgot to take.

"God has forgotten me," she whispers.

Her existence, her persistence, pose a question to those who work at the Nipissing Manor in Corbeil and see her every day. She is a blessing, a miracle, an example to all, they think, when they lean in her door each morning to shout "Bonjour Memere." And she is a symbol to those who just know of her existence and wonder: Would anyone really want to live this long? What meaning exists in a life that outlasts friends, family, mobility?

But to some, Marie Louise Meilleur represents much more. She is the first lady of longevity at a time when living much longer than 80 or 85 seems possible. Recently medical science has found genes linked to aging, metabolism and cancers that some scientists boast could one day profoundly lengthen our lives. Around North America, so-called life-extensionists are counting on lives of not just 117 or 120 years, but 150 or 200 years.

"There will be hundreds -- no, thousands -- of Marie Louise Meilleurs," says Herb Bowie, a computer programmer turned new age life-extensionist in Arizona, whose book Why Die? A Beginner's Guide to Living Forever has just been released.

This isn't just the hyperbole of American baby-boomers like Mr. Bowie who think it's their constitutional right to live longer. Seemingly respectable scientists are also making such claims.

"There will soon be a time when we will live longer and much healthier lives -- of 100, 200, possibly 500 years," declares Dr. Michael Fossel, an esteemed professor of clinical medicine at Michigan State University in his recent book, Reversing Human Aging.

For those with Methuselan imaginings, Mrs. Meilleur is the standard bearer for the new millennium. They wonder what her secret is, and whether it can be bottled. But there is a more crucial question: Is super-longevity really worth the effort?

Do we really want the long view her vantage point provides?

But we're too far down the road already. Let's go back to the beginning.

On a side road in snowy Deep River, there's a small house with not a single seat to sit upon. The couch, every chair, is piled with newspaper clippings, documents and well-wishes for the oldest person in the world. They're mostly from Canadian newspapers, but there is a spread from Paris Match. Not so long ago, a reporter from Paris came knocking at the house with a fake birthday cake with the number 117 written in goopy red icing so they could bring it to Marie Louise Meilleur and pretend it was her birthday.

The house belongs to Rita Gutzman, the youngest daughter of the world's oldest person. She grabs a handful of cards. "I really have no idea what I should do with all this," she says, shrugging. "Make a scrapbook of some kind, I suppose." But a scrapbook seems like such a trifling gesture for such superhuman achievement.

Rita is 72. Her mom was 45 when she had her, the last of a brood of 12. Everyone tells Rita she looks like her mom, when Marie Louise was much younger. Petite, barely five feet tall, rigid posture, with steel-coloured curly hair. Rita takes one last puff of her cigarette before the road trip and, coughing, laughs half-heartedly; super- longevity is probably not within her reach.

Like so many other Fridays during the past nine years, Rita is heading two hours up the highway to Corbeil to see her mom. Today, she is taking a copy of the certificate just arrived in the mail from the Guinness Book of Records. "This is to certify that Marie Louise Meilleur is the oldest living person."

Rita hasn't been sure where to put it, how to hang it, who to give it to. The premier? He was good enough to come up to her mother's 117th birthday party last August, even though her mother slapped his hand out of the way when he tried to get her to cut the cake. The mayor of North Bay? He was there, too. Oh dear.

The Guinness Book of Records has two categories in its longevity section, one for humans, the other for pets.

In late 1995, Jeanne Calment surpassed the previous authenticated oldest human, Shigechiuyo Izumi, who lived on the remote Japanese island of Tokunoshima for 120 years and 237 days. Then in August of last year, Mrs. Calment died, at age 122, and the competition, much of it based on hyperbole by young whippersnappers boasting about deaf and blind relatives, began.

When one of Mrs. Meilleur's 75 grandchildren, Jean Bosse of Kamouraska, Que., heard that some people in San Rafael, Calif., were preparing to contact Guinness on behalf of Christian Mortensen, who turned 116 on Aug. 16, he decided to phone the news media. The competition was stiff. Augusta Watts of Pensacola, Fla., claimed she was 120 years old. But Mr. Bosse was the only one with a birth certificate, dug up from the records of the tiny Catholic church in Kamouraska. Rita was called at 4 a.m. one morning -- the Brits didn't understand there was a time difference -- and asked for her mother's marriage certificates. A few days later, it was announced that Mrs. Meilleur was certifiably the oldest person in the world.

Rita is thinking the nursing home should definitely get a copy. "Maybe they could hang it up?"

She still isn't sure what to do with the porcelain Ontario Black Bear sent as a 117th birthday present by Deputy Ontario Premier Ernie Eaves. She keeps it in a cardboard box in a corner of her dining-room for fear some grandchildren might knock it off the coffee table.

So Rita butts out her cigarette and heads toward the car. Edgar Coote, her second husband, will drive. He's been driving her for nine years, long before they were married. Edgar's daughter is married to Rita's son. When Edgar's wife died a few years ago, Edgar and Rita decided to formalize the driving

arrangement. Now he's not just a chauffeur, but the son-in-law of the world's oldest person. How many ex-butchers in Deep River can boast that?

There are hardly any cars on the road north from Deep River to Corbeil. Pickup trucks mostly, filled with hunters, which pleases Edgar. Now that he's retired he makes ends meet by butchering moose and deer. This past moose season he carved up 26 animals. His own freezer is filled with a few choice cuts given as payment. Last week, he salvaged meat from a roadkill on Highway 17.

The first time Edgar went to Corbeil he was eight or nine. His dad took him there to see another magnificent sight, another type of freak of nature, the Dionne quintuplets, who were born May 28, 1934.

Seeing the money-making potential of the quints, the provincial government made them wards of the Crown just two months after they were born. A hospital nursery was built across the road from the homestead and nurses and teachers were hired to care for the girls. This Quintland attracted more than five million visitors before the girls were 10 years old. Up to 6,000 people every day stood behind a two-way screen watching the girls, who were always dressed identically, at play.

Edgar was one of the gawkers. "I was young but I remember them there, behind glass, playing. They were quite the sight. Really something," he says, never taking his eyes of the grey band of road.

Eventually Quintland was turned into a retirement and nursing home. It is where Mrs. Dionne lived out her life in isolation. It's where Marie Louise Meilleur now lives.

"Strange, ain't it," says Edgar. Neither Rita nor her mother ever made it up to see the Dionnes from their family home across from Deep River, in Quebec. "We were pretty isolated." But she has a small feeling what it must have been like.

Back then, hordes of newsmen stormed the village, bringing kerosene-heated incubators and starting drives to collect breast milk to feed the quints. Now, reporters bring birthday cakes for phony photos but there is no stream of traffic to gawk at her mother. You hear people, afraid of their own old age, say how ugly and shrivelled she looks. Or that she is a waste of space. Or that she should have died a decade ago. You'd think, though, that the life-extensionists would be up looking for tips. Perhaps the fantasy of longevity is more stirring than the daily reality of soft food and diapers.

Rita and Edgar often speculate as to what has kept Mrs. Meilleur alive. It's the reporters that have got them thinking. Hard work? Salt pork? The fact that she smoked but didn't inhale?

She wasn't one for telling stories, or writing things down. She occasionally wrote letters to her grandchildren in Kamouraska. The last letter she wrote, when she was 107, asked for a shipment of fine St. Lawrence sardines to be sent to Corbeil. She'd loved them since she was a girl. So maybe it was the sardines.

As Edgar keeps his foot steady on the gas pedal, Rita begins the story of her mother's life, barely looking at the road she has come to know so well. Somewhere inside this often-told story, the secret of longevity might exist.

Marie Louise was born in the Gulf of St. Lawrence town of Kamouraska on Aug. 29, 1880, at a time when Sir John A. Macdonald was in his second term as Canada's first prime minister. Marie Louise's parents were immigrants from France and would tell their daughter stories about Napoleon Bonaparte. Years later, Marie Louise would boast her grandfather once sat on the French emperor's knee, a minor claim to fame that Paris papers ate up this summer when she became the oldest person in the world.

When her parents arrived in Quebec, they set up a small stopping place for fishermen, renting rooms and providing meals. The small village had a church and a convent, which were the focal point of Marie Louise's life. It was at the convent school she learned Latin and sang in the choir, a lifelong duty and passion. Nurses at Nipissing Manor still ask her to sing Ave Maria. And she still obliges.

Marie Louise was 19 when she married a fisherman named Etiene Leclerc, who made his living from the bounty in the great St. Lawrence. She gave birth to six children. Two died at birth, leaving her with Marie Louise Jr., Gabrielle, Maurice and Gerard. Then her husband died in 1909. Her elder sister Albertienne wrote from a remote village in Quebec, on an island in the Ottawa River, called Rapides-Des-Joachims, saying that one of her little ones had diphtheria and she needed help running her small hotel. With three of her four children (the eldest stayed behind) Marie Louise headed west.

She helped cook meals for lumberjacks while raising a brood of children just north of the village, up the Dumoine Road. There, she met her second husband, Hector Meilleur, a forest ranger and lumberjack from the Ontario side. He'd lost his first wife during childbirth and came to the marriage, in 1915, with four wee ones of his own. The couple and their Brady Bunch-sized family settled in Rapides-Des-Joachims, when Marie Louise was 35. She lived there for 63 years.

On Highway 17, not that far out of Deep River, Edgar veers off the road, taking a side trip to the old homestead. Rapides-Des- Joachims, pronounc-ed Da Swisha by the locals, is located on an island between the two provinces. If the villagers wanted to pack in a few more residents, or create a mini-tourist industry, they could erect a sign on Highway 17, something like: Come visit home of World's Oldest Person. That's not an achievement to take lightly; it's certainly more impressive than the world's biggest apple at the side of the 401 on the way to Toronto.

The road through town is gravel, and although a few new buildings have been added, this is a village -- dominated by a turn-of-the- century schoolhouse and church, dilapidated homes and shacks -- that progress has overlooked. The reasons that once existed for settling here, logging and fishing, are long gone. People remain to raise families out of tradition, or because they have jobs down the river at the Atomic Energy of Canada plant.

Edgar passes the small white church where Mrs. Meilleur used to sing in the choir, and pulls up in front of a ramshackle wooden house, the first timbers floated down the Dumoine River still visible in the walls. The house slouches, deserted. It was kept in the family for a few years, after Mrs. Meilleur moved in with Rita, in Deep River, when she was 92.

In this house, Mrs. Meilleur gave birth to six more children: Ernest, Pauline, Olive, Christie, Alfred and, of course, Rita. Hector was always away, working as a forest ranger in summer, at the logging camps in winter. Mrs. Meilleur, who came to be called Nanny by her 14 children (including the four adopted), also ran a small farm of cows, pigs and chickens and tended a large garden. The children were well fed on thick soups and choice cuts of meat. While she had no gift for pie crusts, her Christmas turkey was to die for.

Even in a crowded house Nanny never raised her voice, never had a cross word. But when she said Sit, they sat.

During the Depression, she was the midwife for miles around, delivering dozens of babies, losing only one, and it was stillborn. Mrs. Meilleur would pray to her patron saint, Ste. Anne de Beaupre, to protect the little ones as they forced their way into the world.

Rita points out the various additions to the house as the family grew. A second floor, a larger kitchen, and out back, a milk shack and behind that, a chicken coop. Still, it's not much to look at. The 57 winters spent inside the thin walls must have been interminable. Mrs. Meilleur has always claimed her long life was due to a lifetime of back-breaking work.

When Hector died at age 94 in 1972, Nanny moved across the river into Rita's home, where she stayed for the next 16 years. When she finally decided it was time to enter a nursing home she was 107 and she was determined to walk in. Manor staff never forgot the day this tough old bird proudly walked in, leaning lightly on a cane.

Edgar pulls up in front of the village graveyard. Almost every name on every weathered headstone is related to Mrs. Meilleur. Two of her sons, her sister, her husband and dozens of nieces and nephews

are buried here. She has asked that when she dies, they find a spot for her in the crowded patch near the white church.

"I suppose if people wanted to know something about my mom's life, they could poke around in here," says Rita, as Edgar drives away.

At the juncture of the Ottawa and Mattawa rivers, Rita and Edgar always stop for brunch. At about 11:15 they tuck into bacon and eggs. There's a nice view of the steel-coloured water from the Valois Restaurant window. Not once have they told the friendly waitresses that they're kin of the world's oldest living person, and that is who they're en route to see.

While Edgar chats with some hunters he knows, Rita considers the menu. She eats fried foods and smokes and drinks and doesn't think she'll live as long as her mother. She might have started her journey on the Earth with the genes for longevity, but she has a feeling she's squandered them. Same with her brothers and sisters. Only three of Marie Louise Meilleur's children are still alive. Ernest, 81, is in the manor with his mother and he's in far worse shape than she is.

What is Nanny's secret? Since she made headlines around the world, the phone calls and letters haven't stopped. Some just want to claim a branch on her family tree, others want advice, which in itself seems like a strange thing. Most people, when they hear about a woman who is 117, sigh and feign exhaustion, as though the thought is just too unbearable. Eighty seems about right to most people.

Born-again life-extensionist Herb Bowie says we're conditioned to think that way. "We think we grow old, get sick, then die. We've got to learn to start thinking out of the box." In a few minutes, he must break off the telephone interview to attend a meeting of his life-extensionist club, a handful of baby-boomers from Scotsdale who will come armed with the latest scientific studies, books -- any piece of information on longevity.

The people in the group, who are between 40 and 60, don't expect to die at 80 because they've broken through conventional thinking. "I see no reason why I can't live to be 150," says the 46-year-old Mr. Bowie.

There are people who think that Mrs. Meilleur is a pioneer, and that increasingly there will be, not just handfuls, but entire blocks filled with people who are living well beyond 100. These people, mostly healthy baby-boomers, think we could be the first generation that has a shot at near immortality because science will deliver super-longevity within the next few decades.

On first glance, it doesn't seem like too much to ask. The average lifespan in Canada has gone from 48 to 80 in this century. Why can't the number keep climbing? Prophecies about such leaps are everywhere. Mass-market books and longevity gurus push anti-aging substances like melatonin, and the popular anti-aging hormone DHEA, which is produced by the human body but is also found in a wild yam extract sold commercially, and human growth hormone.

One of the most recent books to be embraced by life- extensionists is Reversing Human Aging, by neurobiologist Michael Fossel, who boasts that by reading his book, you can "Extend your life dramatically," "End cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's and strokes," "Change life as we know it." Dr. Fossel writes that the key to a much longer life lies in telomeres, the microscopic chromosomal tips that are depleted whenever a healthy cell divides. He predicts that within two decades scientists will learn how to replenish them. With this as yet unavailable telomere therapy will come lifespans of "200, possibly 500 years."

In the meantime, life-extensionists are restricting their diets, after another study -- this one on worms -- showed that a remarkably longer life is possible by calorie reduction. This August, biologists at Massachusetts General Hospital found a gene that can make worms live longer. A species of roundworm known as C. elegans decides in infancy whether to grow up fast and reproduce while there is enough food, or to enter a hibernation-like state and survive longer on less food. If the worms take

the slow lane, they live up to eight times longer. Scientists sequenced the DNA of the worm's daf-2 gene, responsible for the slow-lane state, and found it was similar to a human gene involved in metabolism.

Although there are many implications, the gene's discovery shed light on the now well-known finding that rats and mice kept on near- starvation diets live a third longer than usual. Scientists speculated they may be able to alter the gene in humans, thereby slowing down our metabolism, and increasing our lifespan.

Claims that virtual immortality is around the corner cause Dr. Bill Dalziel to chortle. He is one of Canada's foremost geriatricians and head of Ottawa's Civic Hospital geriatric assessment unit. He begins lectures with a slide showing the reptilian face of Jeanne Calment, former title holder who died this August, not because Dr. Dalziel thinks she is a role model, but because she is a rarity. Throughout history there have always been people who have lived to be 120. He thinks it's doubtful that the rest of us will ever catch up, unless there is a revolution in our understanding of the human body. There have been radical advances in life expectancy this century, but they have been due to improvements in nutrition, housing and sanitation. Not medical advances. Even if cancer was eradicated, life expectancy would only increase by three years. If heart disease was eliminated, expectancy would only increase by 18 months.

He blames this new fixation on living forever on baby-boomers. "They are the first generation that are hoping that medicine will bring them something other than facelifts to keep them young," he says.

In Reversing Human Aging, Dr. Fossel writes that the meaning in people's lives will have to change if it becomes possible to increase life expectancy another 50 years. "Think of how much depends on the knowledge that we age as we do, that we sicken as we age, and that we die when we do," writes Dr. Fossel. "Your outlook, once confined to decades, will move outward into hesitant centuries. Do you enjoy your job? Do you hate it? Do you look forward to retirement as a time of rest, or resent it as forced idleness? What would you do with an extra century of health and youth?"

Dr. Fossel says each of us must answer these questions and help redesign society, as we prepare to live much longer.

Gail Mitchell, the head nurse at Sunnybrook Medical Centre in Toronto and an expert in dealing with the aged, first worked with seniors in Miami Beach. There, she found much wisdom, but also fear, sadness and loneliness. She has learned that those who find themselves living very long lives are often pleasantly surprised at the sense of freedom they feel when time doesn't matter anymore.

Younger people segment their present and future from the past, while for older people, they live in multiple realms of time all at once, says Ms. Mitchell. "They're all at once the children they used to be, the parents (they are), the person about to die." Time loses all meaning for them, while sitting in a chair noticing the colour of the sky or the sound of spring can bring tremendous joy.

"I'm kind of looking forward to it," says Ms. Mitchell.

She says that those who find themselves living well past 100 usually are able to do so because they have meaning in their life. "Meaning keeps them going," in the face of the slow deterioration of their body, when bones wear away, cartilage disappears, and the senses shut down.

Herb Bowie is focusing on meaning and supplements. He follows a considerable regimen each day: Organic, vegetarian, calorie- reduced, and liberally spiced with vitamin and mineral supplements and melatonin. "I think the ideal is to live forever. Death is unequivocally a bad thing," he says, adding that living longer depends much on the principles in one's life. One's spirituality.

In his book he writes of the 15 minimum requirements for living forever. They include: Go with your aliveness. For example, don't buy a burial plot and life insurance. Put people first. "If people are to live forever, then we must make individual human beings -- not humanity as a whole, nor some special

group of "gifted" people - - the most important thing in the universe." Get physical (maintain your body). Take 100-per-cent responsibility for your life. Identify root causes of health problems. Close all exits to death. (He says if people believe in life after death, for example, they won't live in the here and now.) Be creative. His most important requirement for living forever is to "Find some great reasons for living." Mostly, he means "the people you have in your life, the people you know you can count on, the ones who will never leave you, the people who make life worth living."

He dreams of meeting Marie Louise Meilleur. His question list is ready: "What are the principles that guided your life?" he would ask. "How do you feel your life has been different from other people's? Do you think your life still has meaning?"

Edgar slips into Corbeil just after lunchtime. Rita points out the various Dionne landmarks: their old school, the former location of the Dionne homestead, which has been moved closer to North Bay and the tourist route. He rounds a bend and rolls to a stop in front of the Manor. A plaque at the entrance tells visitors it was built for the quintuplets. Rita walks in clutching the Guinness certificate. Milt Graham, the administrator, greets us and she hands it to him. Now, it's his problem.

Mr. Graham, though, doesn't want a repeat of anything like the Dionnes. "It was such a wonderful story, but it is also a sad story. Although this home has amazing historical significance, what with the Dionnes and Mrs. Meilleur, it's such a coincidence, I would feel uncomfortable trying to promote the connection."

Mr. Graham invited a mess of dignitaries and media types up to Corbeil for Memere's 117th. "We had our own version of the paparazzi here and I'm not sure it was good for Memere."

Marie Louise, whom they all call Memere at the Manor, was wheeled into the party room wearing a mauve frock, and with a ribbon tied in her hair. She looked like one of those dolls made out of nylon stockings and cotton batten. While everyone around her, including dozens of grandchildren, looked happy and animated, her face seemed hardened against the excitement, her eyes glassy against the flashing lights of the cameras, as though she had no idea what all the fuss was about. Premier Mike Harris tried to get her to help him cut the cake and that's when she waved his hand away angrily.

Mr. Graham isn't sure he'll throw her a big bash when she hits 118.

Down the hall from Mr. Graham's office, seniors in wheelchairs move in packs, angling for an open path to the recreation room. Most in this grey-haired cavalcade are strapped in, and they propel themselves, not with their arms, but with slippered feet. Nurses spur them on. Few sit up straight. Most are stooped over from age, exhaustion, weary bones and perhaps a little indigestion from the lunch.

Memere's room is at the very end of the crowded east wing hallway. They put her there because it's very busy and all the comings and goings will keep her from getting terribly bored.

On her bad days, Memere doesn't make a peep and just stares off in the distance. But today, before we even enter her room, we hear her. "Mes enfants. Mes enfants," she calls, as if expecting Rita. But it turns out it is the Rita of yesteryear she beckons. She wants to put a bonnet on her little ones. She is somewhere in the Depression. Her little ones are cold.

Looking into the face of the world's oldest person, you see a large, hawkish nose, a mouth drained of the rouge of girlhood and pulled thin, skin so old it's translucent and showing blue veins, and eyes covered with cataracts that seem to form slicks of Vaseline. Her long white hair lies straight down her back and is tied at the crown with a small ribbon. Her hair is no longer washed because, being blind and half deaf, the feel of the water makes her afraid.

Often strangers who come into her room brush their hand against her skin, just to be able to say they touched her.

Most days, she sits in the chair and stares toward the window out at the yard where the Dionnes used to play. She sees only shadows, but can feel sunlight on her eyelids. In the summer, she hears birds in the feeder that hangs outside her window.

"Les oiseaux, les oiseaux," she often says, happily.

An elderly woman in a white sweater and pink pants wanders into the room, looks at Rita and Edgar and says: "I didn't do it. I didn't do it." Then she turns around and walks out.

Another woman, the one who has cared for Memere since the first day she walked into the Manor, stops by. "Hey Memere, how are you?" Murielle Boissonneault shouts. Memere doesn't respond. She talks out loud about salt pork and having to kill cows for food. It makes her cry.

The oldest person in the world is sitting in her easy chair weeping over a cow that might have been killed 110 years ago.

Ms. Boissonneault, a nurse, says Memere stopped eating meat as soon as she came to the manor. "Sometimes I wonder if she just up and decided she was sick of the killing. She never liked it or something." Instead Murielle feeds Memere large helpings of pureed vegetables three times a day.

Memere has two bowls of oatmeal in the morning, and heaping bowls of mashed potatoes for other meals. Ice cream and pudding for dessert. If by accident she is fed meat, she spits it out angrily.

Each day, Memere wakes at 6:30, has breakfast shortly after, naps for 90 minutes, gets up for lunch, naps again. A Manor employee stops in for 15 to 30 minutes to read, talk or play music for her. Then she eats dinner. Lights out by 7 p.m. Ms. Boissonneault says this is a full day. All the way, she listens for the slightest cold or cough. If there is anything, a doctor is called in.

Murielle and Milt Graham and everyone else have deep love for Memere and her determination. They say they have no doubt she wants to keep opening her eyes every day. They, too, wonder what her secret is.

There is something Dr. Bill Dalziel said about watching the body and mind wear away, and wondering what is left in the end. Aging can make you wonder what the essence of a human is. Is it the heart? That's what a cardiologist might say. Or the brain? A neurologist would say so. Or the thyroid gland? That is how an endocrinologist would see it.

Murielle jokes that it is Memere's appetite, but then says it's her obvious love for her family. Milt Graham says she is a principled and pious lady.

Says Murielle: "Every time I go near her, I get this warm feeling in my heart. She has gone through two centuries, miseries, wars, famines, many childbirths. To be able to survive all this and say a prayer each day, it's a miracle." Each night when Ms. Boissonneault goes to bed, she says a prayer for Memere. "I never forget."

Memere's existence doesn't make her dream of living longer, it makes her believe in God.

Still, Mrs. Meilleur seems lonely. Surely she needs an army of others who have rounded the century mark to stave off her loneliness. But maybe her loneliness just speaks to the inhumanity but inevitability of warehousing the very old and frail, and not to a lack of meaning in her life.

"Please, hmm, some salt pork. Salt pork fried," she pleads. "My dad ate all his salt pork. We used to roll the pork in salt, then pack it in salt. We'd eat it all winter."

Rita looks away. "She's really in the past today."

Rita loves to listen to her mother when she is in the past. "She never had time to tell us stories when we were growing up. This is how we learn things."

At one point, Mrs. Meilleur says, "Rita never travelled very far." Rita shouts in her deaf ear, "Memere, c'est Rita. Rita est ici. Ton enfant avec toi."

Memere understands and demands a kiss. Rita tears up and leans in to kiss her mother's thin lips. "She never ever asks me for a kiss."

Edgar hangs back, just watching. He never goes near her. Doesn't even touch her hand. "She doesn't even know we're married," he shrugs.

"My hands are cold," Mrs. Meilleur says, realizing her daughter is there in the flesh. Rita tucks the blanket around them. "I'm going to go and help my kids."

"My God, mother, you've helped us enough."

"When the kids come home from school, the house will be good and full."

Then she stops talking and her eyes under