

The Memory Keeper

Novelist Warren Adler carries a lifetime of highs and lows, alone



ON MY 67TH wedding anniversary, I visited the facility where my wife lives with other dementia patients. As usual, she did not recognize me. She barely speaks.

I do not believe she suffers emotional distress, but I do. Witnessing her decline is debilitating. I kept her at home with around-the-clock care until two years ago, when it became unsafe for her to stay there because she had become aggressive and would wander. Now I live alone in the home we shared, and I am trying to cope with the bruising experience of loneliness. I am told it is a curable malady, and I am following the advice

of others. I made my living as an author and playwright, and I continue to write, exercise daily and force myself to socialize. I am told it will take time. I am 91. How much time?

I often go to visit Sonia with our oldest son, who, like me, lives in Manhattan. Having him along eases the trauma of what I must confront. For this support, I am beyond grateful.

Mostly I see my wife through a veil of tears, which I try desperately to hide. I reckon I have shed more tears during the past five years of her battle with dementia than I have through any other phase of my life.

All lives have their moments of pain, angst, trouble and strife. Mine

is no exception, although, on balance, the rewards have far, far outweighed the punishments. Still, the most consistent fact of my life has been the long and loving relationship I have had with my gorgeous, devoted, adored and adoring best friend—not merely the love of my life but the North Star by which I navigated. Indeed, whatever modest success I have had in the pursuit of my dreams, I owe totally to her. Though not for the reasons one might suspect.

Of course, I wanted to succeed as a writer but not at all for the traditional plaudits of the crowd. Instead, it was to make her proud, to validate her lifelong belief in my pursuits. In turn,



Sonia and Warren Adler were married in 1951, shortly after he finished Army basic training.

I reveled in her spectacular successes as a journalist in Washington, where she covered the lives of the capital's movers and shakers.

The profound irony of these terrible last moments of our charmed life together is that while her memories of those days have passed on to oblivion, mine remain intact and, by some odd miracle, enhanced. I can remember every facet of our life together, from my first glimpse of her lying on a beach blanket at age 19 in a pristine white bathing suit—a stunning, slender beauty who put Cupid's dart right in the solar plexus of my 22-year-old self, a dart that's never been dislodged in nearly seven decades.

It would be natural to dub this vivid recall an extraordinary gift, but I must confess that it has become more of a burden. Where has my sweetheart gone? Yet she is alive. Her heart beats, and, believe me, some remnant of her beauty remains, though the memories that are so intense and rich to me are totally gone for her. I am imprisoned in an empty cell.

Still, when I see her, when I think of her, every sense of her returns—the touch of her; the wondrous sweet smell of her; our interactions in the bed we shared for multiple decades; the random embrace in the dead of night, knowing she was beside me; the steady sound of her breathing; the simple act of hand-holding; and, yes,

the caresses, knowing I was not alone.

We were bonded together in a lifelong contract, a commitment to the joint pursuit of parenthood, with all its joys and responsibilities. How we both worried about every facet of the lives of our three boys—not only the perils of infancy but far beyond.

Parenthood is a never-ending condition of childbearing.

Sonia and I went through our lives with our arms wrapped around each other. It is an apt metaphor, since our worries were always joint worries; all mundane family business was a shared enterprise.

I have learned, too, that memories often bring back the hard parts of marriage—arguments, anger—when we might have questioned the extent of our feelings for each other. But here is a lesson that can be learned only when one reaches the distant borders of life: Like the ocean, love has its high and low tides, controlled by some mysterious force. There is nothing like the ecstasy of the high tides of devotion. But one must also contend with the low tides, when doubts arise. The truest love requires the patience to wade through those low tides, knowing the high tides will come again. The irony of the endgame is that the high tide is at its highest, and there is no low tide.

Today my total recall feels like a curse, but I am hopeful that someday, like the tides, that feeling will recede and I will still have our memories. My most fervent wish is that at some point before my sweetheart's demise, the dark clouds will lift, her eyes will brighten and, for even one brief moment, she will smile at me and squeeze my hand in recognition. ■

*Warren Adler, 91, is the author of *The War of the Roses*. His new novel, *Last Call*, deals with a late-life love affair.*

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