

Love in the Time of Alzheimer's

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You will have been married nearly 50 years when one of you forgets the way home. Some couples go to the doctor together to get an Alzheimer's diagnosis; they cry and discuss plans and treatment. You will not take this route. You'll laugh off forgetfulness, together. When one of you starts to misplace things, the other will quietly move them. You will start forgoing trips; you will accompany each other most places. You make it through this phase by silent but mutual agreement.

The next phase of Alzheimer's arrives at the same time as Covid, just as you started exploring a senior living community. You are somewhat relieved, for you did not like the idea of moving. There are challenges: one of you forgets to turn off the stove, the other has issues with eyesight and mobility. It is harder to shower and manage all the steps. But there is joy in family meals outside, the slow walks around the neighborhood, the comfort of your cozy house in the woods. Every day you sit together in the family room, and every night you curl into each other.

Then you fall. The medical professionals say your house and its many steps are unsafe. You move to a senior living apartment near your daughter. Your art and couch are placed just so, to feel like home, but it is not the same. Still, you're together. You go to meals in the main dining room, concerts, and lunch with old friends. But Alzheimer's marches on, and one of you forgets even more, like how to cut with a knife, take a shower, get out of bed, and have a conversation. There are more and more battles.

You thought the first move was hard; this one is agonizing. It means you will not share a bedroom for the first time in 55 years. One of you is unaware until the move happens, the other is wracked with guilt, even though everyone says you are a good spouse. It does not feel that way, but you need more help.

Now you live one floor apart. Memory care is better than you imagined; the staff is kind and the residents have daily activities, including your beloved music. It is still hard—hard to wake up without you, eat without you, and watch tv without you.

But one thing is unchanged. Every night, without fail, you lie down together on the bed in memory care and hold each other until one of you falls asleep. The nurse says she hopes her husband loves her in old age the way you two do. When one of you moves to a wheelchair and it's time for a hospital bed, you get a double, even though Medicare will only cover a single.

It is worth it, this most expensive bed you've ever owned. Because lying together, in each other's arms, is what it feels like to be truly and fully you again.