

# The Sometimes Stranger: Night after night, this Plano man visits his wife with Alzheimer's

By: Brendan Meyer



PLANO — He takes his 7 p.m. pills and scribbles his name on the assisted living sign-out sheet. Then he inches his walker toward the parking lot, to visit the girl next door.

She's just a minute's drive, one building over. At this hour, she's already in bed, in her own room, behind two sets of heavy metal doors.

Bob Stiegler isn't sure if she recognizes him. But she should.

They met in Kansas City, Mo. She was a pageant girl with big blond hair and green eyes. Her name is Norma, but Bob calls her "No-No," because when they first started dating and he got frisky, she'd brush his hand away and say "No-no."

They got married in a Methodist church and lived a traditional life. He was a golf pro and salesman. She stayed at home. Every day, she did two loads of laundry and the dishes. She planted flowers and trimmed the bushes. Dinner was always on the table. Bob says they never had a single argument. At night, they'd lie on the floor and watch TV, scratching each other's backs.

Day after day, year after year.

Then her mind started to go. One day she thought Bob was her dad. Another time she walked out of the house into the street. The police came. Months later, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Now she's here, at a memory care center in Plano. Bob used to spend all day by her side. Then he had a stroke. So he moved in next door and visits every night.

The disease knows how to hurt. It targets those closest.

But this is still a love story.

She's already taken her bedtime pills by the time he arrives.

"Hi, No-No," he says, flicking on the light. "How's the most beautiful girl in the world?"

She sits up in bed but says nothing. She looks at him. He takes a brush from the bathroom drawer and strokes her silver hair. She smiles. He adjusts her pillow, and lowers her bed, then fluffs the cushions of her wheelchair.

Bob pulls up a seat. Maybe tonight she'll say what he needs to hear.

By now, he knows not to ask too many questions. He knows not to cry. He forces a smile and sits there until her eyes get heavy, thinking about all she did for him.

He checks the thermostat. He un-Velcros her shoes for the following morning. By 8:30, she's almost asleep. He grips his walker, and heads for the door.

"Goodnight, I'll see you tomorrow," he says. "I love you."

She watches him turn off the light, a sometimes stranger, her husband of 58 years.

"I love you," she says.

And that's all he needs.