

Have you ever wondered what it would be like living with Alzheimer's Disease 24 hours a day?

BY MARION RITCHIE

Do you wonder what's ahead of you as you face Alzheimer's in a loved-one? Do you know what to expect? Do you wonder if your situation is normal? Do you ever wonder if you're going to make it?

During the five years of traveling that long road with Alzheimer's, along with my late husband, I asked all of these questions—and more! Unable to find adequate resources during those days of struggling, I was determined to help others find the answers they needed. That's why I was compelled to write a book myself, chronicling our journey through this devastating disease. In response, countless readers have contacted me to say that my book has also helped them to find the strength and courage they sought to carry them through their own personal nightmares.

The Long Way Home is an account of our turbulent journey through Alzheimer's, with my husband as the unwitting protagonist of my tale. Focusing as much as possible on the humorous aspects, rather than the medical or clinical elements of the disease, I strove to create an honest and accessible work, appealing to the average reader. Sometimes embarrassing—for me at least—I determined to hold nothing back in my attempt to help others face that same journey.

During our years together with Alzheimer's, the house in which my

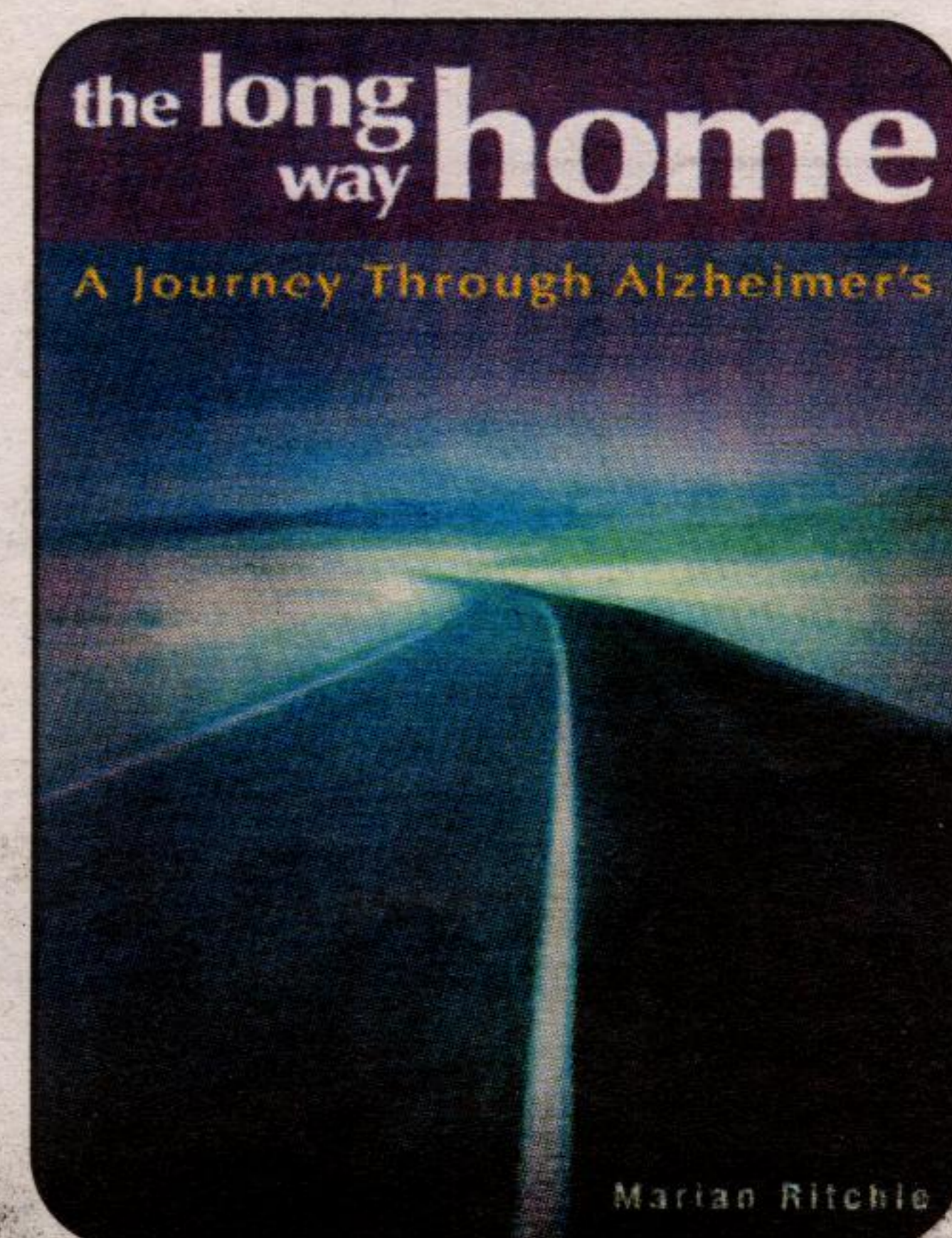
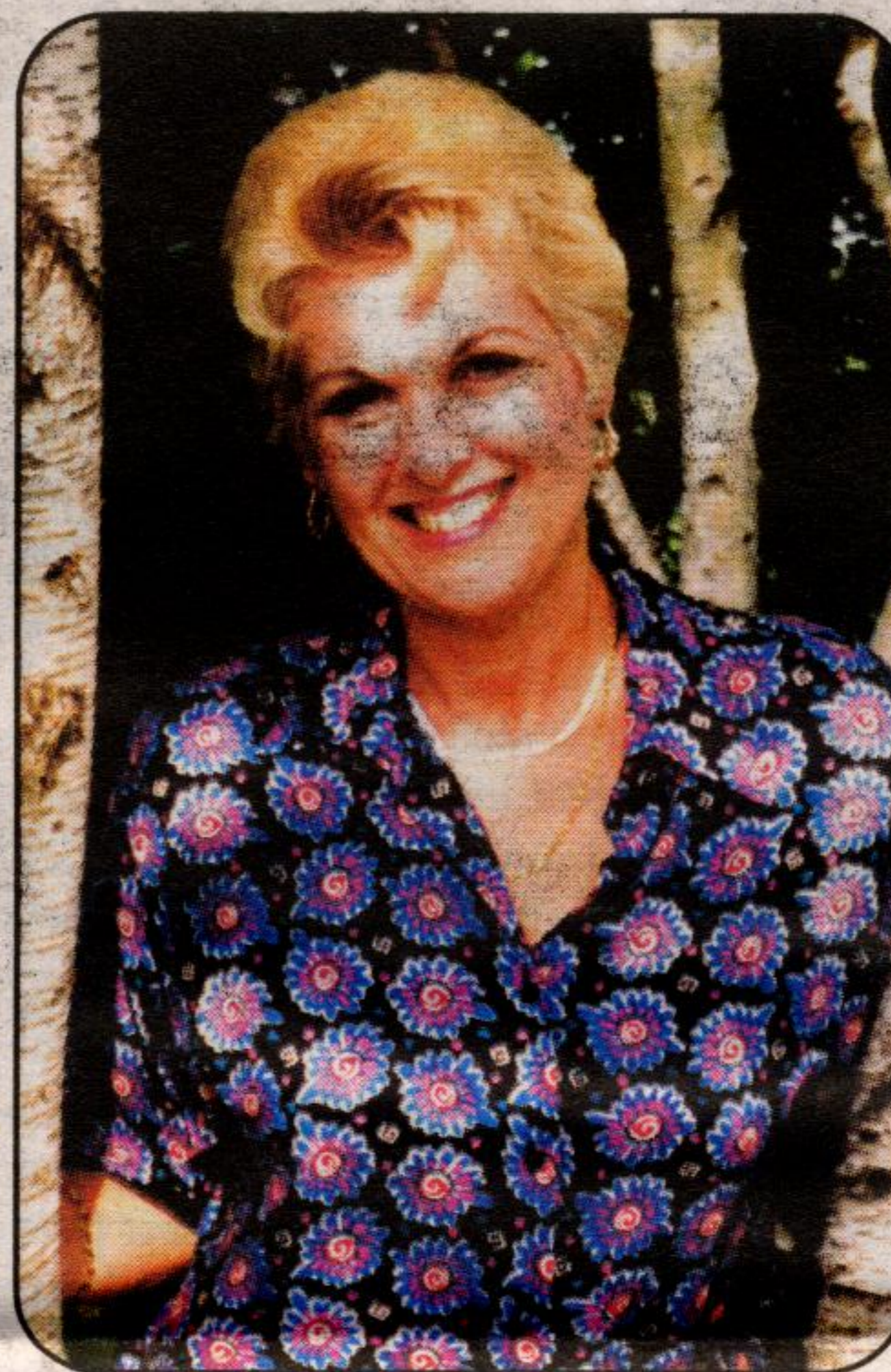
husband had lived for thirty-nine years eventually became strange and unfamiliar to him. In fact, as time passed, it seemed to be a focal point of his continuing confusion. Eventually he came to be living in a different location almost daily. I must say as well, that he never lacked for variety in his imaginative ventures. Our home venue changed regularly every evening, from a rented house, to a luxury hotel, a boarding school in England, a hospital (also in England), a dentist's office, a nursing home, a guesthouse, and almost any other setting you could imagine. As well, our location would change between Florida, Canada, and England, although towards the end it settled mainly in London, England. (Well, it certainly was a cheap way to travel.)

My role constantly changed as well, covering the gamut from gardener, to cook, nurse, doctor, driver, caretaker, "the boy," school mistress, and even "Sally Ann". (Talk about a split personality! Mine was fractured!)

BY THEN I EXISTED ONLY IN HIS MIND

When my husband began referring to me as the person running the boarding school where he lived, I would try reminding him that I was his wife and nothing else. He would look genuinely

shocked at that revelation, unable to take it in. Then, five minutes later he'd be back at the boarding school again, so I'd finally give up trying. He simply wouldn't—or couldn't—accept the truth, so there was no point really in trying to explain. Sometimes I'd encourage him to talk about his wife and he'd give me a wonderfully flattering description of myself so I'd know he did remember me—at some level. Unfortunately, he just didn't recognize



myself constantly, that he wasn't responsible. My husband didn't know what he was doing. It wasn't his fault! He couldn't help it! But I'd still forget—and get frustrated, with him—and with myself! Then I'd feel so guilty for having failed him yet again! It was a vicious circle of guilt, frustration and recrimination.

My one comfort, during those trying and tempestuous times; the one thought that helped to assuage my feelings of failure and guilt, was the knowledge that tomorrow he wouldn't remember. Tomorrow was a new day and I could start all over again, trying to do it right. In other words, the terrible, short-term memory loss, endemic to Alzheimer Disease, can also be a blessing, in a way. It's a new opportunity to try again; a fresh start, if you will, for both you and your loved one.

One of the things that really helped me during those days was a sense of humour. It has been well said, "Laughter is the best medicine." There were times when I had to laugh or I would have cried. Of course, I still cried a lot too, but that's only normal.

I'M VERY HAPPY FOR YOU

One of the last things to go with Alzheimer patients is their social skills, which they've learned from childhood. In fact, that's how they manage to hide their condition as long as they do, and my husband was no exception to the rule. A favourite expression of his was, "I'm very happy for you!" and he used it often. Actually, it worked very well for him, and people would think he was sincere, until the day someone told him their mother had just died. You can imagine their shock when my husband replied, "I'm very happy for you!" I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that point! Needless to say, his cover was blown that day!

Another incident occurred when I was serving my husband his lunch one day. On impulse, I bent down and kissed the back of his neck, as I used to do. He looked up at me with a shocked expression on his face, so I said, "I'm sorry. Didn't you like that?" He replied,

"Oh yes, I liked it! I'm just not used to waitresses being so nice!"

my face anymore. By then, I existed only in his mind, a paragon of virtue, something between Florence Nightingale and an angel! If only it were true! However, too well I knew my own shortcomings when it came to dealing with the fears and frustrations of living daily with such a devastating disease. I was no angel! Believe me! I was just as human as anyone else; an ordinary person thrust suddenly and sadly into an extraordinary situation from which there was no escape and no reprieve.

Another evening, another torrent of questions, but still there was no acceptance of the truth. First he went on about wanting to take a tour of his "new home." After over 39 years it was still new to him! Again he was convinced that we were living in London, England.

"How can we afford this place? Are there no other tenants?"

Why not? Is it too expensive, or what?"

As if those questions weren't enough, after that he continued on a different line of queries.

"How did we get all the furniture here? Did any get damaged? How long have you lived here? How did you come across this place? Was it advertised, a paper ad?"

The questions just didn't stop and he'd ask the same ones over and over, relentlessly going on, until I'd feel like screaming myself, "Stop! Stop! Stop!" I would try to answer him, even making up the answers if it would help, but to no avail. It would just go on and on, endlessly!

At times like that I would remind

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