

# I Can Still Smell It

*by* WARREN ADLER

They had moved three times, from their original apartment in Gramercy Park, to the East Side on 72<sup>nd</sup> and finally to the big high rise on the West Side overlooking the Hudson.

“I can still smell it,” Rachel said.

“It’s not possible. It’s been four years.”

Larry, because he loved her with the same zeal and passion as when he married her in June 2001, was patient, although, by then, he was really worried about her. September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 had come and gone. They had considered themselves lucky, secretly celebrating their good fortune while expressing pity and compassion for those lost.

In the fullness of time, the site had been cleaned up, the building and body remains carted off to far away garbage dumps and some of the area was restored although they were still arguing about the final outcome for the property.

There was no questioning the fact that it did, indeed, smell for that first year. It was a sickening odor, a mixture probably of dust, debris and roasted flesh and bones. When the windows of that first apartment were opened even a crack the smell seeped in and was hard to

ignore. Rachel and he tolerated it like everyone else in Manhattan. It was an understandable byproduct of the horror.

That first move a year later was prompted by the idea that perhaps they were too close to the site, about a mile away and that their apartment might be in the path of an air current carrying the smell which snaked its way through the high rises in lower Manhattan and alighted with great intensity on the Gramercy Park area. That was Rachel’s theory and Larry believed it credible at the time. Her senses had always seemed more acute than his. She had a great eye for color and design and her hearing, as judged by her musical appreciation was exceptional. Her nose for scent was phenomenal and she could detect perfume and sniff the quality of wine like a professional.

When she said she could still smell the pervasive odor of 9/11, he believed her, although he could no longer detect it.

“Who am I to question the quality of your nose?” he joked, often teasing her when she stuck her nose in a wine glass filled with red wine.

They tried all sorts of air cleaners, mists, plug in devices, appliances that promised to clean the air. Apparently these things did not work for Rachel. After awhile, they began to argue about it since his own unscientific survey among his colleagues at the office and friends revealed that no one else had the same olfactory experience.

“I just don’t understand it,” he told her. “You must be the only one in Manhattan that still smells it. Maybe it’s psychological.”

“Are you suggesting I see a shrink?” she rebutted.

“What I mean,” he continued, “is that it could be a memory thing. But then, when it comes to that trauma, everybody in town, the country, the world, is afflicted with that memory.”

Who could ever forget?”

“It’s the smell Larry. I do understand what you characterize as the memory thing. No one will ever forget that monstrous act by those terrible people. That is an indelible memory. It will be with us forever. But the smell, it’s this crazy byproduct. I can’t get rid of it.”

With the exception of that smell, life appeared otherwise normal. She worked as a copywriter with one of the big advertising agencies and he was an art director with another agency. Still in their twenties and earning good money, they had friends, kept in touch with parents and siblings who lived out of town and planned a future with kids. They had had a nice garden wedding in her parents house in Cedar Rapids, Michigan and went back each Christmas to visit with one of another set of parents. He grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

If it wasn’t for the smell, they were otherwise unmarked by the event, although there was no avoiding the general fear that it would happen again some day. It was always in back of one’s mind.

Of course, news of the cleanup was in the papers daily for months following the tragedy. People volunteered. Many went down to the site to assist with food service. Others carpoled. Doctors and nurses volunteered their assistance. Police, fireman and forensic experts scoured the site for remains. Some were found and identified. Others were not. Everyone felt the grief of the survivors who had lost loved ones.

In the immediate aftermath the air quality, along with the smell, was annoying but not debilitating. Some predicted that many of those who worked at the site might suffer from lung problems later in life. But the amazing thing was how New Yorkers coped, hung in there, lived their lives to the fullest and prevailed.

There was something intrepid about New Yorkers. Both Larry and Rachel were proud to

be a part of such resilience and optimism. Three years after the event New York was booming, bigger than ever. Cranes building big high rises were everywhere in Manhattan. Brooklyn, too, was booming. The Bronx was resurgent.

On the other hand, except for the conflicts over what to do with the site and compensation for those who lost loved ones, people were forgetting and growing less uncomfortable about the possibility of another attack. While everybody recognized the potential threat, it was losing any sense of immediacy. The Bush administration was reviled by opponents who thought the fear factor was being used as a political weapon, and most people in New York City hated the President for invading Iraq, feeling that the invasion only exasperated the situation. The fact was that except for security lines at the airports, the presence of Police and National Guardsman at various sensitive places like Grand Central Station, certain public places where people walked through metal detectors and had their pocket books searched, and the stories in the newspapers, the fear of an attack like the one that had destroyed the world trade center was dissipating.

“I wish it would go away,” Rachel told him with increasing frequency, meaning the smell. “It’s here in this apartment. I know it is.”

“That’s what you said when we lived in Gramercy Park.”

“Okay, so it’s a coincidence. But it's here Larry. I can smell it.”

Larry checked with the management of the apartment house to see if anyone else complained about the smell. No one had. Larry reported to Rachel what he had learned.

“Would I complain, if I didn’t smell it?”

He couldn’t argue with that and he tried his best to be patient and sympathetic. In the end, when their lease was up they moved to the West Side to a brand new apartment complex that was

being built overlooking the Hudson River. The view was gorgeous and there were wonderfully exhilarating breezes that floated over the river and reached their terrace on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor.

"I'm so sorry Larry," she told him after they had lived in that apartment for a month. "I can still smell it."

"What is it like?" he asked, determined to be patient.

"Like the same as it was when I first smelled it right after 9/11."

"Be more specific."

"Like dead people, I think."

"Have you ever really smelled dead people?"

"Not really. But it is what I imagine they might smell like."

Of course, he had asked the question before, but he was beginning to think it might be a physical thing, something that had to do with complex biological factors having to do with the sense of smell. Although he had earlier suggested that she see a shrink, he decided to offer a less threatening alternative.

An ear, nose and throat specialist declared, after various tests, that everything appeared normal.

"I suppose that's a relief," Rachel said after they had received the test results. "Except that I can still smell it."

Finally he was losing patience with her insistence. It was having an effect on their relationship. She was getting more restless, sleeping less, tossing at night and inhibiting his own sleep patterns. Sometimes they would discuss the problem of the smell long into the wee hours.

"I smell it now, Larry. Believe me."

"You're imagining it."

He had taken refuge in that idea, since any other possibility was unexplainable.

“Even if I was imagining it, I can still smell it.”

“All the time? Is there any time when you don’t smell it?”

He had asked that question repetitively, as if it might keep hope alive that she was afflicted with the odor at ever diminishing intervals. Unfortunately, the answer was also repetitive.

“It never leaves me, Larry. But it is most intense at home. Maybe when I am thinking of other things at the office, I can ignore it although it doesn’t go away, but when I get back to our apartment it is constant. No matter what I do here in the apartment it is always with me.”

In time, it became for her a dominant obsession. It seemed to pervade everything she did and he sensed that she was growing more and more desperate about the affliction although she appeared fearful of mentioning it. He could tell it was on her mind by the way her eyes drifted and her nostrils twitched.

Finally, almost in desperation, she consented to a visit to a psychiatrist. She had contemplated going by herself, but she decided that since Larry was the most affected by her affliction, he was entitled to a psychological explanation, if one was available.

The psychiatrist, a pleasant and patient middle-aged man, offered an assessment that was highly technical. He referred to that section of the brain that dealt with the sense of smell, the smell brain he called it, and went through a series of possible physical and psychological factors that dealt with trauma and the effect it had on memory.

He had asked her many questions about her childhood. Had she experienced any childhood traumas? Did she have nightmares? What were her principle fears? Had anything happened to her in her lifetime that suggested some relationship with fear and smell? As to the

phenomena of the terrorism threat he was more than curious.

"Are you afraid that another attack is imminent?"

"No more than anyone else."

"Do you panic when you ride a bus or subway or go on an airplane?"

"Acceptance. Not panic."

"Do you have nightmares of death?"

"If you mean death caused by a terrorist attack the answer is no."

"Do news reports of terrorism attacks bother you?"

"Sure they do, but not to the point where I get too upset to function."

"Are you afraid to live in New York?"

"Of course not. I'm here aren't I?"

His diagnosis was understandable and logical, and he did offer her some hope.

"It could be," he explained to both of them after her session when they met in his office.

"That your fear of this terrorist danger is so palpable, so intense, that the odor associated with that tragedy continues to dominate your smell brain."

"But as I told you, I don't obsess about a terrorist attack," she said. "I fear it sure, but I don't dwell on it."

"Not consciously," the psychiatrist said. "It is an evolutionary theory that the sense of smell was the principal defense mechanism of our ancient forebears. They could sniff danger from predators and poisons. It was their most powerful sense and is still powerful in our smell brains."

"And this explains why I can still smell debris?"

"It's a possibility."

"Have you seen other people like me?" Rachel asked him.

"Yes I have. Fear is very disruptive to one's mental health."

"But I don't think about it much."

"Except when the smell reminds you of it."

She shook her head, rejecting the notion.

"So you imply that it's because the fear in my subconscious is so intense that it induces this sense of smell."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Psychiatry is not a pure science. It deals with clues, assumptions and interpretations."

His explanation struck both her and Larry as less than helpful.

"It feeds on itself," the psychiatrist told them. "The smell induces memory, like a chain reaction. Have you ever read Proust?"

Rachel and Larry looked at each other and shrugged. Neither he nor Rachel had read him.

"The smell of Madeline cake when he was a child," the psychiatrist went on, "induced in him a lifetime of memory and served as the trigger to motivate him to write his masterpiece spanning multiple volumes, all because of the memory of that smell."

"So what can I do about it?" Rachel asked him. "Write a book."

He laughed politely.

"I'm going to prescribe a medicine that has worked in cases like yours. It was originally used to stop nausea in pregnant women."

"I'm not pregnant, not yet," she said looking at Larry.

"It may not work," the psychiatrist said.

"And if it doesn't work?" Rachel asked.

"Find a way to live with it," he said. "Like Titinnitis, a hearing difficulty that is rarely cured."

"That it?" Larry asked, after exchanging troubled glances with Rachel.

"One day it might simply disappear," the psychiatrist said. It was a very unsatisfactory diagnosis.

"It's already been more than four years," Larry said.

"I wish I could be more helpful," the psychiatrist said.

"So do we."

For the next few months in their new apartment, they tried to lead normal lives. Nothing changed. The pills he gave her did not work. Once again, she began to make noises about the apartment being a place where the smell became worse.

"Where can we go then?" he challenged. Clearly, he had been patient, understanding and cooperative, had done everything possible to help her cope with the situation.

"Maybe if we moved upstate. Somewhere in the Hudson Valley further up the river," she suggested.

"It's something inside you Rachel, not in the apartment. Will these moves go on forever?"

"I hope not."

He felt deeply sorry for her affliction. Love, he sensed, was turning to pity and compassion. They slept less and less engaging in long nocturnal conversations. They made love less often and when they did it seemed routine, not spontaneous as it had been at the beginning.

But he agreed to look for a place further up the river, vowing to himself that this would

be the absolute last time they would move. Moving was an exhaustive process and was financially draining as well. Nevertheless, he was determined to help Rachel.

“We’ll have to commute by train more than an hour to get to work,” he told her.

“I’m willing if you are.”

“Maybe if we went up there and you sniffed around. You know what I mean. Trees act as filters.”

“That would be wonderful.”

They drove further up the Hudson valley, past Peekskill, but she could still detect the smell.

“Does it seem less so up here?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.”

Nevertheless, they contacted a real estate broker and rented a nice house with a garden, surrounded by trees and the air, to him at least, seemed fresh and clear.

It didn’t help. She could still smell it.

“I’ll never move again,” he told her. He was beginning to see how this mad affliction was chipping away at their relationship. He tried to rationalize his situation by characterizing her as “handicapped.” If she was “handicapped” he reasoned would he stand by her no matter what. In sickness and in health the marriage vow decreed. Taking refuge in the idea, he felt ennobled by his sacrifice. It was a sacrifice.

She had given up her job and was working as a free lancer, doing her work at home. He couldn’t, as he was needed by his colleagues in face-to-face situations. The commute was exhausting him, making him irritable and depressed. Of course, she was well aware of what was happening, but was helpless in the face of what was assailing her.

One day, he came home and she was wearing a surgical mask obviously impregnated with heavy perfume which smelled like lilacs.

"Does it work?" he asked.

"Only when I keep it on," she said, her speech muffled by the mask. She took it off only to eat and drink and when she talked on the telephone. She began to sleep with it. The odor of lilacs was so intense it was giving him headaches. When he complained, she changed the perfume to other floured scents, but nothing worked as well as lilacs.

"I can't stand the smell of it," he told her often, trying valiantly to live with it, feeling guilty, finding it more and more difficult to cope with the smell.

"Now you see what I mean," she said.

"It's driving me crazy."

"For me, it's either that smell or the other. At least the smell of lilacs doesn't remind me of the other, the horror of it."

As time went on, he rarely saw her full face. Her speech behind the mask was muffled and, at times, he found it difficult to understand her words. The house was inundated with the smell of lilacs. It permeated everything, even his clothes. His co-workers would comment about it and after awhile he noticed that they preferred to keep their distance. He was too embarrassed to explain what it was all about.

Finally, his boss called him into his office.

"What is it with you Larry? You stink of perfume, smells like lilacs. It's making some people around here nauseous. Are you wearing this scent?"

"Actually no," he responded. "It's my wife's. It gets into my clothes."

"You'd better get rid of that stink, Larry. Really, it's upsetting people. It's too heavy."

Yuk. I'd prefer if you left my office now.”

As he began to leave the office, his boss called out.

“It's either my way or the highway Larry.”

At home, he tried sleeping in another room and double washing his shirts and underwear and sending his clothes to the cleaners very frequently. Nothing helped. He explained the situation to Rachel.

“I may lose my job,” he said.

“Over the smell of lilacs? That's ridiculous.”

“No it isn't,” he acknowledged. “It's driving me crazy as well.”

The boss kept his word and he was fired. In some ways it was a blessing because it forced him to confront his situation. She couldn't stand the smell of the World Trade Center aftermath, and the lilac scent was the only palliative that worked for her. And he couldn't stand the smell of lilacs.

He tried working from home, but it was impossible to live with the scent. By then, love had disappeared, although he did feel deep compassion for her problem and a new emotion “guilt” was beginning to take hold. As a temporary solution, he took an apartment in Manhattan and came up on weekends. Sometimes, she greeted him without the mask, but the smell of lilacs had seeped into the atmosphere of the house. He could barely wait out the weekend.

“I can still smell it,” she would tell him when the mask was off and the lilac scent did not help.

Finally he could stand it no longer.

“We're both casualties of 9/11 Rachel.”

She agreed and they got a friendly divorce. It took him months to get rid of the smell of

lilacs. He called her on the fifth anniversary of 9/11.

“I can still smell it,” she told him.

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## WARREN ADLER

### AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Warren Adler's novels have been translated into more than two dozen languages. Ten of his novels have been sold or optioned to the movies, and two have become major motion pictures, the classic The War of the Roses starring Michael Douglas, Danny DeVito and Kathleen Turner, and Random Hearts starring Harrison Ford. A trilogy on Public Television The Sunset Gang was a critical and popular success, produced by Linda Lavin with a stellar cast including Uta Hagen, Ron Rifkin, Jerry Stiller, Anne Meara and Doris Roberts.

Mr. Adler has been a pioneering author in electronic publishing. In the late 1980's he began re-acquiring book rights and by 1999 had created a complete eBook and Print-on-Demand library of his works—now available world-wide on every current electronic book platform. All of his titles are in print in both hardcover and trade paperback wherever books are sold.

As a novelist, Mr. Adler's themes deal primarily with intimate human relationships—the mysterious nature of love and attraction, the fragile relationships between husbands and wives and parents and children, the corrupting power of money, the aging process and how families cling together when challenged by the outside world. His books have been cited by readers and reviewers for their insight and wisdom in presenting and deciphering the complexities of

contemporary life.

A product of the New York public school system, Mr. Adler graduated from Brooklyn Technical High School and New York University, where he majored in English literature. Inspired by his freshman English Professor Don Wolfe, Mr. Adler went on to study creative writing with Dr. Wolfe when he taught at the New School. He also studied under Dr. Charles Glicksburg at the New School. Among his classmates were Mario Puzo, William Styron and many other talented writers.

After graduating from New York University with a degree in English literature, Mr. Adler worked for the New York Daily News before becoming Editor of the Queens Post, a prize winning weekly newspaper on Long Island. His column "Pepper on the Side" became a staple of a number of newspapers in the country.

During the Korean War, he was recruited by Armed Forces Press Service to serve in the Pentagon as the only Washington Correspondent for the service. His Washington by-line went all over the world and was published in every publication put out by the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard.

Mr. Adler also has a distinguished business career. He has owned four radio stations and a TV station, has run his own advertising and public relations agency in Washington, D.C. and was one of the founders of the Washington Dossier magazine.

Today, when not writing, Mr. Adler lectures on creative writing, motion picture adaptation and the future of Electronic Books. He is the founder of the Jackson Hole Writer's Conference and has been Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Jackson Hole Public Library. He is married to the former Sonia Kline, a magazine editor. He has three sons, David, Jonathan and Michael and four grandchildren and lives in New York City.

You can visit Warren Adler's website at <http://www.warrenadler.com>.

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