

From The Heart

Real Life Stories by Renee Regent

Author's Note: From time to time, life experiences move us. When we learn from them, and grow as a person, it helps sometimes to share our insights with others. Every post here is based on real events of my life, though some of the names have been changed. I hope you enjoy, and I'd love to hear your stories!

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1. Remembering Those Who Have Passed On- Traditions and Rituals

Valentine's Day was a few days ago. Although my Hubby always makes the day special for me with a card and thoughtful gift, it will forever be a bittersweet time of year for me.

My first husband, whom I was with for most of my adult life, died a few days after Valentine's Day. He and I had spent the holiday week that year at a resort in the Arizona desert having a romantic getaway. In the quaint, romantic town of Sedona, we shopped, toured ancient ruins, ate wonderful meals, and just enjoyed each other's company. We ran a business together so time alone as a couple to simply relax was rare.

At the end of the trip, I came home, but he traveled to Los Angeles to attend to some business. He had other stops to make on the return trip to Georgia, so I did not expect to see him for a few more days.

But I never saw him again.

No Goodbyes

I had been home only one full day, when I got the phone call that changed my life. A heart attack had claimed him. There was no warning, no close calls, no chance to say goodbye.

Even though it has been several years, Valentine's Day is a reminder that the anniversary of his death is coming up. I still celebrate him, remember him, and pay tribute to his effect on my life. My current husband has been very supportive from the beginning, and helps me commemorate the day (yes, I am quite blessed).

I try to remember my first husband in a lighthearted way, though it sometimes makes me sad. Sad because you never expect someone to be ripped from you so suddenly. His life was cut short at a young age. But I also remember the good times, the things about him that made me laugh. My ritual each year is to set aside his death day for a tribute. I cook the same ethnic food he and his family loved, I play his favorite movie (Top Gun), and look through photo albums, reliving some of the memories.

It helps me to heal, and each year it hurts a little less. I don't think the pain will ever completely fade, and I cannot imagine just ignoring the day. I should be so lucky as to have loved ones commemorating me after I've gone.

A Common Tradition

I know other people do similar things for loved ones who have passed, some they share, and some they do alone. A friend of mine places her father's Santa hat on the mantle every year, in tribute to him wearing it each Christmas when she was a child. She and her family get the sense that he is there, joining in the holiday festivities.

Another friend observes the date of the child she lost through miscarriage. It is a very personal, private observation, but it has special meaning for her and is something she needs to do.

I have found that sharing experiences of loss reminds us we are not alone in our grief, for it is a universal experience that we all must face at some time. To remember the ones who have passed on is part of letting them go, while still keeping them in our hearts.

How do you celebrate or commemorate loved ones that have passed? Do you remember them on their birthdays, holidays, or the day they passed?

(If you'd like to discuss, contact info is at the end of this mini ebook. I love to hear from readers!)

2. DANCING NAKED IN THE RAIN- SEIZE THE FANTASY!

I finally danced naked in the rain, just the other evening. It was something I'd always wanted to do, but the stars and the planets had never aligned perfectly until that moment. It was a sultry spring evening, with light, misty Georgia rain descending from the skies. My husband and I were soaking in the hot tub, and I couldn't resist living out my fantasy.

I emerged from the hot tub, skin glowing with warmth, and seized the impulse to prance about like a toddler escaping from her mother's towel. "I'm dancing naked in the rain! Woo hoo! C'mon!"

Despite my plea, Hubby stodgily declined, and accused me of acting like a Hippie. He is several years younger than me, yet I was the one making a fool of myself in the backyard. I didn't care. No one else could see me. There were no paparazzi hiding in the bushes. Why not do something crazy once in a while? Life is too short, my friends.

Writers are by nature observers, and though we may not experience the same things we put our characters through, it doesn't hurt to get out of our comfort zone once in a while. Writing about experiences and situations is what we do, so it's good to keep an open mind and try something wacky or different now and again. So that is why I took advantage of the opportunity to be silly. Just for the experience. You never know when the conditions are going to be just right to get naked and dance in the rain!

Is there something you've done to seize the moment?

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3. The Most Romantic Man in the World (When He's Asleep)

My husband gave me my Valentine's Day gift early, and he doesn't recall doing it.

Last night, as usual, he fell asleep before I did (sound familiar, ladies?). My brain takes a while to shut off, so I was still awake when he turned over, pulled me close and whispered, "I love you." This endearing moment was followed by several passionate kisses and sincere groping. Then he turned over and continued sleeping.

It was sweet and exciting, and incredibly romantic because it was pure, straight from his heart without any filter. And he didn't recall one bit of it. When I told him about it, all he said was, "If you say so, dear."

Someone Has A Pattern...

This wasn't the first time he was romantic and passionate in his sleep. He's been doing this on and off since we met, and it always thrills me. In fact, he proposed marriage in his sleep, whispering several times how he wanted to marry me. Yet he never asked me outright in the daytime, or recalled saying it in his sleep. Somehow, we still ended up married!

I must confess I have never been much into Valentine's Day. I'm an incurable romantic, so I'm more impressed with the little things that happen spontaneously, like when he brings me flowers on a Monday just to cheer me up. He still does give me an actual gift on Valentine's Day, and it's usually very thoughtful, but rather moot at this point, because...

He is the most romantic man in the world, even if he doesn't realize it!

Anyone else have a partner who is more romantic in their sleep than when awake?

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4. Can Romantic Fantasies Really Come True?

Have you ever had a romantic or erotic fantasy associated with a song? It's natural for music to evoke a memory of a certain person, or of a particular time or place. I have had countless songs do that to me, but there is one old song that always inspired a vivid romantic fantasy.

Year Of The Cat

When I was young (and actually, to this day), just the first few notes of this song would throw me into a daydream, no matter where I was or what I was doing. Al Stewart's "Year of The Cat" caused an instant "movie" in my head, where the handsome young man roamed a foreign marketplace, only to be accosted by a beautiful, exotic woman. The two lovers walking arm in arm, the calls of the market vendors, the heavy scent of spices in the air...all unfolded in Technicolor, punctuated by Dolby sound in the theater of my mind.

By the bittersweet ending of the song, there was the implication that this spontaneous love affair would not last. In my version, the young man looks out over the city from his hotel balcony at sunrise, and turns to see his lover sleeping tangled in the sheets, her hair flowing out across the pillow. Their passion had consumed the night, and he had no regrets—except he knew he'd have to leave. Eventually.

In the years since I first heard that song, I traveled to many exotic destinations but never had that particular fantasy come true. Or anything remotely like it. Mainly because I was twenty when I met my

first husband, and though he was romantic and fun to be with, I was never single long enough to have a “tryst” like the one I’d imagined for the song. So it remained a fun daydream, and my husband and I made our own romantic (and erotic) memories.

Year Of The Change

Then, at mid-life, the unthinkable happened—my husband died suddenly. It was devastating, and for a while, I gave up on ever having romantic or erotic adventures again in my life. However, when I finally came out of mourning, my imagination, desire, (and libido) came back in full force. I started dating, hanging out with friends, and I also began to travel to places on my “Bucket List”.

That’s when my “Year of The Cat” fantasy finally came true.

The locale was about as exotic as you can get and not leave the U.S—Key West, Florida. I was itching to drive my new convertible over Seven Mile Bridge, with tunes blasting and the salty wind in my hair. Then I’d end the day enjoying a tropical drink at sunset at the southernmost point of the country.

I did have a blast partying on Duvall St, bar-hopping, listening to live music. I danced, and enjoyed fresh seafood every night. It was just about the best birthday week ever, and in this quaint little beach town it really seemed as though they had “turned back time”, or as though time ceased to exist.

The Tryst

Okay, about the tryst. On the eve of my birthday, I met a man who seduced me with an adorable smile and kissed me senseless on the boardwalk late at night. The moon shimmered over the water, and we were swept away with the type of passion that you’d see on the silver screen, or read about in romance novels. At sunrise, I walked out of his bedroom onto the balcony, and looked out at the water. The bittersweet strains of that song came unbidden to my mind.

We felt a real chemistry, a connection, but he lived ten hours from where I lived, so we knew this was what it was—a vacation fling. And that was okay.

The fantasy didn’t play out exactly as I’d envisioned, but the feelings were definitely there. Was it an accident, a twist of fate? Or did my frequent re-playing of the fantasy in my mind cause me to draw this situation to me?

I may never know. Have you ever had a fantasy come true, unexpectedly?

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5. Is Home A Place Or A State Of Mind?

My grandmother had a plaque on her wall that I loved. An embroidered sampler in a wood frame, with the simple words, “*A house is made of brick and stone; homes are made of love alone.*”

As a child I vowed that one day I would have a home of my own, and a copy of that plaque would hang on my wall. Whenever I would visit my grandparent’s country house, I got a warm, fuzzy feeling, and the words on the plaque seemed to sum it up for me. Their house was small and cozy and smelled of fried chicken most of the time. The yard was wide and green, surrounded by steep forested hills on either side, criss-crossed by gurgling creeks where my cousins and I spent countless barefoot summer hours.

A House Divided

The house where I lived, by contrast, was not so warm and fuzzy. A plain three bedroom, one bath house. Technically, it was made of brick and yes, there was love. But there was enough dysfunction in our family situation to make it feel like nothing more than a dwelling most of the time. I mention this because the contrast between the two households was great enough to inspire my lifelong quest to determine just what it really means to have a home.

My teenage years were a whirlwind. For reasons that would take several volumes to explain, my family moved frequently. By the time I graduated from high school, I had attended eleven different schools, sometimes up to three different schools each year. Constantly being “the new kid” can leave you either really messed up, or extremely resilient. (I like to believe I landed in the latter camp).

The Vagabond Years

During that time, we lived in houses, apartments, condominiums, rustic (read “without plumbing”) cottages, you name it. We were actually temporarily homeless at times, while we were in transition. We became very adept at packing and unpacking. Most of the time, it felt like an adventure. Since we did not have time to make lasting connections with people, there was not much pain or regret over leaving one place to go to another. There was always a sense of hope, though, that the next place we moved to would be better. It would solve all of our problems, life would be easier, and we’d make real friends. Even though we were usually disappointed in that regard, my gypsy-ish family had each other. So despite the lack of roots, and our occasional spats, love got us through the chaos.

Years later, as I entered adulthood, I was eager to have a place of my own. One of my happiest memories is laying in a sleeping bag on the floor, the first night I spent in my very own apartment. I had no furniture, no food in the fridge, yet I felt like a queen in a lavish palace, because it was mine. I paid for it, I was the only person who lived there, I could decorate it any way I wanted to. I could live there for as long as I chose, and no one would tell me when to move. That was the first time I can recall having the feeling I was truly “home”.

I lived in that tiny one bedroom apartment until I married, five years later. With my husband, I somehow slipped back onto the “moving track”, though not as frequently as in my youth. We lived with his mother in her house for five years, then in a condo, then a house we bought. Later, after some financial difficulties, on we moved into a rented guest house on a horse ranch. Finally one day we decided to move to Atlanta, Georgia (how that came about that is another story). In Georgia I was introduced to living in trailers, cabins, and eventually, million-dollar homes.

Coming Home

My husband died in 2006, and we had no children, so I was once again alone. With the support of family and friends, I eventually transitioned into a new life. Within a few years, I moved into a new home which I had built to my own specifications. I also remarried and became a parent for the first time, stepmother my new husband’s son.

I can honestly say I have enjoyed some aspect of each dwelling and town that I have resided in. I was blessed, because had the love of my family and friends, no matter where I was. But I have only truly felt “at home” in a few places. What was that elusive quality which made the difference?

The day I moved into the house I now share with my husband and stepson, I heard the echo of that night long ago that I spent on the floor of my first apartment. My home is the place of my choosing. It could be a small apartment, a huge mansion, or a motorhome travelling down the highway. I believe it is not the “brick and stone”, and it is not the “love alone”. It is being comfortable with where you are living, making that dwelling your own. As my example has shown, we do not always have that option of choosing. I plan to enjoy my current home as much as I can, as long as life will allow. And now, I do have that plaque on my wall!

What is your definition of “home”? Can you be “at home” completely alone, or do you have to have companionship? How much does the physical setting matter to you? I would love to hear how others define the word, “home”.

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6. In Defense Of Happily Ever After

One thing that is non-negotiable in the Romance fiction genre is the HEA, or Happily Ever After. Just like the fairy tales of old, readers expect a happy ending. Although, sometimes you can get away with HFN, or Happy For Now. But...

Why Is the HEA So Important?

Insistence on a happy ending is one of the main reasons the Romance genre is sometimes ridiculed by those who are not regular readers or writers. Critics proclaim, “It’s not real life” and “It gives women unrealistic expectations”.

The common response from those defending the Romance genre is, “It’s just fantasy. Of course the Heroes and Heroines are larger than life; of course we want everything to work out in the end. It’s an escape.”

But I’m here to tell you, happily ever after is *real*.

While it may be true that both sides have a point, I am here to tell you that the argument is irrelevant. Because that fairy-tale ending is real, it can happen in real life! It’s not just a made-up fantasy. I’ve seen it.

Real-Life Case Study

I was reminded recently of what true love really is, when someone close to me passed on.

This woman led a turbulent, remarkable life. She married young, and had her first child at the age of nineteen. By the time she was twenty, she was a divorced single parent, at a time when that was not a cool thing to be. At twenty-two, she remarried, and spent the next eight years in an abusive (physically and mentally) relationship with an alcoholic husband. She had three babies (daughters) in three years, at a time when there was no such thing as disposable diapers. With the help of her eldest daughter she managed to survive, dreaming of a day when she would regain her freedom.

Her second husband (the one described above) committed suicide when she was thirty years old and pregnant with her fifth child. Ready to start a new life, she moved across country (from the east coast to the west coast), and delivered a healthy son. Since she had been a stay-at-home parent most of her life, she had no marketable skills, but she managed to support her family. But it seemed she couldn’t find a place to settle; she drifted in and out of jobs the next several years, relocating her family numerous times, sometimes as often as three times per year. She was always searching for something, and never finding it. Always hoping that the next home, the next job, the next man, would be the one to finally bring her happiness.

Though not conventionally attractive, she was vivacious, and rarely lacked for male company. By the time her children were grown, she had married three more times. All were short-lived relationships, based on hope and companionship, and sometimes chemistry. But it seemed that true love was always just beyond her reach.

She never gave up hope, which always amazed me. Each relationship disaster just seemed to make her more determined to keep trying.

Just When You Are About To Give Up....

She wrestled with her own personal demons, but they never broke her. Not even cancer could beat this woman. She battled it and came out victorious. But the fight for her life had taken its toll, and for the first time, her spark seemed to dim.

It was then she met a very special man.

He too, was a cancer survivor and he was also alone. They had an instant connection, an attraction, but more than that, they had an innate understanding of each other. From the moment they met they were inseparable, and for the sixth time in her life, at age fifty-five, she married for the last time.

They settled down to a life in the countryside. They made a home, and spent the next twelve years happily enjoying each other. When family and friends came to visit, it was obvious to all this was a match made in heaven. The restlessness, the sadness, the searching was over for her; for she had found her true love.

True Love Is A Real Thing

But that was not the end, though it would have seemed the typical HEA. Sadly, the last eight years of her life were spent with a debilitating illness, which kept her in constant pain. Several surgeries and numerous medications did not help, and she slowly deteriorated, requiring more and more care. Her husband rarely left her side, and caring for her became priority number one in his life.

Until one day, when she took a turn for the worst. A massive stroke had taken its toll, and the doctors were not optimistic for her recovery. It was at this time I came to see her, to pay my respects to one of the dearest friends I have ever had. Illness, age, and the catastrophe of her stroke had rendered her a shell of her former self. For me, it was heartbreaking to see her in that condition, knowing how vibrant and feisty she had once been.

But her husband looked at her with such love in his eyes, she may as well have been a fairy princess in a fancy gown. He came to see her every day, talked to her, and told her he loved her, though it was clear she could barely comprehend her situation. But at times she did recognize him, and you could see for a fleeting moment, the love in her eyes, reflected back at him.

She passed away a short time later, leaving a void in the lives of everyone who knew her. But for all her struggles throughout her life, she finally had her Happily Ever After. In real life, there will still be illness, trouble, and danger, but if you find your one true love, you can get through it. My friend was married to her last husband, her one true love, for more years than all her other marriages put together. Their devotion to each other, their unconditional acceptance of each other, that's what made it last.

That is the true definition of an HEA. Never give up hope, my friends.

Do you believe in Happily Ever After?

Author's Note: As so often happens with couples who are close, her husband passed on within a year after losing her. I like to think they are together again, enjoying their ever after.

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