

## Seeking a Happily Ever After by Doreen McCormack

It was gone. There was nothing left inside of her except feelings of guilt and regret. She sat curled up in the corner of the couch and stared at him for a few moments in the dim blue light of the television. She squinted her eyes, searching. Desperately looking for what had made her heart melt and her knees weak seventeen years ago. However, the more she analyzed his aging features and tried to remember the sweet memories that once were, the more her doubt grew. Maybe she had never felt that way. Maybe she had never experienced a time where she felt that she could not live without him. Maybe he was not the one she was meant to be with.

She abruptly sat up and threw herself into his limp arms, desperate to recover those lost memories and rekindle her passion for him. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his unresponsive lips. After a few moments, his shock wore off, and he embraced her tightly. His lips were no longer lifeless. They kissed her tenderly and passionately. However, her lips began to grow stiff and mechanical. Nothing. There was nothing that sparked inside of her, nothing that made her want him, need him, unable to live without him. She pulled away and retreated to her side of the couch. Jack sat there for a few moments in a dazed state of confusion. He reached over and placed his large strong hand on her knee and gently massaged it. She ripped her knee out from his grasp and drew it in closer to her slender body. Not knowing what to do, Jack returned to watching television, confined to his side of the couch.

There was an unbearable silence between the two of them as they got ready for bed that night. They walked past each other as if the other did not even exist. Even once they both got into bed, their bodies only a few inches from each other, they both felt complete and somber loneliness.

Clair turned and looked at the clock. The glowing red numbers revealed that it was 3:00 a.m. Not once had she been able to shut her eyes. The blankets lay in a disheveled heap next to Jack except for a tiny piece that had managed to stick to her one leg throughout her perpetual tossing. Her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, and her mind continued to race. Was she just imagining this? Did she really fall out of love? Did she ever fall into love in the first place? Should she move out of the house? Should she talk to him? Did they have more fights than the average couple? Finally, disgusted with her inability to sleep, she threw herself onto her side, sighed deeply, and locked her eyes shut. She was determined to sleep and awake with a clear mind.

However, her thrust onto her side awoke Jack. He gently turned over and looked at her back that was turned coldly towards him. Unlike Clair, he remembered. He remembered running through the pouring rain in the green fields at the park in a game of tag. He remembered the snowball fight, which left them out of breath and laughing. He remembered the way her hair shimmered like gold and the way it fell gracefully on her face when she would lie on the sand at the lake looking at the oblong clouds. He remembered the way her smile lit up the entire room when she walked down the flower-draped aisle. He remembered looking at her after she had given birth to their son and thinking she was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He remembered being happy. But that had changed. The sweet memories had started to become tainted with his feelings of frustration.

Jack knew he was not Prince Charming and that he had faults, but he also knew he gave her all he was capable of giving. While staring at the ceiling, he thought about the times when what he was capable of was more than enough for Clair. For the life of him, he couldn't place what moment had changed that. As he turned onto his side he noticed their wedding picture, peacefully hanging on the wall. That picture sparked a feeling inside of him that was so strong that he decided to make a desperate attempt to go back to the way things were. Jack turned to face Clair and slipped his hand over her waist.

Clair was still awake, but she still had her eyes clenched shut. When she felt Jack's hand gently slide over her hip to her stomach and pull her in close to him, something inside of her melted. She did not resist him, and in fact it made her feel safe and calm. For a brief moment, even her mind stopped racing. That moment seemed to last forever, but in reality a short while later she remembered everything she had been thinking about. She remembered how unsure she was about their relationship, and whether Jack was the one. To her, there just had to be something better out there, something more passionate. Every romance movie ever made depicted it, and they could not all be completely fictionalized, right? Clair looked at Jack and this new feeling consumed her. So she jerked her body away from his and slid back to her side of the bed.

That was it. Something broke inside of Jack. He was so tired of Clair's mood swings that had been going on for about a year now. There was a point when he felt that he knew her better than anyone, but now he felt like she was a complete stranger. Clair had ceased to make sense to him and he was thoroughly exhausted from trying to accomplish the impossible. He threw himself onto his side and moved as far to the edge of the bed as he could. The frustration that had built up over the last year had been pushed to its threshold and now transformed into indifference. Finally, after what seemed forever, he fell asleep, and while he slept, his sweet memories began to dissolve.

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Hunched over and worn out from an exhausting day at work, Clair shuffled over to the couch and plopped down on it. She was amazed how much energy a bunch of six year olds could suck out of her. Ready to catch up on the sleep she had been deprived of the night before, she stretched out on the couch with her eyes shut. She took a deep breath in and then slowly released it. Although her body became loose with her meditative breathing, she found that she could not fall asleep. Suddenly she found herself wired. Maybe it was her second wind, or maybe it was just because of the leftover thoughts from the night before, which were still bombarding her mind in spite of the defenses she put up to block them. Clair's eyes popped open, and she glanced around the room. She was ready for a second try at capturing a peaceful slumber, when her eyes caught and latched onto a glimmer of hot pink and black. The colors were glistening under the warm spring sun that shined through the window onto the DVD cover. Clair sat up and slipped on her glasses. The image that had caught her eye was the 1990 classic *Pretty Woman*. She had already accepted the fact that she was not going to be able to fall asleep, and she knew that she had about an hour before she had to pick her son, Bryan, up from freshman baseball practice, so she figured a nice movie would be the perfect way to spend her time.

When Jack came home later that evening, he walked straight to their bedroom. He lazily got changed into a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt and then went into the living room where he hopped on to the couch and turned on the television. This completely broke his after-work routine, one that he had followed for the last seventeen years. Typically he would have undone his tie and top collar button, gently kissed Clair on the cheek and asked her how her day was. Then he would venture off to find Bryan and spend a few moments of quality time with his son before dinner was ready. But tonight Jack did not want to be bothered. Tonight he wanted to be left alone. In one day, he had become completely numb to this life, his life.

Clair did not even notice that Jack did not kiss her cheek or ask her how her day was. She stood in the kitchen mechanically peeling and dicing carrots in a daze. The low roar of the television finally snapped her out of her zone, and she realized that Jack must be home, but she just continued to peel and dice. Her mind was too busy whirling around with thoughts that had been provoked by the movie. Why didn't Jack do incredibly romantic things like Richard Gere's character had done? Would Jack ever punch a guy who tried to hurt her in any way? Would he be there to her rescue at

the exact moment she needed him like when Julia Roberts was about to be raped and Richard Gere was there to protect her and care for her? The answer to every one of these questions that shot through her head was a definite no. Clair could not even remember the last time that Jack really initiated a real passionate “I need you” kiss. She noticed that he had been trying to get closer to her lately, but she was sure that it was simply because he noticed that she was unhappy. Unhappy did not even begin to describe her overwhelming feelings of misery. She wanted a guy who would show her that he loved her unreservedly and could not live without her. Clair understood that life gets in the way at times and that passion cannot exist in a marriage at every moment, but she also understood that her husband had not shown extreme passion once in the last two years. So was this what marriage was supposed to be like, or was Jack supposed to be like Richard Gere?

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Clair gasped, wheezed and coughed into the phone. After explaining her sickness and requesting a substitute, she gently hung up the phone and turned to face the large empty house. She had the whole day in front of her. This was the first time she had faked being sick since she was in elementary school. She just stood there for a few minutes pondering exactly what she wanted to do with her day. Then she finally had a revelation. She glided over to the refrigerator and dug through the frozen meat and vegetables until she found her secret stash of Ben & Jerry’s Half Baked ice cream. Clair grabbed a pint and a spoon and then headed over to the DVD player. She rummaged through all of the action and horror movies until she came to her hoard of romance movies. After she put a movie in the player, she plopped onto the couch and hit play on the remote.

Ten hours, four movies, three pints of ice cream, and a small bag of Hershey kisses later Clair looked up to notice that it was beginning to get dark out. She jumped up and began to shovel all of the garbage that had accumulated around her into a pile and then threw it into a garbage bag. Then she dashed up the stairs into her bedroom where she brushed her hair, applied her makeup, and threw on her work clothes. The last thing she needed was for her husband and her son to know that she skipped work. Then they would be asking questions—questions that she couldn’t answer, that she didn’t want to answer. She stood in front of the mirror and realized that it wasn’t believable that she had spent a day teaching six year olds, so she tousled her hair and slightly pulled one side of her blouse out of her skirt. Then she hurried downstairs and began to prepare dinner.

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A month later, Clair stood in the kitchen and told herself again and again that today would be the last time she would skip work to watch movies and eat ice cream, but that’s the same thing she had told herself the last three times she took off this month. She was becoming addicted to these movies. The passion in them gave her a high, making her forget about her marriage and her problems, but just like any other addiction, as soon as the movie was over, the high was gone, and she felt even more depressed than before she watched it.

This day, however, really was different from every other time that she had taken off, because after the third movie she made a life-altering decision. The third movie that she watched that day was the hopelessly romantic *The Notebook*. Wide-eyed and intrigued she watched as Noah wrote to Allie every day for a year, and then how inconsolably sad he was when she never wrote back. Clair anxiously shifted to the end of the couch and began to nibble her nails as she watched how Noah’s life became empty without Allie, and how he kept his promise to her of building their dream house, even though he might never see her again. This made Clair start to think: Would Jack wait for her? Could he live without her? Could she live without him? Well, if he could live without her, and she could live without him, in happiness, then they were not meant to be, Clair convinced herself. And if

they separated and could not live their lives without one another, then they were meant to be. She was going to answer all of her questions, and she knew exactly how she was going to do it.

She stopped the movie and went into the kitchen and began to search through all of her drawers. Finally she found what she was looking for. She pulled the big yellow book out of the bottom cabinet and began to desperately search through it. A—accountants, E—electricians, H—hair stylists, and yep, there it was—L. She began to scan through the L section until she found it. Jim Deats, divorce lawyer. Clair jotted down his number and closed the book, and for the first time in a long time she felt free. She would no longer be trapped and suffocated in unhappiness.

When Clair told Jack that she wanted a divorce, he simply nodded his head, said “sure” and then walked out of the room. The divorce was easy, Jack did not put up a fight, and Clair never doubted what she was doing. Neither of them felt an overall sadness or twisted anger inside of them. Clair was too busy being excited for the love and passion that would await her once Jack realized that he was madly love with her and would be willing to do anything to get her back. Or if Jack never made that realization, she was excited to meet the new tall, dark and handsome lover, whom she was truly meant to be with. Meanwhile, Jack was just too worn out and numb to really realize what was taking place. Besides, he was a man, and men are supposed to be strong and have emotions as plain and sturdy as a piece of cold, hard steel. He gave Clair whatever she wanted, as long as he had joint custody of Bryan, which Clair gave him without any remorse or hesitation. She knew that Jack was not the best husband, especially for her, but she also knew that he was an incredible father, and that Bryan loved him very much. Clair did not want to hurt Jack, she just simply wanted to live her life. She wanted the fairy tale, and did not settle like she had seen so many other women do. Life was too short for her to settle now and hope for something better to happen later. She was a strong, independent woman, and she was going to get what she wanted.

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The night that the divorce was finalized, in his new and bare apartment, Jack drank whiskey by himself from a coffee mug in front of the TV until the wee hours of the morning. Then he finally stumbled to his bed and flopped down on it. He turned onto his side and stared out the window. For the first time in many years, he began to cry. He realized that he wasn't numb to what had happened, he had just stopped himself from thinking about it. This was the first time that he really began to think about what he lost. He saw Clair in his head on their first date to the movie theater and what she was wearing. Then there was the night they stayed up after they got back from their honeymoon and played board games the whole night while sipping wine in front of a fireplace. Jack could remember vividly how she would run around in the back yard with Bryan when he was only a few years old and would let him catch her in a game of tag, and then how she would scoop him up in her arms while Bryan would laugh uncontrollably. Suddenly it occurred to him how much he used to love her. Then his heart broke because he remembered that, under the layer of cold, hard steel emotions that he was supposed to have, he still did love her. The tears increased in number and lasted until the sun rose. Jack began his healing process that night and took the first small step in rebuilding his life without Clair.

The night that the divorce was finalized, Clair also cried. This was the first time throughout the whole divorce that she had doubted what she was doing. Lying in that big bed all by herself, in the house all by herself, she realized how alone she really felt. It completely overwhelmed her. And to her surprise, she started to remember. She remembered many of the sweet and cute things that Jack had done for her. But then she realized that all of those things had happened so long ago, and that the person Jack was now was not the same person she fell in love with. She wiped the tears

from her eyes and curled up under the blanket. Then she fell asleep dreaming of the passion that her life would be filled with now that she was officially divorced from Jack.

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Months went by while Clair waited for Jack to come back. She waited for him to call and plead that he needed her, was waiting for her, and that he loved her. Every time the phone rang, she answered it with great anticipation, and every time someone knocked on the door, she ran to answer it. But Jack never came around; in fact, he never really came to the house or called again, especially since Bryan now had his license and did not need Jack to pick him up.

Months turned into years and both Jack and Clair finally returned to their normal daily schedules, with one little twist: they had both started dating other people. Clair went out on numerous dates, but none of the guys lasted more than a few months. None of them set off fireworks for her when she kissed them. None of them were overly romantic. None of them made her feel an overwhelming amount of passion. None of them made her feel that life would cease to go on for her if they left. Each guy that came into Clair's life and was then disposed of just made her feel more empty and doubtful. Even though she had stopped taking off from work so often, there were occasional days where she would find single tears leaking from her eyes and would find an excuse to go home early. Also she would find herself waking up hysterically crying during the night. However, she would just tell herself that things were going to get better and that it would be worth it once her knight in shining armor came striding into her life on a white horse. She refused to deal with the little nagging part of her that told her that she had made a mistake, or the other little pesky part of her conscience that told her that her expectations were unrealistic.

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About five years after the divorce had been finalized, Bryan wandered into the kitchen where his mother was preparing dinner and grabbed a seat at the table. While he was talking to Clair, he asked her to sit down because he needed to tell her something. Clair cautiously sat down and the table and waited for Bryan to speak. It took him a while to get his thoughts in order, and Clair could tell that this was something bad. Finally Bryan told her in the best way he could think of that his father, Jack, was getting remarried. Clair could feel tears welling in her eyes, even though she was not sure why. She knew Bryan was waiting for her to crumble, but she didn't. She mustered up a smile and said that she was happy for Jack and asked Bryan how he felt about it. After Bryan answered that he liked his father's fiancé and that he was fine with the marriage, Clair stood up and went about fixing dinner. With nothing else to say or do and feeling that his mother was all right with the situation, Bryan went upstairs to his room. Clair stayed in a dazed fog for the rest of the night, but once she got into bed, she let down all of her defenses, and the tears flooded out from her eyes. The more she cried, the more her pesky little conscience began to take over. Thoughts of doubt about what she had done and how she was living began to bombard her. That night, Clair fell asleep with one last thought in her mind: Was there really someone out there who was better for her than Jack, or was she only chasing the fantasy of an unrealistic Hollywood romance?