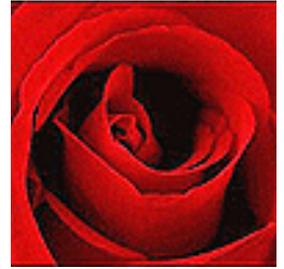


Love is - to be Together, Always

By SusanEngland

Published on Lush Stories on 31 Jul 2007



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The eternal love of two people

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This story was a Finalist in the ASSTR Golden Clitorides Best Seasonal Story Awards 2005 Love is -- to be together, Always A St Valentines Day Story The phone call came in the early hours. "Hello, is that Mrs Lawrence?" "Hello, hello - is that the hospital? Is that Sister? This is Sally Chambers, her daughter, how is my Dad?" "Mrs Chambers, we think that you and Mrs Lawrence might want to visit Mr Lawrence." "Oh, oh Is Daddy worse?" "Well, Doctor thinks you and Mrs Lawrence might like to be here. If you can. Soon" "Yes. Yes ... we will be there as soon as we can. Thank you, Sister." Sally took a deep breath; she had been dreading that phone call. She hurried to her mother who was already dressing. "Mummy, it was..." "Yes, yes dear, I know who it was. I must go to him." Sally's eyes prickled with tears as she saw her mother dressing in her best dress, applying a little powder to her cheeks from her old and treasured compact, a brush of pale lipstick, a hint of her father's favourite perfume to her throat and wrists. "Mother, we must hurry – they said to come soon." "Sally I must look nice for him. It's quite all right. He will wait for me. Please don't fret." Sally wondered at her mother. She knew and her mother knew that her father was deeply sedated. That he would never waken. That he would never see her again. And yet she was taking this time when time was now so short. She felt a flash of irritation. Why were old people so STUBBORN? Having at last adjusted her (now dreadfully out-of-date) hat her mother was finally ready. Sally took her by the arm, helped support her arthritically painful walk, and guided her out of the house, locking the door behind her. She eased her mother into the passenger seat of her car. She drove through the quiet streets, hushed as though respectful of the need for their journey at this dark hour. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her mother fumbling with the clasp of her handbag, saw the pale envelope as her mother reassured herself that it was there. "Mother, I don't know how to say this. I have your wedding anniversary card in my handbag too. This is yours and Daddy's 60th... I wondered .. well .. I don't want to hurt you or Da..." She stopped, bit her lip as she remembered that she could never again hurt her father. "You are a very dear and thoughtful girl, Sally, but you won't hurt either of us. Of course you must give it to

him. He will be so hurt if he thinks you haven't remembered." Sally feared that the stress and heartbreak of her father's illness had finally broken her mother's mind. Again she felt the flare of anger. Why wouldn't her mother accept that her father would never know hurt again. That he was suspended from pain only by the most deeply reaching medication. Medication intended to ease him from the agony of the here, to the relief of the hereafter. "You know, Sally, I can still see him, 60 years ago today – well 60 years ago at 10 o'clock anyway. He was so pale and nervous as he waited for me at the altar. I was wearing my veil down of course, as a modest bride should, and he couldn't see me as I smiled at him. But his face! The relief that I had actually come to him. To be married to him. As if I could NOT have come to him. Sally, your father and I have had the most wonderfully happy marriage. I wouldn't change a single day of it. Well perhaps the odd day when I had to be angry with him over something totally unimportant! But you have to do don't you? You have to be mad at your man sometimes don't you?" "Your father was always romantic. And it was Daddy who wanted us to be married today, Valentine's Day, 60 years ago. Every year, every single year except for when he was a prisoner in the war, and even then when he came home to me he gave me the Valentine's Wishes he'd made when he was away. Just little scraps of paper. But always something. And every year since then we have made our own Wishes for each other. We didn't buy the cards from shops. They couldn't say what we wanted to say." "I have my Wish with me now you know. He will love it. He always does." Sally swallowed hard. Any more of this and she would either scream out loud, or yell at her mother and tell her did she know her Dad was unconscious, in a coma, dying. She felt a chill inside as she wondered how she would cope with her mother looking down on the shrunken, wasted frame of the man she had loved and who would soon leave her. How would her mother cope – afterwards? They were able to park in a disabled slot right in front of the main visitors' entrance and as Sally helped her mother out of the car, a porter unlocked the doors. She turned to the porter – "Is there a wheelchair please for my mother. She is very arthritic." "No, no, Sally. No, I do NOT want a wheelchair. I shall walk to him just as I did before. Just give me your arm, as my own father did as he walked me down the aisle. I must walk to him." Sally wanted to run, to rush to her father's side, to be with him, to not let him be alone but she knew it was pointless to protest. Her mother was so stubborn when she wanted to be. It had taken them well over an hour since the phone call. She was sure they were now too late. She took her mother's arm in her own and they slowly walked the long quiet corridor, took the lift. Again the halting walk. The side ward was dimly lit. The covered figure still wore the oxygen mask. She felt relief for her mother; they had not been too late. Her mother bent and awkwardly kissed her husband's cheek, the oxygen mask hissing softly. "I am here, Charles" was all that she said. Two heavy, padded, hospital visitors' chairs lined the wall, and Sally struggled to move one to the side of the bed for her mother. "It's quite alright, Sally. Leave it there by the wall. It will give your father more space around him." The two women sat and waited, a wife and a daughter. The wife calm, composed, her eyes free from tears and frequently looking at the face of the man she loved. The daughter, restless, anxious, her heart full but not yet spilling out the grief within her. Sally fidgeted and paced the room, looked on the shelves of the bedside cabinet, read the various 'Get Well' cards, pulled open the drawer and found it empty except for her fathers toilet items. His old

shaving brush and razor. His preferred brand of soap and toothpaste. His toothbrush. She almost broke into sobs at the sight of the personal items, used daily for God only knew how many years. There too, was his pen and a blank sheet of paper. He must have been meaning to write a note before he was eased into sleep. There was bustle in the Ward as the day shift took over and the day Sister came in and checked her patient, reading his notes, taking temperature, pulse, blood pressure as the man lay unmoving. She made her own notes, smiled and asked if there was anything she could get for them, then she was gone to her next patient. Sally closed her eyes and slept. She felt her hand being taken, squeezed and realised that her mother was waking her. Her eyes flew to her father, but he lay as he had those hours before. She shook herself free and stood, stretching the discomfort from her back. She walked to her father and looked down. Quite still. The deeply carved furrows of pain cratering his face. She looked at her watch .. goodness she had slept for almost two hours, it was now close to ten o'clock. Her mother's voice broke into her reverie ""Sally, do be a dear and fetch me a cup of tea will you? There's a vending machine just outside and that will do nicely." She opened her handbag, took out her purse and picked the coins to feed the machine. She smiled at her mother, who looked back at her, her eyes bright, a loving smile on her face. "You have been a good daughter to us, Sally. We both love you very much. You know that don't you?" "Yes, Mum, and I love you both as well." She walked from the side ward, fed coins into the machine, pressed the buttons and watched the hospital's sludgy apology for tea pour into the plastic beaker. Walking carefully, balancing the cup in her hand, she walked the few yards to her father's room. She noticed the time on the Ward clock. Exactly 10 o'clock now. As she was about to enter his room, the Sister stopped her. "Doctor will be here in a moment Mrs Chambers. Perhaps you and Mrs Lawrence would like to freshen up a little while he examines your father." "Yes. Yes of course" Sally answered. She eased carefully into the room, watching carefully to be sure she spilled none of the hot drink. Then she looked over to her mother. She blinked, frowned. Where on earth was she? She looked at her father and was shocked, the cup falling from her hand. The heavy chair was neatly placed on the opposite side of the bed. Her mother's hands clasped one hand of her father, and his other hand rested on hers. Her lips touched the back of his hand. The oxygen mask lay on the floor, still gently hissing its life supporting air. Her father's face had smoothed, his skin many years younger. A smile was on his lips. Sally dashed to her mother, skirting the bottom of the bed. "Mother" she called. There was no response. "Mother, mother." She shook her mother's arm, and her face tilted to one side. She, too, wore a beautiful smile. A smile of contented peace. She was quite unmoving. Her heart seemed to contract. She ran to the door. "Sister. Sister. Please come. Come quickly." She put her hands to her mouth, her eyes staring. There was a flurry of white and the Sister was there. "Please wait outside Mrs Chambers." Sally stumbled from the room. Somewhere a bell was ringing stridently. A doctor ran hurriedly into the room. A nurse with a trolley of emergency equipment followed. There was the quiet urgency of sound from her father's room. A muted professional intensity of activity. A nurse took her arm. "Come with me. Come and sit. Let them see to your father." Sally let herself be led to a rest room. She sat. Dazed. Uncomprehending. How had her mother moved that heavy chair? She had been gone for 3 minutes at the most. She was only yards away. Her mother couldn't

possibly have moved the chair. She had difficulty in walking. How? How? The doctor appeared, solemn of face and sat beside her. "I am so sorry. I have to tell you that we couldn't save either your mother or your father. We did our best for your mother, but we had lost her. I am so very sorry." Sally looked at him numbly. "It was their anniversary today. They have been married for 60 years you know. They were married on Valentines day. Today." The doctor repeated, "I am very, very sorry. It was, quick, very sudden. She felt no pain, and of course your father was heavily sedated." The Sister entered the room and gave Sally her mother's handbag. "We found your mother and father holding these papers. You will want to keep them." Sally looked down. She frowned, shocked to see her own Anniversary Card. But surely it was in her own handbag that she had left beside her mother when she was sent for the tea? The handbag that was still in that room. But what were these other papers? She unfolded the first. In her father's handwriting, surprisingly firm and bold she read "My Valentine Wish - to my Beautiful Bride . We have loved for more than 60 years. The time now come to cease from tears. Come, my love, and take my hand And let us leave this anguished land. Walk with me across this line. Walk with me to a future time Where for all Our tomorrows – You will ever be Mine. I love you, My Dearest Valentine." A sob was stifled in her aching throat as she opened the second piece of paper. "My Valentine Wish – to my Handsome Husband. My dearest Man, my Love, my All I've waited long to hear your call. I will, in love, take hold your hand We will respond to God's command. I have no fear. I have your Heart At last I know we'll never part. My Pledge, my Troth – You will ever be Mine. And I love you too, My Valentine." Tears ran unchecked down Sally's aching face. She opened her own card, the one she had been unable to give them. Inside, under her own wishes for their anniversary, was written in her father's hand "Sally, thank you for your lovely wishes for us both. Your dear old Dad." Below that, in her mother's hand "Sally, dear. We do love you so much. Please do not mourn. We have each other. We are happy now.Mum." She could no longer hold back. Her shoulders heaved. Her body was wracked with her grief. A few yards away, side by side on gurneys lay two cooling bodies. Am I mistaken? Are they holding hands?

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