



How do you finally lose weight? Cry for René.

A few years ago I was producing a testimonial video for a French weight loss education company.

The film crew, all five of us, had settled into one of those great old small French farm houses, which ooze charm and the history of having been lived in since before the French Revolution. At the end of a narrow meandering country road, overhung with trees and tangled vines along the shoulders, the small windows, short doors, low ceilings, even the old iron stove was still there. Pictures of family and friends and vacations, even an odd politician or two, were everywhere scattered like odd-shaped jewels in places not obvious to an American.

The lady of the house, whom we had come to film, was a true lady, imparting genuine charm, with an earnest gaze into your eyes as you spoke to her. She listened intensely, and spoke softly and slowly with barely a hint of an accent. Her gray hair was neatly tucked into one of those buns you seldom see anymore. Easily in her 70's, she exuded an air of casual regal-ness, if there were such a thing.



Photo: Karen Watson

Morning light peered tentatively into the tiny breakfast nook where she now sat. Barely room for two, the nook was surrounded on three sides with small-paned windows, and nearly filled with the tiny hand-painted yellow table. The crew leaned into with their sound equipment, and light-bounces, and a big camera that needed more room to do its job.

Atop the table, tea was seeping in a kettle with a padded fit-quilt covering it. Fully faded, the cover resembled a sitting hen.

More sunlight began to flood into the room. Then one of the crew had an idea.

He ran out into the equipment truck and came back with a device that resembled one of those things beekeepers use to smoke beehives with. Placing it on the floor of the nook, he told the cameraman to truck back into the living room (filled as it was with chairs and Ottomans, floor lamps and pictures, and an old cast iron ashtray – two feet tall, no one used it anymore). Moving a camera and crew into there was a task to be carefully executed, making sure nothing fell, was bumped, or broken.

They laid a curving camera track back into the living room so the camera could come slowly around the corner to peer into the nook, as if it were quietly eavesdropping on a conversation at the yellow table. The set dresser moved the vase with the single white rose to one side, to not block the view of the teacup she held in her thin fragile hands.

They rehearsed the shoot and the slow moving of the camera. Checked the light off Sofie's face one last time. Then pronounced themselves ready.

Sofie had a talk earlier with our director. She had used the French company's weight loss education program (which we had created for them) and was said to have a very lively testimonial. She did not want to rehearse her lines, she said, because she wanted it to flow directly from her heart.

They started the smoke machine, just a thin veil to catch the morning light that was now streaming into the nook. The rays of light from the multiple small panes created beautiful patterns on the slow moving wisps of smoke. The effect was so subtle you couldn't guess it was man-made. Just enough smoke to see the streams of light.

"As a child I was always active. I grew up here among the trees and vines and rows of carrots, and the cabbage my dad insisted we grow from a variety he found in England (of all places)", Sophie began. "I have always lived here. I can't imagine any other

place in the world I would want to be. René and I were married just out there,” she gestured to the gnarled tree with low branches outside the nook window. “He was sooo sexy to me.”

“I grew to love him here, in this house, and appreciate his wonderful ways with me. Like this house I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else.” To this last moment Sophie had been upbeat and radiant. But she was turning more serious. I glanced at the director who privately made a motion to me with two fingers like scissors – she was telling me they would have to cut some of this preamble, but Sophie was just getting started, and the director didn’t want to interrupt.

“I had my daughter Simone over there in that bedroom – the same room I was born in.” This time she didn’t point, she barely nodded in the direction that was directly in front of her, the view now blocked by the camera and crew and those big silver light-reflecting panels the crew was using to soften the shadows under her chin.

She was more serious now. “René left me 10 years ago. We buried him next to my parents down by the Cathedral. He said he was sorry. He didn’t want to go first, to not leave me alone. His last words, from my mother’s old bed were, ‘I’m sorry I have to leave you now, please forgive me Sophie.’ With that he closed his eyes one last time.” Sophie was looking straight ahead, almost unblinking, but her gaze was entirely on her memories.

“I loved him more in that moment than in all the moments of my life put together, and he just slipped away, faded away, closing his eyes slowly and grasping my hand as tightly as he could. Then he was gone.”

“I couldn’t cry for a long time. I just sat there holding his hand and looking at his face that I had seen him shave a thousand times, the lips I never tired of kissing, the hands that had held mine so many times, in so many ways. And it had all slipped away, to be gone forever, and I just wanted to be with him – to be with him, to be...” she trailed into silence. Her eyes unblinking, her face frozen.

I turned my head slowly to look at the crew. Everyone was crying, holding back involuntary sounds that escaped from deep in their chests. The cameraman kept rolling, silently motioning to the grip to roll him very slowly forward. He carefully framed her against the windows and the orchard beyond, as he pulled in tight on her hands, and face.

“I’ve missed René these ten years. Missed him so much. I couldn’t garden any more.

Never tended to Mom's roses. Never planted Dad's English cabbage. I was alone here for many years, with Simone in the South, visiting a couple of times a year. When René's small pension ran out, I had to figure out how to pay the bills. I seldom used the electricity. (Grandpa installed that hanging light over there himself.) In the Winter I wore two old wool sweaters from my cousin's sheep.

"One day, after many years, I suddenly cried for René from the depth of my soul and sorrow. I missed him so much. Tears flowed for a very long time.

"The next morning, I don't know why, I ventured back into my garden and started growing things again. Slowly life re-emerged into my hands, light was coming into my eyes, my legs didn't feel so heavy any more." For the first time during this long sequence Sophie looked around the room, as if she saw us all there for the first time.

"When I came out of my cocoon I noticed that I had gained a lot of weight. Somehow I don't recollect how or when it got there. It just did. I was shocked. I had never been overweight my entire life. I was always proud of that, and René would not have approved." With that last line she managed a small smile that barely turned up the corners of her mouth, but her eyes twinkled.

"Then I decided I had to lose it. I couldn't ask my pall bearers to carry me at that weight. It just wouldn't do." A strange comment, I thought. I had never heard it before.

"So I tried dieting. I wasn't very good at it. I never paid much attention to others discussing such things, as I knew I never would need to know about it." She sipped tea for the first time from a pink floral tea cup, like those in the old movies.

"Now, to me, dieting meant you had to stop eating. So I stopped eating. And for the first time in my life I got hungrier than I could imagine. Obviously that wasn't going to work. So, I decided to try to cut things out of my diet instead of not eating anything at all. While my weight fluctuated a bit, I never really lost anything. I didn't eat this or that or the other, but somehow I never lost anything substantial.

"With a limited budget anyway, I kept thinking about cutting out the most expensive foods. When I tried that idea, it failed to help. Besides, I got to the point that I didn't know what else to cut out any more.

"That Spring, after crying for René, I had my neighbor help me plant a big garden (he is about 8 years older than me, but since we grew up together, 8 years had always seemed like a LOT older. Now, with his help, we two old people planted a grand

garden like my grandmother used to plant. I grew a little of everything. I was ravenously hungry and as soon as the peas were ready, I ate them right off the vine. I couldn't wait for the tomatoes to ripen, for the melons to smell just right, for the squash to be the right color and size. The strawberries, small and wonderful.

"By Fall I had lost a lot of weight. I was almost down to my original size. And I had spent so little money to do it, too. I was not cutting down, I was eating more, and enjoying it more."

Finally, Sophie inserted some kind words about our client's weight loss education program, how it helped her learn how to keep her weight off. But by then, all of us in the crowded room just wanted to hear what she was going to say next. The commercial had been turned into a life story we all anxiously wanted to hear. And the camera was still rolling, the focus pulling in tightly on her radiating, lined face.

"About a year ago, René came to me in a dream. I don't remember dreaming much, except when I was a child. So, even though I was dreaming, I knew it was strange I was dreaming.

"I thought as René walked toward me in the dream that there never was a moment when I didn't remember our last moments together. Although I felt pain, unbearable crushing at that last moment, I have always been very thankful we could share those moments together. In the dream he said he could only visit for a short time, but he wanted me to know he had wandered a long time without me where he was now. He said he had never felt so alone."

"Then one day,' René said, 'I saw you in your garden. I couldn't speak to you, but I came back every day to see you. I pushed all my love and devotion to you into those peas, and squash, and your father's English cabbage. And I saw you blossom once again, eating the fruit of our love. You were just as beautiful as the minute I married you. Don't forget that I am with you in that garden for whatever time you have remaining. It will always feed you life. With it, I will always feed you love.'"

"He turned to go, in my dream, and I pleaded with him to stay. He turned around and I saw his wonderful old face one last time, the one I had seen him shave a thousand times, kissed countless kisses. He held up his hand and pointed to the tree outside the breakfast nook window as he began to turn away. 'I am always waiting for you there, every morning when you're having tea. Someday, but not too soon, we can meet there, and we can walk this garden, together, hand-in-hand.'"

The smoke machine had stopped. The camera had run out of film. No one noticed in the silence.

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– Boyd Jentzsch

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