

ECHOFEATURES

"What on earth are you doing here Michael?" said Morag. "I thought you might be on the other side of the world by now, perhaps Australia, remember!"

"I never did get to Australia, but I am living here in Spain now and regard it as home."

"But what about Connemara, I always thought that if you settled down it would be in your beloved Connemara"

"Look around you Morag, this place is the Connemara of Spain and the weather suits me better in winter, but tell me Morag what brings you here — are you on your own or with family?"

"I am holidaying with friends in San Jose but I couldn't miss seeing this place, so right now, yes, I am on my own. I can't believe it either, seeing you after all these years. I'm dying to hear all about your travels. We have so much catching up to do. Why don't we go back down the hill and find somewhere to have a coffee and chat, that's if you have the time of course"

"Time is something I have lots of these days," said Michael and they set off together to walk back towards the cafes. Morag was longing to ask Michael the question that was uppermost in her mind, though she wondered why it should be so, as really it was none of her business. Chatting in a desultory fashion, she finally managed to slip the question into the conversation.

"Did you ever marry, Michael."

"No, but I contemplated it once. A French girl I met in El Salvador. It wouldn't have worked. I think I knew that at the time or maybe I was just afraid of commitment."

Michael's tone was light, shrugging his shoulders he gave an enigmatic smile. For no reason that she could fathom, Morag was pleased by the answer.

Michael had had the flat across the landing in the large rambling house in Hammersmith when Morag and her friends had moved in. They were all in their final year of nursing and so were allowed to live outside the hospital. The idea of independent living was exciting for the three girls and they soon made friends with Michael, especially as the two flats shared a common kitchen facility. Michael had a part time job by day and attended university at night. The girls suspected his cooking depended a lot on his skill with a can-opener and so he became a frequent guest at mealtimes. Always willing to wash up afterwards, this suited the girls very well.

Morag soon began to find excuses to stay in at night and chat with Michael. Not a very outgoing person normally, Morag found on a one to one basis he opened up and had a deep and extensive knowledge of many subjects. She loved to listen to him and talk; warming to his subject, he became utterly changed from the shy person he normally seemed.

They began to go out dancing together, they went to the Fun Fair at Battersea Park; they toured the markets, walked for miles, never

noticing how quickly the hours passed and all the time they talked. They talked about everything and nothing. Morag found herself able to open her heart to him, as she had never done with anyone else. She had discovered, she felt, the other half of herself.

Friendship had grown into love, that all encompassing first love, and they began to make plans for the future. When the exams were finished, they intended to travel across Europe in a beat-up yellow Volkswagen van. They would explore, have fun, but most of all, they would be together. Before making any decisions about settling down, they intended having many adventures.

One month before her final exams Morag received a phone call that changed everything. Her mother was diagnosed with cancer and she was needed at home to care for her. Morag knew in her heart that while caring for her mother was the main concern, her father and brothers needed a housekeeper as well. Farmers worked out of doors, women were required to do the cooking and cleaning and her father had never liked the idea of her leaving home in the first place, especially to go to London. The fact that it was the Sixties and the world was changing cut no ice with him. Torn between her desire to sit her exams and her duty to her family, especially to her mother, Morag cried out her frustrations on Michael's shoulder. Long into the night they had sat on the stairs, whispering so as not to wake the girls, assuring each other that they would keep in touch, that this would only be a hiccup in their plans and that everything would work itself out in the end. They felt their destiny was to be together. Despite their brave words of reassurance to each other, both were heart-broken at the thought of being parted. As Morag boarded the North-bound train a few days later, she could hardly see the figure of Michael on the platform as tears blinded her eyes.

Now seated in a cafe, a selection of tapas before them, Michael and Morag sipped at their wine and endeavoured to fill in the gaps of the years. They had written copious letters to each other at the beginning, later the letters became shorter and less frequent as their situation became more and more impossible. Her mother's fight against cancer was long and hard. While her father's heartbreak was somewhat alleviated by Morag's presence, his dependence upon her grew every day. Finally she accepted the fact that those carefree dreams she had had, would never be realised. It was time to grow up and take responsibility. She did not regard it as a sacrifice. It was simply the right thing to do and after her mother's death her father needed her even more. By then she had met Jack and their relationship moved inexorably towards marriage and family. She wrote to Michael telling him of her engagement and forthcoming wedding.

Now she told him of Jack's death five years

earlier, and the unfortunate events that had preceded it.

"Were you and Jack happy" Michael asked bluntly.

"Yes, for many years, we were happy. We belonged to the same place, we both loved the country and our farm and of course we had our two boys, both young men now living their own lives." Changing the subject she quickly asked him.

"Why did you never get to Australia?"

"Australia was really more Keith's dream than mine. After we crossed from Austria into Czechoslovakia, the contrast was quite shocking. Everywhere looked grey, bleak and forbidding. A degree in Social Science was poor preparation for the misery we witnessed. One night we met a sweet girl at a petrol station. Anya was her name. She sort of attached herself to us. Keith became completely smitten. She begged us to smuggle her over the border and God help the arrogance and foolishness of youth, but we did it. They both went to California eventually. I visited them there once. I got a job with UNICEF in El Salvador. I spent ten years there. When I left, Spain seemed the natural place to go and so I set up an English language school in Malaga and eventually found my way here. I am more or less retired now and recently bought an old cortijo up in the hills. I like to spend as much time as I can there. That's it Morag, my life in a nutshell. Did you ever finish your nursing?"

"No, nursing my mother in the years before she died and afterwards when dad too became ill was enough nursing for me. By then I had the two boys to care for as well, and on a busy farm, believe me, there are never enough hours in the day."

Lunch was now being served and so they ordered the menu del dia and continued to chat as they ate a leisurely lunch in true Spanish style. It was amazing how easily they slipped into the old familiar way they had of talking together. It was without effort and with relief that Morag began to tell him of the loneliness and sadness she had experienced during the last years of Jack's life. She told him about Julie, of their friendship, her devastation at her death and the sense of desolation which continued to plague her. So engrossed had they become, it was not until the waiter indicated that the restaurant was closing that they reluctantly stood to leave. "You must come and meet my friends at the villa, maybe have dinner with us some night," Morag said, reluctant to go. Panic seemed to seize Michael. "How many more days are you staying? I want to spend them with you Morag. Couldn't you stay on for a while longer?" As Morag mutely shook her head, he continued: "Will you come back to Spain again and spend more time, so that we can get to know each other all over again? Don't you think the same Fate which so cruelly parted us all those years ago

has now reunited us?" Morag couldn't get a word in edgeways. The years Michael had spent among the Spanish people had certainly erased the inhibitions of his youth and race. He was still speaking, almost entreating. "We thought out destiny was to spend our youth together, but maybe our destiny is now." "What do you think, Morag, do you think we might be being given a second chance?" Not trusting herself to speak, Morag held out her arms to him. Holding each other close, she finally managed to whisper: "Yes, yes I do." It all seemed to right and so natural and their embrace was like a warm, familiar blanket that wrapped itself around them both.

It was still dark when Morag left the villa, walking downhill until she reached an outcrop or rock, where she perched and waited for the sunrise. It was their last day in Andalucia and she wanted to savour every minute of it. She had fallen in love with this wonderful sun-filled country and its people. The relaxed air and friendly smiles of the locals had caused her to feel a welcome guest. She had also rediscovered fun and friendship. She hadn't felt so alive in years. At night, when she and Michael had walked the deserted beach, listening to the gentle lapping of the water as the sun sank below the horizon, she had felt her soul filled with peace, a peace she never had thought possible. That they had found each other again seemed like a miracle, the rapport, the magic and above all the joy in each other was as it had been all those years ago. What the future held for either or both of them could, she felt, be safely left in the lap of the Gods.

Now she watched as the indigo sky began to lighten, heralding the dawn. Soon the sky became streaked with rose and orange hues and then at last it came, the great red ball of the sun rose up out of the sea and bathed the landscape in its glow. As a flock of birds rose into the sky to greet the day, Morag lifted her face to the sun and understood why ancient peoples had worshipped the Sun God. This daily miracle now observed in such splendour filled her with hope and the sheer joy of life. Her spirit soared and danced, as the birds overhead appeared to do, circling before flying off into the clear blue sky. Her cheeks were wet with unnoticed tears but she felt a deep gratitude to whatever God had led her to this place and allowed her to become healed and whole once more. Yes, she would hate to leave, but now she knew with a certainty that she would return. Her thoughts turned to Gypsy and the welcome that awaited her from her faithful dog. She would bring Gypsy with her next time, she resolved. Turning to make her way back to the villa, she remembered that they had not after all made the trip to Gibraltar. She threw back her head and laughed out loud at how utterly unimportant it now seemed. She also knew that she was ready to move forward, to begin the next chapter of her life.