

BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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LETTING GO

The Atlantic Ocean pounded the beach, crashing ashore in great waves topped with white foamy crowns that exploded on the hard-packed sand then slid back to the indigo depths. Seagulls rode the onshore breeze, swooping and squawking and diving. Glorious sunshine on hot silky sand. A summer day on the Brava beach in Punta del Este.

It was January 1965 and I'd just turned twenty. My parents and I were in Punta for the weekend to celebrate the occasion. We were having a good time. As we lay on towels on the sand that afternoon I sensed that the time had come to tell them about my plans. I was leaving home, setting off to see the world. I felt I couldn't stay put any longer, I had to see what lay beyond the confines of my cocoon. This wasn't about getting away from home, not at all. I was lucky to have had such a loving nest to jump from. No, this was about pushing back horizons and getting a broader perspective. It was about enrolling in the university of life.



There was a silence after I'd had my say. My father snuffed out his cigarette in the sand and lit another one. My mother put on her bathing cap and said, "Yes. Well, I'll be right back." Dad and I watched her dive into the surf head on and swim as hard as she could, buffeted by the incoming waves, her arms moving like pistons. She was a strong swimmer. She loved the sea.

"You've just broken her heart," he said. I didn't fully understand what my dad meant and couldn't appreciate it at the time, but I felt the sting of guilt all the same. My mother and I were very close, but I hadn't given much thought to how my absence would affect her, or my father. My twenty-year-old attention was entirely focused on me and my great adventure.

She came back from her swim looking exhilarated as she always did after a good tumble in the waves. She put a towel around her shoulders and sat beside me. "You're right, you must leave. You must see more of the world and learn things you could never learn here." She hugged me, and the subject of her broken heart was never mentioned again. I left two months later. She could have made my departure a lot harder than it already was, but she had a generous heart—she stood back, gave me her blessing, and let me go.

My father died four years later and after that nothing was ever the same again. My travels had given me a taste for being on the road and I moved around the world for a while. My mother did too, looking for a place to call home, but we were always in

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close touch. As I grew older we outgrew our mother-son relationship and became good friends. In time I made my home in Texas and Muriel settled in Denia, Spain, in a studio apartment not fifty yards from the Mediterranean. In 1995, after she'd moved a few miles inland to Pego, a medieval town in the hills, we said goodbye again.

On the morning of my fiftieth birthday we had our usual long, rambling conversation over the phone. Because of the anniversary we talked at length about our half-century friendship and each got to say: "I love you." She wished me a happy birthday, we hung up, and I went to lunch with a friend. When I came home I learned that my mother had retired to her room to take a nap and had never woken up. She was gone.

Some years earlier I brought Lillian to meet Muriel. Pego, in the province of Alicante, is surrounded by orange groves. One day we dressed in white, picked up a bouquet of pink roses and a bottle of wine at the market, and drove off into the country. We found a peaceful spot beside a stream running through an orange grove. I played the harmonica in those days and serenaded the afternoon while the wine cooled in the water. Then Muriel read the vows we had cobbled together one afternoon over lunch at the Denia Yacht Club, ending with: "...and so, by the power vested in me as Mum, I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride." This is the wedding anniversary Lillian and I still celebrate, thirty years later.



We arrived in Spain very soon after Muriel slipped away. It was January; cold, windy, the sky hanging low and grey overhead. The sixteenth-century church was sombre and a little draughty. Nobody took off their coat. The priest had ridden in on a bicycle and when he stepped up to the altar I caught sight of the clip on his trouser leg. He was mercifully brief, and somehow managed to breathe a sense of warmth into the ritual words. On the short walk to the cemetery the cobblestones, laid centuries ago, glistened in a fine mist as a score or so mourners accompanied Muriel's ashes through the narrow streets to their final resting place.

The sadness lingers forever, but it's the guilt that torments us if we aren't current with a loved one when they die. Guilt fuelled by what we did or didn't do or say while we still had the time. Once again, my mother made it easy on me. We were current with each other when she died—fully up to date after our phone conversation that morning—and I felt even less guilt than I did after our first farewell. There was an aching gap in my life, but no crippling remorse. Muriel believed that, if you love someone, you should let them go; give them the freedom to be themselves and return on their own terms. It's a precious gift.