



## One Hundred Years of Muriel

If she were still with us, we would be celebrating Muriel's one hundredth birthday this month. Sadly, she died a quarter of a century ago—fifty years to the day after giving birth to me. But she lives on, in my memories and in my sense of who I am.

On the morning of my fiftieth birthday, we had our usual long conversation over the phone. Given the occasion, we talked about our lifelong (for me) 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.

The following day Lillian and I were on a plane heading east across the Atlantic. During the flight my thoughts were all about Muriel. Born to British parents living in Argentina. Grew up in Buenos Aires. Married and had two sons in quick succession. Then moved across the river with her family and settled in Uruguay.

She was happy in Montevideo, with its relaxed lifestyle and lovely beaches. She loved being close to the sea and taking long evening swims on Pocitos beach, just three blocks from her front door.

Muriel was tall and blonde and young and lovely, with long legs, a beautiful dancer. She was mad about music and, in the 1950s had a subscription to *DownBeat*, the hottest jazz magazine in the world. She was a private person with just a few close friends and was perfectly comfortable in her own company. She loathed small talk and gossip and dreaded the official receptions she was obliged to attend while her husband was with the British Embassy. But she loved being with young people, who gravitated to her because she took them seriously and was always willing to listen.

Once her sons were old enough, she decided to go back to work. She had studied shorthand and typing at the Academia Pitman in Buenos Aires and was engaged as personal assistant to the general manager of the Shell Oil Company, a job she loved and held for many years. She had an old-world sense of duty and was discreet and loyal to a fault.

In due course her sons left home. She encouraged them, told them they should go out and explore the world, and saw them off with her customary advice: "Be true to yourself." Never said a word about her broken heart or how much she would miss them. When her husband died just four years later, she felt the need to move.

As I got older, we outgrew our mother-son relationship and became good friends, always in close touch wherever we were. In time I made my home in Texas and she settled in Denia, Spain, in a studio flat not fifty yards from the Mediterranean, where the sound of the sea wafted over her at night. Some years later, now in declining health, she moved a few miles inland to Pego, a medieval town in the hills, where she spent her days reading and knitting and listening to music.

We arrived in time to say goodbye. It was late January; cold, damp, the sky hung low and grey. The sixteenth-century church was sombre and draughty. No one took off their coat. The priest had cycled in from a nearby village and when he stepped up to the altar, I caught sight of the bicycle clip on his trouser leg under his cassock. 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 medley of mourners accompanied Muriel through the narrow streets to her final resting place. The tall cedars sighed overhead, and, in the distance, I thought I could hear the sound of the sea.