

Monaco Memories

by Brenda Bishop Blakey

***The Closer To Death, The More Risks You Take In Life~
Patrick White.***

It's been a total lifetime since I hugged him or felt Simon's stubble against my cheek. Of all the thoughts I could choose, I prefer the ones entangled with the Monaco memories.

We spent three sweet months harbored up a gentle ledge in an inlet filled with pastel painted homes. Our nearest neighbor and cohorts, Maria and Howard, lived in the next villa over. Lemon and orange trees dotted the landscape cooling our thoughts on those intemperate forever afternoons. One could not ask for better neighbors than Maria and Howard. They could be as welcoming and close as raindrops on a sweltering day, or, should we need them to be, disinterested and hard of hearing if our talks about familial issues should become too loud.

We spent most evenings on the terrace, ours or theirs, having late supper and taking delight in the fading sun. I recall and rejoice about these moments. Dozens of nights where someone lays the table and someone un-lays, lays, then the un-lay's action starts again. But, in-between, come the stories, jokes, the swapping of myths and balderdash so rich in oxygen that we almost give in to the tendency to float on the night air straight out to sea. All the while giving ourselves over to involuntary, unbridled laughter until finally, sitting around the candlelight listening to what sounded like a quarry of quail we disturbed with our raucousness, we would fall silent and sated.

Howard's favorite topic, the '66 Mustang, entertained us endlessly. He sold his first one in order to finish paying for school. His father lacked the funds to help him out. *Get rid of it son* his

father told him, *you can buy another one once you're bringing in the big bucks.*

He rebuilt his current '66 Mustang to remind him of the one he owned during his college days in Chicago. Back then, he raced, grinding gears and skimming the edges of death. *Real men race*, he would tell us while we dined Al-fresco and toasted with sips of port. Simon and I, appreciative and polite, valued the virtue of self-preservation above the bravura of machismo.

No one ever expects death.

Maria lost her Howard in a dreadful automobile accident just before summer's end. The witnesses said the Mustang's driver slumped over the steering wheel and his Ford tore through the market place banging into brick store-fronts and frightening pedestrians. Maria's Howard. Bad ticker for years.

The driver of the Fiat did not die. With no seat belt to hound him, the Fiat driver smashed through his windshield. When the debris settled they freed the man and whisked him to the medical ward. Severed spinal cord. Crippled. Wheelchair bound. The unfortunate fellow held the manager position at the kelp processing plant before the accident and would still manage it once he healed enough to sit in a wheel chair.

Maria took an immediate turn for the worse refusing to eat. She shoved her summer skinny clothes into a pillow case and sent it over to the mission as donated. She took to wearing those long, full dresses which tie at the shoulders but leave the upper chest, back, and the arms all uncovered. *It's a shift* she answered when I asked why she was wearing them. I thought it looked a lot like a muumuu. But she wore Howard's shirts, never her own, under the goofy things.

Carlotta, Maria's older sister, flew in from Barcelona for the funeral. She would send for her belongings later; Maria would not be left to live alone.

A few days after Howard's cremation we were to leave for the states. The night before our departure, we invited Carlotta and Maria to dine with us. For days Maria subsisted exclusively on

cabbage and cheese sauce, a particular favorite of Howard's though no one else seemed to like it, especially not Maria. I don't know why, but I could imagine Howard saying *real men eat cabbage with cheese sauce*.

Night came and the four of us sat under the vast dark sky and drank and made polite. None of us could deny that the evening seemed a drab affair and not nearly in the same league as previous happy times spent during the summer. Our repast did not upset even one night bird. Maria spent the evening care-taking and waitressing, her flowing shift-dress billowing with the occasional slight breeze.

Carlotta chain smoked. Worried that her cigarette might lose fire she remained tethered to a candle. There seemed a lack of oxygen, not just in our open sky veranda, but in the world. There existed just enough to keep the candles lit—beacons for sojourners lost at sea.

The flight back to the states passed long and lonely punctuated by scotch, dozing, and bathroom breaks. Somehow, a gulf stretched between us and neither of us could cross to the other's side. At one point Simon sat up squarely in his seat. He rubbed his face as if washing away sleep and looked me in the eyes. He said *what will you do when I am gone?* I didn't answer. I didn't know what to say. He didn't really expect an answer.

Routine rescued us. For a couple of months we bumbled through and our façade of comfort became almost indistinguishable from authenticity. One day I came home from work and discovered the signs of cleaned-out gutters on the front of the house. On the back side of the house the gutters raised three stories high. Always a problem. Acorns voluntarily rooted and weighed heavily on the all-ready-heavy metal gutters making it impossible for them to drain. Because I feared heights, I preferred to hold the ladder steady for the task rather than climb. Simon feigned being comfortable on a ladder.

No one ever expects death.

I lost Simon. He fell off the ladder and broke his neck. The examiner called the fall swift, the death instant, as if I should find comfort in that.

In the weeks and months which passed slowly like a funeral caravan, I realized something about death. Real men die. Real men race, and die. Climb ladders, and fall. They hear a name called, chanted by some insensitive reaper, and know it for their own. Sometimes they share their soul in several exquisite evenings on a warm terrace in Monaco. Sometimes they love you by warning you with the question, *what will you do when I am gone?*

In Monaco, real women wear their husband's shirt under a mourning-shift and partake of the dreaded cabbage and cheese. I understand now. And I realized that, in my country, real women clean out the gutters. So I hauled the heavy ladder around the back of the house and climbed it to the pinnacle. I closed my eyes and listened for my name.

This is what I'll do when you are gone.

