

## In Her Own Way

Although still relatively fit and beautiful, Lena was very aware that she was closer to eighty than to seventy. It was time for her to make some decisions about the rest of her life before others made them for her. Her husband, Ben, had died three years ago and since then, her life was very lonely. She and Ben had traveled the globe together through the years collecting pieces for their small antique shop on East Seventy-Eighth Street in Manhattan. They enjoyed wandering the narrow streets in small towns in Italy, Portugal and Spain searching for hidden treasures. Holding hands, often getting lost in a maze of winding alleyways, they found joy on their so-called business trips. Eating cheese and fresh crusty bread and sharing a bottle of local wine, they dined on church steps and in old court yards in all of their favorite countries. The languages and the cultures may have been different, but their exploring routines were always the same. They created their own tours and cherished each other's company. Those pleasures ended when Ben passed away.

A few months after Ben was gone, Lena sold all of the contents of the store at auction and closed the business. She kept only a few small items to remind her of the wonderful trips she and Ben had taken. Her daughter Merrill, who lived in Westchester, wanted nothing from the store. She repeatedly asked her mother to come live with her and her husband Daniel and their two teenage daughters. Lena thanked her for the offer, but told her she needed her independence. She sternly requested that her daughter not ask her again.

It took a while, but slowly a plan developed in Lena's mind. The thought of a nursing home or an assisted living lifestyle in her future horrified her. She got her

paperwork in order. She updated her will and left instructions about scattering her remains, her ashes, in the ocean, any ocean. Sitting on a park beach, looking out at the boats on the East River, she suddenly knew what she was going to do. She decided to sell her apartment and furnishings and travel around Europe until her time came. It was certainly a better plan than spending her remaining years in an old age home. Money was not an issue or a problem. She had enough to do whatever she wanted. Her daughter could have what was left over. Although her wealth after liquidating all of her assets was considerable, it did not take away the loneliness. She needed to visit those places that she had shared with Ben. She wanted to relive some of those experiences. Lena was sure that this trip, her last, would bring her inner peace. She made no plans to return. She told her daughter that her travels would be open-ended, but Lena knew that she would not be coming back to the States.

In her plans, she made some concessions to age. There would be less walking, perhaps, and more taxi rides. There would be no shopping, except for possibly wine, cheese, bread and irresistible desserts. There would be no newspapers read. The horrors of wars and tragedies would not touch her world. She sent all of her jewelry to Merrill by post except for her gold wedding band. She also wore a pair of dangling beaded earrings and a love bead on a silver chain around her neck. Ben had bought them for her in the late fifties on Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village. They had spent a wonderful evening listening to folk music at The Bitter End and two or three other havens for the sweet sounds of young voices. They were young, too, and very much in love. The earrings and necklace were reminders of the magic of that night.

On this, her last trip abroad, Lena was finally able to pack light. All that she needed; her simple black dress, her good walking shoes, her fisherman's knit sweater, jeans and of course, blouses and underwear all fit in one suitcase. Her carry-on bag, containing her heart medication and other items to keep her engine running, was packed carefully. Another concession to her age was that this new suitcase could be pulled along on wheels. Ben would have laughed at the sight, she thought.

On this trip she wanted to see, to taste, to smell and to touch the places she had once traveled to. She had heard the story of a woman who spent her remaining years on a cruise ship, so her plans did not seem like such a crazy idea. She looked forward to the journey even though she knew that it was to be a self-creating fantasy.

The reality of it all came to her as she boarded the plane to Lisbon. She enjoyed a glass of red wine with her meal on the plane in preparation for the wine she planned to savor abroad. She anxiously awaited walking the winding hilly streets in the Alfama district of the city. On her first night in Lisbon, she put on her black dress, pulled her gray, almost white, hair back into a bun, tied with a black ribbon and rode in a taxi to find a café in the old district where she could listen to *Fado* music. She had come to love the sad Gypsy sound of Maria Da Fe and Amalia Rodrigues from her first trip to Portugal. She and Ben had brought their recordings to New York and listened to them often.

As she sat at a table near the small stage, she noticed a man sitting alone at a table across from her. He was wearing a black shirt and trousers that were in sharp contrast to his rather long white hair. He had a thick white mustache that also contrasted with his deeply tanned and lined face. He took a long look at Lena, too, and

seemed to enjoy her simple beauty. Before the woman singer began, he came over to Lena's table and motioned for permission to sit. She nodded "yes," and he raised his glass to toast, "To the music and to your beauty, Madame."

She smiled, thanked him and sipped the rich and warm tasting ruby port that he poured for her. They listened to the *fado* music together and she studied the intensity of his brown eyes. She breathed in his light smell of bay rum. He quietly translated some of the lyrics for her which made the *fado* so much more meaningful. She appreciated how wonderful it was to have a romantic moment at her age. She wondered if he felt the same.

The music, the setting, the company and the port all seemed to belong together. It took her loneliness away. When the singing ended, they touched hands across the table and she said, "*Obrigado*," to him and he lifted his glass as he rose from his chair and said,

"Thank you," in English, back to her.

It is never too late to make a new memory, she thought.

When she left the bar, she walked the dark, empty streets alone, but unafraid. She was emotionally fulfilled by the *fado* music and the sweet moment with a handsome, port bearing stranger. The first night in Lisbon convinced her that the idea she had of traveling to her favorite places in Europe was a good one. It was not to be a whirlwind tour. The itinerary and pace were whatever life allowed Lena. Before she boarded the train to Madrid to continue her odyssey, she methodically re-visited the experiences she had shared with Ben in Portugal long ago.

She ate *bacalhau a bras*, a salt cod dish fried with eggs, onions and potatoes. In the same small restaurant she had grilled sardines, fresh from the sea. Both meals were washed down with “*Vino Verde*,” a wonderful young local wine. Pieces of “*pasties de nata*,” a custard-filled pastry, completed each meal. The dishes seemed to live up to her precious memory of them. She rode the famous number 28 trolley that toured the hills and very narrow streets of old Lisbon. She took the train rides from the Rossio Station to Sintra and Escoril. She looked at the people around her more intensely than she ever remembered doing. She absorbed more of the beauty of the countryside, too.

When she arrived in Madrid, the happiness that she was experiencing continued. The oil paintings in the Prado Museum seemed more beautiful. Her walks in the Retiro Park and the many city squares were a joy. The paella and *rioja* wine in a side street café were wonderful. The pleasures she was absorbing were more heightened than in years past. She was aware of missing Ben, but in her heart, she knew that he would be happy for her. When she went on by train to Barcelona, she registered at the same hotel on the Ramblas where she and Ben had stayed many years ago. She remembered the wine and food they bought in La Boccaria, the market along the Ramblas. She did the same and sat on the balcony overlooking the street and watched as the crowds walked by and the street players performed. Lena, as before, thought Barcelona was a glorious place. She had planned to visit some of the towns along the Costa del Sol, but she was anxious to get to Italy. Perhaps she felt a need to move on while her energy level and enthusiasm were high.

The flight to Rome was tiring, but there were so many places she still wanted to see. She took a taxi tour of the sights to spare her feet. After tossing a coin into the

Trevi Fountain, she decided to move on. The Ponte Vecchio and Duomo in Florence beckoned her, and so did the gelato. She remembered sharing cones with Ben as they strolled the streets. She and Ben took bus rides from Florence to Sienna, Lucca and Pisa. She did the same. She still had the image of a bakery owner tempting Ben with warm cookies on a tray fresh from the oven. They munched the bag of cookies as they studied the old architecture of Lucca. Although the bakery was gone now, Lena could still remember the taste of those cookies. She had a satisfied feeling as she stared out at the Arno River as the sun went down.

Venice was her next stop and it was a continuous series of rides on the Vaporettos. She went to the Lido, the beach area, Murano to see the glass blowers and Burano to see the lace. She bought nothing, but used her eyes more than the last time she visited these scenic places. She walked around St. Mark's Square and had an espresso in Julian's. She spoke to a few people on this trip, but listened more. The splashing of the water, the snippets of conversation and the sounds of the life around her were like a symphony to Lena. She found beauty where it had never been before. The canals of Venice made her long for the sea. Sorrento became her next port of call.

Although her body had held up well during the many miles that she had traveled, Lena was beginning to get weary. When she settled in the same hotel that she and Ben had stayed in before, it felt good just to sit on that small balcony and stared out across the Bay of Naples. With Mt. Vesuvius in the distance, she fell asleep in the soft chair. Her dreams were probably filled with the sweet reminiscences of all of the wonderful places and things that she was able to experience one more time. She had not felt loneliness since setting foot on the ground in Lisbon. Her life had a fullness, a

completeness that she herself had created. She had written the ending of her own play. Ben would have been proud of her. The smell of the lemon groves and the sea blended to put her into a gentle, permanent sleep.