

THE ROMANCE

Mine is not a fairy tale romance, no knight on a flying charger came into my life but the man who did snuck in quietly with no fanfare. I'd had a romance with a boy in the RAF who wrote me beautiful poetry, a brief encounter with a Spanish hombre studying English and a chap who proudly took me for a drive in his newly acquired car only to back into a ditch filled with water.

It was the custom on a Saturday night to go dancing with a group of friends at the Watford Town Hall. There was always much discussion during the week as to what we would wear and who we might meet and in some cases who we wanted to avoid. It was at one of these functions that I first met Ken. Over previous weeks I had noticed him standing with a group of friends. He always had a smile on his face and I wondered what I would do if he asked me to dance. I didn't have to wait long because the very next week I saw him approaching. I nervously took his hand and we went onto the dance floor to a slow waltz. We drifted into easy conversation and over time we got to know a good deal about each other.

He told me that since completing his National Service in Egypt he had resumed his apprenticeship as a compositor but was a bit unsettled because his parents had only recently decided to migrate to Australia. Well, I thought to myself, there's no prospect of a relationship here. We continued to dance together each weekend and went out to the occasional movie. One evening Ken told me he had decided not to accompany his parents to Australia; he said he had a good group of mates he had made while in the Beds & Herts Regiment and for the first time he felt settled. All his young life he had been constantly on the move, firstly being evacuated to live with grandparents in Wales during the war and then as his father pursued work all over the country. He'd had enough of it.

Ken's parents were naturally upset that he decided not to go with them and I had the feeling they thought I was to blame. I suppose you could say our relationship took on a new meaning after they left and we spent more and more time together. Ken was lucky enough to be offered a home with the parents of one of his army friends where he was treated like one of the family and where, for that matter, I was always welcome.

We continued along in this unremarkable way for the next couple of years meeting perhaps once during the week and at weekends. My parents had the view I was too young at 19 to have a permanent relationship. Unfortunately Ken didn't help much because he had a knack of saying the wrong thing. He really put his foot in it the first Christmas of our relationship when he was invited to have lunch. We were all seated around the table after the meal, Grandad at the head puffing on his pipe. We were chatting away when the subject of cigarettes arose. Ken, looking very serious, says "Well, I think smoking is a mugs game". There was a deathly silence. I kicked him under the table "What's wrong" he says. We all excused ourselves and I was summoned into the kitchen for a dressing down about rudeness and disrespect. Although that may seem a trivial thing now, at the time you always had to be very careful how you spoke in front of your elders. Ken's card had been marked not for the first time.

"Let's go to the South of France" Ken announced immediately I opened the front door to him one Saturday. He couldn't wait to get the brochures out of his pocket. "We can't go to the South of France" I said "What would Mum and Dad say". He took no notice spreading maps and booklets all over the front room table. The furthest I'd ever been from home was Bournemouth. I started to get very interested as some of Ken's enthusiasm rubbed off on me.

Over the next few weeks we mulled over the idea. I had to broach the subject with Mum and Dad. They were not impressed. Dad couldn't see why we wanted to go to "*those foreign places*" when you could have a perfectly good holiday in England. They had to be assured we would be having separate accommodation and whilst they didn't want to be kill-joys they were concerned for my reputation. Eventually consent was given and we were off to Thomas Cook to make our bookings.

The fun of making the arrangements can only be surpassed by the holiday itself. We took the ferry from Dover to Calais and then the train, which was still steam in those days with hard wooden seats, arriving in the South of France some 20 hours later. The latter part of the journey was by bus which took us to our final destination, a holiday camp located near St Raphael not far from St Tropez. A hostess greeted us and gave us a tour of the facility. Finally we were guided to our cabins. I was to share with a girl from Belgium and Ken with a chap from Birmingham. My parents could relax!

For two glorious weeks we were in another world, the balmy air, the scent of mimosa, the blue of the Mediterranean. We swam in the clear water, we lounged on the beach listening to strains of romantic songs from cafes, we danced and yes, we fell in love. It was magic.

On our return we made plans to become engaged. I can't say I remember being proposed to. I recently asked my life long friend Olive of her recollections of those events but all she can remember is that when Brian asked her dad if they could become engaged he said "Yes, but take her now". Unfortunately my parents weren't so accommodating.

We were keen to buy our own home so Ken started doing night work which paid double time and within a year we were able to save a deposit for a house. With all the family objections finally out of the way 5 years after we met we were married in the Baptist Church in Berkhamsted. It was a beautiful September day in 1960 and we went to Torquay for our honeymoon. It wasn't until 7 years later that we managed to return to the Mediterranean accompanied by our two children and camped at St Maxime in a cherry orchard. The magic was still there.

