

The Holiday

My friend Michael says if I sing Viva España one more time he's not coming. How about a sombrero? I ask him. But he's not encouraging me in case I go looking for my straw donkey.

We are seasoned holiday companions, the only exception being if either of us get lucky in the interim and find a beau to share our holiday dreams with.

Michael says that's unlikely as we've been stuck doing this for five years now. Stuck! I say, it's better than sipping a piña colada all night on your own pretending you're waiting for someone to come back from the loo. He says that was only the once and after I'd threatened him with my Mamma Mia DVD.

We take it in turns to choose the destination. Sun, sea and sand, I said, when it was mine - I need to get him back for that trip to Bruges. I go for Mallorca, well Palma to be exact, and I'm refusing to let Michael's pessimism about English pubs and sunburnt pensioners stop me. I also get to see him in a pair of trunks.

We get to the airport about four hours early so Michael can look at all the celebrity gone bad magazines, try on some aftershave, and enter a win a car competition. Fortunately just as we've reached Body Shop stage, GO TO GATE comes up on the monitor.

What looks like two-hundred people have somehow got there before us and started queuing, which puts Michael in a spin as he likes to have time to get organised, sort out the overhead locker and look at the menu.

We shuffle to the end of the line and stare suspiciously down at the gigantic carry-on bags everyone thinks they'll get past the airline heavies.

"I'm roasting," I say, resting my bag on the floor and smiling at the old lady behind me.

"Well take off that bloody hat!" Michael hisses, nodding politely to the lady.

"We're going to Spain, Michael, everyone wears sombreros," I reply through a tight smile.

"No they don't!" he whispers through gritted teeth.

I wouldn't say Michael's the shy type but he's happy to let me do the talking. He's looking very dashing today, a little bit *Some Like it Hot*, and I wink at the old lady. As the stewardess checks our passports I feign difficulty with my bag and take his arm, forcing him to duck under the rim of my sombrero as we walk down the steps to the runway and on to the plane.

Out of principal Michael refuses to pay for anything on the flight, but succumbs to a bite of my chicken panini, giving me a look when I buy a small plastic replica of the plane.

"It's for Josh," I tell him pointedly.

“Cats don’t like aeroplanes,” he says just to answer, and so I can see he’s pretending to be more interested by the in-flight magazine.

“Josh is my nephew, my cat is called Jessica. Your magazine’s upside down.”

He turns it round quickly, before realising it was the right way up to begin with.

The heat presses down good and heavy as we step off the plane at Palma, dissolving the chilly membrane we’re usually cloaked in. I inhale dusty dry earth and baking concrete. The sky looks too shiny to be casting evening shadows, which extend like liquorice sticks from skinny palm trees rising from flower beds that burst with sangria red blooms, sea-coloured shrubs and spears of emerald green.

“It’s like Hollywood Boulevard!” I say to Michael.

“But without the movie stars.”

“Just listen to those cicadas!”

“We’ll get eaten alive,” he groans, swatting a fly.

There’s no pleasing some people.

Our taxi takes us passed sandstone baroque dwellings whose windows are dressed with moss green shutters and scarlet net curtains. Ivory awnings are pulled taut to the edge of balconies, and I imagine someone shouting up to a friend to meet them at the cafe on the corner.

We stay at a big, busy hotel where giant globed lights dot its ornamental gardens. Perfectly round, and taller than me, they peep from either sides of palm trees like they've escaped from an episode of Star Trek.

Michael says he needs a lie down and I tell him I'll stick the kettle on in my room if he fancies coming over for a cuppa.

It's only when I unpack I realise I've left my sombrero on the plane! Glory be. It's probably now shading some sleeping baggage handler. Michael bought it for me when we went to Barcelona and I debate whether I should tell him. But he's busy looking for an iron when I call for dinner and doesn't seem too put out.

We find a restaurant next to the hotel where we can sit outside. An old-style box television with a V aerial sits in the corner showing a fuzzy Wimbledon men's final. Rafael Nadal, we learn, is from a village just up the road.

"We've come to the right place, Michael!" I wink from across the table. "My drought could be over!"

"Except he's in south London and you're in Spain," Michael replies, spreading his napkin on his knee and trying not to look confused at the Spanish menu.

I manage to persuade him to try the paella, which comes to us in a giant cast-iron dish, bubbling and smoking, spiked with the butterfly wings of mussels and letting off odours of fat chewy rice, prawns, garlic and creamy butter. Swirled

together in a sticky black, pink, yellow and white stew, I tell Michael it looks just like my sombrero, but he's preoccupied as the waiter has inadvertently asked him to taste the wine.

"How is it?" I ask him.

"Oh lovely, very fruity," he says, which is his stock wine tasting response.

"Well I'll drink to that!" I wink at the waiter, and he fills my glass three-quarters. "Diet tomorrow."

"You'll never get into your linen knee highs," Michael says, so I remind him about his cycling top.

By the time we get down to the pool at eight the following morning, we find the other guests have cheated and laid towels on sunloungers whilst they go and have breakfast. Just as I'm about to throw my toys out of the pram, I hear my name called.

"Look Liz!" Michael says like he's walked into a backless wardrobe.

I follow him to a dark corner of the garden, through a small archway, down some stone steps and on to a beach that frames a seawater pool. We settle under one of the many available straw parasols and stick our bottom bits out in the sun. A burst of cool air fingers my neck and I feel we've found paradise. There's a restaurant behind us where the staff have noticed our arrival. Michael's got his new

trunks on which do wonders for his legs, and lays down flat so he doesn't have to hold his stomach in. I give them an eyeful of Liz in bathing suit and sarong.

Mid-afternoon we climb a winding path to the restaurant overlooking a sea turned Tiffany blue, and a ragged-rock view back towards the hotel. Up this high we can look down onto a shallow cove dotted in the distance by bobbing yachts and closer in the shallows by children swinging buckets ready for shellfish and stones. Two speedboats kiss a natural jetty that extends from the promontory we're perched upon, and the sun casts a perfect path across the water to a woolly island. We sip cold wine, rip at bread and olives, and go no further than a green salad as I'm minding the knee-highs.

"I think the waitress has got her eye on you," I tease Michael.

"Which one?"

"The one who put her hand on your shoulder when she poured the wine."

"No, I mean which eye."

I whoop at that, hold my head back and have a good laugh.

"Do you think they think we're a couple?" I'm teasing again.

He shrugs. "Don't know. It's up to them I suppose."

"I'm not exactly Cameron Diaz." More like Mama Cass.

"Thank god," Michael says shaking his head. "Come on let's get la cuenta and go for a paddle."

I love it when he speaks Spanish.

We're like a couple of kids in the water, Michael spraying me and me daring him to go for a swim. He strips off to his trunks and I watch his shoulders slide in and out as he swims over to the jetty, rises from the water and walks back to me waiting in the lough.

Crisis. When I knock for himself later that evening all I can hear is groaning instead of just a minute.

Eventually the door opens to reveal a Michael that looks like he's been wrung out to dry. He blames the paella, but my money's on too much sun and tight trunks. I feel his forehead and let him tell me how really rotten life is as I puff up his pillows, get him my glossy mags and turn on the TV. We decide there's nothing else for it but dinner solo.

The same waiter we had the night before gives me a discreet corner table and I absorb the scents of fennel, grilled fish and baked fruit. It's a balmy evening and, full from a beautiful meal, I hug my shawl to reach for the last of my wine.

"I hope you don't mind me asking Madame, but would you care to join me for a stroll?"

A leathery brown man, white hair, a belly of good food resting under a pair of work proud hands and clean nails, looks down at me with a smile I can't read

properly, but a demeanour that suggests if I say no he really won't mind. I'm about to do just that when I get a dose of the Shirley Valentines.

The folds of his white cotton shirt gather coolly under my fingers as I take his arm, lightly, like we might be about to dance. He's from Madrid, he tells me, and comes to Palma every summer for a holiday since his wife died. He softly brushes away my condolences with a Spanish accent like heated honey and pistacios.

“Have you ever been to Dubai?” he asks me.

“No, but my friend Michael keeps telling me we should go. He's got it lodged in his head about the England football team living on a palm tree.”

I tell him all about Michael feeling under the weather, and he tells me about the hotels they were planning to build in Dubai before the credit crunch. The underwater one with walls made of glass that look out onto the seabed. The special lift one that takes you to the door of your room as you sit in your car. The rotating floor one that gives you a different view every day. One day I'll take you there, he says, and I laugh like it's even a possibility.

He walks me back to the hotel and kisses my hand; I do believe, dear reader, I actually blush.

I also find someone's feeling much better. Michael's sitting up in bed and has managed two clues on the crossword. A limp bit of lettuce and a slice of tomato sit

on a plate atop my magazines. “The colour’s come back to your face. I hope you didn’t overindulge with room service.”

“Yes, thank you, Nurse Ratchett,” he scowls. “I was feeling hungry so I took it as a good sign.”

“Who brought it up to you - the big Polish momma with the beard?”

“No, actually. The young blond that’s on taxi duty in the mornings.”

“Which blond that’s on taxi duty in the mornings?” I yell, so that he has to tell me to shush, and will only speak again when I tell him about my hombre from Madrid.

They really should invent something for the return journey to stop you getting that knotted feeling thinking about no milk, work emails, unopened post and credit card bills. So I decide to make the most of it on the plane and order one of those small screw top bottles of vino. The plane’s only half full and the steward is ever so nice. He gets one of my winks. I stretch out on the seat (one free either side of me, who needs first class!) and even contemplate the in-flight magazine.

I did see my man from Madrid again, even though he was starting to remind me of Howard Keel. He said he’d look me up on Facebook. OK, I said, but I warn you I’m in there under Liz Taylor Burton so I get a lot of fan mail. As for Michael, well I’ve left him behind - with the blond. Says to tell work he’s got food poisoning

and he'll be off another week. Don't worry, I said, your computer and mug will be on your desk when you get back. He's promised to text me all the details. He knows how much I love a happy ending.

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