

YASMIN

By Anthony Aikman

*'When the dull red eye of day is level with the lone highway and some to Mecca turn
to pray And I towards your bed ...Yasmin.'*

James Elroy Flecker



"Antonio, do you remember our city when we were students and the future destiny of the world could be shaped by us alone. Do you remember the heady days during the student uprising when we felt as if we were storming The gates of the winter palace in St Petersburg when in fact we were drying Out from the rain in Mario's cheap trattoria, bundles of sodden posters and spray cans for graffiti at our feet while we waited for Mario's infamous soup (boiled-up leftovers). They claim that on Mario's paper-tablecloths epic poems, symphonic scores, historical novels had been

composed by customers waiting to be served, while outside rain gushed down the gutters of Via del Moro and the horse drawn carrozinas whined on the cobbles as they clattered back to their steamy stables near the Ponte Sisto. Yes, Antonio, how we used our time at Mario's to change the world- but the world is more stubborn than we think and it is only we who have changed. You, Antonio, became by chance, choice, or circumstance not the great composer you dreamed of, but a humble 'bush' doctor in remote places far from the haunts of the 'cognoscenti' you once so envied. I, to my surprise, for as a student I despised teaching as propaganda of the establishment, became a university professor and Yasmin Ah, Yasmin, how even now after all these years mention or memory of her halts me in my tracks. Yasmin, who was at the centre, the core of our lives, and perhaps is still. Writing to you, Antonio is like corking a letter in a bottle and casting it upon the whims of the waves, for I can never keep up with where you are, or have moved on to, or even if you are alive, but two things conspired to get me to send this letter. One is that whenever --as recently, we see television pictures of students protesting meetings of the world's Rich and Great, I see Yasmin in the thick of it, banner in hand, storming the barricades, no matter whether it is Berlin, Beijing or Bangkok. And the other reason is a faded photograph that fell from my bookshelf the other day. Taken long ago by some street photographer sheltering from the rain, for their is cross-eyed Mario clutching plates behind the three of us; you, Yasmin, and I and although it is black and white and grainy I can see her green bewitching eyes and strands of dark wet hair sticking to her pale cheeks- a magical face. Had I been younger I might shared your infatuation but I had fallen in and out of love enough times already to recognize that as only a temporary madness that happens to us all and that love itself is very different.

What brought you to our city, Antonio? Apart from your music classes at the Santa Cecilia Institute where did you really belong? Yasmin too I remember the first time we came together, studying her and thinking how the blood of Europe and Asia mixed in her veins. She claimed, proudly to be stateless but wasn't their rumor of a rich Lebanese father, and a mother; actress or danseuse part French, from Macau. So there we were in the same city. Each morning, Antonio, you caught the tram that clanged along the river and uphill past the museo dei belli arti and the borghese gardens where you got down and walked through the fashionable Via Veneto where everyone who was rich and famous-or who wished to be, sat outside the elegant overpriced cafes to see and be seen while you read the Times Newspaper to an elderly blind contessa in Via Sardegna, or dashed off to give mandolin lessons, or waited at Cine Citta-Cinema City, hoping to be chosen as an extra by some aspiring director. We finally came together-trapped you said, by an advert in the daily newspaper announcing a new literary magazine. What a strange band of co-conspirators we turned out: a couple of political exiles from Argentina, one heavily pregnant, an Italian count- so he claimed, a jolly Englishman from the British Council who wrote music reviews and raved over performances by Stockhausen, Cage and Nonno. There was an American painter who identified himself only by the picturesque sobriquet of "Pittore Euforico" and a writer who declared that writing his first novel was like carving a marble sculpture with a feather- which provided him with an excuse for never completing it. Antonio, I am sure you remember those boisterous editorial meetings in Mario's where enough hot air was generated to float the foundations of society. We argued over everything, even the name 'the Rome Review'. For Yasmin the magazine was never more than a mouthpiece for her politics which recently under the influence of Che Guevarra had taken such a lurch to the left that even Marxist Leninism seemed bourgo is. But that didn't prevent her pinning a hammer and sickle badge to your sodden coat lapel. In honor of what, I wondered?



Your nightly forays knocking noses off the marble busts of noble heroes of the past, spraying graffiti, pasting posters and even, as you once candidly admitted, making love in the damp shrubbery behind the Museum of Fine Arts, which to Yasmin, for whom every action needed to be politically inspired seemed to suggest sufficient symbolism. At any rate your membership to the exalted club of such champions of peoples' liberty as Lenin, Stalin and Mao at least entitled you to a 30% discount at student restaurants even if, according to Yasmin, Mario drew his tawny wine straight out of the Tiber River.

Yes, Antonio, you never denied Yasmin's jibe that you joined the communist party solely for economic reasons. But what was that photograph of us celebrating? Looking closely at a date penciled faintly on the back I am wondering if it was taken the night before you both set off to join your fellow revolutionaries in Paris. And next morning it was with mixed feelings I accompanied you to the bustling railway station, the train carriages festooned with red flags, Yasmin waving excitedly, singing of the 'international' interrupted by whistles of guards and shunting carriages and suddenly the track empty and the crowded platform of supporters falling strangely silent. Public



transport being on strike I walked back across the city and over the ponte sisto bridge to my apartment in Trastevere where from the window I could view the statue of Garibaldi proudly saluting on horseback beneath the umbrella pines on the Gianicolo hilltop. Yes, Antonio, I thought Garibaldi setting off with his thousand strong motley band of red shirted militia a hundred years before to liberate the Nation- he would have approved. And how was Paris when you got there? Of course I never expected a letter. You were too busy being revolutionaries and the

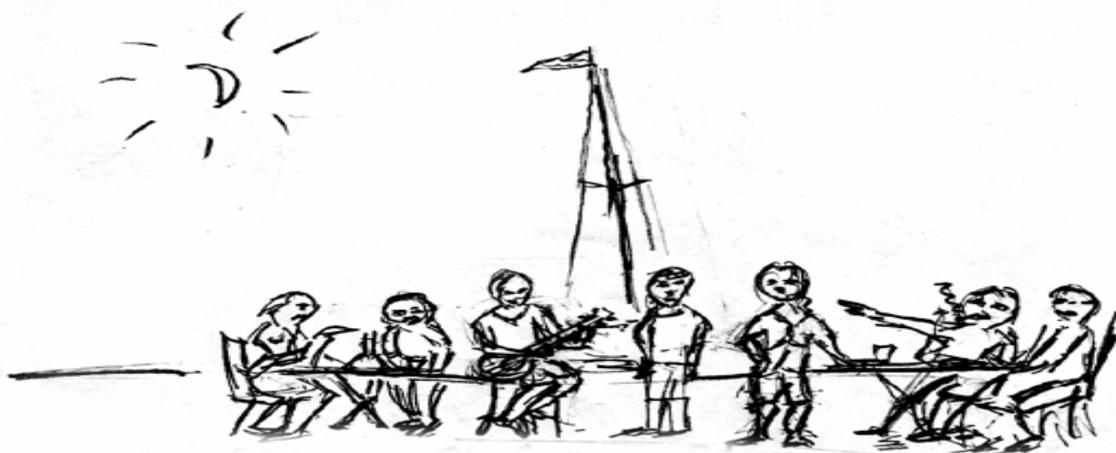
Italian post was on strike. I learned most from your anecdotes later. You found lodging in a cheap hotel in the rue St Jaques and how all night as you tried to clutch the excited Yasmin in your eager grasp, while she kept running to the window to cheer on the marchers below, and how the car horns hooted a cacophony of support,- in the intensity of your frenetic love-making did you not wonder with a pang of jealousy if Yasmin's passion was not as much or more for the chanting crowds in the streets below as it was for you. Yes how hard it is when we are young and everything matters so much and all at the same time. Then came that inevitable finale, that final confrontation in the boulevard san Michele; the riot police waiting lined up in neat squares at the street inter sections near the river while higher up the rising street students lit fires, unfurled banners, hurled cobblestones, yelled taunts and the shopkeepers hurriedly pulled down their shutters expecting the worst. And when it came the students seemed quite unprepared for the speed and pitiless efficiency of the charges-which reminded you of phalanxes of Roman Legionaries with their long shields, helmets and batons raised like swords.



Except the Romans did not have teargas grenades to toss into sides streets as they ran, these modern mercenaries of the state were just as ruthless, clubbing the students down regardless of sex, and booting them bloody and senseless in the gutters. Somehow you managed to pull away the red flag Yasmin was brandishing and dragged her into one of the few cafe entrances still open, escaping with only a few cudgel blows and a ripped shirt- prized mementoes of your participation. And yet Yasmin didn't seem to regard this episode as a defeat. Back in Rome she never ceased to marvel at the extremist tactics of the Paris students. She denounced non-violent protest and declared that only direct action would force governments to change. But now-for the moment at least-a welcome lull. Summer had arrived. Italy in august is far too hot for revolution. The cities empty apart from perspiring tourists and the entire population heads for the coast. Politics are put aside for a month or two.



Antonio, do you still play the mandolin-for it was with the proceeds of your lessons we bought that leaky little yacht-oddly named "dreamer", from a penniless Englishman who had somehow reached Fiumicino. "She leaks just a bit," he advised off handedly as he counted the payment, adding," be sure to pump her dry before going to sleep." We realized why the boat was so cheap when we loaded it onto trailer to tow across to Brindisi; the plywood hull was rotten and the bilge keels on the point of falling off. As there were only two berths in the tiny cabin it was decided I should take the ferry and wait for you in Corfu from where we would sail together to Ithaca following Ulysses course across Homer's wine dark seas. At Brindisi we sat eating with the fishermen who feted Yasmin with admiring glances while you played neapolitan songs on the mandolin. But the fishermen's infatuation with Yasmin didn't stop them mocking the proposed voyage.



"Do you really expect to cross the Adriatic Sea in that coffin?" "This yacht," you corrected," has sailed from England." but the fishermen laughed even louder." People swim across the English channel," they scoffed. I waited and worried for five days in Corfu. Morning and afternoon I walked down the steep narrow alleys of Kerkira the old Venetian town, to the harbor in specting new arrivals and anxiously scanning the horizon. Finally on the feast day of St Nicolas-patron of seas and sailors, I was happily rewarded by the sight of a familiar sail flapping in a dying breeze and a small yellow quarantine flag hoisted in the shrouds. Warning of what impending plague, I wondered. For these were troubled times in Greece. Following a military coup a junta of Colonels ruled the country. King Constantine had fled to Rome and Colonel Papandreuos declared himself Regent and Head of State. All opposition was ruthlessly repressed. Watching you pry a mooring space between fishing boats while Yasmin waved from the stern, the yellow flag reminded me of Churchill's comments when Lenin was dispatched in a sealed railway carriage from Switzerland to Russia, 'like a plague virus sent to start an epidemic'. I wondered how the Colonels might have reacted had they known about Yasmin's political background. Re-united and exuberant we wound a way through the festive throng. Parades of Boy Scouts, brass bands, and gold-coated priests with long beards accompanied the saint whose skeletal remains hoisted into a glass canopy wobbled dangerously as acolytes waving gilded icons danced and pranced like whirling dervishes. In a cafe under the long colonades at the top of the town we had to bellow to hear ourselves speak. The tale of your voyage emerged. "For two days we were held up by storms," yelled Yasmin between greedy mouthfuls of mousacha. "Then came the 'tramontana'-the wind from the sunset and the fishermen told us to go, but no sooner had we cleared the coast than a gale blew up from the south." She waved an arm dramatically at the sky," Waves as tall as the mast." Antonio, I remember you explaining how the charts indicated an anchorage, Punto San Cataldo, marked by a lighthouse and tucked behind high rocks but the seas were crashing with such force you couldn't see the way in. "Then crash, bang!" rejoined Yasmin. "The skies exploded. Shells falling all around!" It seemed you had unknowingly strayed into a military firing range and were being used for target practice. But Saint Nicolas must have been on your side and drew you out of danger. Now on the shore there were figures waving and pointing. Heading the boat straight into what seemed a solid wall of surf you suddenly found yourselves flying through a narrow opening into the quiet security of a little lagoon. Fishermen helped you tie up. Antonio, you took a photograph we later enlarged of Yasmin in a yellow sailing jacket, hair stiff with sea-salt, seated on a coil of ropes against the mast. Those fishermen were so proud of their catch they feasted you at the taverna on fried octopus and next dawn you set off for Otranto from where at evening having had your papers duly stamped by the port commandant you headed across the night sea for the Ionian islands. Ah, that was a night to savour, flying fish falling on the deck, a misty moon in a silvery aurora, the ocean rollers splashing lazily past and finally the welcome glimmer and flash of the Fano lighthouse. Reaching the island at dawn just as the rising sun lit up the soaring Pindus Mountains of Albania you moored in a sheltered bay and sitting beneath a pomegranite tree a fisherman's wife cooked you red mullet. South across the wine-dark seas lay the mythical islands of Samothraci and Merlera. Later with a wind filling the patched sails you crossed to Sidari on the north coast of Corfu, attended by a school of playful dolphins leaping past the bows into the clear blue depths. That night you moored in a still bay that the moonlight magicked into quicksilver and night birds sang among the olive groves.

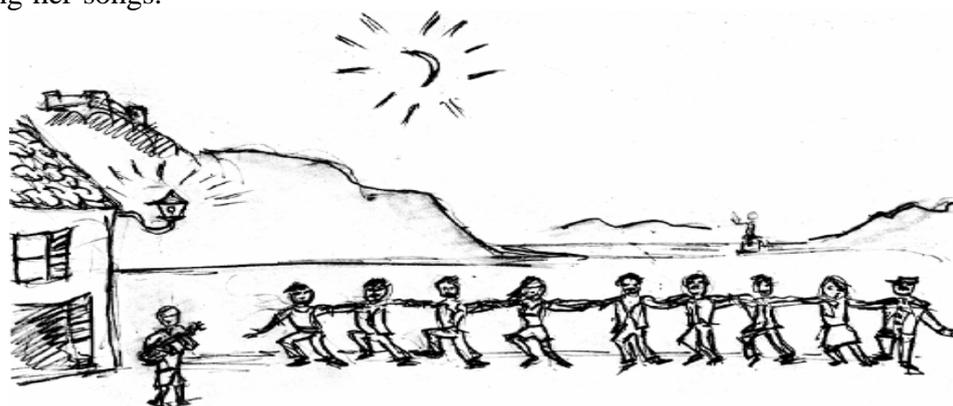
Now, though, luck changed. Could it just be possible that the Colonels whose portraits dominated everywhere sensed a 'viper' in their midst, or was it just that yellow flag or talkative fishermen who drew us to the attention of the authorities. Without warning the police arrived and took away our passports. After long difficult discussions aided by a dictionary we gathered the problem lay not with our papers but with the boat. According to the maritime regulations which the port police thrust before us -despite the fact that our boat floated (at an angle) had mast, sails and even a small engine, it lacked two vital features which every international yacht must possess- a cooking galley and a toilet. The port commandant was adamant. Next morning there would be an official inspection to decide our fate. We hastily removed a poster of Che Guevarra and other revolutionary emblems that might offend the scrutiny of the Colonel's emissaries, secured the paraffin cooking stove and worried how to improvise a toilet. Promptly next morning, wearing immaculate white pressed uniforms the three senior port officials descended from the dockside trying to maintain their dignity as they stooped inside the tiny cabin.



The galley looked quite presentable with a plastic bowl and cups but where was the toilet? From beneath her bunk Yasmin drew out a Chianti flask with a large green funnel. "Toiletta", she announced with a flourish. Banging their heads and glaring with distaste the three officials backed out. From the dock the commandant tossed down our passports. "Go!" he declared and we did so at once in case he changed his mind, hoisting the sails and slipping past the old ruined citadel and the steep wooded shores beyond. We managed to reach Lefkimi, sailing up a narrow river to what the guidebook described as a 'decayed township', where not even Colonel Papandreou countenanced his portrait being displayed. A drunken fisherman adopted us. His Italian was limited to "Domani niente venti", (tomorrow no wind), something he repeated again and again until collapsing in the cockpit he commenced snoring like an artillery barrage. By dawn he had vanished but he was right about the forecast-all day we drifted over a limpid sea towards the hazy green outline of Paxos Island. In the end we never got any further. Ithaca would have to wait. Paxos provided enchantment enough. We renamed it Prospero's island. Massive gnarled olive trees covered the island from end to end. Yasmin was sure that beneath their veil of mystery the ancient Gods still thrived and looked out for any large horned goat that might oblige her by turning into Pan. Pungent scents of myrtle and wild thyme followed us as we wandered along stony tracks and ruined farmsteads.



We moored the boat at Gaios where a pine covered isle sheltered the harbor seawards. All the cottages were whitewashed with tile roofs and the small square beside the quay contained a tiny church so white in the sunshine it blinded us. Every shop was also a taverna, selling along with nets and ropes retzina wine that tasted of the same tar the sailors used on their boats. Antonio, do you remember how the Greeks love to discuss politics. Greek men think quite naturally they are better than their women, so it came as a shock for them when Yasmin held forth with vigorous tirades denouncing the military junta. They never quite understood her-perhaps a good thing-for, as you know their are two Greek languages; the official 'kathourevu' and the ordinary 'demotici'. Our phrase book contained the former, so when we inquired at the taverna we frequented where was the toilet the 'apokoritirio', we were surprised when the fishermen rose and doffed their caps in mock respect. It appeared we had asked for 'the ladies and gentlemen's retiring chamber'. "We call it 'topos' the place. It's round the back." Adding candidly, "We only use it at lunchtime when all the flies go to the kitchen!" In the evenings I can still hear you strumming the mandolin. The Colonels had banned Merlina Mercuri's songs, but there was one local renegade with a wind - up gramophone in his rowboat who used to paddle about the harbor in the dark playing her songs.



Then, one Saturday evening, defying all regulations you started strumming "Never on a Sunday" and within minutes the town went wild, the entire population of Gaios lined up , linking arms , dancing and singing along the quayside, Yasmin in the middle. Finally, you remember, she went up to the young lieughtenant - the military representative, on the island and persuaded him to join in, waving his arms and dancing with the rest. What a night that was! One of Yasmin's political partisans was Spiro the baker. Late at night in the bakery they drank ouzo and argued reform.