

THE SECOND COMING
OF
SARA MONTIEL

Carmen was busy painting her nails on the plane. She sucked her teeth and swore when Easyjet hit a pocket of turbulence and her aim slipped. Pepper patted her knee and made soothing noises. He had his eyes tight shut and his teeth clenched.

"Is all right, gal."

"I'm not scared of flying anymore, boss. Why? You nervous? "

She looked at him carefully. Something was horribly wrong. Was he going to be sick?

"It's not so bad if you open your eyes."

Pepper ogled the nail polish. Purple Passion. An evil, suggestive colour which became fluorescent under the spots. He had given her the pot and the lipstick to match. They were flying to Barcelona, scene of his greatest sexual triumph, when he had pulled the most gorgeous Arab boy in the bar. Pepper was barely present beside Carmen in the plane. He was reliving those first ecstatic moments of dawning passion when he had entered La Concha, in search not of sex, but literary vibrations.

"Genet used to drink here," he gushed to the bored boy dressed as a 40s Hollywood star.

"Who's Genet?" demanded Hassan, concentrating on his nail polish.

"He's a Great Writer. He made our lives possible." Pepper had read *A Thief's Journal* under the bedclothes with a torch as a teenager and had

never recovered from the experience. Hassan raised his superb, curling lashes in an incredulous, languid stare.

"Well, he may have made them possible, but he didn't make them easy."

How rich was this black tourist, who spoke English but clearly wasn't American? Hassan assessed the cost of the flash jeans with flares, the embroidered belt and the rings bulging with red stones. Not costume jewellery. He had an unlikely hat perched on the back of his Afro, but had taken off the shades when he walked into the bar. Hassan noticed that the man's eyes were dark brown and wet with emotion. This guy was for real. Could he risk asking for champagne?

"You loved this Genet?" he crooned sweetly. Genet was probably one of the black man's ex-lovers.

"He is a genius," sighed Pepper.

"Did you drink champagne here together?" Hassan assumed a wheedling tone.

"I think he drank rum."

"Ah. Well, I'd like a Campari cocktail," Hassan decided.

Pepper looked up and saw a God in full length blue sequins and Purple Passion nail polish, smiling down upon him.

And so it all began. Hassan was as fickle as he was gorgeous. Pepper's frequent trips to Barcelona often ended in scenes, tears and rage. All the money got spent on dresses never worn above three times or, in the later days, on coke. The odd thing about Hassan was that he went on looking as if he were seventeen when he was certainly pushing thirty. Pepper suspected him of having a picture in the attic. Then one day the begging phone calls ceased. Pepper scrambled onto the next flight to Spain.

Hassan had simply vanished. The flat was empty, all their life together packed up and removed. Pepper could get nothing out of the whores at La Concha. No, they hadn't seen Hassan. No, his mother and

sister hadn't been over from Morocco. What with the amount of coke he was snorting it wasn't strange if he vanished for a while, often weeks at a time. No, not at all surprising. There were rumours of course. Hassan had found another rich protector and become a kept woman. He had encountered a married couple on a yacht and was last seen screwing both of them. He had heard the call of the muezzin and gone to fight the French in the desert. No one really knew where he had gone. He became one of the disappeared.

Pepper never got over this Arab boy. Pepper had fallen in love. He failed to notice the fact that Hassan wanted nothing more than a bottomless pocket full of cash. Pepper had other men, but he never loved anyone else other than the Arab whore with long lashes and pretty dresses. After the loss of Hassan, as a displacement activity, Pepper went on to make a fortune in the music industry. Carmen was his most lucrative discovery. He found her singing Bessie Smith cover versions upstairs at Ronnie Scott's. He listened carefully to her smoky supple voice, then offered her a lift home. He made her a proposition in the taxi, rather different from the one she was expecting. She had to give up smoking, put on four stone, let him pay for a year's worth of singing lessons with a maestro of his choice and sign her soul away to Hot Island Records for ever and ever.

She was as sulky as Hassan, and just as obstinate. She mounted a huge battle about putting on weight. Pepper told her that she looked like a drug-addicted stick and that he couldn't market a blues singer who hadn't any tits. Carmen's mother pitched in on his side. She didn't think that thin women were beautiful. Thinness was a whitewomanting. And she had heard tell of Pepper's father, Reginald Leroy Jones, who came from Trinidad. As did her husband, God rest his soul.

Carmen's mother stood beside Pepper, shaking her head at Carmen's recalcitrance. Carmen gave up smoking and put on four stone almost immediately. She moved downstairs at Ronnie Scott's and caused a sensation. Pepper was a generous man. When the money, contracts and offers of international tours descended on them in a waterfall he altered her contracts and upped her percentage, still keeping the lion's share for himself. He became her manager. She lost her sleazy, sleepy look and shone like a well-brushed panther on display in a circus. Pepper dressed her up, took care of all the details. He insisted on buying all her performance clothes. She was fantastically and extravagantly clad. Pepper's taste leaned towards exaggeration and excess. Carmen drew the line at strapless orange taffeta. She stripped it off in front of him, proving that the four stone were genuine. Pepper never laid a finger upon her. He was queer to the marrow of his bones and had never laid a finger upon any woman. He could smell the difference.

They stayed in 5-Star Hotels. Carmen's jewellery had to be locked away in the safe when they arrived. She always wore it on the planes in case she needed to bargain with hijackers. For the only thing Pepper could not bring himself to spend money upon were the planes. He rang up obscure bucket shops or bustled round the Internet, scouring the airlines for better deals. When they flew to Montreal for the first time in 1988 he discovered a bargain charter for £99 return. But Carmen found out that they were leaving from Luton at three in the morning and threw the mother of all wobblies. Pepper's meanness prevailed. The hotels became more luxurious and the Economy Charter Bargains stayed the same. They were now cruising down to Barcelona on a ticketless Easyjet holiday flight.

Carmen was singing at a club called American Diva. The show had been sold out for weeks in advance. Pepper extended the tour by three performances. These sold out too. Pepper demanded more money. Carmen's mother rubbed her hands, delighted. American Diva was in a hot

pocket of the city called El Born. Pepper saw her through the first night. He left her in the care of her bodyguard for the second. Carmen never had nervous fits. She was a perfect professional down to her Purple Passion fingernails. Her confidence was a little sinister.

Carmen's only weakness was men. If a man gazed longingly upon the now ample, handsome tits and besieged her dressing room with flowers and champagne she was appallingly likely to say yes. After a dreadful incident with a Norwegian pervert, who had smeared her body with crushed avocados, Pepper hired the bodyguard. He was a completely silent Japanese man named Gus. Gus nurtured a torrid homosexual passion for an Englishman whom he rang up every night. So far as he was concerned Carmen was a tricky assignment rather than a temptation. He drove her cars and sat behind her on the bucket shop charter flights. He monitored her phone calls, policed her autograph sessions, purchased her condoms and checked her premises for lurking suitors. He informed Pepper that his job would be a lot easier if Carmen could be persuaded to have a regular boyfriend rather than an endless saga of one-night stands. Gus was not interested in spontaneous passion.

"Yeah, yeah," said Pepper. He knew Gus was right. But he still remembered a night in a bar in Barcelona at the beginning of the 1970s when he was wearing flares and an Afro, and an Arab boy in full length blue sequins, and then later that same night, in daring, strapless orange taffeta, had captured his heart.

Pepper stopped behind a flower stall to score two interesting white tablets off an American crusty.

"This'll set you up, man. Have a great night."

Pepper went striding back down memory lane. He turned off the Ramblas and passed over to the other side, - the darker side of the streets.

Carmen looked for Pepper in the bar. He wasn't there. When she came offstage he was always there. She looked around for Gus. He was sitting impassively in front of an orange juice. A crowd of fans rushed at her, waving their CDs: Carmen Campbell, Best Of. Gus lurched off his seat and thugged them up into orderly lines. The signing and smiling took an hour and a half. The music journalists took up another hour. By the time she was free it was almost two in the morning. Pepper was still not there and Carmen was hungry enough to eat the hotel curtains.

"Where the fuck's the boss gone, Gus?"

"He's looking for his lost love," said Gus, gloomily. This was the longest speech that Gus had ever made. Carmen looked at him, astonished.

"Lost love?"

"Hassan."

The name had never passed Pepper's lips in front of Carmen.

"Hassan?"

"La Concha. Genet drank there."

Gus lapsed back into monosyllabics.

"Who's Jenny?" snapped Carmen, looking down at her Purple Passion nail polish, which was ever so slightly chipped. Lost love was bad news. So were spontaneous trips down the dark pathways of the past.

"Order a car, Gus. We're going out to find the boss."

The bar was still there, exactly where it had been thirty years before. He remembered Hassan's sunburnt skin, warm as the nap of a ripe peach. He opened the door and for a second, saw a room full of men and excessively beautiful transvestites, all dressed like film stars. It was like stepping onto a Hollywood set. There were the shimmering harem bead curtains, the back rooms smelling of spilt sex, the rough boys in leather

with their shaved heads and obscene tattoos, and there he stood handsome in the doorway, slick as a Mafia boss in a dinner jacket and spats.

The bar was still there.

But it was almost empty. The curtains were still there, but they were drawn aside and looped up like a bourgeois kitchen separation screen. The sagging couches smelled not of sperm, but of damp. The whole dank cavern was dilapidated and sad. There were eight men clinging to the bar, some Arab, some Catalan, and no one was under fifty. The Nigger of the Narcissus stood behind its shining length. He had huge muscles, earned heaving weights in the gym, a golden smile and a single earring. He had grey hair.

The disco crystal was still circulating in empty space above them. Many surfaces had flaked away; others were blackened and cracked. The photographs of Sara Montiel were still there. Here she was laughing with James Dean, luscious on the arm of Gary Cooper. Pepper put on his glasses. The portraits were yellowing. Some of them were creased and slightly stained with damp. Pepper shrugged himself onto the bar stool and struggled to remember not only who he had once been, but who he now was. He had unadvisedly swallowed both white tablets at once. Everyone said Hello. Pepper nodded. He ordered whisky. He then set about losing his mind, entirely and forever.

"Is this your first time in Barcelona?" proposed the handsome black barman, acting as elderly hostess among the senior statesmen ranged along the stools.

"Genet used to drink here! Did you know that?" roared Pepper. The barman flashed his golden smile and indicated a frightful photograph of Genet in a hat perched just behind the bottles.

Pepper stared into his idol's ancient creased face and glassy eyes. The picture was dingy and curled. Above the raddled image of the old writer Pepper saw his own face in the spotted dirty glass. He too was old. He had

lost one tooth and was now sporting a pink gap. The boys who clustered round him in the studio wanted to be on the covers of the CDs he produced, not in his bed. His stomach bulged suggestively over his underpants. He could just see the emerging roll beneath his shirt. He had developed an ingrown toenail. He could no longer seduce, he could no longer charm. On the other side of the bar was nothing but a black abyss.

Everyone else strewn along the stools watched Pepper's existential crisis developing with expressions of perceptive sympathy. They had long since crossed the bridge towards which Pepper was advancing with rapid strides and substantial help from dramatic slugs of neat whisky. The white tablets began to take hold. Pepper started to rant uncontrollably.

"I was queer before gay," he thundered, "Queer! Does anyone remember queer?"

Everyone listened, puzzled, but interested.

"Is he one of the immigrants on hunger strike?" asked one of the bar's permanent inhabitants in Catalan when it became clear that Pepper was monoglot English. The barman concluded that he must be since he was black and gripped by a great passion. He drew Pepper's attention to their stack of supporting leaflets.

Around midnight the door lurched open and a lovely upbeat drag queen came swinging into the bar. He kissed and greeted all the men in turn and by name, offering his hand to Pepper as well in the convivial embrace. Pepper looked into the man's painted face and saw the lines and chasms beneath the cultivated surface. He too was old, old.

"Mon semblable, mon frère," screeched Pepper and fell off the bar stool.

"Comment ça va? How're you doing, man?" said the drag queen cheerfully, trying out several languages and arresting Pepper's descent onto the murky damp of the composting carpet.

"I am Sir Percival Leroy Jones," shrieked Pepper, giving himself a gong on the spur of the moment.

"No offence meant," smiled the drag queen, helping him up. He hadn't understood a word, but correctly identified Pepper as an amiable colourful drunk. He rattled a charity can under Pepper's nose.

"For the AIDS ward and the research unit. One of my friends works there," he added, giving the request for money a personal touch.

The row of men fumbled in their pockets. Pepper realised that he had misjudged the company. They were reaching for their guns. He dived towards the floor and skidded down into a mass of discarded fag ends. Then the grill upon the door rattled as it were being shaken by a mighty wind. It was too dark for Carmen to see the door handle and she was trying to force the grill. Someone sitting near the door opened it for her and she stepped down three stairs into the murky space, lifting her gown above her high heels.

So far as the bar was concerned it was the Second Coming of Sara Montiel. Before them stood a transsexual so lovely she could have been a woman, in full length blue sequins, her golden cloak edged with fur, flung back to reveal a dark ravine between her olive breasts, high, proud and pointed like restored gargoyles. Her hair was piled up in a series of predatory coils. It was a wig, but didn't look as if it was.

"Hassan!" shouted Pepper from the depths.

He was sitting in a puddle of slopped Baileys. Here at last was his Beloved. Someone had told the errant youth that his Master had returned. The boy had dressed to kill, then rushed out to be re-united with his lover, to drink champagne and snort coke in an ecstasy of joy.

"What're you doing down there, boss?"

Carmen hauled Pepper to his feet. She saw at once that her manager had long since passed the point of no return and was almost certainly hallucinating. She looked around. Good God, what an awful place.

The Nigger of the Narcissus beamed at the new arrival. He was relieved that someone else had come to clear up Pepper. The gorgeous transsexual was a blast from the radiant past, when there had been singers every Friday and Saturday night to accompany the sexual struggles behind the harem curtain. She was elegant, expensive, one of the up-town whores.

"Champagne?" he suggested.

Carmen was delighted to have discovered the missing prodigal. The boss was clutching her hand in a way he had never done before. He was alarmingly cross-eyed. But she was in the mood to celebrate.

"Champagne for everyone," she cried.

"Are you an actress or a singer?" asked one of the punters, speculatively staring at Carmen's crotch. Did he still have his tackle? Or had he gone for the op? Pepper lifted his head off the bar.

"That's my boyfriend," he growled. Hassan had painted his nails with Purple Passion nail polish, just as Pepper loved them best. Purple and blue sequins in his dress. Purple eye shadow. Purple lips. A little stagy perhaps, but ravishing. He smelt a little odd. Pepper sniffed the air.

"I love you, my darling." He leaned over and shot her a most terrific ogle.

"You're out of your head, boss," snapped Carmen, lining up the glasses all along the bar.

"Give us a song, sweetheart," urged the drunken punter. Carmen slapped down two notes of 10,000 pesetas and waved away the change. The Nigger of the Narcissus turned off the pounding disco music. They all heard the feeble thump of the central heating clicking in. The bar darkened, held its breath, closed like a clam around ten old and drunken men, beached in history, gazing at this huge olive-skinned transsexual with breasts like the statue of Diana at Ephesus. Standing at the bar, Carmen straightened her back, steadied her shoulders. The aged drag

queen was admiringly fingering her cloak. Breathe. Sing something they all know.

She looked round the walls and came face to face with a white woman wearing clothes identical to her own. There she was, laughing with James Dean, loving up Gary Cooper. Breathe. Sing. Something they know. Breathe.

*Do not forsake me, oh my darling,
On this our wedding day*

The crowd sighed with pleasure. Many of them joined in.

*I'm not afraid of death
But oh, what will I do if you leave me?*

Pepper gazed at Hassan. At last. The boy had understood and shared his pain. Hassan had never forgotten him. He had no idea that Hassan could sing. It was a little odd.

Carmen's voice rushed into all the damp corners where illegal partners had savaged one another's bodies, loveless, uncaring. She filled every man's heart with hope that tonight he would meet the one he loved and somehow they would know that it was to be this time, this place, now.

*Do not forsake me, oh my darling,
You made that promise when we wed,
Do not forsake me, oh my darling,
'Til I have shot Frank Miller dead.*

Pepper felt a rush of jealousy. Who was this Frank Miller Hassan was singing about? Had the boy met a white man at the clinic? Was this the chap in the white coat, who organised his hormone treatment? He glared at Carmen. The bar vibrated with applause.

The row of men toasted Carmen with the champagne she had bought for them and yelled for more. Hearing the shouts from the bar in the street outside several young men wandered in and were immediately absorbed into the general atmosphere of conviviality and free booze. It's open house tonight. We are all young and in love. Carmen sang *La Vie en Rose*, *I Did it*

My Way and *Je ne regrette rien*, with an obligatory bass choral accompaniment. The bar was flush with sentimental passion and the big, big love that fills everyone who has drunk half a dozen glasses of free champagne.

Pepper was exceedingly unsteady on his feet. The white tablets flared through his system in one final burst.

"Last song, boys!"

Carmen raised her glass to the assembled men. She tried out an old Seekers number, which her mother used to sing when she was doing the Hoovering.

*My love, the light is dawning,
This will be our last goodbye,
Though the carnival is over
I will love you till I die.*

Pepper surged away in the direction of total unconsciousness on a wave of ecstasy. Hassan had never declared himself so unconditionally. He collapsed at his lover's feet.

The elderly Moroccan whores carried Pepper, who was still singing *You'll never walk alone* in a whispered cracked falsetto, outside to Gus and the waiting taxi. Before he descended into darkness Pepper knew that he was being transported by a seductive handsome man, half his age, the only man he had ever loved. His exit was applauded by everyone standing in the doorway of La Concha. He was in triumph.
