

My Summer of '69



Penelope Gardiner

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We live our lives forward and understand them backward.

– Søren Kierkegaard

1. I Meet the Man in Black

I first became aware of the infamous Tom Corley as ‘the man in black’ who used to come down to the beach every afternoon. Tom was an enigma, a rather solitary figure, who at 33 years of age did not welcome any intrusion into his privacy. I was a 22-year-old virgin from New Zealand with no real world experience. But I was open to everything new the world could throw at me.

I didn’t know anything about him when I laid eyes on him, tall and slim, black jeans, black shirt, black boots, and black sunglasses, anxiously scanning the beach looking for his staff whom he had fired the night before (this apparently occurred on a regular basis). The staff were strangely only too happy to go back with him to the Dubliner Bar, for another night of madness and mayhem, usually ending up with the punters all being ‘thrown out’ at 3 o’clock in the morning, including the staff. When I say ‘infamous’, not a lot was known about him, as he had created an air of mystery around himself, but in such a small village, it was impossible to not know who he was.

In those days, meaning the ’60s in Franco’s Spain, Sitges was a small enclave on the Mediterranean coast, an hour south of Barcelona on the train, or 40 minutes on the terrifying coastal road, consisting of hairpin bends and huge coastal drop-offs, known to the locals as the ‘Road of Death’. Sitges had remained untouched by all the huge developments taking place further down the coast in Torremolinos and Marbella, but it was fast becoming *the* place to go on your ‘tour de España, for reasons I was about to find out.

To be truthful, I was enthralled by the place from day one, a picture-

postcard Spanish town with golden sand beaches, and in those days, the fishermen's boats drawn up on the shore as they unloaded their shining baskets of sardines and prawns. Just above the beach was the Paseo Marítimo (seafront promenade) where all the best, and most expensive restaurants were to be found. The town of Sitges stretched from there up to the plaza de la villa (village square) in the middle of town, and then downtown to all the tourist bars and cafes. I couldn't help it, I just fell in love with the place.

I had never been to the Dubliner, the Irish bar that Tom owned and ran in Calle Isla de Cuba (Cuba street) just off the town square and was in no hurry to do so, as I had heard of awful fights in there, including stories of guns lying about on the bar and blood running down the stairs. This sounds far-fetched I know, but there were mercenaries in town, recently out of the Belgian Congo, and the Dubliner Bar was where they hung out.

In summer, just like all the 'tourist' bars in the town, the Dubliner Bar was packed every night, mainly with Irish, Scottish, English, Australians, and Kiwis, all the big drinkers you could wish for. The bar itself, rather like its owner, was secretively tucked away on a residential street, up a flight of stairs with a small terrace outside overlooking the street; as opposed to all the bars in the Calle Dos de Mayo which was the big party venue downtown where all the tourists went, so you had to know about the Dubliner to find it and go there. I would eventually get to know it very well.

It was the 'summer of '69' in Spain and we partied hard every day. I had been hitch-hiking all over Europe, and had ended up in Sitges. It was known as a cool little village where a lot of the boys who had fought in Vietnam passed through on their way to Marrakesh. They had finished their 'tour, of duty', signed off in Stuttgart, and made a beeline for Morocco, where they had heard the hash was plentiful and good.

I had only been living there for a few weeks, and was hanging with some young Americans who had, on this particular day my story begins,

organised a boat to go out on the water for a few hours. Pay 100 pesetas and you had all the booze you could drink, guys with guitars, some sandwiches: one big bloody piss-up. A 100 pesetas in 1969 was about US\$12.

It was a beautiful day, with some people smoking dope, (I think that was the whole idea of the boat trip as they couldn't be arrested by the Guardia Civil out at sea) and all of us just enjoying the sun and the crystal clear water out there. There were about 50 of us on board – foreigners from all over the world; pissed and stoned young people on an old, renovated fishing boat.

After a beautiful, long hot day of cruising around the coast, swimming off the boat, and getting sunburned and slightly tipsy, we finally arrived back at the port and a few of us found our way to Duncan's Bar. This was a little bar at the bottom of town, near the waterfront, where the smell of the salty sea breeze and the delicious aroma of sardines being grilled down on the beach hung in the air, along with the homey smell of Coppertone suntan lotion. This bar was owned by a Canadian guy, Duncan, where I had a spot singing with a band from Birmingham and where I sang for my drinks every night. I don't remember how I got that job, but I loved it, singing my favourite songs by the Dubliners, a very famous Irish folk group at the time.

There were four of them in the band, lovely guys, whom I really didn't know very well, and we sang mostly Irish songs, 'Black Velvet Band' and 'I'm a Rover' being great favourites. Unbeknownst to me, Duncan was one of Tom's best friends, so Tom was in the bar that night.

Apparently, although I never saw him, he saw me singing and went back to the Bar Dubliner and sent his sidekick Tony to approach me. We all knew Tony was Tom's 'go to' man, who would do his bidding, no matter what the task. Tony was English and was known by several monikers, including Dirty Tony, Tony Fix It and Tarragona Tony, for various, self-explanatory reasons. It was this 'person of many names' who approached me and said Tom wanted me to go up to the Dubliner.

I flat out refused, saying I would never go to 'that place'. Then he said, "Well, Tom would like to take you out to dinner."

Whoa! This was a whole different ball game. We didn't do *dinner* in those days. I had become addicted to the custard-filled donuts I had recently discovered in Spain, so that was usually my breakfast. For lunch I would join my American mates driving to the little pueblo of San Miguel de Orlerdola up in the hills behind the town, where we had found a typical Spanish restaurant that served 'pan tostado con tomate y ajo' (grilled bread with tomato, garlic and olive oil), and maybe a lamb chop, if you were feeling rich. We spent many amazing days up there, drinking all day, sleeping it off in the church next door, and starting all over again. If you ordered a pan tostado for 25 pesetas (US\$3) you got a free bottle of red wine.

So, as I was not in the habit of eating dinner, (or, more correctly, couldn't afford to) this was a very tempting offer, and also, I was intrigued. The man in black that I had seen on the beach, so abandoning all caution, and to start off the beginning of the rest of my life, I went with Tony up to the Dubliner.

I shall never forget walking up the steps and into the bar for the first time and catching Tom's eye. I have no idea what I was wearing; it would have been a version of jeans and a T-shirt, and bare feet, but I remember the exact moment as if it were yesterday. Tom walking down the length of the bar and coming over to me and walking me back down the stairs, and it sounds completely crazy, but that night I knew something special was happening. I had heard of 'love at first sight' and now I really felt this could be it.

From day one, it was all just terribly exciting. He was a very charismatic man, and I was totally entranced. He asked me where I would like to go to dinner, and I knew exactly where I wanted to go, as I had always imagined having dinner there. So, we made our way to the beautiful little restaurant I had in mind, with tables outside on the narrow footpath, with hanging baskets of flowers, and Spanish

guitar music playing softly inside. I walked past this restaurant every day on my way to the beach, and I had always dreamed of having a meal there one day. I can no longer remember the name of this little Spanish restaurant, but it looked so beautiful and authentic, on one of the myriad streets of steps leading down to the water.

I don't remember what we had to eat or what we talked about, but I was sure I was in love by the end of the night.

Since I had arrived in Sitges a couple of months before, I had found a place to stay with three American guys, Russ, Pete, and Cowboy John, who all had jobs in different bars in town. They generally slept all day and worked and partied all night, so I hardly ever saw them, although Tom thought they were losers and bums and wasn't very impressed that I lived with them. They thought I was very strange as I didn't smoke or do drugs which I have never done in my life, but they liked me as I looked after their puppy whose name was Dog. The only thing that stands out in my relationship with them was the day the town police knocked on the door looking for drugs, where Russ came bounding up the stairs with a small bag of hash insisting that I flush it down the loo in my bathroom. (Nice of them to knock I remember thinking.)

As we were leaving the restaurant on that first dinner date, Tom had asked me out for lunch the next day and, although I knew I was very involved by now, I had already made plans to go on a road trip to the south of France and on to Sardinia with my girlfriend, Gayle, a ballet dancer from South Africa. I couldn't let her down at the last minute, so Tom gave me a letter for a friend of his in Sardinia to see if he could give us a job in his nightclub. We were planning to hitch-hike up to the Spanish border and on to the south coast of France, before taking a ferry to Corsica, which would only take us a few days.

It felt very strange just leaving him like that after one date, but I couldn't let my friend down, and I had the feeling he would wait for me, well I was hoping. We only planned to be away for a few weeks, and I knew it was Tom's busiest time of the year in the Dubliner, so although

it was hard, I felt very positive about continuing with my plans.

Let's just say, as I had never been 'in love' before, I wasn't too sure what it felt like, but for the moment I was happy that it all felt terribly romantic – and it would have to wait.

2. My Earliest Memories

To go right back to the beginning, up until the moment I met Tom, I had led what could be described as a fairly normal life in New Zealand, with an absolutely idyllic childhood, living on a large sheep and cattle farm in the 'wop wops' of Manawahe, in the Bay of Plenty, with my mum and dad and five younger sisters. There were no shops, just the local school, gravel roads and of course, no TV.

I started Manawahe school in 1951 when I was still four years' old; probably because mum had had enough of me at home, as I was evidently a 'bit of a handful'. I caught the bus to school the first day and I was so excited as I couldn't wait to leave home. There is a photo of me in my little striped summer frock, holding my black cat, Nugget, whom I was hoping I could take with me to school.

I just couldn't wait to get to school, even though I had no idea what was in store for me there. On my first day all the kids lined up outside the schoolroom when the headmaster, Mr Noonan, rang the old cow bell, and then he played folk music on the gramophone, and we all marched around and did Scottish dancing; our PE for the day. This is the same Mr Noonan who later gave me the strap out in the school corridor when I was ten: man it hurt! I must have done something pretty bad to merit getting the strap, as usually only the boys got hit.

I was the only kid in Primer 1, and was made to sit up the front of the 25 kids of all ages sitting behind me, ranging from age four to 14. We were all taught by the one teacher, Mr Noonan, in the same building. These older kids basically stayed at primary school until they