

AZIZ AHMAD

The Foot Trail*

A FESTIVE, BOISTEROUS ATMOSPHERE had swept across Paris during the 1937 World Expo. Paris is always beautiful, but during this time its beauty had increased several fold. A new city had sprung up on either side of the Seine from Trocadéro to the Eiffel Tower and even beyond. Each country had set up its pavilion with such attention-grabbing displays that one felt seduced into visiting it.

Russia and Germany's pavilions stood right across from each other. The two gorgeous statues of a man and a woman with a sickle and hammer at the Russian pavilion seemed to give the impression that they were on their way to subdue Germany. The German eagle, on the other hand, its wings spread in supreme indifference, its neck tilted faintly sideways, its claws clutching the Nazi swastika, was unruffled by the menacing presence of the Russian sickle and hammer.

This scene was a visual premonition of the coming war. The British and Italian pavilions were farther afield but the sight of the Russian and German contest of force inevitably dragged in the thought of those other two countries and of France, but then the expo was taking place right in France.

Immersed in these thoughts, Azad first sauntered into the German pavilion and saw displays that seemed to bear no connection to German culture. How could he say that, he had lived in that country for only a few months after all? The battle songs that rang out in the pavilion, the eagles and the swastikas did impress him a lot though.

In the Russian pavilion, which he visited next, he saw a huge portrait of Stalin, a workingman's car, and many similar items which invited a person to visit Russia but didn't fail to impress upon him the triumph of the socialist system.

This Exposition Universelle, Azad concluded, was a magnificent advertisement. The sickle and hammer and the eagle may well have been

*"Pagdandī," *Savērā* No. 2 (n.d.), 162–75.

there to promote tourism, but they also provided a glimpse of reality: the impending arrival of war.

After looking at the pavilions of these two war-hungry nations, Azad visited those of Japan, England, Egypt, Canada, the USA, Sweden, Norway, etc., and decided to call it a day. He returned to the Trocadéro thinking that he would come back the next day and visit the pavilions of other countries.

From the hill of the Trocadéro he swept his gaze over the Exposition grounds. Evening had set in and a riotous galaxy of shimmering lights had sprung up around him the likes of which he had never in his life seen before. Rising above the cluster of buildings, the Eiffel Tower appeared even more breathtaking in its splendor.

He had never before seen such a crowd of the world's beauties gathered in one place as he saw during the Expo—in its pavilions, along its paths, in its strange-looking transport vehicles, its hotels and coffee houses. American girls in glamorous outfits smiling and chatting away with distinctly American accents; English girls otherwise taught from early on to bear themselves with dignity and reserve visibly affected enough by the infectious gaiety of Paris to talk more freely; Swedish blonds always ready to laugh with endearing spontaneity and without pretension; dark-eyed, sable-haired Italian women who reminded Azad of the Eastern beauty; and Spanish girls forced to immigrate because of the civil war raging at home—some in nice clothes, perhaps their parents were supporters of Generalissimo Franco—others shabby, perhaps they were partisans of democracy ...

Overwhelmed by such an immense galaxy of beautiful women around him, Azad took a deep breath: "If only I had a girlfriend with me!" And then the thought crossed his mind: "Why not find one here?"

He went down the steps of the Trocadéro and became lost in the crush of Expo-watchers. He was searching for some girl who was alone, or perhaps even two together, he would find a way to strike up a conversation.

An hour's hard work produced no result and he accepted defeat. He even tried some uncalled-for gestures a couple of times, even winked, even resorted to: "Excuse me, haven't I seen you somewhere before?" But, alas! nothing worked so he left the Expo through the Trocadéro exit.

He had struck up friendships with quite a few girls in Paris, but this time around he wanted to have a new girlfriend. He liked the principle of fresh and new in everything, and in matters of love he considered this principle golden.

So, rather than ask an old girlfriend to accompany him, he decided to

find a new one for the next day at the Expo as quickly as possible. A new girlfriend would make his day there even more enjoyable.

Accordingly, the next day Azad went to the Association des Étudiants Étrangers. He had long been a member. Whenever he was visiting Paris from London he spent most of his time there and he'd made quite a few conquests in the Society's club.

He was visiting Paris and the club for the first time in two months. His friends and acquaintances were everywhere. Shouting "Hello," "Bonjour, mademoiselle," "Buongiorno, signora," "Hello," "Bonjour," "Wie geht es," "Assalam-o-alaikum, ya akhi," "Hello," "How're you," "Oh, you're still here," "Hello," returning a smile with a smile, and sometimes greeting an acquaintance with a slight nod of the head—he proceeded straight away to the secretary's desk, where he saw a young woman chatting with her and sipping tea. He had never seen this woman before.

The secretary was a French woman in her mid- to late-twenties. She got up to shake hands with Azad and asked him laughing, "When did you get here?" And then she introduced him to the young woman.

"Monsieur Azad, Indien. Mademoiselle du Val."

Then she asked Azad, "The Channel wasn't stormy, was it?"

This question was often asked on the other side of the Channel, in England. The secretary, even if she didn't take Azad for English at least took him for a Brit.

After some brief small talk Azad said, "Mademoiselle's name is du Val. If I remember correctly, du Val was also the name of an old poet of Provence."

The secretary laughed and said, "Mademoiselle du Val also comes from the south of France."

Mademoiselle du Val, who was talking to an Indian perhaps for the first time in her life, said cheerfully, "I only study at the university there. Actually my hometown is Burgundy."

"Burgundy?"

"Yes, Monsieur. I wonder whether Monsieur is acquainted with the geography of our small country. India, by comparison, is a small sub-continent."

"No. I remember European history only in bits and pieces. Burgundy is where Attila and his wild Huns were defeated. Perhaps you know the real reason for their defeat."

"We all know the general account. Perhaps Monsieur knows something we don't."

"Yes, I do," Azad smiled and said. "Attila and his companions were so swept away by the incredible beauty of Burgundy's women that they

forgot how to fight. That's why they lost."

Azad's answer produced the expected effect. Hearing this praise of her country's women, and thus obliquely of her own beauty, the French girl felt somewhat pleased, and breaking into smiles warmed up to the Indian man.

Her hair was ash blond and her face, though a bit long, had attractive features. She wore lipstick and when she smiled her sparkling white teeth made her look quite lovely. To call her a beauty would be something of a stretch, but she was definitely good-looking, a bit too scrawny and slim though. Her clothes betrayed that she was not stylish and perhaps not even well-to-do. She had a pale yellow jacket on. In better clothes she might have looked more appealing. All the same, even in her present clothes she exuded an aura of the austere, carefree grace of students.

He and the girl talked mostly about this and that, first the politics of India and then the Spanish Civil War. At some point the secretary called her Yvonne. That's how he found out her first name. The conversation drifted toward Western politics. She told Azad that, up to a point, she was a supporter of communism, which promptly transmogrified Azad into a diehard communist. He lost no time in pillorying capitalists, fascists, and reactionaries. As he was holding forth against Wall Street tycoons, a young man approached their table. Yvonne du Val promptly introduced him to Azad.

You could call this fellow a young man only because he didn't appear much older and went to school with Yvonne, but everything about him—his face, the awkward slump of his shoulders, his small eyes, long nose and rather wide mouth that didn't seem to go well together, and his lumbering, lifeless stride—all of these somehow gave the impression that youth and old age had descended upon him at the same time.

Like Yvonne, he was studying classical languages. The two had a long, family friendship. It didn't take long for Azad to realize that his rival was no threat. He didn't have it in him to get in Azad's way.

And Azad was right because Yvonne was paying attention to him the whole time and completely ignored the young man.

It was close to eight in the evening. The tea session was breaking up and the Society's members were leaving in groups of two or three to go to dinner, or the movies, or the Expo, or just for a stroll. One particular group was heading off to march in some socialist demonstration. The leader of this group happened to be an incredibly beautiful girl who taught English at a French school in Egypt and was visiting Paris during the summer vacation. It seemed as if she and Yvonne were old friends. She came over and invited Yvonne to join their party. Yvonne introduced

her to Azad and asked him to come along. Azad knew well that French police didn't look kindly on foreigners attending political meetings or demonstrations in their country, but this was a godsend for him to develop his friendship with Yvonne. He immediately consented to tag along.

Yvonne also invited her old half-dead-looking friend to accompany them. He was himself an ardent champion of communism, so he was only too glad to join. In short, this group of a couple dozen, half of them women, set off in the direction of the Bastille district, which at one time was the site of the notorious prison that was completely obliterated during the French Revolution and only a memorial tower stood in its place now.

After the group returned from the demonstration, with its lively and boisterous atmosphere, its slogans, banners and hullabaloo, Azad waited for the right opportunity and invited Yvonne du Val to the Expo.

"I will wait for you at La Surus. What time will you be there?"

"I'll have to ask my father for permission," she said. "I'm sure you know that girls are not permitted to go out so freely in France. I'll call you in the morning by nine o'clock and let you know whether I can come."

Young, middle-class women did not enjoy the kind of freedom in France and other Latin countries that their counterparts in northern Europe or Germany did. Azad knew that, still he jotted down his phone number at the hotel and gave it to her.

If she didn't or couldn't turn up tomorrow, he would have to look for another girl.

They parted at the Metro. His hotel was not far from the station so he decided to walk.

The next morning Azad waited until nine o'clock but she didn't call, which made him angry.

In his angry state he shaved, changed, ate breakfast and then went down to the lobby around 10:30. There were three letters for him, two had British stamps on them and the third was a plain envelope with only his name scribbled on it. It looked as if someone had hand-delivered it.

He asked the doorman and was told that a young woman in a pale yellow jacket had dropped it off. He had even asked her whether "Monsieur Azad" should be informed but she had said just the letter would do.

Azad opened the envelope. The letter was in French and seemed to have been written hastily.

Dear Azad,

I'm writing this letter in a rush from the secretary's office. Forgive me, I couldn't find an opportunity to call you before nine o'clock this morning.

I'm not sure quite how to ask Father for permission. If I tell him that I'm going out with a young man for a stroll around town he'll never give his consent.

Since you're a kind, caring friend, and I too want very much to go to the Expo with you, give me some time to bring Father around to letting me go. Pushing it won't work.

I hope I'll see you at the "club" today. At least I'm permitted to go there.

Au revoir,
Yvonne

"What nonsense!" Azad mumbled to himself as he read through this strange, somewhat unusual missive. "Anyway 'Dear Azad' isn't really such a bad beginning. But what is this 'kind, caring' nonsense? and this 'bring Father around'? This girl is plain wasting my time."

He resolved firmly not to go to the club and whiled away his time moseying around the streets instead. In the afternoon, though, he felt the urge to go to the club, but he suppressed it. "No, I'll go to the Expo instead." But what would be the fun in going there alone? He thought he might ask some old girlfriend to go with him, but that wouldn't be fun either so finally he opted for the club.

It was almost 5:00 when he arrived. He talked with old friends and acquaintances until about 6:00. There was no sign of Yvonne anywhere. After setting up a date to go to the Expo with an old girlfriend the next day, he left the club cursing Yvonne up and down in his heart. But he had barely set foot outside when he spotted her, still wearing the same pale yellow jacket.

Azad tipped his hat to greet her and she said, "Okay, let's go."

"Where?"

"Didn't you say you wanted to go to the Expo today?"

"But you said in your letter that it was unlikely you would get permission, didn't you?"

"My father will think I'm at the club. Meanwhile we'll roam around the Expo, provided I can get home by 8:30."

They arrived at the Expo. Inside, Azad took a picture of Yvonne on the Trocadéro with the Eiffel Tower looming up behind her in the background, against which she looked stunning. The one thought that kept nagging at him was: if only she were wearing upscale clothes rather than this pale yellow jacket.

They looked around the Expo and ate their dinner there. When they left it was around nine o'clock. Yvonne began to feel terribly nervous. Partly because of her nervousness and partly because of the great crush of exiting people, Azad couldn't find an opportunity to even touch her

slightly. And at the Expo there was no way for him to have broached such matters since they were too busy exploring the exhibits.

Yvonne didn't show up at the club the next few days, nor did Azad get any news of her. He wrote her a letter every day in English, on purpose because her father didn't know English, and kept them very short, no longer than three or four lines, each one expressing his desire to see her again. And all this economy simply as a precaution.

Azad began to despair after three days. However, on the fourth, when he returned to his hotel for lunch, he was given a letter in the lobby, from Yvonne. Inside the envelope he found a scrap of blotting-paper with the following scribbled in pencil:

Dear Azad,

I knew I wouldn't find you at the hotel so I brought this scrap along. You had asked me to visit some place with you outside Paris. Shall we go tomorrow?

I'll come around two, two-thirty.

Till tomorrow,
Yvonne

Azad immediately jotted down a letter responding in the affirmative. She came the next day and they took the Metro to Gare du Nord. The train going to the small village they planned to visit was to leave in fifteen minutes.

"I told Father that I had to see a girlfriend," Yvonne told him. "No matter how hard I might try to convince him that my relationship with you is not of a sexual nature, he just wouldn't believe it. It's hard for these old-fashioned people to imagine pure friendship between a man and a woman."

"This does not bode well," Azad told himself. "We're starting off on the wrong foot, but, anyway, no harm in trying."

"Our relationship is based on our mental affinity," Yvonne, in no mood to let up on her silly talk, went on. "You care about communism," (Azad said in his heart, "Well, that depends on the time and occasion."), so do I. If a man and a woman can forget about gender and work together, they can bring about the revolution in no time at all. ("But this goes against the teachings of Marx and Lenin, and is completely contrary to the teachings of Freud," thought Azad.) I like you because you're a comrade who comes from such a far country, but still our thoughts about mankind's well-being are amazingly similar."

She was not quite done with her speech when the train whistled and they hopped aboard.

The village they were visiting was some twenty miles from Paris on the banks of the Seine, with hardly more than a couple of dozen houses. They first had some tasteless coffee in a restaurant by the river and then set out to explore the area.

After the din of Paris, the hustle bustle and the awesome grandeur of the Expo, the austere beauty of this village had a pleasure all its own. Azad felt the pleasure of the relatively secluded atmosphere even more because his companion was a beautiful—all right, tolerably good-looking—young, French woman.

They crossed the red brick bridge over the Seine and set out on a trail discussing current politics and the possibility of revolution in Europe. The Seine flowed along one side of the trail and a copse of very dense trees stretched out along the other.

The weather was absolutely perfect. The sky was slightly overcast, but everything about the atmosphere predicted that it was not likely to rain that day. The absence of sunlight made the trees look darker and denser and the waters of the Seine a shade murkier.

They left the village far behind as they strolled on. In the fields beyond the river a few peasants were at work, but the trail was totally deserted, except for the two of them.

They soon forgot about current politics and continued walking in silence. One of the branches of a tree was hanging over the path low enough that Yvonne started to climb on it while Azad supported her. When she came back down he wrapped his arm around her and she didn't object.

They walked on. Slowly he tightened his grip around her waist, which was incredibly thin. When he moved his hand up a little, he could feel her jutting ribs clearly. For the first time he realized how truly skinny she was. His hand moved further up and the two walked along stuck to each other. Neither said a word. The path was already empty and was now moving away from the riverbank into the thicket of dense trees.

With Yvonne still in his arms he asked, "Shall I kiss you?"

"Why?" she asked, her body quaking all over.

He didn't hesitate to answer this strange question. He hugged her intimately, planted a long kiss on her lips, and then said, "Yvonne, I love you."

A soft, melting emotion swept over the girl, which Azad found rather ridiculous, and she asked, "Are you telling the truth?"

Summoning all the signs of true love to his face he answered, "I'm telling the truth."

"But I had hoped for a friendship that rose above any trace of sexual-

ity, the friendship of two true revolutionaries. You're ruining it."

"Revolutionaries also believe in sex. It's the same as any other physical need, though revolutionaries don't put much store in emotions."

"Azad, you're an incorrigible materialist."

"Revolutionaries are materialists too," he said and kissed her again. This time she melted completely. He thought that perhaps no one had kissed her so passionately before, no one had taken such liberties with her body. He knew that at this moment her mind was completely incapable of dealing with the complexities of revolution, materialism, communism, love, and emotions. What was evident, though, was that her warm, young flesh was trembling with excitement. He didn't let the opportunity slip. He lifted her in his arms, quickly found a spot in the thicket, gently laid her down and started to unbutton her pale yellow jacket. He caressed her breasts, which resembled pink blossoms among the lush green trees. Then he covered her whole body with his like a stretch of cloud spreading itself over a clump of flourishing trees.

Later, when he helped her get up from the bed of grass he felt a strange feeling of satisfaction wash over him. This girl was not a virgin, and he was not the first man in her life. Some other comrade, some other revolutionary and materialist had kissed her before, taken liberties with her body and accepted her virginity as a tribute.

The kissing and hugging continued while they trekked back, but as they came to the open road they separated. On the bridge over the Seine Yvonne suddenly broke her stride, bent over and started staring at the murky waters below. In a painful voice she said, "Azad, I didn't expect this from you. I had thought you would remain a friend. And this ... that nothing of this sort would happen between us to spoil it."

"Dear, it's not as if we've done something gross. Even in the Russian Republic it was permitted freely."

"Only my husband has the right to kiss and hug me, and ..."

"Prior experience in these matters always comes in handy after marriage."

"Azad, you're a terrible materialist. You don't love me. You don't love me at all."

"I've just now given you a practical demonstration of my love, and in the future, too, I would be ready to prove it again anytime."

"You have no emotions. You don't know how to love."

"Yvonne, according to socialist principles, love is merely a biological need."

She burst out laughing. "You're a terrible materialist." And then she lapsed back into her former melancholy state. Azad understood why and

said, "I've taken every precaution. There's no chance of your getting pregnant."

She laughed again. "No, I was thinking that after some time you will go back to your home country or somewhere else ... I will be married to Adolf, but ..."

"Adolf—who?"

"My friend. The one you met at the club."

Oh, that half-dead youth—he thought to himself—they would make an odd couple indeed!

"But whenever I put my arms around him, when his children jump in my lap, I'll sometimes remember you and I'll remember the foot trail ..."

Tears welled up in her eyes.

This prompted him to put on fake signs of having been affected by her feelings and he said, "God knows how long and how many people it has taken walking back and forth to make that trail ... just so it should become a memorial to our love."

Her tears brimmed over. Azad continued in the same sad tone, "Nature made that path to serve as a memorial to our love. It also made the nose in such a way that it would be able to hold the weight of eye-glasses."

In the middle of crying she burst out laughing, "You've lifted that. Voltaire said it."

"When did I claim that I didn't lift it?"

On the trip back in the train he asked her softly, "Have you had a lover before me?"

"Yes," she replied, "Adolf."

He asked her to meet him again. She found one excuse after another not to until the train pulled into the Paris station.

In a decisive voice he told her the time and the place where he expected to see her and then walked off to board the bus before she answered.

When he arrived at the appointed time and place he didn't see her. For a whole month afterwards he stayed in Paris and wrote her several letters. She didn't respond. Neither did she show up at the club even once during this time. And neither did Adolf.

As he was leaving for Rome, he dropped her one more letter. He received her response a fortnight later in Rome.

Like all her letters, this one was no less odd. It started with a French poem:

The worst pain is that one does not know its cause.
Without love, without hate

My heart feels so much pain ...

The segment following the poem, dated 24 August, was scribbled in English:

Now listen to me with a cool head. I believe I told you that one of my girlfriends and her husband were coming to Paris. They arrived the evening of the "foot trail." That's why I really couldn't come to see you. Whatever happens, happens for our own good. What do you think? Wouldn't you say I'm a young philosopher?

On the way back you looked a little crestfallen at the station. And when you dashed off to your bus I felt pity for you. I spent the whole night thinking. I couldn't fall asleep. I kind of feel embarrassed to tell you. Perhaps you think that I was worried. The fact is your letters heightened my worry. I don't love Adolf the way I love you, and you know that. You must have known that already on the trail. I worried that you might start loving me and push our life along a dangerous path.

But your last letter, filled with bitterness and anger, made me feel that you're back to your normal self now. In the course of your present travel you'll gradually forget me. You'll realize that I'm not the loveliest, the best girl in the world. There are plenty of lovely girls around. So

Goodbye now.

Something tells me that to you I am what I really am not. I really am not.

What a pity! I liked your friendship so much, but I don't like that dangerous path at all.

You're an out-and-out materialist!

Dear Azad, I must leave now; I have to take care of my girlfriend.

Goodbye,

Yvonne.

The remaining space on the last page of the letter was occupied with the following, dated 26 August:

Oh Lord, the 26th of August already and I haven't had a chance to drop this letter in the post. You must be thinking that I won't respond even to your last letter.

I'm getting married the day after tomorrow.

Ok, bye now.

But that depends on you.

A member of your club, student of classical languages, lover of communism, and the heroine of the dangerous foot trail,

Yvonne □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon