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I first saw José years ago on the stairs of the old Residencia Internacional hotel. I looked at him, he at me, then we both carried on walking, he up to the bar and I to the main door. It didn't seem too much to me, but then I wasn't aware in those days just how important a look can be. I travelled further south for more adventures with my friend Beryl, and he did whatever he did, which I didn't find out until much later. Beryl and I were fifteen, it was May 1955, and we had all our lives ahead of us. We took the roads as they came, as long as things were new and different to where we'd been. That's all we asked.

Girona, a pre-Roman city about forty miles inland from the Costa Brava, had a vast old quarter with a much-visited cathedral, Arab baths, and monumental churches. Bells rang across this forest of stone every fifteen minutes, day and night. The cobbled alleys and crumbling stairways, the deep arches leading to unexpected courtyards, were all stone, medieval or pre-Roman. Parts of the original city wall still stood as clumps of stone covered with weeds, thousands of years old. The buildings, huge buttresses of Roman craft, leaned together across the strip of street leaving only a shine of brilliant sky. The stone made the town echo and enhanced all sound. Only the bells were free

as they tolled high above the buildings. Girona holds on to its atmosphere and makes sure the past is there always, solid, unconquered by decay. It was said the stones had a magnetism that drew certain people back time and time again. I believe it. Carcassonne has the same legend and I've heard it's to do with the ley lines. At certain points across the earth the energy builds up and creates a pull, a pulse, and in these places unusual and mystical things can happen.

Beryl and I were Bohemians and wore rope Roman sandals you could buy in London's Charing Cross Road for three and sixpence, and very tight, black drainpipe trousers. Our black sleeveless tops were lopsided, hand-made, falling apart. Our nails were painted black and we wore beautifully applied white lipstick. We dressed the same as we did when dancing all night to trad jazz at Cy Laurie's club in Soho, or Sidney Bechet's in Paris. In Girona that first time, the Spanish had never seen anything like it. They hadn't seen many foreigners. Tourism hadn't even begun. The women threw round prickly things that stuck to our hair, the kids, stones, and the men, glances long and curious. They were more concerned with what was underneath our extraordinary clothes. Beryl wore gold hoop earrings, mine were dangling silvered chandeliers. We put on a huge amount of make-up – the longest task of the day was getting that on. Brigitte Bardot kiss-curls covered our ears, and our hair was streaked with gold dust that in certain climates turned green. In the evening we wore white fisherman's sweaters reaching our knees, also bought in Charing Cross Road. And the obligatory black duffel coats, the pockets filled with make-up and Coty perfume. Beryl was indeed beautiful, which made being her friend difficult. I didn't compete; even at fifteen I knew

that was a mistake, but I certainly tried to be always at my best. I wanted to be a gypsy. My father didn't consider that a career, but I knew I'd travel. I had a great love of life in those days.

We came from Albany Park, in Kent. No description really fitted that place, so housing-estate will do. Most of it was pre-Second World War, a lot of bungalows, and there were no scandals except what Beryl and I provided with our appearance. I was dying for the fabulous, the superb.

Before long we hitched a lift to Barcelona and then south to Castelldefels, which consisted then of two hotels. We didn't eat much because we didn't have any money, but we were filled with a lovely shivery excitement. We danced as we breathed – if there weren't clubs and dancehalls, then in the streets. In Paris people had thrown us money, which was better than working in bars, modelling and sometimes begging. And we had the big one on our side – youth – but we didn't even consider that. Ageing, like death, was a process that didn't happen to us.

Over the next few months, I sometimes thought of Girona, its strong skyline with the cathedral and the church of St Felix, and oddly an ordinary house with a rather grand tower that stuck up incongruously amidst the ancient buildings. They said it belonged to a Frenchwoman.

When I set foot in Girona the second time I knew I was where I should be. It took the second arrival to capture me, and once that happened I had no desire to move again.

They were lighting fires at the edge of the old quarter, and the sky was violet and flashing with huge flat stars. The sun was up there too, setting behind the last bridge in a blaze of scarlet rage. The narrow streets were full of music,

perfume, the smell of wood smoke. The church bells chimed as though for a celebration and all the lights of the city came on, hundreds of yellow eyes. It was a true welcome.

Beryl said we should work in a club. We'd say we were eighteen, so where was the problem? There was no language difficulty – pouring drinks. Our Spanish was limited. *Guapa* – beautiful, *dinero* – money, *rubia* – blonde, *morena* – dark. That way we missed a lot of indelicate talk.

Cal Ros, the smart restaurant excelling in regional delicacies, was already filling up. It was a clamorous night, everybody on the street, the bars full. There was a definite feeling of fiesta and yet it was just another evening for them.

We turned into the alley beside the Cal Ros restaurant and two men came towards us. One was Lluís, a cathedral guide I'd met the previous time, the other shorter one was his friend. We exchanged names, shook hands. The friend wore a blue shirt and dark patterned pullover. He had a persuasive voice and, even on such an insignificant occasion, his speech was salted with irony. He was alive in every part of him, the opposite of anything I'd encountered in Albany Park, and he wasn't afraid to show it. He said there was a film director in town and maybe Beryl and I should apply for roles. After all it was a coincidence. The director arrives, then we arrive. Coincidences should never be dismissed. The next week he'd be shooting a sequence up near the cathedral. The director's name was Jean Cocteau.

'He wants a ballet dancer.'

'That's me,' I said immediately.

'Yes, you look as though you should be a ballet dancer, but can you dance? Lluís for example is a born writer but has never written a word.' He clapped his hands, dismissing mere talent.

Lluís spoke fluent English, and his friend bits of everything. He laughed a lot, but it was attractive. When we said good-bye I knew where I'd seen him. He was the man on the stairs of the Residencia Internacional hotel.

Suddenly all the radios played the haunting Spanish song that we thought was a flamenco chart buster. It was in fact an advertising jingle. The music was full of the melancholy and desire that the south conjured up. I thought it announced the beginning of a huge and deathly passion. How right I was.