

## 2

Before the Romans arrived, Girona was an Iberian trading centre. The first known inhabitants, at least 5000 years ago, were Iberians living in the Catalan country village of Ullastret. The Phoenicians settled in Girona province, leaving artefacts and sacrificial stones. The Greeks left a settlement along the Catalan coast named 'Empúries', a Spanish translation of the Greek name 'Emporion'. Then came the Romans, who built a large part of what is now the old quarter. Charlemagne marched into the city and left his influence, as did Napoleon III. Girona won the Moorish invasion, but lost against Franco in the Civil War.

They all left something.

Believed to have begun as a simple pagan temple for the Romans, the cathedral is now predominantly Gothic. Near the altar is Charlemagne's chair. A museum houses masterpieces from every century, including the much-visited 'Tapestry of the Creation'. With its disproportionately large nave, the fact the building stands up at all is a miracle.

And there were other settlements not yet rediscovered, but their presence added to the force of the atmosphere.

Perhaps because so many cults and religions have flourished there, no one of them is remembered exceptionally.

Historical finds occur frequently, giving evidence of much older civilizations. Girona celebrates its past with fiestas, legends, ritual, and theatre. The only sign of what has been so important there, and then completely forgotten, is the stones.

I think Beryl and I, as we walked on that magical evening through these unimaginable streets, sensed the imprint of some of this, although we knew nothing of its outer knowledgeable form and could not have put any of it into words.

They remembered us with pleasure at the Residencia Internacional hotel, which couldn't be said for a lot of places we revisited. Manolo, the night concierge, got out the drinks and Eva, the cleaning woman, ran down the stairs to welcome us as though it was an occasion. It was the first time I'd felt important anywhere.

'Who needs a St Christopher medal?' said Beryl. 'This place has all the luck we need.'

And then José was there and asked if we were runaways. He looked as though he could handle a drama. I explained our career was travelling, and that we were making our way to Bohemia in mid-Europe.

'Why?'

'Because we're Bohemians.'

'I'm sure Bohemians dance exquisitely. There's a fiesta tonight. I'll take you.'

Eva told me later that José thought I was twelve. He did ask how we had got our passports so young. I'd persuaded my father that Beryl and I were going to do a language course in Paris at a youth centre. It was the only way we could get passports under age. I was the one with

the ideas, and Beryl went along with them and shared the consequences.

For the fiesta we wore skirts, but that didn't mean we were dressed right. The skirts were tight, with slits at the side. When the wolf whistles started, so did the insults. The women thought we were whores, the men hoped we were. All that quietened down when José caught up with us. He commanded respect.

The chirp of insects, the delicious breeze from the south, the distant music, the Mediterranean night, thrilled me to the bone. All the joyous things were there. Life promised me that night I'd be happy.

We learned to dance the *pasodoble* and the traditional *sardana*—both the 'long' and the 'short'. Lamb was the speciality of the region and we had cutlets, salad, and a caramel custard with a burnt sugar top. We ate plenty because we were never sure when we would eat again. Lluís was there and he gave me an old piece of sculpture he'd found in the garden behind the cathedral. It was flat, smooth, and brown with horns and was apparently an ancient animal head. José gave him a knife and he etched my name and the date on the stone. Lluís was well in with the cathedral and had asked permission to open one of its properties as a bar, selling postcards and reproductions of the cathedral's treasures. Then when he'd got enough money he'd write full-time. José wasn't exactly quiet, but I got no impression of what he did, who he was.

On the way back I saw the Catalan trees like up-flung umbrellas, blue grey in the night light. The road, a mere strip, was hard and warm, and Beryl and I walked without shoes. All of it was beautiful. I wasn't in love that night, I just felt part of life, flowing with it, full to the brim. The champagne helped, and José was no slouch at pouring a drink.

'If only it could stay like this,' said Lluís suddenly.

'If only,' said José.

We walked together, the four of us – harmonious, good friends now, at our best.