

# GOLDEN EARRINGS

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ONE

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*Paloma*  
*Paris, 1975*

It was 24 November, the day after the funeral of Generalissimo Franco, the dictator of Spain, that I saw my first ghost. The morning started off ordinarily enough. I woke at six o'clock and stretched my arms and legs before slipping out of bed. It was still dark and I turned on the bedside lamp with its floral shade. By its mottled light, I pulled on my leotard and tights. My hairpins and headband were in the dresser drawer. I fixed my hair away from my face quickly and by habit, before guarding myself against the late autumn chill by wrapping my dressing gown around me and putting on my slippers.

The hallway was dark, but I didn't need the light to guide me along it towards the kitchen. I crept past Mamie's bedroom. My grandmother — whom I called 'Mamie' when we spoke French and 'Iaia' when we spoke Catalan — was a heavy sleeper and a herd of bulls wouldn't have disturbed her, but it was guilt that made me move quietly. Mamie said that no ballerina should even think of getting out of bed before nine o'clock, let alone practising before that time. But I was meeting Gaby at the café during her

break in lectures, and I had classes to give in the afternoon. Despite the events of the previous summer, I could not give up my daily practice of barre and centre work, even if it meant rising early. I'd rather do without sleep and food than miss my routine of *pliés*, *tendus*, *ronds de jambe* and stretching. They were as essential to me as breathing.

I switched on the light above the stove, careful not to wake my cockatiel, Diaghilev, who was still quiet in his covered cage. The Australian parrot with the Russian name had been a present to me from Mamie for my eighteenth birthday and was a chatterer. As soon as the morning light entered the kitchen he would be whistling bars from Mozart's 'Alla Turca'. I turned on the tap and filled a saucepan with water. There was a copy of *El Diario*, the Spanish émigré newsletter, on the bench. The newsletter was directed at those refugees who had fled Spain for France in 1939, after the Civil War. Pictures of Franco from his youth to his old age were on the cover. The article said that the dictator, who had died two weeks shy of his eighty-third birthday, would be buried at a memorial commemorating the War Dead. The paragraph was crossed out in red pen. Next to it Mamie had written: 'The *Fascist* War Dead!' I could feel the vehemence in her scrawl. It was not her usual ladylike penmanship and, if there weren't only the two of us in the apartment, I would have thought someone else had written it.

I stood by the window while I waited for the coffee to brew. The wheaty smell of fresh bread drifted from the bakery across the street. I lifted the lace curtain and saw a queue of eager housewives waiting on the pavement outside. It was passion that made them early risers, like me. Their pursuit of the finest *pain frais* to feed their families enabled them to go without sleep. Dance affected

me the same way. Nothing gave me more satisfaction than to unfold myself into a beautiful *arabesque* or execute a graceful *grand jeté*, even if I had to practise from morning until night seven days a week to do it.

A bittersweet aroma wafted around the kitchen, signalling that the coffee was ready. I let the curtain fall, noticing for the first time that its hem was frayed. I reached for a cup and saucer from the odd assortment of floral and plain designs in the cupboard. When I sat down to drink the honey-thick brew, my lip touched something rough on the china and I saw the cup was chipped. Mamie was fastidiously neat, but it was my mother who would never have tolerated things like chipped cups or frayed curtains. ‘Beauty is always in the details, Paloma,’ she used to say. But Mama wasn’t here any more, and my grandmother and I muddled along in our chipped and frayed existence without her.

There were two entrances to my grandmother’s ballet studio: one was directly from our kitchen; the second was next to the landing in the corridor outside. I took the key from the hook on the back of the kitchen door and entered the studio. Daybreak was starting to filter through the windows that overlooked the courtyard of our apartment building, so I didn’t turn on the lights. Although the floor was swept and mopped daily, the closed air was choked with the scent of dust and mould that was common to old buildings in Paris.

I took my ballet slippers from the cupboard and sat on the floor to tie the ribbons. While I was tucking in the ends, I thought about Mamie’s angry scribbling on the newsletter. When I was a child, I had often asked my grandmother about her Spanish past, but her lips would purse and the light would disappear from her eyes.

‘Perhaps when you are older,’ she would reply. I could see I was causing her pain and learned not to touch on the subject of her life before she came to Paris.

I left my dressing gown and bed slippers on the piano stool. Our accompanist, Madame Carré, would be in later to play Beethoven and Schubert for our students. But I liked to practise on my own in silence, following my body rather than the beat. From my *demi-pliés*, I moved to my *grand-pliés*, relishing the feeling of strength and flexibility in my legs. I cringed when a memory from last June’s debacle at the ballet school tried to force its way into my thoughts. I closed my eyes and pushed the image of me standing in front of the noticeboard, bathed in sweat and with nausea rising in my stomach, out of my mind. Years of training had taught me to focus on a single objective until I achieved it, and I was not going to give up on my dreams now.

After an hour at the barre, I was ready to do some centre practice. I positioned myself in front of the mirrored wall at the front of the studio and was about to commence a *tendu* combination when suddenly the daylight outside flickered. It was such a strange phenomenon that I lost my concentration. A thunderstorm so early in the morning? In November? I moved towards the window, perplexed. That was when I saw her, standing in the courtyard as if she was waiting for someone to arrive. I didn’t realise that she was a ghost at first but I wondered — because of her black wavy hair and the proud way that she held her chin — whether she was Spanish. The woman wasn’t anyone I recognised from Mamie’s collection of former refugees who occasionally gathered in our apartment. My initial impression was that she was a mother coming to enquire about lessons for her child on her way to work.

I opened the window and called to her, ‘*Bonjour, Madame! Un moment, s’il vous plaît.*’

I grabbed my leg warmers and coat from the cupboard, and slipped some loose boots over my ballet shoes. Before I headed out into the corridor, I picked up a leaflet for our school that gave the times of the classes. It was only when I was halfway down the stairs that it occurred to me that the courtyard door should have still been locked. How had the woman got inside? We didn’t have a concierge: my grandfather had never believed in them. He’d viewed anyone outside of the family as a potential spy.

I reached the ground floor and opened the door to the courtyard. The cold air bit my face and I shivered. I couldn’t see the woman. Where had she gone? Then I felt someone watching me. I turned and saw her standing by the disused well. My breath caught in my throat. She emanated a quality that reminded me of the great *étoiles* of the Paris Ballet: majesty. Her face was a slightly offset oval, and her nose above her strong, red mouth was broad and flat. But her eyes ... I had never seen such eyes. They were like two black shells shimmering under the sea. It was their depth that made me realise the woman was not of this world.

She moved slowly towards me, her arm extended from her cloak with the grace of a dancer. Her hand hovered near mine as if she wanted to give me something. Without thinking, I opened my palm. Two objects dropped into it. I glanced down and saw a pair of golden hooped earrings. I looked from my palm to the woman, but she had disappeared as suddenly as she had arrived, leaving only the fading echo of her footsteps and the earrings I held in my hand.