

The Shadow of the Wind

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Extract

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The Cemetery of Forgotten Books

I still remember the day my father took me to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books for the first time. It was the early summer of 1945, and we walked through the streets of a Barcelona trapped beneath ashen skies as dawn poured over Rambla de Santa Mónica in a wreath of liquid copper.

‘Daniel, you mustn’t tell anyone what you’re about to see today,’ my father warned. ‘Not even your friend Tomás. No one.’

‘Not even Mummy?’

My father sighed, hiding behind the sad smile that followed him like a shadow all through his life.

‘Of course you can tell her,’ he answered, heavy-hearted. ‘We keep no secrets from her. You can tell her everything.’

Shortly after the Civil War, an outbreak of cholera had taken my mother away. We buried her in Montjuïc on my fourth birthday. The only thing I can recall is that it rained all day and all night, and that when I asked my father whether heaven was crying, he couldn’t bring himself to reply. Six years later my mother’s absence remained in the air around us, a deafening silence that I had not yet learned to stifle with words. My father and I lived in a modest apartment on Calle Santa Ana, a stone’s throw from the church square. The apartment was directly above the bookshop, a legacy from my grandfather, that specialized in rare collectors’ editions and secondhand books – an enchanted bazaar, which my father hoped would one day be mine. I was raised among books, making invisible friends in pages that seemed cast from dust and whose smell I carry on my hands to this day. As a child I learned to fall asleep talking to my mother in the darkness of my bedroom, telling her about the day’s events, my adventures

at school, and the things I had been taught. I couldn't hear her voice or feel her touch, but her radiance and her warmth haunted every corner of our home, and I believed, with the innocence of those who can still count their age on their ten fingers, that if I closed my eyes and spoke to her, she would be able to hear me wherever she was. Sometimes my father would listen to me from the dining room, crying in silence.

On that June morning, I woke up screaming at first light. My heart was pounding in my chest as if my very soul was trying to escape. My father hurried into my room and held me in his arms, trying to calm me.

'I can't remember her face. I can't remember Mummy's face,' I muttered, breathless.

My father held me tight.

'Don't worry, Daniel. I'll remember for both of us.'

We looked at each other in the half-light, searching for words that didn't exist. For the first time, I realized my father was growing old. He stood up and drew the curtains to let in the pale glint of dawn.

'Come, Daniel, get dressed. I want to show you something,' he said.

'Now? At five o'clock in the morning?'

'Some things can only be seen in the shadows,' my father said, flashing a mysterious smile probably borrowed from the pages of one of his worn Alexandre Dumas romances.

Night watchmen still lingered in the misty streets when we stepped out of the front door. The lamps along the Ramblas marked out an avenue in the early morning haze as the city awoke, like a watercolour slowly coming to life. When we reached Calle Arco del Teatro, we continued through its arch toward the Raval quarter, entering a vault of blue haze. I followed my father through that narrow lane, more of a scar than a street, until the glimmer of the Ramblas faded behind us. The brightness of dawn filtered down from balconies and cornices in streaks of slanting light that dissolved before touching the ground. At last my

father stopped in front of a large door of carved wood, blackened by time and humidity. Before us loomed what to my eyes seemed the carcass of a palace, a place of echoes and shadows.

‘Daniel, you mustn’t tell anyone what you’re about to see today. Not even your friend Tomás. No one.’

A smallish man with vulturine features framed by thick grey hair opened the door. His impenetrable aquiline gaze rested on mine.

‘Good morning, Isaac. This is my son, Daniel,’ my father announced. ‘He’ll be eleven soon, and one day the shop will be his. It’s time he knew this place.’

The man called Isaac nodded and invited us in. A blue-tinted gloom obscured the sinuous contours of a marble staircase and a gallery of frescoes peopled with angels and fabulous creatures. We followed our host through a palatial corridor and arrived at a sprawling round hall where a spiralling basilica of shadows was pierced by shafts of light from a high glass dome above us. A labyrinth of passageways and crammed bookshelves rose from base to pinnacle like a beehive, woven with tunnels, steps, platforms and bridges that presaged an immense library of seemingly impossible geometry. I looked at my father, stunned. He smiled at me and winked.

‘Welcome to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books, Daniel.’

Scattered among the library’s corridors and platforms I could make out about a dozen human figures. Some of them turned to greet me from afar, and I recognized the faces of various colleagues of my father’s, fellows of the secondhand-booksellers’ guild. To my ten-year-old eyes, they looked like a brotherhood of alchemists in furtive study. My father knelt next to me and, with his eyes fixed on mine, addressed me in the hushed voice he reserved for promises and secrets.

‘This is a place of mystery, Daniel, a sanctuary. Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and

dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens. This place was already ancient when my father brought me here for the first time, many years ago. Perhaps as old as the city itself. Nobody knows for certain how long it has existed, or who created it. I will tell you what my father told me, though. When a library disappears, or a bookshop closes down, when a book is consigned to oblivion, those of us who know this place, its guardians, make sure that it gets here. In this place, books no longer remembered by anyone, books that are lost in time, live forever, waiting for the day when they will reach a new reader's hands. In the shop we buy and sell them, but in truth books have no owner. Every book you see here has been somebody's best friend. Now they only have us, Daniel. Do you think you'll be able to keep such a secret?

My gaze was lost in the immensity of the place and its sorcery of light. I nodded, and my father smiled.

'And do you know the best thing about it?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'According to tradition, the first time someone visits this place, he must choose a book, whichever he wants, and adopt it, making sure that it will never disappear, that it will always stay alive. It's a very important promise. For life,' explained my father. 'Today it's your turn.'

For almost half an hour, I wandered within the winding labyrinth, breathing in the smell of old paper and dust. I let my hand brush across the avenues of exposed spines, musing over what my choice would be. Among the titles faded by age, I could make out words in familiar languages and others I couldn't identify. I roamed through galleries filled with hundreds, thousands of volumes. After a while it occurred to me that between the covers of each of those books lay a boundless universe waiting to be discovered, while beyond those walls, in the outside world, people allowed life to pass by in afternoons of football and radio soaps, content to do little more than gaze at their navels. It

might have been that notion, or just chance, or its more flamboyant relative, destiny, but at that precise moment, I knew I had already chosen the book I was going to adopt, or that was going to adopt me. It stood out timidly on one corner of a shelf, bound in wine-coloured leather. The gold letters of its title gleamed in the light bleeding from the dome above. I drew near and caressed them with the tips of my fingers, reading to myself.

The Shadow of the Wind

JULIÁN CARAX

I had never heard of the title or the author, but I didn't care. The decision had been taken. I took the book down with great care and leafed through the pages, letting them flutter. Once liberated from its prison on the shelf, it shed a cloud of golden dust. Pleased with my choice, I tucked it under my arm and retraced my steps through the labyrinth, a smile on my lips. Perhaps the bewitching atmosphere of the place had got the better of me, but I felt sure that *The Shadow of the Wind* had been waiting there for me for years, probably since before I was born.

That afternoon, back in the apartment on Calle Santa Ana, I barricaded myself in my room to read the first few lines. Before I knew what was happening, I had fallen right into it. The novel told the story of a man in search of his real father, whom he had never known and whose existence was only revealed to him by his mother on her deathbed. The story of that quest became a ghostly odyssey in which the protagonist struggled to recover his lost youth, and in which the shadow of a cursed love slowly surfaced to haunt him until his dying breath. As it unfolded, the structure of the story began to remind me of one of those Russian dolls that contain innumerable diminishing replicas of themselves inside. Step by step the narrative split into a thousand stories, as if it had entered a gallery of mirrors, its identity

fragmented into endless reflections. The minutes and hours glided by as in a dream. When the cathedral bells tolled midnight, I barely heard them. Under the warm light cast by the reading lamp, I was plunged into a new world of images and sensations peopled by characters who seemed as real to me as my surroundings. Page after page I let the spell of the story and its world take me over, until the breath of dawn touched my window and my tired eyes slid over the last page. I lay in the bluish half-light with the book on my chest and listened to the murmur of the sleeping city. My eyes began to close, but I resisted. I did not want to lose the story's spell or bid farewell to its characters just yet.

Once, in my father's bookshop, I heard a regular customer say that few things leave a deeper mark on a reader than the first book that finds its way into his heart. Those first images, the echo of words we think we have left behind, accompany us throughout our lives and sculpt a place in our memory to which, sooner or later – no matter how many books we read, how many worlds we discover, or how much we learn or forget – we will return. For me those enchanted pages will always be the ones I found among the passageways of the Cemetery of Forgotten Books.

DAYS OF ASHES
1945–1949

1

A secret's worth depends on the people from whom it must be kept. My first thought on waking was to tell my best friend about the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. Tomás Aguilar was a classmate who devoted his free time and his talent to the invention of wonderfully ingenious but bizarre contraptions such as the aerostatic dart or the dynamo spinning top. I pictured us both, equipped with torches and compasses, uncovering the mysteries of those bibliographic catacombs. Who better than Tomás to share my secret? Then, remembering my promise, I decided that circumstances advised me to adopt what in detective novels is termed a different 'modus operandi'. At noon I approached my father to quiz him about the book and about Julián Carax – both of which must be famous, I assumed. My plan was to get my hands on the complete works and read them all by the end of the week. To my surprise, I discovered that my father, a natural-born librarian and a walking lexicon of publishers' catalogues and oddities, had never heard of *The Shadow of the Wind* or Julián Carax. Intrigued, he examined the printing history on the back of the title page for clues.

'It says here that this copy is part of an edition of two thousand five hundred printed in Barcelona by Cabestany Editores, in June 1936.'

'Do you know the publishing house?'

'It closed down years ago. But, wait, this is not the original. The first edition came out in November of 1935, but was printed in Paris. . . . Published by Galiano & Neuval. Doesn't ring a bell.'

'So is this a translation?'

'It doesn't say so. From what I can see, the text must be the original one.'

‘A book in Spanish, first published in France?’

‘It’s not that unusual, not in times like these,’ my father put in. ‘Perhaps Barceló can help us. . . .’

Gustavo Barceló was an old colleague of my father’s who now owned a cavernous establishment on Calle Fernando with a commanding position in the city’s secondhand-book trade. Perpetually affixed to his mouth was an unlit pipe that impregnated his person with the aroma of a Persian market. He liked to describe himself as the last romantic, and he was not above claiming that a remote line in his ancestry led directly to Lord Byron himself. As if to prove this connection, Barceló fashioned his wardrobe in the style of a nineteenth-century dandy. His casual attire consisted of a cravat, white patent leather shoes, and a plain glass monocle that, according to malicious gossip, he did not remove even in the intimacy of the lavatory. Flights of fancy aside, the most significant relative in his lineage was his begetter, an industrialist who had become fabulously wealthy by questionable means at the end of the nineteenth century. According to my father, Gustavo Barceló was, technically speaking, loaded, and his palatial bookshop was more of a passion than a business. He loved books unreservedly, and – although he denied this categorically – if someone stepped into his bookshop and fell in love with a tome he could not afford, Barceló would lower its price, or even give it away, if he felt that the buyer was a serious reader and not an accidental browser. Barceló also boasted an elephantine memory allied to a pedantry that matched his demeanour and the sonority of his voice. If anyone knew about odd books, it was he. That afternoon, after closing the shop, my father suggested that we stroll along to the Els Quatre Gats, a café on Calle Montsió, where Barceló and his bibliophile knights of the round table gathered to discuss the finer points of decadent poets, dead languages, and neglected, moth-ridden masterpieces.

Els Quatre Gats was just a five-minute walk from our house and one of my favourite haunts. My parents had met there in 1932, and I attributed my one-way ticket into this world in part to the old café's charms. Stone dragons guarded a lamplit façade. Inside, voices seemed to echo with shadows of other times. Accountants, dreamers, and would-be geniuses shared tables with the spectres of Pablo Picasso, Isaac Albéniz, Federico García Lorca, and Salvador Dalí. There any poor devil could pass for a historical figure for the price of a small coffee.

'Sempere, old man,' proclaimed Barceló when he saw my father come in. 'Hail the prodigal son. To what do we owe the honour?'

'You owe the honour to my son, Daniel, Don Gustavo. He's just made a discovery.'

'Well, then, pray come and sit down with us, for we must celebrate this ephemeral event,' he announced.

'Ephemeral?' I whispered to my father.

'Barceló can only express himself in frilly words,' my father whispered back. 'Don't say anything, or he'll get carried away.'

The lesser members of the coterie made room for us in their circle, and Barceló, who enjoyed flaunting his generosity in public, insisted on treating us.

'How old is the lad?' inquired Barceló, inspecting me out of the corner of his eye.

'Almost eleven,' I announced.

Barceló flashed a sly smile.

'In other words, ten. Don't add on any years, you rascal. Life will see to that without your help.'

A few of his chums grumbled in assent. Barceló signalled to a waiter of such remarkable decrepitude that he looked as if he should be declared a national landmark.

'A cognac for my friend Sempere, from the good bottle, and a cinnamon milkshake for the young one – he's a growing boy. And bring us some bits of ham, but spare us

the delicacies you brought us earlier, eh? If we fancy rubber, we'll call for Pirelli tyres.'

The waiter nodded and left, dragging his feet.

'I hate to bring up the subject,' Barceló said, 'but how can there be jobs? In this country nobody ever retires, not even after they're dead. Just look at El Cid. I tell you, we're a hopeless case.'

He sucked on his cold pipe, eyes already scanning the book in my hands. Despite his pretentious façade and his verbosity, Barceló could smell good prey the way a wolf scents blood.

'Let me see,' he said, feigning disinterest. 'What have we here?'

I glanced at my father. He nodded approvingly. Without further ado, I handed Barceló the book. The bookseller greeted it with expert hands. His pianist's fingers quickly explored its texture, consistency, and condition. He located the page with the publication and printer's notices and studied it with Holmesian flair. The rest of us watched in silence, as if awaiting a miracle, or permission to breathe again.

'Carax. Interesting,' he murmured in an inscrutable tone.

I held out my hand to recover the book. Barceló arched his eyebrows but gave it back with an icy smile.

'Where did you find it, young man?'

'It's a secret,' I answered, knowing that my father would be smiling to himself. Barceló frowned and looked at my father. 'Sempere, my dearest old friend, because it's you and because of the high esteem I hold you in and in honour of the long and profound friendship that unites us like brothers, let's call it at forty duros, end of story.'

'You'll have to discuss that with my son,' my father pointed out. 'The book is his.'

Barceló granted me a wolfish smile. 'What do you say, laddie? Forty duros isn't bad for a first sale. . . . Sempere, this boy of yours will make a name for himself in the business.'

The choir cheered his remark. Barceló gave me a triumphant look and pulled out his leather wallet. He ceremoniously counted out two hundred pesetas, which in those days was quite a fortune, and handed them to me. But I just shook my head. Barceló scowled.

‘Dear boy, greed is most certainly an ugly, not to say mortal, sin. Be sensible. Call me crazy, but I’ll raise that to sixty duros, and you can open a retirement fund. At your age you must start thinking of the future.’

I shook my head again. Barceló shot a poisonous look at my father through his monocle.

‘Don’t look at me,’ said my father. ‘I’m only here as an escort.’

Barceló sighed and peered at me closely.

‘Let’s see, junior. *What* is it you want?’

‘What I want is to know who Julián Carax is and where I can find other books he’s written.’

Barceló chuckled and pocketed his wallet, reconsidering his adversary.

‘Goodness, a scholar. Sempere, what do you feed the boy on?’

The bookseller leaned towards me confidentially, and for a second I thought he betrayed a look of respect that had not been there a few moments earlier.

‘We’ll make a deal,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow, Sunday, in the afternoon, drop by the Ateneo library and ask for me. Bring your precious find with you so that I can examine it properly, and I’ll tell you what I know about Julián Carax. *Quid pro quo*.’

‘*Quid pro* what?’

‘Latin, young man. There’s no such thing as a dead language, only dormant minds. Paraphrasing, it means that you can’t get something for nothing, but since I like you, I’m going to do you a favour.’

The man’s oratory could kill flies in midair, but I suspected that if I wanted to find out anything about Julián Carax, I’d be well advised to stay on good terms with him. I

proffered my most saintly smile in delight at his Latin outpourings.

‘Remember, tomorrow, in the Ateneo,’ pronounced the bookseller. ‘But bring the book, or there’s no deal.’

‘Fine.’

Our conversation slowly merged into the murmuring of the other members of the coffee set. The discussion turned to some documents found in the basement of El Escorial that hinted at the possibility that Don Miguel de Cervantes had in fact been the nom de plume of a large, hairy lady of letters from Toledo. Barceló seemed distracted, not tempted to claim a share in the debate. He remained quiet, observing me from his fake monocle with a masked smile. Or perhaps he was only looking at the book I held in my hands.

2

That Sunday, clouds spilled down from the sky and swamped the streets with a hot mist that made the thermometers on the walls perspire. Halfway through the afternoon, the temperature was already grazing the nineties as I set off towards Calle Canuda for my appointment with Barceló, carrying the book under my arm and with beads of sweat on my forehead. The Ateneo was – and remains – one of the many places in Barcelona where the nineteenth century has not yet been served its eviction notice. A grand stone staircase led up from a palatial courtyard to a ghostly network of passageways and reading rooms. There, inventions such as the telephone, the wristwatch, and haste, seemed futuristic anachronisms. The porter, or perhaps it was a statue in uniform, barely noticed my arrival. I glided up to the first floor, blessing the blades of a fan that swirled above the sleepy readers melting like ice cubes over their books.

Don Gustavo’s profile was outlined against the windows of a gallery that overlooked the building’s interior garden.