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The Midnight Palace

Written by Carlos Ruiz Zafón

Translated from the Spanish by Lucia Graves

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The
MIDNIGHT
PALACE

CARLOS RUIZ ZAFÓN

Translated from the Spanish by Lucia Graves



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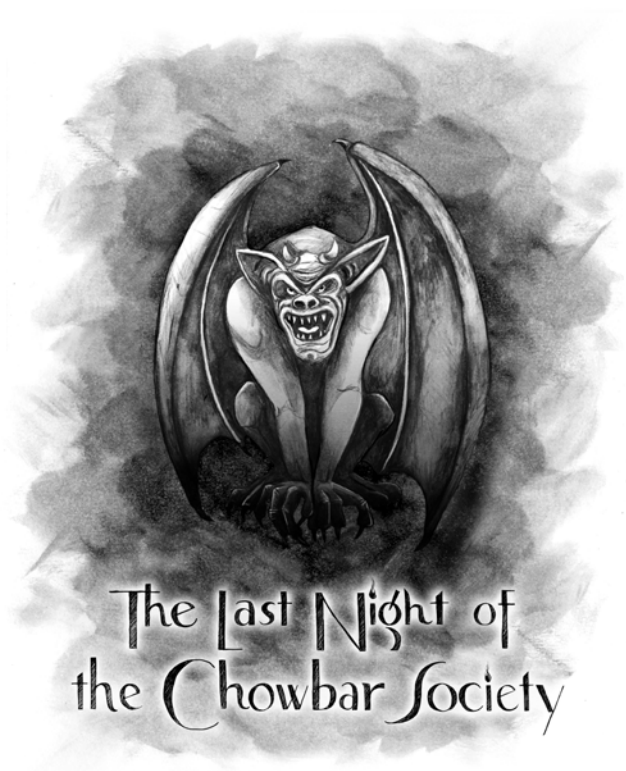
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Calcutta, 25 May 1932

FOR OVER THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, AS HEAD OF ST Patrick's, Thomas Carter had taught his pupils literature, history and arithmetic with the confidence of a jack of all trades and master of none. The only subject he was never able to deal with properly was the subject of their departure. Year after year, the boys and girls whom the law would soon place outside the influence and protection of his institution would file past him, their faces revealing a mixture of anticipation and fear. And as he watched them walk out of the orphanage, Thomas

Carter would think of their lives as the blank pages of a book in which he had written the initial chapters of a story he would never be allowed to finish.

Beneath the austere expression of a man not given to displays of emotion, nobody feared the date on which those blank books would leave his desk for ever more than Thomas Carter. They would pass into unknown hands, perhaps to more unscrupulous pens who would inscribe a sombre twist in the plot, a lifetime away from the dreams and the expectations with which his pupils undertook their solitary flight into the streets of Calcutta.

Experience had taught him to abandon any desire to find out how his students fared once he could no longer offer guidance and shelter. For Thomas Carter, saying goodbye usually went hand in hand with the bitter taste of disappointment – sooner or later he would discover that the young people who had been robbed of a past were also, it seemed, being robbed of a future.

That hot night in May, as he listened to the young people's voices in the courtyard, where they were having a small farewell party, Thomas Carter stared at the city lights from the darkness of his office. Flocks of black clouds fled across a canopy of stars towards the horizon.

Once again he had refused the invitation to the party and instead had remained in his armchair, sitting quietly with no light other than the multicoloured reflections from the paper lanterns with which Vendela and the pupils had decorated the trees in the courtyard and

the facade of St Patrick's, as if it were a ship ready to be launched. There would be time enough to utter words of farewell in the few days remaining until he had to comply with the law and return the children to the streets from which he had rescued them.

As had become the custom in recent years, it wasn't long before Vendela knocked on his door. For once, she came in without waiting for a reply and closed the door behind her. Carter noticed the nurse's cheerful face and smiled in the dark.

'We're getting old, Vendela,' said the headmaster.

'You're getting old, Thomas,' she corrected him. 'I'm maturing. Aren't you coming down to the party? The kids would love to see you. I've reminded them you aren't exactly the life and soul of a party ... But if they haven't listened to me for the past few years then they're not going to start now.'

Carter lit a small lamp on his desk and gestured to Vendela to take a seat.

'How long have we been together, Vendela?' he asked.

'Twenty-seven years and eight months, Mr Carter. More than I endured with my dear late husband, God rest his soul.'

Carter laughed. 'How have you managed to put up with me all this time? Don't hold back. Today's a holiday and I'm in a good mood.'

Vendela shrugged and fiddled with a piece of scarlet streamer that was tangled in her hair.

‘The pay isn’t bad and I like the children. You’re not coming down, are you?’

Carter shook his head slowly.

‘I don’t want to ruin the party,’ he explained. ‘And besides, I couldn’t bear to hear another of Ben’s jokes.’

‘Ben’s very calm tonight,’ said Vendela. ‘He’s sad, I suppose. The boys have already given Ian his ticket.’

Carter’s face lit up. The members of the Chowbar Society – whose clandestine existence had been known to Carter for some time – had for months been saving money to buy a ticket on a ship to Southampton, which they planned to give to their friend Ian as a goodbye present. For years Ian had been expressing his desire to study medicine, and Mr Carter, at Ben and Isobel’s suggestion, had written to a number of English schools, supporting the boy and recommending him for a scholarship. The news of the scholarship had arrived a year ago, but the cost of the journey to London turned out to be far higher than anyone had expected.

Faced with this problem, Roshan suggested robbing the offices of a shipping company that was two blocks away from the orphanage. Siraj proposed they organise a raffle. Carter took out a sum from his meagre personal savings and Vendela did the same, but it was not enough.

So Ben decided to write a three-act play entitled *The Spectres of Calcutta* – a phantasmal piece of gibberish in which everyone died, including the stagehands. With

Isobel playing the lead as Lady Windmare, the rest of the group performing secondary roles and an over-the-top production courtesy of Ben, it enjoyed remarkable success with its audiences – though not with its critics – in various schools in the city. As a result, enough money was collected to pay for Ian’s journey.

‘Ian had tears in his eyes when he received the gift,’ said Vendela.

‘He is a wonderful lad, a little insecure but wonderful. He’ll make good use of the ticket and the scholarship,’ said Carter proudly.

‘He asked after you. He wanted to thank you for your help.’

‘You didn’t tell him I contributed money from my own pocket, did you?’ asked Carter in alarm.

‘I did, but Ben denied it, saying you’d spent the year’s entire budget on your gambling debts.’

The noise from the party echoed through the courtyard. Carter frowned.

‘That boy is a devil. If he wasn’t about to leave, I would throw him out.’

‘You adore the boy, Thomas.’ Vendela laughed as she stood up. ‘And he knows it.’

The nurse made her way to the door, turning as she reached it. She didn’t give up easily.

‘Why don’t you come down?’

‘Goodnight, Vendela.’

‘You’re a boring old man.’

‘And proud of it ...’

Recognising the futility of her task, Vendela mumbled a few words and left Carter alone. The director of St Patrick’s turned his desk lamp off and walked stealthily to the window to peer at the party through the slats of his blind. The garden was lit with flares, and lanterns cast a copper glow over the familiar smiling faces under the full moon. Although none of them knew it, they each had a one-way ticket to somewhere, but only Ian knew his destination.



‘IN TWENTY MINUTES IT will be midnight,’ Ben announced.

His eyes shone as he watched the firecrackers spreading a shower of golden sparks into the air.

‘I hope Siraj has some good stories tonight,’ said Isobel as she stared at the bottom of her glass, holding it up to the light as if she expected to find something in it.

‘The best,’ Roshan assured them. ‘Tonight is our last night. The end of the Chowbar Society.’

‘I wonder what will become of the Palace,’ said Seth.

For years none of them had referred to the dilapidated old house by any other name.

‘Guess,’ Ben suggested. ‘Most likely a bank. Isn’t that what they always build when they knock something down in any city? It’s the same the world over.’

Siraj had joined them and was considering Ben's prediction.

'They might turn it into a theatre,' the skinny boy proposed, gazing at Isobel, the impossible object of his affection.

Ben rolled his eyes and shook his head. When it came to flattering the girl, Siraj had no dignity.

'Maybe they won't touch it,' said Ian, who had been listening quietly to his friends, stealing a few quick glances at the picture Michael was drawing on a small sheet of paper.

'What are you doing there, master?' asked Ben.

Michael looked up from his drawing for the first time. He looked as if he had just stepped out of a faraway world. He smiled shyly and exhibited the sheet of paper.

'It's us,' the club's resident artist explained.

The six other members of the Chowbar Society examined the picture for five long seconds in silence. The first to look away from the drawing was Ben. Michael recognised the enigmatic expression that crossed his friend's face when he suffered one of his strange attacks of melancholy.

'Is that supposed to be my nose?' asked Siraj. 'I don't have a nose like that! It looks like a fish hook!'

'That's exactly what you've got,' Ben stated with a smile that did not fool Michael, although it may have fooled the others. 'Don't complain; if he'd drawn you in profile all you'd see is a straight line.'

‘Let me have a look,’ said Isobel, snatching the picture and studying it in the flickering light of a lantern. ‘Is this how you see us?’

Michael shrugged.

‘You’ve drawn yourself looking in a different direction from the rest of us,’ observed Ian.

‘Michael always looks at what others don’t see,’ said Roshan.

‘And what have you seen in us that nobody else can, Michael?’ asked Ben.

He joined Isobel and analysed the drawing. Thick pencil strokes depicted the group next to a pond in which their faces were all reflected. There was a large full moon in the sky and below it was a forest disappearing off into the distance. Ben examined the blurred faces on the water’s surface and compared them to those of the figures by the edge of the pond. Not a single one of them carried the same expression as its reflection. Isobel’s voice rescued him from his thoughts.

‘May I keep it, Michael?’ she asked.

‘Why you?’ Seth protested.

Ben placed a hand on the Bengali boy’s broad shoulders and gave him a brief intense look.

‘Let her keep it,’ he murmured.

Seth nodded and Ben patted his back affectionately. As he did so, he caught sight of an elderly woman, elegantly dressed, and a young girl of about their age, crossing

the orphanage courtyard and heading towards the front door of the building.

‘Is anything the matter?’ whispered Ian, next to him.

Ben shook his head slowly.

‘We have visitors,’ he said, without taking his eyes off the woman and the young girl. ‘Or something like that ...’



WHEN BANKIM KNOCKED ON his door, Thomas Carter was already aware of the arrival of the woman and her companion. He had seen them through the window as he watched the party below. He turned on the desk lamp and told his assistant to come in.

Bankim was a young man with very marked Bengali features and lively, penetrating eyes. He had grown up in the orphanage and, after working for a few years in different schools around the province, had returned to St Patrick’s as a physics and maths teacher. Bankim’s happy ending was one of the few exceptions which, year after year, gave Carter hope. To see him there as an adult, helping educate other young people in the same classrooms he had once sat in, was the best possible reward.

‘I’m sorry to bother you, Thomas,’ said Bankim. ‘But there’s a lady downstairs who says she needs to speak to you. I’ve told her you aren’t available, that we’re having a

party, but she won't listen and was most insistent, to say the least.'

Carter gave his assistant a puzzled look, then checked his watch.

'It's almost midnight. Who is she?'

Bankim shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know, but I do know she won't leave until she sees you.'

'She didn't say what she wanted?'

'She only asked me to give you this,' Bankim replied, handing Carter a small shiny chain. 'She said you'd know what it was.'

Carter took the chain and examined it under his desktop lamp. Hanging from it was a gold pendant, a circle with the shape of a moon. It took a few seconds for the image to jog Carter's memory. He closed his eyes and felt his stomach knot. He had a very similar pendant hidden in the box he kept under lock and key in his glass cabinet. A pendant he had not seen in sixteen years.

'Is there a problem, Thomas?' asked Bankim, visibly worried by the change in Carter's expression.

The headmaster shook his head and smiled faintly as he put the gold chain into his shirt pocket.

'None at all,' he replied. 'Ask her to come up. I'll see her.'

Bankim eyed him with surprise, and for a moment Carter thought his former pupil was going to ask him a

question he didn't want to hear. But in the end Bankim simply nodded and left the office, gently closing the door behind him. Two minutes later Aryami Bose entered Thomas Carter's private sanctuary, removing the veil that covered her face.



BEN LOOKED INTENTLY AT the girl as she waited under the arches of the main entrance to St Patrick's. Bankim had returned and, after being asked to follow him, the old lady had instructed the girl in no uncertain terms to remain by the door. It was obvious the woman had come to visit Carter, and considering how lacklustre the head of the orphanage's social life was, Ben assumed that any midnight visit from a mysterious beauty, whatever her age, must definitely be classed as unexpected. He smiled and concentrated once more on the girl. Tall and slim, she was dressed in simple though unusual clothes that looked as if they'd been made by someone with a unique personal style and obviously not bought in any old bazaar in the Black Town. Her features, which he couldn't see clearly from where he stood, seemed to be soft and her skin was pale and luminous.

'Anyone home?' Ian whispered in his ear.

Ben signalled towards the girl, his eyes still transfixed.

'It's almost midnight,' Ian added. 'We're meeting in

the Palace in a few minutes. Final session, may I remind you?’

Ben nodded absently.

‘Wait a minute,’ he added and started to walk resolutely towards the girl.

‘Ben,’ Ian called behind him. ‘Not now, Ben ...’ Ben ignored his friend. The curiosity he felt was stronger than all the ceremonial delights of the Chowbar Society. He adopted the saintly smile of a model pupil and walked on. The girl saw him approach and lowered her eyes.

‘Hello. I’m Mr Carter’s assistant – he’s the head of St Patrick’s,’ said Ben. ‘May I help you in any way?’

‘Actually, no ... Your ... colleague has already taken my grandmother to see the headmaster,’ said the girl.

‘Your grandmother?’ asked Ben. ‘I see. I hope it’s nothing serious. I mean it’s midnight and I wondered whether there was something wrong.’

She gave a weak smile and shook her head. Ben smiled back. She was not such easy prey.

‘My name is Ben,’ he said politely.

‘Sheere,’ replied the girl, looking towards the door as if she expected her grandmother to emerge at any moment.

Ben rubbed his hands.

‘Well, Sheere,’ he said. ‘While my colleague Bankim takes your grandmother to Mr Carter’s office, perhaps I can offer you some hospitality. The head always insists we be polite to visitors.’

‘Aren’t you a bit young to be the headmaster’s assistant?’ asked Sheere, avoiding the boy’s eyes.

‘Young? You flatter me. I’m just blessed with an enviable complexion, but I’ll be twenty-three soon.’

‘I never would have guessed it,’ replied Sheere.

‘It runs in the family,’ Ben explained. ‘Our skin is resistant to aging. To this day people mistake my grandfather for an altar boy.’

‘Really?’ asked Sheere, suppressing a nervous laugh.

‘So how about accepting St Patrick’s hospitality?’ Ben insisted. ‘We’re having a party for some of the kids who are about to leave us. It’s sad, but a whole new life will open up before them. It’s exciting too.’

Sheere fixed her eyes on Ben and her lips slowly formed a sceptical smile.

‘My grandmother asked me to wait here.’

Ben pointed at the door. ‘Here?’ he asked. ‘Just here?’

Sheere nodded.

‘You see ...’ Ben began, waving his hands about. ‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but ... Well, I thought I might not have to. These things are not good for the image of the institution, but you leave me no option. There’s a structural problem. With the walls.’

The young girl looked at him in astonishment.

‘Structural?’

Ben adopted a serious expression and nodded.

‘Exactly. It’s regrettable, but here on the very spot where you’re standing, not even a month ago, Mrs Potts,

our old cook, God bless her, was hit by a piece of brick that fell from the second floor and for two weeks she thought she was Moll Flanders. Imagine the scandal.'

Sheere laughed.

'I don't think it's a laughing matter, if I may say so,' said Ben, his tone icy.

'I don't believe a single word you've said. You're not the headmaster's assistant, you're not twenty-three, and no cook was ever hit by a shower of bricks,' said Sheere defiantly.

'Are you suggesting I have provided you with inaccurate information?'

'To put it mildly.'

Ben weighed up the situation. The first part of his strategy was on the point of floundering, so he had to think of a change of direction, and it had to be clever.

'I may have been carried away by my imagination, but not everything I've said is untrue.'

'Oh?'

'I didn't lie about my name. I'm called Ben. And the bit about offering you our hospitality is also true.'

Sheere gave a winning grin.

'I'd love to accept, Ben. But I must wait here. Honestly.'

The boy adopted an expression of calm acceptance.

'All right. I'll wait with you,' he announced solemnly. 'If a brick falls, let it fall on me.'

Sheere shrugged and fixed her eyes on the door again.

A long minute of silence went by. Neither of them moved or uttered a word.

‘It’s a hot night,’ said Ben at last.

Sheere turned her head. ‘Are you going to stand there all night?’

‘Let’s make a deal,’ Ben proposed. ‘Come and have a glass of ice-cold lemonade with me and my friends and then I’ll leave you in peace.’

‘I can’t, Ben. Really.’

‘We’ll only be twenty metres away,’ said Ben. ‘We could tie a little bell to the door.’

‘Is it so important for you?’ asked Sheere.

Ben nodded.

‘It’s my last week in this place. I’ve spent my whole life here and in five days’ time I’ll be alone again. Completely alone. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to spend another night like this one, among friends. You don’t know what it’s like.’

Sheere looked at him for a long while.

‘I do know,’ she said at last. ‘Take me to that lemonade.’



ONCE BANKIM HAD LEFT his office, Mr Carter poured himself a small glass of brandy and offered another to his visitor. Aryami declined and waited for Carter to sit in his armchair, with his back to the large window below which the young people were still celebrating, unaware of

the icy silence that filled the headmaster's room. Carter wet his lips and looked questioningly at the old woman. Time had not diminished the authority of her features in the slightest. Her eyes still blazed with the same fire he remembered in the woman who, so long ago, had been his best friend's wife. They gazed at one another for a long time.

'I'm listening,' said Carter finally.

'Sixteen years ago I was obliged to entrust you with a baby boy, Mr Carter,' Aryami began in a low but firm voice. 'It was one of the most difficult decisions of my life and I know for a fact that during these past years you have honoured the trust I put in you and haven't let me down. During this time I never interfered with the boy's life, for I was well aware that he wouldn't be better off anywhere else but here, under your protection. I've never had the opportunity to thank you for what you've done for him.'

'I was only doing my duty,' Carter replied. 'But I don't think that is why you've come here, at this late hour.'

'I wish I could say it was, but you're right,' said Aryami. 'I've come here because the boy's life is in danger.'

'Ben.'

'That's the name you gave him. He owes everything he knows and everything he is to you, Mr Carter,' said Aryami. 'But there is something that neither you nor I can protect him from any longer: the past.'

The hands on Thomas Carter's watch pointed towards

midnight. Carter downed his brandy, then turned to glance through the window at the courtyard below. Ben was talking to a girl Carter didn't recognise.

‘As I said earlier, I’m listening,’ Carter repeated.

Aryami sat up and, clasping her hands together in her lap, she began to tell her story ...

