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

I

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. Despite the almost tropical atmosphere, he sported his customary foppish attire, his monocle shining in the dark like a coin at the bottom of a well. Next to him was a figure swathed in a white alpaca dress who looked to me like an angel.

When Barceló heard the echo of my footsteps, he half closed his eyes and signalled for me to come nearer. 'Daniel, isn't it?' asked the bookseller. 'Did you bring the book?'

I nodded on both counts and accepted the chair Barceló offered me next to him and his mysterious companion. For a while the bookseller only smiled placidly, taking no notice of my presence. I soon abandoned all hope of being introduced to the lady in white, whoever she might be. Barceló behaved as if she wasn't there and neither of us could see her. I cast a sidelong glance at her, afraid of meeting her eyes, which stared vacantly into the distance. The skin on her face and arms was pale, almost translucent. Her features were sharp, sketched with firm strokes and framed by a black head of hair that shone like damp stone. I guessed she must be, at most, twenty, but there was something about her manner that made me think she could be ageless. She seemed trapped in that state of perpetual youth reserved for mannequins in shop windows. I was trying to catch any sign of a pulse under her swan's neck when I realized that Barceló was staring at me.

'So are you going to tell me where you found the book?' he asked.

'I would, but I promised my father I would keep the secret,' I explained.

'I see. Sempere and his mysteries,' said Barceló. 'I think I can guess where. You've hit the jackpot, son. That's what I call finding a needle in a field of lilies. May I have a look?'

I handed him the book, and Barceló took it with infinite care. 'You've read it, I suppose.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I envy you. I've always thought that the best time to read Carax is when one still has a young heart and a blank soul. Did you know that this was the last novel he wrote?'

I shook my head.

'Do you know how many copies like this one there are on the market, Daniel?'

'Thousands, I suppose.'

'None,' Barceló specified. 'Only yours. The rest were burned.'

'Burned?'

For an answer Barceló only smiled enigmatically while he leafed through the book, stroking the paper as if it were a rare silk. The lady in white turned slowly. Her lips formed a timid and trembling smile. Her eyes groped the void, pupils white as marble. I gulped. She was blind.

'You don't know my niece, Clara, do you?' asked Barceló.

I could only shake my head, unable to take my eyes off the woman with the china doll's complexion and white eyes, the saddest eyes I had ever seen.

'Actually, the expert on Julián Carax is Clara, which is why I brought her along,' said Barceló. 'In fact I think I'll retire to another room, if you don't mind, to examine this tome while you get to know each other. Is that all right?'

I looked at him aghast. The scoundrel gave me a little pat on the back and left with my book under his arm.

'You've impressed him, you know,' said the voice behind me.

I turned to discover the faint smile of the bookseller's niece. Her voice was pure crystal, transparent and so fragile I feared that her words would break if I interrupted them.

'My uncle said he offered you a good sum of money for the Carax, but you refused it,' Clara added. 'You have earned his respect.'

'All evidence to the contrary,' I sighed.

I noticed that when she smiled, Clara leaned her head slightly to one side and her fingers played with a ring that looked like a wreath of sapphires.

'How old are you?' she asked.

'Almost eleven,' I replied. 'How old are you, Miss Clara?'

Clara laughed at my cheeky innocence.

'Almost twice your age, but even so, there's no need to call me Miss Clara.'

'You seem younger, miss,' I remarked, hoping that this would prove a good way out of my indiscretion.

'I'll trust you, then, because I don't know what I look like,' she answered. 'But if I seem younger to you, all the more reason to drop the "miss".'

'Whatever you say, Miss Clara.'

I observed her hands spread like wings on her lap, the suggestion of her fragile waist under the alpaca folds, the shape of her shoulders, the extreme paleness of her neck, the line of her lips, which I would have given my soul to stroke with the tip of my fingers. Never before had I had a chance to examine a woman so closely and with such precision, yet without the danger of meeting her eyes.

'What are you looking at?' asked Clara, not without a pinch of malice.

'Your uncle says you're an expert on Julián Carax, miss,' I improvised. My mouth felt dry.

'My uncle would say anything if that bought him a few minutes alone with a book that fascinates him,' explained Clara. 'But you must be wondering how someone who is

blind can be a book expert.'

'The thought had not crossed my mind.'

'For someone who is almost eleven, you're not a bad liar. Be careful, or you'll end up like my uncle.'

Fearful of making yet another faux pas, I decided to remain silent. I just sat gawking at her, imbibing her presence.

'Here, come, get closer,' Clara said.

'Pardon me?'

'Come closer, don't be afraid. I won't bite you.'

I left my chair and went over to where she was sitting. The bookseller's niece raised her right hand, trying to find me. Without quite knowing what to do, I, too, stretched out my hand towards her. She took it in her left hand and, without saying anything, offered me her right hand. Instinctively I understood what she was asking me to do, and guided her to my face. Her touch was both firm and delicate. Her fingers ran over my cheeks and cheekbones. I stood there motionless, hardly daring to breathe, while Clara read my features with her hands. While she did, she smiled to herself, and I noticed a slight movement of her lips, like a voiceless murmuring. I felt the brush of her hands on my forehead, on my hair and eyelids. She paused on my lips, following their shape with her forefinger and ring finger. Her fingers smelled of cinnamon. I swallowed, feeling my pulse race, and gave silent thanks that there were no eyewitnesses to my blushing, which could have set a cigar alight even a foot away.

3

That afternoon of mist and drizzle, Clara Barceló stole my heart, my breath, and my sleep. In the haunted shade of the Ateneo, her hands wrote a curse on my skin that was to hound me for years. While I stared, enraptured, she explained how she, too, had stumbled on the work of Julián Carax by

chance in a village in Provence. Her father, a prominent lawyer linked to the Catalan president's cabinet, had had the foresight to send his wife and daughter to the other side of the border at the start of the Civil War. Some considered his fear exaggerated, and maintained that nothing could possibly happen in Barcelona. In Spain, both the cradle and pinnacle of Christian civilization, barbarism was for anarchists – those people who rode bicycles and wore darned socks – and surely they wouldn't get very far. But Clara's father believed that nations never see themselves clearly in the mirror, much less when war preys on their minds. He had a good understanding of history and knew that the future could be read much more clearly in the streets, factories, and barracks than in the morning press. For months he wrote a letter to his wife and daughter once a week. At first he did it from his office on Calle Diputación, but later his letters had no return address. In the end he wrote secretly, from a cell in Montjuïc Castle, into which no one saw him go and from which, like countless others, he would never come out.

Clara's mother read the letters aloud, barely able to hold back her tears and skipping paragraphs that her daughter sensed without needing to hear them. Later, as her mother slept, Clara would convince her cousin Claudette to reread her father's letters from start to finish. That is how Clara read, with borrowed eyes. Nobody ever saw her shed a tear, not even when the letters from the lawyer stopped coming, not even when news of the war made them all fear the worst.

'My father knew from the start what was going to happen,' Clara explained. 'He stayed close to his friends because he felt it was his duty. What killed him was his loyalty to people who, when their time came, betrayed him. Never trust anyone, Daniel, especially the people you admire. Those are the ones who will make you suffer the worst blows.'

Clara spoke these words with a hardness that seemed

grown out of years of secret brooding. I gladly lost myself in her porcelain gaze and listened to her talk about things that, at the time, I could not possibly understand. She described people, scenes, and objects she had never seen yet rendered them with the detail and precision of a Flemish master. Her words evoked textures and echoes, the colour of voices, the rhythm of footsteps. She explained how, during her years of exile in France, she and her cousin Claudette had shared a private tutor. He was a man in his fifties, a bit of a tippler, who affected literary airs and boasted he could recite Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin without an accent. The girls had nicknamed him 'Monsieur Roquefort' by virtue of the peculiar aroma he exuded, despite the baths of eau de cologne in which he marinated his Rabelaisian anatomy. Notwithstanding his peculiarities (notably his firm and militant conviction that blood sausages and other pork delicacies provided a miracle cure for bad circulation and gout), Monsieur Roquefort was a man of refined taste. Since his youth he had travelled to Paris once a month to spice up his cultural savoir faire with the latest literary novelties, visit museums, and, rumour had it, allow himself a night out in the arms of a nymphet he had christened 'Madame Bovary', even though her name was Hortense and she limited her reading to twenty-franc notes. In the course of these educational escapades, Monsieur Roquefort frequently visited a secondhand bookstall positioned outside Notre Dame. It was there, by chance, one afternoon in 1929, that he came across a novel by an unknown author, someone called Julián Carax. Always open to the *nouveau*, Monsieur Roquefort bought the book on a whim. The title seemed suggestive, and he was in the habit of reading something light on his train journey home. The novel was called *The Red House*, and on the back cover there was a blurred picture of the author, perhaps a photograph or a charcoal sketch. According to the biographical notes, Monsieur Julián Carax was twenty-seven, born with the century in

Barcelona and currently living in Paris; he wrote in French and worked at night as a professional pianist in a hostess bar. The blurb, written in the pompous, mouldy style of the age, proclaimed that this was a first work of dazzling courage, the mark of a protean and trailblazing talent, and a milestone for the entire future of European letters. In spite of such solemn claims, the synopsis that followed suggested that the story contained some vaguely sinister elements slowly marinated in saucy melodrama, which, to the eyes of Monsieur Roquefort, was always a plus: after the classics what he most enjoyed were tales of crime, boudoir intrigue, and questionable conduct.

The Red House tells the story of a mysterious, tormented individual who breaks into toyshops and museums to steal dolls and puppets. Once they are in his power, he pulls out their eyes and takes them back to his lugubrious abode, a ghostly old conservatory lingering on the misty banks of the Seine. One fateful night he breaks into a sumptuous mansion on Avenue Foch determined to plunder the private collection of dolls belonging to a tycoon who, predictably, had grown insanely rich through devious means during the industrial revolution. As he is about to leave with his loot, our *voleur* is surprised by the tycoon's daughter, a young lady of Parisian high society named Giselle, exquisitely well read and highly refined but cursed with a morbid nature and naturally doomed to fall madly in love with the intruder. As the meandering saga continues through tumultuous incidents in dimly lit settings, the heroine begins to unravel the mystery that drives the enigmatic protagonist (whose name, of course, is never revealed) to blind the dolls, and as she does so, she discovers a horrible secret about her own father and his collection of china figures. At last the tale sinks into a tragic, darkly perfumed gothic denouement.

Monsieur Roquefort had literary pretensions himself and

was the owner of a vast collection of letters of rejection signed by every self-respecting Parisian publisher in response to the books of verse and prose he sent them so relentlessly. Thus he was able to identify the novel's publishing house as a second-rate firm, known, if anything, for its books on cookery, sewing, and other handicrafts. The owner of the bookstall told him that when the novel appeared it had merited but two scant reviews from provincial dailies, strategically placed next to the obituary notices. The critics had had a field day writing Carax off in a few lines, advising him not to leave his employment as a pianist, as it was obvious that he was not going to hit the right note in literature. Monsieur Roquefort, whose heart and pocket softened when faced with lost causes, had decided to invest half a franc on the book by the unknown Carax and at the same time took away an exquisite edition of the great master, Gustave Flaubert, whose unrecognized successor he considered himself to be.

The train to Lyons was packed, and Monsieur Roquefort was obliged to share his second-class compartment with a couple of nuns who had given him disapproving looks the moment they left the Gare d'Austerlitz, mumbling under their breath. Faced with such scrutiny, the teacher decided to extract the novel from his briefcase and barricade himself behind its pages. Much to his surprise, hundreds of miles later, he discovered he had quite forgotten about the sisters, the rocking of the train, and the dark landscape sliding past the windows like a nightmare scene from the Lumière brothers. He read all night, unaware of the nuns' snoring or of the stations that flashed by in the fog. At daybreak, as he turned the last page, Monsieur Roquefort realized he had tears in his eyes and a heart that was poisoned with envy and amazement.

That Monday, Monsieur Roquefort called the publisher in

Paris to request information on Julián Carax. After much insistence a telephonist with an asthmatic voice and a virulent disposition replied that Carax had no known address and that, anyhow, he no longer had dealings with the firm. She added that, since its publication, *The Red House* had sold exactly seventy-seven copies, most of which had presumably been acquired by young ladies of easy virtue and other regulars of the club where the author churned out nocturnes and polanaises for a few coins. The remaining copies had been returned and pulped for printing missals, fines, and lottery tickets.

The mysterious author's wretched luck won Monsieur Roquefort's sympathy, and during the following ten years, on each of his visits to Paris, he would scour the secondhand bookshops in search of other works by Julián Carax. He never found a single one. Almost nobody had heard of Carax, and those for whom the name rang a bell knew very little. Some swore he had brought out other books, always with small publishers, and with ridiculous print runs. Those books, if they really existed, were impossible to find. One bookseller claimed he had once had a book by Julián Carax in his hands. It was called *The Cathedral Thief*, but this was a long time ago, and besides, he wasn't quite sure. At the end of 1935, news reached Monsieur Roquefort that a new novel by Julián Carax, *The Shadow of the Wind*, had been published by a small firm in Paris. He wrote to the publisher asking whether he could buy a few copies but never got an answer. The following year, in the spring of 1936, his old friend at the bookstall by the Seine asked him whether he was still interested in Carax. Monsieur Roquefort assured him that he never gave up. It was now a question of stubbornness: if the world was determined to bury Carax, he wasn't going to go along with it. His friend then explained that some weeks earlier a rumour about Carax had been doing the rounds. It

seemed that at last his fortunes had improved. He was going to marry a lady of good social standing and, after a few years' silence, had published a novel that, for the first time, had earned him a good review in none less than *Le Monde*. But just when it seemed that the winds were about to change, the bookseller went on, Carax had been involved in a duel in Père Lachaise cemetery. The circumstances surrounding this event were unclear. All the bookseller knew was that the duel had taken place at dawn on the day Carax was due to be married, and that the bridegroom had never made it to the church.

There was an opinion to match every taste: some maintained he had died in the duel and his body had been left abandoned in an unmarked grave; others, more optimistic, preferred to believe that Carax was tangled up in some shady affair that had forced him to abandon his fiancée at the altar, flee from Paris, and return to Barcelona. The nameless grave could never be found, and shortly afterwards a new version of the story begin to circulate: Julián Carax, who had been plagued by misfortune, had died in his native city in the most dire straits. The girls in the brothel where he played the piano had organized a collection to pay for a decent burial, but when the money order reached Barcelona, the body had already been buried in a common grave, along with beggars and people with no name who had turned up floating in the harbour waters or died of cold at the entrance to the subway.

If only because he liked to oppose general views, Monsieur Roquefort did not forget Carax. Eleven years after his discovery of *The Red House*, he decided to lend the novel to his two pupils, hoping, perhaps, that the strange book might encourage them to acquire the reading habit. Clara and Claudette were by then teenagers with hormones coursing through their veins, obsessed by the world winking at them from beyond the windows of the study. Despite the tutor's

best efforts, the girls had until then proved immune to the charms of the classics, Aesop's fables, or the immortal verse of Dante Alighieri. Fearing that his contract might be terminated if Clara's mother discovered that he was miseducating two illiterate, feather-brained young women, Monsieur Roquefort presented them with Carax's novel dressed up as a love story, which was, at least, half true.

4

'Never before had I felt trapped, so seduced and caught up in a story,' Clara explained, 'the way I did with that book. Until then, reading was just a duty, a sort of fine one had to pay teachers and tutors without quite knowing why. I had never known the pleasure of reading, of exploring the recesses of the soul, of letting myself be carried away by imagination, beauty, and the mystery of fiction and language. For me all those things were born with that novel. Have you ever kissed a girl, Daniel?'

My brain seized up; my mouth turned to sawdust.

'Well, you're still very young. But it's that same feeling, that first-time spark that you never forget. This is a world of shadows, Daniel, and magic is a rare asset. That book taught me that by reading, I could live more intensely. It could give me back the sight I had lost. For that reason alone, a book that didn't matter to anyone, changed my life.'

By then I was hopelessly dumbstruck, at the mercy of this creature whose words and charms I had neither means nor desire to resist. I wished that she would never stop speaking, that her voice would wrap itself around me forever, and that her uncle would never return to break the spell of that moment that belonged only to me.

'For years I looked for other books by Julián Carax,' Clara went on. 'I asked in libraries, in bookshops, in schools.

Always in vain. No one had ever heard of him or of his books. I couldn't understand it. Later on, Monsieur Roquefort heard a rumour, a strange story about someone who went around libraries and bookshops looking for works by Julián Carax. If he found any, he would buy them, steal them, or get them by some other means, after which, he would immediately set fire to them. Nobody knew who he was or why he did it. Another mystery to add to Carax's own enigma. In time, my mother decided she wanted to return to Spain. She was ill, and Barcelona had always been her home. I was secretly hoping to make some discovery about Carax here, since, after all, Barcelona was the city in which he was born and from which he had disappeared at the start of the war. But even with the help of my uncle, all I could find were dead ends. As for my mother, much the same thing happened with her own search. The Barcelona she encountered on her return was not the place she had left behind. She discovered a city of shadows, one no longer inhabited by my father, although every corner was haunted by his memory. As if all that misery were not enough, she insisted on hiring someone to find out exactly what had happened to him. After months of investigation, all the detective was able to recover was a broken wristwatch and the name of the man who had killed my father in the moat of Montjuïc Castle. His name was Fumero, Javier Fumero. We were told that this individual – and he wasn't the only one – had started off as a hired gunman with the FAI anarchist syndicate and had then flirted with the communists and the fascists, tricking them all, selling his services to the highest bidder. After the fall of Barcelona, he had gone over to the winning side and joined the police force. Now he is a famous bemedalled inspector. Nobody remembers my father. Not surprisingly, my mother faded away within a few months. The doctors said it was her heart, and I think that for once they were right. When she died, I went to live with my uncle Gustavo, the sole relative of

my mother's left in Barcelona. I adored him, because he always gave me books when he came to visit us. He has been my only family and my best friend through all these years. Even if he seems a little arrogant at times, he has a good heart, bless him. Every night, without fail, even if he's dropping with sleep, he'll read to me for a while.'

'I could read to you, if you like, Miss Clara,' I suggested courteously, instantly regretting my audacity, for I was convinced that, for Clara, my company could only be a nuisance, if not a joke.

'Thanks, Daniel,' she answered. 'I'd love that.'

'Whenever you wish.'

She nodded slowly, looking for me with her smile.

'Unfortunately, I no longer have that copy of *The Red House*,' she said. 'Monsieur Roquefort refused to part with it. I could try to tell you the story, but it would be like describing a cathedral by saying it's a pile of stones ending in a spire.'

'I'm sure you'd tell it much better than that,' I spluttered.

Women have an infallible instinct for knowing when a man has fallen madly in love with them, especially when the male in question is both young and a complete dunce. I fulfilled all the requirements for Clara Barceló to send me packing, but I preferred to think that her blindness afforded me a margin for error and that my crime – my complete and pathetic devotion to a woman twice my age, my intelligence, and my height – would remain in the dark. I wondered what on earth she saw in me that could make her want to befriend me, other than a pale reflection of herself, an echo of solitude and loss. In my schoolboy reveries, we were always two fugitives riding on the spine of a book, eager to escape into worlds of fiction and secondhand dreams.

When Barceló returned wearing a feline smile, two hours had passed. To me they had seemed like two minutes. The

bookseller handed me the book and winked.

'Have a good look at it, little dumpling. I don't want you coming back to me saying I've switched it, eh?'

'I trust you,' I said.

'Stuff and nonsense. The last man who said that to me (a tourist who was convinced that Hemingway had invented the *fabada* stew during the San Fermín bull run) bought a copy of *Hamlet* signed by Shakespeare in ballpoint, imagine that. So keep your eyes peeled. In the book business you can't even trust the index.'

It was getting dark when we stepped out into Calle Canuda. A fresh breeze combed the city, and Barceló removed his coat and put it over Clara's shoulders. Seeing no better opportunity, I tentatively let slip that if they thought it was all right, I could drop by their home the following day to read a few chapters of *The Shadow of the Wind* to Clara. Barceló looked at me out of the corner of his eye and gave a hollow laugh.

'Boy, you're getting ahead of yourself!' he muttered, although his tone implied consent.

'Well, if that's not convenient, perhaps another day or . . .'

'It's up to Clara,' said the bookseller. 'We've already got seven cats and two cockatoos. One more creature won't make much difference.'

'I'll see you tomorrow, then, around seven,' concluded Clara. 'Do you know the address?'

5

There was a time, in my childhood, when, perhaps because I had been raised among books and booksellers, I dreamed of becoming a novelist. The root of my literary ambitions, apart from the marvellous simplicity with which one sees things at the age of five, lay in a prodigious piece of craftsmanship and

precision that was exhibited in a fountain pen shop on Calle Anselmo Clavé, just behind the Military Government building. The object of my devotion, a plush black pen, adorned with heaven knows how many refinements and flourishes, presided over the shop window as if it were the crown jewels. A baroque fantasy magnificently wrought in silver and gold that shone like the lighthouse at Alexandria, the nib was a wonder in its own right. When my father and I went out for a walk, I wouldn't stop pestering him until he took me to see the pen. My father declared that it must be, at the very least, the pen of an emperor. I was secretly convinced that with such a marvel one would be able to write anything, from novels to encyclopaedias, and letters whose supernatural power would surpass any postal limitations. Written with that pen, they would surely reach the most remote corners of the world, even that unknowable place to which my father said my mother had gone and from where she would never return.

One day we decided to go into the shop and inquire about the blessed artefact. It turned out to be the queen of all fountain pens, a Montblanc Meisterstück in a numbered series, that had once belonged, or so the shop attendant assured us, to Victor Hugo himself. From that gold nib, we were informed, had sprung the manuscript of *Les Misérables*.

'Just as Vichy Catalán water springs from the source at Caldas,' the clerk swore.

He told us he had bought it personally from the most serious collector in Paris, and that he had assured himself of the item's authenticity.

'And what is the price of this fountain of marvels, if you don't mind telling me?' my father asked.

The very mention of the sum drew the colour from his face, but I had already fallen under its spell. The clerk, who seemed to think we understood physics, began to assail us with incomprehensible gibberish about the alloys of precious

metals, enamels from the Far East and a revolutionary theory on pistons and communicating chambers, all of which contributed to the Teutonic science underpinning the glorious stroke of that champion of scrivening technology. I have to say in his favour that, despite the fact that we must have looked like two poor devils, the clerk allowed us to handle the pen as much as we liked, filled it with ink for us, and offered me a piece of parchment so that I could write my name and thus commence my literary career in the footsteps of Victor Hugo. Then, after polishing it with a cloth to restore its shiny splendour, he returned the pen to its throne.

'Perhaps another day,' mumbled my father.

Once we were out in the street again, he told me in a subdued voice that we couldn't afford the asking price. The bookshop provided just enough to keep us afloat and send me to a decent school. The great Victor Hugo's Montblanc pen would have to wait. I didn't say anything, but my father must have noticed my disappointment.

'I tell you what we'll do,' he proposed. 'When you're old enough to start writing, we'll come back and buy it.'

'What if someone buys it first?'

'No one is going to take this one, you can be quite sure. And if not, we can ask Don Federico to make us one. That man has the hands of a master.'

Don Federico was the local watchmaker, an occasional customer at the bookshop, and probably the most polite and courteous man in the whole of the Northern Hemisphere. His reputation as a craftsman preceded him from the Ribera quarter to the Ninot Market. Another reputation haunted him as well, this one of a less salubrious nature, related to his erotic proclivity for muscular young men from the more virile ranks of the proletariat, and to a certain penchant for dressing up like the music-hall star Estrellita Castro.

'What if Don Federico doesn't have the right tools for the

job?' I asked, unaware that to less innocent ears, the phrase might have had a salacious echo.

My father arched an eyebrow, fearing perhaps that some foul rumours might have sullied my innocence.

'Don Federico is very knowledgeable about all things German and could make a Volkswagen if he put his mind to it. Besides, I'd like to find out whether fountain pens existed in Victor Hugo's day. There are a lot of con artists about.'

My father's zeal for historical fact checking left me cold. I believed obstinately in the pen's illustrious past, even though I didn't think it was such a bad idea for Don Federico to make me a substitute. There would be time enough to reach the heights of Victor Hugo. To my consolation, and true to my father's predictions, the Montblanc pen remained for years in that shop window, which we visited religiously every Saturday morning.

'It's still there,' I would say, astounded.

'It's waiting for you,' my father would say. 'It knows that one day it will be yours and that you'll write a masterpiece with it.'

'I want to write a letter. To Mummy. So that she doesn't feel lonely.'

My father regarded me. 'Your mother isn't lonely, Daniel. She's with God. And with us, even if we can't see her.'

This very same theory had been formulated for me in school by Father Vicente, a veteran Jesuit expert at expounding on all the mysteries of the universe – from the gramophone to a toothache – quoting the Gospel According to Matthew. Yet on my father's lips, the words sounded hollow.

'And what does God want her for?'

'I don't know. If one day we see Him, we'll ask Him.'

Eventually I discarded the idea of the celestial letter and concluded that, while I was at it, I may as well begin with the masterpiece – that would be more practical. In the absence of the pen, my father lent me a Staedtler pencil, a number two,

with which I scribbled in a notebook. Unsurprisingly, my story told of an extraordinary fountain pen, remarkably similar to the one in the shop, though enchanted. To be more precise, the pen was possessed by the tortured soul of its previous owner, a novelist who had died of hunger and cold. When the pen fell into the hands of an apprentice, it insisted on reproducing the author's last work, which he had not been able to finish in his lifetime. I don't remember where I got that idea from, but I never again had another one like it. My attempts to re-create the novel on the pages of my notebook turned out to be disastrous. My syntax was plagued by an anaemic creativity, and my metaphorical flights reminded me of the advertisements for fizzy footbaths that I used to read in tram stops. I blamed the pencil and longed for the pen, which was bound to turn me into a master writer.

My father followed my tortuous progress with a mixture of pride and concern.

'How's your story going, Daniel?'

'I don't know. I suppose if I had the pen, everything would be different.'

My father told me that sort of reasoning could only have occurred to a budding author. 'Just keep going, and before you've finished your first work, I'll buy it for you.'

'Do you promise?'

He always answered with a smile. Luckily for my father, my literary dreams soon dwindled and were minced into mere oratory. What contributed to this was the discovery of mechanical toys and all sorts of tin gadgets you could find in the bric-a-brac stalls of the Encantes Market, at prices that were better suited to our finances. Childhood devotions make unfaithful and fickle lovers, and soon I had eyes only for Meccano and wind-up boats. I stopped asking my father to take me to see Victor Hugo's pen, and he didn't mention it again. That world seemed to have vanished, but for a long time the image I had of my father, which I still preserve

today, was that of a thin man wearing an old suit that was too large for him and a secondhand hat he had bought on Calle Condal for seven pesetas, a man who could not afford to buy his son a wretched pen that was useless but seemed to mean everything to him.

When I returned from Clara and the Ateneo that night, my father was waiting for me in the dining room, wearing his usual expression of anxiety and defeat.

'I was beginning to think you'd got lost somewhere,' he said. 'Tomás Aguilar phoned. He said you'd arranged to meet. Did you forget?'

'It's Barceló. When he starts talking there's no stopping him,' I replied, nodding as I spoke. 'I didn't know how to shake him off.'

'He's a good man, but he does go on. You must be hungry. Merceditas brought down some of the soup she made for her mother. That girl is an angel.'

We sat down at the table to savour Merceditas's offering. She was the daughter of the lady on the third floor, and everyone had her down to become a nun and a saint, although more than once I'd seen her with an able-handed sailor who sometimes walked her back to the shop. She always drowned him with kisses.

'You look pensive tonight,' said my father, trying to make conversation.

'It must be this humidity, it "dilates" the brain. That's what Barceló says.'

'It must be something else. Is anything worrying you, Daniel?'

'No. Just thinking.'

'What about?'

'The war.'

My father nodded gloomily and quietly sipped his soup. He was a very private person, and although he lived in the past,

he hardly ever mentioned it. I had grown up convinced that the slow procession of the postwar years, a world of stillness, poverty, and hidden resentment, was as natural as tap water, that the mute sadness that seeped from the walls of the wounded city was the real face of its soul. One of the pitfalls of childhood is that one doesn't have to understand something to feel it. By the time the mind is able to comprehend what has happened, the wounds of the heart are already too deep. That evening in early summer, as I walked back through the sombre, treacherous twilight of Barcelona, I could not blot out Clara's story about her father's disappearance. In my world death was like a nameless and incomprehensible hand, a door-to-door salesman who took away mothers, beggars, or ninety-year-old neighbours, like a hellish lottery. But I couldn't absorb the idea that death could actually walk by my side, with a human face and a heart that was poisoned with hatred, that death could be dressed in a uniform or a raincoat, queue up at a cinema, laugh in bars, or take his children out for a walk to Ciudadela Park in the morning, and then, in the afternoon, make someone disappear in the dungeons of Montjuïc Castle or in a common grave with no name or ceremony. Going over all this in my mind, it occurred to me that perhaps the papier-mâché world that I accepted as real was only a stage setting. Much like the arrival of Spanish trains, in those stolen years you never knew when the end of childhood was due.

We shared the soup, a broth made from leftovers with bits of bread in it, surrounded by the sticky droning of radio soaps that filtered out through open windows into the church square.

'So tell me. How did things go with Gustavo today?'

'I met his niece, Clara.'

'The blind girl? I hear she's a real beauty.'

'I don't know. I don't notice things like that.'

'You'd better not.'

'I told them I might go to their house tomorrow, after school, to read to her for a while – as she's so lonely. If you'll let me.'

My father looked at me askance, as if he were wondering whether he was growing old prematurely or whether I was growing up too quickly. I decided to change the subject, and the only one I could find was the one that was consuming me.

'Is it true that during the war people were taken to Montjuïc Castle and were never seen again?'

My father finished his spoonful of soup unperturbed and looked closely at me, his brief smile slipping away from his lips.

'Who told you that. Barceló?'

'No. Tomás Aguilar. He sometimes tells stories at school.'

My father nodded slowly.

'When there's a war, things happen that are very hard to explain, Daniel. Often even I don't know what they really mean. Sometimes it's best to leave things alone.'

He sighed and sipped his soup with little relish. I watched him without saying a word.

'Before your mother died, she made me promise that I would never talk to you about the war, that I wouldn't let you remember any of what happened.'

I didn't know how to answer. My father half closed his eyes, as if he were searching for something in the air – looks, silences, or perhaps my mother – to corroborate what he had just said.

'Sometimes I think I've been wrong to listen to her. I don't know.'

'It doesn't matter, Dad. . . .'

'No, it does matter, Daniel. Nothing is ever the same after a war. And yes, it's true that lots of people who went into that castle never came out.'

Our eyes met briefly. After a while my father got up and

took refuge in his bedroom. I cleared the plates, placed them in the small marble kitchen sink, and washed them up. When I returned to the sitting room, I turned off the light and sat in my father's old armchair. The breeze from the street made the curtains flutter. I was not sleepy, nor did I feel like trying to sleep. I went over to the balcony and looked out far enough to see the hazy glow shed by the streetlamps in Puerta del Ángel. A motionless figure stood in a patch of shadow on the cobbled street. The flickering amber glow of a cigarette was reflected in his eyes. He wore dark clothes, with one hand buried in the pocket of his jacket, the other holding the cigarette that wove a web of blue smoke around his profile. He observed me silently, his face obscured by the street lighting behind him. He remained there for almost a minute smoking nonchalantly, his eyes fixed on mine. Then, when the cathedral bells struck midnight, the figure gave a faint nod of the head, followed, I sensed, by a smile that I could not see. I wanted to return the greeting but was paralysed. The figure turned, and I saw the man walking away, with a slight limp. Any other night I would barely have noticed the presence of that stranger, but as soon as I'd lost sight of him in the mist, I felt a cold sweat on my forehead and found it hard to breathe. I had read an identical description of that scene in *The Shadow of the Wind*. In the story the protagonist would go out onto the balcony every night at midnight and discover that a stranger was watching him from the shadows, smoking nonchalantly. The stranger's face was always veiled by darkness, and only his eyes could be guessed at in the night, burning like hot coals. The stranger would remain there, his right hand buried in the pocket of his black jacket, and then he would go away, limping. In the scene I had just witnessed, that stranger could have been any person of the night, a figure with no face and no name. In Carax's novel, that figure was the devil.

6

A deep, dreamless sleep and the prospect of seeing Clara again that afternoon persuaded me that the vision had been pure coincidence. Perhaps that unexpected and feverish outbreak of imagination was just a side effect of the growth spurt I'd been waiting for, an event that all the women in the building said would turn me into a man, if not of stature, at least of a certain height. At seven on the dot, dressed in my Sunday best and smelling strongly of the Varón Dandy eau de cologne I had borrowed from my father, I turned up at the house of Gustavo Barceló ready to make my début as personal reader and living-room pest. The bookseller and his niece shared a palatial apartment in Plaza Real. A uniformed maid, wearing a white cap and the expressionless look of a soldier, opened the door for me with theatrical servility.

'You must be Master Daniel,' she said. 'I'm Bernarda, at your service.'

Bernarda affected a ceremonial tone that could not conceal a Cáceres accent thick enough to spread on toast. With pomp and solemnity, she led me through the Barceló residence. The apartment, which was on the first floor, circled the building and formed a ring of galleries, sitting rooms, and passageways that to me, used as I was to our modest family home on Calle Santa Ana, seemed like a miniature of the Escorial palace. It was obvious that, as well as books, incunabula and all manner of arcane texts, Don Gustavo also collected statues, paintings, and altarpieces, not to mention abundant fauna and flora. I followed Bernarda through a gallery that was full to overflowing with foliage and tropical species. A golden, dusky light filtered through the glass panes of the gallery, and the languid tones from a piano hovered in the air. Bernarda fought her way through the jungle brandishing her docker's arms as if they were machetes. I followed her closely,

examining the surroundings and noticing the presence of half a dozen cats and a couple of cockatoos (of a violent colour and encyclopaedic size) which, the maid explained, Barceló had christened Ortega and Gasset, respectively. Clara was waiting for me in a sitting room on the other side of this forest, overlooking the square. Draped in a diaphanous turquoise-blue cotton dress, the object of my confused desire was playing the piano beneath the weak light from the rose window. Clara played badly, with no sense of rhythm and mistaking half the notes, but to me her serenade was liquid heaven. I saw her sitting up straight at the keyboard, with a half smile and her head tilted to one side, and she seemed like a celestial vision. I was about to clear my throat to indicate my presence, but the whiff of cologne betrayed me. Clara suddenly stopped her playing, and an embarrassed smile lit up her face.

'For a moment I thought you were my uncle,' she said. 'He has forbidden me to play Mompou, because he says that what I do with him is a sacrilege.'

The only Mompou I knew was a gaunt priest with a tendency to flatulence who taught us physics and chemistry at school. The association of ideas seemed to me both grotesque and downright improbable.

'Well, I think you play beautifully.'

'No I don't. My uncle is a real music enthusiast, and he's even hired a music teacher to mend my ways – a young composer who shows a lot of promise called Adrián Neri. He's studied in Paris and Vienna. You've got to meet him. He's writing a symphony that is going to premiere with the Barcelona City Orchestra – his uncle sits on the management board. He's a genius.'

'The uncle or the nephew?'

'Don't be wicked, Daniel. I'm sure you'll fall for Adrián.'

More likely he'll fall on me like a grand piano plummeting down from the seventh floor, I thought.

'Would you like a snack?' Clara offered. 'Bernarda makes the most breathtaking cinnamon sponge cakes.'

We took our afternoon snack like royalty, wolfing down everything the maid put before us. I had no idea about the protocol for this unfamiliar occasion and was not sure how to behave. Clara, who always seemed to know what I was thinking, suggested that I read from *The Shadow of the Wind* whenever I liked and that I might as well start at the beginning. And so, trying to sound like one of those pompous voices on Radio Nacional that recited patriotic vignettes after the midday Angelus, I threw myself into revisiting the text of the novel. My voice, rather stiff at first, slowly became more relaxed, and soon I forgot myself and was submerged once more into the narrative, discovering cadences and turns of phrase that flowed like musical motifs, riddles made of timbre and pauses I had not noticed during my first reading. New details, strands of images and fantasy appeared between the lines, and new shapes revealed themselves, like the structure of a building looked at from different angles. I read for about an hour, getting through five chapters, until my throat felt dry and half a dozen clocks chimed throughout the apartment, reminding me that it was getting late. I closed the book and observed that Clara was smiling at me calmly.

'It reminds me a bit of *The Red House*,' she said. 'But this story seems less sombre.'

'Don't you believe it,' I said. 'This is just the beginning. Later on, things get complicated.'

'You have to go, don't you?' Clara asked.

'I'm afraid so. It's not that I want to, but . . .'

'If you have nothing else to do, you could come back tomorrow,' she suggested. 'But I don't want to take advantage of you. . . .'

'Six o'clock?' I offered. 'That way we'll have more time.'

That meeting in the music room of the Plaza Real apartment was the first of many more throughout the

summer of 1945 and the years to follow. Soon my visits to the Barcelós became almost daily, except for Tuesdays and Thursdays, when Clara had music lessons with Adrián Neri. I spent long hours there, and in time I memorized every room, every passageway, and every plant in Don Gustavo's forest. *The Shadow of the Wind* lasted us about a fortnight, but we had no trouble in finding successors with which to fill our reading hours. Barceló owned a fabulous library, and, for want of more Julián Carax titles, we ambled through dozens of minor classics and major bagatelles. Some afternoons we barely read, and spent our time just talking or even going out for a walk around the square or as far as the cathedral. Clara loved to sit and listen to the murmuring of people in the cloister and guess at the echoes of footsteps in the stone alleyways. She would ask me to describe the façades, the people, the cars, the shops, the lampposts and shop windows that we passed on our way. Often she would take my arm and I would guide her through our own private Barcelona, one that only she and I could see. We always ended up in a milk bar on Calle Petritxol, sharing a bowl of whipped cream or a cup of hot chocolate with sponge fingers. Sometimes people would look at us askance, and more than one know-all waiter referred to her as 'your older sister', but I paid no attention to their taunts and insinuations. Other times, I don't know whether out of malice or morbidity, Clara confided in me, telling me far-fetched secrets that I was not sure how to take. One of her favourite topics concerned a stranger, a person who sometimes came up to her when she was alone in the street and spoke to her in a hoarse voice. This mysterious person, who never mentioned his name, asked her questions about Don Gustavo and even about me. Once he had stroked her throat. Such stories tormented me mercilessly. Another time Clara told me she had begged the supposed stranger to let her read his face with her hands. He did not reply, which she took as a yes. When she raised her

hands to his face, he stopped her suddenly, but she still managed to feel what she thought was leather.

'As if he wore a leather mask,' she said.

'You're making that up, Clara.'

Clara would swear again and again that it was true, and I would give up, tortured by the image of that phantom who found pleasure in caressing her swan-like neck – and heaven knows what else – while all I could do was long for it. Had I paused to reflect, I would have understood that my devotion to Clara brought me no more than suffering. Perhaps for that very reason, I adored her all the more, because of the eternal human stupidity of pursuing those who hurt us the most. During that bleak postwar summer, the only thing I feared was the arrival of the new school term, when I would no longer be able to spend all day with Clara.

By dint of seeing me so often around the house, Bernarda, whose severe appearance concealed a doting maternal instinct, became fond of me and, in her own manner, decided to adopt me.

'You can tell this boy hasn't got a mother, sir,' she would say to Barceló. 'I feel so sorry for him, poor little mite.'

Bernarda had arrived in Barcelona shortly after the war, fleeing from poverty and from a father who on a good day would beat her up and tell her she was stupid, ugly, and a slut, and on a bad one would corner her in the pigsty, drunk, and fondle her until she sobbed with terror – at which point he'd let her go, calling her prudish and stuck up, like her mother. Barceló had come across Bernarda by chance when she worked in a vegetable stall in the Borne Market and, following his instinct, had offered her a post in his household.

'Ours will be a brand-new *Pygmalion*,' he announced. 'You shall be my Eliza and I'll be your Professor Higgins.'

Bernarda, whose literary appetite was more than satisfied

with the church newsletter, glanced over him. 'I might be poor and ignorant, but I'm decent too,' she said.

Barceló was not exactly George Bernard Shaw, but even if he had not managed to endow his pupil with the eloquence and spirit of a literary lady, his efforts had refined Bernarda and taught her the manners and speech of a provincial maid. She was twenty-eight, but I always thought she carried ten more years on her back, even if they showed only in her eyes. She was a serial churchgoer with an ecstatic devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes. Every morning she went to the eight o'clock service at the Basilica of Santa María del Mar, and she confessed no less than three times a week, four in warm weather. Don Gustavo, who was a confirmed agnostic (which Bernarda suspected might be a respiratory condition, like asthma, but afflicting only refined gentlemen), deemed it mathematically impossible that the maid could sin sufficiently to keep up that schedule of confession and contrition.

'You're as good as gold, Bernarda,' he would say indignantly. 'These people who see sin everywhere are sick in their souls and, if you really press me, in their bowels, too. The endemic condition of the Iberian saint is chronic constipation.'

Every time she heard such blasphemy, Bernarda would make the sign of the cross five times over. Later, at night, she would say a prayer for the tainted soul of Señor Barceló, who had a good heart but whose brains had rotted away due to excessive reading, like that fellow Sancho Panza. Very occasionally Bernarda had boyfriends who would beat her, take what little money she had stashed in a savings account, and sooner or later dump her. Every time one of these crises arose, Bernarda would lock herself up in her room for days, where she would cry an ocean and swear she was going to kill herself with rat poison or bleach. After exhausting all his persuasive tricks, Barceló would get truly frightened and call the locksmith to open the door. Then the family doctor

would administer a sedative strong enough to calm a horse. When the poor thing woke up two days later, the bookseller would buy her roses, chocolates, a new dress and would take her to the pictures to see the latest from Cary Grant, who in her book was the handsomest man in recorded history.

'Did you know? They say Cary Grant is queer,' she would murmur, stuffing herself with chocolates. 'Is that possible?'

'Rubbish,' Barceló would swear. 'Dunces and blockheads live in a state of perpetual envy.'

'You do speak well, sir. It shows that you've been to that Sorbet university.'

'The Sorbonne,' he would answer, gently correcting her.

It was very difficult not to love Bernarda. Without being asked, she would cook and sew for me. She would mend my clothes and my shoes, comb and cut my hair, buy me vitamins and toothpaste. Once she even gave me a small medal with a glass container full of holy water, which a sister of hers who lived in San Adrián del Besós had brought all the way from Lourdes by bus. Sometimes, while she inspected my head in search of lice and other parasites, she would speak to me in a hushed voice.

'Miss Clara is the most wonderful person in the world, and may God strike me dead if it should ever enter my head to criticize her, but it's not right that you, Master Daniel, should become too obsessed with her, if you know what I mean.'

'Don't worry, Bernarda, we're only friends.'

'That's just what I say.'

To illustrate her arguments, Bernarda would then bring up some story she had heard on the radio about a boy who had fallen in love with his teacher and on whom some sort of avenging spell had been cast. It made his hair and his teeth fall out, and his face and hands were covered with some incriminating fungus, a sort of leprosy of lust.

'Lust is a bad thing,' Bernarda would conclude. 'Take it from me.'

Despite the jokes he made at my expense, Don Gustavo looked favourably on my devotion to Clara and my eager commitment to be her companion. I attributed his tolerance to the fact that he probably considered me harmless. From time to time, he would still let slip enticing offers to buy the Carax novel from me. He would tell me that he had mentioned the subject to colleagues in the antiquarian book trade, and they all agreed that a Carax could now be worth a fortune, especially in Paris. I always refused his offers, at which he would just smile shrewdly. He had given me a copy of the keys to the apartment so that I could come and go without having to worry about whether he or Bernarda were there to open the door. My father was another story. As the years went by, he had got over his instinctive reluctance to talk about any subject that truly worried him. One of the first consequences of that progress was that he began to show his obvious disapproval of my relationship with Clara.

'You ought to go out with friends your own age, like Tomás Aguilar – you seem to have forgotten him, though he's a splendid boy – and not with a woman who is old enough to be married.'

'What does it matter how old we each are if we're good friends?'

What hurt me most was the reference to Tomás, because it was true. I hadn't gone out with him for months, whereas before we had been inseparable. My father looked at me reprovingly.

'Daniel, you don't know anything about women, and this one is playing with you like a cat with a canary.'

'You're the one who doesn't know anything about women,' I would reply, offended. 'And much less about Clara.'

Our conversations on the subject rarely went any further than an exchange of reproaches and wounded looks. When I was not at school or with Clara, I devoted my time to helping my father in the bookshop – tidying up the storeroom at the

back of the shop, delivering orders, running errands, or even serving regular customers. My father complained that I didn't really put my mind or my heart into the work. I, in turn, replied that I spent my whole life working there and I couldn't see what he could possibly complain about. Many nights, when sleep eluded me, I'd lie awake remembering the intimacy, the small world we had both shared during the years following my mother's death, the years of Victor Hugo's pen and the tin trains. I recalled them as years of peace and sadness, a world that was vanishing and that had begun to evaporate on the dawn when my father took me to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. Time played on the opposite team. One day my father discovered that I'd given Carax's book to Clara, and he rose in anger.

'You disappoint me, Daniel,' he said. 'When I took you to that secret place, I told you that the book you chose was something special, that you were going to adopt it and had to be responsible for it.'

'I was ten at the time, Father, and that was a child's game.'

My father looked at me as if I'd stabbed him.

'And now you're fourteen, and not only are you still a child, you're a child who thinks he's a man. Life is going to deal you some hard knocks, Daniel. And very soon.'

In those days I wanted to believe that my father was hurt because I spent so much time with the Barcelós. The bookseller and his niece lived a life of luxury that my father could barely dream of. I thought he resented the fact that Don Gustavo's maid behaved as if she were my own mother, and was offended by my acceptance that someone could take on that role. Sometimes, while I was in the back room wrapping up parcels or preparing an order, I would hear a customer joking with my father.

'What you need is a good woman, Sempere. These days there are plenty of good-looking widows around, in the prime of their life, if you see what I mean. A young lady would sort

out your life, my friend, and take twenty years off you. What a good pair of breasts can't do . . .'

My father never responded to these insinuations, but I found them increasingly sensible. Once, at dinnertime, which had become a battleground of silences and stolen glances, I brought up the subject. I thought that if I were the one to suggest it, it would make things easier. My father was an attractive man, always clean and neat in appearance, and I knew for a fact that more than one lady in the neighbourhood approved of him and would have welcomed more than just his reading suggestions.

'It's been very easy for you to find a substitute for your mother,' he answered bitterly. 'But for me there is no such person, and I have no interest at all in looking.'

As time went by, the hints from my father and from Bernarda, and even Barceló's intimations, began to make an impression on me. Something inside told me that I was entering a cul-de-sac, that I could not hope for Clara to see anything more in me than a boy ten years her junior. Every day it felt more difficult to be near her, to bear the touch of her hands or to take her by the arm when we went out for a walk. There came a point when her mere proximity translated into an almost physical pain. Nobody was unaware of this fact, least of all Clara.

'Daniel, I think we need to talk,' she would say. 'I don't think I've behaved very well towards you—'

I never let her finish her sentences. I would leave the room with any old excuse and flee, unable to face the possibility that the fantasy world I had built around Clara might be dissolving. I could not know that my troubles had only just begun.