

MARINA

Carlos Ruiz Zafón is the author of seven novels including the international phenomenon *The Shadow of the Wind*, *The Angel's Game* and *The Prisoner of Heaven*. He is one of the world's most read and best loved writers. His work has been translated into more than forty languages and published around the world, garnering numerous international prizes and reaching millions of readers. He divides his time between Barcelona and Los Angeles.

Also by Carlos Ruiz Zafón

The Shadow of the Wind

The Angel's Game

The Prisoner of Heaven

The Prince of Mist

The Midnight Palace

The Watcher in the Shadows

MARINA

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A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a black horizontal bar on the left containing the word "CHAPTER" in a white, serif, all-caps font. To the right of the bar is a large, black, diamond-shaped element containing the number "1" in a white, serif font. The entire graphic is surrounded by intricate, black, floral and vine-like patterns that extend upwards and downwards.

IN THE LATE 1970S BARCELONA WAS A MIRAGE OF avenues and winding alleys where one could easily travel thirty or forty years into the past by just stepping into the foyer of a grand old building or walking into a café. Time and memory, history and fiction merged in the enchanted city like watercolours in the rain. It was there, in the lingering echo of streets that no longer exist, that cathedrals and age-old palaces created the tapestry into which this story would be woven.

I was then a fifteen-year-old boy languishing in a boarding school named after some half-forgotten saint, on the lower slopes of the hill to Vallvidrera. In those days the district of Sarriá still looked like a small village stranded on the shores of an art nouveau metropolis. My school stood at the top end of a narrow street that climbed up from Paseo de la Bonanova. Its monumental

façade was more reminiscent of a castle than a school and its angular red-brick silhouette formed a dark maze of turrets, arches and wings.

The school was surrounded by a sprawling citadel of gardens, fountains, muddy ponds, courtyards and shadowy pinewoods. Here and there sombre buildings housed swimming pools enveloped in a ghostly vapour, eerily silent gyms and gloomy chapels where images of long-fingered angels grinned in the flickering candlelight. The main building was four storeys high, not counting the two basements and an attic set apart as an enclosed residence for the few aging priests who still worked as teachers. The boarders' rooms were located along the cavernous corridors of the fourth floor. These endless galleries lay in perpetual darkness, always shrouded in a spectral aura.

I spent my days lost in hopeless reverie in the cold classrooms of that huge castle, waiting for the miracle that took place every afternoon at twenty minutes past five. At that magical hour, when the setting sun drenched the tall windows with liquid gold, the bell rang announcing the end of lessons and we boarders were allowed almost three free hours before dinner was served in the vast dining hall. The idea was that we should devote this time to studying and to meditation, but in all honesty I don't remember having applied myself even once to either of those noble pursuits the whole time I was there.

It was my favourite moment of the day. Slipping past the porter's lodge, I'd go out and explore the city. I made

an art of getting back to the school just in time for dinner, having wandered through old streets and avenues in the darkening twilight. During those long walks I felt an exhilarating sense of freedom. My imagination would take wing and soar high above the buildings. For a few hours the streets of Barcelona, the boarding school and my gloomy room on the fourth floor seemed to vanish. For those few hours, with just a couple of coins in my pocket, I was the luckiest person in the world.

My route would often take me through what in those days was still known as the Desert of Sarriá – no sandy dunes or anything remotely desert-like about it; it was, in fact, just the remains of a forest lost in a no-man’s-land. Most of the old mansions that had once populated the top end of Paseo de la Bonanova, though still standing, were in an incipient state of ruin, and all the streets surrounding the boarding school were developing the eerie atmosphere of a ghost town. Ivy-clad walls blocked the way into wild gardens where huge residences loomed: derelict weed-choked palaces over which memory seemed to drift like a perpetual mist. Some of these decaying properties awaited demolition; others had been ransacked over the years. Some, however, were still inhabited.

Their occupants were members of dying dynasties, long forgotten – families whose names had filled entire pages of the local papers in the old days when trams were still regarded with scepticism as a modern invention. Now they were the hostages of a rapidly fading era who refused to abandon their sinking ships. Fearing perhaps

that if they dared step outside their withered homes they might turn to ashes and be blown away in the wind, they wasted away like prisoners entombed in the relics of their lost glory. Sometimes, as I hurried past rusty gates and ghostly gardens peopled by worn faceless statues, I could sense their owners' suspicious looks from behind faded shutters.

One afternoon, towards the end of September 1979, I decided to venture down one of those streets studded with art nouveau mansions that I hadn't noticed before. It curved round, and at the end of it stood an ornate iron gate, no different to many others in the area. Beyond this entrance lay the remains of a garden marked by years of neglect. Through the weeds I glimpsed the outline of a two-storey home, its sombre façade rising behind a fountain with a stone mermaid whose face time had covered with a veil of moss.

It was beginning to get dark and I thought the place looked rather sinister, even for my taste. A grave silence enveloped it; only the breeze seemed to whisper a mute warning. I realised I'd walked into one of Sarriá's 'dead' spots and decided I'd better retrace my steps and return to the boarding school. I was hovering between the morbid fascination of that forgotten place and common sense when I noticed two bright yellow eyes in the shadows, fixed on me like daggers. I swallowed hard.

The motionless silhouette of a cat with velvety grey fur stood out against the gate of the old manor. In its mouth it held a tiny half-dead sparrow, and a silver bell hung

from its neck. The cat studied me coldly for a few seconds then turned and slid under the metal bars. I watched as it disappeared into the immensity of that lost paradise, carrying the sparrow on its last journey.

I was struck by the sight of the haughty, defiant little beast. Judging by its shiny fur and its bell, I surmised that it had an owner. It looked well fed. Perhaps this building was home to something more than the ghosts of a Barcelona long gone. I walked up to the gate and put my hands on the iron bars. They felt cold. The last gleam of sunset lit up the shiny trail of blood left by the sparrow through that jungle. Scarlet pearls marking a path through the labyrinth. I swallowed again. Or rather I tried to swallow. My mouth was dry. I could feel my pulse throbbing in my temples as if it knew something I didn't know. Just then I felt the gate yielding under my weight and realised it was open.

As I stepped into the garden, the moon lit up the veiled face of the mermaid emerging from the black waters of the fountain. She was observing me. I stood there, transfixed, expecting her to slither out of the pond and spread her wolfish grin, revealing a serpent's tongue and long fangs. None of that happened. Taking a deep breath, I considered reining in my imagination or, better still, giving up my timid exploration of the property altogether. Once again someone took the decision for me. A celestial sound wafted across the shadows of the garden like a perfume. I could make out traces of its soft tones carving out the notes of an aria to the accompaniment of

a piano. It was the most beautiful voice I had ever heard.

The melody was familiar, though I couldn't put a name to it. It came from inside the house. I followed its hypnotic trail. Sheets of diaphanous light filtered through the half-open door of a glass conservatory, above which I recognised the cat's eyes, fixed on mine from a windowsill on the first floor. I drew closer to the illuminated glasshouse from which the alluring sound was issuing. It was a woman's voice. The faint halo of a hundred candles twinkled inside, revealing the golden horn of an old gramophone spinning a record. Without thinking what I was doing, I found myself walking into the conservatory, bewitched by the music from the gramophone. Sitting next to it on the table was a round shiny object: a pocket watch. I picked it up and examined it in the candlelight. The hands had stopped and the dial was cracked. It looked like gold and as old as the house itself. A bit further away stood a large armchair with its back to me, facing a fireplace over which hung an oil portrait of a woman dressed in white. Her large grey eyes, sad and profound, presided over the room.

Suddenly the spell was shattered. A figure rose from the armchair and turned to look at me. A head of long white hair and eyes burning like red-hot coals shone in the dark. The only other thing I managed to see were two huge pale hands reaching out towards me. As I scrambled off in a panic, heading for the door, I bumped into the gramophone and knocked it over. I heard the needle scratch the record and the heavenly voice broke off with

a hellish scream. Those hands brushed my shirt as I rushed out into the garden with wings on my feet and fear burning in every pore of my body. I didn't pause for a moment. I ran and ran without looking back, until a sharp pain tore through my side and I realised I could hardly breathe. By then I was bathed in cold sweat and could see the school lights shining some thirty metres ahead.

I slipped in through one of the kitchen doors that was rarely guarded and crept up to my room. The other boarders must have gone down to the dining room a good while ago. I dried the sweat off my forehead and slowly my heart recovered its normal rhythm. I was beginning to feel calmer when someone rapped on my door.

'Oscar, time to come down to dinner,' chimed the voice of one of my tutors, a freethinking Jesuit called Seguí who disliked having to play the policeman.

'I'll be right down, Father,' I replied. 'Just a second.'

I hurriedly put on the jacket required for dinner and turned off the light. Through the window the moon's spectre hovered over Barcelona. Only then did I realise that I was still holding the gold watch in my hand.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a black horizontal bar with the word "CHAPTER" in white, serif, all-caps font. To the right of the bar is a large, black, diamond-shaped element containing the number "2" in a white, serif font. The entire graphic is surrounded by intricate, black, floral and vine-like patterns.

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS THAT DAMNED WATCH and I became inseparable companions. I took it everywhere with me; I even slept with it under my pillow, fearful that someone might find it and ask me where I'd got it from. I wouldn't have known what to answer. 'That's because you didn't find it; you stole it,' whispered the accusing voice in my head. 'The technical term is *breaking and entering leading to grand larceny* – and goodness knows what other malfeasance you may be liable for,' the voice added. For some odd reason, it sounded suspiciously like the voice of Perry Mason on the old TV series.

Every night I waited patiently for my friends to fall asleep so that I could examine my forbidden treasure. When silence reigned, I studied the watch with my torch. All the remorse in the world could not have diminished the fascination produced by the booty of my first

adventure in 'disorganised crime'. It was a heavy watch and appeared to be made of solid gold. The glass had probably been cracked as a result of a knock or a fall. The same impact must have ended the life of its mechanism, I imagined, freezing the hands at six twenty-three for all eternity. On the back was an inscription:

For Germán, through whom light speaks.

H.A.

19 January 1964

It occurred to me that the watch must be worth a fortune and soon I was assailed by pangs of guilt. Those engraved words made me feel that I'd become not just a thief of other people's valuables, but one who also stole their most precious memories.

One rainy Thursday I decided to unload my guilty conscience and share my secret. My best friend at school was a boy with penetrating eyes and a nervous temperament who insisted on being called JF, though those initials had little or nothing to do with his real name. JF had the soul of an avant-garde poet and such a sharp wit he often cut his own tongue on it. He suffered from a weak constitution and had only to hear the word *germ* being mentioned within a one-kilometre radius to think he was coming down with some deadly infection. Once I looked up 'hypochondriac' and copied out the definition for him.

'You might be interested to know you've been

mentioned in the *Dictionary of the Royal Academy*,' I announced.

JF glanced at the note and threw me a scathing look.

'Try looking under 'i' for 'idiot' and you'll see I'm not the only famous one,' he replied.

That day, during our lunch break, JF and I sneaked into the gloomy assembly hall. Our footsteps down the central aisle conjured up the echo of tiptoeing shadows. Two harsh shafts of light fell on the dusty stage. We sat in a pool of light, facing rows of empty seats that melted away into the darkness. Rain scratched at the first-floor windows.

'Well,' JF spat out. 'What's all the mystery about?'

Without saying a word, I pulled out the watch and showed it to him. JF raised his eyebrows and appraised the object carefully for a few moments before handing it back to me with a questioning look.

'What do you think?' I asked.

'I think it's a gold watch,' replied JF. 'Who is this fellow Germán?'

'I haven't the foggiest.'

'How typical of you. Spill the beans.'

I went on to recount in detail my adventure a few days earlier in the old dilapidated mansion. JF listened to my story with his characteristic patience and quasi-scientific attention. When I'd finished, he seemed to weigh up the matter before offering his first impressions.

'In other words, you've stolen it,' he concluded.

'That's not the point,' I objected.

'I'd like to know what this Germán person thinks the point may be,' JF replied.

'This Germán person probably died years ago,' I suggested without much conviction.

JF rubbed his chin.

'I wonder what the penal code has in store for those juvenile miscreants inclined to the premeditated theft of personal objects and watches engraved with a dedication ...'

'There was no premeditation, or anything of the sort,' I protested. 'It all happened suddenly – I had no time to think. By the time I realised I had the watch, it was too late. You would have done the same in my place.'

'In your place I would have had a heart attack,' remarked JF, who was more a man of words than a man of action. 'Supposing I'd been crazy enough to go into that old house following a feral cat with a bleeding bird in its jaws. God knows what germs you could catch from that kind of animal.'

For a while we just sat there without saying a word, listening to the faraway sound of the rain.

'Well,' JF concluded. 'What's done is done. You're not thinking of returning to the scene of the crime, are you?'

I smiled meekly.

'Not on my own.'

My friend's eyes opened wide.

'Don't even think about it.'

That afternoon, once classes were over, JF and I slipped out through the kitchen door and headed for

the mysterious street leading to the mansion. The cobblestones were spattered with puddles and dead leaves, and a threatening metallic sky hung over the city. JF, who wasn't at all sold on the merits of our outing, looked paler than usual. The sight of that remote corner trapped in the past must have made his stomach shrink to the size of a marble. The silence was eerie.

'I've seen enough. Let's call it a day – let's turn round and return to our boring but safe lives in the school,' he mumbled, taking a few steps back.

'Don't be a chicken.'

'I won't even respond to that ...'

Just then the tinkle of a bell drifted through the wind. JF went quiet. The cat's yellow eyes were watching us. All of a sudden the cat hissed like a serpent and showed us its claws. The fur on its back stood on end and it opened its jaws to reveal the fangs that had taken the life of a sparrow a few days earlier. A distant flash of lightning illuminated the sky like a cauldron of light. JF and I exchanged glances.

Fifteen minutes later we were sitting on a bench next to the pond in the boarding-school cloister. The watch was still in my jacket pocket, feeling heavier than ever.



There it remained for the rest of that week, until the early hours of Saturday morning. Shortly before dawn I awoke with the vague feeling of having dreamed about the voice captured in that old gramophone. Outside my window

Barcelona was coming alive in a canvas of scarlet shadows. I jumped out of bed and looked for the wretched watch that had been cursing my existence for the past few days. We stared at one another. Finally, arming myself with a determination one can only summon when having to face some ridiculous task, I decided to put an end to the matter: I was going to return it.

I dressed quietly and tiptoed along the dark fourth-floor corridor. Nobody would notice my absence until ten or eleven o'clock. By then I hoped to be back. Or else.

Outdoors, the streets still lay beneath that mantle of purplish brightness tingeing the dawn skies of Barcelona. I walked down to Calle Margenat. Sarriá was waking up around me as low clouds swept through the district, capturing the first light in a golden halo. Here and there the front of a house was just visible through gaps in the haze and the swirling dry leaves.

It didn't take me long to find the street. I paused for a while to take in the silence and the strange peace that filled that lost corner of the city. I was beginning to feel that the world had stopped like the watch I had in my pocket when I heard a sound behind me.

I turned round and beheld a vision straight out of a dream.

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A BICYCLE WAS SLOWLY EMERGING OUT OF THE mist. A young girl clad in a vaporous white dress was pedalling up the hill towards me. In the early sunlight I could almost make out her silhouette through the cotton. Her long straw-coloured hair waved about, concealing her face. I stood there, immobile, watching her as she approached, rooted to the ground like a fool. The bicycle stopped a couple of metres away. My eyes, or my imagination, spied the shape of slim legs as she stepped down. Slowly, I took in every part of that dress – which looked like something out of a Sorolla painting – until my eyes rested on the girl’s deep grey eyes, so deep you could fall straight into them. They were riveted on mine with a sarcastic look. I gawped at her, smiling stupidly.

‘You must be the watch thief,’ said the girl in a tone that matched the strength of her expression.

I reckoned she must be about my age, perhaps a year or two older. Guessing a woman's age was, for me, an art or a science, never a pastime. Her skin was as pale as her dress.

'Do you live here?' I stammered, pointing to the gate.

She didn't even blink. Those eyes drilled into me with such intensity that it took me a long while to realise she was the most stunning creature I had ever seen, or hoped to see, in my entire life. Full stop.

'And who are you to ask?'

'I suppose I'm the watch thief,' I improvised. 'My name is Oscar. Oscar Drai. I've come to return it.'

Without waiting for a reply, I pulled the watch out of my pocket and handed it to her. She held my gaze for a few seconds before taking it. When she did, I noticed that her hand was strikingly pallid and that she wore a plain gold band on her ring finger.

'It was already broken when I took it,' I explained.

'It's been broken for fifteen years,' she murmured without looking at me.

When at last she raised her eyes, she did so to examine me from head to toe, like someone sizing up an old piece of furniture or a bit of junk. Something in the way she looked at me made me realise she didn't really believe I was a thief; she was probably categorising me as your run-of-the-mill imbecile. My beguiled expression surely didn't help. The girl arched an eyebrow and smiled mysteriously as she handed the watch back to me.

'You took it; you return it to its owner.'

‘But ...’

‘It isn’t my watch,’ she explained. ‘It belongs to Germán.’

The mere mention of that name conjured up the image of the towering figure with white hair that had surprised me in the conservatory a few days earlier.

‘Germán?’

‘My father.’

‘And you are?’ I asked.

‘His daughter.’

‘I meant, what’s your name?’

‘I know exactly what you meant,’ replied the girl.

She climbed back onto her bike and rode through the entrance gate, looking back briefly before disappearing into the garden. Those eyes seemed to be ridiculing me with their laughter. I sighed and followed her. An old acquaintance welcomed me in: the cat, staring at me with its usual disdain. I wished I was a Dobermann.

The cat escorted me as I negotiated my way through the tangled garden. When I reached the fountain with the mermaid, the bicycle was leaning against it while its owner unloaded a bag from the basket fixed over the handlebars. There was a smell of freshly baked bread. The girl pulled a bottle of milk out of the bag and knelt down to fill a bowl that was lying on the ground. The animal rushed to its breakfast. It looked like a daily ritual.

‘I think he prefers to kill his food before he eats it,’ I said.

‘He only hunts for fun. He doesn’t eat what he catches,’

she explained as if she were talking to a child. 'It's a territorial thing.'

'What an adorable little beast,' I remarked.

'What he likes is milk. Don't you, Kafka? You love milk, don't you?'

The Kafkaesque cat licked her fingers in agreement. The girl smiled warmly and stroked his back. Through the folds of her dress, I could see the muscles flex on the side of her body. Just then she looked up and caught me watching her and licking my lips.

'How about you? Have you had breakfast?' she asked.

I shook my head.

'Then you must be hungry. Dimwits are always hungry,' she said. 'Here, come in and have something to eat. It will do you good to have a full stomach if you're going to tell Germán why you stole his watch.'



The kitchen was a large room at the back of the house. My condemned-man's breakfast consisted of delicious buttery croissants the girl had bought at the Foix patisserie in Plaza Sarriá, along with a very large cup of white coffee. She sat down facing me while I avidly devoured my feast, eyeing me with a mixture of curiosity, pity and suspicion, as if she'd taken in a starving beggar. She herself didn't eat a thing.

'I've seen you around here before,' she remarked without taking her eyes off me. 'You and that little guy who looks like he's just seen a ghost. You often cross over

the street behind this one when they let you out of the boarding school. Sometimes it's just you, humming in an absent-minded way. I bet you have a great time in that dungeon of a school ...'

I was about to make some witty reply when an enormous shadow spread over the table like a cloud of ink. My host looked up and smiled. I sat there, stock-still, my mouth full of croissant, my heart beating like castanets.

'We have a visitor,' she announced gleefully. 'Dad, this is Oscar Draï, an amateur watch thief. Oscar, this is Germán, my father.'

I gulped down my food and slowly turned my head. Standing above me was an impressively tall figure wearing an alpaca wool suit, with a waistcoat and a bow tie. The man's white hair, neatly combed back, fell to his shoulders. His face, finely chiselled around dark sad eyes, displayed a grey moustache. But what really defined him were his hands. The white hands of an angel, with slender and unusually long fingers. Germán.

'I'm not a thief, sir ...' I stated nervously. 'Let me explain. I only ventured into your house because I thought it was uninhabited. Once I was inside, I don't know what happened to me, I listened to that music, well, no, well, yes, the thing is, I came in and saw the watch. I wasn't going to take it, I swear, but I got scared and by the time I realised I'd taken the watch, I was already quite a distance away. That is to say, I'm not sure whether I've explained this properly ...'

The girl was smiling mischievously. Germán's eyes

rested on mine. They were unfathomable. I rummaged about in my pocket and handed him the watch, expecting that at any moment he'd start shouting and threatening to call the police, the Civil Guard and the Juvenile Court.

'I believe you,' he said amiably, taking the watch and sitting down next to us at the table.

His voice was gentle, almost inaudible. His daughter served him two croissants on a plate and a cup of coffee just like mine. As she did so she kissed her father on the forehead and he put his arm around her. I gazed at them against the light that strayed in through the windows. Germán's face – which I'd expected to be the face of an ogre – became delicate, almost frail. He was extraordinarily thin. Smiling at me kindly, he brought the cup to his lips, and for a moment I noticed that the affection flowing between father and daughter went beyond words and gestures. A silent bond, a look in their eyes, seemed to draw them together in the shadows of that house at the end of a forgotten street, where they took care of one another, far from the world.



Germán finished his breakfast and thanked me for having taken the trouble to return his watch. So much kindness made me feel doubly guilty.

'Well, Oscar,' he said in a tired voice. 'It's been a pleasure to meet you. I hope to see you round here again, whenever you wish to pay us another visit.'

I couldn't understand why he insisted on speaking

to me so politely. There was something about him that made me think of another age, of other times when his grey hair shone and the old mansion was a palace halfway between Sarriá and heaven. He shook my hand and said goodbye to me before disappearing into what seemed like an impenetrable maze. I saw him walk away down the corridor, limping slightly. His daughter watched him, trying to conceal the sadness in her eyes.

‘Germán isn’t very well,’ she murmured. ‘He gets tired easily.’

But she quickly put on a cheerful expression.

‘Would you like anything else?’ she asked.

‘It’s getting late,’ I replied, struggling against the temptation to seize any excuse for prolonging my stay. ‘I think I’d better be going.’

She accepted my decision and came with me into the garden. The morning light had scattered the mist and the onset of autumn tinged the trees with copper. We walked towards the gates; Kafka purred in the sun. When we reached the exit the girl remained inside and opened the gate for me. We looked at one another without saying a word. She put out her hand and I shook it. I could feel her pulse beneath her velvety skin.

‘Thanks for everything,’ I said. ‘And I’m sorry about ...’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

I shrugged.

‘All right ...’

I set off down the street, feeling the magic of the house

leaving me with every step I took. Suddenly, I heard her voice behind me.

‘Oscar!’

I turned round. She was still there, behind the gates. Kafka lay by her feet.

‘Why did you come into our house the other night?’

I looked around me as if I were trying to find the answer written on the road surface.

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted finally. ‘The mystery, I suppose ...’

The girl gave me an enigmatic smile.

‘Do you like mysteries?’

I nodded. I think if she’d asked me whether I liked arsenic or cyanide on toast I would have given her the same answer.

‘Are you by any chance busy tomorrow?’

I shook my head, still unable to speak. If I did have anything to do, I’d think of an excuse. I may have been useless as a thief, but I confess I’ve always had a real talent for lying.

‘Then I’ll be waiting for you here, at nine,’ she said, disappearing into the shadows of the garden.

‘Wait!’

My shout stopped her.

‘You haven’t told me your name ...’

‘Marina. See you tomorrow.’

I waved at her, but she’d already vanished. I waited in vain for Marina to reappear. The sun had almost attained its full height and I guessed it must be close to

noon. When I realised that she was not going to return, I made my way back to the school. Along the way, the old doorways of Sarriá seemed to smile at me conspiratorially. Although I could hear the echo of my footsteps, I could have sworn I was walking a few centimetres above the ground.