

The
PRISONER
of HEAVEN

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Translated from the Spanish by Lucia Graves

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THE CEMETERY OF FORGOTTEN BOOKS

The Prisoner of Heaven is part of a cycle of novels set in the literary universe of the Cemetery of Forgotten Books of which *The Shadow of the Wind* and *The Angel's Game* are the two first instalments. Although each work within the cycle presents an independent, self-contained tale, they are all connected through characters and storylines, creating thematic and narrative links.

Each individual instalment in the Cemetery of Forgotten Books series can be read in any order, enabling the reader to explore the labyrinth of stories along different paths which, when woven together, lead into the heart of the narrative.

I have always known that one day I would return to these streets to tell the story of the man who lost his soul and his name among the shadows of a Barcelona trapped in a time of ashes and silence. These are pages written in the flames of the city of the damned, words etched in fire on the memory of the one who returned from among the dead with a promise nailed to his heart and a curse upon his head. The curtain rises, the audience falls silent and before the shadow lingering over their destiny descends upon the set, a chorus of pure souls takes the stage with a comedy in their hands and the blessed innocence of those who, believing the third act to be the last, wish to spin a Christmas story – unaware that once the last page is turned, the poison of its words will drag them slowly but inexorably towards the heart of darkness.

Julián Carax

The Prisoner of Heaven

(Éditions de la Lumière, Paris, 1992)

Part One

A Christmas Story

Textured, handwritten-style text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. The text is mostly illegible due to the image's low contrast and the texture of the paper.

1

Barcelona, December 1957

That year at Christmas time, every morning dawned laced with frost under leaden skies. A bluish hue tinged the city and people walked by, wrapped up to their ears and drawing lines of vapour with their breath in the cold air. Very few stopped to gaze at the shop window of Sempere & Sons; fewer still ventured inside to ask for that lost book that had been waiting for them all their lives and whose sale, poetic fancies aside, would have contributed to shoring up the bookshop's ailing finances.

'I think today will be the day. Today our luck will change,' I proclaimed on the wings of the first coffee of the day, pure optimism in a liquid state.

My father, who had been battling with the ledger since eight o'clock that morning, twiddling his pencil and rubber, looked up from the counter and eyed the procession of elusive clients disappearing down the street.

'May heaven hear you, Daniel, because at this rate, if we don't make up our losses over the Christmas season, we won't even be able to pay the electricity bill in January. We're going to have to do something.'

'Fermín had an idea yesterday,' I offered. 'He thinks it's a brilliant plan that'll save the bookshop from imminent bankruptcy.'

'Lord help us.'

I quoted Fermín, word for word:

'Perhaps if by chance I was seen arranging the shop window in my underpants, some lady in need of strong literary emotions would

be drawn in and inspired to part with a bit of hard cash. According to expert opinion, the future of literature depends on women and as God is my witness the female is yet to be born who can resist the primal allure of this stupendous physique,' I recited.

I heard my father's pencil fall to the floor behind me and I turned round.

'So saith Fermín,' I added.

I thought my father would smile at Fermín's plea, but when I noticed that he remained silent, I sneaked a glance at him. Not only did Sempere senior not appear to find the suggestion the least bit funny, but he had adopted a pensive expression, as if he were seriously considering it.

'Well, well . . . perhaps Fermín has unexpectedly hit the nail on the head,' he murmured.

I looked at him in disbelief. Maybe the customer drought that had struck in the last few weeks was finally affecting my father's good judgement.

'Don't tell me you're going to allow him to wander around the bookshop in his Y-fronts.'

'No, of course not. It's about the shop window. Now that you've mentioned it, it's given me an idea . . . We may still be in time to save our Christmas after all.'

He disappeared into the back room, then emerged sporting his official winter uniform: the same coat, scarf and hat I remembered him wearing since I was a child. Bea suspected that my father hadn't bought any new clothes since 1942 and everything seemed to indicate that my wife was right. As he slipped on his gloves, my father smiled absently, his eyes twinkling with almost childlike excitement, a look that only momentous tasks managed to bring out in him.

'I'll leave you on your own for a while,' he announced. 'I'm going out to do an errand.'

'May I ask where you're going?'

My father winked at me.

'It's a surprise. You'll see.'

I followed him to the door and saw him set off at a brisk pace towards Puerta del Ángel, one more figure in the grey tide of pedestrians advancing through another long winter of shadows and ashes.

2

Making the most of the fact that I'd been left alone, I decided to turn on the radio and enjoy a bit of music while I reorganised the collections on the shelves to my liking. My father argued that to have the radio on when there were customers in the shop was in bad taste and if I turned it on when Fermín was around, he'd start to hum on the back of any melody, or even worse, given a chance he'd start swaying to what he called 'sensual Caribbean rhythms' and after a few minutes he'd get on my nerves. Taking those practical difficulties into account, I'd come to the conclusion that I should limit my enjoyment of the radio waves to the rare moments when there was nobody else in the shop but me and thousands of books.

That morning, Radio Barcelona was broadcasting a rare recording of a fabulous Louis Armstrong concert – made when the trumpeter and his band had played at the Hotel Windsor Palace on Avenida Diagonal, three Christmases earlier. During the publicity breaks, the presenter insisted on labelling that music as *chass*, with the warning that some of its suggestive syncopations might not be suitable for pious Spanish listeners brought up on the popular *tonadillas* and boleros that ruled the airwaves.

Fermín was in the habit of saying that if Don Isaac Albéniz had been born black, jazz would have been invented in the village of Camprodón, near the Pyrenees. That glorious sound, he said, was one of the precious few true achievements of the twentieth century along with the pointed bras worn by his adored Kim Novak in some of the films we saw at the Fémina Cinema matinees. I wasn't going to argue with that. I let the remainder of the morning drift by between the alchemy of the music and the perfume of books,

savouring the satisfaction that comes from a simple task well done.

Fermín had taken the morning off to finalise preparations for his wedding with Bernarda, due to take place at the beginning of February, or so he said. The first time he'd brought up the subject, barely two weeks earlier, we'd all told him he was rushing into it and that too much haste would lead him nowhere fast. My father tried to persuade him to postpone the event for at least two or three months, arguing that weddings were always best in the summer when the weather was good. But Fermín had insisted on sticking to his date, alleging that, being a specimen weathered in the harsh, dry airs of the Extremadura hills, he was prone to break into profuse perspiration during the Mediterranean summer, a semi-tropical affair in his estimation, and didn't deem it appropriate to celebrate his nuptials flashing sweat stains the size of pancakes under his armpits.

I was beginning to think that something odd must be happening to Fermín Romero de Torres – proud standard-bearer of civil resistance against the Holy Mother Church, banks and good manners in that pious 1950s Spain so given to religious services and propaganda newsreels – for him to display such urgency for tying the knot. In his pre-matrimonial zeal he'd even befriended Don Jacobo, the new parish priest at the church of Santa Ana, who was blessed with a relaxed ideology and the manners of a retired boxer. Fermín had infected him with his boundless passion for dominoes and together they staged epic matches at the Bar Admiral on Sundays after mass. Don Jacobo would laugh his head off when my friend asked him, between glasses of fine liqueurs, if he had it from a higher source that nuns actually had thighs, and if that were the case, were they as soft and nibbly as he'd been suspecting since adolescence?

'You'll manage to get that priest excommunicated,' my father scolded him. 'Nuns are not to be looked at, or touched.'

'But the reverend is almost more of a rogue than I am,' Fermín protested. 'If it weren't for the uniform . . .'

I was recalling that conversation and humming to the sound of Maestro Armstrong's trumpet when I heard the soft tinkle of the doorbell and looked up, expecting to see my father returning from his secret mission, or Fermín ready to start the afternoon shift.

'Good morning,' came a deep, broken voice from the doorway.