

# CORRIDORS OF SHADE

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*For my daughter, Mariña*



*Memory opens up luminous  
corridors of shade.*

JOSÉ ÁNGEL VALENTE,  
*Fragments of a Future Book*



THE time has come, I shan't put it off any longer. I never thought I would end up fulfilling my uncle Carlos' wish, I never imagined I would be capable of smashing the invisible barrier which prevented me from writing down all that happened in the summer of 1995. A summer which is more and more removed in time and in my memory, I was still quite young, and now I see I'm nearing the milestone of thirty. I suppose I needed all this time to acquire a certain distance, for the facts to gain solidity in my mind and shed their more disturbing aspects. It's been more than ten years, the necessary period to be able to confront this moment when, with fear and trepidation, I undertake this journey to the past, guided only by my words.

Perhaps all I'm trying to do is settle scores, or break with the family ghosts, as Carlos kept asking me. Perhaps these are the reasons which motivate me, any other justification is unnecessary. And yet I'm aware I've also been influenced by news which might appear

to have nothing to do with me. When I read in the newspapers, as I've been doing repeatedly over the last few weeks, the effort people have been putting into locating the resting-place of their loved ones, abandoned in an anonymous grave after the Spanish Civil War; when I witness their deep desire to recover their remains and rescue them from the abyss of oblivion which devoured them after they were murdered; when I see so many people demanding the opening of common graves from a war which seems so distant, so much part of the twentieth century, but which is still so alive, I feel I cannot remain indifferent.

And then I also experience an urgent need to relate how, albeit involuntarily, I contributed to opening up a grave which everyone wanted to stay closed. It's time to record here the memory of that dead man who could have remained forgotten until the end of the world, were it not for chance, that strange chance which directs our lives and caused me to be in the exact location that morning in July 1995. Even we, the descendants of the victors in the civil war, can contribute a grain of sand to the collective memory, while others who emerged victorious get on comfortably with lives built on the crime and theft committed during those years. A traitor, a traitor to my class, some would say. They may be right, but that's not how I see it. I cannot change my past, it's true, but nor do I have to let that past end up conditioning the rest of my life.



Memory is powerful, but it's also fragile and tricks us into going where it would like us to. "Memory opens up luminous corridors of shade," wrote José Ángel Valente, a poet I heard Carlos quote so many times he soon became an essential point of reference for me. I'm lucky I still have my diaries from that time, they will be the thread of Theseus which leads me into the labyrinth. They will enable me to reconstruct what happened during those few weeks, they will help me to avoid succumbing to the distortions of memory after so many years. I admit I feel a mixture of shame and tenderness when I read these notebooks which were so important to me during my teenage years. I was just starting to discover life and I used solemn, hackneyed words to describe my feelings, it would take a lot longer for me to master my own language. But I recorded the facts with precision and, if I brush aside the sentimental overlay, the diaries will act as a reliable guide so I can direct my footsteps accurately.

There is a huge distance between me now and the girl I was then, I find it difficult to recognize myself in the words I wrote in the diaries. What I can discern, however, is that this was a period of change. The end of one period and the beginning of another, even though I was scarcely aware of the underground shift taking place within me. I lived it all as an adventure, a breaking of family rules, and didn't notice the seeds of change sprouting inside me, which would direct me towards a new life.

And how not to remember Miguel in this adventure of retracing my footsteps? It was with him I discovered love, the love which can sometimes flood our bodies and illuminate our whole lives. Even if time then proceeded to show me no relationship lasts for ever, except in the novels we invent to hoodwink death, and all have a date of expiry from the very moment they begin.

There was no way of knowing all this back then. I was just a girl of sixteen, with lots of fancy ideas, though I realized there was something inside me which set me apart from the superficiality of most of the other pupils of Santa María do Mar, the school I attended. A school I remember with fondness, not the hatred others of my generation feel towards theirs. This is something I have to thank my mother for, since, had it been down to my father, I would have gone to Adoradoras or somewhere like that, a school attended by the children of the more established families and the nouveau riche. At my school, however, were all the children of what a sociologist would call Coruña's upper-middle class: liberal families who wanted an education far removed from the shackles of the past and religious obscurantism.

I've barely started and I'm already straying from the point, I have to be more rigorous. Now is not the time to talk about my parents or my life at school. But before I open my diary and get carried away by the events of that 6th July, I should say something about Soutelo Manor, the place where it all happened.

Soutelo Manor is in the district of Vilarelle and has belonged to my father's family since it was built in the middle of the eighteenth century. The Soutelos have always been the lords of the manor, the nobles who owned most of the land and lived comfortably off the sweat and toil of tenant farmers. A family which was already powerful before the manor was built, linked to some of the major Galician families, such as the Montenegros or the Andrades.

Vilarelle is inland, a far cry from the milder climate of the coast. The town is some thirty miles from Coruña, which is where my parents settled after they were married and where I was born six months later, as some people insisted on reminding me when I was young, though it took me some time to understand what the short distance between these two dates meant.

The manor is situated a little before the town, on top of a hill which slopes down gently to the river. The building has two wings in the shape of an L, but what's really impressive is the walled enclosure which surrounds it, in particular the garden in front of the south façade with its circular fountain and goldfish I liked so much, the orchard stretching as far as the river and, most of all, the wood which began after the allotments behind the building, a wood I loved to roam in when I was a child, it seemed to go on for ever, like the forests in the Grimms' fairy tales I used to read in that beautiful edition Mummy gave me one birthday.

Today I can appreciate the special character and artistic value of the house, but not back then. For me it

was always the place where Grandma Rosalía lived, a happy place where I could free myself from the limitations of city life. As long as she was alive, we used to go there often, always for a few days during the holidays and longer in the summer months, when my parents would travel and leave me and my brothers in the care of Grandma and a few maids who treated me like a princess. A privileged treatment I noticed as well in girls from the town's more well-to-do families, who sometimes came to play with me and displayed a submissive attitude towards me which at the time I considered normal.

Grandma Rosalía died in 1993. I'd recently turned fourteen and was less and less interested in spending the holidays in Vilarelle, since life in the city had started to appeal to me. The summer after she died, we went for just a few days and I thought the manor house's time, a time I associated with a childhood I was leaving, was over and done with. What I didn't expect is that, when the family's inheritance was divided, my father would buy Uncle Carlos and Aunt María's shares in the house. He wished to renovate it, he told us when he informed us of his decision, to give it a new lease of life and have it as a second home. This way he'd avoid the property falling into the hands of anyone who wasn't a Soutelo, a possibility he couldn't accept.

Now, with the distance of years, knowing my father better, I think his reasons were quite different. He may have felt nostalgia for his childhood or have

wanted to safeguard the family's property, but more than that was the desire to feel he represented a lineage which, though times had changed, continued to wield influence in the local area. Above the gate, and on the building's main façade, was the family coat of arms, a granite shield, which defied the passing of time. Stone banners and crosses topped by the crowned S of the Soutelos, all symbols of an impressive past, which must have served to confirm to my father a prestige which in the city, though we weren't badly off, was lessened by the power of the traditional families and the large fortunes amassed by those in the construction field.

As soon as the documents were prepared which made him sole owner of the property, my father undertook repairs to the building. The truth is some parts had deteriorated and others didn't function very well, they belonged to an old way of life, since Grandma Rosalía, after Grandpa died, had not seen fit to modernize anything. So began an intense period of renovations which lasted more than a year and gave the manor house back some of the comfort it had lost through neglect and the passing of time.

In the summer of 1995, the renovations were well underway. In fact all the main wing and the first floor of the side wing, the prettier part, with the veranda I liked so much, were ready to be lived in. All that remained was the ground floor of the side wing, which was formerly used for stables and for storing all sorts of things, and which, after the alterations, would hold

a gym and various smaller rooms. In the spring my father decided we would spend the months of July and August in the manor; this way he could keep a close eye on the renovation work and we could breathe new life into the family home.

My mother was pleased by the idea; she planned to devote herself to painting, and the peace and quiet there offered her the ideal conditions. My brothers, the twins, were delighted at the prospect of having free range of the fascinating grounds which surrounded the building. They were also pleased that Daddy had invited our cousins, Aunt María's two children. Although my cousin Alfredo was older than they were – he'd recently turned fourteen – they felt sure he would share their games and adventures, as he had done on previous occasions.

I should have felt the same about my cousin Ana, but the truth is the mere thought of putting up with her made me sick. I suppose it wasn't her fault, she was exactly what you would expect of a seventeen-year-old girl in her social position. She loved to discuss clothes, make-up and boys, topics of conversation I cared little about. I was going through a phase of rebelliousness and self-affirmation, and was drawn to music – Nirvana, The Smashing Pumpkins, and The Clash, the group I most identified with – which was a far cry from the sugary melodies she listened to at all hours.

Which is why I spoke of chance. That summer should have passed by as was expected, those months

had been arranged so that we could all enjoy the luxury and pleasures due to us as owners of the manor house: huge rooms, every imaginable comfort, maids to cater to our every whim, days spent in conversation and having fun. But, luckily for me, it wasn't like that. Chance irrupted into my life and changed it so much I was never the same again.

I am well aware a story never has a concrete beginning and starts long before, as is especially the case with the one I'm about to describe. But I have to begin with that 6th July, going by my diary, because that was the day a skeleton turned up in the side wing, the first skeleton I'd ever seen. How could I suspect this discovery would have such a profound effect on me?





I SEEM to recall the circumstances of that morning very well, though time may have distorted them in my memory. We'd been in the manor for several days and, with the prospect of so many weeks before me, I was trying to find a way to enjoy myself and not be swept along by boredom. I'd got into the habit every morning of going to a pleasant stone mirador situated at the end of the path which crossed the wood, next to the enclosure wall, which on that side was in fairly poor condition. The mirador or lookout, built entirely from granite aged by the years, appeared to possess the virtue of transporting me to another time. A nearby magnolia tree protected it from the sun, and the honeysuckle growing behind the stone on an old metallic structure gave me the sensation I was somewhere isolated from the rest of the world. It was an ideal place to read or while away the hours, thinking about my things.

That morning, having had the breakfast Celsa prepared for me in the kitchen, I left the house through

the back porch, as was my custom, and headed towards the mirador. As on other days, I was obliged to pass the area where the building work was underway. The workmen had already emptied the rooms on the ground floor and were in the process of dismantling the partition walls. They were using heavy iron hammers, and the rhythm of their blows and the noise of the rubble caused me to stop by one of the doors to watch what they were doing. The walls can't have been very resistant because they gave way easily to the battering they received. It was then, as I watched with the interest of someone seeing such work for the first time, that one of the men stopped hitting the wall and shouted:

"Hang on a minute! What have we here?"

The other workmen put down their tools and went over to where he was standing. I also entered the building, drawn by curiosity. The man had started demolishing an inner wall which appeared to separate two rooms and had just discovered this wasn't so: each room had its own partition and between them both was a small compartment, a strange cubby-hole a couple of feet wide. Even I realized this wasn't normal. The one who seemed to be the foreman went up to the partially demolished walls and peered into the space between them. There can't have been enough light because he went to fetch a torch and, turning it on, he proceeded to examine the chamber.

"There's something in there," he said. "Carry on knocking down the walls, but do it carefully, working from the inside."

With smaller hammers, two men continued dismantling the brick walls. And I stayed watching them, suddenly intrigued to find out what could be inside that compartment which appeared to have no set function.

Once both the walls had been brought down to a height of barely two feet, the workmen stopped. Everyone leaned forwards to see what was inside the gap, and so did I. The light coming in through the windows now reached to the back of that small space.

The skull was the first thing I noticed. I'd never seen one before and couldn't help feeling disgusted. It emerged from the top of a rolled-up carpet which filled the cavity, and it seemed to observe us with irritation and surprise through both its sockets, as if it were none too pleased suddenly to be exposed to the light of day.

"There's a dead body!" exclaimed one of the builders.

"And look! There's a hole in its skull," added another standing next to me.

This comment drew my attention to something I hadn't noticed. In the skull's left temple was a circular opening, a hole which, I suppose from seeing so many films, I recognized immediately. You didn't have to be very intelligent to realize this hole was the result of a bullet entering the skull. I remember the amazement I felt, an amazement shared by the workmen who'd just unearthed these remains.

"Don't touch anything!" ordered the foreman. "We have to leave everything as it is and inform Don Víctor as quickly as possible."

“My father’s in Coruña and won’t be back until one thirty,” I explained. Although we were on holiday, Daddy carried on going to his notary’s office in July, but was always back in time for lunch.

“Then we have to let Dona Flora know. She can ring him, we’d better not let anyone else know until Don Víctor is informed.”

The foreman sent one of the workers off to fetch my mother. The man came back quite soon, but my mother took longer. Although she must have been prepared for what she was about to see, she couldn’t avoid a look of amazement, as had happened to the rest of us a moment before. But she soon recovered and adopted the role assigned to her, no doubt she felt she ought to take control of the situation in front of the workmen.

“I have just spoken to my husband on the phone and he gave me instructions as to what must be done in such cases.” It amused me to see the air of determination she gave herself, so different from the way she was normally at home, when my father was about. “I’ve telephoned the Civil Guard, who are responsible for informing the judge. We’re not to touch anything until the judge arrives.”

Shortly after that, the Civil Guard pulled up in a car. Three officers got out and, having checked the discovery was real, told us the judge would be here soon. While we waited, one of them started taking photographs of the compartment and adjoin-

ing rooms. I was so absorbed by what was going on I didn't even notice the hours go by; in my memory the events followed each other quickly, though there must have been a significant amount of time spent waiting in between.

My father arrived before the judge, having possibly left Coruña as soon as he heard from Mummy. In his presence the builders and officers adopted an attitude of submission, as if they were at his orders. I'd witnessed such behaviour before, but was always amazed by the respect with which my father was treated in town, as if subjection to the lord of the manor had been inscribed in the DNA of the people of Vilarelle since time immemorial.

He also checked the discovery was real and confirmed we had to wait for the judge, only he could order the removal of the body or what was left of it. The judge soon arrived. He was a young man, tall, with a pronounced bald spot which didn't give him the distinguished air I'd been expecting. He was quite different from the typical image I had of a judge, elderly and serious-looking, and was accompanied by a man I later learned was the legal secretary and a woman younger than my mother, who turned out to be the coroner.

Although they must all have been completely used to the procedures followed in such cases, I felt like the spectator of a film being projected before my eyes. In a serious tone, as if addressing someone who wasn't there, the judge described out loud what the rest of us

could see. The secretary stood next to him and noted down everything he said. I was struck by the judge's description, the cold, precise language which, at a distance, conveyed the terrible reality we were facing. Once this was over, he ordered the rolled-up carpet to be removed so that he could examine what was inside, something it wasn't difficult to guess.

The builders dismantled the rest of the walls as carefully as if they were carving a delicate sculpture. Once the walls were down, the officers proceeded to extract the carpet and placed it in an area we quickly vacated. The carpet disintegrated slightly when it was removed, it must have been all mouldy after so long in that compartment. When they rolled it out, they found what I think we'd all imagined: a whole skeleton in a good state of preservation. You could still see the remnants of the clothes the person had been wearing when they were shut up in that strange chamber, but many years must have passed because only the bones were well preserved, despite some of them being loose. As the judge continued his meticulous description of the scene, I was able to observe certain details I would have missed otherwise: the buckle and remains of what must once have been a leather belt, several buttons from the trousers and shirt worn by the deceased, as well as the rubber soles of his shoes, the only materials which had withstood the devastating effect of time.

Then the coroner knelt down and rummaged among the bones. Using some pincers, she picked out

the buttons and remains of the belt, which the officers sealed in some clear plastic bags. She also located a thin chain, which hadn't been visible at first, together with a blackened medallion. Finally, having examined the skull, she pulled out a small piece of metal. As she was now describing what she found, I learned this was the bullet which had made a hole in the skull. She then poked in among the ribs and pulled out another piece of metal similar to the first. Two bullets, clear evidence that the person to whom this skeleton belonged had died as a result of two gunshot wounds, a death which could hardly be considered natural.

Having conferred in a low voice with the coroner, the judge described the skeleton as that of a young man a little under six feet tall, who had probably been buried there for more than fifty years. He described the hole in the skull and the crack in one of the back ribs, which must have suffered the impact of the second bullet. Finally he gave an overview of the place and circumstances in which the remains had come to light.

Once the authorities had finished their work, the officer took a few more photographs of the skeleton and the place where it had been found. Then two men entered the building, who until that point had been waiting outside. They placed the carpet and remains on a stretcher, which they introduced into a vehicle parked nearby. From the workmen's conversations, I learned they were from the undertaker's in Vilarelle and would take the remains to the town's mortuary. My father, who meanwhile had been talking to the

judge and coroner, went with them since he'd been asked to go to the courthouse and fill out a few forms. My mother went back into the house to see to the lunch and, since it was now after two, the builders collected their things and left for the day, my father having told them there was no need for them to work that afternoon.

I was left alone, still confused by all the events I'd just witnessed. I felt strange, not only as a result of seeing a skeleton for the first time, but because, while I couldn't put it into words exactly, it was obvious something unusual had happened. Someone had shot a man twice and then concealed the corpse behind a wall. It sounded like a story from one of the mystery books I'd been reading, a story which might take place in a damp and misty London, for example, but never in our family home.

I approached the small compartment again, this peculiar tomb which had held a corpse for so many years. At the back of it, there was only dust and a few scraps from the carpet. The builders would soon dismantle everything and rearrange that space as if there'd never been a body. There's nothing easier than erasing all trace of the things we would rather forget.

As I turned to leave, my eyes fell on a small object in the area where they'd rolled out the carpet, half hidden by the rubble. I knelt down to pick it up and placed it in the palm of my hand: it was a ring, a simple ring made of a dark grey metal. It grew wider



at the top, where it formed an oval, inside which an ornate letter R had been engraved.

Without quite knowing why, I took the decision to keep it for myself, though it would have been more reasonable to hand it over to my parents, since it wasn't difficult to surmise that this object had belonged to the person whose remains had just been brought to light. I didn't think at the time that I might be concealing evidence or something like that, nor was I aware of the importance the ring would have. I simply acted on impulse and, going on my diary entry for that day, out of a predisposition to fantasy and a certain desire that this unexpected discovery would help me to escape the routine awaiting me that summer.