

VALPARAÍSO

A Novel

“The wall that separates the living from one another is no less opaque than the wall that separates the living from the dead.”

Jose Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*

I.

The Dangerous Friend

1.

Marimar's father was a sailor. He worked the big ships carrying Chilean copper to the US and Europe. Sometimes he crewed on scientific expeditions to Antarctica. He was an ardent supporter of Salvador Allende and after the 1973 coup he never came home. Marimar told me that when she was a girl she used to stand at the harbor scanning the horizon until finally her mother told her to give it up, he wasn't coming back.

During those December mornings we'd sit on a bench up at the *mirador* at Cerro Concepción, eating donuts and drinking coffee, watching the giant winches loading cargo containers onto ships in the wide harbor below, and, further out, the Chilean navy enacting its maneuvers. Marimar got off her shift at eight from the German Hospital where she worked as a night nurse. She'd tell me about some of her patients – a Dutch junkie who'd ripped out his IV and lurched down the corridors looking for a fix, a sailor from Puerto Montt dying of emphysema sneaking handrolled smokes on the hospital balcony, looking out to sea. I'd tell her what I'd seen on my day walks and night hauntings of Valparaíso. Then we'd toss the crumbs to the cats and hike the twisting streets up to Arturo's house in Cerro Alegre to see if he'd come back from his trip.

It was a tiny, turreted, two-story clapboard-and stucco house, shaped like a boat, on a dogleg corner dividing two slanted streets. Marimar would knock first, and then when nobody answered she'd let herself in. While she fed Arturo's cat and watered his plants, I'd look around for signs, clues, some evidence my brother Alex might have left behind there.

I'd come to Valparaíso to try and find Alex, and to save him if I could.

Arturo's house was a warren of tiny, dim, ordered rooms, definitely the house of a man who lived alone. Worn wood furniture, stacked back issues of the local daily *El Mercurio*, handouts for local events. Medical books, poultices and serums, small surgical tools. A fly – the same fly? – buzzed against the kitchen pane every time we were there. The windows admitted little light, as if the man who lived there needed a lot of seclusion. A broken, unstrung cello body leaned in a corner. Cassettes of children's music in Spanish and English lay piled by an old radio tape player. Fading Polaroids of Cerro Alegre and its people, affixed to a humming fridge in the closet-sized kitchen, gave off a fugitive poignancy.

I asked Marimar about the small hand puppets hanging from beams or lying about on chairs. She said Arturo sometimes put on little plays with the neighborhood kids. He helped people with their medical problems, though quietly because he wasn't a certified doctor in Chile. He taught English to anyone who wanted to learn. I asked her what she knew of his past and she said only that he'd come from the north and had lived in a lot of countries before settling here some years ago. She seemed devoted to Arturo. Of course I wondered if there was more to their connection. Marimar would have been a few years shy of forty, I'd guess, Arturo a year older than my brother, who was forty-two, me three years younger than Alex.

There was a lone photo on a desk of a man standing in what looked to be a jungle clearing. He was dressed in a rumpled white suit - tall, lean, with a short beard and well-formed face, his eyes hidden by the broad brim of a straw hat. Surrounding him were a half dozen small, long-haired indigenous women in woven sack dresses. "That's Arturo," she said. "He goes to eastern Bolivia every year to treat people for trachoma. It's a curable condition. You slit open the eyelid. That's probably where he is now."

"Who took the photo?" I asked.

"I did," she said. "I went with him on that trip."

A cramped wood caracole staircase wound to a second story loft with a low pitched ceiling and a single bed. A window allowed a glimpse over rooftops of the harbor. Arturo's tabby cat paced the sill, mewling irritably at the intrusion. There were plenty of books, volumes in Spanish and English, most of them worn, as if picked up in used bookstalls: Borges, Julio Cortázar, Neruda, Gabriela Mistral. Collected Shakespeares, Chekhovs. Some Graham Greene, Forsyth, and LeCarre thrillers. Volumes of the 18th century German explorer Humboldt's South American journeys. Che Guevara's *Motorcycle Diaries*. Well-thumbed Spanish-English dictionaries, medical references, an old edition of a Merck home medical manual.

Up in Arturo's loft, out of Marimar's sight, I felt freer to look around. There was a miscellany of papers - bills, lists, check stubs. A checkbook, for Arturo Wright, on a bank in downtown Valparaíso. Letters in Spanish I didn't try to read. One day, opening a drawer in a small bureau by the bed, I found beneath a bedsheet a black chamois bag with a pistol in it: a silver : 32 automatic with a full 15-shot clip. Engraved on its serrated grip were the words: *petro Beretta gardone V.T. Col. 7.65. Made in Italy*. Shaken, I tried to wipe off my fingerprints with the tail of my shirt. Then I gingerly placed the weapon back in the drawer beneath the sheet. The gun hardly fit with the benign image of Arturo Wright the rest of his house suggested. It left me with a fleeting, grim satisfaction I couldn't quite explain.

Soon I'd begin to feel agitated in Arturo's house, my worries and frustrations about Alex mounting, and I'd go outside and wait for Marimar to finish tidying up. I'd stand in the street smoking - I'd taken it up again in Valparaíso after years free of it - watching gusts of wind blow scrap down the streets and the cats slink among the garbage. The *cerros* are full of cats. Though it was summer in Valparaíso, fogs and mists and sometimes drizzles settled in for stretches. Then the sun dried the streets and people crept out of their houses.

Marimar and I would walk back down to Cerro Concepción and take the boxy, rattling funicular cable car down to the city floor. From there she'd go home to sleep, and I'd walk the streets for hours, looking for Alex.

“Up and down the infinite hills,” Chile’s vast poet, Pablo Neruda, wrote. “If you walk all the stairs of Valparaíso, you have done a tour of the world.”

As days passed with no sign of Alex, I sometimes felt that before long I’d complete that tour. Hiking the winding cordilleras among stacked, multihued houses of wood and stucco and tin, past pennants of flapping laundry, down scrambled, untended ravines of stink and beauty. Stumbling upon gaping views, then their obscuration by another hillside among people rusted by time and the sea. Riding the swaying painted wooden boxes down scruffy hillsides on cable tracks overgrown with wildflowers.

I’d arrived in Chile with only the directions to Arturo’s house, given me by a childhood friend of Alex’s whose disclosure had set Alex, and now me, on this journey. I’d climbed the cerros that first day, still jetlagged and in a kind of daze, found my way to Arturo’s house, and knocked on the door. Then I’d hung about the adjacent streets, trying not to attract attention, appear as some sort of lurker or thief. By luck there was an artists’ café up the street that doubled as a fluff-and-fold *lavandería* where I could sit at a front table, drinking endless *café cortado*, pretending I was reading or writing while keeping an eye on Arturo’s house. I saw the postman drop mail through a slot late mornings. I watched local kids knock on Arturo’s door after school. Finally I spotted Marimar arriving one morning, still in her nurse’s uniform, and approached her.

At first I’d thought I might simply run into Alex on the street. Valparaíso, after all, has a finite downtown, defined by the blocks running at sea level parallel to the waterfront known as *el plan*. The western end of the city below Arturo’s house, with its bars and restaurants and hotels and banks, and the picturesque foothills immediately above, was where I’d most likely find him. The rest of Valparaíso, stretching along the curve of the bay towards the resort town of Viña del Mar, was mainly a nondescript sprawl of offices and residences. I figured, too, that some vestigial brotherly radar from youth would come to my aid. But ten days of plying the downtown streets had turned up nothing.

Of course there are ways to hunt down a missing person. I briefly considered hiring a local detective, but I was in a strange country and my Spanish was not good. I feared some kind of expensive, irrelevant goose chase. Contacting police trained by General Pinochet's thugs seemed risky. Besides, I couldn't be certain Alex was even in Valparaíso, or in Chile for that matter. And I knew enough about why he'd come here and what he probably had in mind to realize an official investigation could turn against both of us. One morning I looked up the U.S. Embassy number in Santiago, dialed it, then hung up. Surely if they knew anything they'd have already contacted his family, which meant our father, and there'd been nothing on my voicemail back home or any word from Dad.

Tossing on my *pensión* bed, languishing in a void, I'd get these sudden ideas. Alex liked Asian food, I remembered, and so I began casing a prominent downtown Chinese restaurant called Pekin. Another off the Plaza Victoria, Valparaíso Eterno, seemed a possibility for its name value alone, but then I was probably projecting. Alex and I hadn't lived in the same city, let alone the same house, for years. What time would he eat? As the futility of the food gambit soon became clear, I began staking out the internet cafes downtown, thinking he might show up there. Alex had left behind a busy life he still might want to check in on. One day I did a search of his name, adding in words like "Valparaíso" and "Chile," but other than the usual blizzard of entries documenting his life in music, there was nothing. I also tried a search on Arturo Wright but got only the name of a dentist in Costa Rica. So much information, so little knowledge. Ruefully I'd log off and walk back out into the busy Valparaíso streets.

Valparaíso seemed a world to itself, so different from Santiago, the capital just an hour south, where I'd first arrived. "The star of Valparaíso called us like a magnetic pulse," Neruda wrote, arriving here young and broke to revel in the city's great available bohemia. "Something infinitely indefinable distances Santiago from Valparaíso. Santiago is a prisoner city, rimmed by walls of snow. Valparaíso by contrast opens its doors to the infinite sea, to the cries of the streets, to the eyes of children." Furrowed with memories of earthquakes that had leveled it, the city

seemed both unrecoverable and timeless in its romantic decrepitude. Eerily, it evoked San Francisco, the city Alex had departed from, with its art nouveau buildings and tumbledown wood houses, waterfront dives, warehouse sidings of corrugated tin, steep hills and busy harbor, fogs and mist. Shaped by quakes and the Gold Rush when ships set out from here for the Barbary Coast with wheat for the miners, it was old North Beach and Russian Hill and the embarcaderos. Summer here, winter there. A mirror city. Surely Alex would have noted it too.

In search of a person, I'd found a city instead. I would have savored those rambles had I not been dogged by my task. But I was just another *porteño*, stranded along the wharf at Muelle Prat, watching the slow motion shift of the harbor, scanning for a lost one.

One day I followed the cerros up past the Catholic Cemetery and the Cemetery of Dissidents to San Sebastiana, Neruda's home, hung high above the port, now a small museum filled with ships in bottles and trinkets the communist gourmand and lover of things had obsessively collected. Combing the guest register for Alex's name, I found in its polyglot pages another tour of the world, but no Alex: *nada*. Then back down along *el plan*, lunching in the old central market by the port among cats and sailors contesting for fish parts among importuning waitresses - "*Que le doy, caballero?*" - and Spanish I'd never heard - *ya ya* and *ciao ciao* and *listo listo*. Eating *lomo a la pobre* in La Rotonda in the deepening dusk among ancient waiters in shiny faded tuxedos, I'd riffle through useless notes and recollections, trolling for a hint, a missed intimation, some key to Alex's whereabouts and his fate.

Running low on funds, drinking too much in the long sailor bars at night, sucked into woozy conversations with garrulous travelers and *sexiservidores* in tall pumps, I'd brandish my lone Alex snapshot, then lurch back out among the night's refuse, salty wind blowing pages of *El Mercurio* around my feet to strains of jazz, Sade, and tango.

One night late, down by the port, I saw a woman get out of a taxi at the triple junction of Prat and Cochrane and Esmeralda Streets, beneath the Turri clock. She bent to say goodbye to a dark male silhouette within, then turned, in lipstick and black dress and pearl necklace - flushed,

radiant, sexual. I froze, hoping she wouldn't spot me there, reeling in the forsaken night. She was the only person I'd befriended in Valparaíso, and now I realized how little I knew of Marimar, or had any right to know, and how alone I was, and how utterly lost. She glanced my way, and the moment when we could decide not to recognize each other passed. She regarded me with unapologetic, frank concern, then smiled, called goodnight, and walked off in the other direction, coat bundled over her shoulders, heels clicking the stones.

Bereft, I mounted the twisting path to the cerros, as the *ascensores* were already closed. It would have been her night off at the hospital. So things were not as I'd imagined: Marimar's devotion to Arturo Wright had its limits. Ridiculously, I felt aligned with Arturo in some imagined betrayal I'd just witnessed. And I realized that, in my solitude, I'd developed my own piteous *amor* for Marimar.

Mornings I'd open the curtain of my little room to dazzling southern light and a reshuffled harbor scene: loaded ships gone, fresh ones moored. Then I'd dress and go out to meet Marimar at the mirador. We never mentioned the encounter beneath the Turri clock. She seemed increasingly perplexed that Arturo wasn't back, which did nothing to ease my concerns about Alex. Surely something bad had happened, or was going to, in a drama playing out of view, beyond my ability to alter or intervene.

When I was young, there were times when I'd all but disappeared into my brother's world. Then something terrible had happened to Alex. It had taken me years to back out of that narrative into my own. Mostly, I'd written my way out. Now I felt Alex's fate and mine fusing again, here in Valparaíso. It was that same dormant tale, sprung back to hideous life. I was following Alex down another rabbit hole.

"Everyone blinks in the end, even writers, especially writers," the Chilean Roberto Bolaño wrote. I knew it was time for me to leave Valparaíso. Every bone in my body screamed it.

But I didn't. I stayed.