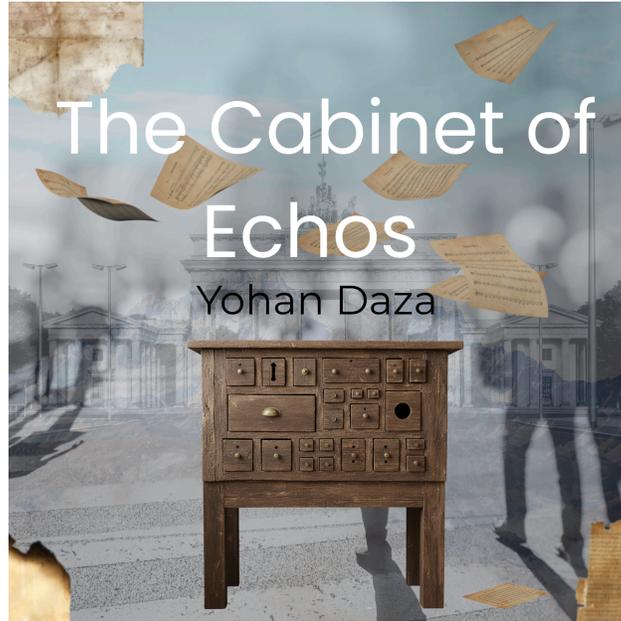


THE CABINET OF ECHOES
A novel by Yohan Daza

SILENCES – PART I



Chapter 1: The Journalist

Santiago, Chile — winter 1978. I stepped off the bus at a brisk pace; my heart was pounding louder than the traffic.

I looked back. The black car had stopped, and I saw the CNI men get out — dark suits, mirrored glasses hiding their eyes.

They're following me. They already know everything.

I pressed the briefcase to my chest and nearly broke into a run along the sidewalk, my footsteps echoing too loudly in my ears.

I reached the iron gate of the old mansion in one of Santiago's elegant neighborhoods. My hands shook so badly that I almost failed to close it behind me.

I burst inside. Matilde sat at the dining table, surrounded by school notebooks.

"They're here!" I gasped.

"Who?" she asked, looking up.

"The government men. I have to hide these papers — you need to leave right now."

"Leave where?"

"Your uncle's house. Stay the night there. I'll call tomorrow... if it's safe."

Matilde's eyes turned to the briefcase.

"And the documents? Where will you hide them?"

"In the cabinet. If you come back and I'm gone, you know how to get them out. Don't open the wrong drawer."

"Dad, come with me," she whispered, stepping closer. "We can slip out the back..."

I shook my head. "No. They've seen me. They'll be here any moment."

"Then come!" she urged, tugging at my jacket. "We can jump into the neighbor's yard and get away."

She never finished the sentence. The gate burst open — a metallic crash that shook the house — and the front door was kicked in.

The men poured in like a black tide.

The reporter fell silent. He answered no questions.

They searched every room, ripped up floors, tore down paintings, smashed furniture. They even opened the cabinet, pulling each drawer in turn — nothing.

Yet the documents remained, somewhere between the wood and the silence.

Chapter 2: The Guardian

Enrique was a Spanish journalist, the son of a German father and a Spanish mother. His parents had emigrated to Chile in the early 1950s, fleeing the long shadows of Francoism that smothered half of Europe.

With them came a strange piece of furniture — an antique 19th-century cabinet that his father called dangerous rather than magical: an object built to protect what must never fall into the hands of oppressive governments, but to be discovered by those brave enough to bring its secrets to light for the good of their nations and the hope of their people.

From childhood, Enrique had known that his duty was not only to guard the cabinet but also the secrets sleeping within it.

That afternoon, the men in dark suits and mirrored glasses took him away. No one ever heard from him again.

The cabinet, however, remained in the mansion — silent, waiting for the next pair of hands bold enough to open it.

Chapter 3: The Revelation

That night, the house was breathing differently. Outside, the country remained trapped under Pinochet's dictatorship; inside, fear had taken on the face of the CNI and of a door recently smashed in. Everything was in disarray: drawers on the floor, torn papers, overturned chairs, as if the raid were still happening in an endless echo.

Matilde looked at the wreckage, fully aware of what those dark suits her father mentioned really meant: the CNI — the dictatorship's secret police — the ones who made journalists, students, anyone who dared raise their voice against Pinochet, simply disappear. Her hands began to tremble as she understood that this shadowy force, embodied in men with black glasses, might silence her father forever.

The silence weighed more than the blows from a few hours earlier.

Matilde approached the cabinet slowly, her eyes still wet. Her uncle Federico's silhouette was framed in the dining-room doorway, motionless, while the pale afternoon light slipped through the window and fell directly onto the cabinet's dark wood.

A tear slid down her cheek at the exact moment one of the drawers slid open by itself, with a faint whisper, as if asking permission to be heard.

Matilde flinched.

"That drawer..." she whispered. "That drawer wasn't there before."

Federico stepped closer, puzzled.

"What are you talking about, Matilde?"

She leaned in, studying the drawer's front, the grain of the wood, the handle.

"It's different," she said. "Like they swapped it for another one. I'm sure this drawer didn't exist."

She held her breath and slid her hands into the drawer, feeling the cold touch of metal and the crackle of paper.

Her fingers brushed the familiar edge of the folded briefcase, the envelopes, the folders.

She pulled out a stack of carefully arranged documents — her father's papers.

The cabinet remained still, as if it had done nothing at all.

Only the light, the dust hanging in the air, and the silence seemed to know the truth.

"Could it be...?" murmured Federico. "Enrique wasn't lying."

"What do you mean, Uncle?" Matilde asked, still holding the documents.

He ran a hand through his hair, as if searching for a memory that kept slipping away.

"I was much younger than your father," he said. "But he used to tell me that this cabinet had... strange abilities. He never wanted to call them 'magic,' but that's what they felt like. Sometimes odd things would happen, and I thought he was just playing with my imagination — a story for children."

"What kind of things, Uncle?"

The man looked at the cabinet with a mixture of respect and distrust.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. My memories are like shadows; I know they're there, but I can't quite see their faces. A lot of what happened in Spain gets blurry. I only know that when our father used the cabinet, sometimes it felt like we were somewhere else... as if the house changed without moving."

Matilde did not fully understand what her uncle was trying to explain.

She stepped closer to the cabinet and began to explore, opening its drawers one by one.

What she saw was beyond belief: the drawers were full of letters, old objects, small notebooks, black-and-white photographs she had never seen in the house before.

Each drawer seemed to hold a different life.

Chapter 4: Colonia Dignidad

The documents her father had hidden from the dark forces were evidence and testimonies of what was happening in Colonia Dignidad, a German enclave nestled in the foothills of the Maule region, about 400 kilometers south of Santiago. Her father

had interviewed survivors who had escaped its barbed-wire fences, and the papers described unimaginable horrors: underground cells where Chilean soldiers tortured political prisoners with electric shocks, freezing water, and mock executions; systematic sexual abuse of women and children; illegal medical experiments disguised as "treatments"; and the use of the colony as a clandestine detention center, shielded by diplomatic immunity and guarded by CNI agents who visited regularly.

Matilde remembered her father's urgent words: it was crucial to get those documents to the Swedish embassy. Neutral countries like Sweden, with their tradition of defending human rights, had been key in receiving complaints about the dictatorship and carrying them out into the wider world.

"Uncle, we have to get this cabinet out of here," Matilde said, glancing nervously toward the broken window.

"We could take it to your place," she suggested.

Federico shook his head.

"I don't think that's a good idea. The CNI could follow us there. Let's wait a couple of days and make sure they're not watching the house."

Two nights later, Federico managed to get a pickup truck with the help of his friend Rafael. They parked a few blocks from Enrique's old mansion and waited in the half-light. Federico noticed a suspicious car nearby: dark, unlit, sitting just where the streetlamp's glow did not reach. They couldn't see whether anyone was inside.

"Federico, I think we can go in now," Rafael said after a couple of hours.

"Wait," Federico whispered. "Look at that red light inside."

A few minutes later, the car's window slid down just a crack. Someone flicked a lit cigarette into the street, and it rolled, sparking across the asphalt. The engine rumbled softly, and the vehicle pulled away, disappearing into the night.

"Now we can," said Federico. "Let's go get the cabinet."

They carried it carefully between them, wrapped in blankets. Matilde and Clara, Rafael's wife, were waiting at the farmhouse in the middle of the countryside on the outskirts of Santiago. It was safer to stay with them: they had no political record, were not considered suspicious or rebellious by the regime.

In that forgotten corner, the cabinet could wait — and the documents, perhaps, could still find their way out into the world.

