

VIOLETA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

The House of the Spirits

Of Love and Shadows

Eva Luna

The Stories of Eva Luna

The Infinite Plan

Daughter of Fortune

Portrait in Sepia

Zorro

Inés of My Soul

Island Beneath the Sea

Maya's Notebook

Ripper

The Japanese Lover

In the Midst of Winter

A Long Petal of the Sea

Violeta

FOR YOUNG ADULTS

City of the Beasts

Kingdom of the Golden Dragon

Forest of the Pygmies

NONFICTION

Paula

Aphrodite

My Invented Country

The Sum of Our Days

The Soul of a Woman

ISABEL
ALLENDE
VIOLETA

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH
BY FRANCES RIDDLE

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING and the Diana logo are
trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Spanish in 2022 in Spain by Plaza & Janes, a member of
Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, Barcelona, Spain
First published in English in 2022 in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint
of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, USA
This edition first published in Great Britain 2022

Copyright © Isabel Allende, 2022
English translation © Isabel Allende, 2022

Isabel Allende has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents
Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-4834-1; TPB: 978-1-5266-4835-8;
Waterstones Signed Special Edition: 978-1-5266-5147-1;
eBook: 978-1-5266-4837-2; ePDF: 978-1-5266-4976-8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and
sign up for our newsletters

T O

Nicolás Frías and Lori Barra, pillars of my life
Felipe Berríos del Solar, beloved friend



Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

— MARY OLIVER



Dear Camilo,

My intention with these pages is to leave you a testimony of my life. I imagine someday, when you are old and less busy, you might want to stop and remember me. You have a terrible memory since you're always so distracted, and that defect gets worse with age. I think you'll see that my life story is worthy of a novel, because of my sins more than my virtues. You have received many of my letters, where I've detailed much of my existence (minus the sins), but you must make good on your promise to burn them when I die, because they are overly sentimental and often cruel. This recounting of my life is meant to replace that excessive correspondence.

I love you more than anyone in this world.

VIOLETA

Santa Clara, September 2020



PART ONE

EXILE

(1920–1940)



CAME INTO THE WORLD ONE STORMY FRIDAY IN 1920, THE year of the scourge. The evening of my birth the electricity went out, something that often happened during storms, so they lit candles and kerosene lamps, which were always kept on hand for these types of emergencies. María Gracia, my mother, began to feel the contractions—a sensation she knew well since she'd already birthed five sons—and she surrendered to the pain, resigned to bringing another male into the world with the help of her sisters, who had assisted her through the difficult process several times. The family doctor had been working tirelessly for weeks in one of the field hospitals and she felt it imprudent to call him for something as prosaic as childbirth. On previous occasions they had used a midwife, always the same one, but the woman had been among the first to fall victim to the flu and they didn't know of anyone else.

To my mother it seemed she'd spent the entirety of her adult life either pregnant, recovering from childbirth, or convalescing after a miscarriage. Her oldest son, José Antonio, had turned seventeen, she was sure of that, because he had been born the same year as one of

our worst earthquakes, which knocked half the country to the ground and left thousands of deaths in its wake. But she could never precisely recall the ages of her other sons nor how many pregnancies she'd failed to carry to term. Each miscarriage had left her incapacitated for months and after each birth she'd felt exhausted and melancholic for a long while. Before getting married she had been the most beautiful debutante in the capital—slender, with an unforgettable face, green eyes, and translucent skin—but the extremes of motherhood had distorted her body and drained her spirit.

She loved her sons, in theory, but in practice she preferred to keep them at a comfortable distance. The exuberant band of boys was as disruptive as a battle in her peaceful feminine realm. She'd once admitted during confession that she felt doomed to bear only sons, like a curse from the Devil. In penitence she was ordered to recite a rosary every day for two years straight and to make a sizable donation to the church renovation fund. Her husband forbade her from returning to confession.

Under my aunt Pilar's direction, Torito, the boy we employed for a wide range of chores, climbed a ladder to hang a labor sling from two steel hooks that he himself had installed in the ceiling. My mother, kneeling in her nightdress, each hand pulling at a strap, pushed for what felt like an eternity, cursing like a pirate, using words she'd never utter under normal circumstances. My aunt Pía, crouched between her legs, waited to receive the newborn baby before he could fall to the floor. She had already prepared the infusions of nettle, artemisia, and rue for after the birth. The clamor of the storm, which beat against the shutters and ripped tiles from the roof, drowned out the low moans and then the long final scream as I began to emerge, first a head, followed by a body covered in mucus and blood, slipping through my aunt's fingers and crashing down onto the wood floor.

"You're so clumsy, Pía!" Pilar shouted, holding me up by one foot. "It's a girl!" she added, surprised.

“It can’t be, check him good,” my mother mumbled, exhausted.
“I’m telling you, sister, she doesn’t have a willy,” Pilar responded.

THAT NIGHT, MY FATHER returned home late, after dinner and several hands of cards at the club, and went directly to his room to change his clothes and rub himself down with alcohol as a precautionary measure before greeting his family. He ordered a glass of cognac from the housekeeper on shift, who didn’t think to give him the news because she wasn’t accustomed to speaking to the boss, and then he went to say hello to his wife. The rusty smell of blood warned him of what had occurred before he’d even crossed the threshold. He found his wife in bed, flushed, her hair damp with sweat, wearing a clean nightdress, resting. They’d already removed the straps from the ceiling and the buckets of soiled rags.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me!” he exclaimed after kissing his wife on the forehead.

“How could we have? The driver was with you and none of us were going out on foot in that storm, assuming your henchmen would even let us,” Pilar responded coldly.

“It’s a girl, Arsenio. You finally have a daughter,” Pía interrupted, showing him the bundle she held in her arms.

“Thank God!” my father muttered, but his smile faded as he saw the creature peeking out from the folds of the blanket. “She has a lump on her forehead!”

“Don’t worry. Some babies are born that way. It goes down after a few days. It’s a sign of intelligence,” Pilar improvised.

“What are you going to name her?” Pía asked.

“Violeta,” my mother said firmly, without giving her husband a chance to chime in.

It was the name of our illustrious great-grandmother who had embroidered the shield of the first flag after independence, in the 1800s.

THE PANDEMIC HAD NOT taken my family by surprise. As soon as word spread about the dying people in the streets near the port and the alarming number of blue corpses in the morgue, my father, Arsenio Del Valle, calculated that the plague would not take more than a few days to reach the capital, but he did not lose his calm. He had prepared for this eventuality with the efficiency he applied to his business. He was the only one of his brothers on track to recover the prestige and wealth that my grandfather had inherited but lost over the years because he'd had too many children and because he was an honest man. Of my grandfather's fifteen children, eleven survived, a considerable number that proved the heartiness of the Del Valle bloodline, as my father liked to brag. But such a large family took a lot of effort and money to maintain, and the fortune had dwindled.

Before the national press ever called the illness by its name, my father already knew that it was the Spanish flu. He kept up to date on the news of the world through foreign newspapers, which arrived with considerable delay to the Union Club but provided better information than the local papers, and via a radio he had built himself, by following the instructions in a manual, to keep in touch with other enthusiasts. And so, punctuated by the static and shrieks of the short-wave, he learned of the havoc wreaked by the pandemic in other places. He had followed the advance of the virus from the beginning, and he knew how it had blown through Europe and the United States like a deadly breeze. He deduced that if civilized countries had experienced such tragic consequences we should expect worse in ours, where resources were more limited.

The Spanish influenza, "the flu" for short, reached us after almost two years' delay. According to the scientific community, we'd be spared infection entirely due to our geographic isolation, the natural barrier afforded by the mountains to one side and the ocean to the other, as well as our remoteness. Popular opinion, however, attrib-

uted our salvation to Father Juan Quiroga, in whose honor precautionary processions were held. Quiroga is the only saint worth worshipping, because no one can outdo him when it comes to domestic miracles, even if the Vatican has failed to canonize him. Nevertheless, in 1920 the virus arrived in all its majestic glory with more force than anyone could have imagined, toppling the notions of scientists and theologians alike.

The onset of illness brought first a terrible chill from beyond the grave, which nothing could quell, followed by fevered shivering, a pounding headache, a blazing fire behind the eyes and in the throat, and deliriums, with terrifying hallucinations of death lurking steps away. The person's skin turned a purplish-blue color that soon darkened until the feet and hands were black; a cough impeded breathing as a bloody foam flooded the lungs, the victim moaned and writhed in agony, and the end arrived by asphyxiation. The most fortunate ones were dead in just a few hours.

My father suspected, on good grounds, that the flu had reaped a greater death toll among the soldiers in Europe, huddled in the trenches with no way to mitigate the spread, than the bullets and mustard gas had. It ravaged the United States and Mexico with equal ferocity and then turned toward South America. The newspapers said that in other countries the bodies were piled up like cordwood along the streets because there was not enough time or cemetery space to bury them all, that a third of humanity was infected, and that there were more than fifty million victims. The reports were as contradictory as the terrifying rumors that circulated. It had been eighteen months since the armistice had been signed, putting an end to the four horrific years of the Great War in Europe. But the full scope of the pandemic, which military censorship had covered up, was only just starting to be understood. No nation had wanted to report the true number of deaths. Only Spain, who had remained neutral in the conflict, shared news of the illness, which is why it ended up being called the Spanish influenza.

Before, the people of our country had always died from the usual causes, which is to say, crushing poverty, vices, violence, accidents, contaminated water, typhus, or the normal wear and tear of years. It was a natural process that culminated in a dignified burial. But with the arrival of the flu, which pounced on us like a voracious tiger, we were forced to dispense with consolation for the dying and the regular rituals of mourning.

THE FIRST CASES WERE detected in the houses of ill repute near the port in late autumn, but no one except my father paid them much mind, since the victims were mostly women of dubious virtue, criminals, and smugglers. They said it was a venereal disease brought over from Indonesia by sailors passing through. Very quickly, however, it was impossible to ignore the widespread catastrophe or continue blaming promiscuity and happy living, because the illness did not discriminate between sinners and saints. The virus triumphed over Father Quiroga and moved freely through the population, viciously assailing children, the elderly, rich and poor alike. When an entire company of zarzuela singers and several members of Congress fell ill, the tabloids announced the Apocalypse and the government decided to close the borders and restrict the ports. But it was already too late.

Masses presided over by three priests with little bags of camphor tied around the neck did nothing to ward off infection. Winter was just around the corner and the first rains made the situation worse. Field hospitals sprang up on soccer pitches, makeshift morgues appeared in the meat lockers of the local slaughterhouse, and mass graves were dug for the bodies of the poor to be dumped and covered in lime. Since it was already understood that the illness entered the body through the breath and not from a mosquito bite or stomach worms, as had been widely believed, the use of face coverings was ordered. But since there weren't even sufficient masks for health

workers, who fought on the front lines, there certainly weren't enough to go around for the general population.

The president of the nation, son of an Italian immigrant, with progressive ideas, had been elected a few months prior thanks to the vote of the emerging middle class and the workers' unions. My father, like all his Del Valle relatives, friends, and acquaintances, distrusted the man because of the reforms he'd vowed to implement—highly inconvenient for the conservatives—and because he was an upstart without an old Spanish-Basque surname, but my father did approve of how he'd tackled the public health crisis. The first measure was a stay-at-home order to curb the spread, but since no one heeded it, the president decreed a state of emergency, a nightly curfew, and a ban on free circulation of the civil population without due cause, under penalty of fine, arrest, and, in many cases, beatings.

Schools were closed, as well as shops, parks, and other places where people typically congregated, but some public offices and banks remained open. The trucks and cargo trains continued to deliver supplies, and liquor stores had license to operate, since it was believed that alcohol with a large dose of aspirin would kill the virus. No one counted the number of people poisoned by that combination of alcohol and aspirin, as pointed out by my aunt Pía, who did not drink and didn't believe in pharmaceutical remedies either. The police were overwhelmed and unable to impose order and prevent crime, just as my father had feared, and soldiers were called in to patrol the streets, despite their well-earned reputation for brutality. This rang an alarm bell for the opposition parties, intellectuals, and artists, who had not forgotten the massacre of defenseless workers, including women and children, carried out by the military a few years prior, as well as other instances in which they'd brandished their bayonets against civilians, treating our people like foreign enemies.

The shrine of Juan Quiroga was thronged with devotees seeking to cure themselves of the influenza, and in many cases they saw improvement. The skeptics, who can always be counted on to give their

two cents, said that any person who could climb the thirty-two steps of the San Cerro Pedro Chapel was already on the mend. This did not discourage the faithful. Despite the fact that public gatherings were prohibited, a crowd led by two bishops marched to the shrine but were quickly scattered by soldiers doling out bullets and beatings. In under fifteen minutes they left two bodies dead in the street and sixty-three wounded, one of whom perished later that night. The bishops' formal protest was ignored by the president, who refused to receive the prelates in his office and instead answered in writing through his secretary that "anyone, even the Pope, who disobeys a public ordinance will feel the firm hand of the law." No more pilgrimages were attempted after that.

There wasn't a single infected person in our family because, before the government had even issued measures to curb spread, my father had already made preparations, taking his cue from methods of combatting the pandemic in other countries. He got on the radio and contacted the foreman of his sawmill, a highly trustworthy Croatian immigrant, and had two of their best loggers sent up from the south. He armed the men with ancient rifles, planted one at each entrance to our property, and assigned them the task of ensuring that no one entered or exited the premises except himself and my oldest brother. It was a ridiculous order, because they couldn't realistically shoot members of the family, but the presence of these men was mostly meant to dissuade looters. The loggers, transformed overnight into armed guards, never entered the house; they slept on pallets in the garage, ate food that the cook served them through the window, and drank the mule-killer aguardiente that my father provided in limitless supply, along with handfuls of aspirin, to keep the illness at bay.

For his own protection, my father bought a contraband Webley revolver, of proven efficacy in war, and began target practice in the service yard, terrorizing the hens. In reality he wasn't as scared of the virus as of the desperation it would sow among the masses. In normal times there were already too many poor, beggars, and thieves in the

city. If what had happened in other places was any indication of what we could expect, unemployment would rise, food would become scarce, panic would set in, and even honest people, who up to that point had merely protested outside Congress demanding jobs or justice, might turn to crime. It had happened before, when laid-off miners from the north, furious and starving, had invaded the city and spread typhus.

My father bought enough supplies to last the winter: bags of potatoes, flour, sugar, oil, rice and beans, nuts, strings of garlic, dried meats, and crates of fruits and vegetables for preserves. He sent four of his sons, the youngest of whom had just turned twelve, down south before the San Ignacio school suspended classes by government decree. Only José Antonio stayed on in the capital, because he was going to start university as soon as the world went back to normal. All travel had been suspended, but my brothers managed to take one of the last passenger trains to San Bartolomé, where Marko Kusanovic, the Croatian foreman, met them at the station armed with instructions to put them to work alongside the rugged local loggers. No coddling. This would keep them busy and healthy and keep things quieter at home.

My mother, her two sisters, and the maids were ordered to remain indoors and not leave for any reason. My mother, who'd had weak lungs ever since a bout of tuberculosis in childhood, was of a delicate constitution and could not risk exposing herself to the flu.

THE PANDEMIC DID NOT greatly alter the closed universe of our home. The front door, of carved mahogany, opened onto a wide, dark vestibule that led to two sitting rooms, the library, the formal dining room, the billiards room, and another room that was always locked. We called that room the office because it contained half a dozen metal cabinets filled with documents that no one had looked at since time immemorial. The second wing of the house was separated

from the first by a courtyard paved in blue Portuguese tile with a Moorish fountain that had a broken water pump, and a profusion of potted camellias; these flowers gave their name to the property: Camellia House. Along three sides of the courtyard ran a long corridor we called the conservatory, lined with beveled-glass windows, that connected the rooms for daily use: casual dining room, game parlor, sewing room, bedrooms, and bathrooms. The conservatory was cool in summer, and was kept more or less warm in winter with coal braziers. The back part of the house was the realm of the servants and the animals: consisting of the kitchen, laundry sinks, cellars, garage, and a line of pathetic cubicles where the domestic employees slept. My mother had entered that back courtyard on very few occasions.

The property had once belonged to my paternal grandparents, and when they died it was the only significant thing their children inherited. Its value, divided in eleven parts, represented a very small amount for each child. My father, the only one with any vision, offered to buy out his siblings in small installments. At first they thought he was doing them a favor, since that old mansion had endless structural issues, as he explained to them. No one in their right mind would live there, but he needed the space for his sons and the other children, who would come later, as well as his mother-in-law, already advanced in age, and his wife's two spinster sisters, who relied on his charity. Later, when he began to make late payments, proffering only a fraction of the promised amount, and then finally stopped paying altogether, the relationship with his siblings began to deteriorate. He truly never intended to swindle them. He was presented with investment opportunities that he had to seize, promising himself he would pay them back, with interest, but the years passed with one deferment after another, until he eventually forgot about the debt.

The house was truly a neglected ruin, but the lot took up half a block and had entrances from two streets. I wish I had a picture to show you, Camilo, because that's where my life began and my first

memories were made. The old house had lost its former luster from before the financial setbacks, when my grandfather still reigned over a clan of children and an army of servants who kept the house in impeccable condition. The gardeners cared for a paradise of flowers and fruit trees with a glass greenhouse that held orchids from other climes. There were four marble statues of mythological Greek figures, popular at the time among the families of noble lineage and sculpted by the same local artisans who carved their elaborate family crypts in the cemetery. The old gardeners no longer existed, and the new ones were a bunch of lazy bums, according to my father. “If we keep going at this rate, the weeds are going to overrun the house,” he would say, but he did nothing to rectify the problem. He considered nature something nice to admire from a distance, but it did not merit his attention, which was better reserved for more profitable activities. He was unconcerned by the progressive deterioration of the house because he planned to stay there only as long as necessary: The structure itself was worth nothing, but the lot was magnificent. He planned to sell it as soon as it had appreciated enough in value. His motto was a cliché: Buy low, sell high.

The upper class had begun moving to more-residential neighborhoods, far from the public offices, markets, and dusty plazas covered in pigeon poop. The trend was to demolish the old mansions like ours and construct office buildings or apartments for the middle class. The capital was and still is one of the most segregated cities in the world, and as the lower classes began to encroach onto those streets, which had been the city’s main thoroughfares since colonial times, my father would have to either move his family or risk being looked down upon by his friends and acquaintances. At my mother’s insistence, he modernized the house, adding electricity and installing toilets, as the home otherwise silently deteriorated all around us.