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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
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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

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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

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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

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

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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)

I 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.

MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER SAT ALL DAY IN THE CONSERVATORY, in a high-backed armchair, so lost to her memories that she hadn't uttered a single word in six years. My aunts Pía and Pilar, several years older than my mother, also lived with us. The first was a sweet lady, knowledgeable in the healing properties of plants, gifted with a talent for curing through the laying on of hands. At twenty-three she had been engaged to marry a second cousin, whom she'd been in love with since age fifteen, but she never got to wear her wedding dress because her fiancé died suddenly two months before the wedding. The family refused an autopsy and the cause of death was attributed to a congenital heart defect. Pía considered herself a widow who'd lost her only love, dressed religiously in mourning clothes from then on, and never accepted any other candidates for marriage.

Aunt Pilar was pretty, like all the women in her family, but she did her best to hide her looks and she mocked the virtues and adornments of femininity. A few brave men had tried to court her in her youth, but she'd managed to frighten them away. She lamented not having

been born a half century later, when she could have fulfilled her dream of being the first woman to climb Mt. Everest. The day the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and the New Zealander Edmund Hillary achieved the feat in 1953, Pilar cried in frustration. She was tall, strong, and agile, with the authoritarian temperament of a colonel; she managed the household and saw to repairs, which were endless. She had a talent for mechanics, invented her own domestic appliances, and came up with ingenious ways to solve problems, which is why everyone said that God had made a mistake when he chose her gender. No one was surprised to see her straddled atop the house, directing the replacement of roof tiles after a quake, or helping to slaughter hens and turkeys for the Christmas celebration without a hint of disgust.

The quarantine imposed by the influenza didn't change much for our family. In normal times, the maids, cook, and washing woman were off only three afternoons per month; the driver and the gardeners had more freedom, because the men were not considered part of the staff. The exception was Apolonio Toro, a gigantic adolescent who had come knocking at the Del Valles' a few years prior asking for something to eat, and had stayed. They supposed he was an orphan, but no one had bothered to verify this. Torito rarely went out, because he was afraid he would be bullied, as had happened on many occasions; his almost beastly appearance combined with his childlike innocence elicited cruelty from others. He was tasked with hauling firewood and coal, sanding and waxing the parquet floors, and other hard physical chores that did not require critical thinking.

MY MOTHER WAS NOT particularly social, and went out as little as possible. She accompanied her husband to Del Valle family gatherings, so many that you could fill up the entire calendar with all the anniversaries, baptisms, weddings, and funerals, but she did so grudgingly, because the noise gave her headaches. She would use her

ill health or another pregnancy as an excuse to stay in bed or escape to a tuberculosis sanatorium in the mountains, where her bronchitis would clear up and she'd have a chance to rest. If the weather was nice, she liked to go for rides in the flamboyant automobile that her husband had purchased as soon as they'd come into fashion, a Ford Model T, which reached the suicidal speed of thirty miles an hour.

"One day I'm going to take you flying in my very own airplane," my father promised her, although it was the last thing she would have chosen as a mode of transport.

Aeronautics, which was considered a vagary of adventurers and playboys, fascinated my father. He believed that in the future those mosquitos made of wood and cloth would be readily accessible to anyone who could afford them, like automobiles, and he would be among the first to invest in them. He had thought it all out. He would buy planes secondhand in the United States, have them disassembled and brought into the country as parts, to avoid tariffs, and then after careful reassembly he would sell them for a fortune. By a strange twist of fate, I would end up fulfilling a form of his dream many years later.

The driver took my mother shopping at the Turkish market or to meet one of her sisters-in-law at the Versailles tearoom, where they would fill her in on the family gossip, but almost none of that had been possible in recent months, first due to the weight of her belly and later because of the quarantine orders. The winter days were short and they passed quickly over games of cards with my aunts Pía and Pilar, or sewing, knitting, and praying the rosary in penance with Torito and the servants. She had the rooms of her absent sons closed up, as well as the two sitting rooms and the formal dining room. Only her husband and her oldest son used the library, where Torito kept the fire lit so that the damp wouldn't creep into the books. In the rest of the rooms and in the conservatory they set up coal braziers topped with pots of boiling water containing eucalyptus leaves to cleanse the lungs and dispel the ghost of influenza.

My father and my brother José Antonio did not adhere to the quarantine or respect the curfew, my father because he was one of the business tycoons considered indispensable to the proper functioning of the economy and my brother because he went everywhere our father went. They had a permit to circulate, something granted to certain industrialists, businessmen, politicians, and healthcare workers. Father and son went to the office, met with colleagues and clients, and dined at the Union Club, which remained open; closing it would've been like shuttering the cathedral itself, although the quality of service declined as the waiters began dying off. On the streets they safeguarded themselves using felt masks sewn by my aunts, and they rubbed themselves down with alcohol before getting into bed. They knew that no one was immune to the flu, but they hoped that with these measures, along with the cleansing eucalyptus, they could keep the virus from entering our home.

Back when I was born, ladies like María Gracia shut themselves away to hide their pregnant bellies from the eyes of the world, and they did not nurse their infants, which was considered vulgar. It was common to hire a wet nurse, some poor woman who had to rip the breast from her own child's mouth and rent it to another more fortunate babe, but my father would not allow any stranger into our home. They might bring in the influenza and infect us all. They solved the problem of my nourishment with the milk of a goat that they brought to live in the back courtyard.

From my birth until five years old, I was left in the exclusive care of my aunts Pía and Pilar, who spoiled me to the point of almost completely ruining my character. My father contributed as well, because I was the only girl in a pack of sons. At the age when other kids learned to read, I was still unable to use silverware, having always been spoon-fed, and I slept curled up inside a bassinet beside my mother's bed.

One day my father dared to scold me for shattering my doll's porcelain head against the wall.

“Spoiled brat! I’m going to give you a good spanking!”

Never before had he raised his voice to me. I threw myself face-down onto the floor, panting like I was possessed, one of my usual tricks, and for the first time he lost his infinite patience, picked me up by the arms, and shook me so hard that, if my aunts hadn’t stepped in, he might’ve broken my neck. The shock put an instant end to my tantrum.

“What this child needs is an English governess,” my father decreed, furious.

And that’s how Miss Taylor came into the family. My father found her through the commercial agent that managed some of his business interests in London, who simply put an ad in the *Times*. The two men communicated via telegram and letters that took several weeks to arrive at their destination and several more to return with a response. Despite the obstacles imposed by the distance and the language, since the agent didn’t speak Spanish and my father’s English vocabulary was limited to exchange rates and exportation documentation, they managed to hire the ideal person to fill the role, a woman of proven experience and respectability.

FOUR MONTHS LATER, MY parents and my brother José Antonio took me, dressed in my Sunday best with a blue velvet coat, straw hat, and patent-leather boots, to meet the Englishwoman at the port. We had to wait for all the passengers to disembark down the gangplank, greet whoever had showed up to welcome them, photograph themselves in huge groups, and sort out their complicated luggage, before the dock finally cleared and we made out a lone figure with a lost look on her face. That’s when my parents saw that the governess was nothing at all like they had pictured based on a correspondence plagued with linguistic misunderstandings. In reality, the only personal detail my father had asked in one of his telegrams before hiring

her was if she happened to like dogs. She had responded that she preferred them to humans.

Due to one of my family's many deep-rooted prejudices, they had expected a matronly, old-fashioned woman with a sharp nose and bad teeth, like some of the ladies from the British community they were vaguely acquainted with or had seen in the society section of the paper. Miss Josephine Taylor was a young twentysomething woman, short in stature and slightly curvy, without being fat, and she wore a loose mustard-colored dress with a drop waist, a felt hat shaped like a chamber pot, and slingback heels that buckled around the ankle. Her round, light-blue eyes were painted with black kohl, which set off her startled expression. She had strawlike blond hair, and that skin as transparent as rice paper that girls from cold countries sometimes have, which over time becomes spotted and mercilessly wrinkled. José Antonio was able to communicate with her using the basic English he had acquired through an intensive course but had never gotten a chance to put into practice.

My mother was enchanted with Miss Taylor from her first glimpse of the woman, fresh as an apple, but her husband considered himself swindled, because his sole objective for bringing her from so far away was to impose discipline and good manners and to lay the foundation of an acceptable education. He had decreed that I would be home-schooled to protect me from harmful ideas, vulgar customs, and the illnesses that decimated the young population at that time. The pandemic had taken some victims among our more distant relatives but everyone within our immediate family had gone unscathed. Nevertheless, there was a fear that it could return with renewed fury and sow death among children, who had not been immunized by the first wave of the virus like the surviving adults had. Five years on, the country had not yet fully recovered from the tragedy caused by the flu; the impact on public health and the economy was so devastating that, while in other parts of the world the Roaring Twenties were in full

swing, in our country people still lived guardedly. My father feared for my health, never suspecting that my fainting fits, convulsions, and explosive vomiting were the result of my extraordinary talent for the-
atrics. He took it for granted that the trendy flapper he met at the port couldn't possibly be up to the task of taming his daughter's wild temperament. But that foreign woman would surprise him in more ways than one, down to the fact that she wasn't actually English.

BEFORE HER ARRIVAL, NO one was clear on the precise position that Miss Taylor would occupy in the domestic order. She didn't fit into the same category as the maids, but she definitely wasn't a member of the family. My father said that we should treat her with courtesy and distance, that she should eat her meals with me in the conservatory or in the pantry but not in the dining room. He assigned her to the bedroom that had been previously occupied by my grandmother, who had died sitting on her chamber pot a few months earlier. Torito moved the old lady's worn, heavy furniture down into the basement, and it was replaced with other less gloomy pieces, to keep the governess from getting depressed since, according to Aunt Pilar, she'd have enough to worry about between me and adapting to a barbaric land at the end of the world. Pilar chose an understated striped wallpaper and faded pink curtains, which she thought appropriate for an old maid, but as soon as she laid eyes on Miss Taylor, she understood that she had been mistaken.

Within a week, the governess had integrated into the family much more intimately than her employer had expected, and the issue of her place in the social hierarchy, so important in this classist country, melted away. Miss Taylor was friendly and discreet, but not at all shy, and she gained the respect of everyone, including my brothers, who were now grown but still behaved like cannibals. Even the two mastiffs my father had acquired in the time of the pandemic to protect us from possible assailants, and which had now turned into spoiled lap-

dogs, obeyed her. Miss Taylor only had to point at the floor and give them an order in her language, without raising her voice, and they would jump from the sofas with their ears folded. The new governess quickly established routines and started the process of teaching me basic manners, after getting my parents' approval on a plan of studies that included outdoor physical education, music lessons, science, and art.

My father asked Miss Taylor how she had acquired so much knowledge at such a young age and she responded that that was what reference books were for. Above everything else, she touted the benefits of saying "please" and "thank you." If I refused, and threw myself to the floor howling, she would stop my mother and her sisters with a mere gesture before they could rush over to console me. She let me kick and scream until I got tired, as she continued reading, knitting, or arranging flowers from the garden, unfazed. She was also wholly unmoved by my feigned epilepsy.

"Unless she's bleeding, we're not going to interfere," she declared, and they obeyed, intimidated by the woman and never daring to question her didactic methods.

They supposed that, since she came from London, she must be well qualified.

Miss Taylor deemed me too big to sleep curled up in a bassinet beside my mother, and asked for another bed to be placed in her own room. For the first two nights she pushed a dresser against the door so that I couldn't escape, but I quickly resigned myself to my fate. She immediately taught me to dress and feed myself, through the method of leaving me half-naked until I learned to put on at least some of my clothes and sitting me in front of my plate, spoon in hand, waiting with the patience of a Trappist monk until I finally succumbed to hunger. The results were so dramatic that in a short while the monster that had grated on the nerves of the entire household had become a normal little girl who followed the governess everywhere she went, fascinated by the smell of her bergamot perfume and her

chubby hands that fluttered in the air like pigeons. Just as my father had always maintained, I'd spent five years yearning for structure, and I finally received it. My mother and aunts took this as a criticism, but they had to admit that there had been a fundamental shift. The air had sweetened.

MISS TAYLOR POUNDED AT the piano with more enthusiasm than talent, and sang ballads with an anemic but well-tuned voice; her good ear allowed her to quickly acquire a watered-down but intelligible Spanish that even included some curse words she'd picked up from my brothers, which she sprinkled into her sentences without understanding their meaning. The insults didn't sound as offensive with her accent, and since no one ever corrected her, she continued to use them. She couldn't stomach rich food but she kept her British stiff upper lip when it came to the local cuisine, just as she did during the winter rainstorms, the summer's dry, dusty heat, and the earthquakes that made the light fixtures dance and rearranged the chairs while everyone went about their business. What she couldn't stand, however, was the slaughter of animals in the service yard, which she classified as a cruel and primitive custom. She thought it savage to eat a stew made with a bunny or hen that we'd known personally. When Torito slit the throat of a goat he'd been fattening up for three months for his boss's birthday, Miss Taylor fell sick in bed with a fever. From then on Aunt Pilar decided to start buying meat from a butcher, even though she didn't see any difference between killing the poor animal in the market or at home. I should clarify that it wasn't the same goat that served as my wet nurse in infancy; that one died of old age several years later.

The two green metal trunks that comprised Miss Taylor's luggage contained textbooks and art history tomes, all in English; a microscope; a wooden box with everything needed for chemistry experiments; and twenty-one volumes of the most recent edition of

Encyclopædia Britannica, published in 1911. She maintained that anything that didn't appear in the encyclopedia didn't exist. Her wardrobe contained two nice outfits, with their respective hats, one of which was the mustard-colored dress in which she'd stepped off the boat, and a coat with a fur collar made from some unidentifiable mammal; the rest was all skirts and plain blouses, which were covered in an apron all day. She took off and put on her clothes with the skill of a contortionist, in such a way that I never once saw her in her slip, much less naked, even though we shared a room.

My mother made sure that I prayed in Spanish before I got into bed, because the English prayers could be blasphemous and who knew if they'd even be understood up in heaven. Miss Taylor belonged to the Church of England, and that made her exempt from coming to Catholic mass with the family and from praying the rosary with us. We never saw her read the Bible she kept on her nightstand, or heard her speak with any religious zeal. Twice a year she went to the Anglican service held in the home of a member of the British community, where she sang hymns and talked to the other foreigners she often met with to have tea and exchange books and magazines.

With her arrival my existence was notably improved. The first years of my life had been a tug of war; I was constantly trying to impose my will and, since I always got my way, I didn't feel safe or protected. My father had always said I was stronger than the adults around me and so I didn't have anyone to lean on. The governess could not completely tame my rebelliousness, but she taught me the basic societal norms of acceptable behavior and managed to break me of my obsession with bodily functions and illness, which were popular topics of conversation in our country. Men talk about politics and business; women talk about their ailments and their servants. Every morning when my mother woke up, she took inventory of her aches and pains, writing them down in a notebook where she also kept a list of past and present medications, and she often entertained herself by flipping through those pages with more nostalgia than she felt for our