
Isabel Allende
(b. 1942)

Born in Lima, Peru, Isabel Allende lived in Bolivia, Europe, and the Middle East with her mother and diplomat stepfather during her adolescence. She is the niece of Chile's assassinated President Salvador Allende. After August Pinochet's right-wing coup and the murder of her uncle in 1973, Allende, her husband, and children fled from Chile to exile in Caracas, Venezuela. A television journalist, dramatist, columnist for the Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional*, and author of stories for children, the Chilean writer has described the circumstances that inspired her first novel, *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), translated as *The House of the Spirits* (Knopf, 1985). In 1981, her maternal grandfather, who was almost one hundred years of age and had remained in Chile, discussed his impending death with her on the telephone. Allende recalls her reaction: "I wanted to tell my grandfather that I was never going to forget him, he would never die, just as my grandmother had never died. . . . And I started writing a letter, telling him the same things he had told me when I was a child." She never mailed that letter. Instead, it was transmuted into a work of art. Allende continues:

That's why at the beginning of the book Alba (the granddaughter of Clara and Esteban) writes to keep alive the memory of her past and to survive her own terror. That's how I felt. I wanted to survive the terrible experience of exile, and I wanted to keep alive the memory of the past—the house that I lost, the people that are dead, those that disappeared, the friends that were scattered all around the world.

A *New York Times* reviewer who characterized the resulting novel as "spectacular" commented that "*The House of the Spirits* with its all-informing genius, and humane sensibility, is a unique achievement, both personal witness and possible allegory of the past, present, and future of Latin America." Her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows* (Knopf, 1987), depicts the lives of two lovers who live in a corrupt and scandal-ridden dictatorship. *Eva Luna* (Knopf, 1988), her third novel, was followed by a collection of short fiction framed by a narrative device. These stories in *The Stories of Eva Luna* (Macmillan, 1991) are purported to be the tales told by Allende's character, Eva, in response to the request: "Tell me a story you have never told anyone before. Make it up for me."

CLARISA

Clarisa was born before the city had electricity, she lived to see the television coverage of the first astronaut levitating on the moon, and she died of amazement when the Pope came for a visit and was met in the street by homosexuals dressed up as nuns. She had spent her childhood among pots of ferns and corridors lighted by oil lamps. Days went by slowly in those times. Clarisa never adjusted to the fits and starts of today's time; she always seemed to have been captured in the sepia tints of a nineteenth-century portrait. I suppose that once she had had a virginal waist, a graceful bearing, and a profile worthy of a medallion, but by the time I met her she was already a rather bizarre old woman with shoulders rounded into two gentle humps and with white hair coiled around a sebaceous cyst the size of a pigeon egg crowning her noble head. She had a profound, shrewd gaze that could penetrate the most hidden evil and return un-

scathed. Over the course of a long lifetime she had come to be considered a saint, and after she died many people placed her photograph on the family altar along with other venerable images to ask her aid in minor difficulties, even though her reputation for being a miracle worker is not recognized by the Vatican and undoubtedly never will be. Her miraculous works are unpredictable: she does not heal the blind, like Santa Lucia, or find husbands for spinsters, like St. Anthony, but they say she helps a person through a hangover, or problems with the draft, or a siege of loneliness. Her wonders are humble and improbable, but as necessary as the spectacular marvels worked by cathedral saints.

I met Clarisa when I was an adolescent working as a servant in the house of La Señora, a lady of the night, as Clarisa called women of her occupation. Even then she was distilled almost to pure spirit; I thought at any minute she might rise from the floor and fly out the window. She had the hands of a healer, and people who could not pay a doctor, or were disillusioned with traditional science, waited in line for her to relieve their pain or console them in their bad fortune. My *patrona* used to call her to come lay her hands on her back. In the process, Clarisa would rummage about in La Señora's soul with the hope of turning her life around and leading her along the paths of righteousness—paths my employer was in no hurry to travel, since that direction would have unalterably affected her commercial enterprise. Clarisa would apply the curative warmth of the palms of her hands for ten or fifteen minutes, depending on the intensity of the pain, and then accept a glass of fruit juice as payment for her services. Sitting face to face in the kitchen, the two women would have their chat about human and divine topics, my *patrona* more on the human side and Clarisa more on the divine, never straining tolerance nor abusing good manners. Later, when I found a different job, I lost sight of Clarisa until we met once again some twenty years later and reestablished a friendship that has lasted to this day, overcoming the many obstacles that lay in our way, including death, which has put a slight crimp in the ease of our communications.

Even in the times when age had slowed her former

missionary zeal, Clarisa persevered steadfastly in her good works, sometimes even against the will of the beneficiaries—as in the case of the pimps on Calle República, who had to bear the mortification of the public harangues that good lady delivered in her unwavering determination to redeem them. Clarisa gave everything she owed to the needy. As a rule she had only the clothes on her back, and toward the end of her life it was difficult to find a person any poorer than she. Charity had become a two-way street, and you seldom could tell who was giving and who receiving.

She lived in an old rundown three-story house; some rooms were empty but some she rented as a storehouse for a saloon, so that the rancid stench of cheap liquor always hung in the air. She had never moved from the dwelling she had inherited from her parents because it reminded her of an aristocratic past, and also because for more than forty years her husband had buried himself alive in a room at the back of the patio. He had been a judge in a remote province, an office he had carried out with dignity until the birth of his second child, when disillusion robbed him of the will to accept his fate, and like a mole he had taken refuge in the malodorous cave of his room. He emerged only rarely, a scurrying shadow, and opened the door only to hand out his chamber pot and to collect the food his wife left for him every day. He communicated with her by means of notes written in his perfect calligraphy and by knocks on the door—two for yes and three for no. Through the walls of his room you could hear asthmatic hacking and an occasional long-shoreman's curse intended for whom, no one never knew.

"Poor man, I pray that God will soon call him to his side, and he will take his place in the heavenly choir," Clarisa would sigh without a suspicion of irony. The opportune passing of her husband, however, was one grace Divine Providence never granted, for he has survived to the present day. He must be a hundred by now, unless he has already died and the coughs and curses we hear are only echoes from the past.

Clarisa married him because he was the first person to ask her, and also because her parents thought that a

judge would be the best possible match. She left the sober comfort of her paternal hearth and reconciled herself to the avarice and vulgarity of her husband with no thought of a better fate. The only time she was ever heard to utter a nostalgic comment about the refinements of her past was in regard to a grand piano that had enchanted her as a girl. That is how we learned of her love for music and much later, when she was an old woman, a group of us who were her friends gave her a modest piano. It had been over sixty years since she had been anywhere near a keyboard, but she sat down on the piano stool and played, by memory and without hesitation, a Chopin nocturne.

A year or so after her marriage to the judge, she gave birth to an albino daughter, who as soon as she began to walk accompanied her mother to church. The tiny creature was so dazzled by the pageantry of the liturgy that she began pulling down drapes to "play bishop," and soon the only game that interested her was imitating the ecclesiastical ritual, chanting in a Latin of her own invention. She was hopelessly retarded; her only words were spoken in an unknown tongue, she drooled incessantly, and she suffered uncontrollable attacks during which she had to be tied like a circus animal to prevent her from chewing the furniture and attacking guests. With puberty, however, she grew more tractable, and helped her mother around the house. The second child was born into the world totally devoid of curiosity and bearing gentle Asian features; the only skill he ever mastered was riding a bicycle, but it was of little benefit to him since his mother never dared let him out of the house. He spent his life pedaling in the patio on a stationary bicycle mounted on a music stand.

Her children's abnormality never affected Clarisa's unalterable optimism. She considered them pure souls immune to evil, and all her relations with them were marked by affection. Her greatest concern was to save them from earthly suffering, and she often asked herself who would look after them when she was gone. The father, in contrast, never spoke of them, and used the pretext of his retarded children to wallow in shame, abandon his career, his friends, even fresh air, and entomb himself

in his room, copying newspapers with monklike patience in a series of stenographic notebooks. Meanwhile, his wife spent the last cent of her dowry, and her inheritance, and took on all kinds of jobs to support the family. In her own poverty, she never turned her back to the poverty of others, and even in the most difficult periods of her life she continued her works of mercy.

Clarisa had a boundless understanding of human weaknesses. One night when she was sitting in her room sewing, her white head bent over her work, she heard unusual noises in the house. She got up to see what they might be, but got no farther than the doorway, where she ran into a man who held a knife to her throat and threatened, "Quiet, you whore, or I'll slash your throat."

"This isn't the place you want, son. The ladies of the night are across the street, there where you hear the music."

"Don't try to be funny, this is a robbery."

"What did you say?" Clarisa smiled, incredulous. "And what are you going to steal from me?"

"Sit down in that chair. I'm going to tie you up."

"I won't do it, son. I'm old enough to be your mother. Where's your respect?"

"Sit down, I said!"

"And don't shout, you'll frighten my husband, and he's not at all well. By the way, put that knife down, you might hurt someone," said Clarisa.

"Listen, lady, I came here to rob you," the flustered robber muttered.

"Well, there's not going to be any robbery. I will not let you commit a sin. I'll give you some money of my own will. You won't be taking it from me, is that clear? I'm giving it to you." She went to her purse and took out all the money for the rest of the week. "That's all I have. We're quite poor, as you see. Come into the kitchen, now, and I'll set the kettle to boil."

The man put away his knife and followed her, money in hand. Clarisa brewed tea for both of them, served the last cookies in the house, and invited him to sit with her in the living room.

"Wherever did you get the notion to rob a poor old woman like me?"

The thief told her he had been watching her for days; he knew that she lived alone and thought there must be something of value in that big old house. It was his first crime, he said; he had four children, he was out of a job, and he could not go home another night with empty hands. Clarisa pointed out that he was taking too great a risk, that he might not only be arrested but was putting his immortal soul in danger—although in truth she doubted that God would punish him with hell, the worst might be a while in purgatory, as long, of course, as he repented and did not do it again. She offered to add him to her list of wards and promised she would not bring charges against him. As they said goodbye, they kissed each other on the cheek. For the next ten years, until Clarisa died, she received a small gift at Christmastime through the mail.

Not all Clarisa's dealings were with the indigent; she also knew people of note, women of breeding, wealthy businessmen, bankers, and public figures, whom she visited seeking aid for the needy, with never a thought for how she might be received. One day she presented herself in the office of Congressman Diego Cienfuegos, known for his incendiary speeches and for being one of the few incorruptible politicians in the nation, which did not prevent his rising to the rank of Minister and earning a place in history books as the intellectual father of an important peace treaty. In those days Clarisa was still young, and rather timid, but she already had the unflagging determination that characterized her old age. She went to the Congressman to ask him to use his influence to procure a new modern refrigerator for the Teresian Sisters. The man stared at her in amazement, questioning why he should aid his ideological enemies.

"Because in their dining room the Little Sisters feed a hundred children a day a free meal, and almost all of them are children of the Communists and evangelicals who vote for you," Clarisa replied mildly.

That was the beginning of a discreet friendship that was to cost the politician many sleepless nights and many donations. With the same irrefutable logic, Clarisa obtained scholarships for young atheists from the Jesuits, used clothing for neighborhood prostitutes from the

League of Catholic Dames, musical instruments for a Hebrew choir from the German Institute, and funds for alcohol rehabilitation programs from viniculturists.

Neither the husband interred in the mausoleum of his room nor the debilitating hours of her daily labors prevented Clarisa's becoming pregnant again. The midwife advised her that in all probability she would give birth to another abnormal child, but Clarisa mollified her with the argument that God maintains a certain equilibrium in the universe, and just as He creates some things twisted, He creates others straight; for every virtue there is a sin, for every joy an affliction, for every evil a good, and on and on, for as the wheel of life turns through the centuries, everything evens out. The pendulum swings back and forth with inexorable precision, she said.

Clarisa passed her pregnancy in leisure, and in the proper time gave birth to her third child. The baby was born at home with the help of the midwife and in the agreeable company of the two inoffensive and smiling retarded children who passed the hours at their games, one spouting gibberish in her bishop's robe and the other pedaling nowhere on his stationary bicycle. With this birth the scales tipped in the direction needed to preserve the harmony of Creation, and a grateful mother offered her breast to a strong boy with wise eyes and firm hands. Fourteen months later Clarisa gave birth to a second son with the same characteristics.

"These two boys will grow up healthy and help me take care of their brother and sister," she said with conviction, faithful to her theory of compensation; and that is how it was, the younger children grew straight as reeds and were gifted with kindness and goodness.

Somehow Clarisa managed to support the four children without any help from her husband and without injuring her family pride by accepting charity for herself. Few were aware of her financial straits. With the same tenacity with which she spent late nights sewing rag dolls and baking wedding cakes to sell, she battled the deterioration of her house when the walls began to sweat a greenish mist. She instilled in the two younger children her principles of good humor and generosity with such splendid results that in the following years they were always

beside her caring for their older siblings, until the day the retarded brother and sister accidentally locked themselves in the bathroom and a leaking gas pipe transported them gently to a better world.

When the Pope made his visit, Clarisa was not quite eighty, although it was difficult to calculate her exact age; she had added years out of vanity, simply to hear people say how well preserved she was for the ninety-five years she claimed. She had more than enough spirit, but her body was failing; she could barely totter through the streets, where in any case she lost her way, she had no appetite, and finally was eating only flowers and honey. Her spirit was detaching itself from her body at the same pace her wings germinated, but the preparations for the papal visit rekindled her enthusiasm for the adventures of this earth. She was not content to watch the spectacle on television because she had a deep distrust of that apparatus. She was convinced that even the astronaut on the moon was a sham filmed in some Hollywood studio, the same kind of lies they practiced in those stories where the protagonists love or die and then a week later reappear with the same faces but a new destiny. Clarisa wanted to see the pontiff with her own eyes, not on a screen where some actor was consumed in the Pope's robes. That was how I found myself accompanying her to cheer the Pope as he rode through the streets. After a couple of hours fighting the throngs of faithful and vendors of candles and T-shirts and religious prints and plastic saints, we caught sight of the Holy Father, magnificent in his portable glass cage, a white porpoise in an aquarium. Clarisa fell to her knees, in danger of being crushed by fanatics and the Pope's police escort. Just at the instant when the Pope was but a stone's throw away, a rare spectacle surged from a side street: a group of men in nun's habits, their faces garishly painted, waving posters in favor of abortion, divorce, sodomy, and the right of women to the priesthood. Clarisa dug through her purse with a trembling hand, found her eyeglasses, and set them on her nose to assure herself she was not suffering a hallucination.

She paled. "It's time to go, daughter. I've already seen too much."

She was so undone that to distract her I offered to buy her a hair from the Pope's head, but she did not want it without a guarantee of authenticity. According to a socialist newspaperman, there were enough capillary relics offered for sale to stuff a couple of pillows.

"I'm an old woman, and I no longer understand the world, daughter. We'd best go home."

She was exhausted when she reached the house, with the din of the bells and cheering still ringing in her temples. I went to the kitchen to prepare some soup for the judge and heat water to brew her a cup of camomile tea, in hopes it would have a calming effect. As I waited for the tea, Clarisa, with a melancholy face, put everything in order and served her last plate of food to her husband. She set the tray on the floor and for the first time in more than forty years knocked on his door.

"How many times have I told you not to bother me," the judge protested in a reedy voice.

"I'm sorry, dear, I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to die."

"When?"

"On Friday."

"Very well." The door did not open.

Clarisa called her sons to tell them about her imminent death, and then took to her bed. Her bedroom was a large dark room with pieces of heavy carved mahogany furniture that would never become antiques because somewhere along the way they had broken down. On her dresser sat a crystal urn containing an astoundingly realistic wax Baby Jesus, rosy as an infant fresh from its bath.

"I'd like for you to have the Baby, Eva. I know you'll take care of Him."

"You're not going to die. Don't frighten me this way."

"You need to keep Him in the shade, if the sun strikes Him, He'll melt. He's lasted almost a century, and will last another if you protect Him from the heat."

I combed her meringue hair high on her head, tied it with a ribbon, and then sat down to accompany her through this crisis, not knowing exactly what it was. The moment was totally free of sentimentality, as if in fact she was not dying but suffering from a slight cold.

"We should call a priest now, don't you think, child?"

"But Clarisa, what sins can you have?"

"Life is long, and there's more than enough time for evil, God willing."

"But you'll go straight to heaven—that is, if heaven exists."

"Of course it exists, but it's not certain they'll let me in. They're very strict there," she murmured. And after a long pause, she added, "When I think over my trespasses, there was one that was very grave . . ."

I shivered, terrified that this old woman with the aureole of a saint was going to tell me that she had intentionally dispatched her retarded children to facilitate divine justice, or that she did not believe in God and had devoted herself to doing good in this world only because the scales had assigned her the role of compensating for the evil of others, an evil that was unimportant anyway since everything is part of the same infinite process. But Clarisa confessed nothing so dramatic to me. She turned toward the window and told me, blushing, that she had not fulfilled her conjugal duties.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well, I mean I did not satisfy my husband's carnal desires, you understand?"

"No."

"If you refuse your husband your body, and he falls into the temptation of seeking solace with another woman, you bear that moral responsibility."

"I see. The judge fornicates, and the sin is yours."

"No, no. I think it would be both our sins. . . . I would have to look it up."

"And the husband has the same obligation to his wife?"

"What?"

"I mean, if you had had another man, would your husband share the blame?"

"Wherever did you get an idea like that, child!" She stared at me in disbelief.

"Don't worry, because if your worst sin was that you slighted the judge, I'm sure God will see the joke."

"I don't think God is very amused by such things."

"But Clarisa, to doubt divine perfection *would* be a great sin."

She seemed in such good health that I could not imagine her dying, but I supposed that, unlike us simple mortals, saints have the power to die unafraid and in full control of their faculties. Her reputation was so solid that many claimed to have seen a circle of light around her head and to have heard celestial music in her presence, and so I was not surprised when I undressed her to put on her nightgown to find two inflamed bumps on her shoulders, as if her pair of great angel wings were about to erupt.

The rumor of Clarisa's coming death spread rapidly. Her children and I had to marshal an unending line of people who came to seek her intervention in heaven for various favors, or simply to say goodbye. Many expected that at the last moment a significant miracle would occur, such as, the odor of rancid bottles that pervaded the house would be transformed into the perfume of camellias, or beams of consolation would shine forth from her body. Among the visitors was her friend the robber, who had not mended his ways but instead become a true professional. He sat beside the dying woman's bed and recounted his escapades without a hint of repentance.

"Things are going really well. I rob only upper-class homes now. I steal from the rich, and that's no sin. I've never had to use violence, and I work clean, like a true gentleman," he boasted.

"I will have to pray a long time for you, my son."

"Pray on, Grandmother. It won't do me any harm."

La Señora came, too, distressed to be saying goodbye to her beloved friend, and bringing a flower crown and almond-paste sweets as her contribution to the death vigil. My former patrona did not know me, but I had no trouble recognizing her despite her girth, her wig, and the outrageous plastic shoes printed with gold stars. To offset the thief, she came to tell Clarisa that her advice had fallen upon fertile ground, and that she was now a respectable Christian.

"Tell Saint Peter that, so he'll take my name from his black book" was her plea.

"What a terrible disappointment for all these good

people if instead of going to heaven I end up in the cauldrons of hell," Clarisa said after I was finally able to close the door and let her rest for a while.

"If that happens, no one down here is going to know, Clarisa."

"Thank heavens for that!"

From early dawn on Friday a crowd gathered outside in the street, and only her two sons' vigilance prevented the faithful from carrying off relics, from strips of paper off the walls to articles of the saint's meager wardrobe. Clarisa was failing before our eyes and, for the first time, she showed signs of taking her own death seriously. About ten that morning, a blue automobile with Congressional plates stopped before the house. The chauffeur helped an old man climb from the back seat; the crowds recognized him immediately. It was *don* Diego Cienfuegos, whom decades of public service had made a national hero. Clarisa's sons came out to greet him, and accompanied him in his laborious ascent to the second floor. When Clarisa saw him in the doorway, she became quite animated; the color returned to her cheeks and the shine to her eyes.

"Please, clear everyone out of the room and leave us alone," she whispered in my ear.

Twenty minutes later the door opened and *don* Diego Cienfuegos departed, feet dragging, eyes teary, bowed and crippled, but smiling. Clarisa's sons, who were waiting in the hall, again took his arms to steady him, and seeing them there together I confirmed something that had crossed my mind before. The three men had the same bearing, the same profile, the same deliberate assurance, the same wise eyes and firm hands.

I waited until they were downstairs, and went back to my friend's room. As I arranged her pillows, I saw that she, like her visitor, was weeping with a certain rejoicing.

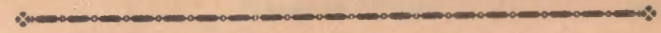
"*Don* Diego was your grave sin, wasn't he?" I murmured.

"That wasn't a sin, child, just a little boost to help God balance the scales of destiny. You see how well it worked out, because my two weak children had two strong brothers to look after them."

Clarisa died that night, without suffering. Cancer, the doctor diagnosed, when he saw the buds of her wings;

saintless, proclaimed the throngs bearing candles and flowers; astonishment, say I, because I was with her when the Pope came to visit.

Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden



Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)

Among the most influential twentieth-century writers, Jorge Luis Borges was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, into a household in which both English and Spanish were spoken. As a frail child he was a voracious reader, spending considerable time in his father's extensive library. Stranded in Switzerland in 1914 at the outbreak of World War I, Borges studied at the College de Genève where he received his degree in 1918. For almost a decade he was a municipal librarian in Buenos Aires, and subsequently became the director of the National Library of Argentina. A professor of English literature at the University of Buenos Aires beginning in 1956, he was relatively unknown as a poet, novelist, and story writer until 1961 when, together with the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, he won the International Publishers Prize (Prix Formentor). At the age of sixty-two, with the simultaneous publication in six countries of his collection of short stories *Ficciones: 1935–1944*, he achieved international acclaim. In *Jorge Luis Borges*, Jaime Alazraki asserted: "As with Joyce, Kafka, or Faulkner, the name of Borges has become an accepted concept; his creations have generated a dimension that we designate 'Borgesian.'" Critics agree that Borges, in rejecting complete reliance on traditional realism or naturalism, has molded the shape of modern fiction in both Latin America and the United States. In his introduction to *Labyrinths*, James E. Irby describes the major subjects of "Borgesian" fiction based on the author's own categories:

Borges once claimed that the basic devices of all fantastic literature are only four in number: the work within the work, the contamination of reality by