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# ISABEL ALLENDE

*A Memoir*

# PAULA





PAULA FRIAS ALLENDE



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*A Memoir*

ISABEL ALLENDE

Translated from the Spanish  
by Margaret Sayers Peden



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## Epigraph

*We did not come to remain whole.  
We came to lose our leaves like the trees,  
The trees that are broken  
And start again, drawing up from the great roots.*

—ROBERT BLY

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Dear Reader,

I have written many books in the last thirty-something years and *Paula* is the one that has received the greatest and warmest response from my readers. I got thousands of touching letters when the book was published. Some of my editors in Europe made a selection and published them under the title *Letters to Paula*. Even now, so many years after its first publication, I get messages every week from all over the world.

This is memory written with tears and love.

My daughter Paula had a rare genetic condition called porphyria that, while serious, should not be fatal if treated properly. In 1991 she was twenty-eight years old and recently married when she suffered a porphyria crisis and ended up in the emergency room at a large hospital in Madrid. We know now that she was given the wrong drugs and when she fell into a coma she was grossly neglected in the ICU. For five harrowing months I paced the corridors of that hospital waiting for my daughter to open her eyes, until finally I was told that she had severe brain damage and would never wake up.

I brought her to my home in California and prepared to take care of her with the help of our family. I was devastated. The only way I have ever been able to sort out the confusion of life and overcome my losses is writing. Writing always saves me from darkness.

Based on a journal that I kept at the hospital and one hundred eighty letters that I wrote during that year to my mother, who was living in Chile, I pieced together a memoir. It's about Paula, of course, about who she was and what happened to her, but mostly it's about her past, her country, her family, and her marriage. The result is a book that is not sad, because in the process of writing I realized that even when tragedy seems overwhelming, there's love, friendship, good memories, little children, pets, family, laughter, and much more that can give us joy.

Everyone has losses of one kind or another. Most people have been in a dark tunnel at some point in their lives and in those moments company and empathy help the most. Maybe that's why so many of my readers have found comfort and hope in this memoir.

Isabel Allende, 2020

**I**N DECEMBER 1991 my daughter, Paula, fell gravely ill and soon thereafter sank into a coma. These pages were written during the interminable hours spent in the corridors of a Madrid hospital and in the hotel room where I lived for several months, as well as beside her bed in our home in California during the summer and fall of 1992.