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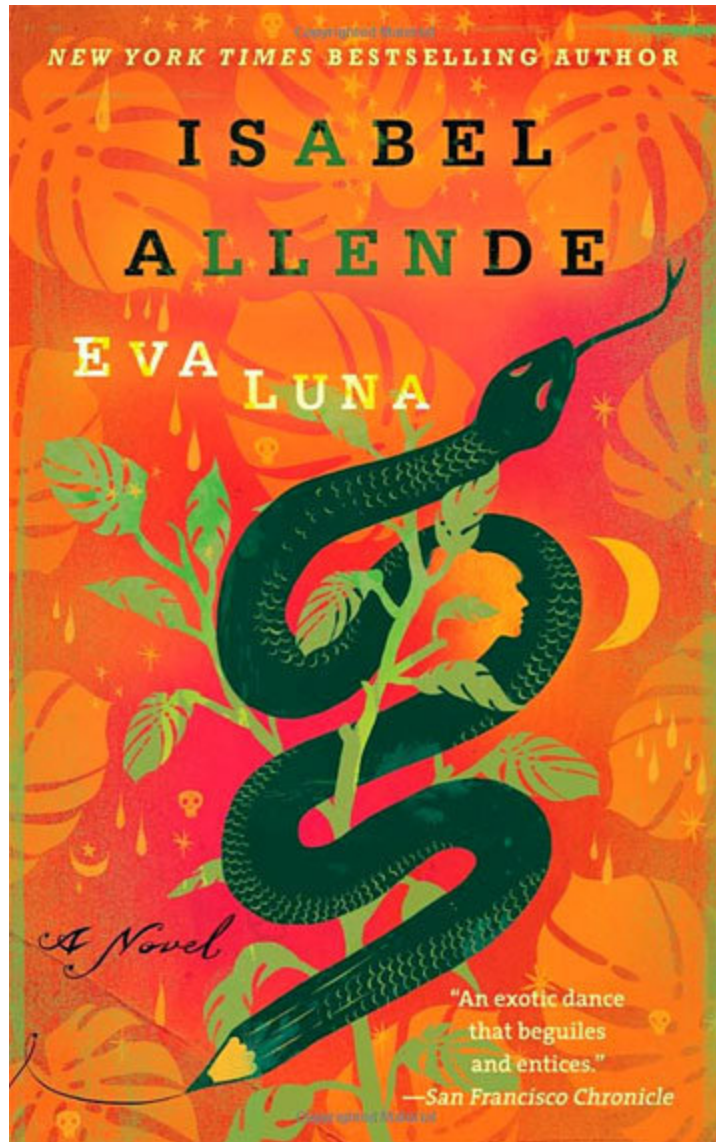
ISABEL
ALLENDE

EVA
LUNA

A Novel

"An exotic dance
that beguiles
and entices."

—San Francisco Chronicle



*Eva
Luna*

ISABEL ALLENDE

Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden

ONE

My name is Eva, which means "life," according to a book of names my mother consulted. I was born in the back room of a shadowy house, and grew up amidst ancient furniture, books in Latin, and human mummies, but none of those things made me melancholy, because I came into the world with a breath of the jungle in my memory. My father, an Indian with yellow eyes, came from the place where the hundred rivers meet; he smelled of lush growing things and he never looked directly at the sky, because he had grown up beneath a canopy of trees, and light seemed indecent to him. Consuelo, my mother, spent her childhood in an enchanted region where for centuries adventurers have searched for the city of pure gold the conquistadors saw when they peered into the abyss of their own ambitions. She was marked forever by that landscape, and in some way she managed to pass that sign on to me.

Missionaries took Consuelo in before she learned to walk; she appeared one day, a naked cub caked with mud and excrement, crawling across the footbridge from the dock like a tiny Jonah vomited up by some freshwater whale. When they bathed her, it was clear beyond a shadow of doubt that she was a girl, which must have caused no little consternation among them; but she was already there and it would not do to throw her into the river, so they draped her in a diaper to cover her shame, squeezed a few drops of lemon into her eyes to heal the infection that had prevented her from opening them, and baptized her with the first female name that came to mind. They then proceeded to bring her up, without fuss or effort to find out where she came from; they were sure that if Divine Providence had kept her alive until they found her, it would also watch over her physical and spiritual well-being, or, in the worst of cases, would bear her off to heaven along with the other innocents. Consuelo grew up without any fixed niche in the strict hierarchy of the Mission. She was not exactly a servant, but neither did she have the status of the Indian boys in the school, and when she asked which of the priests was her father, she was cuffed for her insolence. She told me that a Dutch sailor had set her adrift in a rowboat, but that was likely a story that she had invented to protect herself from the

onslaught of my questions. I think the truth is that she knew nothing about her origins or how she had come to be where the missionaries found her.

The Mission was a small oasis in the heart of an expanse of voluptuous vegetation writhing and twisting from the banks of the river to the feet of the monumental geologic towers that rose toward the firmament like one of God's mistakes. There time is bent and distances deceive the human eye, persuading the traveler to wander in circles. The humid, heavy air smells of flowers, herbs, man's sweat, and animal breath. The heat is oppressive, unalleviated by any breeze; the stones steam and blood boils in the veins. At dusk the sky is filled with phosphorescent mosquitoes whose bites produce endless nightmares, and the still night; air carries the distinct cries of birds, the chattering of monkeys, and the distant roar of the waterfalls born high in the mountains to crash far below like the thunder of warfare. The modest mud-and-wattle Mission building, with its tower of woven stakes and a bell to toll for Mass, balanced, like all the huts, on piles driven into the mud of a river of opalescent waters whose banks evaporated in the reverberating light. The dwellings seemed to drift amid silent canoes, garbage, carcasses of dogs and rats, and inexplicable white blossoms.

Consuelo was easy to distinguish even from a distance, her long red hair like a whip of fire against the eternal green of that landscape. Her playmates were young Indians with swollen bellies, an impudent parrot that recited an "Our Father" salted with curses, and a monkey chained to a table leg; from time to time she would let the monkey loose to look for a sweetheart in the jungle, but he always returned to the 'same spot to scratch his fleas. Even in those days Protestants were everywhere, distributing their Bibles, preaching against the Vatican, and hauling their pianos through heat and rain so their converts could celebrate salvation in public song. Such competition demanded the total dedication of the Catholic priests, and they paid little attention to Consuelo, who was growing up scorched by the sun, poorly nourished on yucca and fish, infested with parasites, bitten by mosquitoes, free as a bird. Aside from helping with domestic chores, attending religious services and a few classes in reading, arithmetic, and catechism, she had no obligations; she roamed outdoors, sniffing the flora and chasing the fauna, her mind filled with images, smells, colors, and myths borne on the river current.

She was twelve when she met the man with the prospecting chickens, a weathered Portuguese who was dry and hard outside and bubbling with laughter inside. His birds pillaged the countryside, devouring anything that glittered, and after a certain amount of time their owner would slit open their craw and harvest his grains of gold -- not enough to make him rich, but enough to nourish his dreams. One morning, El Portugues glimpsed a white-skinned girl with a blaze of hair, knee-deep in the swamp with her skirt tucked up around her legs, and thought he had suffered another of his periodic attacks of fever. His whistle of surprise would have set off a mule train. The sound reached the girl's ears; she looked up, their eyes met, and both smiled the same smile. After that day they met frequently: he, bedazzled, to gaze at her and she to learn to sing Portuguese songs.

"Let's go harvest gold," El Portugues said one day. They set off into the jungle and soon were out of earshot of the Mission bell, deeper and deeper into the tangled growth along paths visible only to him. All day, crowing like roosters, they looked for the hens, catching them on the wing once they spied them through the dense foliage. She clamped them between her knees, and with one surgical slash he slit open the craw and stuck in his fingers to pull out the seeds of gold. If the hen survived, they stitched it up with needle and thread to continue to serve its owner; the others they put in a sack to sell in the village or use as bait. They burned the feathers because chicken feathers bring bad luck and spread the pip. Tangle-haired, Consuelo returned at dusk, content and spattered with blood. As she climbed the ladder from the rowboat to the terraced riverbank, her nose bumped into four filthy sandals belonging to two friars from Extremadura who were waiting for her with crossed arms and fearsome expressions of repudiation.

"It is time for you to go to the city," they said. Nothing was gained by begging. Nor was she allowed to take the monkey or the parrot, two companions judged inappropriate for the new life awaiting her. She made the trip along with five native girls, all tied by the ankle to prevent their jumping from the pirogue and disappearing into the river. As he bid her farewell, El Portugues took one long last look at Consuelo; he did not touch her; but as a remembrance he gave her a tooth-shaped gold nugget strung on a cord. She would wear it around her neck most of her life, until she met someone she would give it to as a gift of love. El Portugues saw her for the

last time dressed in a stained cotton jumper, a straw hat pulled down to her ears, barefoot and dejected, waving goodbye with one hand. The journey began by canoe, down tributaries that wound through a landscape to derange the senses, then on muleback over rugged mesas where the cold freezes night thoughts, and finally in a truck, across humid plains through groves of wild bananas and dwarf pineapple and down roads of sand and salt; but none of it surprised the girl, for any person who first opens her eyes in the most hallucinatory land on earth loses the ability to be amazed. On that long journey she wept all the tears stored in her soul, leaving none in reserve for later sorrows. Once her tears were exhausted, she closed her lips, resolving from that moment forward to open them only when it could not be avoided. Several days later, when they reached the capital, the priests took the terrified girls to the Convent of the Little Sisters of Charity, where a nun with a jailer's key opened an iron door and led them to a large shady patio with cloistered corridors on four sides; in the center, doves, thrushes, and hummingbirds were drinking from a fountain of colored tiles. Several young girls in gray uniforms sat in a circle; some were stitching mattresses with curved needles while others wove wicker baskets.

The nun, hands hidden beneath the folds of her habit, recited something that sounded like "Through prayer and toil shall you atone for your sins. I have come not to heal those of you who are whole, but to minister unto those who are suffering and afflicted. The shepherd rejoices more when he finds the lost sheep than in all the ninety and nine. Word of God, praise be His Holy Name, amen."

Consuelo did not understand the meaning of that peroration; she did not even listen to it, she was too exhausted and too assailed by claustrophobia. She had never before been inside a walled enclosure, and when she looked up and saw the sky reduced to a rectangle, she felt that she was suffocating. When they separated her from her traveling companions and took her to the office of the Mother Superior, she had no inkling that it was because of her light skin and eyes. The Little Sisters had not received anyone like her in many years, only girls of mixed blood from the barrios, or Indian girls dragged there bodily by the missionaries.

"Who are your parents?" "I don't know." "When were you born?" "The year of the comet."

Even at that age, Consuelo supplanted with poetic flourishes what she lacked in information. The moment she heard of the comet she decided to adopt it as the year of her birth. During her childhood, someone had told her how everyone had awaited the celestial prodigy with fear and trembling. It was supposed to blaze across the sky like a fiery dragon, and when it entered the earth's atmosphere its tail would envelop the planet in poisonous gases, and heat like molten lava would put an end to any form of life. Some people committed suicide to avoid being scorched to death; others preferred to anesthetize themselves with last-minute gluttony, drunkenness, and fornication. Even El Benefactor was impressed when he saw the sky turn green and he learned that under the comet's influence mulattos' hair had unkinked and the hair of Chinese had curled into ringlets, and he freed some political opponents who had been in prison so long they had forgotten what sunlight looked like-although a few had kept alive the germ of rebellion and were prepared to bequeath it to future generations. Consuelo was seduced by the idea of being born in the midst of all that fear, in spite of the rumor that babies born during that period were abominations and would remain so years after the comet had faded from sight as a ball of ice and stellar dust.

"The first thing we must do is get rid of this Satan's tail," declared the Mother Superior, hefting in both hands the burnished copper coil hanging down the back of the new interne. She gave the order that those long locks be cut and the girl's head washed with a mixture of lye and reolina Onirem to kill the lice and tone down the insolent color; therewith, half the hair fell, and what was left was dulled to the color of clay-much more suitable to the climate and goals of a religious institution than the original, naturally incandescent mane.

Consuelo spent three years in that place, chilled in body and soul, sullen and solitary, convinced that the pale sun in the patio was not the same as the one that scalded the jungle in the home she had left behind. No profane babel penetrated these walls, nor any of the national prosperity that had begun when someone dug a well and, instead of water, struck a heavy, fetid

black substance that gushed out as if from a dinosaur's entrails. The nation was sitting on a sea of petroleum. The consequence stirred ever so slightly the somnolence of the dictatorship, because it raised the fortunes of the tyrant and his family so high that some trickled down to everyone else. There were signs of progress in the cities, and in the oil fields contact with the hearty foremen from the North rocked the old traditions; a breeze of modernity lifted the women's skirts, but in the Convent of the Little Sisters of Charity none of this mattered. Life began at 4 a. m. with the first prayers; the day progressed with unvarying routine, ending at six o'clock when the bells signaled the hour of the Act of Contrition to cleanse the spirit and prepare for the eventuality of death, since night might be a journey of no return. Long silences, cloisters of waxed paving stones, the odor of incense and lilies, the whisper of prayers, the dark wooden benches, white unadorned walls. God's presence was absolute. In addition to the nuns and a pair of servants, only sixteen girls occupied the vast adobe-and-tile building, most of them orphaned or abandoned. They learned to wear shoes, eat with a fork, and master a few elementary domestic skills, so that later they could be employed in humble serving positions, for it was assumed that they were incapable of anything else. Consuelo's appearance set her apart from the others, and the nuns, sure that this was not accidental but a sign of benevolent divine will, spared no effort in cultivating her faith, in the hope she would decide to take her vows and serve the Church; all their efforts, however, came to naught before the girl's instinctive rejection. She made the attempt in good faith, but never succeeded in accepting the tyrannical god the nuns preached to her about; she preferred a more joyful, maternal, and compassionate god.

"That is the Most Holy Virgin Mary," the nuns explained to her.

"She is God?"

"No, she is the Mother of God."

"Yes, but who has the say in heaven, God or his Mama?" "Quiet, silly girl. Be quiet and pray. Ask the Lord to give you light," they counseled.

Consuelo would sit in the chapel and stare at the altar dominated by a terrifyingly realistic Christ and try to recite the rosary, but soon she would

be lost in endless adventures in which her memories of the jungle alternated with the figures of Sacred History, each with his bundle of passions, vengeance, martyrdom, and miracles. She soaked it in greedily, all of it: the ritual words of the Mass, the Sunday sermons, the pious readings, the night noises, the wind in the colonnades, the witless expressions of the saints and anchorites in the niches of the church. She learned to hold her tongue, and prudently suppressed the treasure of her prodigious flow of fables until I gave her the opportunity to unloose the torrent of words stored within her.

Consuelo spent so much time in the chapel-motionless, hands clasped, placid as a cow chewing her cud-that the rumor spread through the convent that she was blessed with heavenly visions. The Mother Superior, however, a practical Catalan woman less inclined than the other nuns of the congregation to believe in miracles, realized that Consuelo was touched not by saintliness but by an incurable bent for daydreaming. As the girl did not, in addition, show any enthusiasm for stitching mattresses, making the hosts for Mass, or weaving baskets, she judged her training to be complete, and placed her in the house of a foreign doctor named Professor Jones. She herself led Consuelo by the hand to a somewhat run-down but still splendid French-style mansion on the outskirts of the city, sitting at the foot of a hill authorities have now designated as a National Park. Consuelo's first impression of the doctor was so intense that it was months before she lost her fear of him. He came into the large parlor wearing a butcher's apron and carrying a strange metallic instrument. He was so preoccupied in his project that he did not even say hello; he dispatched the nun with four incomprehensible sentences and, with a grunt, packed Consuelo off to the kitchen. She, on the other hand, studied him in detail; she had never seen such a threatening individual. But she also noticed that he was as handsome as a picture of Jesus, all gold, with the same blond beard as the Prince of Peace, and eyes of an impossible color.

The only employer Consuelo was to have in her lifetime had spent years perfecting a system for preserving the dead, a secret he carried finally to the grave-to the relief of all mankind. He was also seeking a cure for cancer; he had observed that this illness is rare in areas where malaria is rife, and had deduced quite logically that he could palliate the malady by exposing its victims to the bite of the swamp mosquito. Following the same logic, he

experimented with thumping the head of idiots, whether by birth or by vocation, because he had read in *The Physician's Friend* that a person had been transformed into a genius as the result of cerebral trauma. He was a dedicated anti-Socialist. He calculated that if the world's riches were equally distributed, each of the planet's inhabitants would receive less than thirty-five cents, and that therefore revolutions were ineffectual. Physically, he was healthy and strong; he suffered from unrelenting bad humor, and possessed the knowledge of a sage and the cunning of a sexton. His formula for embalming, like most great inventions, was of admirable simplicity. No nonsense about extracting the viscera, scooping out the cranium, plunging the body into Formol, and then stuffing it with pitch and tow, only to end up with something as wrinkled as a prune whose glass eyes stared at you with stupefaction. He merely drew the blood of the still-fresh cadaver and replaced it with a liquid that conserved the body as it had been in life. The skin, although pale and cold, did not decompose, the hair remained firmly rooted, and in some cases even the fingernails and toenails survived, and continued to grow. The only drawback, perhaps, was a certain penetratingly acrid odor, but after a while the family would grow accustomed to it. At that time, few patients voluntarily submitted to the bite of curative insects, or to blows on the head to increase intelligence, but news of Jones's prestige as an embalmer had crossed the oceans, and he was frequently visited by European scientists or North American businessmen avid to wrest his formula from him. They always left empty-handed. His most famous case—one that spread his fame around the globe—was that of a local lawyer well known in life for his liberal inclinations; El Benefactor had ordered him killed as he left a performance of the musical *La Paloma* in the Municipal Theater. The family carried the still-warm body containing more bullet holes than could be counted, but with the face intact, to Professor Jones. Although he considered the victim his ideological enemy—he himself was a supporter of authoritarian regimes and he distrusted democracy, which he considered vulgar and too much like Socialism—Jones devoted himself to the task of preserving the body. The results were so spectacular that the family seated the dead man, dressed in his best suit and holding a pen in his right hand, in the library, and for several decades protected him from moths and dust as a reminder of the brutality of the dictator, who did not dare intervene; it is one thing to engage in battle with the living, but quite another matter to quarrel with the dead.