

Isabel Allende

Early life

She was born in 1942 in Lima, Peru, but considers herself Chilean since that is where her parents and all of her ancestors are from. They were living in Peru due to her father's work.

Father – Tomas Allende – Chilean diplomat

Mother – Francisca Allende

Isabel is the oldest child. She has two younger brothers, Pancho and Juan. All were born within the four years that her parents were together.

Her father was not a good man. Her grandfather (Francisca's parents - Tata/Meme) tried to convince Francisca not to marry him, but she was stubborn. From her book *Paula*: "The bride wore a sober satin gown and a defiant expression. I don't know how the groom looked, because the photograph has been cropped; we can see nothing of him but one arm. As he led his daughter to the large room where an altar of cascading roses had been erected, Tata paused at the foot of the stairway. 'There is still time to change your mind,' he said. 'Don't marry him, Daughter, think better of it. Just give me a sign and I will run this mob out of here and send the banquet to the orphanage.' My mother replied with an icy stare" (10-11).

Francisca knew right away it was a mistake, even in the first days of the marriage as they sailed from Chile to Peru, where Tomas had been named secretary at the Chilean embassy "My mother spent the first two days of her honeymoon so nauseated by the tossing Pacific Ocean that she was unable to leave her stateroom; then, just as she felt a little better and could go outside to drink in the fresh air, her husband was felled by a toothache.... Three interminable days had to pass before the patient allowed the ship's physician to intervene with his forceps and ease the torment. Only then did the swelling subside, and husband and wife could begin married life. The next night they appeared together in the dining room as guests at the captain's table. After a formal toast to the newlyweds, the appetizer was served: prawns arranged in goblets carved of ice. In a gesture of flirtatious intimacy, my mother reached across and speared a bit of seafood from her husband's plate, unfortunately flicking a minute drop of cocktail sauce onto his necktie. Tomas seized a knife to scrape away the offensive spot, but merely spread the stain. To the astonishment of his fellow guests and the mortification of his wife, the diplomat dipped his fingers into his dish, scooped up a handful of crustaceans, and smeared them over his chest, desecrating shirt, suit, and the unsoiled portion of his tie; then, after passing his hands over his slicked-down hair, he rose to his feet, bowed slightly, and strode off to his stateroom, where he stayed for the remainder of the voyage, deep in a sullen silence" (11-12). Despite all of the drama, Francisca became pregnant with Isabel on the honeymoon.

Instead of giving birth at home, as the women in her family had always done, Francisca had to give birth in a clinic. The doctors knocked her out. Her mother came and got her out of the clinic—as Isabel tells the story, the two women weren't even sure they were taking the right baby: “She [Meme] arrived just in time for my birth. As her own children had been born at home with the aid of her husband and a midwife, she was bewildered by the modern methods of the clinic. With one jab of a needle, they rendered her daughter senseless, depriving her of any chance to participate in events, as soon as the baby was born transferred it to an aseptic nursery. Much later, when the fog of the anesthesia had lifted, they informed my mother that she had given birth to a baby girl, but that in accord with regulations she could have her only during the time she was nursing. While I screamed with hunger on a different floor, my mother thrashed about, prepared to reclaim her daughter by force, should that be necessary. A doctor came, diagnosed hysteria, and administered a second injection that knocked her out for another twelve hours. By then my grandmother was convinced that they were in the anteroom to hell, and as soon as her daughter was conscious, she splashed cold water on her face and helped her get dressed. ‘We have to get out of here. Put on your clothes and we’ll stroll out arm in arm like two ladies who’ve come to visit.’ ‘For God’s Sake, Mama, we can’t go without the baby!’ ‘Of course we can’t!’ exclaimed my grandmother, who probably had overlooked that detail. The two women walked purposefully into the room where the newborn babies were sequestered, picked one out, and hastily exited, without raising an alarm. They could tell the sex, because the infant had a rose colored ribbon around its wrist, and though there wasn’t enough time to be certain that it was theirs, that wasn’t vital anyway, all babies are more or less alike at that age” (13-14).

Tomas disappeared for all three births, and was gone forever after the last birth (amid scandal). Francisca was left with three small children and a mountain of debt. The consulate sent someone to check on her – and that someone was Tio Ramon. He was married, a Catholic, with four children. Yet he fell in love with Francisca as soon as he saw her.

The family returned to Chile, and Francisca’s marriage was annulled. She and her children lived with Tata and Meme, which was pleasant until Meme died. Then all the life went out of the house. Two years after they returned, Francisca went away to rendezvous with Ramon—he then came to Santiago. His wife and children had already returned to Santiago. He caused a scandal when he didn’t go to them, but ended up living with Francisca, Tata, and her children.

When Isabel was eight, she met a man on the beach. He convinced her to meet him the next day. He took her into the woods and sexually assaulted her, although she says he didn’t rape her. She told no one, but someone must have seen. The man was found dead the next day.

When Isabel was 10, Tio Ramon was assigned to Bolivia, so they moved to La Paz. Later they spent three years in Lebanon. When she was 15, there was a violent uprising in Lebanon. She and her brothers returned to Chile to her grandfather. Her mother and Tio Ramon went to Turkey.

Adulthood

Isabel soon met Michael, who would become her first husband. His family was from England. She got a job after graduation at the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN. She was hired as a secretary, although she was awful at it. She and Michael married before Michael finished engineering school. They lived in a house that was robbed regularly until they had nothing left. Tata moved out of his house in Santiago to an old beach house, and signed the house over to Isabel and Michael. They later moved into their own house when Tata moved back into his. Tata had a stroke, but recovered and lived another 20 years, finally dying just short of 100 years old.

Isabel gave birth to daughter Paula in 1963. In the 1960s Isabel worked as a journalist, writing small pieces and working on a 15 minute TV program. She, Michael and Paula spent a year traveling (on a very small budget) in Europe. That's where Nicolas was conceived. She returned to Chile to give birth in 1966.

She got a job writing for a magazine with a feminist slant, which was unheard of in Chile. But those views didn't transfer to her own life: "In private life I had internalized the formulas for eternal domestic bliss. Every morning I served my husband his breakfast in bed, every evening I was waiting in full battle dress with his martini olive between my teeth, and every night I laid out the suit and shirt he would be wearing the next day; I shined his shoes, cut his hair and fingernails, and bought his clothes to save him the bother of trying them on, just as I did with my children. That was not only stupidity on my part, it was misdirected energy and excessive love" (145).

For some unknown reason she was the one contacted when her biological father Tomas died—she went to the morgue but couldn't identify him because she had no idea what he looked like. Tio Ramon had to do it. The family paid for the burial, then found out about other children/families he had.

In 1970 Salvador Allende, Isabel's uncle, was elected president. He put Chile on a socialist path. He was a Marxist. He named Tio Ramon Ambassador to Argentina, so that is where Isabel's parents went. However, the president was hated by half the nation.

Isabel began writing plays – one called *The Ambassador*, and two musical comedies. She was becoming well known in Chile.

On Sept. 11, 1973 Salvador Allende was killed in a bloody military coup. The rest of his family was exiled to Mexico. Thousands were kidnapped, tortured and killed. Total government censorship became the norm in the new dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet, which lasted for the next 17 years.

Later Life

Isabel worked in the underground for awhile to help people escape to safety. Her parents had to flee Argentina, and ended up in Venezuela. Eventually they all ended up there. However, her grandfather and in-laws remained in Chile. Her marriage began to fall apart. She had affairs. Husband followed her to Spain once to bring her back. She left again for three months, leaving the kids with him. They continued to try to work it out.

Isabel found out her grandfather was dying back in Chile. She sat down to write him a letter. She was never able to send it, but she kept writing, and it turned into her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, which was released in Spain.

Michael became ill, and it took three years to diagnose porphyria. It is genetic. He had it, and so did Paula and Nicolas.

Isabel's second novel about the aftermath of coup was called *Of Love and Shadows*. Her third novel was *Eva Luna*. She separated from her husband in 1987. She was 44. She then met Willie on a lecture tour in CA. She eventually returned to CA to live with him. He had kids with issues who lived with him (addiction), so it was not easy. She started teaching writing at the University of California Berkeley. She and Willie married. In 1988 Isabel returned to Chile for the first time. She visited Michael, who had remarried. Pinochet was forced from power in 1989, but remained in control of the military.

Isabel still lives in CA. Her books include *The House of the Spirits*, *Of Love and Shadows*, *Eva Luna*, *The Stories of Eva Luna*, *The Infinite Plan*, *Paula*, *Aphrodite*, *Daughter of Fortune*, *Portrait in Sepia*, *City of the Beasts*, *My Invented Country*, *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon*, *Forest of the Pygmies*, *Zorro*, *Ines of my Soul*, *The Sum of Our Days*, *Island Beneath the Sea*, *Maya's Notebook*, *Amor*, *Ripper*, and *The Japanese Lover*.

You will be reading sections of her book *Paula*, about her daughter, so I will not include information about Paula's life here.