LISTEN, PAULA. I AM GOING TO TELL YOU A STORY, SO that when you wake up you will not feel so lost. The legend of our family begins at the end of the last century, when a robust Basque sailor disembarked on the coast of Chile with his mother’s reliquary strung around his neck and his head swimming with plans for greatness. But why start so far back? It is enough to say that those who came after him were a breed of impetuous women and men with sentimental hearts and strong arms fit for hard work. Some few irascible types died frothing at the mouth, although the cause may not have been rage, as evil tongues had it, but, rather, some local pestilence. The Basque’s descendants bought fertile land on the outskirts of the capital, which with time increased in value; they became more refined and constructed lordly mansions with great parks and groves; they wed their daughters to rich young men from established families; they educated their children in rigorous religious schools; and thus over the course of the years they were integrated into a proud aristocracy of landowners that prevailed for more than a century—until the whirlwind of modern times replaced them with technocrats and businessmen. My grandfather was one of the former, the good old
families, but his father died young of an unexplained shotgun wound. The details of what happened that fateful night were never revealed, but it could have been a duel, or revenge, or some accident of love. In any case, his family was left without means and, because he was the oldest, my grandfather had to drop out of school and look for work to support his mother and educate his younger brothers. Much later, when he had become a wealthy man to whom others doffed their hats, he confessed to me that genteel poverty is the worst of all because it must be concealed. He was always well turned out—in his father’s clothes, altered to fit, the collars starched stiff and suits well pressed to disguise the threadbare cloth. Those years of penury tempered his character; in his credo, life was strife and hard work, and an honorable man should not pass through this world without helping his neighbor. Still young, he already exhibited the concentration and integrity that were his characteristics; he was made of the same hard stone as his ancestors and, like many of them, had his feet firmly on the ground. Even so, some small part of his soul drifted toward the abyss of dreams. Which was what allowed him to fall in love with my grandmother, the youngest of a family of twelve, all eccentrically and deliciously bizarre—like Teresa, who at the end of her life began to sprout the wings of a saint and at whose death all the roses in the Parque Japonés withered overnight. Or Ambrosio, a dedicated carouser and fornicator, who was known at moments of rare generosity to remove all his clothing in the street and hand it to the poor. I grew up listening to stories about my grandmother’s ability to foretell the future, read minds, converse with animals, and move objects with her gaze. Everyone says that once she moved a billiard table across a room, but the only thing I ever saw move in her presence was an insignificant sugar bowl that used to skitter erratically across the table at tea time. These gifts aroused certain misgivings, and many eligible suitors were intimidated by her, despite her charms. My grandfather, however, regarded telepathy and telekinesis as innocent diversions and in no way a serious obstacle to marriage. The only thing that concerned him was the difference in their ages. My grandmother was much younger than he, and when he first met her she was still playing with dolls and walking around clutching a grimy little pillow.
Because he was so used to seeing her as a young girl, he was unaware of his passion for her until one day she appeared in a long dress and with her hair up, and then the revelation of a love that had been gestating for years threw him into such a fit of shyness that he stopped calling. My grandmother divined his state of mind before he himself was able to undo the tangle of his own feelings and sent him a letter, the first of many she was to write him at decisive moments in their lives. This was not a perfumed billet-doux testing the waters of their relationship, but a brief note penciled on lined paper asking him straight out whether he wanted to marry her and, if so, when. Several months later they were wed. Standing before the altar, the bride was a vision from another era, adorned in ivory lace and a riot of wax orange blossoms threaded through her chignon. When my grandfather saw her, he knew he would love her obstinately till the end of his days.

To me, they were always Tata and Memé. Of their children, only my mother will figure in this story, because if I begin to tell you about all the rest of the tribe we shall never be finished, and besides, the ones who are still living are very far away. That’s what happens to exiles; they are scattered to the four winds and then find it extremely difficult to get back together again. My mother was born between the two world wars, on a fine spring day in the 1920s. She was a sensitive girl, temperamentally unsuited to joining her brothers in their sweeps through the attic to catch mice they preserved in bottles of Formol. She led a sheltered life within the walls of her home and her school; she amused herself with charitable works and romantic novels, and had the reputation of being the most beautiful girl ever seen in this family of enigmatic women. From the time of puberty, she had lovesick admirers buzzing around like flies, young men her father held at bay and her mother analyzed with her tarot cards; these innocent flirtations were cut short when a talented and equivocal young man appeared and effortlessly dislodged his rivals, fulfilling his destiny and filling my mother’s heart with uneasy emotions. That was your grandfather Tomás, who disappeared in a fog, and the only reason I mention him, Paula, is because some of his blood flows in your veins. This clever man with a quick mind and merciless tongue was too intelligent and free of prejudice for that
provincial society, a rara avis in the Santiago of his time. It was said that he had a murky past; rumors flew that he belonged to the Masonic sect, and so was an enemy of the Church, and that he had a bastard son hidden away somewhere, but Tata could not put forward any of these arguments to dissuade his daughter because he lacked proof, and my grandfather was not a man to stain another’s reputation without good reason. In those days Chile was like a mille-feuille pastry. It had more castes than India, and there was a pejorative term to set every person in his or her rightful place: mto, pije, arribista, siútico, and many more, working upward toward the comfortable plateau of “people like ourselves.” Birth determined status. It was easy to descend in the social hierarchy, but money, fame, or talent was not sufficient to allow one to rise, that required the sustained effort of several generations. Tomás’s honorable lineage was in his favor, even though in Tata’s eyes he had questionable political ties. By then the name Salvador Allende, the founder of Chile’s Socialist Party, was being bruited about; he preached against private property, conservative morality, and the power of the large landowners. Tomás was the cousin of that young deputy.

Look, Paula, this is Tata’s picture. This man with the severe features, clear eyes, rimless eyeglasses, and black beret is your great-grandfather. In the picture he is seated, hands on his cane, and beside him, leaning against his right knee, is a little girl of three in her party dress, a pint-size charmer staring into the camera with liquid eyes. That’s you. My mother and I are standing behind you, the chair masking the fact that I was carrying your brother Nicolás. The old man is facing the camera, and you can see his proud bearing, the calm dignity of the self-made man who has marched straight down the road of life and expects nothing more. I remember him as always being old—although almost without wrinkles except for the two deep furrows at the corners of his mouth—with a lion’s mane of snow-white hair and an abrupt laugh filled with yellow teeth. At the end of his days it was painful for him to move, but he always struggled to his feet to say hello and goodbye to the ladies and, hobbling along on his cane, escort them to the garden gate as they left. I loved his hands, twisted oak branches, strong and gnarled, his inevitable silk neckerchief, and his odor of English
Creolin-and-lavender soap. With inexhaustible good humor, he tried to instill in his descendants his stoic philosophy: he believed discomfort was healthful and that central heating sapped the strength; he insisted on simple food—no sauces or pot-au-feu—and he thought it bad taste to have too good a time. Every morning he took a cold shower, a custom no one in the family imitated, and one that when he resembled nothing more than a geriatric beetle he fulfilled, old but undaunted, seated in a chair beneath the icy blast. He spoke in ringing aphorisms and answered direct questions with a different question, so that even though I knew his character to the core, I know very little about his ideology. Look carefully at Mother, Paula. In this picture she is in her early forties, and at the peak of her beauty. That short skirt and beehive hair were all the rage. She’s laughing, and her large eyes are two green lines punctuated by the sharp arch of black eyebrows. That was the happiest period of her life, when she had finished raising her children, was still in love, and the world seemed secure.

I wish I could show you a photograph of my father, but they were all burned more than forty years ago.

Where are you wandering, Paula? How will you be when you wake up? Will you be the same woman, or will we be like strangers and have to learn to know one another all over again? Will you have your memory, or will I need to sit patiently and relate the entire story of your twenty-eight years and my forty-nine?

“May God watch over your daughter,” don Manuel told me, barely able to whisper. He’s the one in the bed next to yours, an elderly peasant who has undergone several operations on his stomach but has not given up fighting for health and life. “May God watch over your daughter” was also what a young woman with a baby in her arms said yesterday. She had heard about you and come to the hospital to offer me hope. She suffered an attack of porphyria two years ago and was in a coma for more than a month. It was a year before she was normal again and she will have to be careful for the rest of her life, but she is working now, and she married and had a baby. She assured me that being in a coma is like a sleep without dreams, a mysterious parenthesis. “Don’t cry anymore, Señora,”
she said, “your daughter doesn’t feel a thing; she will walk out of here and never remember what happened.” Every morning I prowl the corridors of the sixth floor looking for the specialist, in hopes of learning something new. He holds your life in his hands, and I don’t trust him. He wafts through like a breeze, distracted and rushed, offering me worrisome explanations about enzymes and copies of articles about your illness that I try to read but do not understand. He seems more interested in the statistics from his computer and formulas from his laboratory than in your poor body lying crucified on this bed. He tells me—without meeting my eyes—“That’s how it is with this condition; some recover quickly after the crisis, while others spend weeks in intensive therapy. It used to be that the patients simply died, but now we can keep them alive until their metabolism resumes functioning.” Well, if that’s how it is, all we can do is wait and be strong. If you can take it, Paula, so can I.

When you wake up we will have months, maybe years, to piece together the broken fragments of your past; better yet, we can invent memories that fit your fantasies. For the time being, I will tell you about myself and the other members of this family we both belong to, but don’t ask me to be precise, because inevitably errors will creep in. I have forgotten a lot, and some of the facts are twisted. There are places, dates, and names I don’t remember; on the other hand, I never forget a good story. Sitting here by your side, watching the screen with the luminous lines measuring your heartbeats, I try to use my grandmother’s magic to communicate with you. If she were here she could carry my messages to you and help me hold you in this world. Have you begun some strange trek through the sand dunes of the unconscious? What good are all these words if you can’t hear me? Or these pages you may never read? My life is created as I narrate, and my memory grows stronger with writing; what I do not put in words on a page will be erased by time.

Today is January 8, 1992. On a day like today, eleven years ago in Caracas, I began a letter that would be my goodbye to my grandfather, who was dying, leaving a hard-fought century behind him. His strong body had not failed, but long ago he had made his preparations to follow Memé, who was beckoning to him from the other
side. I could not return to Chile, and he so detested the telephone that it didn’t seem right to call, but I wanted to tell him not to worry, that nothing would be lost of the treasury of anecdotes he had told me through the years of our comradeship; I had forgotten nothing. Soon he died, but the story I had begun to tell had enmeshed me, and I couldn’t stop. Other voices were speaking through me; I was writing in a trance, with the sensation of unwinding a ball of yarn, driven by the same urgency I feel as I write now. At the end of a year the pages had grown to five hundred, filling a canvas bag, and I realized that this was no longer a letter. Timidly, I announced to my family that I had written a book. “What’s the title?” my mother asked. We made a list of possibilities but could not agree on any, and finally it was you, Paula, who tossed a coin in the air to decide it. Thus was born and baptized my first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, and I was initiated into the ineradicable vice of telling stories. That book saved my life. Writing is a long process of introspection; it is a voyage toward the darkest caverns of consciousness, a long, slow meditation. I write feeling my way in silence, and along the way discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit in the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world. I also began my second novel on an eighth of January, and since have not dared change that auspicious date, partly out of superstition, but also for reasons of discipline. I have begun all my books on a January 8.

When some months ago I finished my most recent novel, *The Infinite Plan*, I began preparing for today. I had everything in my mind—theme, title, first sentence—but I shall not write that story yet. Since you fell ill I have had no strength for anything but you, Paula. You have been sleeping for a month now. I don’t know how to reach you; I call and call but your name is lost in the nooks and crannies of this hospital. My soul is choking in sand. Sadness is a sterile desert. I don’t know how to pray. I cannot string together two thoughts, much less immerse myself in creating a new book. I plunge into these pages in an irrational attempt to overcome my terror. I think that perhaps if I give form to this devastation I shall be able to help you, and myself, and that the meticulous exercise of writing can be our salvation. Eleven years ago I wrote a letter to my
grandfather to say goodbye to him in death. On this January 8, 1992, I am writing you, Paula, to bring you back to life.

My mother was a radiant young woman of eighteen when Tata took the family to Europe on a monumental journey that in those days was made only once in a lifetime: Chile lies at the bottom of the world. He intended to place his daughter in an English school to be “finished,” hoping that in the process she would forget her love for Tomás, but Hitler wrecked those plans; the Second World War burst out with cataclysmic force, surprising them on the Côte d’Azur. With incredible difficulty, moving against the streams of people escaping on foot, horseback, or any available vehicle, they managed to reach Antwerp and board the last Chilean ship to set sail from the docks. The decks and lifeboats had been commandeered by dozens of families of fleeing Jews who had left their belongings—in some cases, fortunes—in the hands of unscrupulous consuls who sold them visas in exchange for gold. Unable to obtain staterooms, they traveled like cattle, sleeping in the open and going hungry because of food rationing. Through that arduous crossing, Memé consoled women weeping over the loss of their homes and the uncertainty of the future, while Tata negotiated food from the kitchen and blankets from the sailors to distribute among the refugees. In appreciation, one of them, a furrier by trade, gave Memé a luxurious coat of gray astrakhan. For several weeks they sailed through waters infested with enemy submarines, blacking out lights by night and praying by day, until they had left the Atlantic behind and safely reached Chile. As the boat docked in the port of Valparaiso, the first sight that met their eyes was the unmistakable figure of Tomás in a white linen suit and Panama hat. At that moment, Tata realized the futility of opposing the mysterious dictates of destiny and so, grudgingly, gave his consent for the wedding. The ceremony was held at home, with the participation of the papal nuncio and various personages from the official world. 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.

Just as my grandmother had been warned by the spirits in one of her sessions, my parents’ marriage was a disaster from the very beginning. Once again, my mother boarded a ship, this time for Peru, where Tomás had been named secretary at the Chilean embassy. She took with her a collection of heavy trunks containing her bridal trousseau and a mountain of gifts, so much china, crystal, and silver that even now, a half-century later, we keep running into them in unexpected corners. Fifty years of diplomatic assignments in many latitudes, divorce, and long exile have not rid the family of this flotsam. I greatly fear, Paula, that among other ghastly prizes you will inherit a lamp that is still in my mother’s possession, a baroque chaos of nymphs and plump cherubs. Your house is monastically spare, and your meager closet contains nothing but four blouses and two pairs of slacks. I wonder what you do with the things I keep giving you? You’re like Memé, whose feet had scarcely touched solid ground before she removed the astrakhan coat and draped it over a beggarwoman’s shoulders. 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. While she strolled around the decks, indifferent to the covetous stares of officers and sailors, he lay moaning in his bunk. At sunset the vast horizon was flooded with shades of orange and at night a scandal of stars invited love, but suffering was more powerful than romance. 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. Tomás 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. Despite these mishaps, I was conceived on that sea voyage.

Nothing had prepared my mother for motherhood. In those days, such matters were discussed in whispers before unwed girls, and Memé had given no thought to advising her about the libidinous preoccupations of the birds and the flowers because her soul floated on different planes, more intrigued with the translucence of apparitions than the gross realities of this world. Nevertheless, as soon as my mother sensed she was pregnant, she knew it would be a girl. She named her Isabel and established a dialogue that continues to the present day. Clinging to the creature developing in her womb, she tried to compensate for the loneliness of a woman who has chosen badly in love. She talked to me aloud, startling everyone who saw her carrying on as if hallucinating, and I suppose that I heard her and answered, although I have no memory of the intrauterine phase of my life.

My father had a taste for splendor. Ostentation had always been looked upon as a vice in Chile, where sobriety is a sign of refinement. In contrast, in Lima, the city of viceroys, swagger and swash is considered stylish. Tomás installed himself in a house incommensurate with his position as second secretary in the embassy, surrounded himself with Indian servants, ordered a luxurious automobile from Detroit, and squandered money on parties, gaming, and yacht clubs, without anyone’s being able to explain how he could afford such extravagances. In a short time he had managed to establish relations with the most illustrious members of Lima’s political and social circles, had discovered the weaknesses of each, and, through his contacts, heard a number of indiscreet confidences, even a few state secrets. He became the indispensable element in
Lima's revels. At the height of the war, he obtained the best whiskey, the purest cocaine, and the most obliging party girls; all doors opened to him. While he climbed the ladder of his career, his wife felt as if she was a prisoner with no hope for escape, joined at twenty to an evasive man on whom she was totally dependent. She languished in the humid summer heat, writing interminable pages to her mother; their correspondence was a conversation between the deaf, crossing at sea and buried in the bottom of mailbags. Nevertheless, as melancholy letters stacked up on her desk, Memé became convinced of her daughter's disenchantment. She interrupted the spiritist sessions with her three esoteric friends from the White Sisterhood, packed her prophetic deck of cards in her suitcase, and set off for Lima in a light biplane, one of the few that carried passengers, since during times of war planes were reserved for military purposes. She 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, and 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.

"She's a freak, that's why they won't let me see her!"

"She's a precious little thing!" my grandmother replied, trying to sound a note of conviction, although she herself had not yet actually seen me: through the glass, she had spied a blanket-wrapped bundle, something that to her eyes did not look entirely human.

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. It is possible that in their haste they traded me for another baby, and that somewhere there is a woman with spinach-colored eyes and a gift for clairvoyance who is taking my place. Once safely home, they stripped me bare to be sure I was whole, and discovered a small birthmark in the shape of a sun at the base of my spine. “That’s a good sign,” Memé assured my mother. “We won’t have to worry about her, she’ll grow up healthy and blessed with good fortune.”

I was born in August, under the sign of Leo, sex, female, and, if I was not switched in the clinic, I have three-quarters Spanish-Basque blood, one-quarter French, and a tot of Araucan or Mapuche Indian, like everyone else in my land. Despite my birth in Lima, I am Chilean. I come from a “long petal of sea and wine and snow,” as Pablo Neruda described my country, and you’re from there, too, Paula, even though you bear the indelible stamp of the Caribbean where you spent the years of your childhood. It may be difficult for you to understand the mentality of those of us from the south. In Chile we are influenced by the eternal presence of the mountains that separate us from the rest of the continent, and by a sense of precariousness inevitable in a region of geological and political catastrophes. Everything trembles beneath our feet; we know no security. If anyone asks us how we are, we answer, “About the same,” or “All right, I guess.” We move from one uncertainty to another; we pick our way through a twilight region. Nothing is precise. We do not like confrontations, we prefer to negotiate. When circumstances push us to extremes, our worst instincts are awakened and history takes a tragic turn, because the same men who seem mild-mannered in their everyday lives can, if offered impunity and the right pretext, turn into bloodthirsty beasts. In normal
times, however, Chileans are sober, circumspect, and formal, and suffer an acute fear of attracting attention, which to them is synonymous with looking ridiculous. For that very reason, I have been an embarrassment to my family.

And where was Tomás while his wife was giving birth and his mother-in-law effecting the discreet kidnapping of her first grandchild? I have no idea. My father is a great lacuna in my life. He went away so early, and vanished so completely, that I have no memory of him at all. My mother lived with him for four years, including two long separations—but sufficient time to bring three children into the world. She was so fertile that she became pregnant if a pair of men’s undershorts was waved anywhere within a radius of a half kilometer, a predisposition I inherited, although, to my good fortune, the age of The Pill arrived in time for me. With each birth her husband disappeared—as he did at the sign of any major difficulty—and then, once the emergency was over, returned, beaming, with some extravagant present. She watched the proliferation of paintings on the walls and Chinese porcelains on the shelves, totally mystified at where all the money was coming from. It was impossible to explain such luxuries when others at the consulate could scarcely make ends meet, but when she asked him, my father gave her the runaround—just as he did when she asked about his nocturnal absences, his mysterious trips, and his shady friendships. My mother had two children, and was about to give birth to the third, when the whole house of cards of her innocence came tumbling down. Lima awoke one morning to rumors of a scandal that escaped the newspapers but filtered into every salon. It had to do with an elderly millionaire who used to lend his apartment to special friends for clandestine trysts. In the bedroom, lost among pieces of antique furniture and Persian tapestries, hung a false mirror in a heavy baroque frame—actually, a window. On the other side, the master of the house liked to sit with a select group of guests, well supplied with liquor and drugs, eager to enjoy the antics of the current, usually unsuspecting, couple in the bed. That night a high-ranking politician was among the invited. When the curtain was drawn for the voyeurs to spy on the unwary lovers, the first surprise was that they were two males; the second was that one of
them, decked out in a corset and lace garters, was the eldest son of the politician, a young lawyer destined for a brilliant career. In his humiliation, the father lost control; he kicked out the mirror, threw himself on his son to tear off the women's frippery, and, had he not been restrained, might have murdered him. A few hours later every circle in Lima was humming with the particulars of the event, adding more and more scabrous details with each telling. It was suspected that it was not a chance incident, that someone had planned the scene out of pure malice. Frightened, Tomás disappeared without a word. My mother did not hear of the scandal until several days later; she was isolated by the demands of her series of pregnancies, and also by a desire to escape the creditors who were clamoring for payment. Tired of waiting for their wages, the servants had deserted; only Margara remained, a Chilean employee with a hermetic face and heart of stone who had served the family since the beginning of time. It was in these straits that my mother felt the pangs of imminent birth. She gritted her teeth and prepared to have the baby under the most primitive circumstances. I was almost three, and my brother Pancho was barely walking. That night, huddled together in the corridor, we heard my mother's moans and witnessed Margara scurrying back and forth with towels and kettles of hot water. Juan came into the world at midnight, tiny and wrinkled, a hairless wisp of a mouse, barely breathing. It was soon obvious that he couldn't swallow; he had some knot in his throat that wouldn't let food pass. Although my mother's breasts were bursting with milk, he was destined to perish of hunger, but Margara was determined to keep him alive, at first by squeezing drops from milk-soaked cotton, then later using a wooden spoon to force a thick pap down his throat.

For years, morbid explanations for my father's disappearance rattled around in my head. I asked about him until finally I gave up, recognizing that there is a conspiracy of silence around him. Those who knew him describe him to me as a very intelligent man, and stop there. When I was young, I imagined him as a criminal, and later, when I learned about sexual perversions, I attributed all of them to him, but the facts suggest that nothing so dramatic colored his past; he merely had a cowardly soul. One day he found himself
trapped by his lies; events were out of control, so he ran away. He left the Foreign Service and never again saw my mother or any of his family or friends. He simply vanished in smoke. I visualized him—partly in jest, of course—fleeing toward Machu Picchu disguised as a Peruvian Indian woman, wearing a wig with long black braids and layers of many-colored skirts. “Don’t ever say that again!” my mother screamed when I told her my fantasy. “Where do you get such crazy ideas?” Whatever happened, he disappeared without a trace, although obviously he did not hie himself off to the thin, clear air of the Andes to live unnoticed in some Aymara village; he just descended a rung in the immutable scale of Chile’s social classes and became invisible. He must have returned to Santiago and walked the streets of the city center but as he did not frequent the same social milieu it was as if he had died. I never again saw my paternal grandmother or any of my father’s family—except for Salvador Allende, who out of a strong sense of loyalty kept in close touch with us. Nor did I see my father again, or hear his name spoken aloud. I know absolutely nothing about his physical appearance, so it is ironic that one day I was called to identify his body in the morgue—but that came much later. I’m sorry, Paula, that this character must disappear at this point, because villains always are the most delicious part of a story.

My mother, who had been brought up in a world of privilege in which women were excluded from money matters, entrenched herself in her house, wiped away the tears of abandonment, and found consolation in the fact that for a time, at least, she would not starve; she had the treasure of the silver trays, which she could pawn one by one to pay the bills. She was alone in a strange land with three children, surrounded by the trappings of wealth but without a cent in her pocketbook and too proud to ask for help. The embassy, nonetheless, was alert, and learned immediately that Tomás had disappeared, leaving his family in bankruptcy. The honor of the nation was at stake; they could not allow the name of a Chilean official to be dragged through the mud, much less permit his wife and children to be put out into the street by creditors. So the consul was sent to call on the family, with instructions to help them return to Chile with the greatest possible discretion. You guessed right, Paula,
that man was your Tío Ramón, your grandfather, a prince, and the
direct descendant of Jesus Christ. He himself tells that he was one
of the ugliest men of his generation, but I think he is exaggerating.
We can’t call him handsome, but what he lacks in good looks he
more than makes up for in intelligence and charm. Besides, the
years have lent him an air of great dignity. At the time he was sent
to our aid, Tío Ramón was bone thin, had a greenish tint to his skin, a
walrus mustache, and Mephistophelian eyebrows; he was the father
of four children and a practicing Catholic, and not a spot on the
mythic character he would become after he had shed his skin like a
snake.

Margarita opened the door to this visitor and led him to the
bedroom of her señora, who received him lying in bed surrounded
by her children, still slightly battered by the youngest’s birth but
glowing with striking beauty and youthful ebullience. The consul,
who had scarcely known his colleague’s wife—he had always seen
her pregnant, and with a remote air that did not invite closer con-
tact—stood near the door, sinking into a swamp of emotions. As he
questioned her about the intricacies of her situation and explained
the plan to send her back to Chile, he was tormented by a stampede
of wild bulls in the area of his chest. Calculating that there was no
more fascinating woman alive, and failing to understand how her
husband could have abandoned her—he would give his life for
her—he sighed at the crushing injustice of having met her too late.
She looked at him for a long moment, and finally agreed:

“All right, I will return to my father’s house.”

“In a few days a ship is leaving Callao for Vuh-Valparaíso. I'll try
to obtain passages,” he stammered.

“I shall be traveling with my three children, Margarita, and the
dog. I don’t know whether my baby will survive the trip, this little
one is very weak,” and although her eyes were shining with tears,
she refused to allow herself to cry.

In a flash, Ramón’s wife and his children filed before his eyes,
followed by his father pointing an accusing finger, and his uncle, the
bishop, holding a crucifix shooting rays of damnation. He saw him-
self excommunicated from the Church and disgraced in the Foreign
Service, but he could think of nothing but this woman’s perfect face.
He felt as if he had been blown off his feet by a hurricane. He took
two steps toward the bed. In those two steps, his future was decided.

"From now on, I will look after you and your children. . . .

Forever."

Forever. What is that, Paula? I have lost count of the days in this white building where echoes reign and it is never night. The boundaries of reality have been blurred; life is a labyrinth of facing mirrors and deformed images. A month ago, at this very hour, I was a different woman. I have a photograph from that day. I am at a party launching the publication in Spain of my most recent novel. I am wearing a silver necklace and bracelets and an aubergine-colored dress. My nails are manicured and my smile confident. I am a century younger than I am today. I don’t know that woman; in four weeks, sorrow has transformed me. As I stood at a microphone describing the circumstances that led me to write The Infinite Plan, my agent pushed her way through the crowd and whispered in my ear that you had been taken to the hospital. I had a jolting presentiment that something fundamental had happened to change our lives. We had been together the day before, and you were very ill. When I landed in Madrid, I was surprised that you weren’t at the airport to greet me, as you always have been. I dropped my suitcases at the hotel and, still reeling from the long flight from California, rushed to your house, where I found you vomiting and burning with fever. You had just returned from a spiritual retreat with the nuns from the school where you work forty hours a week as a volunteer helping underprivileged children, and you told me it had been an intense and saddening experience. You were beset with doubts, your faith was fragile.

"I go looking everywhere for God, but He slips away from me, Mama."

"God can wait for a while. Right now it’s more urgent to look for a doctor. What’s the matter with you, Paula?"

"Porphyria," you replied without hesitation. Since learning several years earlier you had inherited the condition, you had taken very good care of yourself, and regularly consulted one of the few specialists in Spain. When Ernesto found you so weak, he took you to the emergency room; they diagnosed flu, and sent you back
home. That night your husband told me that for weeks, even months, you had been tense and tired. As we sat and discussed what we thought was depression, you were suffering behind the closed door of your bedroom; the porphyria was poisoning you, and neither of us saw it. I don’t know how I went on with my obligations; my mind was on you, and in a break between interviews I ran to the telephone to call. The minute I heard you were worse, I canceled the rest of my tour and flew to the hospital. I ran up the six flights of stairs and located your room in this monstrous building. I found you lying in bed, ashen, with a disoriented expression on your face. One glance was enough to realize how ill you were.

“Why are you crying?” you asked in an unrecognizable voice.

“Because I’m afraid. I love you, Paula.”

“I love you, too, Mama.”

That was the last thing you said to me, Paula. Instants later you were delirious, babbling numbers, with your eyes fixed on the ceiling. Ernesto and I sat beside your bed all night, in a daze, taking turns in the one available chair, while in other beds in the room an elderly patient was dying, a demented woman was screaming, and an undernourished Gypsy girl with signs of a recent beating tried to sleep. At dawn I convinced your husband to go rest, he was exhausted from being up several nights. He kissed you goodbye and left. An hour later the true horror was unleashed: a spine-chilling vomit of blood followed by convulsions. Your tense body arched upward, shuddering in violent spasms that lifted you from the bed. Your arms trembled and your fingers contracted as if you were trying to hold on to something. Your eyes were filled with terror, your face congested, and saliva ran from your mouth. I threw my body on yours to hold you down, and screamed at the top of my lungs for help. The room filled with people in white, and I was dragged out of the room by force. I remember finding myself kneeling on the floor, then being slapped. “Be quiet, Señora; you must be calm or you will have to leave.” A male nurse was shaking me. “Your daughter is better now; you can go in.” I tried to stand but my knees buckled. Someone helped me to your bed and then left. I was alone with you and with the patients in the other beds, who were watching in silence, each deep in her own private hell. Your color was
ghostly, your eyes were rolled back, dried blood threaded from your lips, and you were cold. I waited, calling you by all the names I had given you as a little girl, but you were far away in another world. I tried to get you to drink a little water. When I shook you, you looked at me with glassy, dilated eyes, staring through me toward another horizon, and then suddenly you were as still as death, not breathing. Somehow I called for help, and immediately tried to give you mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but fear made me clumsy. I did everything badly. I blew air into your mouth erratically, any way at all, five or six times, and then I noticed your heart had stopped beating, and began to pound your chest with my fists. Help arrived seconds later, and the last thing I saw was your bed hurtling toward the elevator at the end of the corridor. From that moment life stopped for you. And for me. Together we crossed a mysterious threshold and entered a zone of inky darkness.

"Her condition is critical," the physician on call in the intensive care unit told me.

"Should I call her father in Chile?" I asked. "It will take him more than twenty hours to get here."

"Yes."

People began to come by: Ernesto’s relatives, and friends and nuns from your school. Someone notified the members of the family scattered through Chile, Venezuela, and the United States. Shortly afterward, your husband arrived, calm and gentle, more concerned about others’ feelings than his own, but he looked very fatigued. They allowed him to see you for a few minutes, and when he came back he informed us that you were hooked up to a respirator and being given a blood transfusion. "It isn’t as bad as they say," he told us. "I feel Paula’s strong heart beating close to mine," a phrase that at the moment seemed to have little meaning but now that I know him I can better understand. We spent that day and the next night in the waiting room. At times I drifted into an exhausted sleep, but when I opened my eyes I found Ernesto always in the same position, unmoving, waiting.

"I’m terrified, Ernesto," I admitted toward dawn.

"There’s nothing we can do. Paula is in God’s hands."
“You find that easier to accept than I do, because at least you have your faith.”

“It’s as painful to me as to you, but I have less fear of death and more hope for life,” he replied, putting his arms around me. I buried my face in his jacket, breathing his young male scent, racked by an atavistic fear.

As it grew light, my mother and Michael arrived from Chile, along with Willie, from California. Your father was very pale. He had boarded the airplane in Santiago convinced that he would find you dead. The flight must have seemed an eternity. Devastated, I hugged my mother, and realized that although she may have shrunken with the years, she still radiates an aura of protection. Beside her, Willie is a giant, yet when I wanted a chest to lay my head upon, my mother’s seemed more ample and comforting than his. We went into the intensive care room and found you conscious, and improved over the previous day. The doctors had begun to replace the sodium in your body—which you were losing in alarming amounts—and the transfusion had revived you. That illusion, however, lasted only a few hours; soon afterward, you became very agitated, and with the massive dose of sedatives they used to treat it you descended into the deep coma from which you have not awakened to this day.

“Your poor daughter, she doesn’t deserve this. I’m old, why can’t I die in her place?” don Manuel wonders from time to time, his voice barely audible.

It is so difficult to write these pages, Paula, to retrace the steps of this painful journey, verify details, imagine how things might have been if you had fallen into more capable hands, if they had not immobilized you with drugs, if . . . , if . . . . How can I shake this guilt? When you mentioned the porphyria I thought you were exaggerating and, instead of seeking further help, I trusted those people in white; I handed over my daughter without hesitation. It isn’t possible to go back in time. I must not keep looking back, yet I can’t stop doing it, it’s an obsession. Nothing exists but the unremitting certainty of this hospital; the rest of my life is veiled in heavy mist.

Willie, who after a few days had to return to his work in Cali-
Paula

fornia, calls every morning and every night to offer support, to remind me that we love each other and have a happy life on the other side of the ocean. His voice comes to me from very far away, as if I had dreamed him and there was no wood house high above San Francisco Bay, no ardent lover now a distant husband. It also seems I have dreamed my son Nicolás, my daughter-in-law Celia, and little Alejandro with his giraffe eyelashes. Carmen, my agent, comes from time to time with sympathies from my editors or news about my books, but I don't know what she's talking about. Nothing exists but you, Paula, and this space without time in which we both are trapped.

In the long, silent hours, I am trampled by memories, all happening in one instant, as if my entire life were a single, unfathomable image. The child and girl I was, the woman I am, the old woman I shall be, are all water in the same rushing torrent. My memory is like a Mexican mural in which all times are simultaneous: the ships of the Conquistadors in one corner and an Inquisitor torturing Indians in another, galloping Liberators with blood-soaked flags and the Aztecs' Plumed Serpent facing a crucified Christ, all encircled by the billowing smokestacks of the industrial age. So it is with my life, a multilayered and ever-changing fresco that only I can decipher, whose secret is mine alone. The mind selects, enhances, and betrays; happenings fade from memory; people forget one another and, in the end, all that remains is the journey of the soul, those rare moments of spiritual revelation. What actually happened isn't what matters, only the resulting scars and distinguishing marks. My past has little meaning; I can see no order to it, no clarity, purpose, or path, only a blind journey guided by instinct and detours caused by events beyond my control. There was no deliberation on my part, only good intentions and the faint sense of a greater design determining my steps. Until now, I have never shared my past; it is my innermost garden, a place not even my most intimate lover has glimpsed. Take it, Paula, perhaps it will be of some use to you, because I fear that yours no longer exists, lost somewhere during your long sleep—and no one can live without memories.