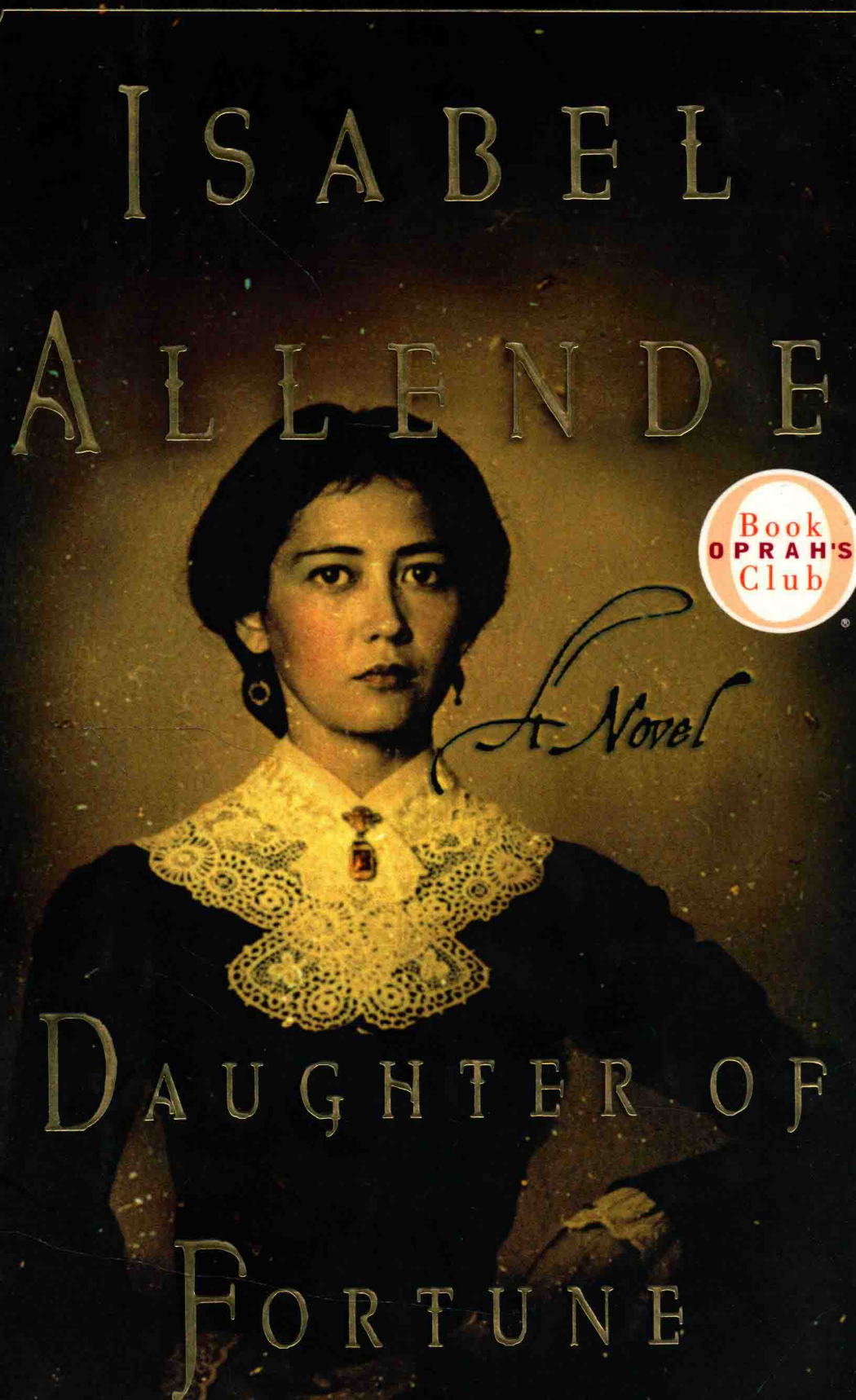
ISABEL ALLENDE



DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE

ISABEL ALLENDE

Daughter of Fortune

A NOVEL

Translated from the Spanish
by Margaret Sayers Peden

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Eliza

Everyone is born with some special talent, and Eliza Sommers discovered early on that she had two: a good sense of smell and a good memory. She used the first to earn a living and the second to recall her life—if not in precise detail, at least with an astrologer's poetic vagueness. The things we forget may as well never have happened, but she had many memories, both real and illusory, and that was like living twice. She used to tell her faithful friend, the sage Tao Chi'en, that her memory was like the hold of the ship where they had come to know one another: vast and somber, bursting with boxes, barrels, and sacks in which all the events of her life were jammed. Awake it was difficult to find anything in that chaotic clutter, but asleep she could, just as Mama Fresia had taught her in the gentle nights of her childhood, when the contours of reality were as faint as a tracery of pale ink. She entered the place of her dreams along a much traveled path and returned treading very carefully in order not to shatter the tenuous visions against the harsh light of consciousness. She put as much store in that process as others put in numbers, and she so refined the art of remembering that she could see Miss Rose bent over the crate of Marseilles soap that was her first cradle.

"You cannot possibly remember that, Eliza. Newborns are like cats, they have no emotions and no memory," Miss Rose insisted the few times the subject arose.

Possible or not, that woman peering down at her, her topaz-colored dress, the loose strands from her bun stirring in the breeze were engraved in Eliza's mind, and she could never accept the other explanation of her origins.

"You have English blood, like us," Miss Rose assured Eliza when she was old enough to understand. "Only someone from the British colony would have thought to leave you in a basket on the doorstep of the British Import and Export Company, Limited. I am sure they knew how good-hearted my brother Jeremy is, and felt sure he would take you in. In those days I was longing to have a child, and you fell into my arms, sent by God to be brought up in the solid principles of the Protestant faith and the English language."

"You, English? Don't get any ideas, child. You have Indian hair, like mine," Mama Fresia rebutted behind her *patrona*'s back.

But Eliza's birth was a forbidden subject in that house, and the child grew accustomed to the mystery. It, along with other delicate matters, was never mentioned between Rose and Jeremy Sommers, but it was aired in whispers in the kitchen with Mama Fresia, who never wavered in her description of the soap crate, while Miss Rose's version was, with the years, embroidered into a fairy tale. According to her, the basket they had found at the office door was woven of the finest wicker and lined in batiste; Eliza's nightgown was worked with French knots and the sheets edged with Brussels lace, and topping everything was a mink coverlet, an extravagance never seen in Chile. Over time, other details were added: six gold coins tied up in a silk handkerchief and a note in English explaining that the baby, though illegitimate, was of good stock—although Eliza never set eyes on any of that. The mink, the coins, and the note conveniently disappeared, erasing any trace of her birth. Closer to Eliza's memories was Mama Fresia's explanation: when she opened the door one morning at the end of summer, she had found a naked baby girl in a crate.

"No mink coverlet, no gold coins. I was there and I remember very well. You were shivering and bundled up in a man's sweater. They hadn't even put a diaper on you, and you were covered with your own caca. Your nose was running and you were red as a boiled lobster, with a head full of fuzz like corn silk. That's how it was. Don't get any ideas," she repeated stoutly. "You weren't born to be a princess and if your hair had been as black as it is now, Miss Rose and her brother would have tossed the crate in the trash."

At least everyone agreed that the baby came into their lives on March 15, 1832, a year and a half after the Sommers arrived in Chile, and they adopted that date as her birthday. Everything else was always a tangle of contradictions, and Eliza decided finally that it wasn't worth the effort to keep going over it, because whatever the truth was, she could do nothing to change it. What matters is what you do in this world, not how you come into it, she used to say to Tao Chi'en during the many years of their splendid friendship; he, however, did not agree. It was impossible for him to imagine his own life apart from the long chain of his ancestors, who not only had given him his physical and mental characteristics but bequeathed him his karma. His fate, he believed, had been determined by the acts of his family before him, which was why he had to honor them with daily prayers and fear them when they appeared in their spectral robes to claim their due. Tao Chi'en could recite the names of all his ancestors, back to the most remote and venerable great-great-grandparents dead now for more than a century. His primary concern during the gold madness was to go home in time to die in his village in China and be buried beside his ancestors; if not, his soul would forever wander aimlessly in a foreign land. Eliza, naturally, was drawn to the story of the exquisite basket—no one in her right mind would want to have begun life in a common soap crate—but out of respect for the truth, she could not accept it. Her bloodhound nose remembered very well the first scents

of her life, which were not clean batiste sheets but wool, male sweat, and tobacco. The next smell she remembered was the monumental stench of a goat.

Eliza grew up watching the Pacific Ocean from the balcony of her adoptive parents' home. Perched on the slopes of a hill overlooking the port of Valparaíso, the house was meant to imitate a style then in vogue in London, but the exigencies of landscape, climate, and life in Chile had forced substantial changes and the result was an unfortunate hodgepodge. At the rear of the patio, springing up like organic tumors, were various windowless rooms with dungeonlike doors where Jeremy Sommers stored his company's most precious cargo, which tended to disappear from the warehouses in the port.

"This is a land of thieves. Nowhere else in the world does the company spend so much on safeguarding the merchandise as here. Everything gets stolen, and everything we save from the rabble is soaked by winter floods, scorched in summer, or smashed during one of their ungodly earthquakes," he said every time the mules brought new bundles to be unloaded in the patio of his home.

From sitting so long at the window overlooking the sea to count the ships and the whales on the horizon, Eliza convinced herself that she was the child of a shipwreck and not of an unnatural mother capable of abandoning her and leaving her exposed to the uncertainty of a March day. She wrote in her diary that a fisherman had found her on the beach amid the debris of a beached ship, wrapped her in his sweater, and left her at the finest house in the English colony. As time passed she concluded that this story wasn't bad at all: there is a certain poetry and mystery about what the sea washes up. If the ocean should draw back, the exposed sand would be a vast, damp desert strewn with sirens and dying fish, John Sommers used to say. He was the brother of Jeremy and Rose and had sailed all the seas of the world, and he would vividly describe how

the water gathered itself in sepulchral silence and roared back in a single monstrous wave, sweeping away everything before it. Horrible, he maintained, although at least that gave you time to run toward the hills, while with earthquakes the church bells clanged, announcing the catastrophe as everyone was scrambling through the rubble.

At the time the baby appeared, Jeremy Sommers was thirty years old and was beginning to forge a brilliant future with the British Import and Export Company, Ltd. In commercial and banking circles he was known as an honorable man: his word and a handshake were as good as a signed contract, an indispensable virtue in a transaction, since letters of credit took months to cross the ocean. For Jeremy Sommers, lacking a fortune, his good name was more important than life itself. With sacrifice, he had achieved a solid position in the remote port of Valparaíso, and the last thing he wanted in his well-organized life was a tiny baby to disturb his routine, but when Eliza turned up on their doorstep he had to take her in because his resolve crumbled when he saw his sister, Rose, clinging to the babe as if its mother.

Rose was only twenty, but she was already a woman with a past, and her chances for making a good marriage were minimal. In addition, she had totted up her possibilities and had decided that marriage, even in the best of cases, was a dreary business. With her brother Jeremy she enjoyed the independence she would never have with a husband. She had her life in order and she was not daunted by the stigma attached to spinsterhood; just the opposite, she was determined to be the envy of all wives despite the current theory that when women deviated from their role as mothers and wives they grew a mustache, like the suffragettes; but she had no children and that was the one affliction she could not transform into a triumph through the disciplined exercise of imagination. Sometimes she dreamed that the walls of her room were covered

with blood, that blood soaked the carpet, spattered the walls up to the ceiling, and that she was sprawled in the center, naked and as wild-haired as a madwoman, giving birth to a salamander. She would awake screaming and spend the rest of the day disoriented, unable to rid herself of the nightmare. Jeremy watched her, worrying about her nerves and feeling guilty for having dragged her so far from England, although he could not avoid a certain smug satisfaction with their mutual arrangement. As the idea of matrimony had never passed through his heart, Rose's presence solved all his domestic and social problems, two important aspects of his career. His sister compensated for his introverted and solitary nature, and that was why he bore her shifts of mood and unnecessary expenditures with good humor. When Eliza appeared and Rose insisted on keeping her, Jeremy did not dare oppose her or express niggardly doubts, and he gallantly lost all his battles to keep the baby at arm's length, beginning with the first: giving her a name.

"We will call her Eliza, after our mother, and she will have our family name," Rose decided almost as soon as she had fed, bathed, then wrapped the baby in her own little blanket.

"We will do no such thing, Rose! Whatever would people say?"

"I'll take responsibility for that. People will say you are a saint for taking in a poor little orphan, Jeremy. There is no worse fate than not having a family. Where should I be without a brother like you?" she replied, conscious of her brother's horror of the least hint of sentimentality.

Gossip was inevitable, but Jeremy Sommers had to resign himself even to that, just as he accepted that the baby would have his mother's name, sleep all her early years in his sister's bedroom, and create an uproar in the house. Rose spread the implausible story of the lavish basket left anonymously at the office of the British Import and Export Company, Ltd., and no one swallowed it, but since they could not

accuse her of a misstep—they saw her every Sunday of her life singing in the Anglican service and her tiny waist was a challenge to the laws of anatomy—they said that the baby was the product of Jeremy's relation with some loose woman and that was why they were bringing Eliza up as one of the family. Jeremy made no effort to defend himself against the malicious rumors. Children's irrationality in general upset him, but Eliza managed to enchant him. Although he would not admit it, he liked watching her play at his feet in the evenings when he sat down in his easy chair to read the newspaper. There were no demonstrations of affection between them; Jeremy went stiff just shaking a human hand, and the thought of more intimate contact sent him into a panic.

When the tiny newborn appeared at the Sommers' home that March fifteenth, Mama Fresia, who served them as cook and housekeeper, argued against keeping her.

"If her own mother abandoned her, it's because she is cursed, better not to touch her," she said, but she could do nothing to dent her *patrona*'s determination.

The minute Miss Rose picked up the baby, Eliza started screeching at the top of her lungs, shaking the house and grating on the nerves of everyone in it. Unable to get the infant to stop crying, Miss Rose improvised a cradle in a dresser drawer and pulled a cover over her while she rushed out to look for a wet nurse. She soon returned with a woman she had found in the market. It had never occurred to Miss Rose to examine her find close up; all she had needed to engage the woman on the spot was one glimpse of huge breasts straining to escape a billowing blouse. She turned out to be a rather dull-witted campesina who brought her baby with her, a poor creature as begrimed as she was. They had to soak that child a long time in warm

water to loosen the filth on his bottom and dip the woman's head in a bucket of water with lye to get rid of her lice. The two babies, Eliza and the wet nurse's, came down with colic and a bilious diarrhea that rendered the family's physician and the German pharmacist helpless. Done in by the babies' howling, which was pain and misery added to hunger, Miss Rose wept, too. Finally, on the third day, Mama Fresia reluctantly intervened.

"Can't you see that woman has sour breasts?" she grumbled. "Buy a she-goat to feed your baby and dose her with cinnamon tea, because if you don't she'll be gone before Friday."

At that time Miss Rose barely stumbled through a little Spanish, but she understood the word "she-goat"; she sent the coachman to fetch one and dismissed the wet nurse. The minute the coachman brought the goat, Mama Fresia lay Eliza directly beneath its swollen udders—to the horror of Miss Rose, who had never seen such a revolting spectacle. The warm milk and cinnamon infusions promptly addressed the situation, however; the baby stopped crying, slept seven hours in a row, and awoke making frantic sucking sounds. After a few days she had the placid expression of a healthy infant and it was evident that she was gaining weight. Miss Rose bought a baby bottle when she realized that when the she-goat bleated in the patio, Eliza began sniffing, looking for the teat. Rose did not want to see the child grow up with the bizarre notion that the animal was her mother. That colic was one of the few upsets Eliza suffered in her infancy; the others were headed off at the first symptoms by Mama Fresia's herbs and incantations, including the fierce epidemic of African measles carried to Valparaíso by a Greek sailor. As long as that danger lasted, Mama Fresia placed a piece of raw meat on Eliza's navel every night and bound it with a strip of red flannel, nature's secret for preventing contagion.

In the following years, Miss Rose made Eliza her play toy. She spent happy hours teaching her to sing and dance, reciting verses her

charge memorized with no effort, braiding her hair and dressing her up, but the minute she found another diversion or was felled by a headache, she sent the child to the kitchen with Mama Fresia. Eliza grew up between Miss Rose's sewing room and the back patios, speaking English in one part of the house and a mixture of Spanish and Mapuche, her nana's native tongue, in the other, one day dressed and shod like a duchess and the next playing with hens and dogs, barefoot and barely covered by an orphan's smock. Miss Rose presented her at her musical evenings, and took her out in the coach to go shopping, or to visit the ships at the dock, or to stop at the finest pastry shop for hot chocolate, but she could just as easily spend days at a time writing in her mysterious notebooks or reading a novel without a thought for her protégée. When she did remember her, she would run repentently to look for her, cover her with kisses, shower her with treats, and dress her up like a doll and take her out for a ride. She devoted herself to giving Eliza the broadest possible education, not overlooking the skills appropriate for a young lady. The day Eliza threw a tantrum because she didn't want to practice the piano, Miss Rose grabbed her by an arm and without waiting for the coachman dragged Eliza twelve blocks downhill to a convent. On the adobe wall, above a heavy oak door with iron studs, you could read in letters faded by the salt air: "Foundling Home."

"Be thankful that my brother and I took you under our wing. This is where little bastards and abandoned children end up. Is this what you want?"

Speechless, the girl shook her head.

"Then you would do well to learn to play the piano like a little lady. Do you understand me?"

Eliza learned to play without either talent or grace, but through dint of strict discipline could by the time she was twelve accompany Miss Rose at her musical evenings. She never lost that skill,

despite long periods without playing, and several years later she was able to earn her daily bread in a traveling brothel, an application that had never crossed Miss Rose's mind when she had insisted on teaching her ward the sublime art of music.

Many years later, on a tranquil evening as she drank tea and chatted with her friend Tao Chi'en in the delicate garden they both tended, Eliza concluded that the erratic Englishwoman had been a very good mother and that she was grateful to her for the large spaces of internal freedom she had given her. Mama Fresia was the second pillar of Eliza's childhood. She clung to her full black skirts, followed her around while she did her chores, and in the meantime drove her crazy with questions. That was how Eliza learned Indian legends and myths, how to read signs of the animals and the sea, how to recognize the habits of the spirits, and the messages in dreams, and also how to cook. With her prodigious nose, she was able to identify herbs, spices, and other ingredients with her eyes closed, and just the way she memorized poems, she remembered how to combine them. Soon Mama Fresia's complicated Chilean dishes and Miss Rose's delicate pastries lost all their mysteries for her. She had a rare culinary gift; at seven, without turning a hair, she could skin a beef tongue, dress a hen, make twenty empanadas without drawing a breath, and spend hours on end shelling beans while she listened openmouthed to Mama Fresia's cruel Indian legends and her colorful versions of the lives of the saints.

Rose and her brother John had been inseparable since they were children. In the wintertime she entertained herself by knitting sweaters and socks for the captain and he took great pains every voyage to bring her suitcases filled with gifts and huge boxes of books, several of which ended up under lock and key in Rose's armoire. Jeremy, as master of the house and head of the family, had the right to open his sister's correspondence, read her private diary, and demand a copy of the keys to her furniture, but he never showed any inclination