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**MY  
NAME IS  
EMILIA  
DEL  
VALLE**

**ISABEL  
ALLENDE**

**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH  
BY FRANCES RIDDLE**

**B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G**

**LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY**

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**PART  
ONE**

## 1

THE DAY I TURNED SEVEN YEARS OLD, APRIL 14, 1873, my mother, Molly Walsh, dressed me in my Sunday best and brought me to Union Square to have my portrait taken. The only existing photograph of my childhood depicts me standing beside a harp with the terrified expression of a man on the gallows, a result of the long minutes spent staring into the black box of the camera, holding my breath, followed by the startle of the flashbulb. I should clarify that I do not know how to play any instrument; the harp was merely one of the dusty theatrical props crowded into the photography studio alongside cardboard columns, Chinese vases, and a stuffed horse.

The photographer was a small mustachioed Dutchman who had made a good living at his trade since the times of the gold rush when the miners came down from the mountains to deposit their nuggets in the banks and have their portraits taken to send home to their all-but-forgotten families. Gold fever soon died down, but San Francisco's upper-class patrons still frequented the studio to pose for posterity. My family didn't fall into that category, but my mother had her own reasons for wanting a photo of her daughter. She haggled on the price of the portrait, more on principle than out of real necessity; I've never

known her to purchase anything without attempting to obtain a discount.

“While we’re here, we’ll go and see the head of Joaquín Murieta,” she told me as we left the Dutchman’s studio.

At the opposite end of the square, near the entrance to Chinatown, she bought me a cinnamon roll and led me to the door of an unsanitary tavern. We paid the entrance fee and traversed a long hallway to the rear of the locale. There, a scary thug lifted a heavy curtain and we entered a room hung with lugubrious draperies and lit with altar candles like some ghastly church. There was a table shrouded in black cloth at one end of the space and atop it sat two large glass jars. I cannot recall any further details of the décor because I was paralyzed by fright. My mother seemed euphoric even as I quaked with fear, both hands clutching at her skirts. The first jar held a human hand floating in a yellowish liquid. The second, a man’s decapitated head with the eyelids sewn shut, lips pulled back, teeth barred, and hair standing on end.

“Joaquín Murieta was a bandit. A reprobate, like your father. This is how bandits usually end up,” my mother explained.

It goes without saying that I suffered horrible nightmares that night. I was even feverish, but my mother was of the opinion that unless a person was bleeding, there was no need to intervene. The following day, wearing the same dress and the same cursed lace-up boots that pinched terribly, since I had been forcing my feet into them for the past two years, we picked up my portrait and walked to the wealthy part of town, a neighborhood I had never set foot in before. Cobbled streets wended their way up the hills flanked by stately homes overlooking rose gardens and tidily trimmed hedges, coach houses stocked with glossy horses, not a single beggar in sight.

Up to that point, my entire existence had transpired within the confines of the Mission District, that multicolored, polyglot multitude of emigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Italy; Mexicans who had always lived in California; and a considerable cohort of Chileans

who came with the gold rush in 1848 and, several decades later, were still as poor as when they had first arrived. They never saw any gold. If they did find anything in the mines, it was snatched from them by the whites who arrived a year later. Many returned to their homeland with nothing more than fabulous tales to tell. Others stayed because the return trip was long and costly. The Mission District was bursting with factories, workshops, piles of rubbish, stray dogs, skinny mules, clotheslines, and doors thrown open wide because there was nothing of value to steal.

That pilgrimage with my mother to the restricted universe of the upper class was my first hint that we were poor. We were far from hungry and plagued by rodents, like my maternal grandparents in Ireland, but we led a modest lifestyle like everyone else around us, who lived hand to mouth. I had never paid any mind to people of greater means before because I had never had any contact with them. I had seen them from afar when I went downtown with my parents, but that seldom happened. The coaches pulled by lustrous horses; ladies in exaggerated Victorian fashions festooned with ruffles, fringe, and rosettes; gentlemen with their top hats and canes; and children dressed in sailor suits were creatures of another species. Our working-class neighborhood was filled with barefoot children, eternally pregnant women, and drunken men working odd jobs to scrape together enough money for bread. Compared to our neighbors, my small family was fortunate. My honorable stepfather always said that as long as we had work, love, and dignity, we should want for nothing. We also had a decent little home, and we were not indebted to anyone.

I didn't dare ask my mother where we were going. I followed her up and down the hills, enduring the blisters on my feet. At that time, Molly Walsh was a young woman with an angelic face, that is to say, with the beatific expression of church martyrs, and the crystal clear voice of a mockingbird, which she still retains. That voice is deceptive, however, because my mother is actually quite forceful and bossy. On the rare occasion that she has cause to mention my father, her

voice changes and her singsong tone becomes halting as she spits out her words. She hadn't said it, but I guessed that this torturous walk to the wealthy area of town was somehow related to him.

Finally, we reached the top of Nob Hill, panting from the effort, and took in the panoramic view of the city and San Francisco Bay. We came to a stop in front of the most imposing mansion on the street, with a marvelous garden hemmed in by a monumental iron fence. Through the bars, I glimpsed a statue of a fish shooting water from its mouth into a stone fountain. At the end of the garden an enormous butter-colored house rose up with a columned porch and a heavy wooden door flanked by two stone lions. My mother said it was a nouveau riche eyesore, but my mouth hung agape; this must be what a fairy-tale palace looked like. We stood before the iron gate for a few minutes catching our breath, as my mother dabbed sweat from her brow and straightened her hat. Before she could pull the cord to ring the bell, a man stepped out from a side door, dressed in a black suit with a starched collar. He crossed the vast expanse of garden and stopped before us. He did not open the gate. A mere glance was all it took for him to accurately size us up despite the care my mother had taken with our appearance.

"How may I help you, madam?" he asked in a haughty British accent, his lips so tight we could hardly understand him.

"I am here to speak with Mr. Gonzalo Andrés del Valle," my mother declared, trying to imitate the man's petulant tone.

"Do you have an appointment with Mr. del Valle?"

"No, but he'll see me."

"I am afraid he is traveling at the moment, madam."

"When will he return?" my mother asked, somewhat deflated.

"I couldn't say, madam."

The man stared at us for a moment and finally opened the gate, but he did not invite us in. I suppose he had reached the conclusion that we did not pose any real threat or major nuisance, because he took on a slightly more friendly tone.

“Mr. del Valle visits San Francisco from time to time, but he resides in Chile,” the Englishman explained before adding that the family did not accept visitors without previous appointments.

“Could you provide an address where I can send him a letter? It’s a very important matter,” my mother said.

“You can leave it with me, Mrs. . . .”

“Molly Walsh,” she replied, without mentioning her married name, Claro.

“I will personally see that it reaches him, Mrs. Walsh,” he assured her.

She then handed the man an envelope containing my photograph and a note introducing Gonzalo Andrés del Valle to his daughter, Emilia. This was not the last letter she would write to him, nor was it the first.

I GREW UP being told that my father was a very wealthy Chilean and that I had a claim to a certain inheritance. Destiny had stolen my birthright from me but God, in His infinite mercy, would place it in my path in due time. Our present economic hardship was merely a test handed down from heaven to teach me humility; the future would hold great rewards as long as I remained obedient and virtuous, something measured in virginity and modesty, because nothing offends God more than a brazen woman. At mass and in my nightly prayers kneeling before my bed, my mother had me ask God to soften the hearts of those indebted to us and to pardon them to the extent that they repaid their debts. It would be several years before I understood that this Byzantine prayer was a reference to my father.

In truth, my childhood was perfect. My mother fussed over me, but she was very busy and couldn’t watch me too closely. My stepfather believed his perfect princess to be utterly incapable of misbehavior and he left me to my own devices as well. He was right. I was an introverted child, an avid reader, solitary and sensitive by nature and

content to entertain myself. I was never a nuisance at all, that is until the strong gale of adolescence churned me up into a true harpy. Fortunately, that phase did not last long. The economic hardship my mother referred to in our nightly prayers was irrelevant to me, because no one around us had more abundance than we did. As for my hypothetical inheritance, I saw it for what it was—a fairy tale—and I was careful never to mention it to anyone we knew because they would have found it laughable. More than anything, I was terrified by the thought that my mysterious Chilean father, a bandit like Joaquín Murieta, might one day appear to claim me as his daughter and whisk me away to some far-off land. I couldn't bear the thought of being separated from my mother and Francisco Claro, who was and always will be my only father, even if we do not share the same blood.

But I had better tell the story in its proper order, to avoid confusion. I shall start with my mother, because, to explain who I am, I have to go back to her and my stepfather, whom I have always called Papo.

Molly Walsh, my mother, was born in New York, daughter of Irish immigrants who came to America fleeing the potato famine. In 1849, when her father heard that the streets of California were paved with gold, he joined the caravan of prospectors crossing the continent from east to west with hopes of striking it rich. One of his four children died along the way and was left behind in a small unmarked grave. A few months after arriving in the nascent, chaotic city of San Francisco, his wife died of consumption. That woman, my grandmother, heroically endured the long, terrible months of travel, trudging onward for the sake of her remaining children, but her strength and courage were not enough to prolong her existence once they reached California, land of crude, opportunistic people. One day, during a violent fit of bloody coughing, her heart stopped.

Her widower, my grandfather, suddenly found himself alone with three children in an inhospitable city, and he understood that he could not care for them properly if he aimed to fulfill his dream of finding

gold. He took the oldest son, who was twelve, with him into the hills, placed the second as an indentured servant, and left Molly, age four, at an orphanage founded by three Mexican nuns, with the promise that he would return for her as soon as he obtained the fortune he was after. That never happened.

AS A YOUNG girl, Molly was submissive and pious, seeming to delight in sacrifice and suffering. This is what Papo has told me anyway, but it is hard to imagine it seeing the warrior woman she is today, capable of leading street protests and, armed with her rolling pin, facing down any drunk, bandit, cop, or other scoundrel making trouble in our neighborhood. Little Molly spent so many hours on her knees, fasted with such fervor, and accepted the mockery of her peers with such resignation that she was dubbed “Saint Molly” by the other orphans. The two younger nuns, simple women, favored her over all the other girls, moved by the thought of a budding saint in their midst. At first, Mother Rosario, the leader of that tiny religious order, paid no attention to Molly’s exaggerated devotion and the other nuns’ desperate hopes; her pupils, all orphaned or abandoned girls, often displayed strange conduct. The mother superior was forced to intervene, however, when, at age eleven, young Molly began to have visions and hear voices. That was taking it a step too far. Mother Rosario felt that saintliness was fine for women of leisure but it had no place there, where a love of God was demonstrated through hard work. She believed there to be a very fine line between celestial communion and mental illness and so set about curing Molly’s miracles through baths of cold water and geranium oil. She forced my mother to eat three meals daily, closely guarded to ensure she swallowed every bite and kept it down. She put her to work in the garden with a shovel and hoe, at the washing troughs and the bread oven, had her scrub the floor with bleach. Between the daily dishes of beans and rice and the sweat of hard work, the girl sailed through the difficult years

of puberty with a certain normalcy, but she always maintained her inclination toward melodrama. Her father and brothers never returned for her or even sent news and so she eventually accepted that those three good sisters were her only family. She was now too busy to find creative ways of imitating the martyrs from the calendar of saints, but her religious fervor remained unwavering and at age fifteen she begged to be accepted as a novice.

And that is how Molly Walsh was blessed enough to don the rough white habit of the novice nuns. Her hair was shorn off like an inmate and she joined the small circle of women who had raised her, prepared to give herself over, body and soul, to charity. She would've preferred to enter a cloistered convent, some austere, medieval fortress made of icy stone where spiked belts were employed to punish the flesh, sleeping on the hard ground with a log for a pillow and fasting to the point of collapse. Instead, she had to make do with a more agreeable existence in the large adobe house of the orphanage, where the bunk beds had horsehair mattresses and the food was simple but plentiful. The mother superior, whose healthy appetite manifested in the contours of her hips and the rolls on her waist that her loose habit was unable to dissimulate, was of the belief that the body should be well nourished in order to better serve the Lord in strength and good health.

BY AGE SEVENTEEN, Molly was ready to exercise the calling she'd been trained for: serving and educating. There was much work to be done at the orphanage, but Mother Rosario thought it best for her pupil to move down out of the clouds and into the real world so that she could acquire a bit of common sense and put her calling to the test. She suspected that the girl had a bonfire raging inside, so fierce that no religious habit would be able to contain it.

The world that the mother superior was referring to was limited to the Mission District, which took its name from the first Franciscan

mission founded in the eighteenth century. San Francisco's large Mexican population was concentrated here. Mere days after the discovery of gold, the shameful Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, putting an end to the war and ceding more than half of the Mexican territory, including California, to the United States. The better part of the old Mexican haciendas were expropriated and the campesinos, who had lived on the land for generations, were expelled from their homes. Some futilely chased the illusion of gold, others became bandits, and the rest got by the best they could. Growing up there, we knew that certain neighbors earned their living as highwaymen, robbing travelers on the roads, but as long as they respected the people of the Mission District, no one would turn them in. More than once the neighbors had hidden them during a police raid because they knew they would be later compensated with favors or an interest-free loan in a time of need. No one trusted the bankers, who were the true thieves.

Molly Walsh got a job as a teacher in a little school by the pompous name of Aztec Pride. It consisted of a one-room adobe schoolhouse with a thatched roof where the students, all boys between the ages of six and seventeen, crowded in. The lessons were dictated in Spanish, but there were two Irish kids and one black boy, the grandson of slaves whose family had escaped the Civil War in Alabama. All three learned Spanish quickly. The modest space included two long tables flanked by mismatched stools and chairs donated from the neighborhood, a wood-burning stove in one corner to combat the damp fog and to fry eggs, a cupboard for school supplies, and a latrine outside in the yard. There was also a henhouse that provided the eggs for the boys' lunch, because many of them were sent to school on an empty stomach. There were still some powerful Mexican families in California, but their sons were educated in Catholic schools far from the Mission District. The students of Aztec Pride were all poor.

The school's founder, director, and only teacher until Molly's arrival was a mestizo man from Chihuahua named Francisco Claro,