

My Invented Country

A Memoir



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MY
INVENTED
COUNTRY



A Memoir

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by Margaret Sayers Peden



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Map



Map by David Cain

Dedication

. . . for some reason or other, I am a sad exile. In some way or other, our land travels with me and with me too, though far, far away, live the longitudinal essences of my country.

—PABLO NERUDA, 1972

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A FEW WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

I was born in the years of the smoke and carnage of the Second World War, and the greatest part of my youth was spent waiting for the planet to blow apart when someone distractedly pressed a button deploying atomic bombs. No one expected to live very long; we rushed around swallowing up every moment before being overtaken by the apocalypse, so we didn't have time to examine our navels and take notes, as people do today. In addition, I grew up in Santiago, Chile, where any natural tendency toward self-contemplation is quickly nipped in the bud. The saying that defines the lifestyle of that city is "Shrimp that dozes is shrimp on the platter." In other, more sophisticated cultures, like those of Buenos Aires or New York, a visit to the psychologist was thought to be a normal activity: to deprive oneself of that attention was considered evidence of a lack of culture or of mental deficiency. In Chile, however, only dangerously disturbed patients visited a psychologist, and then always in a straitjacket, but that changed in the seventies, along with the arrival of the sexual revolution. (One wonders if there's a connection . . .) In my family no one ever resorted to therapy, even though many of us were classic case studies, because the idea of confiding intimate matters to a stranger—and a stranger we were *paying* to listen—was absurd. That's what priests and aunts were for. I have very little training for reflection, but in recent weeks I have caught myself thinking about my past with a frequency that can only be explained as a sign of premature senility.

Two recent events have triggered this avalanche of memories. The first was a casual observation by my grandson Alejandro, who surprised me at the mirror scrutinizing the map of my wrinkles and said, with compassionate commiseration, "Don't worry, Grandmother, you're going to live at least three more years." I decided right then and there that the time had come to take another look at my life, in order to know how I wanted to live those three years that had been so generously granted.

The second event was a question asked by a stranger during a conference of travel writers where I'd been invited to give the opening address. I must make clear that I do not belong to that weird group of people who travel to remote places, survive the bacteria, and then publish books to convince the incautious to follow in their footsteps. Traveling demands a disproportionate effort, especially when it's to places where there is no room service. My ideal vacation consists of sitting in a chair beneath an umbrella on my patio, reading books of adventures I would never consider attempting unless I was escaping from something.

I come from the so-called Third World (what is the Second?), and I had to trap a husband in order to live legally in the First. I have no intention of going back to underdevelopment without good cause. Nevertheless, for reasons quite beyond my control, I have wandered across five continents, and have in addition been an exile and an immigrant. So I know something about travel, which is why I had been asked to speak at that conference. At the end of my brief talk, a hand was raised in the audience

and a young man asked me what role nostalgia played in my novels. For a moment I was silent. Nostalgia . . . according to the dictionary, *nostalgia* is “a bittersweet longing for things, persons, or situations of the past. The condition of being homesick.” The question took my breath away because until that instant I’d never realized that I write as a constant exercise in longing. I have been an outsider nearly all my life, a circumstance I accept because I have no alternative. Several times I have found it necessary to pull up stakes, sever all ties, and leave everything behind in order to begin life anew elsewhere; I have been a pilgrim along more roads than I care to remember. From saying good-bye so often my roots have dried up, and I have had to grow others, which, lacking a geography to sink into, have taken hold in my memory. But be careful! Minotaurs lie in wait in the labyrinths of memory.

Until only a short time ago, if someone had asked me where I’m from, I would have answered, without much thought, Nowhere; or, Latin America; or, maybe, In my heart I’m Chilean. Today, however, I say I’m an American, not simply because that’s what my passport verifies, or because that word includes all of America from north to south, or because my husband, my son, my grandchildren, most of my friends, my books, and my home are in northern California; but because a terrorist attack destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and starting with that instant, many things have changed. We can’t be neutral in moments of crisis. This tragedy has brought me face to face with my sense of identity. I realize today that I am one person in the multicolored population of North America, just as before I was Chilean. I no longer feel that I am an alien in the United States. When I watched the collapse of the towers, I had a sense of having lived a nearly identical nightmare. By a blood-chilling coincidence—historic karma—the commandeered airplanes struck their U.S. targets on a Tuesday, September 11, exactly the same day of the week and month—and at almost the same time in the morning—of the 1973 military coup in Chile, a terrorist act orchestrated by the CIA against a democracy. The images of burning buildings, smoke, flames, and panic are similar in both settings. That distant Tuesday in 1973 my life was split in two; nothing was ever again the same: I lost a country. That fateful Tuesday in 2001 was also a decisive moment; nothing will ever again be the same, and I gained a country.

Those two statements, the consoling words from my grandson and the question asked by a stranger at a conference, gave rise to this book. I’m not sure what direction it will take. For the moment, I’m wandering, but I ask you to stay with me a little longer.

I am writing these pages in a room perched high on a hill, under the vigil of a hundred gnarled oaks overlooking San Francisco Bay, but I come from a different place. Nostalgia is my vice. Nostalgia is a melancholy, and slightly saccharine, sentiment, like tenderness. It is nearly impossible to approach those emotions without sounding insipid, but I am going to try. If I fall and slip into cloying vulgarity I will climb out of it a few lines later. At my age—I’m at least as old as synthetic penicillin—you begin to remember things that have been erased from your mind for half a century. I haven’t thought about my childhood or adolescence for decades. In truth, those periods of my remote past matter so little to me that when I look at my mother’s photograph albums I

don't recognize anyone except a bulldog with the improbable name of Pelvina López-Pun, and the only reason why she is etched in my mind is because we were very much alike. There is a snapshot of the two of us, when I was a few months old, in which my mother had to indicate with an arrow which of us was which. Surely my bad memory is due in part to the fact that those times were not particularly happy ones, but I suppose that's the case with most mortals. A happy childhood is a myth, and in order to understand that we have only to take a look at children's stories; for example, the one in which the wolf eats the beloved grandmother, then along comes a woodsman and slits the poor beast open with his knife, extracts the old woman, alive and uninjured, fills the wolf's belly with stones and then stitches him up, in the process creating such a thirst in the animal that he runs down to drink from the river, where he drowns from the weight of the stones. Why didn't they do away with him in a simpler, more humane way, is what I want to know. Surely because nothing is simple or humane in childhood. In those days there was no such term as "abused children," it was accepted that the best way to bring up little ones was with a strap in one hand and a cross in the other, just as it was taken for granted that a man had a right to give his wife a good shaking if his soup was cold when it reached the table. Before psychologists and authorities intervened, no one doubted the beneficial effects of a good switching. I wasn't whipped like my brothers, but I lived in fear, like all the other children I knew.

In my case, the natural unhappiness of childhood was aggravated by a mass of complexes so tangled that even today I can't list them. Fortunately, they left no wounds that time hasn't healed. Once I heard a famous Afro-American writer say that from the time she was a little girl she felt like a stranger in her family and her hometown. She added that nearly all writers have experienced that feeling, even if they have never left their native city. It's a condition inherent in that profession, she suggested; without the anxiety of feeling different, she wouldn't have been driven to write. Writing, when all is said and done, is an attempt to understand one's own circumstance and to clarify the confusion of existence, including insecurities that do not torment normal people, only chronic nonconformists, many of whom end up as writers after having failed in other undertakings. This theory lifted a burden from my shoulders. I am not a monster; there are others like me.

I never fit in anywhere: not into my family, my social class, or the religion fate bestowed on me. I didn't belong to the neighborhood gangs that rode their bikes in the street, my cousins didn't include me in their games, I was the least popular girl in my school, and for a long time I was the last to be invited to dance at parties—a torment, I like to think, due more to shyness than to looks. I cloaked myself in my pride, pretending it didn't matter to me, but I would have sold my soul to the devil to be part of a group had Satan presented me with such an attractive proposition. The source of my difficulties has always been the same: an inability to accept what to others seems natural, and an irresistible tendency to voice opinions no one wants to hear, a trait that frightened away more than one potential suitor (I don't want to give a false impression, there weren't very many). Later, during my years as a journalist, curiosity and boldness had their advantages. For the first time I was part of a community, I had absolute liberty to ask indiscreet questions and divulge my ideas, but that ended abruptly with the military coup of 1973, which unleashed uncontrollable forces.

Overnight I became a foreigner in my own land, until finally I had to leave because I couldn't live and bring up my children in a country where terror reigned and where there was no place for dissidents like myself. During that period, curiosity and boldness were outlawed by decree. Outside Chile, I waited years to return once democracy was restored, but when that happened I didn't, because by then I was married to a North American and living near San Francisco. I haven't gone back to take up residence in Chile, where in truth I have spent less than half of my life, although I visit frequently. But in order to respond to the question that the stranger asked about nostalgia, I must refer almost exclusively to my years there. And to do that, I have to talk about my family because nation and tribe are confused in my mind.

COUNTRY OF LONGITUDINAL ESSENCES

Let's begin at the beginning, with Chile, that remote land that few people can locate on the map because it's as far as you can go without falling off the planet. *Why don't we sell Chile and buy something closer to Paris?* one of our intellectuals once asked. No one passes by casually, however lost he may be, although many visitors decide to stay forever, enamored of the land and the people. Chile lies at the end of all roads, a lance to the south of the south of America, four thousand three hundred kilometers of hills, valleys, lakes, and sea. This is how Neruda describes it in his impassioned poetry:

*Night, snow and sand compose the form
of my slender homeland,
all silence is contained within its length,
all foam issues from its seaswept beard,
all coal fills it with mysterious kisses.*

This elongated country is like an island, separated on the north from the rest of the continent by the Atacama Desert—the driest in the world, its inhabitants like to say, although that must not be true, because in springtime parts of that lunar rubble tend to be covered with a mantle of flowers, like a wondrous painting by Monet. To the east rises the cordillera of the Andes, a formidable mass of rock and eternal snows, and to the west the abrupt coastline of the Pacific Ocean. Below, to the south, lie the solitudes of Antarctica. This nation of dramatic topography and diverse climates, studded with capricious obstacles and shaken by the sighs of hundreds of volcanoes, a geological miracle between the heights of the cordillera and the depths of the sea, is unified top to tail by the obstinate sense of nationhood of its inhabitants.

We Chileans still feel our bond with the soil, like the campesinos we once were. Most of us dream of owning a piece of land, if for nothing more than to plant a few worm-eaten heads of lettuce. Our most important newspaper, *El Mercurio*, publishes a weekly agricultural supplement that informs the public in general of the latest insignificant pest found on the potatoes or about the best forage for improving milk production. Its readers, who are planted in asphalt and concrete, read it voraciously, even though they have never seen a live cow.

In the broadest terms, it can be said that my long and narrow homeland can be broken up into four very different regions. The country is divided into provinces with beautiful names, but the military, who may have had difficulty memorizing them, added numbers for identification purposes. I refuse to use them because a nation of poets cannot have a map dotted with numbers, like some mathematical delirium. So let's talk about the four large regions, beginning with the *norte grande*, the “big north” that occupies a fourth of the country; inhospitable and rough, guarded by high

mountains, it hides in its entrails an inexhaustible treasure of minerals.

I traveled to the north when I was a child, and I've never forgotten it, though a half-century has gone by since then. Later in my life I had the opportunity to cross the Atacama Desert a couple of times, and although those were extraordinary experiences, my first recollections are still the strongest. In my memory, Antofagasta, which in Quechua means "town of the great salt lands," is not the modern city of today but a miserable, out-of-date port that smelled like iodine and was dotted with fishing boats, gulls, and pelicans. In the nineteenth century it rose from the desert like a mirage, thanks to the industry producing nitrates, which for several decades were one of Chile's principal exports. Later, when synthetic nitrate was invented, the port was kept busy exporting copper, but as the nitrate companies began to close down, one after another, the pampa became strewn with ghost towns. Those two words—"ghost town"—gave wings to my imagination on that first trip.

I recall that my family and I, loaded with bundles, climbed onto a train that traveled at a turtle's pace through the inclement Atacama Desert toward Bolivia. Sun, baked rocks, kilometers and kilometers of ghostly solitudes, from time to time an abandoned cemetery, ruined buildings of adobe and wood. It was a dry heat where not even flies survived. Thirst was unquenchable. We drank water by the gallon, sucked oranges, and had a hard time defending ourselves from the dust, which crept into every cranny. Our lips were so chapped they bled, our ears hurt, we were dehydrated. At night a cold hard as glass fell over us, while the moon lighted the landscape with a blue splendor. Many years later I would return to the north of Chile to visit Chuquicamata, the largest open-pit copper mine in the world, an immense amphitheater where thousands of earth-colored men, working like ants, rip the mineral from stone. The train ascended to a height of more than four thousand meters and the temperature descended to the point where water froze in our glasses. We passed the silent salt mine of Uyuni, a white sea of salt where no bird flies, and others where we saw elegant flamingos. They were brush strokes of pink among salt crystals glittering like precious stones.

The so-called *norte chico*, or "little north," which some do not classify as an actual region, divides the dry north from the fertile central zone. Here lies the valley of Elqui, one of the spiritual centers of the Earth, said to be magical. The mysterious forces of Elqui attract pilgrims who come there to make contact with the cosmic energy of the universe, and many stay on to live in esoteric communities. Meditation, Eastern religions, gurus of various stripes, there's something of everything in Elqui. It's like a little corner of California. It is also from Elqui that our *pisco* comes, a liquor made from the muscatel grape: transparent, virtuous, and serene as the angelic force that emanates from the land. *Pisco* is the prime ingredient of the *pisco* sour, our sweet and treacherous national drink, which must be drunk with confidence, though the second glass has a kick that can floor the most valiant among us. We usurped the name of this liquor, without a moment's hesitation, from the city of Pisco, in Peru. If any wine with bubbles can be called champagne, even though the authentic libation comes only from Champagne, France, I suppose our *pisco*, too, can appropriate a name from another nation. The *norte chico* is also home to La Silla, one of the most important observatories in the world, because the air there is so clear that no star—either dead or yet to be born—escapes the eye of its gigantic telescope. Apropos of the observatory,

someone who has worked there for three decades told me that the most renowned astronomers in the world wait years for their turn to scour the universe. I commented that it must be stupendous to work with scientists whose eyes are always on infinity and who live detached from earthly miseries, but he informed me that it is just the opposite: astronomers are as petty as poets. He says they fight over jam at breakfast. The human condition never fails to amaze.

The *valle central* is the most prosperous area of the country, a land of grapes and apples, where industries are clustered and a third of the population lives in the capital city. Santiago was founded in 1541 by Pedro de Valdivia. After walking for months through the dry north, it seemed to him that he'd reached the Garden of Eden. In Chile everything is centralized in the capital, despite the efforts of various governments that over the span of half a century have tried to distribute power among the provinces. If it doesn't happen in Santiago, it may as well not happen at all, although life in the rest of the country is a thousand times calmer and more pleasant.

The *zona sur*, the southern zone, begins at Puerto Montt, at 40 degrees latitude south, an enchanted region of forests, lakes, rivers, and volcanoes. Rain and more rain nourishes the tangled vegetation of the cool forests where our native trees rise tall, ancients of thousand-year growth now threatened by the timber industry. Moving south, the traveler crosses pampas lashed by furious winds, then the country strings out into a rosary of unpopulated islands and milky fogs, a labyrinth of fjords, islets, canals, and water on all sides. The last city on the continent is Punta Arenas, wind-bitten, harsh, and proud; a high, barren land of blizzards.

Chile owns a section of the little-explored Antarctic continent, a world of ice and solitude, of infinite white, where fables are born and men die: Chile ends at the South Pole. For a long time, no one assigned any value to Antarctica, but now we know how many mineral riches it shelters, in addition to being a paradise of marine life, so there is no country that doesn't have an eye on it. In the summertime, a cruise ship can visit there with relative ease, but the price of such a cruise is as the price of rubies, and for the present, only rich tourists and poor but determined ecologists can make the trip.

In 1888 Chile annexed the Isla de Pascua, mysterious Easter Island, *the navel of the world*, or Rapanui, as it is called in the natives' language. The island is lost in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean, 2,500 miles from continental Chile, more or less six hours by jet from Valparaíso or Tahiti. I am not sure why it belongs to us. In olden times, a ship captain planted a flag, and a slice of the planet became legally yours, regardless of whether that pleased its inhabitants, in this case peaceful Polynesians. This was the practice of European nations, and Chile could not lag behind. For the islanders, contact with South America was fatal. In the mid-nineteenth century, most of the male population was taken off to Peru to work as slaves in the guano deposits, while Chile shrugged its shoulders at the fate of its forgotten citizens. The treatment those poor men received was so bad that it caused an international protest in Europe, and, after a long diplomatic struggle, the last fifteen survivors were returned to their families. Those few went back infected with small pox, and within a brief time the illness exterminated eighty percent of the natives on the island. The fate of the remainder was not much better. Imported sheep ate the vegetation, turning the

landscape into a barren husk of lava, and the negligence of the authorities—in this case the Chilean navy—drove the inhabitants into poverty. Only in the last two decades, tourism and the interest of the world scientific community have rescued Rapanui.

Scattered across the Easter Island are monumental statues of volcanic stone, some weighing more than twenty tons. These *moais* have intrigued experts for centuries. To sculpt them on the slopes of the volcanoes and then drag them across rough ground, to erect them on often-inaccessible bases and place hats of red stone atop them, was the task of titans. How was it done? There are no traces of an advanced civilization that can explain such prowess. Two different groups populated the island. According to legend, one of those groups, the Arikis, had supernatural mental powers, which they used to levitate the *moais* and transport them, floating effortlessly, to their altars on the steep slopes. What a tragedy that this technique has been lost to the world! In 1940, the Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl built a balsa raft, which he christened *Kon Tiki*, and sailed from South America to Easter Island to prove that there had been contact between the Incas and the Easter Islanders.

I traveled to Easter Island in the summer of 1974, when there was only one flight a week and tourism was nearly nonexistent. Enchanted, I stayed three weeks longer than I had planned, and thus happened to be on the spot when the first television broadcast was celebrated with a visit by General Pinochet, who had led the military junta that had replaced Chile's democracy some months earlier. The television was received with more enthusiasm than the brand-new dictator. The general's stay was extremely colorful, but this isn't the time to go into those details. It's enough to say that a mischievous little cloud strategically hovered above his head every time he wanted to speak in public, leaving him wringing wet and limp as a dishrag. He had come with the idea of delivering property titles to the islanders, but no one was terribly interested in receiving them, since from the most ancient times everyone has known exactly what belongs to whom. They were afraid, and rightly so, that the only use for that piece of government paper would be to complicate their lives.

Chile also owns the island of Juan Fernández, where the Scots sailor Alexander Selkirk, the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, was set ashore by his captain in 1704. Selkirk lived on the island for more than four years—without a domesticated parrot or the company of a native named Friday, as portrayed in the novel—until he was rescued by another captain and returned to England, where his fate did not exactly improve. The determined tourist, after a bumpy flight in a small airplane or an interminable trip by boat, can visit the cave where the Scotsman survived by eating herbs and fish.

Being so far from everything gives us Chileans an insular mentality, and the majestic beauty of the land makes us take on airs. We believe we are the center of the world—in our view, Greenwich should have been set in Santiago—and we turn our backs on Latin America, always comparing ourselves instead to Europe. We are very self-centered: the rest of the universe exists only to consume our wines and produce soccer teams we can beat.

My advice to the visitor is not to question the marvels he hears about my country,

its wine, and its women, because the foreigner is not allowed to criticize—for that we have more than fifteen million natives who do that all the time. If Marco Polo had descended on our coasts after thirty years of adventuring through Asia, the first thing he would have been told is that our *empanadas* are much more delicious than anything in the cuisine of the Celestial Empire. (Ah, that's another of our characteristics: we make statements without any basis, but in a tone of such certainty that no one doubts us.) I confess that I, too, suffer from that chilling chauvinism. The first time I visited San Francisco, and there before my eyes were those gentle golden hills, the majesty of forests, and the green mirror of the bay, my only comment was that it looked a lot like the coast of Chile. Later I learned that the sweetest fruit, the most delicate wines, and the finest fish are imported from Chile. Naturally.

To see my country with the heart, one must read Pablo Neruda, the national poet who in his verses immortalized the imposing landscapes, the aromas and dawns, the tenacious rain and dignified poverty, the stoicism and the hospitality, of Chile. That is the land of my nostalgia, the one I invoke in my solitude, the one that appears as a backdrop in so many of my stories, the one that comes to me in my dreams. There are other faces of Chile, of course: the materialistic and arrogant face, the face of the tiger that spends its life counting its stripes and cleaning its whiskers; another, depressed, crisscrossed by the brutal scars of the past; one that shows a smiling face to tourists and bankers; and the one that with resignation awaits the next geological or political cataclysm. Chile has a little of everything.

DULCE DE LECHE, ORGAN GRINDERS, AND GYPSIES

My family is from Santiago, but that doesn't explain my traumas, there are worse places under the sun. I grew up there, but now I scarcely recognize it, and get lost in its streets. The capital was founded following the classic pattern for Spanish cities of the time: a *plaza de armas* in the center, from which parallel and perpendicular streets radiated. Of that there is nothing but a bare memory. Santiago has spread out like a demented octopus, extending its eager tentacles in every direction; today five and a half million people live there, surviving however they can. It would be a pretty city, because it's well cared for, clean, and filled with gardens, if it didn't sit under a dark sombrero of pollution that in wintertime kills infants in their cradles, old people in nursing homes, and birds in the air. Santiaguinos have become accustomed to following the daily smog index just as faithfully as they keep track of the stock market or the soccer results. On days when the index climbs too high, the volume of vehicles allowed to circulate is restricted according to the number on the license plate, children don't play sports at school, and the rest of the population tries to breathe as little as possible. The first rain of the year washes the grime from the atmosphere and falls like acid over the city. If you walk outside without an umbrella you will feel as if lemon juice has been squirted in your eyes, but don't worry, no one has been blinded yet. Not all days are like that, sometimes the day dawns with a clear sky and you can appreciate the magnificent spectacle of snow-capped mountains.

There are cities, like Caracas or Mexico City, where poor and rich mix, but in Santiago the lines of demarcation are clear. The distance between the mansions of the wealthy on the foothills of the cordillera, with guards at the gate and four-car garages, and the shacks of the proletarian population where fifteen people live crowded together in two rooms without a bath, is astronomical. Every time I go to Santiago I notice that part of the city is in black-and-white and the other in Technicolor. In the city center and in the worker's districts everything seems gray; the few trees that survive are exhausted, the walls faded, the clothing of the inhabitants very worn, even the dogs that wander among the garbage cans are mutts of indefinite color. In middle-class neighborhoods there are leafy trees, and the houses are modest but well cared for. In the areas where the wealthy live only the vegetation can be appreciated: the mansions are hidden behind impenetrable walls, no one walks down the streets, and the dogs are mastiffs let out only at night to guard the property.

Summer in the capital is long and hot. A fine, yellowish dust blankets the city during those months; the sun melts the asphalt and affects the mood of the inhabitants, so anyone who can tries to get away. When I was a girl, my family went for two months to the beach, a true safari in my grandfather's automobile, loaded with a ton of bundles on the luggage rack and three totally carsick children inside. At that time the

roads were terrible and we had to snake up and down hills, which strained the vehicle to the breaking point. We always had to change tires once or twice, a task that entailed unloading all the bundles. My grandfather carried a huge pistol in his lap, like the ones used when people still fought duels, because he thought that bandits lurked on the Curacaví Hill, appropriately called the Graveyard. If there were highwaymen, they were probably just drifters who would have cut and run at the sound of the first shot, but just in case, we prayed as we drove past the hill—undoubtedly an infallible protection against assault, since we never saw the famous *bandidos*. Nothing of that nature exists today. Now you can drive to seaside resorts in less than two hours, with excellent highways all the way. Until recently the only bad roads were those that led to the areas where the wealthy summer, part of their fight to preserve their exclusive beaches. They are horrified when they see the *hoi polloi* arriving in buses on the weekends with their dark-skinned children, their watermelon and roast chicken, and their radios and boom boxes blaring popular music—which is why they kept the dirt roads in the worst possible state. That has changed. As a rightist senator pontificated, “When democracy gets democratic, it doesn’t work at all.” The country is connected by one long artery, the Pan American and Austral Highways, and by an extensive network of paved and very safe roads. No guerrillas on the lookout for someone to kidnap, or gangs of drug traffickers defending their territory, or corrupt police looking for bribes, as in other Latin American countries rather more interesting than ours. You are much more likely to be mugged in the heart of the city than on a little-traveled road in the country.

Almost as soon as you leave Santiago, the countryside becomes bucolic: poplar-lined pastures, hills, and vineyards. To the visitor I recommend stopping to buy fruit and vegetables in the stands along the highway, or to take a little detour and drive into the villages and look for the house where you see a white cloth fluttering; there they serve leavened bread, honey, and eggs the color of gold.

Along the coastal route there are beaches, picturesque little villages, and coves where fishermen anchor their boats and spread their nets. There you find the fabulous treasures of our cuisine: first of all, the conger, king of the sea, wearing its jacket of jeweled scales; then the corbina, with its succulent white meat, accompanied by a court of a hundred other more modest but equally savory fish. Then comes the chorus of our shellfish: spider crabs, oysters small and large, mussels, abalone, langoustine, sea urchins, and many others, including some with such a questionable appearance that no foreigner dares try them, like the *pícoroco*, iodine and salt, pure marine essence. Our fish are so delicious that to prepare them you don’t even need to know how to cook. You arrange a bed of minced onion in the bottom of a clay platter or Pyrex baking dish, lay the fresh fish, dotted with butter and sprinkled with salt and pepper and swimming in lemon juice, over the onion. Bake the fish in a hot oven until done—but not too long, you don’t want it to get dry. Serve with one of our chilled white wines in the company of your closest friends.

Every year in December we would go with my grandfather to buy the Christmas turkey, which the campesinos raised for that holiday. I can see that old man, hobbling along on his bad leg, chasing around a field trying to catch the bird in question. He had

to time his leap perfectly to fall on it, press it to the ground, and hold it while one of us struggled to bind its feet with a cord. Then he had to give the campesino a tip to kill the turkey out of sight of us children, otherwise we would have refused to taste it once it was cooked. It's very difficult to cut the throat of some creature with which you've established a personal relationship, as we could attest from the time my grandfather brought home a young goat to fatten in the patio of our house and roast on his birthday. That goat died of old age. And as it turned out, it wasn't a nanny but a male, and as soon as it grew horns, it attacked us at will.

The Santiago of my childhood had the pretensions of a large city but the soul of a village. Everything was public knowledge. Did someone miss mass on Sunday? That news traveled fast, and by Wednesday the parish priest was knocking at the door of the sinner to find out the reason. Men were stiff with hair pomade, starch, and vanity; women wore hat pins and kid gloves; elegant dress was expected when going into "the city" or to a movie—which people still thought of as a "talkie." Few houses had a refrigerator—in that my grandfather's house was very modern—and every day a hunchbacked man came by to deliver blocks of ice in sawdust for the neighborhood iceboxes. Our refrigerator, which ran for forty years without a repair, was fitted with a motor as noisy as a submarine, and from time to time shook the house with fits of coughing. The cook had to use a broom to fork out the bodies of electrocuted cats that had crawled beneath it to get warm. In the long run, that was a good method of birth control because dozens of cats were born on the roof tiles, and if some hadn't been zapped by the refrigerator we would have been inundated.

In our house, as in every Chilean home, there were animals. Dogs are acquired in different ways: inherited, received as a gift, picked up after they've been run over but not killed, or because they followed a child home from school, after which there's not a chance of throwing them out. This has always been the case and I hope it never changes. I don't know a single normal Chilean who ever bought a dog; the only people who do that are the fanatics from the Kennel Club, but no one takes them seriously. Almost all the dogs in Chile are called Blackie, whatever their color, and cats bear the generic names of Puss or Kitty; our family pets, however, always had Biblical names: Barrabas, Salome, Cain, except for one dog of dubious lineage whom we called Chickenpox because he appeared during an epidemic of that disease. Gangs of ownerless dogs roam the cities and towns of my country, not in the form of the hungry, miserable packs you see in other parts of the world but, rather, as organized communities. They are mild-mannered animals, satisfied with their social lot, a little lackadaisical. Once I read a study in which the author maintained that if all existing breeds of dogs were liberally intermingled, within a few generations they would narrow down to one type: a strong, astute beast of medium size, with short, wiry hair, a pointed muzzle, and willful tail: that is, the typical Chilean stray. I suppose we will come to that, and I hope also that with time we will succeed in fusing all human races; the result will be a rather short individual of indefinite color, adaptable, resilient, and resigned to the ups and downs of existence, like us Chileans.

In those days we went twice a day to the corner bakery to buy bread, and brought it home wrapped in a white cloth. The aroma of that bread just out of the oven, still

warm, is one of the most tenacious memories of my childhood. Milk was a foamy cream sold from a tin can. A little bell that hung from the neck of the horse, and the smell of the stable invading the street, announced the arrival of the milk cart. Maids lined up with their bowls and basins and bought what was needed by the cup, which the milkman measured out by thrusting his hairy arm up to the armpit into large tin cans that were always swarming with flies. Sometimes several liters extra were bought to make *manjar blanco*, also called *dulce de leche*, a kind of blancmange that lasted several months when stored in the cool shadows of the cellar, where the home-bottled wine was also kept. First a fire of kindling and charcoal was built in the patio. A tripod was set over it that supported an iron kettle black from use. The ingredients were added in proportions of four cups of milk to one of sugar, and that mixture was flavored with two vanilla beans and the peel of a lemon and then boiled patiently for hours, occasionally stirred with a long wooden spoon. We children would watch from a distance, waiting for the process to end and the sweet to cool so we could lick the kettle. We were not allowed to come anywhere near it during the cooking; every time we would be told the sad story of the greedy little boy who fell into the pot and, as the tale went, “was dissolved in the boiling milk till not even his bones could be found.” When pasteurized milk in bottles was invented, housewives dressed in their best clothes to be photographed—Hollywood-style—beside the white truck that replaced the unsanitary cart. Today not only are there whole, skim, and flavored milks, you can also buy bottled *manjar blanco*, no one makes it at home anymore.

In the summertime, little kids used to come by the house with baskets of blackberries and bags of quince for making preserves. The muscleman Gervasio Lonquimay also came by to check the metal springs of the cots and wash the wool mattresses, a task that could last three or four days because the wool had to dry in the sun and then be combed by hand before being stuffed back into the ticking. It was rumored that Gervasio Lonquimay had been in jail for slitting a rival’s throat, gossip that lent him an aura of unquestionable prestige. The maids always offered him a cool drink for his thirst and towels for his sweat.

An organ grinder, always the same one, was a fixture in the streets of our barrio until one of my uncles bought his hurdy-gurdy and pathetic parrot, and went around cranking out music as the bird distributed little papers that brought good luck, to the horror of my grandfather and the rest of the family. I understand that my uncle’s intention was to seduce a cousin with this display, but that the plan did not achieve the desired result: the girl married in a whirlwind and ran as far away as possible. Finally my uncle gave away the instrument but kept the parrot. It was very ill-humored, and at the first sign of inattention would nip a piece from the finger of anyone who came too close, but my uncle liked it because it swore like a corsair. It lived with him for thirty years, and who knows how many it had lived before: a Methuselah with feathers. Gypsy women, too, passed through the barrio, bamboozling the unwary with their mangled Spanish and those irresistible eyes that had seen so much of the world; they came always in twos or threes, with a half dozen runny-nosed brats clinging to their skirts. We were terrified of them because people said they stole little children, locked them in cages so they would grow up deformed, and then sold them to the circuses as freaks. They cast the evil eye on anyone who didn’t give them money. They were thought to have magical powers: they could make jewels disappear without touching

them, and unleash plagues of lice, warts, baldness, and rotted teeth. Even so, we couldn't resist the temptation to have them read the future in our palms. They always told me the same thing: a dark, mustached man would take me far away. Since I don't remember a single lover who fit that description, I have to assume they were referring to my stepfather, who had a mustache like a walrus and took me to many countries in his journeys as a diplomat.

AN OLD ENCHANTED HOUSE

My first memory of Chile is of a house I never knew, the protagonist of my first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, where it appears as the large home that shelters the issue of the Truebas. That fictional family bears an alarming resemblance to my mother's; I could never have invented such a clan. Actually, I had no need to, with a family like mine you don't need imagination. The idea of the "large old house on the corner," so much a part of the novel, evolved from the home on Calle Cueto where my mother was born, and so frequently evoked by my grandfather that it seems I have lived there. There are no houses like that left in Santiago, they've been devoured by progress and demographic growth, but they still exist in the provinces. I can see it: vast and drowsy, worn by use and abuse, with high ceilings and narrow windows and three patios, the first with orange trees and jasmine and a singing fountain, the second with a weed-choked garden, and the third a clutter of laundry utensils, dog houses, chicken coops, and unhealthy quarters for the maids, like cells in a dungeon. To go to the bathroom at night, you had to make an excursion with a flashlight, defying cold air and spiders and turning a deaf ear to the sounds of creaking wood and scurrying mice. That huge old house, which had an entrance on two streets, was one-story tall with a mansard roof, and it harbored a tribe of great-grandparents, maiden aunts, cousins, servants, poor relatives, and guests who became permanent residents; no one tried to throw them out because in Chile "visitors" are protected by the sacred code of hospitality. There was also an occasional ghost of dubious authenticity, always in plentiful supply in my family. Some attest that souls in pain wandered within those walls, but one of my older relatives confessed to me that as a boy he dressed up in an ancient military uniform to frighten Tía Cupertina. That poor maiden lady hadn't the slightest doubt that her nocturnal visitor was the spirit of Don José Miguel Carrera, one of the fathers of the nation, who had come to ask for money to say masses for the salvation of his warrior's soul.

My maternal aunts and uncles, the Barros, were twelve rather eccentric brothers and sisters, though none was hopelessly mad. When they married, some stayed on in that house on Calle Cueto with their spouses and children. That is what my grandmother Isabel did when she married my grandfather Agustín. The couple not only lived in that chicken yard of outlandish relatives but, on the death of my great-grandparents, they bought the house and for several years raised their four children there. My grandfather modernized the house, but his wife suffered from asthma because of the damp; in addition, the poor moved into the neighborhood and "the best people" began to emigrate en masse to the eastern part of the city. Bowing to social pressure, my grandfather built a modern house in the barrio of Providencia, and although it was then on the city's outskirts, he predicted that the area would prosper. The man had a good eye, because within a few years Providencia had become the most elegant residential area in the capital, though that ended long ago when the middle