



# The Blue Line: A Novel

By Ingrid Betancourt

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*From the extraordinary Colombian French politician and activist Ingrid Betancourt, a stunning debut novel about freedom and fate*

Set against the backdrop of Argentina's Dirty War and infused with magical realism, *The Blue Line* is a breathtaking story of love and betrayal by one of the world's most renowned writers and activists. Ingrid Betancourt, author of the *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Even Silence Has an End*, draws on history and personal experience in this deeply felt portrait of a woman coming of age as her country falls deeper and deeper into chaos.

Buenos Aires, the 1970s. Julia inherits from her grandmother a gift, precious and burdensome. Sometimes visions appear before her eyes, mysterious and terrible apparitions from the future, seen from the perspective of others. From the age of five, Julia must intervene to prevent horrific events. In fact, as her grandmother tells her, it is her duty to do so—otherwise she will lose her gift.

At fifteen, Julia falls in love with Theo, a handsome revolutionary four years her senior. Their lives are turned upside down when Juan Perón, the former president and military dictator, returns to Argentina. Confronted by the realities of military dictatorship, Julia and Theo become Montoneros sympathizers and radical idealists, equally fascinated by Jesus Christ and Che Guevara. Captured by death squadrons, they somehow manage to escape. . . .

In this remarkable novel, Betancourt, an activist who spent more than six years held hostage by the FARC in the depths of Colombian jungle, returns to many of the themes of *Even Silence Has an End*. *The Blue Line* is a story centered on the consequences of oppression, collective subservience, and individual courage, and, most of all, the notion that belief in the future of humanity is an act of faith most beautiful and deserving.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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## Editorial Review

Review

### Praise for *The Blue Line*

"Betancourt, the victim of a well-known, six-year-long political kidnapping in Colombia, can certainly be taken seriously as a chronicler of South American brutality and repression, and she does not turn away from the ugly truth in her fiction debut...the novel generally propels the reader along with its conviction and moral force."—*Library Journal*

"Betancourt writes unflinchingly . . . [She] tells an anguished story of passion, sacrifice, imprisonment, torture, and exile with often gruesome detail, historical accuracy, and rising suspense. . . .Betancourt orchestrates an intimate conflict and shocking denouement that fuse the personal and the political in a twenty-first-century variation on Greek tragedy."—*Booklist*

"The perfect summer read, à la Isabel Allende."—*Libération*

"A wonderful first novel . . . It's got what it takes to become this summer's bestseller."—*RTL*

"[Ingrid Betancourt] has written her first adventure novel and it's a great success . . . The writing is vivid and strong."—*Le Figaro Magazine*

"Striking the perfect balance, *The Blue Line* is serious and entertaining at once . . . Thoughtfully constructed between the past and present . . . [it] gets to the heart of the matter: how hard it can be to love, but also the horror of not loving and the pain of no longer loving. It is as dense and beautiful as a fall in slow-motion . . ."—*Le Point*

"An intense, moving, and gripping book."—*Version Fémina*

"An adventure novel reminiscent of Isabel Allende or Oriana Fallaci's *A Man*. The torture scenes are Dantean. The novel's structure allows Ingrid to come back to many of the themes that made *Even Silence Has an End* so powerful. They reappear in the hearts of new characters, yet are no less believable."— *Paris Match*

"A successful and enthralling first novel."—*Europe 1*

"In *The Blue Line*, Betancourt tells a love story – that of Julia and Theo – which also underscores the horror of political persecution and torture during the Argentinian dictatorship. She does so with great narrative strength and a touch of magical realism."—*El País*

"A strong, powerful novel."—*Elle*

"Bewitching."—*Point de Vue*

**Praise for Ingrid Betancourt's *Even Silence Has An End*:**

"[*Even Silence Has An End*] is gripping not just for its heart-wrenching portrayal of captivity, but also because of the sharp and useful psychological insights it offers"--*The New York Times*

"Remarkable."--*The Los Angeles Times*

#### About the Author

Born on December 25, 1961, in Bogotá, Colombia, Ingrid Betancourt was a politician and presidential candidate celebrated for her determination to combat widespread corruption. In 2002 she was taken hostage by the FARC, a brutal terrorist guerrilla organization, and held for more than six and a half years in the Colombian jungle. She was rescued in 2008. She is the author of the New York Times bestselling memoir *Even Silence Has an End*.

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*Also by Ingrid Betancourt*

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1.

## THE YOUNG WOMAN IN BLACK

End of Boreal Summer

2006

She looks into the distance.

She sees the mauve line between the sea and the flawless blue sky.

She sees the wind moving across the water. She can see it coming. Then she's not quite sure.

—

But the wind sweeps over the path of trembling grass. It slithers, climbs up the bank, and chafes the hedge that ends at the beach in a cross shape. Then it falls silent, crouching like a wild animal, watching the street. Gathering momentum, it swoops down onto the asphalt, skips over the manicured hydrangeas, and picks up strength.

She watches, intrigued, as it advances. It's coming closer now, brushing against the painted wooden houses, very close. It glides up the old maple tree that fills her window and coils itself snakelike around the trunk, transforming the branches into long, twitching fingers.

It taps at her window. It presses up against the glass. It whistles and calls to her as the rattling branches beat against the panes.

Julia is happy. She tugs impatiently at the lock on the frame and forces the window open. Leaning out, she allows the vagabond wind to sweep in and fill her entire being, breathes in deep lungfuls of its sharp air. She closes her eyes. She recognizes that salty, tarry smell. This Connecticut wind is strangely similar to the wind of her Buenos Aires childhood. It's not as intense, perhaps; lighter, more delicate. Or perhaps not. She knows from experience that memory can't be relied on to capture the true essence of things. The present often seems less vibrant than our recollections of the past.

Even so, Julia couldn't be happier.

She smiles. She likes the restraint of her surroundings: the neatly clipped shrubs in the gardens across the way, the carefully aligned elms along the avenue that runs perpendicular to the beach, the hedge and the grass that frame the fine sand like a rampart stretching parallel to the waves, and the horizon like a straight line drawn from one end to the other.

It suits her, this symmetry. She has finished putting her life in order. She is in her rightful place, living the destiny she has chosen for herself, with the man she has always loved. Julia feels fulfilled.

She looks up at the azure sky above her maple tree. Happiness is blue. Blue horizon, blue water.

A Mark Rothko painting, she thinks, forming a picture frame in the air with her fingers.

She'd like to hang that painting just in front of her face to remind herself that happiness is right there, within arm's reach.



Funny. This idea that happiness is blue: it's as if she's had this thought before.

All of a sudden the wind sets up a high-pitched whistling and rushes in through the window. Maple twigs catch at Julia's dress and scratch her skin. The sky has gone dark. Julia shivers. The air smells humid. The next moment a flash of lightning rips her painting from top to bottom. The light is blinding. It hurts, as if a razor had slit her retina.

A sharp cracking sound shatters the silence. The tree across the road has been split in two. Its heart is blown open, scorched, but the tree has not caught fire. One of the severed branches dangles dangerously close to the power lines along the avenue.

Julia ducks her head back in, pulls the window shut, and turns around, trembling. She scans the room, ready to face whatever might be coming. But everything is in order, each item sitting silently in its assigned place. Still, her eyes continue flicking back and forth, lingering on dark corners, decoding shadows.

Seized by an irrational feeling of panic, she gathers up the dirty clothes piled in the hamper and hurries downstairs to the basement laundry room. She arrives panting. *Such a fright, for no reason!* She shrugs her shoulders.

And then she feels the tremors begin. They always start the same way: a tingling in her heels, getting sharper as it travels up her calves, intensifying as it reaches her knees.

Julia knows she has only a few minutes before she passes out. She climbs the laundry room steps on all fours and crawls across the kitchen and into the living room. She needs to get into a corner of the room and prop herself up before it's too late. She wedges herself into the corner, sits up straight, legs stretched out in front of her for balance. One brief moment to congratulate herself for reacting in time, and then her world turns upside down. Her inner eye has taken over.

She feels herself slipping away. Her gaze clouds over; her eyes are choked with a thick white mist, and her mind shifts to another place. Julia floats into nothingness, beyond time and space. She has lost control of her body. She has abandoned it, like a lost glove, between two walls of her living room.

She is familiar with this journey, though she can never predict how long it will last or where it will take her.

Julia's not scared anymore. She knows she won't die; she knows she won't suffocate in the white substance enveloping her. She has the gift; she has received instruction; she is part of a lineage. All of her energy is being channeled into the connection that is about to take place. Her inner eye will graft itself onto someone else's vision—someone completely unknown to her.

Suddenly Julia finds herself in a dimly lit room, looking through a half-open door. She can see a young woman with her back turned illuminated in the glare of a neon light. The woman is wearing a skin-tight black dress down to her ankles. Her black hair is pulled back into a perfect chignon, as round and shiny as a pebble. She is carefully applying her makeup, her graceful neck bent forward to bring her face closer to the mirror covering the wall.

The eyes through which Julia is looking trace the young woman's slim figure from the nape of her neck to her heels, lingering on the hollow of her back. Aware she is being watched, the woman turns around. She has Oriental eyes and full red lips. They part in a distant smile, revealing perfect teeth.

Julia's source is sitting on the edge of a bed. A man. She glimpses his strong knees, realizes he is naked. Her peripheral vision takes in the drawn curtains, the mussed sheets, a chest of drawers behind the half-open

door, articles of clothing thrown carelessly over a chair.

The man gets up and walks toward the young woman. Julia sees a small, impersonal bathroom. She recognizes the logo of a large American hotel chain on the damp towels lying on the floor.

The young woman holds out a hand in a gesture of affection and finds herself being swept up into a passionate embrace from which she hastily disengages herself, laughing. She spins around, throwing one last look at herself in the mirror, picks up her handbag from beside the washbasin, and walks quickly out of the room, perched confidently on her high heels. The door clicks shut behind her.

Julia searches in the shadows for a long moment, then her field of vision shifts to the left. It travels up the bed and comes to rest on a mobile phone that is buzzing insistently, like a fly on its back. The man ignores it. He lies down and closes his eyes. Julia remains trapped in the dark for some time, helpless, unable to enter the thoughts or dreams of the person she's been twinned with.

And then the connection breaks. Julia feels herself being propelled to the surface. She breaks free from the darkness and travels through the milky white haze. Light restores the shapes of objects, signaling the gradual return of her sight. Slowly things come into focus. Her hands are still on her knees; her body is still wedged into the corner. Only her head has moved. It hangs heavily in front of her. The nape of her neck is sore, the way it always is after one of her journeys.

She rubs the back of her neck hard. Then she begins the set of stretches she learned from her grandmother. She circles her head slowly, from left to right and back again, until the stiffness eases. The inside of her neck crunches like crumpled paper. This journey was particularly long. She folds her legs into a lotus position and stretches her back, sticking her neck out like a turtle. Julia breathes slowly, centers herself. She regains control of her body by repeating the movements that have been part of her return ritual since childhood.

Little by little she becomes aware of the noises coming from the street. Looking out the window, she sees a team of uniformed men busy clearing away the remains of the dead tree. All signs of the storm have vanished and the sky has cleared. Only then does it occur to her to glance at her watch. It's noon. She hasn't had breakfast yet. She hasn't even started work. Luckily Theo's gotten into the habit of coming home late from the office. This gives her a few extra hours to finish her translations and get them to the client on time.

Ever self-disciplined, she prepares a large bowl of yogurt, almonds, and dried fruit so she can eat while reading through the pages. The text is beautiful. She has no problem finding the right words to transpose thoughts from one language to another. But she finds it harder to capture the harmony of sounds, their rhythm, their cadence. The task of re-creating the music of one language in another is more like art than anything else. It is what she finds most challenging. She plunges into her work with enthusiasm.

—

Julia jumps when she hears the front door open and realizes it's already 7:30 P.M. She hastily closes her laptop and smooths out the creases in her red dress. She glances in the mirror on the landing before going downstairs, relieved to find she looks nice. No traces of her journey, no need for explanations.

Theo is in the kitchen sorting through the mail. He has emptied his pockets and placed his keys on the countertop. He pauses when he sees Julia. Smiling, he takes her in his arms and spins her around. Then he kisses her on the forehead, as if to indicate that playtime is over.

"I'm starving, my love," he says. "I'm exhausted."

Julia's face clouds over. She pulls away, disappointed. She stares at Theo's shirt, at his hands. Lost in thought, she slowly opens the refrigerator.

"Tomorrow's Friday," she says in a level tone. "Maybe you could take the day off."

"Didn't I tell you? They've changed the rules. No more working longer during the week and taking Fridays off."

"But you're still getting up really early. Earlier and earlier, in fact. Wait, let me do the math. . . ."

"It doesn't work that way anymore, sweetheart. Anyway, I'm putting in overtime because it looks like I might be getting a promotion."

Julia gives him a blank look.

Theo slips in front of her and pushes the refrigerator door shut. "You still haven't learned to close doors, Julia my love," he says with a hint of irritation.

He walks out of the kitchen and goes upstairs. Julia follows mechanically. She wants to tell him about the lightning and the tree. But before she can catch up with him, he's gone into the bathroom and double-locked the door.

2.

## THE FIRST JOURNEY

Austral Summer

1962

She must have been five years old the first time it happened. She was living in Colonia del Sacramento, in Uruguay, in an old house behind the port, overlooking the estuary. She was playing in a dusty courtyard, away from the older children, who had devised a game of jumping off a low wall into the garden next door and terrorizing the neighbor's old dog.

Julia knew she was poor. Not because she lacked anything but because her mother complained about it. The word "poor" meant nothing to Julia. Oddly enough, she associated it with her carefree existence, far removed from adult preoccupations. But she also understood that it was the reason why her father had gone away and left them. And she missed him. Her mother would point to the Río de la Plata\* and explain that he had gone to look for work over there in Argentina, on the other side of the water.

"The river of silver, the river of silver . . ." Julia would say to herself over and over, like the words of a magic spell. She would stand at the railing for hours on end, staring down at the port of Colonia and the expanse of gray water flecked with silver that stretched as far as she could see. What more could there possibly be on the other side? She didn't understand.

"Mom," she would ask, "why has Dad gone away?"

"To get money for us, of course!"

Julia would stare with fascination at the platinum glint of the water below her. Turning to her mother, she would insist: “But, Mom, what about all the silver in the river? We don’t need any more!”

Her exasperated mother would roll her eyes and reply: “¡Nena! ¡El Río de la Plata no es ni un río, ni es de plata!”\*

Her twin brothers were only too delighted to hear their mother scolding Julia. They were nearly two years older and liked to treat her as a punching bag. They taunted her mercilessly, shoved her around, and tripped her up. Anna, her older sister, would rush to her rescue, gathering her up and chasing the twins away with a slap. “Daddy will be home soon, Julia. Don’t worry,” she would whisper in her ear.

Anna was the only one who could console Julia, because she too was desperately impatient for their father to return. For that reason, and because her mother was so distant and so strict with her, Julia showered all the love she was storing up for her father on her older sister. She would have liked to be included in the twins’ games but she was too scared of them; they were such daredevils. Besides, they had taught themselves to swim and spent most of their time in the river, where Julia couldn’t follow them.

On the afternoon of her first mysterious journey, Julia was in the backyard, sitting on the kitchen steps. She was playing by herself, drawing shapes in the dirt with her finger and filling an old oil canister with pebbles. At that time of day, the children had usually finished their lunch. It was Anna’s job to reheat the meal their mother had made at dawn before leaving for work. But on that particular day she had told Anna to wait: she would bring some groceries back from town.

The sun was beating down. Wearing a cotton dress that was too short for her—one of her sister’s castoffs—Julia was getting bored as she sat uncomfortably on the uneven stone steps. She started to feel unwell, almost feverish, but kept quiet as usual for fear of being scolded. Then she began to feel a prickling sensation up and down her legs. Thinking she was being bitten by insects, she swatted at her legs in annoyance.

The tremors spread very quickly, rising up through her body and stiffening each limb in turn until she was completely immobilized. Panic-stricken, she called to Anna as loudly as she could, but the twins’ high-pitched shrieks and the barking of the old dog drowned out her thin little voice.

All at once she couldn’t see. She thought she had fallen into the River of Silver. She was suffocating, trapped inside a thick white substance with no taste or smell. Disconnected from her body, petrified and blinded, she floated in a state of nothingness. She would remember that moment for the rest of her life. Emptied of her being, she understood what it meant to die.

She didn’t start breathing again until her eyes pierced the milky haze around her and she could once again make out the shapes of things and people.

That was when Julia became convinced that her sense of sight was not her own. The wide-angle images were moving, as if she were walking, but she knew she was totally paralyzed, unable even to control the direction of her gaze. She might almost have thought she had nodded off and was dreaming, except that this was different: it felt like she’d been cut in half and was seeing through someone else’s eyes, like an intruder catapulted into a strange world.

Julia, with her child’s mind, couldn’t comprehend why it was already night. She could make out a full moon hidden behind a flurry of clouds overhead. She saw the prow of a boat pitch upward on a nasty swell, as if she were on board. Violent gusts of wind whipped up the waves and sent them sweeping over the deck. Fascinated by the majestic scene unfolding in front of her yet feeling strangely protected from it, she forgot

to be afraid.

Suddenly Anna crossed into Julia's field of vision. She was walking toward the prow, every muscle in her body straining as she clung to the rail. She was trying to reach the twins, who were huddled on the deck in a pool of vomit, dangerously close to the edge. Julia couldn't see her mother, but out of the corner of her eye she spotted her father standing next to the tiller, directly to her left.

Just then a huge wave crashed onto the deck, and the prow disappeared behind a curtain of spray. The next moment Anna had vanished. Julia's field of vision panned around and she found herself looking in the opposite direction. She tried to will the vision to search for Anna, but what she saw instead was her father's distorted face, screaming. In the foreground she recognized her mother's white, veined hands clutching at him. She was her mother. Terrified, she realized she was seeing through her mother's eyes.

The next few seconds changed Julia's life forever. Her father's face was as hollow as a dead man's. She saw her mother's hands lash out and scratch him as she tried to grasp control of the tiller and turn the boat around. He was staring, transfixed, at a dot in the water, a dot that was getting farther and farther away, that was being lost in the furious agitation of the waves. Unable to move, he looked on as his world was being swallowed up. Julia wanted to throw herself at him too and force him to jump into the water after Anna. Why wasn't he doing anything?

All at once her view shifted again. For a fraction of a second she saw herself, as if in a mirror. She was clinging to her mother's skirts, her body rigid, panic in her eyes, screaming as loudly as her father.

The shock of seeing herself as another person was so brutal that it broke the connection. Shaking uncontrollably, she tumbled into empty space and plummeted down, sucked into a vortex. She wanted to cry out, to shout for help, to shake off this unfamiliar body. A second later she found herself entering the viscous white substance, coming up for air, ready to implode.

She landed with an abrupt thud and opened her mouth as wide as she could, gulping for air. Her lungs began to reinflate slowly and painfully. She recognized Anna by her smell of salt and guava alone: Julia's eyes had dried out in the white-hot December sun during her trance and she couldn't see. Anna was calling out her name in desperation and shaking her like a rag doll.

Julia let out an inhuman scream and burst into tears of fear, rage, and powerlessness. She didn't yet have the proper words to express her emotions, so she clung to Anna's neck and howled.

The next thing she knew she was lying on her bed, covered in blood. Anna told her she had toppled headfirst down the kitchen steps and cracked her forehead. Then Julia noticed the twins: just standing there, same hollow cheeks, same dazed expression. Struggling free from her sister's arms, she flung herself at them, scratching and biting them with her tiny teeth, her small fists, spluttering that it was all their fault, that Anna was dead and they hadn't done anything to rescue her.

Hearing her cries, her mother rushed into the room. It took all her strength to separate Julia from her brothers. She spent hours trying to calm her daughter down, offering cuddles, sweets, and rewards. But even Anna's appeals couldn't convince Julia to let go of the crazy idea she'd gotten into her head. Clinging to her big sister's neck, she kept screaming that Anna was dead and that no one had tried to save her.

She remained in the same state for the next few days. She refused to have anything to do with the twins and insisted on being allowed to go down to the sea on her own. She had decided she wanted to learn to swim. Her mother watched her from a distance, overcome with a feeling she hadn't felt for any of her children, more akin to resignation than to affection.

She let Julia have her way and sent Anna to keep an eye on her. Anna had an instinctive aversion to the brackish water the twins swam in. Out of love for her little sister and in the hope of curing Julia's madness, she overcame her disgust. She agreed to accompany her sister into the enigmatic waters of the river, but there was no getting Julia out. For hours on end Anna would hold her up in the water as she tried to do the breaststroke like the twins. Julia finally learned to swim and soon became as bold as her brothers. Through sheer persistence she managed to get Anna to swim too, though her sister went along with it more out of devotion to Julia than from any natural inclination.

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Christmas Day came. And as one good thing often leads to another, their father returned from Argentina laden with food. He had gotten himself a decent job in Buenos Aires and found a house for the whole family. His wife was overwhelmed with a joy that quickly spread to everyone else—everyone except Julia, who kept fiercely to herself.

One night she heard her parents talking at the kitchen table for hours after her older siblings had gone to sleep. So they really were going to leave Uruguay. Though Julia wasn't quite sure what that meant, the tone of their voices was enough to set her heart beating faster. Julia didn't want to leave Colonia. She liked her little world: the cobbled streets that wound upward as if searching for the sky; her own sloping, rickety house with its roof of crooked pink tiles—the exclusive domain of the neighborhood cats that Julia fed in secret. She felt she was the mistress of this small, safe world where she could do as she pleased with her days; where Anna alone was allowed to enter; and where everyone except her mother respected her desire for childhood solitude.

For some time there was no further talk of moving, and Julia thought they had given up the idea. Gradually her distress began to fade. Maybe it had just been a dream after all.

Like everyone else in the family, her father had been trying to coax her out of her shell. Walking to the market with him one day, her hand in his, Julia looked him straight in the eye and said with a grown-up air, "Alone at last!" Her father gave a shout of laughter. He lifted her up and twirled her in the air. Julia thought she would fly off into the blue sky that sucked her upward, taking her breath away, and was glad of her father's strong arms around her.

The departure took them all by surprise. A man in a sailor's cap arrived one morning and gruffly announced that the boat was ready and that they would have to set sail that evening. The household was thrown into utter upheaval. Everything was taken apart, stacked, folded, rolled, trussed, and piled up outside the house. They all found it hard to believe that their entire life could be reduced to such a small number of possessions.

Julia gathered up the things the others were throwing away. She found a long piece of string and threaded it through all the empty containers she found in the house and the garden. She dragged her train of dented receptacles behind her like some precious treasure. Amid the chaos her family greeted her eccentric behavior with relief. They had been worried she would have a nervous fit in the middle of their preparations to leave.

They set off toward the pier in a little procession at dusk. The captain was waiting for them. Julia instantly recognized the boat. The dread she had felt during her vision returned, and she began screaming in terror. The captain, all black beetle brows and bulging eyes, thought the child was throwing a tantrum and lost his patience. He even threatened to punish her, having decided that her parents lacked authority.

Julia became hysterical. Clutching her string of bottles and cans, she took refuge between her father's legs, but nothing could calm her. Despairing, he took her in his arms, climbed into the boat, and instructed the elder children to join him in the stern. Meanwhile, the captain was loading the boat and balancing the cargo

in the hold under their mother's watchful eye.

There was a full moon, and the night sky was clear and starless. Large black clouds were building up in the distance, but the crossing wouldn't take long—two hours at most. However, the wind began to pick up as soon as they sailed out of the port, and the rising swells slowed the boat's progress.

Just as in her trance, it all happened very quickly. The twins began to feel seasick, and the captain sent them to the prow. Anna wanted to help them and began to make her way to the front, gripping the rail. The boat pitched dangerously, and the captain left the tiller to secure the front hold. Their father took his place.

It was at that precise moment that a giant wave surged up and crashed with the sound of thunder across the deck. The captain had just enough time to snap on his safety harness, grab hold of the twins, and pull them to him. Anna went overboard. The roar of the wave drowned out Julia's screams. She was still gripping her string of bottles and cans. Left alone at the controls, her father yelled with fear, unable to steer the boat and thrown into a further panic by his wife's hysterical shrieks as Anna disappeared into the hollow of the wave. The boat had filled with water and the captain was frantically attempting to bail it out in order to escape disaster, all the while bellowing instructions to Julia's father, who seemed incapable of understanding him.

The twins hesitated for no more than a second. They exchanged a meaningful glance, launched themselves at Julia, grabbed her string of bottles, and jumped overboard. The last thing Julia saw before she passed out was Anna's head bobbing like a cork in the trough between two waves.

3.

MAMA FINA

Austral Summer

1962

Julia remembers every moment of her life from her first "journey" onward. She knows she hadn't yet turned six, because they celebrated her sixth birthday at her grandmother's house sometime after. Looking back, she thinks it was probably then that she became an adult.

Her grandmother had a lot to do with it. Hers was the first face Julia saw when she came to after the boat incident. She had never met this grandmother from Buenos Aires her father talked about so often. She remembers immediately feeling safe with her.

"Anna and the twins are alive," her grandmother told her. Julia stared at the unfamiliar face and then instantly fell asleep again, but this time into a child's deep sleep. She spent her convalescence in a bright room that opened onto an inner courtyard with an endlessly cooing stone fountain at its center. She could hear her mother's voice and the shouts of the twins from outside, like an echo. But it was her grandmother who was always there, all the time, right beside her.

Mama Fina had clear gray eyes so gentle you could lose yourself in them. Her voice, in contrast, was deep, rasping, even, almost masculine. She sat patiently by Julia's bedside for hours on end. From time to time she would lean forward to stroke her face and Julia would feel the touch of her hands, the skin as rough as a cat's tongue.

Julia thought Mama Fina was beautiful, with her hair in a heavy braid across her shoulder and her large, full-

lipped Neapolitan mouth. Julia's father had inherited her transparent eyes, but the rest of her features had skipped a generation. In adulthood Julia would be pleased to see a younger version of Mama Fina looking back at her in the mirror. She was the image of her, except for the large, dark eyes she had inherited from her own mother.

Julia didn't speak during her convalescence. As the days passed, she became increasingly fascinated by Mama Fina. Her words were enchanting. They transported Julia to another country and another time. Mama Fina told her how she had left Italy when she was not much older than Julia, about the ship, her family, the starry sea under the heavens, the forbidden races on the first-class deck, and the games of hide-and-seek in the engine room. And the arrival in Argentina: different smells, a different language that she could understand but not speak. Mama Fina described her trials with all the words she needed that kept eluding her and playing tricks on her. Identical words that meant one thing in Italian and another in Spanish. She was told to watch out for the *burro*, and she'd be looking around for the butter when they were talking about the donkey. And Julia laughed. For the first time ever, she laughed a real child's laugh. Finally she understood her own mistake with the Río de la Plata.

Mama Fina's stories penetrated deep into her like balm. She explained to Julia what had actually happened on the night of the storm. Thanks to her bottles and cans, the twins had been able to save Anna. Julia sensed that, oddly enough, it was she Mama Fina was most proud of.

Mama Fina's description of what happened was better than if she'd seen it with her own eyes. The twins had jumped into the sea in order to disprove Julia's prophecy that blamed them for the death of their big sister. The swell prevented them from seeing where Anna was, but she had managed to stay afloat, certain the twins would come after her because she too realized that Julia had prepared them. Hanging on to their containers, the twins had spotted Anna's head above the water several times, only to see her disappear the next moment, getting farther away each time. They were half-dead from their exertions when suddenly she appeared, like a vision, suspended on the crest of a wave just above them. Crying out, they fought through the swell and managed to catch hold of Anna as she came down. She grabbed onto the floats; only then did she nearly pass out. But the boys had no intention of letting go of her. Adrift in a raging sea in the middle of the night, the three children hung on.

At last the wind let up and the captain managed to turn the boat around. Instinctively calculating a possible drift, he tried to track them down. All of a sudden, their mother thought she heard cries. The captain shut down the engine. She hadn't been mistaken.

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Once Julia had recovered, everyone noticed she wasn't quite the same. There was something precocious in her eyes, almost painful, like a scar.

One day, when the family was gathered for lunch, Julia's father made an announcement: their house was finally ready and they could move in over the next few days. He told them it was in an attractive neighborhood in the western suburbs of Buenos Aires, with parks, flower-decked balconies, and lots of children. The twins began to race around the table in excitement, and Anna was overjoyed. Only Julia didn't look up from her plate. Her mother, noticing her silence, tried to cheer her up by pointing out that there were four bedrooms. As there was no question of separating the twins, Julia would have her own room. But there was no convincing her.

Mama Fina got up to clear the table and disappeared into the kitchen. An embarrassed silence fell. Anna stared uncomprehendingly at her little sister. Their father tried to explain that La Boca, the noisy neighborhood where Mama Fina lived, with its old port and nightlife, wasn't really suitable for children.



Julia held her older sister's gaze for a long moment, as if to give herself courage. Then, in a clear and final voice, she said, "I'm staying here."

It was the first adult decision of her life.

Anna sided with her little sister. In a way, she understood better than anyone just how much Julia needed her own space. She also sensed intuitively that Julia would blossom at Mama Fina's.

The family moved into their house. By way of marking the beginning of their new life together, Mama Fina enrolled Julia in the parish school and took her to the cinema for the first time to see a Cantinflas film. The movie theater seemed enormous to Julia, with its white pillars flanking the entrance and its heavy red velvet curtain with gold tassels. The film posters showed a funny little man with a ridiculous mustache and baggy pants who seemed to be inviting her in. Mama Fina had made her wear a sailor dress for the occasion and a white coat. Julia was worried she would get it dirty. She also had on a round hat with a trailing dark blue ribbon that tickled her neck. A gaggle of similarly dressed children were racing around the lobby and jumping from the grand staircase as they waited for their parents to finish buying candy.

A man wearing a small flat hat and a red uniform decorated with a long row of gold buttons went past, ringing a bell. The gaggle of children dispersed, and Mama Fina led Julia into the darkness of the huge air-conditioned theater. She handed her a little paper bag filled with popcorn, which Julia didn't want because she was thirsty more than anything. The beam of a flashlight directed them to two seats in the center of the theater. They slipped into their places, apologizing. The giant screen lit up and Julia felt overwhelmed by its presence. Hypnotized, she followed the movements of the little man with the silly mustache, unable to understand why the other children were laughing when she felt like crying.

"Did you like it?" Mama Fina asked as they walked out of the theater.

Julia thought for a moment, then turned to her and asked solemnly, "Was it real, Mama Fina?"

"No, it's a movie."

"But when I see movies . . . they become real afterward."

"We'll have to have a proper talk about this!"

—

One evening, when Julia had finished her homework, Mama Fina took her by the hand. "Come with me. I want to have a word with you."

She led Julia through the narrow streets of La Boca, along a familiar route that led to the church. They sat down on the low wall at the entrance. Intimidated by the solemnity of the occasion, Julia didn't dare open her mouth. After several long minutes of reflection, Mama Fina turned to Julia, looked her straight in the eye, and began, weighing her words: "This is a very important moment, in your life as well as mine. I'm going to tell you a big secret—the one my father's mother told me sixty years ago, before we left Italy. I was exactly the same age as you, because you'll be six in a few days' time.

"You told me that before the boat accident, when you were playing on the steps, you fell into the 'silver water.' You were very scared because you couldn't breathe, and then you saw things in your head that scared you even more. You were very angry because nobody seemed to understand.

"What happened to you, my grandmother used to call it the 'inner eye.' It's a gift. Like a special present.

Only a few girls in our family receive it. . . . I did, and so have you, but nobody else. We don't know who gives us this gift; we only know it's always a bit difficult to pass it on.

"If you want to give your gift to someone else, for example, first you have to become a mommy and have a boy. Sometimes mommies have little girls and sometimes they have little boys. But in your case, to pass the gift on, you have to have a boy.

"So you see, Julia, it's not all that easy, because we don't choose. Do you understand?"

"So the mommies don't say what they want when the baby is in their tummy?"

"No, not the mommies or the daddies. It's a surprise."

Julia began to swing her legs, hitting her heels against the wall. "And I'll give my inner eye to my son? Like you gave your eyes to Daddy?"

"Yes, but the gift skips a generation. That means your daddy has the gift, but he can't use it. The daddy has to have little girls, and then one of his little girls will receive the gift and can use it."

"Like me. It's your gift that you gave to Daddy, and now it's mine."

"Exactly."

"But why did Daddy give it to me?"

"You know, that's a big secret. Your daddy doesn't know the inner eye exists."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a secret."

"But why is it me who has the inner eye and not Anna?"

"Because usually it's not the eldest girl who inherits the gift."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody should be able to guess who will have it. That way it's a real secret."

"So nobody knows I have the inner eye?"

"Nobody except me. Because I have it too, so I can recognize it. You didn't know either, Julia, even though you have the gift. Now that you're a big girl, I can tell you about it and you can keep it a secret."

Julia drank in her words, enchanted. She wasn't sad anymore; she wasn't angry. Mama Fina had put into words the thing she hadn't been able to understand. She felt herself coming out of chaos.

Her grandmother paused, searching Julia's face, then carried on, fixing her with her translucent eyes: "Do you understand what the inner eye is?"

"It's a present nobody knows about."

"Yes, but the main thing is that it's a gift. It means you have a talent for something. Everybody has a gift of

some kind. Some people are better at singing, other people at drawing, some at talking, others at listening. Sometimes it's a tiny gift, like being good at organizing a closet. Sometimes it's a very big gift, like being able to understand the stars. This gift can be wasted. Or it can be used to make other people happy. If I die before I've had the time to teach you everything, remember this above all else: we were given our gift so we can help others."

Mama Fina broke off and said in a schoolmistress voice, "Julia, repeat what I just said."

Julia took a deep breath and recited carefully: "We were given our gift so we can help others."

Mama Fina smiled, patted Julia on the cheek, and carried on. "Our gift is different. It's secret because it's unique. Other people don't understand, and they might be scared. The way our inner eye works is a bit like looking through a keyhole: we can see things, but nobody knows we can see them. It's like when we went to the movies to see *Cantinflas*, remember? We sat in our seats and we watched the story, but we weren't in the story."

"That was why the children were laughing, wasn't it, Mama Fina? Because they weren't in it."

"The difficult thing for us is to figure out who it is who's lending us their eyes. . . . Remember, when you saw Anna falling out of the boat, you guessed it was your mommy."

"Yes, because I was scrrrratching Daddy with Mommy's hands," Julia said, screwing up her face in an effort to mimic the gesture.

"You weren't scratching Daddy. You were using Mommy's eyes to see, and you recognized the hands that went with the eyes. They were Mommy's hands."

Julia looked puzzled. Her grandmother paused, then whispered in a sympathetic tone: "I know, *mi amor*, it's difficult for us to imagine. Your mother asked you for help without knowing it, and you saw what was going to happen through her eyes."

"Mommy never asks me to help her," Julia said sulkily.

"She did on the boat."

"But Mommy didn't call out to me on the boat!" Julia protested.

"Your mother doesn't know she called you because it comes from the heart, not the head. She didn't think, *I'll ask Julia to help me*, but when she was on the boat . . ."

"She was screaming and she was scratching Dad," Julia interrupted, screwing her face up again, her little fingers outstretched.

"Yes, because she was very scared, and without thinking about it, her fear called out to you. Like when the telephone rings. And you answered."

"You mean my inner eye answered?"

"Exactly. We can respond to other people's feelings with our inner eye, you and me. That's how it works. And most of the time, what we see hasn't happened yet. It'll happen the next day, or the day after, or even later."

“So the telephone rings backward?”

“Something like that. The person who is calling us—our source—is experiencing what they see in the future.”

“Why?”

“That’s just the way it is. When our inner eye answers, we set off on a journey through time. Our gift lets us go forward or backward while everyone else is caught in the present.”

“Is that why it’s a gift?”

“Yes.”

“Why is it a good thing to travel through time?”

“Because we can help other people. Like you helped Anna.”

“But it was the twins who . . .”

“We’ve already talked about this, Julia. You’re the one who wanted Anna to learn to swim. You’re the one who took those containers on the boat. If you hadn’t done that, *mi amor*, I wouldn’t be able to tell you our secret, and your inner eye would wither by itself.”

“I would have lost my gift?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to lose it, Mama Fina.”

4.

## DECRYPTION

Boreal Autumn

2006

She stands at the top of the stairs, dumbfounded. *Come on, it’s perfectly natural to want to be alone in the bathroom.* All the same. He has never felt the need to lock himself in before.

She lingers there for a moment, then retraces her steps slowly, needing to clear her thoughts, to put some distance between the two of them. Get too close and love suffocates. The other person’s presence becomes oppressive. So you learn to live without seeing each other, the way you stop noticing the pedestal table in the hallway.

Julia comes back downstairs and sits in the living room. She has already laid the table and tossed a salad. Distracted, sitting on the sofa in the dark, she stares through the window at the corridor of shadows formed by the elms and maples.

It is the same ritual after each journey. She has to be sitting down, alone. When she was younger, she would

wait for the dead of night and the privacy of silence. She needed to go back over her journey while the world was extinguished so she wouldn't have to worry about being caught unawares. She is practiced enough now not to have to wait until midnight. She can blank out the world with her eyes wide open. Only the sequence of images already etched in her mind flashes before her eyes. The images come back to her, not like the blurred recollections of memory but with a clarity and precision that sight alone can produce. It's like a store of pictures compressed between her eyes and her brain. Her pupils are contracted even though she's in the dark because she is staring at a light source inside her head. The film of her latest journey plays in a continuous loop: the hotel room, the young Asian woman, the man. She repeats the same sequence once, twice, a hundred times.

Julia has been rigorously trained to gather the information and sift through it. Nothing can be dismissed out of hand. She knows from experience that the most obvious details, the ones most likely to be overlooked, are often the most useful.

She needs to establish whom the images captured by her inner eye come from. She has to understand the connection, the reason why she has been linked to this particular person at this particular moment. Sometimes her source is a family member or friend, but very often it's someone she can't identify because she hasn't met them yet. After a journey, she knows for sure that the person will one day pass through the meridian of her life. It is a rule. But Julia has to understand her role, the reason she has been called on to intervene.

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