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1. Isabel Allende and Her Mother Told Each Other (Almost) Everything

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Body

My mom and I are constantly in touch: We text multiple times a day, and call a few times a week. Historically (and embarrassingly), our communication has been pretty one-sided: me dumping my latest work or boy stress on her, asking for advice or reassurance, spinning out about the past or the future or the pesky leak in my ceiling. But recently, I've been making an effort to turn these "conversations" into actual conversations. To ask my mom questions, to listen to her answers, to have the same compassionate curiosity about her day-to-day as she does about mine. It's overdue, and deeply rewarding: We're getting to know each other as adults.

I was thinking about this during my conversation with *Isabel Allende*. To call Allende an author feels — insufficient. She's an icon of literature. At 83, Allende has written over 30 books that have sold tens of millions of copies around the world. Her first novel, "The House of the Spirits," has just been adapted into a TV series. It's a story about mothers and daughters, the fierce intensity and magical unknowability of that bond.

Allende and her mother were also constantly in touch, but in a very different way from me and my mom. They wrote to each other, every day, for over 30 years. Allende told me she has 24,000 letters in storage — which, she says, is only a subset of the total number. Their written correspondence deepened their connection, in a way that in-person interactions couldn't: On the page, they were able to share secrets and fears and dreams, to complain and gossip, to be themselves fully and receive the other without judgment. Allende got to know her mother — truly know her — through these letters. And she told me it was this ritual with her mother that really taught her to be a writer.

As we talked about the mothers in Allende's fictional world, and she shared memories of her own mother, I thought: I am learning so much from his interview, and I also can't wait for it to end so I can call my mom. There's a lot I want to tell her, but even more I want to ask her.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Anna Martin: Isabel, I know that writing letters has been a through line throughout your life. Your first novel, "The House of the Spirits," began as a letter to your grandfather as he was dying. What did you want to say to him in that letter?

Isabel Allende: I wanted to say that he could go in peace and that I remembered everything he had ever told me. I remembered him, his life. We were really close. I grew up in his house. I would write to him often when I was living in Venezuela, but this letter I knew somehow that he would never be able to read, because the snail mail was very slow then. And it was not about him really — it was about me saying goodbye. And I wanted to tell him I remembered all the characters in my family, the crazy lunatic relatives. The stories of my grandmother, who was a

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legend. My grandmother supposedly was clairvoyant, and she spent her short life experimenting with the paranormal. So there would be séances every week to call the spirits and the souls of the dead. It was she and three sisters, the Mora sisters. I wanted to tell my grandfather that no matter how long we hadn't seen each other and we hadn't talked, I remembered everything.

Martin: People who have read "The House of the Spirits" will recognize so much of what you're saying in the clairvoyant Clara, in the Mora sisters, in the supernatural. I want to talk more about what you said, that you had this sense that your grandfather would not be able to respond to this letter because he was in the process of dying. So was this letter also for you?

Allende: Yes. First, let me tell you that the book is fiction.

Martin: Yes.

Allende: It started as a reminder. And then very quickly it turned into something that I couldn't describe. I just kept on writing, and I said, "Well, it doesn't matter what it is — I just need to put it down." It was dictated in a way from the beyond, probably by my grandmother.

Martin: Can I ask you a bit of a woo-woo question? When you heard this dictation — when you received it — were you hearing a voice?

Allende: No, it was a sort of incredible speed to write. And it was easy. I wasn't thinking. I didn't have a sketch of a script, nothing. I just sat down and started to write, and then my relatives and their stories and the characters and what was happening in the country just happened on the computer in spite of me. It wasn't even a computer, it was a portable typewriter with no copies. Just one copy. So what happened? It's magical. It has never happened to me again. And I've been writing for 45 years. That feeling that the whole book is inside you and your job is to show up and just write it down before you forget.

Martin: You were 40 when you started this book?

Allende: Forty when I finished the book. My agent said two things that are important. She said: "Everybody can write a first good book because everything is inside. It's your experience, your memories, your feelings, everything. The second book is a challenge." And the other thing she said is, "You will have to do double the effort of any man to get half the recognition, because you're a woman."

Martin: Has that been true, Isabel?

Allende: Absolutely true. But I wouldn't say double. Three times the effort.

Martin: I want to talk more about "The House of the Spirits," which has been adapted into a stunning TV show. For people who are not familiar with the story, what would you say is at the heart of "The House of the Spirits?"

Allende: It's a story of three generations of mostly women. The main character is a man. But the story is told by the women. And it is the story of this family and the story of a country, how both stories blend in and mix.

Martin: Was there a question you were trying to answer with "The House of the Spirits?"

Allende: No, I was trying to remember. It was, I think, an exercise in nostalgia, in trying to get back everything I had lost in exile — my country, my home, my family. The memories that were fading, I wasn't forgetting. And I felt very displaced, disconnected, uprooted. And in a way, writing the story down grounded me, and gave me a voice, a purpose, something to do. I was sort of desperate. I was working administering a school, 12 hours a day, two shifts. That's not the kind of job I know how to do or I want to do, but I had to make a living. So the writing was such a joy. I was creating a universe in which I was like God. I could do whatever I wanted.

Martin: You were powerful in a way you did not feel in your day-to-day life.

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Allende: No. My day-to-day life was flat. Nothing was happening. My marriage was collapsing. My children were leaving the nest. And my job didn't mean anything to me. And I was displaced. I was a foreigner.

Martin: You mentioned the three women whose stories are told in "The House of the Spirits." And these women, at least ostensibly, do not have much power. They're hemmed in by the family, by their roles, by the patriarchy, by society. But each of these three women find these ways to express themselves and exert their power. You've spoken about how these characters are inspired by women in your life. Can you speak a bit to that?

Allende: Clara in "The House of the Spirits" is my grandmother, exaggerated. My grandmother, I'm sure, could not play the piano with the lid on.

Martin: Well, do you know that for sure? Maybe she just did it, not around you.

Allende: [laughter] No, but you know, Anna, the legend of my grandmother grew in time. So I don't know what she could really do, but as the stories were told, everybody added a little bit. So my grandmother became, in my memory, this magical creature that could interpret dreams and could know what was going to happen. She would feel the earthquakes before they happened.

Martin: Do you remember a time when you were young where she predicted something and it came true?

Allende: No, but when I was born, she looked at my back immediately and found a star birthmark that most kids have on their back. But according to my grandmother, that meant that I would have good health and have good luck and therefore I didn't need to get vaccinated or anything. So I was brought up with a sort of mild neglect that was really, really good because I had to fend for myself, given that I had good health and good luck.

Martin: I love that — born lucky. Can you talk more about your grandmother and how she's infused into this book, and also your mother, who you've spoken about appearing in this story?

Allende: Yeah, so Blanca is my mother. I created a character that was similar to my mother in personality, not the same life. But like my mother, she falls in love with the wrong man. My mother married my father, who was the wrong man, by the way. And my father left before I was even 3 years old, and left my mother with two toddlers and pregnant. Later, my mother fell in love with a married man who had four children. This is in a country with no divorce — in a Catholic conservative patriarchal society where they were ostracized. So to make a life with my stepfather, my mother had to sacrifice a lot. One of the many things was that he was a diplomat. So she traveled constantly, which was good in a way because it kept her away from Chile, where she was criticized because of what had happened. They always blamed the woman. She is the witch, and the man is just the victim always.

Martin: They blamed her for the dissolution of this marriage?

Allende: Of course. My mother lived abroad most of her life, except when she was very old. And so we were separated, and that's where the letter writing started. I was 16 when I was living in Chile in the house of my grandfather and my mother was in Turkey. So we started writing every single day. The letters would take two months to get there, and sometimes you would get 15 letters in a day and sometimes nothing for weeks.

Martin: I'm fascinated by this relationship between you and your mom and these daily letters. You started when you were living apart. What was happening in your life?

Allende: I was finishing high school, living with my grandfather in a very strict, severe environment, so I didn't go out much or anything. I did get a boyfriend just by miracle. But life was hard, and I was lonely and insecure. And I had no self-esteem. I was angry at authority, at patriarchy and how unfair the world was. And later that anger turned into a cause that has been the cause of all my life — feminism. But it didn't have a name at the time. "Feminist?" No one had heard that word. It was like "contraception" — no one had heard that word either. So that's how I grew up. It was a long time ago.

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Martin: With this anger inside you — I will speak for myself — when I was 15, 16, this is the time where I simultaneously hated my mom more than ever and also needed her more than ever. She was such a central figure in my life, and your mom was very far from you.

Allende: My anger was never against her, because she was far away. If we had lived close by like most families do, probably I would have targeted her with all my resentment and my anger and my frustration and my insecurity, but she wasn't there. So it all turned inside. I was just boiling inside. I couldn't turn it against my grandfather, because he would have not accepted any tantrum of any kind. That was unacceptable then. You did not talk back to your parents. You just swallow it somehow. But the fact that my mom wasn't there made it much easier. My mom and I were very different people. And I think that we were so close because of the letters and because we were not living close by. There was no time for pettiness, for little things. It was just the essentials.

But one thing that is interesting, Anna, is that in a way, I think that letter writing — although I didn't know it at the time — made me a writer. I lived the day paying attention to what was happening, so that I would have something to tell my mother in the letter in the evening. So I wasn't distracted as we usually are in life — I was paying attention. And that's great training for writing. So when my mom died, what I miss the most is my letters to her, not her letters to me. Because my letters forced me to observe my life, to record it, to pay attention, to understand what I was doing wrong, what was working. It changed me, the letter writing, more than anything.

Martin: In those earlier letters, what were you paying attention to? Was it like, "I had the best croissant for lunch?" What details would you share with her?

Allende: Things that I was reading. I would tell her what I was studying. I would talk about my relatives, my grandfather, conversations I had overheard, stories that I have been told by my grandfather. I would talk about my day, but not like a journal. It was never a list of activities. It was never, "I had a croissant," no. Because today that's what people do on FaceTime, but who cares if you had a hamburger, for God's sake? Who cares?

Martin: I completely agree with you. It's cool to me for a minute, and then it's like, Let's talk about some real stuff, right?

Allende: That small talk. I mean, why waste another person's time with your hamburger? I think that's very disrespectful. I would tell her about the place where I got the croissant, what kind of people were there. Who was the guy who served me, or the woman who served the croissants. So it would be about people and about relationships and mood. And that's what I would do with my mom — tell her the circumstances of life, the relationships.

So let me give you an example. I divorced my second husband in 2015, and we had been together for 28 years. Recently, I decided to write a memoir about the end of love, a time alone, and the beginning of a new love at a very old age. I didn't remember much why my marriage ended, because we were really good friends. We never slammed the door. I was never unfaithful. So why? And then I went to my mother's letters, day by day, with the emotion of the day, with the circumstances of the day, so I could relive what I had forgotten.

Martin: How many years did you two write letters to each other every single day?

Allende: I started collecting them in 1987. And my son has calculated when we digitized the whole thing, that we have around 24,000 letters. But that's from both of us, it's not just one person. And also, I left my country with nothing. So if there was a bunch of letters, they were lost in the shuffle.

Martin: I mean, 24,000 existing letters of more that were left behind — it's a remarkable number. You've shared with me the types of things you would write to your mother. What would she write to you?

Allende: First of all, she belongs to a generation that learned to write, because communication was written. If you invited someone for dinner, you didn't pick up a phone — there was no phone, probably. You sent a card, an invitation. It had to be written with perfect calligraphy on a beautiful piece of paper. You couldn't have a spelling mistake. A spelling mistake was bad manners. It would be like farting in public. Awful. My mother's letters, for

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example, were six pages, with not one correction, in blue ink and beautiful handwriting until she couldn't hand write anymore because she was 98. And so what would she tell me? She would tell me everything from kitchen recipes that she was experimenting with, to a fight that she had with my stepfather. Many letters are incredibly confidential because the things that she says about other people are horrible. Even about my brothers. I mean, she and I could say, to each other, anything. We talked about sex, about money.

Martin: You talk about sex explicitly?

Allende: Yes, we did. My mother was very funny. She would be 95 and have erotic dreams. So she would tell me the dream in the letter. It was always very funny.

Martin: Was there ever a thing where you were like, "Mom, that's a little T.M.I.?"

Allende: No, but I would not tell her about my sex life with my husband. But she would, no problem.

Martin: That door was open between you, but that's not necessarily the norm between mothers and daughters, certainly at that time.

Allende: I think she established that relationship since I was very little. She called me "mami," so I was her "mami," and she was very clingy and dependent. And so I had the role of the grown-up most of the time.

Martin: So your mom opened up this really intimate channel because she didn't have anyone else to share this stuff with? Was that your impression?

Allende: Well, because the first few years when I was little, she didn't have a husband. She was in love with the wrong man. He was a diplomat, so he was away. So she was rejected, ostracized, economically dependent. She was poor. We lived in the house of my grandfather, and we never lacked food or shoes for school. But my mother didn't have any pocket money. So if she wanted to buy ice cream for us, she didn't have the money for ice cream. The contrast between the men in the family who had a salary, who had the keys of their house, who had a car, who didn't have to explain where they went or where, when they were coming back. I didn't want to be like my mother in that sense. I wanted to be like the men in the family, who had this independence that I craved.

So my mother was dependent, poor, beautiful. She was craving care, craving attention, respect, money, everything.

Martin: And so as a kid you fulfilled that need for her. And maybe what you're saying — although let me know if I'm wrong — is the openness in these letters was a way of her receiving care and attention from you, because she's sharing so much and you're receiving it. Is that what you were saying?

Allende: No, because that was when I was little — I don't know, it's a strange question, Anna, because what did she want from me? She just wanted a confidant. And the trust that we had was absolute. There was nothing that she would tell me that would turn me against her, ever, and vice versa. I could tell her anything. I always felt in my life that I could take risks, stupid risks, because I had someone to fall back on. Someplace where I could fall back to and be safe — my mother's love. She could not protect me or give me anything material, but she gave me all the support. And as I said before, we could not be more different. For many years, she could not understand that I was a feminist. She would say: "Look, you can do anything you want, but discreetly. Do it discreetly. You don't have to make so much noise." And I said: "Mother, feminism is about noise! What are you talking about?"

Martin: There must have been disagreements in the letters as well. I'm curious if you remember any kind of conflict or friction that you had when you were writing these letters.

Allende: No, when we were together we would have moments. She was very sensitive, and everything was about her. So let's say that she has to go to the hairdresser, and she will say, "Yeah, it has to rain today!" She would misplace the keys — "Somebody stole my keys!" And so we would get in a fight. But by mail, you can't. So that's why my relationship with her was so perfect. And then on the other hand, Anna, I am bossy. I am terribly bossy. I'm opinionated. I have strong ideas. I am not tolerant with stupid people. I have a lot of problems. I am really a bitch. So my mother seldom got to see that, but she resented that I was bossy when we were together.

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Martin: The way you say, “I’m a bitch,” I’m like, I want to be that kind of bitch ...

Allende: No, you don’t, Anna — ask my husband. You don’t. [Laughter]

Martin: We’ll get him on the line at the end of this. No, I mean, what you’re articulating is something really interesting, which is like, if you had lived in the same place with your mother, you wouldn’t have had this kind of relationship. It was the distance and this ability to grow your relationship through writing that allowed for this kind of supreme trust. The distance made the relationship what it was.

Allende: There is another point — not now with email so much, but before, when I wrote by hand or I typed, you couldn’t correct. So you had to think about the sentence before, which now is a lost art. People just say whatever. Before, you had to think, because you couldn’t correct. So if I was mad at my mom for whatever, I would not just spit it out. I had to think, How am I going to say it? And that gives you a pause, and you don’t hurt the other person so easily.

Martin: Now I’m like, man, I should have lived apart from my mom and written her letters. We would have had a much smoother couple years when I was a teenager. So Isabel, you have these decades of writing letters to each other daily, and then she passes ...

Allende: You know, after my mother died — she died in 2019 — I kept on writing to her for some time with the idea that somehow it could reach her, the intention would reach her.

Martin: A dialogue that can exist from this world to another world.

Allende: Exactly. Why not?

Martin: Do you remember the feeling when you stopped writing to her? Letter writing to your mom had been a constant presence in your life for decades. What was it like to not have that as part of your life anymore?

Allende: Sad and sort of emptiness, something is missing. But what I have seen in these years is that I don’t pay attention anymore. I go through life like everybody else, not noticing, because I don’t have the obligation to write to my mother in the evening. Look, I wrote to my mom every day, even when I was on a book tour. And some of the book tours were crazy — for example, one of them was 23 cities in 30 days. I would write to her every evening.

Martin: OK, so for anyone who can’t call their mom back, I want you to hear that Isabel Allende was on the road to 23 cities in 30 days, and still wrote letters to her mom.

I want to turn now to a different relationship in your life that you also have written about — your relationship with your daughter, Paula. You’ve shared your loss of Paula in her 20s. You wrote a book about this experience, and it started out as a kind of letter to your daughter, similar to how “The House of the Spirits” started off as a letter to your grandfather. What did you want to tell your daughter in these letters?

Allende: First, let me tell you that when Paula fell in love, she went with her husband to live in Spain. And so my mother, she and I shared like a triangle of letters. I would send letters to my mom and Paula. So I have letters that are from the three of us. Paula had a rare condition called porphyria that should not be fatal, but she had a crisis in Madrid. She went to the hospital, and she fell into a coma. She ended up with severe brain damage. During those five months, I was in the hospital with her. And what I was told was that people in a coma, often when they wake up, have lost parts of their memory or all of it. And it takes a while to recover those memories, and some people just don’t. So, I started a notebook to tell Paula about her life, so that she would remember her husband, her family, where she came from, the past of her country, her family. So that was the intention of the first part during those five months. I had written to my daughter hundreds of letters, but when she was in the hospital, it was a different kind of letter because it was like informing her, like explaining to her where she came from. I was sure she was going to recover, that she was going to wake up at some point. I was waiting for her to open her eyes to be able to disconnect her from the ventilator, but it didn’t happen.

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Martin: You said the beginning part of this book, when you thought that Paula was going to recover and wake up, was you reminding her of her story, which is beautiful.

Allende: Which is what I did with my grandfather. Same idea.

Martin: And then the second part of the book, once you knew that you were going to lose her, that you'd lost her, what were you trying to do with that part of the book?

Allende: I was trying to say: "Don't worry, you're like a newborn baby, and I am your mother. You will be safe. Nothing is going to happen to you. It's a beautiful day. Now it's the spring. All the jasmine on the deck has bloomed, and you love the smell. So I'm going to take you out to smell the jasmine." Or I would say, "We will have to cut your hair, because we can't handle your long hair anymore." That kind of stuff.

Martin: How did writing to her help you move through your grief?

Allende: At the end, after Paula passed away — she died on Dec. 6, 1992 — and I start all my books on January 8. So a month later, by Jan. 6 or 7, my mother came from Chile, and she said, "Well, what are you going to write tomorrow?" I said: "Mom, nothing. I just feel completely empty. I am incredibly sad. Nothing." And she said, "If you don't write, you will die." She said: "This is a long tunnel that you will have to walk alone, but there is light at the end. Just keep walking, one step at a time, one day at a time, word by word. And so get started tomorrow." And then the next day, Jan. 8, she accompanied me to my office, and she says, "I'm going to Macy's to buy a sweater." And she gave me back the letters that I had written to her during that year. And she said: "Read them — they're in chronological order, and you will realize that the only way out for Paula was death. She's free now." So she left, and she came back like six hours later without a sweater, and I had written several pages in that time. So writing helped me a lot. I could walk the tunnel alone, because I was writing.

Martin: It's hitting me that you sort of had to parent your mother when you were growing up — give her a lot of care. Then when Paula's in the hospital, you're consumed with being a mother to Paula. And it just strikes me that this is the moment that your mom comes and is taking care of you, is a mother, to you.

Allende: Absolutely. She never hesitated. When Paula fell into a coma, I called Chile. My mother took a plane the next day.

Martin: You know throughout this conversation, I'm thinking about my own mom. Recently, she's been opening up to me a lot more about her past and past relationships and struggles she's had and regrets. And I feel so grateful to be let into this part of her life and also a little bit terrified, because I'm getting to know her so much more fully. She's becoming more known and less known at the exact same time.

Allende: Because you have an idea of her, and then the idea changes when she tells you things.

Martin: Certainly you didn't grow up with this kind of dynamic, but to me there's almost this kind of unwritten rule that mothers aren't supposed to really share their innermost lives with their children. Because, you know, we need or we want our mothers to remain these kind of invincible figures.

Do you have any advice for me?

Allende: Enjoy her, enjoy it, and ask questions, as many as you can, because that's what you will have afterward from her. Everything that she has given you, all the questions, the confidences.

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