A Genetics of Justice

Julia Alvarez
Born 1950

"English, not the United States, was where I landed and sunk deep roots."

About Alvarez

At the age of ten, Julia Alvarez found herself thrust into an entirely new culture. She had grown up in the Dominican Republic during the brutal regime of General Rafael Trujillo, a military dictator who terrorized the nation for thirty-one years. Fleeing their country in the last months of Trujillo's rule, Alvarez and her family settled in New York City.

Being forced to learn English in her new home made Alvarez focus on language and led to her desire to become a writer, a decision she had made by the time she had reached high school. "I consider this radical uprooting from my culture, my native language, my country, the reason I began writing," the award-winning poet and novelist has stated. American culture also encouraged Alvarez to write: "Being in a world where there were books and encouragement of women to discover their talents contributed to my becoming a writer." Alvarez captures the immigrant experience in her poetry, short stories, and essays.

The Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic, located between Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Caribbean, shares an island called Hispaniola with Haiti. The Republic has had a tumultuous political history, which has affected Alvarez's family. Her father, a doctor with many ties in the United States, kept the Alvarez family relatively protected during the political upheavals under Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 to 1961. In the 1950s, Alvarez's father joined a group of revolutionaries. However, when the situation became too violent and dangerous, the family fled to New York City. The revolutionaries assassinated Trujillo nine months later.

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— Julia Alvarez

Perhaps because I was spared, at ten, from the dictatorship my parents endured most of their lives, I often imagine what it must have been like for them growing up under the absolute rule of Generalísimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

Especially, I imagine my mother's life. Respectable families such as hers kept their daughters out of the public eye, for Trujillo was known to have an appetite for pretty girls, and once his eye was caught, there was no refusing him.

My mother must have been intrigued. She knew nothing of the horrid crimes of the dictatorship, for her parents were afraid to say anything—even to their own children—against the regime. So, as a young girl, my mother must have thought of El Jefe as a kind of movie star. She must have wanted to meet the great man.

Images of the dictator hung in every house next to the crucifix and la Virgencita with the declaration beneath: *In this house Trujillo is Chief*. The pale face of a young military man wearing a plumed bicorne hat and a gold-braided uniform looked down beneficently at my mother as she read her romantic novelas and dreamed of meeting the great love of her life. Sometimes in her daydreams, her great love wore the handsome young dictator's face. Never having seen him, my mother could not know the portrait was heavily retouched.

By the time my mother married my father, however, she knew all about the true nature of the dictatorship. Thousands had lost their lives in failed attempts to return the country to democracy. Family friends, whom she had assumed had dropped away of their own accord, turned out to have been disappeared. My father had been lucky. As a young man, he had narrowly escaped to Canada after the plot he had participated in as a student failed. This was to be the first of two escapes. That same year, 1937, El Generalísimo ordered the overnight slaughter of some eighteen thousand Haitians, who had come across the border to work on sugarcane plantations for slave wages. It was from my father that my mother learned why Trujillo hated blacks with such a vengeance, how he disguised his own Haitian ancestry, how he lightened his skin with makeup.

Perhaps because she had innocently revered him, my mother was now doubly revolted by this cold-blooded monster. He became something of an obsession with her—living as she was by then in exile with my father, isolated from her family who were still living on the Island. As my sisters and I were growing up, Trujillo and his excesses figured in many of my mother's cautionary tales.

Whenever we misbehaved, she would use his example as proof that character shows from the very beginning. One such story showed the seeds of Trujillo's megalomania. As a child, Trujillo had insisted his mother sew coke bottle tops or *chapitas* to his shirt front so that he could have a chest of medals. Later, the underground's code name for him would be Chapita because of his attachment to his hundreds of medals.

When my sisters and I cared too much about our appearance, my mother would tell us how Trujillo's vanity knew no bounds. How in order to appear taller, his shoes were specially made abroad with built-in heels that added inches to his height. How plumes for his Napoleonic hats were purchased in Paris and shipped in vacuum-packed boxes to the Island. How his uniforms were trimmed with tassels and gold epaulettes and red sashes, pinned with his medals, crisscrossing his chest. How he costumed himself in dress uniforms and ceremonial hats and white gloves—all of this in a tropical country where men wore *guayaberas* in lieu of suit jackets, short-sleeved shirts worn untucked so the body could be ventilated. My mother could go on and on.

At this point I would always ask her why she and my father had returned to live in the country if they knew the dictatorship was so bad. And that's when my mother would tell me how, under pressure from his friends up north, Trujillo pretended to be liberalizing his regime. How he invited all exiles back to form political parties. How he announced that he would not be running in the next elections. My father had returned only to discover that the liberalization was a hoax staged so that the regime could keep the goodwill and dollars of the United States.

My father and mother were once again trapped in a police state. They laid low as best they could. Now that they had four young daughters, they could not take any chances. For a while, that spark which had almost cost my father his life and which he had lighted in my mother

seemed to have burnt out. Periodically, Trujillo would demand a tribute, and they would acquiesce. A tax, a dummy vote, a portrait on the wall. To my father and other men in the country, the most humiliating of these tributes was the occasional parade in which women were made to march and turn their heads and acknowledge the great man as they passed the review stand.

If you did not march, your *cédula* would not be stamped, and without a stamped identification card, you could do nothing; in particular, you could not obtain your passport to leave the country under the pretext of wanting to study heart surgery. This was the second escape—this time with his whole family—that my father was planning.

The day came when my mother had to march. The parade went on for hours in the hot sun until my mother was sure she was going to faint. Her feet were swollen and hurting. The back of her white dress was damp with sweat. Finally when she thought she could not go one more step, the grandstand came into sight, a clutter of dress uniforms, a vague figure on the podium.

When I run through my mother's memory of this parade, there is a scene I imagine that she has not told me about. My mother walks into El Jefe's line of vision, the parade stops. Somebody ahead of Mami has fainted, and orderlies are rushing forward with their stretcher to resuscitate the woman in question. Under her breath, my mother is cursing this monster who drags thousands of women out on the hot streets to venerate him. She looks up at him, and what she sees makes it all worthwhile, somehow.

For there, no more than ten steps away, he stands, a short, plump man sweating profusely in his heavy dress uniform. The medals on his chest flash brightly in the hot sun so that he looks as if he has caught on fire. She can see the rivulets of sweat under his Napoleonic hat, making his pancake makeup run down his face, revealing the dark skin beneath. I invent this scene because I want my mother to see what she cannot yet imagine: El Jefe coming undone.

Eventually, the parade moved on, and my mother marched out of sight. It was the one and only time that my mother saw, up close, the man who had ruled her imagination most of her life.

On May 30, 1961, nine months after our escape from our homeland, the group of plotters with whom my father had been associated assassinated the dictator. Actually, Dominicans do not refer to the death as an assassination but as an *ajusticiamiento*, a bringing to justice. Finally, after thirty-one years, Trujillo was brought to justice, found guilty, and executed.

But the execution was an external event, not necessarily an internal exorcism. All their lives my parents, along with a nation of Dominicans, had learned the habits of repression, censorship, terror. Those habits would not disappear with a few bullets and a national liberation proclamation. They would not disappear on a plane ride north that put hundreds of miles distance between the Island and our apartment in New York.

And so, long after we had left, my parents were still living in the dictatorship inside their own heads. Even on American soil, they were afraid of awful consequences if they spoke out or disagreed with authorities. The First Amendment right to free speech meant nothing to them. Silence about anything "political" was the rule in our house.

In fact, my parents rarely spoke about the circumstances of our leaving the Island. To us, their daughters, they offered the official story: my father wanted to study heart surgery. We were not told that every night our house had been surrounded by black Volkswagens; that the SIM had been on the verge of arresting my father; that we had, in fact, *escaped* to the United States. But this great country that had offered my parents a refuge had also created the circumstances that made them have to seek refuge in the first place. It was this same United States that had helped put our dictator in place during their occupation of the country from 1916 to 1924. About all these matters, my parents were silent, afraid that ungratefulness would result in our being sent back to where we had come from.

My mother, especially, lived in terror of the consequences of living as free citizens. In New York City, before Trujillo was killed, Dominican exiles gathered around the young revolutionary Juan Bosch planning an invasion of the Island. Every time my father attended these meetings, my mother would get hysterical. If the SIM found out about my father's activities, family members remaining behind were likely to be in danger. Even our own family in New York could suffer consequences. Five years earlier, in 1955, Galíndez, an exile anti-Trujillo teaching at Columbia University, had disappeared from a New York subway. The same thing could happen to us.

I don't know if my father complied or just got too busy trying to make a living in this country. But after a few months of hotheaded attendance, he dropped out of these political activities and his silence deepened. During my early teen years in this country, I knew very little about what was actually going on in the Dominican Republic. Whenever *la situación* on the island came up, my parents spoke in hushed voices. In December 1960, four months after our arrival, *Time* magazine reported the murder of the three Mirabal sisters, who along with their husbands had started the national underground in the Dominican Republic. My parents confiscated the

magazine. To our many questions about what was going on, my mother always had the ready answer, "*En boca cerrada no entran moscas*." No flies fly into a closed mouth. Later, I found out that this very saying had been scratched on the lintel of the entrance of the SIM's torture center at La Cuarenta.

Given this mandate of silence, I was a real thorn in my mother's side.

She had named me, her second of four daughters, after herself—so we shared the same name. Of all her babies, she reports, I was the best behaved, until I learned to talk. Then, I would not shut up. I always had to answer her back when I disagreed with her. Childhood was rocky, but adolescence was a full-fledged war.

Still, my mother found ways of controlling me. The Trujillo cautionary tales worked momentarily, in that I loved to hear those outlandish stories. Her threats to disown me for being disrespectful were more effective. The definition of disrespect—as she had learned in the dictatorship—was anything short of worship. When Eleanor Roosevelt's grandson published a biography of his famous grandmother, my mother said he should be ashamed of himself for calling his grandmother "a plain woman."

"But she was a plain woman," I argued. "That's just saying the truth."

"Truth! What about honoring his grandmother?" My mother's eyes had that look she saw in my eyes when she said, "If looks could kill . . ."

Unfortunately for my mother, I grew up to be a writer publishing under my maiden name. At first, my mother flushed with personal pride when friends mistook her for the writer. "The poem in your Chrismas card was so beautiful! You're quite the poet, Julia!" But after I became a published writer, friends who had read a story or an essay of mine in some magazine would call up and say, "Why, Julia, I didn't know you felt that way. . . ." My mother had no idea what ideas she was being held responsible for. When I published a first novel with a strong autobiographical base, she did not talk to me for months.

Then I started to work on my second novel. My mother heard from one of my sisters that I was writing about the dictatorship. The novel would be a fictional retelling of the story of three Mirabal sisters, contemporaries of my mother, whose murder had been reported in that confiscated *Time* magazine. This time, my mother warned, I was not just going to anger family members, but I would be directly reponsible for their lives. There were still old cronies of the dictator around who would love an excuse to go after my family, after my father, after her.

This was one of the hardest challenges I had ever had to face as a writer. If my mother were indeed speaking the truth, could I really put

my work above the lives of human beings? But if I shut up, wouldn't I still be fanning the embers of the dictatorship with its continuing power of censorship and control over the imagination of many Dominicans? I talked to my cousins in the Dominican Republic and asked them if my mother's dire predictions had any foundation. "The old people still see a SIM agent under every bush!" they said, shaking their heads.

When the novel came out, I decided to go ahead and risk her anger. I inscribed a copy to both Mami and Papi with a note: "Thank you for having instilled in me through your sufferings a desire for freedom and justice." I mailed the package and—what I seldom do except in those moments when I need all the help I can get—I made the sign of the cross as I exited the post office. Days later, my mother called me up to tell me she had just finished the novel. "You put me back in those days. It was like I was reliving it all," she said sobbing. "I don't care what happens to us! I'm so proud of you for writing this book."

I stood in my kitchen in Vermont, stunned, relishing her praise and listening to her cry. It was one of the few times since I had learned to talk that I did not try to answer my mother back. If there is such a thing as genetic justice that courses through the generations and finally manifests itself full-blown in a family moment, there it was.