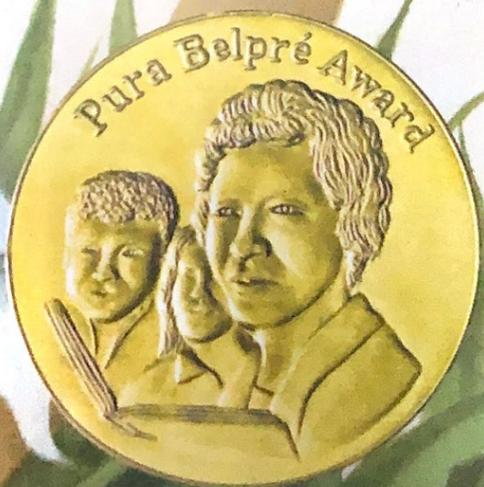
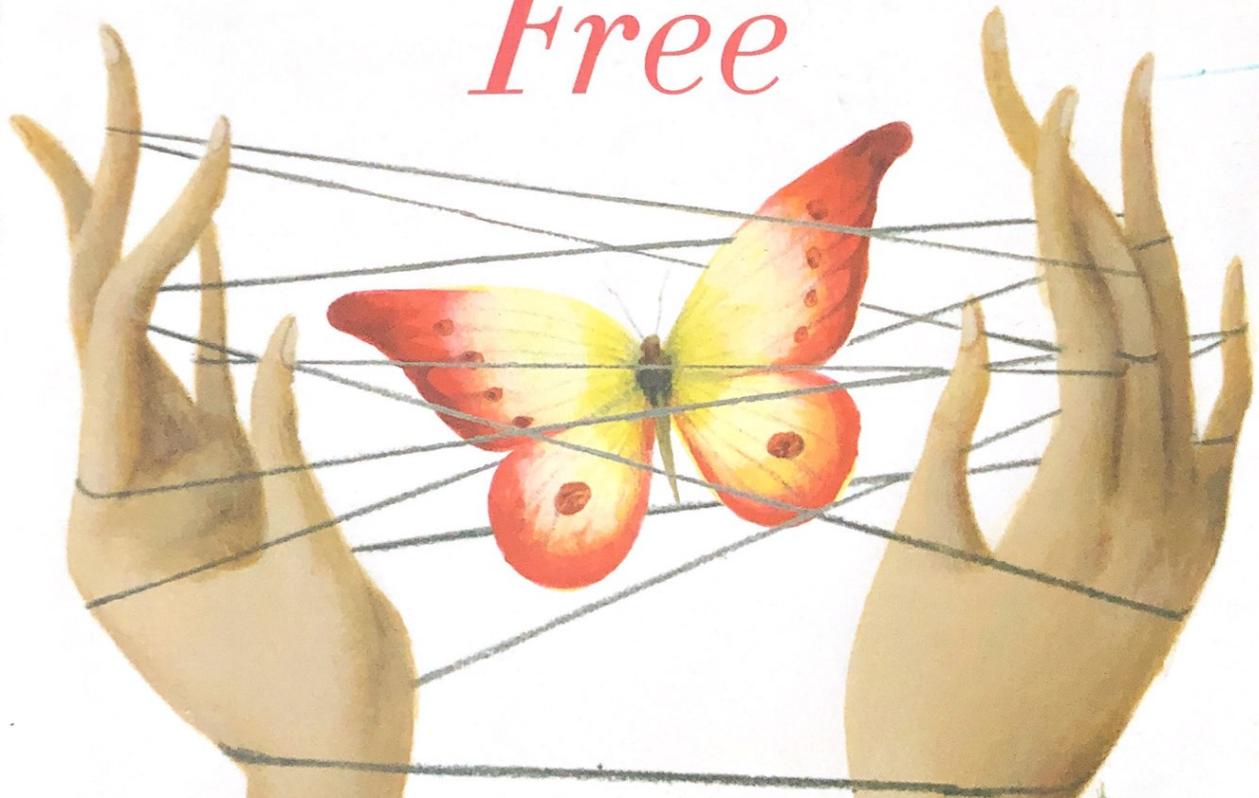


JULIA ALVAREZ

*Before We Were
Free*



*The Eraser in the Shape of the
Dominican Republic*

"May I have some volunteers?" Mrs. Brown is saying. We are preparing skits for Thanksgiving, two weeks away. Although the Pilgrims never came to the Dominican Republic, we are attending the American school, so we have to celebrate American holidays.

It's a hot, muggy afternoon. I feel lazy and bored. Outside the window, the palm trees are absolutely still. Not even a breeze. Some of the American students have been complaining that it doesn't feel like Thanksgiving when it's as hot as the Fourth of July.

Mrs. Brown is looking around the room. My cousin, Carla, sits in the seat in front of me, waving her arm.

Mrs. Brown calls on Carla, and then on me. Carla and I are to play the parts of two Indians welcoming the Pilgrims. Mrs. Brown always gives the not-so-good parts to those of us in class who are Dominicans.

She hands us each a headband with a feather sticking up like one rabbit ear. I feel ridiculous. "Okay, Indians, come forward and greet the Pilgrims." Mrs. Brown motions toward where Joey Farland and Charlie Price stand with their toy rifles and the Davy Crockett hats they've talked Mrs. Brown into letting them wear. Even I know the pioneers come after the Pilgrims.

"Anita"—she points at me—"I want you to say, 'Welcome to the United States.'"

Before I can mutter my line, Oscar Mancini raises his hand. "Why the Indians call it the United Estates when there was no United Estates back then, Mrs. Brown?"

The class groans. Oscar is always asking questions. "United Estates! United Estates!" somebody in the back row mimics. Lots of classmates snicker, even some Dominicans. I hate it when the American kids make fun of the way we speak English.

"That's a good question, Oscar," Mrs. Brown responds, casting a disapproving look around. She must have heard the whisper as well. "It's called poetic license. Something allowed in a story that isn't so in real life. Like a metaphor or a simile."

Just then, the classroom door opens. I catch a glimpse of our principal, and behind him, Carla's mother, Tía Laura, looking very nervous. But then, Tía Laura always looks nervous. Papi likes to joke that if there were ever an Olympic event for worrying, the Dominican Republic would win with his sister on the team. But lately, Papi looks pretty worried himself. When I ask questions, he replies with "Children should be seen, not heard" instead of his usual "Curiosity is a sign of intelligence."

Mrs. Brown comes forward from the back of the room and stands talking to the principal for a minute before she follows him out into the hall, where Tía Laura is standing. The door closes.

Usually when our teacher leaves the room, Charlie Price, the class clown, acts up. He does stuff like changing the hands on the clock so that Mrs. Brown will be all confused and let us out for recess early. Yesterday, he wrote NO HOMEWORK TONIGHT in big block letters above the date on the board, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1960. Even Mrs. Brown thought that was pretty funny.

But now the whole class waits quietly. The last time the principal came to our classroom, it was to tell Tomasito Morales that he

mother was here for him. Something had happened to his father, but even Papi, who knew Señor Morales, would not say what. Tomasito hasn't come back to school since then.

Beside me, Carla is tucking her hair behind her ears, something she does when she's nervous. My brother, Mundín, has a nervous tic, too. He bites his nails whenever he does something wrong and has to sit on the punishment chair until Papi comes home.

The door opens again, and Mrs. Brown steps back in, smiling that phony smile grown-ups smile when they are keeping bad news from you. In a bright voice, Mrs. Brown asks Carla to please collect her things. "Would you help her, Anita?" she adds.

We walk back to our seats and begin packing up Carla's schoolbag. Mrs. Brown announces to the class that they'll continue with their skits later. Everyone is to take out his or her vocabulary book and start on the next chapter. The class pretends to settle down to its work, but of course, everyone is stealing glances at Carla and me.

Mrs. Brown comes over to see how we're doing. Carla packs her homework, but leaves the usual stay-at-school stuff in her desk.

"Are those yours?" Mrs. Brown points at the new notebooks, the neat lineup of pens and pencils, the eraser in the shape of the Dominican Republic.

Carla nods.

"Pack it all up, dear," Mrs. Brown says quietly.

We pack Carla's schoolbag with everything that belongs to her. The whole time I'm wondering why Mrs. Brown hasn't asked me to pack my stuff, too. After all, Carla and I are in the same family.

Oscar's hand is waving and dipping like a palm tree in a cyclone. But Mrs. Brown doesn't call on him. This time, I think we're all hoping he'll get a chance to ask his question, which is

probably the same question that's in everyone's head: Where is Carla going?

Mrs. Brown takes Carla's hand. "Come along." She nods to me. Mrs. Brown leads Carla up the side of the classroom. I follow, afraid I'll burst into tears if I catch anyone's eye. I look up at the portrait of our Benefactor, El Jefe, which hangs above the classroom, his eyes watching over us. To his left hangs George Washington in his white wig, looking off into the distance. Perhaps he is homesick for his own country?

Just staring at El Jefe keeps my tears from flowing. I want to be brave and strong, so that someday if I ever meet the leader of our country, he'll congratulate me. "So, you are the girl who never cries?" he'll say, smiling down at me.

As we cross the front of the class, Mrs. Brown turns to make sure I'm behind her. She reaches and I take the free hand she is holding out to me.

We ride home in the Garcías' Plymouth with the silver fins that remind me of the shark I saw at the beach last summer. I'm stuffed in the back with Carla and her younger sisters, Sandi and Yo, who've been taken out of their classes, too. A silent and worried-looking Tía Laura sits in front next to Papi, who is driving.

"What's happening?" I keep asking. "Is something wrong?"

"Cotorrita," Papi warns playfully. That's my nickname in the family because sometimes I talk too much, like a little parrot. Mami says. But then at school, I'm the total opposite and Mrs. Brown complains that I need to speak up more.

Papi begins explaining that the Garcías have finally gotten permission to leave the country, and they'll be taking the airplane in

a few hours to go to the United States of America. He's trying to sound excited, looking in the rearview mirror at us. "You'll get to see the snow!"

None of the García sisters says a word.

"And Papito and Mamita and all your cousins," Papi goes on. "Isn't that so, Laura?"

"Sí, sí, sí," Tía Laura agrees. She sounds like someone letting air out of a tire.

My grandparents left for New York at the beginning of September. My other aunts and uncles were already there, having gone away with the younger cousins back in June. Who knows where Tío Toni is? Now, with the García cousins leaving, only my family will be left living at the compound.

I lean forward with my arms on the front seat. "So are we going to go, too, Papi?"

Papi shakes his head. "Somebody has to stay and mind the store." That's what he always says whenever he can't go on an outing because he has to work. Papito, my grandfather, started Construcciones de la Torre, a concrete-block business to build houses that won't blow over during hurricanes. When my grandfather retired a few years ago, Papi, being the oldest, was put in charge.

As we come up the driveway to the García house, I see Mami and Lucinda and Mundín waiting for us. Somebody must have picked up my older sister and brother at the high school so they can say good-bye to the Garcías, too. Behind them stands Chucha, our old nanny, in her long purple dress, holding my baby cousin, Fifi, in her arms.

As soon as the car doors open, I run to Mami, who puts her arms around me. She doesn't have to ask me what's wrong. A row

of suitcases have been brought out and lined up, ready to be loaded into the car. Beside them stands Mr. Washburn, a tall, skinny man with a bow tie that makes his whole face look like a gift someone wrapped up real nice. Papi has explained that Mr. Washburn is the American consul, who represents the United States when Ambassador Farland is out of the country.

"Troops all here?" he asks cheerily. "Ready to go?"

"Where's Papi?" Yo asks. She and I are the Oscars of our family, always asking questions. But I don't always get to ask mine when Yo is around.

A look passes from one adult to another as if they are playing musical chairs with their eyes, trying to decide who'll be the one stuck answering Yo's question. Finally, Papi speaks up. "He'll be waiting for you at the airport."

It seems rude of Tío Carlos not to say good-bye. But something so unusual is going on that good manners seem beside the point.

"Okay, girls," Tía Laura says, clapping her hands. "I want you to go to your rooms and change into the clothes on your bed. Chucha'll go with you." Tía Laura takes baby Fifi from Chucha's hands so that the old woman will be free to help the girls.

"Do we bring our bookbags with us?" Yo wants to know.

Tía Laura shakes her head. "One special thing, just one each, girls. We can only take ten kilos apiece."

"Can Anita come and help me pick?" Carla asks. She has already taken my hand and is leading me away with her.

"Just be sure you make it quick!" Tía Laura scolds, but even her scolding voice has nothing but worry in it.

The bedroom the girls share has a long closet down one side of it. The sliding door has been rolled back and many of the drawers

are gaping open with clothes hanging out. Whoever packed did so in a hurry.

Carla's eyes sweep over a high shelf where toys and trinkets are stored out of the way. Three ballerina jewelry boxes stand open, the little dancers with their arms over their heads. Behind them, the hula hoops are lined up, each one a different color so the girls won't fight.

"I just can't decide," Carla admits. She seems on the verge of tears, tucking stray hair behind her ears.

"Girls!" we hear their mother calling from the hall.

"What do I choose?" Carla asks me desperately, as if I know what she'll need in the United States of America, where I've never been.

"Your jewelry box," I suggest. It'll be a way to take more than one thing. The box is filled with Carla's bangles and her butterfly pin and her chain with a little cross—jewelry that isn't real gold.

Carla nods agreement. As I climb up on a chair, my eye is caught by a snow globe with the tiny deer nibbling the ground. I can't resist giving it a shake, stirring up the snowstorm until I cannot see the little deer.

"That's mine," Yo cries out, reaching her hands for it. "That's what I'm taking."

"That's so stupid, Yo," Carla scolds. She rolls her eyes at me as if the two of us know better than to take a snow globe to a place where there's already going to be snow.

"You're the stupid one!" Yo shoots back.

Soon the two of them are shouting. It doesn't take much to get two García girls arguing. Their raised voices draw their mother to the room.

"If I hear another word, I'm going to leave you all here and go to New York by myself!" she threatens. "Now choose what you want and change into your clothes. The car's ready for us."

There is no more fooling around. On each bed there's a petticoat and party dress ready to be put on. The girls dress quickly.

Out in the driveway, Mr. Washburn is already sitting in his big black car with the little American flag on the antenna. Papi leans against the passenger side, talking to him through the open window.

"We're keeping Mr. Washburn waiting," Tía Laura scolds. She nudges the girls to say their good-byes.

Suddenly, Yo announces, "I don't want to go. I want to stay with Tía Carmen."

That starts a chain reaction. "Me too," Sandi sobs, clinging to my mother. In Tía Laura's arms, Fifi begins bawling, reaching her chubby little hands for Chucha, who stands at the door with her arms crossed. I feel like crying, too, but I know Mami is counting on me to cheer up the García girls.

"Girls, please, I can't take this right now," Tía Laura begins, but then she, too, bursts into tears.

Papi hurries over to his sister's side. He puts his arm around her, speaking softly, the way he speaks to me when I've had a nightmare.

"Come here, girls." Mami gathers the García sisters around her, squatting down so she can talk to them privately. "You go along with your mami and behave yourselves, please. We'll be seeing you soon, I promise!"

I'm surprised. Papi has said we have to stay and mind the store. So it must be that the Garcías are just going away for a short trip.

My cousins seem comforted by this news. For a moment it

crosses my mind that maybe Mami is just saying this to make them feel better. Like telling my grandmother in *Nueva York* that Tío Toni is fine, so Mamita won't worry about my young uncle, whom we haven't seen in months.

Mr. Washburn pops his head out of the car and says, "Time to go, folks!" The García girls go down the line, hugging and kissing each of us. They've already set their special toys on the backseat of the car. Through the open door, I can see Yo's snow globe, the storm starting to settle down so the tiny deer can eat the flakes strewn on the ground.

When Carla gets to me, the tears well up in my eyes. I can't help it. There's no portrait of El Jefe out here to make me brave and strong. I hang my head as the tears drop down.

"We'll see you soon," Carla reminds me. But it only makes me cry harder when she reaches over and absently pushes my hair back behind my ears.

After the car leaves, we stand for a while looking down the empty driveway. I feel hollow inside, as if a big part of me is gone. Finally, we turn and cross over to our house through the hibiscus hedge, carrying the bookbags of supplies the García girls left for us to use.

Overnight, we've become what Mrs. Brown calls a nuclear family, just my parents and my sister and brother, instead of the large *familia* of uncles and aunts and cousins and my grandparents, who were living in the compound only a few months ago. Now all the houses but ours are empty. The orchid shed is full of straggly blossoms. The hammock that used to hang in the porch of Tío Toni's bachelor pad has been taken down. The pond is overrun with bullfrogs that croak all night long.

For the rest of the afternoon, I mope around the house, until Mami sends me over to help Chucha move in. Chucha has been part of our family for as long as anyone can remember and has taken care of every baby since Papi was born. In fact, Chucha took care of me, too, as she likes to remind me. "You're never too old to mind me," she'll say. "After all, I was the one who changed your diapers." What a thing to be reminded of! At least she's nice enough never to bring it up in public.

First thing we move over is Chucha's coffin. Porfirio, the gardener, balances it across the wheelbarrow, and Chucha and I walk on either side, holding on to each end. I know it's pretty strange, but this is Chucha's bed she sleeps in every night! She says she wants to prepare herself for the next life. Chucha's people came from Haiti, where they do things different from us.

Inside the coffin, we've packed up all her purple clothes. That's another thing. Chucha always wears purple because she once made a promise that she would always wear purple. But she's never said why she made such a promise or to whom or why she decided on purple. Yellow or even lavender would be a lot more cheerful.

Chucha also has dreams where she can see the future. Mundín likes to say, "You would, too, if you slept in a coffin!" As a matter of fact, a few weeks ago, Chucha dreamed that my cousins would be leaving for a city of tall buildings before my cousins even knew they would be leaving for New York.

Strange as Chucha is, I'm glad she's moving in with us. I feel safer when she's around. And now especially with everyone gone, it'll be comforting to have Chucha in our house.

"Chucha," I ask her after we've moved all her things over, "how soon do you think I'll see the Garcías?"

Chucha narrows her shiny eyes. Her wrinkled black face wrinkles even more when she concentrates. She doesn't say anything for a while. Then she looks straight at me and says one of her riddles: "You will see them before they come back but only after you are free."

I feel too scared to ask her when that might possibly be.

At supper, Papi explains that the construction business isn't doing all that well, that we're going to have to economize, that the *familia* is going to be scattered for a while—

"For how long?" I want to know.

Mami gives me her warning look that reminds me that I am interrupting. Little parrot or not, I am almost twelve and have to learn some manners.

Suddenly, a black moth flaps into the room. Talk about interrupting! It's as big as my hand. "A bat!" Lucinda screams, and ducks under the table.

"It's not a bat. It's a black butterfly," Mundín observes, leaping up to catch it.

"Don't touch it!" Mami cries. We all know from Chucha that a black moth is an omen of death. Mundín stops in his tracks. The moth lifts off and disappears into the night.

"You can come out now, Lucinda," Mami calls in a teasing voice. But she looks pretty shaky herself.

Lucinda rises slowly from under the table. Tears are rolling down her face. "This place is just . . . just . . . just . . . so . . . sad," she sobs, then storms out of the room.

Mami and Papi exchange a tense look. Papi stands up from his place at the table. As he goes by me, he plants a kiss on top of my head. "My grown-up baby girl," he says.

I feel proud to be acting more mature than Lucinda, but the truth is, I'm just as sad even if I'm not showing it.

After supper, I try tidying my room to make myself feel better. But when I empty the contents of Carla's schoolbag on my bed—her neatly sharpened pencils, her notebooks with pictures of kittens tangled in balls of yarn, her funny eraser that she got for winning the recitation contest on Independence Day last February—I feel the sadness stir up again like a storm inside me. There's no way I'll be able to use my cousin's supplies. I pack everything back in her bag and stick it in my closet. Or so I think. A little later, I crawl into bed and jump right back out. I've felt something hard, a cockroach or scorpion, under the covers. But when Chucha draws back the sheets, we find the eraser in the shape of the Dominican Republic.