

## *Still the Time for Butterflies*

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### A Note from the Author

November 25, 2010, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of the Mirabal sisters. Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa, known in the underground by their code name, las Mariposas (the Butterflies), were killed on November 25, 1960.

I'm also making it a point every time I mention them to add the name of the young man driving them on that fateful day, Rufino de la Cruz. He, too, lost his life when Trujillo's *caliés*, as the dictator's thugs were known, stopped the girls' Jeep on a lonely mountain road as they were returning from visiting their jailed husbands. No one else had wanted to drive them, as rumors were flying that they would be killed. But Rufino volunteered.

Just as their journey was ending, my family's journey into freedom was beginning. On August 6, 1960, a few months before the murder of the Mirabal sisters, my family landed in New York City, having just barely escaped from the dictator's secret police, the SIM. My father had been part of an underground group, loosely connected to the Mirabals' movement, and two members had been arrested. It was just a matter of time before they broke down and disclosed names under the horrible tortures inflicted on them.

It was only after we arrived in this country that I heard about the Mirabal sisters. My father brought home a *Time* magazine because he had heard from other exiles in New York City of a horrifying piece of news reported there (December 12, 1960: "Dominican Republic: Warning

Beneath the Cliff"). My sisters and I were not allowed to look at the magazine. My parents still lived as if Trujillo's dreaded secret police might show up at our door any minute and haul us away.

By the end of 1961, the dictatorship had been toppled, but years of unrest, shifting governments, and civil war ensued. My parents decided to stay on in their new country. As he felt safer and settled in this country, my father began to tell me stories about the dictatorship, about his underground group, and about the Mirabal sisters. They became haunting figures in my imagination. My three sisters and I had made it. Three of those four sisters had not. I knew I had a debt to pay.

Fifty years have gone by. And what I'm struck by is the fact that these three young women, seemingly powerless, obviously vulnerable, have managed to accomplish so much! Not only did they spark a national movement that eventually toppled a powerful dictator with his vast network of secret police and absolute control of all avenues of communication, but beyond the borders of one small nation, they went on to inspire an international movement. In 1999, the United Nations declared the day of their murder International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, a day that marks the beginning of a sixteen-day worldwide observance of human rights, ending with December 10, Human Rights Day. Three young women from one small island have become international symbols of freedom for women, and men, everywhere.

In her powerful book *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Rebecca Solnit talks about the surprising and often indirect ways in which change can happen. She calls it the indirectness of direct action. We do one little thing, expecting this result, and expecting it right away, but what happens is beyond what we imagine, and not necessarily on our watch. One of the examples Solnit cites is a story told by a member of Women's Strike for Peace, a very small, hardy, and committed group of mothers in the early 1960s who were among the first activists against the Vietnam War. This woman said she often felt foolish, picketing in front of the White House, sometimes with just a dozen or so members in the rain. She secretly wondered if they were wasting their time. No news program covered their protest marches; no spokesperson came out of the White House to speak with them. But



then, years later, she heard Dr. Benjamin Spock, who had become one of the most high-profile activists against the war, say that the turning point for him was spotting a small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at the White House. If they were so passionately committed, he thought, he should give the issue more consideration himself.

One of my favorite passages that I like to read when I'm feeling demoralized about the slow progress of social change comes from Seamus Heaney's poem *The Cure at Troy*:

History says, Don't hope  
on this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
the longed-for tidal wave  
of justice can rise up,  
and hope and history rhyme.

That longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme. I'm living and writing and working toward that hope these days, asking for what Rebecca Solnit calls "an imagination adequate to the possibilities and the strangeness and the dangers on this earth in this moment." Toni Morrison puts it this way: "The function of freedom is to free someone else."

Often when we read about brave women like the Mirabal sisters, we think that in order to advance the cause of freedom we have to do grand things. But in fact, if we look at the lives of these four sisters, we realize that all of them came to their courage in small incremental steps, little moments and challenges we all face every day of our lives. In some ways, we become brave, almost by accident. Something happens and we respond to that challenge courageously and compassionately. But really, all along the way to that something big happening, we've been cultivating a compassionate heart, a listening and big-hearted imagination. And one of the ways to cultivate such an elastic and inclusive imagination is by reading books.

Think about it. When you read, you become someone else. Terence, the Roman slave and playwright, who freed himself with his writings,

once wrote, "I am a human being. Nothing human is alien to me." That could be the motto of literature. Nothing human is alien to the pen of a novelist. And when we read, nothing human is alien to us either. We actually inhabit and become someone else. Nothing human is alien to us. Not a Danish prince trying to make a decision about what moral code to follow; or a young black girl named Maya Angelou growing up in the rural south in the 1930s; or a grief-stricken King Gilgamesh searching for his lost friend, Enkidu, in the underworld in 2700 B.C.; or a beautiful young freedom fighter named Minerva Mirabal forming an underground movement in the 1950s in the dictatorship of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic.

In fact, I would go as far as to say that by reading books, entering other realities, and then taking those adventures back into our own lives, we *are* freedom fighters. One of the first things that happens in a dictatorship is that books are confiscated, people are not permitted to congregate and share ideas and stories. There is one official story, one reason to gather together, and that is for indoctrination. I know because I lived that reality in a dictatorship. You know it because you have lived that reality in the novel I have written or in other novels you have read about similar situations. A reading, thinking, empathetic citizenry is a lot less likely to be controlled or hoodwinked.

"The function of freedom is to free someone else." And I can't think of a better way to pass on that freedom than to make that someone else a reader and put a good book in his or her hands.

Julia Alvarez

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To read more about the Mirabal sisters and the writing of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, read Julia Alvarez's essay "Chasing the Butterflies" in her book *Something to Declare*.