

Chasing the Butterflies
Julia Alvarez

I first heard about the Mirabal sisters when I was ten years old. It was four months after we arrived in this country. 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. My sisters and I were not allowed to look at the magazine. My parents still lived as if the SIM might show up at our door any minute and haul us away.

Years later, doing research for the novel I was writing, I dug up that *Time* article. I stared once again at the picture of the lovely, sad-eyed woman who stared back from the gloom of the black-and-white photo. As I read the article, I recovered a memory of myself as I sat in the dark living room of our New York apartment secretly paging through this magazine I was forbidden to look at.

It was December 1960. My first North American winter. The skies were gray and my skin was turning a chapped, ashy color that made me feel infected by whatever disease was making the trees lose all their leaves. Every evening my sisters and I nagged our parents. We wanted to go home. They answered us with meaningful looks that we couldn't quite decipher. "We're lucky to be here," my mother always replied. "Why?" we kept asking, but she never said.

When my father read of the murder of the Mirabal sisters, he must have felt a shocking jolt at what he had so narrowly missed. Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa were members of the same underground he had bailed out of in order to save his life. Here, just four months after we had escaped, they were murdered on a lonely mountain road. They had been to visit their jailed husbands, who had been transferred to a distant prison so that the women would be forced to make this perilous journey.

And so it was that my family's emigration to the United States started at the very time their lives ended. These three brave sisters and their husbands stood in stark contrast to the self-saving actions of my own family and of other Dominican exiles. Because of this, the Mirabal sisters haunted me. Indeed, they haunted the whole country. They have become our national heroines, and November 25, the day they were killed, has been declared by the United Nations the International Day against Violence against Women.

I did not become personally involved in their story until a trip I made to the Dominican Republic in 1986. A woman's press was doing a series of postcards and booklets about Latina women, and they asked me if I would contribute a paragraph about a Dominican heroine of my choice. The Mirabal sisters came instantly to mind. Looking for more about them, I visited several Dominican bookstores. But all I found on that first trip was a historical "comic book." How disconcerting to read about heroines with balloons coming out of their mouths! On the other hand, any shoeshine boy on the Street or campesino tilting his cane chair back on a coconut tree knew the story of the Mirabal sisters. Las muchachas, everyone called them. The girls.

When I complained to a cousin that I couldn't find enough formal information about them, she offered to introduce me to someone who knew someone who knew one of the Mirabal "children:" six orphans—now grown men and women—had been left behind when the girls were murdered. That's how I met Noris, the slender, black-haired daughter of the oldest sister, Patria. In her early forties, Noris had already outlived her mother by six years.

Noris offered to accompany me on my drive north to visit the rich agricultural valley where the girls had grown up. She would take me through the museum that had been established in their mother's house, where the girls had spent the last few months of their lives.

What happened on that trip was that the past turned into the present in my imagination. As I entered the Mirabal house, as I was shown the little patio where Trujillo's secret police gathered at night to spy on the girls, as I held the books Minerva treasured (Plutarch, Gandhi, Rousseau), I felt my scalp tingle. It was as if the girls were watching me. Here is a page from the journal that I kept on that trip:

In the bedroom: The little clothes that the girls had made in prison for their children are laid out on the beds. Their jewelry—bracelets, clamp earrings, the cheap costume type—lies on the dresser under a glass bell that looks like a cheese server. In the closet hang their dresses. "This one was Mami's," Noris says holding up a matronly linen shift with big black buttons. The next one she pulls out she falls silent. It's more stylish, shirtwaist style with wide blue and lavender stripes. When I look down, I notice the pleated skirt has a blood stain on its lap. This was the dress Patria carried "clean" in her bag the day she was murdered so she could change into something fresh before seeing the men.

Maria Teresa's long braid lies under a glass cover on her "vanity." There are still twigs and dirt and slivers of glass from her last moments tumbling down the mountain in that rented jeep. When Noris heads out for the next room, I lift the case and touch the hair. It feels like regular real hair.

We walk in the garden and sit under the laurel tree where “the girls used to sit.” Noris says it is too bad that I am going to miss meeting Dedé.

That is the first I hear there is a fourth sister who survived.

Dedé was away in Spain and wouldn't be back until after I had returned to the States. Maybe the next trip, Noris said. “Meanwhile, there are a lot of people you can meet now.”

“It's just for a paragraph on a postcard,” I reminded her for I was a little ashamed to be taking so much of her time.

She waved my politeness aside. “It will inspire you,” she promised me. Maybe she could sense that more than a postcard was already cooking in my head.

One of the people I met was the dynamic and passionate Minou, daughter of Minerva Mirabal. She was four years old on the day her mother was killed. *I remember her sitting in that chair. I remember her leaning down to kiss me, laughing.* Eventually, Minou would show me a folder of the love letters her parents had written each other during their many separations. Among them, letters they had smuggled back and forth in prison:

My life, I send you this pencil so you can write me. Tell me everything. Don't keep a sorrow from me.

Adored one, how many times haven't I thought about our last night together, how full of presentiments we were. I've asked myself a thousand times if I shouldn't have done something to escape capture. What a painful experience this has been. ¡Dios mio! And then, when I knew you and your compañeras had been caught, I wanted to die. I could not bear that large, cruel moral torture of knowing you were suffering what I was suffering. Ay, what long days, what interminable days. All I can do is fill myself with illusions. To be asleep in your arms, my head on your breast. ¡Vida mia! Tu Manolo.

I also met Marcelo Bermudez, another member of the underground who was in the torture prison along with the other men. Again, from my journal:

Marcelo tells the story of the day the girls were captured and brought to the torture prison. The men were already there, naked, packed in cells behind thick walls of stone, silent and afraid. All of a sudden, the girls spoke out in code and the prisoners took heart. “We are the Butterflies!” (Las Mariposas, their code name.) “We are here with you. If any of you would like to identify yourselves, do so now.” Marcelo said that voices started to call out, “I am the Indian of the Mountains.” “I am the Hunter of the North Coast.” And so on. That's how the group found out that people believed long dead were still alive.

Back in the capital, I recounted the story for my aunt and cousin. “What did the guards do?” my aunt asked me.

I had been so caught up in Marcelo's story that I couldn't remember what he had said had actually happened. “Let's see,” I told my aunt. And I think that's when I realized that I was bound to write a novel about the Mirabals rather than the biography I had been vaguely contemplating.

But after I wrote my Latina postcard paragraph, I put the project away. The story seemed to me almost impossible to write. It was too perfect, too tragic, too awful. The girls' story didn't need a story. And besides, I couldn't yet imagine how one tells a story like this. *Once upon a holocaust, there were three butterflies.* A paragraph of this stuff was quite enough.

What I was forgetting—and not forgetting—was the fourth sister. It was my curiosity about her that led me back to the Mirabal story. In 1992, during my annual trip “home,” I met her—the surviving sister. Dedé, as everyone calls her, invited me out to the house where she and her sisters had grown up and where she still lives.

It was late afternoon, the light falling just so, a deepening of colors in the garden, the rockers clacking on the wooden patio floor. Dedé, very modern in black culottes, a hot-pink shirt, wire-rimmed glasses recalled this and that in a bright upbeat voice as if it were the most normal thing, to have had three sisters massacred by a bloody dictator and live to drink a lemonade and tell about it. I realized this was her triumph. She had suffered her own martyrdom: the one left behind to tell the story of the other three.

It was after this meeting that I decided to write a novel about the Mirabal sisters. I wanted to understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years. I believed that only by making them real, alive, could I make them mean anything to the rest of us.

And so I began to chase the butterflies. With my husband, Bill, at the wheel of our rented car, we traversed the Island, meeting the people and visiting the places that had been a part of the girls' lives. There were always surprises.

In the National Archives I combed for information about the Trujillo regime. I found many volumes missing and the blaring radio distracting. The “librarians” (two young girls doing each other’s nails and singing along with the radio) offered to help. We found a stack of yellowing *El Caribes*. In the one published the day the girls were killed, November 25, 1960, a warm day was forecast throughout the Island with possible rains in the north. A Japanese doctor had registered a machine that proves that humans snore in thirty different patterns. In “Confidencialmente,” it was reported that everyone has the same measurement at the fattest part of the calf as at the neck. Maria Teresa, the youngest sister, might have read her horoscope for the day: *Libra, Do you realize how much effort and materials you’ve lost? Try to find a way to save your efforts.* Her two sisters had better luck predicted: *Pisces, This is your lucky time. Neptune is now in a benevolent angle for your sign.*

Leaving the capital and driving north, we stopped at Salcedo. I wanted to see the church where the girls had gone to mass. A gray adobe with a red bell tower, it looked quaint and pretty, a place for fairytales. We wanted to see the inside, but the big wooden doors were locked. We stopped an old man who asked Bill in Spanish if he was a priest. Cura, one who cures? Bill deduced. Bill, a doctor, nodded, “Si, yo cura.” No, I shook my head. “Honey, he’s asking you if you’re a priest.”

“He’s not a priest,” I said. Then, more bluntly. “He sleeps with me.”

“That’s okay,” the old man said, slapping Bill on the back. Way to go.

We found out why priesthood and pleasure didn’t necessarily jar the old man. In order to get inside the locked church, we had to find the priest with the key. He wasn’t in the rectory, the old man told us, but over in the discotheque. Bill and I looked at each other, daring each other not to laugh.

A young woman came out on the sidewalk. Her mother owned the pharmacy behind us. Did we want to come in and get out of the sun? Many thanks, but we were headed to the discotheque to find the priest so we could get inside the church. She was too polite to ask what we were up to. But I offered her our story. I was interested in the Mirabals. I wanted to visit the church where they had been married and had gone to mass. The mother came to the door from behind the counter. If you’re interested in the Mirabals, why don’t you go talk to Doña Lesbia. She lives right across the street. Who’s Doña Lesbia? my look said.

“Their aunt. She knew the girls since they were this high.” The proprietress of the pharmacy held her palm flat near her knees.

“Let’s go,” Bill said. He had understood enough Spanish to know we were being invited into another story.

So, that’s how we met the girls’ aunt, and how we met many others who had been important to the Mirabal sisters. We even got the priest to come out of the discotheque. (“I get invited to these darn things I have to go to,” he explained himself.) He opened the church doors, chatting all the while about his parishioners. “By the way,” he asked—and my ears had learned to perk up at the phrase in Pavlovian anticipation of a choice tip or tidbit —“do you know one of Minerva’s compañeras in prison lives in town? Doña Sina. Shall I give you an introduction?”

Just past the town of Salcedo, we turned off the main road and headed down a dirt road shaded by a canopy of interlacing amapola branches. Here and there we stopped to admire one of the lovely ranchos, small wooden houses, painted bright island colors with Victoriana bric-à-brac on the gables and shutters of tiny wooden slats for windows. A man, and in a moment, a woman, who had been tying a scarf stylishly around her head, stepped out of one of the ranchos. Her makeup matched the extravagant colors of some of the houses: bright lipstick and heavy eyeliner with little tadpole tails at the corners of her eyes. Did we want to come inside the gate?

We sat on their verandah and told them what we were after. We had heard that down this road we’d find Patria’s husband’s farm. It had been a magnificent thriving spread, but when the girls were captured, the house was destroyed and the farm confiscated. Did they know where the place was?

Why, of course they knew where the Gonzalez farm was! “We’re all related,” the woman explained. “Their mother and my paternal grandmother. . .” They went on to recount how the girls’ deaths was reported the very next day in *El Coribe* as a car accident. “We felt those girls’ deaths. Trujillo pretended his hands were clean. Such a tragic accident, he said when he was here. Oh yes, he was here. He made us throw him a big party. And the girls not a month in the ground. Imagine, all of us dressed up like there was something to celebrate, our hearts so heavy, ay.”

They directed us to follow the road till it came to a dead end. There we would find what was left of the farmhouse.

You can’t miss it: seven concrete pillars stand in the middle of a field. In what would have been the backyard, we could make out the water tank. We climbed over the barbed wire, walked towards the front steps, still visible, past two toppled concrete urns where I imagined Patria grew her sweet-smelling jasmine. She loved flowers.

Bill and I stayed close, stunned at the sight of a great house fallen. Wandering back towards the fence, we found a grapefruit tree with low-hanging branches. We picked one, peeled it, and ate the bittersweet fruit.

At the opposite end of the island in the dry and desert-like Northwest, we visited Monte Cristi, the hometown of Manolo Tavárez, Minerva’s husband. After they were married, Minerva and Manolo lived there, first with his

parents, then alone in their own humble casita. It was from their own house, one they would never return to live in, that both were taken into custody by the SIM. We walked the hot, dusty streets wondering how we would ever find the house. At the square, we approached a seated, elderly gentleman wearing a Panama hat and smoking a cigar. Would he happen to know the house where Minerva Mirabal and her husband, Manolo Tavárez, had lived? He looked us over, deciding. Then, he pointed across the street at a tiny pea—green house. “They lived there!” My mouth dropped.

He let that sink in a minute. Then, patting his guayabera pocket as if to make sure he was all there, he stood up. “Come on, I’ll show you the place. I live there now.”

And so it was that we went inside the house in which Minerva spent the last of her married days. Everywhere we went, it seemed we could reach out and touch history. And always there were plenty of living voices around to tell us all their individual versions of that history.

Even the grim trip on the mountain road where the girls were killed brought out the storytellers. On this road Trujillo had built one of his many “mansions,” kept fully staffed and ready in case El Jefe should decide to drop in without notice. Usually he brought a young lady guest he wanted to try out.

We parked in a shallow ditch off the narrow road and looked up at the crest of the hill and the abandoned house. The gate with the five stars was locked. Two young men appeared out of nowhere: a tall one in a gaudy, disco fever-type shirt and another one with a crippled foot. He walked with a crude crutch, maneuvering easily to show us the way up an incline to a break in the wall. We climbed the mossy, cobbled driveway that had once, I’m sure, been scrubbed by caretakers on hands and knees.

It was here, the boys told us, that the girls were brought after their Jeep had been stopped on the mountain road. El Jefe was waiting for them inside, the boys told us. He wanted to have his way with them, especially with the one who had slapped him when he was fresh with her at a dance.

“That would have been Minerva,” I said.

“Then, they say, he gave each sister to one of his SIM to terminate.”

“Which one went first?” I wanted to know.

“We don’t know things like that,” the tall, more self-assured one told me.

“Over there.” They pointed into the lower garden full of tall grass. “Some stories say they were killed there. Then, they put them in the Jeep with their dead driver. And they drove it up that road there, see.” They indicated a steep road that led from the few side-by-side thatched huts they called ‘the town.’

“It was already dark by then,” the one on the crutches said. “They pushed the Jeep over the side of the mountain to make it look like an accident.”

“Many of the old people heard the crash,” the tall one said. “You want to talk to someone who remembers?”

My heart was too full in this grim place. The night was falling. The overgrown garden, the brick buildings, the padlocked doors, the mossy stones that rang with our footsteps were ominous. I said we had to go.

Down below, on the road, the villagers swarmed around our car. Two giggly girls with spreads of missing teeth approached us. Somebody had told them the gringo and his lady were going to make a movie about the Mirabals. “This town needs money,” an old grandmother nodded at me. “Let us all be in the movie.”

“Okay,” I promised them. “If they make the movie, you can be in it.” There was general applause, good-bye slaps on the car as Bill and I drove away.

As we descended the mountain, I felt as if we had traveled the whole route of their lives to the place where they had been struck down. And now that I had come to love the girls in my head, I didn’t want them to be dead.

“Where to tomorrow?” Bill asked. Maybe a plan would brighten both our spirits.

“Home,” I said. I meant Vermont. It was time to hole up and write the novel about the Mirabal sisters. *¡Que vivan las Mariposas!*