

# JULIA ALVAREZ

¡YO!



AUTHOR OF *HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS* AND  
*IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES*

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Julia Alvarez

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

*for Papi*

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*Preview of Julia Alvarez's Latest Book, A Wedding in Haiti*

*Also by Julia Alvarez*

**¡Yo!**

# Prologue

# The sisters

## *fiction*

Suddenly her face is all over the place in a promo picture that makes her look prettier than she is. I'm driving downtown for groceries with the kids in the back seat and there she is on *Fresh Air* talking about our family like everyone is some made-up character she can do with as she wants. I'm mad as anything, so I U-turn the car and drive back home and call her up and I get her long-winded machine that says she can't come to the phone right now, to please call her agent. Like hell I'm going to call her agent to give her a piece of my mind. Instead, I call up one of the other sisters.

"She's now on to Papi in the Laurentians, imagine."

"Jesus! Doesn't she have any sense?"

"She has this whole spiel about art and life mirroring each other and how you've got to write about what you know. I couldn't listen to it, it was making me sick."

The kids are running around, screaming, knowing it's a heyday because their mother's mad at somebody else. And then little Carlos comes up and says, "Mamma, am I really in Auntie Yoyo's book? Am I going to have my picture in the paper?" And then he's begging to bring his auntie's book to Easter show-and-tell so that the whole third grade of little Christians can get their ears burned to a crisp with the doctored-up family story.

"No! You cannot take that book to school!" I snap at him. And then more gently because those sweet chocolate-kisses eyes are blinking back tears, "It's a grown-up book."

“So can I take it in?” the eighth grader chimes in. She has started wearing her hair all fluffed out like her aunt’s.

“You kids are going to drive me crazy. When I end up at Bellevue—” And then I have to stop myself because that sounds more than vaguely familiar—it’s what the mami in the book always says. “Are you still there?” I say to my sister, who has gone strangely silent. Now I’m the one blinking back tears.

“I tell you, if she gets into my personal stuff, I’m going to . . .”

“But what can we do? Mami’s saying she’s going to sue her.”

“Ay, come on, Mami’s just pulling her usual. Remember when she used to pile us in the car as kids and drive over to the Carmelite nuns and say she was going to leave us in the convent unless we’d promise to behave? Remember? We’d be kneeling by the car and all these Carmelite nuns, who weren’t supposed to show their faces, were at the windows wondering what the hell was going on!”

We’re both laughing over that old story. I don’t know if we actually feel better about being fictional characters or if it’s just so nice to have a memory these days that we haven’t seen already worked over in print.

That night I talk to my husband—after the kids are off to their rooms. I fill him in on the radio show, the phone call with my sister, our mother’s temper tantrums out there for the whole world to know about. “What are we going to do about this?”

“About what?” he says.

I am not going to act like our mother and blow my temper. At least, not right away. “This . . . this exposure,” I say, because suddenly I don’t know what to call it myself. “I don’t think it’s good for the kids.”

My husband looks over his shoulder as if to assure himself there are no hidden cameras or reporters around. "We seem quite cozy here," he says. He has a quaint way of saying things in his German accent that makes it hard to get angry at him. It's as if you were to yell at someone in an ESL class who needs all the help he can get. I don't know why he calls up this tender tolerance in me when I'm just as much a foreigner as he is. "There is no need to get upset. Soon she will write another book and this one will be forgotten."

"Yeah, right. She was on the radio today talking away about Papi skiing topless in the Laurentians with all his French-Canadian girlfriends. Mami's going to hit the roof!"

"Your mother will hit the roof anyway," he says nonchalantly until he sees the look on my face. "But this is true," he says lamely, scratching his balding head, something he does when he's nervous that usually blunts the sharp edge of my anger. Tonight, it's not really anger I'm feeling. I'm out and out flabbergasted that he would say such a thing even if it is true, which it is. I know for a fact that before he read the book and had lines like that plopped into his mouth, he would never have said so of his own accord. He used to be more polite. I feel like my whole life is losing ground to fiction.

"I just won't have everyone criticizing the family," I say in a teary voice that goes dry on me before I can wring any sympathy from him. So off I go to the kitchen to fix the kids' lunches and settle my nerves. The last thing I want to do tonight is not be able to go to sleep and have to come out here and lie on the couch till all hours reading some stupid novel. I always was a reader, but now, whenever I open a book, even if it's something by someone dead, all I can do is shake my head and think, oh my god, I wonder what their family thought of this story?

I'm in there cutting up the bread into little space-food squares the way my third-grader likes his sandwich and

leaving out mayonnaise the way my eighth grader likes hers when the phone rings and it's my other "fictionally victimized sister," or so she introduces herself in a grim voice. I can't say I go in for all this labeling but my two sisters are psychologists and that's the way they get a handle on things. Me, I just get mad.

"People have been coming up to me at work asking, so which one are you. My therapist says this is a kind of abuse!" She goes quiet a moment. "What are you doing? It sounds like you're hitting something."

"Just making the kids' lunches."

My sisters, I love them all, but sometimes they get on my nerves. This one is always seeing trauma and sadness. Around her, I purposely go shallow, hoping I'll get her to smile. "Oh, we'll survive," I say. Maybe talking to my husband has calmed me down.

"Speak for yourself," she says gloomily. "But I'll tell you one thing, I'm never going to talk to her again."

"Oh, come on," I say.

"I mean it. I'm glad this is all happening around my birthday. Because when she calls me, I'm just going to let her have it."

"I know," I say instead of pointing out that if she's not talking to our sister, she can't let her have it. "So how are things?" I say in a bright voice, hoping to get her talking about something happy. Why is it that with all my sisters I always feel like I'm the therapist?

"Well, actually, there is something else. But you've got to promise me that you're not going to tell her—"

"Hey, I'm not talking to her either," I lie. I'm not sure why. It's as if I'm caught up in some family melodrama that I don't necessarily like. "So what is it?"

A coy pause, and then a jubilant, "I'm pregnant."