

Julia Alvarez

Our Papers

We never went on trips abroad when I was a child. In the Dominican Republic no one could travel without papers, and the dictatorship rarely granted anyone this special permission.

There were exceptions—my grandparents went to New York regularly because my grandfather had a post in the United Nations. My grandmother, who was described as one of the most beautiful widows in the country, got permission to go on a trip because she was clever. At a state function, she told El Jefe that she knew he was a gentleman, and a gentleman would not refuse a lady a favor. She wanted so much to travel. The next morning a black limousine from the National Palace rolled up to her door to deliver her papers, along with some flowers.

"Where did you want to go?" I asked her, years later.

"Want to go?" she looked at me blankly. "I didn't want to go anywhere. I just wanted to get away from the hell we were living in."

Those trips were not vacations—though they did share an aspect of vacations: they were escapes, not from the tedium of daily routines, but from the terror of a police state.

metaphor

When I was a child, then, vacations meant a vacation from school. That was vacation enough for me! Summer vacations also meant a move. During the long, hot months of July and August, the whole extended family—uncles, aunts, sisters, cousins, grandparents—left the capital to get away from the heat and diseases that supposedly festered in the heat. My grandfather had bought an old house a short walk from the beach in the small fishing village of Boca Chica, close to where the new airport was being built. The house itself was nothing elegant: two stories, wood frame, a wraparound porch on the first floor, a large screened-in porch on the second, a big almond tree that dropped its fruit on the zinc roof. Ping! in the middle of the night. *What was that?*

We slept on cots, all the cousins, in that screened-in porch. Meals were eaten in two shifts on a big picnic table—first, the whole gang of children, our seating arrangement planned to avoid trouble, the rowdy ones next to the well-behaved ones, the babies with bibs in high chairs, looking like the little dignitaries of the gathering. The grown-ups ate after ^{we} we were sent up to our cots to nap so we could “make our digestions” and be able to go swimming in the late afternoon. Our lives, which were communal during the rest of the year, since we all lived in neighboring houses, grew even more communal when we were all under the same roof. The men stayed on in the capital during the week, working hard, and appeared on Friday afternoons to a near-stampede of children running up from the beach to see what our papis had brought us from the city. During the rest of the week, it was just the cousins and our mothers and grandmother and aunts and nursemaids, and the great big sea that splashed in our dreams all night long.

It seemed then that we were not living in a dictatorship but in a fairyland of sand and sun and githish mothers who shared in our fun. The perpetual worried look disappeared from my mother's face. She went barefoot on the beach, a sea breeze blew her skirt up in the air, she tried to hold it down. We chose the fish for our dinner right off the fishermen's boats. The women gossiped and told stories and painted

their fingernails and toenails and then proceeded the same for the girl children. They always had some. They especially loved to tease the husbands alone in funny phone calls, pretending they were other women member me, *Eyá querido?*) or pretending they were say that their wives' order of a hundred dollars' cosmetics had just arrived. Could payment be sent in men's embarrassment. It was fun to see them have for a change.

And then, suddenly, in 1960, summers at the together. We stayed home in the capital. The women leave the men by themselves. Nightly, a black Vol driveway and sat there, blocking our way out. house arrest by the SIM. The men talked in low hind closed doors. The shadows under my mother When we begged and pleaded to go to Boca Chica blurted out, “*¡Absolutamente no!*” before she was h cumspect aunt.

That's when talk of a vacation began in my f the American understanding of vacation, a trip fa “Wouldn't you love to go to the United State one aunt asked my sisters and me one day out of

“That would be so much fun!” another aunt cl We sisters looked from one to the other au about the conversation seemed rehearsed. Some a This one would not involve giggles on the phone over how gullible the men were. This one wou how serious I did not understand until years later My father's activities in the underground were s be only a matter of time before he would be ha And who knew where else the ax might fall—on

we all have

their fingernails and toenails and then proceeded down the line to do the same for the girl children. They always had some little intrigue going. They especially loved to tease the husbands alone in the capital, making funny phone calls, pretending they were other women ("Don't you remember me, *Edy querida*?") or pretending they were salesladies calling to say that their wives' order of a hundred dollars' worth of Revlon cosmetics had just arrived. Could payment be sent immediately?

Ha, ha, ha! The women held their sides and laughed wildly at the men's embarrassment. It was fun to see them having such a good time for a change.

And then, suddenly, in 1960, summers at the beach stopped altogether. We stayed home in the capital. The women were too worried to leave the men by themselves. Nightly, a black Volkswagen came up our driveway and sat there, blocking our way out. We were under virtual house arrest by the SIM. The men talked in low, worried voices behind closed doors. The shadows under my mother's eyes grew darker. When we begged and pleaded to go to Boca Chica for the summer, she blurted out, "*¡Absolutamente no!*" before she was hushed by a more circumspect aunt.

That's when talk of a vacation began in my family—vacation as in the American understanding of vacation, a trip far away, for fun.

"Wouldn't you love to go to the United States and see the snow?" one aunt asked my sisters and me one day out of the blue.

"That would be so much fun!" another aunt chimed in.

We sisters looked from one to the other aunt, unsure. Something about the conversation seemed rehearsed. Some adult intrigue was afoot. This one would not involve giggles on the phone and howls of laughter over how gullible the men were. This one would be serious, but just how serious I did not understand until years later.

My father's activities in the underground were suspected, and it would be only a matter of time before he would be hauled away if we stayed. And who knew where else the ax might fall—on his wife and children?

with a few

child, then, vacations meant a vacation from school. Enough for me! Summer vacations also meant a move. Not months of July and August, the whole extended months, sisters, cousins, grandparents—left the capital to eat and diseases that supposedly festered in the heat. I bought an old house a short walk from the beach village of Boca Chica, close to where the new airport house itself was nothing elegant: two stories, wood porch on the first floor, a large screened-in porch and almond tree that dropped its fruit on the zinc roof. of the night. *What was that?*

s, all the cousins, in that screened-in porch. Meals shifts on a big picnic table—first, the whole gang of arrangement planned to avoid trouble, the rowdy ill-behaved ones, the babies with bibs in high chairs, dignitaries of the gathering. The grown-ups ate after our cots to nap so we could "make our digestions" swimming in the late afternoon. Our lives, which were the rest of the year, since we all lived in neighboring more communal when we were all under the same and on in the capital during the week, working hard, day afternoons to a near-stampede of children run each to see what our papas had brought us from the of the week, it was just the cousins and our mothers d aunts and nursemaids, and the great big sea that ms all night long.

hat we were not living in a dictatorship but in a d sun and girlish mothers who shared in our fun. ed look disappeared from my mother's face. She e beach, a sea breeze blew her skirt up in the air, own. We chose the fish for our dinner right off the The women gossiped and told stories and painted

Friends in the States rigged up a fellowship for my father. The pretext was that he would study heart surgery there since there wasn't a heart surgeon in the Dominican Republic. What if our dictator should develop heart trouble? Papi was petitioning for a two-year visa for himself and his family. No, he told the authorities, he would not go without us. That would be a hardship.

"You bet," my mother tells me now. "We would have been held hostage!"

"Why didn't you tell us any of this back then?" I ask her. All we ever heard about was that we were taking a vacation to the United States. "Why didn't you just say, we're leaving forever?" *My father*

"Ay sí, and get ourselves killed! You had the biggest mouth back then—" She shakes her head, and I know what is coming, "and you still do, writing, writing, writing."

She is right, too—about the big mouth. I remember my three sisters and I were coached not to mention that we were going to the United States of America—at least not till our papers came, if they ever came.

Before the day was over, I had told our secret to the cousins, the maids, the dogs, and the corner candy man, who was always willing to exchange candy for my schoolbooks and school supplies. I hadn't meant to disobey, but it was so tempting to brag and get a little extra respect and a free box of cinnamon Chickets.

"I'm going to see the snow!" I singsang to my boy cousin Ique.

"So?" he shrugged and threw me a shadow punch. Needless to say, we were two of the rowdy ones.

Toys made a better argument. I was going to the land where our toys came from.

He raised his chin, struggling with the envy he did not want to admit to feeling. "Bring me back something?" he finally pleaded.

"Okay," I said, disarmed. No one had mentioned our return until this very moment. Surely, vacations were something you came back from?

When our papers finally arrived one morning in early August, Papi

booked us on the next flight off the Island. The v could tell anybody we wanted. Now, I was the one

"Hello, very pleased to make your acquaintance," English, holding out his hand to me. He had come for we were leaving that very night. Meanwhile, we our English! We would get so tall and pale and I States, and smart! Maybe we would marry American eyed babies that didn't know how to speak Spanist That gripped my braggart's heart. We were going As the hours ticked by and more and more visito in the back way to say good-bye, my sisters and I We didn't really want to go to a place where build and everyone spoke English all the time, not just class. We didn't want to go someplace if all th couldn't come along.

The uncles mocked us, lifting their eyebrows in Do you know how many children would give th to the United States of America?" Their argumen starving Chinese children who would give their I vegetables, did not convince us. Our protests, it drew near.

I don't know which aunt it was, or perhaps it w mother, who decided to trick us to calm us do United States, we were really going to Boca Chic total untruth. The new airport was on the way to

We were suspicious. Why were we dressed in pa going to the beach? Why did we have suitcases instead of the big hampers of clothes and provis when we left for the summer for the beach hous "That's enough, girls!" Mami snapped. "One and you can all stay here by yourselves!"

Now there was a threat worth its weight in silen

into America

States rigged up a fellowship for my father. The pretext could study heart surgery there since there wasn't a heart Dominican Republic. What if our dictator should develop Papi was petitioning for a two-year visa for himself and he told the authorities, he would not go without us. That dship.

my mother tells me now. "We would have been held you tell us any of this back then?" I ask her. All we ever as that we were taking a vacation to the United States. you just say, we're leaving forever?" *hyperbole* get ourselves killed! You had the biggest mouth back shakes her head, and I know what is coming, "and you still iting, writing."

too—about the big mouth. I remember my three sisters atched not to mention that we were going to the United ica—at least not till our papers came, if they ever came. day was over, I had told our secret to the cousins, the , and the corner candy man, who was always willing to for my schoolbooks and school supplies. I hadn't meant it was so tempting to brag and get a little extra respect of cinnamon Chiclets.

o see the snow!" I singsang to my boy cousin Ique. ruggled and threw me a shadow punch. Needless to say, f the rowdy ones.

better argument. I was going to the land where our toys chin, struggling with the envy he did not want to admit ng me back something?" he finally pleaded.

id, disarmed. No one had mentioned our return until this Surely, vacations were something you came back from? apers finally arrived one morning in early August, Papi

booked us on the next flight off the Island. The vacation was on. We could tell anybody we wanted. Now, I was the one who grew silent.

"Hello, very pleased to make your acquaintance," one uncle joked in English, holding out his hand to me. He had come by to say good bye, for we were leaving that very night. Meanwhile, we girls better practice our English! We would get so tall and pale and pretty in the United States, and smart! Maybe we would marry Americans and have little blue-eyed babies that didn't know how to speak Spanish!

That gripped my braggart's heart. We were going to be gone *that* long?

As the hours ticked by and more and more visitors and relatives snuck in the back way to say good-bye, my sisters and I grew pale with fear. We didn't really want to go to a place where buildings scraped the sky and everyone spoke English all the time, not just at school in English class. We didn't want to go someplace if all the cousins and aunts couldn't come along.

The uncles mocked us, lifting their eyebrows in shock. "How crazy! Do you know how many children would give their right arms to go to the United States of America?" Their argument, a variation on the starving Chinese children who would give their right arms to eat our vegetables, did not convince us. Our protests increased as the hour drew near. *hyperbole*

I don't know which aunt it was, or perhaps it was our own distraught mother, who decided to trick us to calm us down. Never mind the United States, we were really going to Boca Chica! The story wasn't a total untruth. The new airport was on the way to the fishing village.

We were suspicious. Why were we dressed in party dresses if we were going to the beach? Why did we have suitcases like foreign people, instead of the big hampers of clothes and provisions we took with us when we left for the summer for the beach house?

"That's enough, girls!" Mami snapped. "One more word from you and you can all stay here by yourselves!"

Now there was a threat worth its weight in silence. Abandonment was

far worse than a long, maybe permanent vacation somewhere weird. By the time we boarded the plane, long past midnight, none of us had raised any further objections. Besides by now, it had been drummed into us how lucky we were to have our papers, to be free to go on this long vacation.

Soon after the roar of take off, we fell asleep, so we did not see the little lights flickering in some of the houses as we flew over Boca Chica. Hours before dawn, the fishermen would already be casting their nets out in the ocean. By mid morning, when we would be gaping at the buildings in New York City, the fish would be laid out on a big board across the rowboats' length, their pink and silver scales iridescent with the water scooped over them to make them look fresher.

For weeks that soon became months and years, I would think in this way. What was going on right this moment back home? As the leaves fell and the air turned gray and the cold set in, I would remember the big house in Boca Chica, the waves telling me their secrets, the cousins sleeping side by side in their cots, and I would wonder if those papers had set us free from everything we loved.

person's location

S. Shankar

from A Map of Where I Live

I, Valur Vishvesvaran, in the fortieth year of my life, after great research the exact location of Lilliput, a journey of discovery. The wonderful events of the heard, recorded, what all of these events portend man, for the community of *bandur*, which is the Northern Lilliputian for us and means "giant one of these my memoirs."

Skepticism I expect. I expect *bandur* to say, "What land of tiny dwarfs? There can be no such thing is but the invention of an Irishman. It is nothing Much is invented in Jonathan Swift's tale of Gulliver I will not deny this. Swift took the few real details of liver's travels to Lilliput that he knew and surmised inventions of his own overworked imagination. misuse of the imagination, this creation of a map Swift proceeded to invent three more "journeys" The fictions of Swift I will not bother to defend.