

Excerpt From: Julia Alvarez. "In the Time of the Butterflies." Chapter 5

"She got so she wouldn't go to church unless Mamá made a scene. She argued that she was more connected to God reading her Rousseau than when she was at mass listening to Padre Ignacio intoning the Nicene Creed. "He sounds like he's gargling with words," she made fun.

"I worry that you're losing your faith," I told her. "That's our pearl of great price; you know, without it, we're nothing."

"You should worry more about your beloved church. Even Padre Ignacio admits some priests are on double payroll."

"Ay, Minerva," was all I could manage. I stroked my aching belly. For days, I'd been feeling a heaviness inside me. And I admit it, Minerva's talk had begun affecting me. I started noting the deadness in Padre Ignacio's voice, the tedium between the gospel and communion, the dry papery feel of the host in my mouth. My faith was shifting, and I was afraid.

"Sit back," Minerva said, kindly, seeing the lines of weariness on my face. "Let me finish counting those hairs."

"And suddenly, I was crying in her arms, because I could feel the waters breaking, the pearl of great price slipping out, and I realized I was giving birth to something dead I had been carrying inside me.

After I lost the baby, I felt a strange vacancy. I was an empty house with a sign in front, Se Vende, For Sale. Any vagrant thought could take me.

I woke up in a panic in the middle of the night, sure that some brujo had put a spell on me and that's why the baby had died. This from Patria Mercedes, who had always kept herself from such low superstitions.

I fell asleep and dreamed the Yanquis were back, but it wasn't my grandmother's house they were burning—it was Pedrito's and mine. My babies, all three of them, were going up in flames. I leapt from the bed crying, "Fire! Fire!"

I wondered if the dead child were not a punishment for my having turned my back on my religious calling? I went over and over my life to this point, complicating the threads with my fingers, knotting everything.

"We moved in with Mama until I could get my strength back. She kept trying to comfort me. "That poor child, who knows what it was spared!"

"It is the Lord's will," I agreed, but the words sounded hollow to my ear.

Minerva could tell. One day, we were lying side by side on the hammock strung just inside the galería. She must have caught me gazing at our picture of “the Good Shepherd, talking to his lambs. Beside him hung the required portrait of El Jefe, touched up to make him look better than he was. “They’re a pair, aren’t they?” she noted.

That moment, I understood her hatred. My family had not been personally hurt by Trujillo, just as before losing my baby, Jesus had not taken anything away from me. But others had been suffering great losses. There were the Perozos, not a man left in that family. And Martinez Reyna and his wife murdered in their bed, and thousands of Haitians massacred at the border, making the river, they say, still run red—iAy, Dios santo!

I had heard, but I had not believed. Snug in my heart, fondling my pearl, I had ignored their cries of desolation. How could our loving, all-powerful Father allow us to suffer so? I looked up, challenging Him. And the two faces had merged!”