

# Names *Nombres*

By Julia Alvarez

When we arrived in New York City, our names changed almost immediately. At Immigration, the officer asked my father, *Mister Elbures*, if he had anything to declare. My father shook his head no, and we were waved through. I was too afraid we wouldn't be let in if I corrected the man's pronunciation, but I said our name to myself, opening my mouth wide for the organ blast of the *a*, trilling my tongue for the drumroll of the *r*, *All-vah-rrr-es!* How could anyone get *Elbures* out of that orchestra of sound?

At the hotel my mother was *Missus Alburest*, and I was *little girl*, as in "Hey, little girl, stop riding the elevator up and down. It's not a toy."

When we moved into our new apartment building, the super called my father *Mister Alberase*, and the neighbors who became mother's friends pronounced her name *Jew-lee-ah* instead of *Hoo-lee-ah*. I, as her namesake, was known as *Hoo-lee-ah* at home. But at school I was *Judy* or *Judith*, and once an English teacher mistook me for *Juliet*.

It took a while to get used to my new names. I wondered if I shouldn't correct my teachers and new friends. But my mother argued that it didn't matter. "You know what your friend Shakespeare said, 'A rose by any other name would be as sweet.'" My family had gotten into the habit of calling any literary figure "my friend" because I had begun to write poems and stories in English class.

By the time I was in high school, I was a popular kid, and it showed in my name. Friends called me *Jules* or *Hey Jude*, and once a group of troublemaking friends my mother forbade me to hang out with called me *Alcatraz*. I was *Hoo-lee-tah* only to Mami and Papi and uncles and aunts who came over to eat *sancocho*<sup>1</sup> on Sunday afternoons – old world folk whom I would just as soon go back to where they came from and leave me to pursue whatever mischief I wanted to in America. JUDY ALCATRAZ: the name on the wanted poster would read. Who would ever trace her to me?

My older sister had the hardest time getting an American name for herself because *Mauricia* did not translate into English. Ironically,

although she had the most foreign-sounding name, she and I were the Americans in the family. We had been born in New York City when our parents had first tried immigration and then gone back "home," too homesick to stay. My mother often told the story of how she had almost changed my sister's name in the hospital.

After the delivery, Mami and some other new mothers were cooing over their new baby sons and daughters and exchanging names and weights and delivery stories. My mother was embarrassed among the Sallys and Janes and Georges and Johns to reveal the rich, noisy name of *Mauricia*, so when her turn came to brag, she gave her baby's name as *Maureen*.

"Why'd ya give her an Irish name with so many pretty Spanish names to choose from?" one of the women asked her.

My mother blushed and admitted her baby's real name to the group. Her mother-in-law had recently died, she apologized, and her husband had insisted that the first daughter be named after his mother, *Mauran*. My mother thought it the ugliest name she had ever heard, and she talked my father into what she believed was an improvement, a combination of *Mauran* and her own mother's name, *Felicia*.

"Her name is Mao-ree-shee-ah," my mother said to the group.

"Why that's a beautiful name," the new mothers cried. "*Moor-ee-sha*, *Moor-ee-sha*," they cooed into the pink blanket. *Moor-ee-sha* it was when we returned to the states eleven years later. Sometimes, American tongues found even that mispronunciation tough to say and called her *Maria* or *Marsha* or *Maudy* from her nickname *Maury*. I pitied her. What an awful name to have to transport across borders!

My little sister, Ana, had the easiest time of all. She was plain *Anne*—that is, only her name was plain, for she turned out to be the pale, blond "American beauty" in the family. The only Hispanic-seeming thing about her was the affectionate nicknames her boyfriends sometimes gave her, *Anita*, or as one goofy guy used to sing to her to the tune of the banana advertisement, *Anita Banana*.

Later, during her college years in the late 60's, there was a push to pronounce Third World names correctly. I remember calling her long distance at her group house and a roommate answering.

"Can I speak to Ana?" I asked, pronouncing her name the American way.

"Ana?" The man's voice hesitated. "Oh! You must mean *An-nah!*"

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<sup>1</sup>*sancocho* traditional Caribbean stew of meat and vegetables

Our first few years in the States, though, ethnicity was not yet “in.” Those were the blond, blue-eyed, bobby-sock years of junior high and high school before the 60’s ushered in peasant blouses, hoop earrings, *sarapes*.<sup>2</sup> My initial desire to be known by my correct Dominican name faded. I just wanted to be Judy and merge with the Sallys and Janes in my class. But inevitably, my accent and coloring gave me away. “So where are you from, Judy?”

“New York,” I told my classmates. After all, I had been born blocks away at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

“I mean, *originally*.”

“From the Caribbean,” I answered vaguely, for if I specified, no one was quite sure what continent our island was located on.

“Really? I’ve been to Bermuda. We went last April for spring vacation. I got the worst sunburn! So, are you from Portoriko?”

“No,” I shook my head. “From the Dominican Republic.”

“Where’s that?”

“South of Bermuda.”

They were just being curious, I knew, but I burned with shame whenever they singled me out as a “foreigner,” a rare, exotic friend.

“Say your name in Spanish, oh, please say it!” I had made mouths drop one day by rattling off my full name, which, according to Dominican custom, included my middle names, Mother’s and Father’s surnames for four generations back.

“Julia Altagracia Maria Teresa Alvarez Tavarez Perello Espiaillat Julia Perez Rochet Gonzalez.” I pronounced it slowly, a name a chaotic with sounds as a Middle Eastern bazaar or market day in a South American village.

I suffered most whenever my extended family attended school occasions. For my graduation, they all came, the whole noisy foreign-looking lot of fat aunts in their dark mourning dresses and hair nets, uncles with full, droopy mustaches and baby-blue or salmon-colored suits and white pointy shoes and fedora hats, the many little cousins who snuck in without tickets. They sat in the first row in order to better understand the American’s fast-spoken English. But how could they listen when they were constantly speaking among themselves in florid-sounding<sup>3</sup> phrases, rococo<sup>4</sup> consonants, rich, rhyming vowels?

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<sup>2</sup> *sarapes* A long, blanket-like shawl

<sup>3</sup> *florid-sounding* flowery; very ornate

<sup>4</sup> *rococo* elaborate; flamboyant

Their loud voices carried.

Introducing them to my friends was a further trial to me. These relatives had such complicated names and there were so many of them, and their relationships to myself were so convoluted.<sup>5</sup> There was my Tia Josefina, who was not really an aunt but a much older cousin. And her daughter, Aida Margarita, who was adopted, *una hija de crianza*.<sup>6</sup> My uncle of affection, Tio Jose, brought my *madrina*<sup>7</sup> Tia Amelia and her *comadre*<sup>8</sup> Tia Pilar. My friends rarely had more than their nuclear family to introduce, youthful, glamorous-looking couples (“Mom and Dad”) who skied and played tennis and took their kids for spring vacations to Bermuda.

After the commencement ceremony, my family waited outside in the parking lot while my friends and I signed yearbooks with nicknames which recalled our high school good times: “Beans” and “Pepperoni” and “Alcatraz.” We hugged and cried and promised to keep in touch.

Sometimes if our goodbyes went on too long, I heard my father’s voice calling out across the parking lot. “*Hoo-lee-tah! Vamanos!*”<sup>9</sup>

Back home, my tios and tias and primas, Mami and Papi, and *mis hermanas*<sup>10</sup> had a party for me with *sancocho* and a store-bought *pudin*<sup>11</sup> inscribed with *Happy Graduation, Julie*. There were so many gifts—that was a plus to a large family! I got several wallets and a suitcase with my initials and a graduation charm from my godmother and money from my uncles. The biggest gift was a portable typewriter from my parents for writing my stories and poems.

Someday, my family predicted, my name would be well-known throughout the United States. I laughed to myself, wondering which one I would go by.

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<sup>5</sup> *convoluted* difficult to understand; complicated

<sup>6</sup> *una hija de crianza* a child raised as if one’s own

<sup>7</sup> *madrina* godmother

<sup>8</sup> *comadre* close friend

<sup>9</sup> *Vamanos* Let’s go!

<sup>10</sup> *mis hermanas* my sisters

<sup>11</sup> *pudin* pudding

