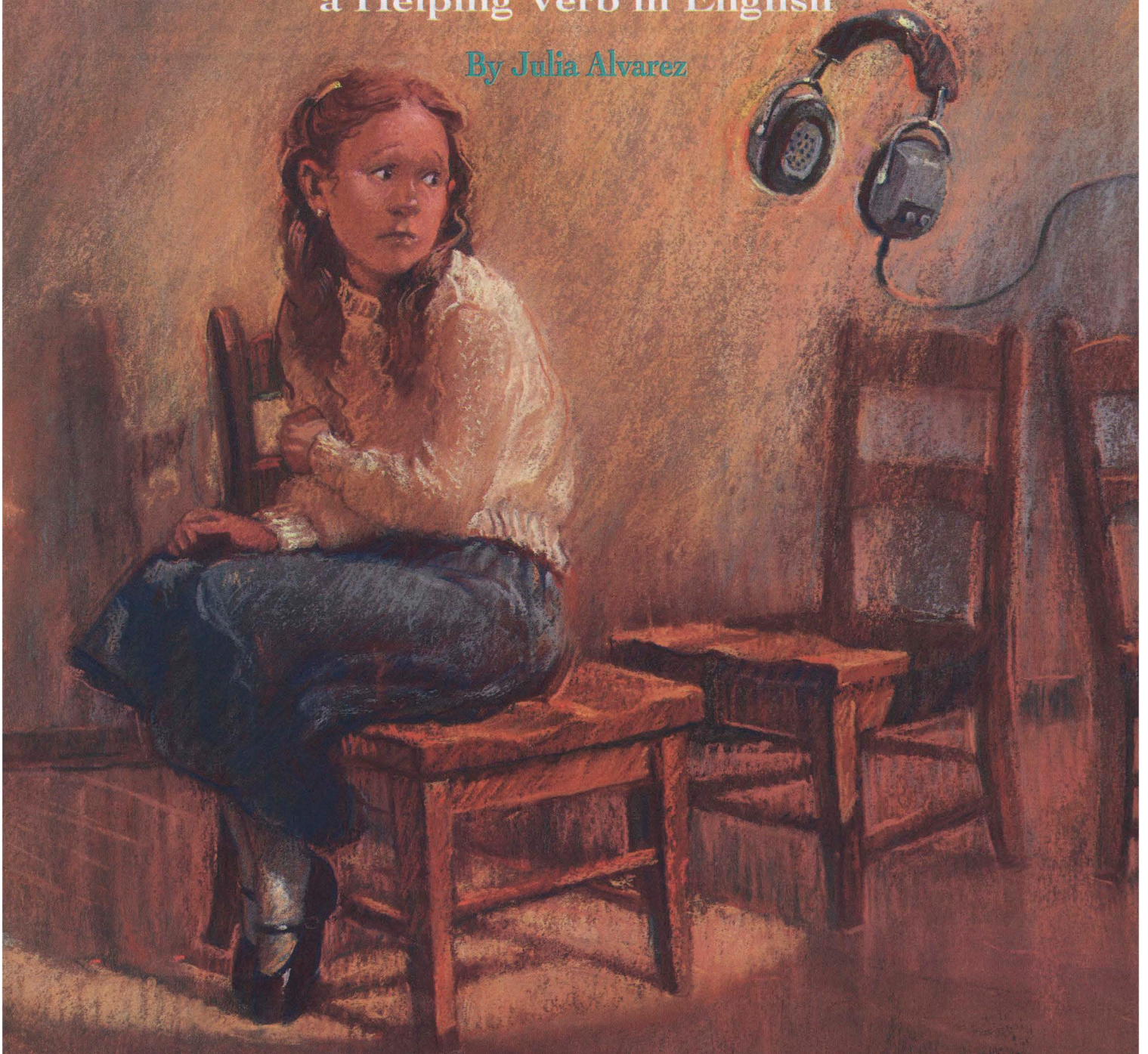


FICTION

Disappeared

Does Not Take
a Helping Verb in English

By Julia Alvarez



At first, Yolanda did not notice how many of her classmates were disappearing. Every time the voice in the intercom crackled, she would look up, startled by the noise, and then bend over her workbook again.

She was studying her helping verbs for the test tomorrow. The verb *to be* was holding hands with the verb *to make*, and then there was a picture of a girl wrapped in a coat like the one Yolanda's mother had bought her and rolling up big balls of dough. "Sally is

making a snowman," the caption read. Yolanda thought how her mother would never let her waste that much flour.

The next time the voice called a name, Yolanda noted how Josephine Cleary immediately closed her books,

lifted her desk top, and put them away, then quietly left the room. The seats in front of Josephine were empty, all the A's and B's had already been called. Fear shot through Yolanda's heart. Back home, she remembered when Tio Persio had been taken away by the police, and he hadn't done anything wrong. "A lot of people are disappearing," her mother had said, "but this is not something to ever talk about, you understand?"



D'Allaird '94

"Why not?" Yolanda asked.

"Because if you say anything, your father will be next." Her mother had looked at Yoyo with piercing eyes as if she wanted to say more than she had already said.

Yolanda did not mention what she had heard to anyone except Gladys, who was her favorite of anyone who had ever worked for them. The young maid told Yolanda things it would have taken Yolanda eight more years to find out, for Gladys was already 16.

That night she had a nightmare and woke up screaming. Her mother came running in the room, "What? What?" Yolanda explained about the tortures, and her mother got very angry. "There are spies everywhere," she hissed in the dark. And then, she hit Yolanda hard where her legs should be under the blanket. Yolanda began to cry, not because the spanking hurt, but because it was frightening to see her mother so angry.

The next morning her mother had

secrets to themselves." When Yolanda's mouth dropped open, her mother gave her a slow, accusing nod.

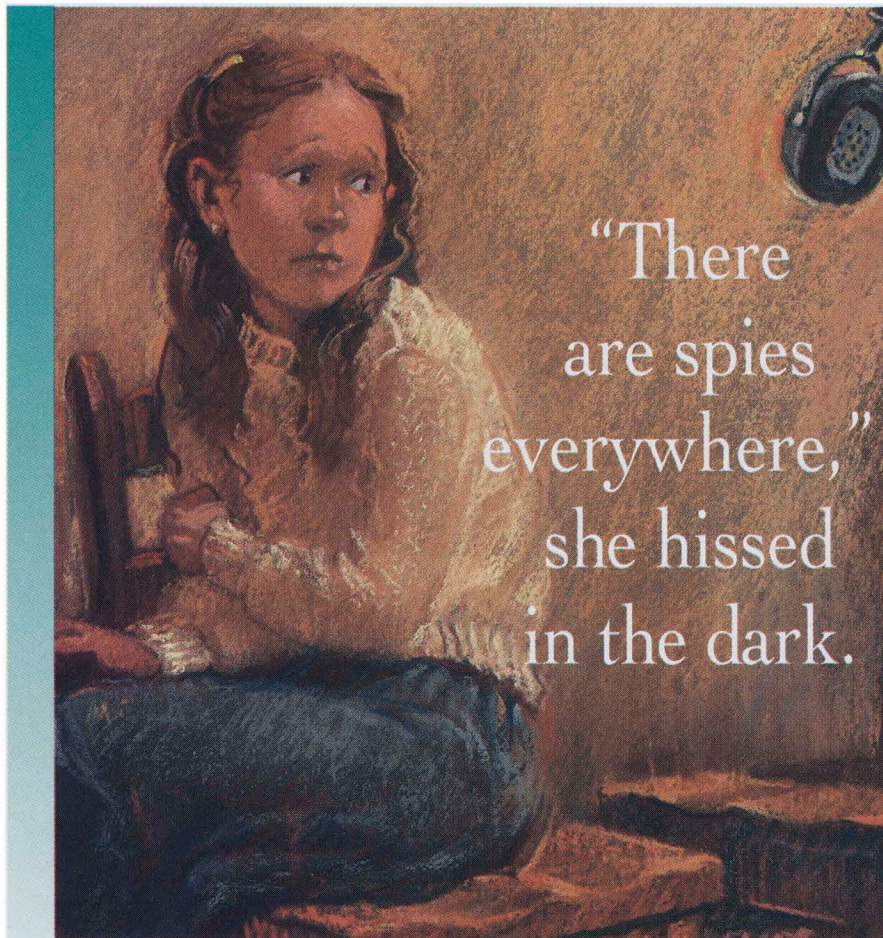
But no one else had disappeared in Yolanda's family while they were still on the Island, thank goodness. Sometimes to practice silence under torture, Yolanda would turn on the hot faucet and put her hands under the steaming jet as long as she could stand it, biting her lips to keep from uttering a sound.

But in the United States—as her mother called it—the Garcias were safe. "You have to stop being scared of every little thing," her mother scolded. When the leaves all started turning red and falling a few weeks back, Yolanda suspected the trees were being poisoned. The cold she already knew would come, but it still didn't seem right for the world to be like the inside of a refrigerator. She was sure all these changes were leading up to something the grown-ups didn't want to tell the children about.

Now, counting the empty chairs in the classroom, Yolanda imagined what might be happening to the children who had been called out of the room. Maybe they were being questioned about their parents, and the ones who answered were released, for a few children were already returning. The others, the ones who wouldn't talk as Yolanda knew she wouldn't, were being taken away to be tortured.

What was it they would ask her? Yolanda wondered. Did her parents like this country? Was the right answer yes or no? She knew that every night her father sat in the living room listening to his crackling radio, turning the dials until he got a far-away little Spanish voice that told him news about what was happening back on the Island. Someday soon they would go back home, he promised Yolanda and her sisters.

But Mami said this was a great country, and she wouldn't trade it for anything, and they were very lucky to be here. The United States of America had replaced Papi as the big boss the girls had to obey. Instead of the old threat, "Wait till Papi gets home," now, it was, "The Americans will send



Most incredible was the story of where babies came from and how they got in there. When Yolanda told Gladys about Tío Persio disappearing, the young maid already knew that the secret police were torturing him. She began describing horrible things until Yolanda clapped her hands over her ears and cried, "Stop!"

puffy, red eyes, and every time the phone rang, she jumped. During a visit from an aunt, Yolanda's mother spoke about how in Nazi Germany, wherever that was, they used to take children away and make them talk. Her mother looked keenly in Yolanda's direction. "Some children got their whole families killed because they couldn't keep

you back if you don't behave!" This was said especially about schoolwork, and Yolanda had taken this threat to heart. She did not want to be the one responsible for sending them back and getting everybody killed after all. Every time she took a test, Yolanda's hand shook as she filled in the blanks. Often she cried when a test was announced.

Sister Beatrice told her to relax, but Yolanda tried to explain that she could not get a bad mark on her test. "We will be disappeared like my Tío Persio," she explained. Sister shook her head. "*Disappeared* does not take a helping verb in English. And you will do very well on your test, my dear. You are a bright girl!" She tapped her forehead and winked. Yolanda forced a brave smile. She could not make herself understood in this new language yet, but her paper English was coming along. She got 100 percent on all her tests, which she brought home to show that she was doing her part to keep the family safe.

Yolanda could not study anymore. She was totally alert to the disappearances in the classroom. When Sally Frankel's name was called, the girl sitting just ahead of Yolanda put her notebook away, nestled her pencil in the slot at the top center of her desk, and calmly left the room. Yolanda was surprised that Sally hadn't been more upset. Sally Frankel cried easily, especially when the other children called her Frankenstein and burst into laughter. Only Yolanda, who didn't understand what was so funny, and Sally herself, didn't laugh. In the blushing girl's face, Yolanda could see the effort of held-back crying, an effort Yolanda had to make often when she mispronounced a word and the whole class broke into laughter. Once she had pronounced *sheets* as *shits* and even the kind Sister Beatrice laughed along with the classroom.

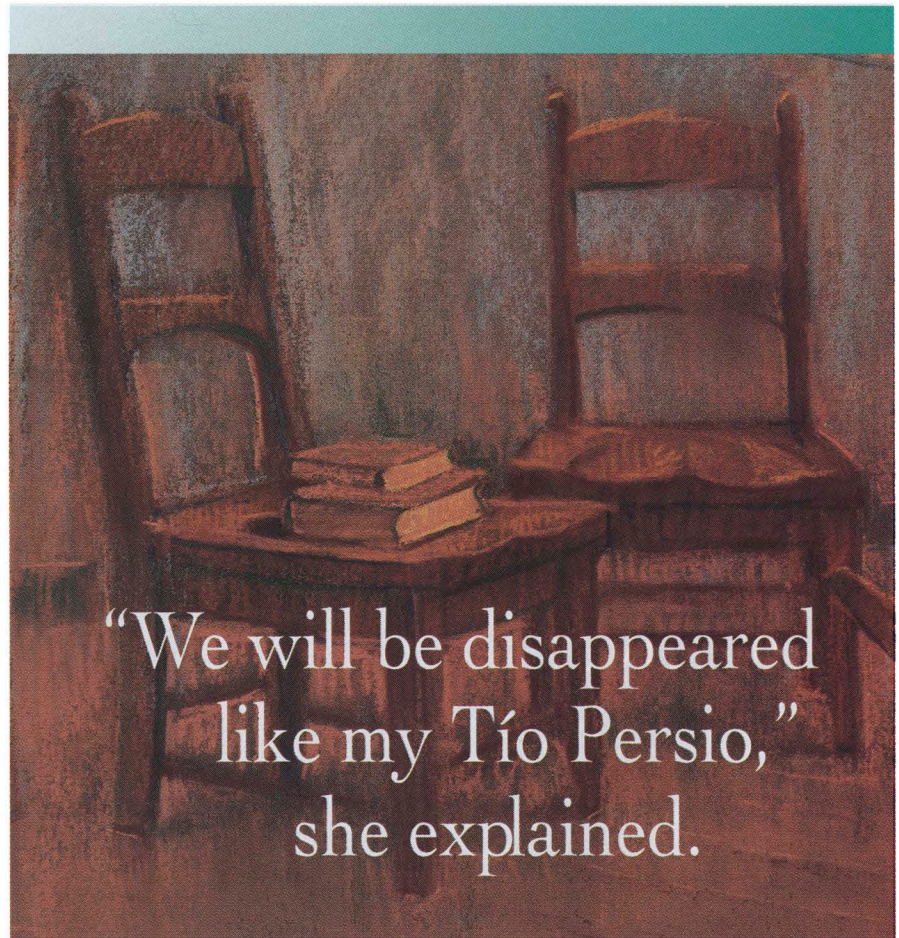
Yolanda quietly closed her workbook. She had it all worked out: The minute her name was called, she'd run home and yell for her mother and baby sister to run and hide before the secret

police got there. It would be a brave thing to do, like in a movie. No one could accuse her of being like a kid in Nazi Germany.

The crackling announcement of her first name might have been a gunshot at the start of the race: Yolanda dashed up her aisle across the room right in front of Sister Beatrice's startled face, and out the door before she had even heard her last name called. No one was in the hall as Yolanda raced toward the stairs, aware now of

they could have access to shots and bad-tasting medicines.

Next to the front entrance stood Sister Mary Joseph, the principal. She was a fat, grandmotherly nun with a kind face who often asked Yolanda questions in a calm, slow voice that actually made English understandable. It was as if Sister Mary Joseph had taken the tangled mess of English, unknotted it, rolled it into a ball, and handed it to Yolanda to do with as she wanted. Now she held up her hand



the growing commotion of voices from her classroom, and Sister Beatrice's sharp voice calling out, "Stop!"

Down the stairs, two at a time, Yolanda raced. In the hall below, she caught sight of her classmates standing in a line outside the nurse's office. Of course, the secret police would carry out their interrogations here where

and very clearly said, "Stop!"

It surprised Yolanda that a nice nun like Sister Mary Joseph would participate in interrogations with the secret police. But then her own uncles, Tío Tancredo and Tío Danilo, were in the very army that had seized Tío Persio, their half brother. Mami had explained that good people took part in bad

things often without realizing it. Yolanda had wished her mother had considered that when she discovered Yolanda accidentally taking money left out on a dresser to buy candy to appease the children in her class.

Sister Mary Joseph frowned when Yolanda did not stop her headlong plunge towards the front door. "What in God's name. . ." she began and reached out, catching Yolanda by the shoulders. "You can't go out without. . ."

Yolanda wriggled this way and that,

new scarf and hat. A small loss given the safety of her family.

It was after she had turned the corner that she noticed the air was filling with strange cindery flakes. Perhaps this odd occurrence was connected with the emergency that had sent the secret police investigating through the schools. Something dangerous was happening to the air, and the sooner Yolanda got home and warned her family about the burning skies the better.

But these ashes were really pretty,

self looking straight at a navy blue coat with many bright buttons. Yolanda knew before she even looked up at the familiar cap that she was face to face with an American policeman.

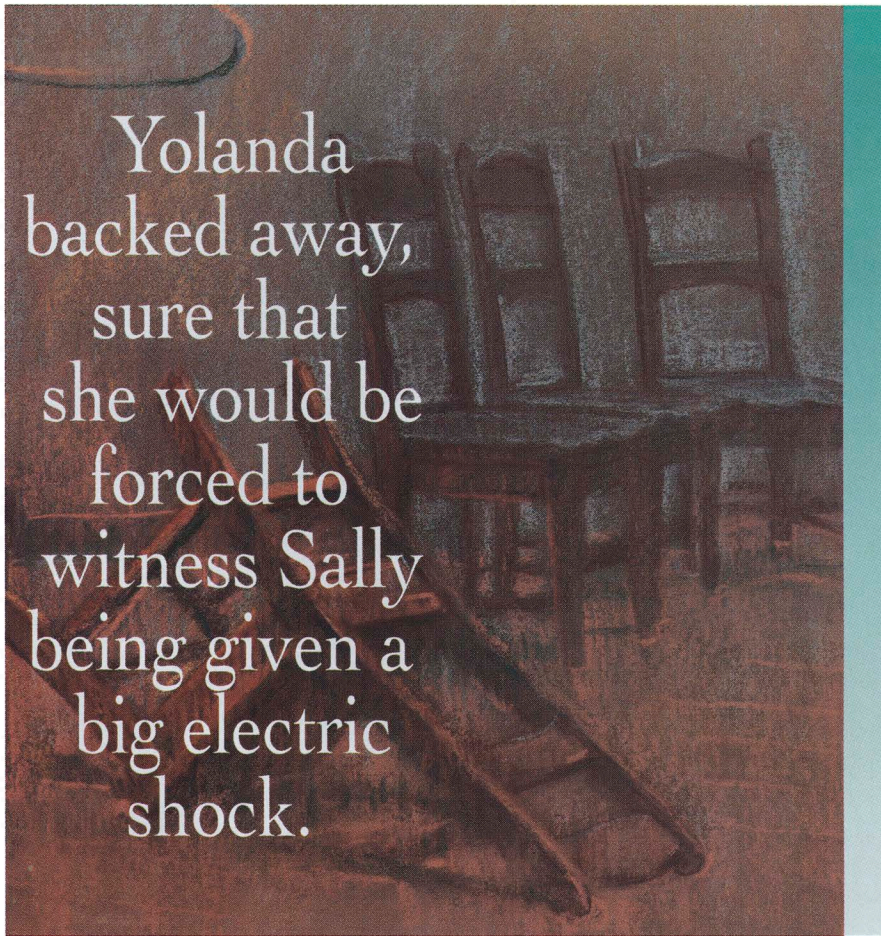
He asked her something, bending down to look into her frightened eyes, but she could not make out what he was saying. The flakes were falling so thickly now that they were coating his cap and shoulders. Again, he asked her something, and this time she distinctly understood "lost." She pointed down the block towards her apartment building, and the man took her hand and headed in the direction Yolanda had indicated.

But they did not get far. Over their shoulders there were shouts. Sister Mary Joseph was racing towards them, her veils flapping about her, making her hurry seem panicked like a bird trapped indoors.

The old nun lifted her black cape off her shoulders and mantled it over Yolanda's head. Yolanda felt like the Virgin Mary with a veil over her hair rushing away from Bethlehem on account of someone was after her and the baby Jesus. She was crying quietly, and the flakes falling on her skin and melting added to her tears. Now she would be in for it. As the nun led her away, Yolanda looked over her shoulder at the policeman who gave her a little wave like Yolanda gave to babies just learning how to wave back.

They cut in line at the nurse's office, and entered the small room. On a table sat a large black machine that looked like a record player except it had no turntable. Plugged into the side was a pair of earphones, which Sally Frankel was wearing over her head. Yolanda backed away, sure that she would be forced to witness Sally being given a big electric shock in her ears like Gladys had described the secret police gave to prisoners all over their bodies. But as the nurse turned a little dial on her machine, Sally Frankel lifted up her hand and smiled.

"See," Sister Mary Joseph said, taking the earphones off Sally and placing



wrenching free at last, and pushing open the double doors like orderlies thrusting stretchers into emergency rooms in TV hospitals.

As she hurried down the front stairs of the building, Yolanda felt the cold air like stinging slaps all over her body. Her winter coat was back in the classroom, hanging in the closet with her

Yolanda noticed, white and lacy like the little doilies they had been cutting out of paper in school all month and pasting on the windows. The flakes were landing on the sidewalk. Yolanda stepped on a couple to make sure they were not alive. She bent to pick one up but it turned to nothing in her hand.

When she stood up, she found her-

them over her own ears with the headband part down under her chin because she couldn't get it over her head. She crouched down beside Yolanda and nodded to the nurse, then she pulled the earphone away from her

ear. Yolanda heard a ringing sound like a telephone in an empty house, louder and louder as the nurse turned the knob. Sister Mary Joseph lifted up her hand as Sally had done. She smiled and offered the earphones to Yolanda

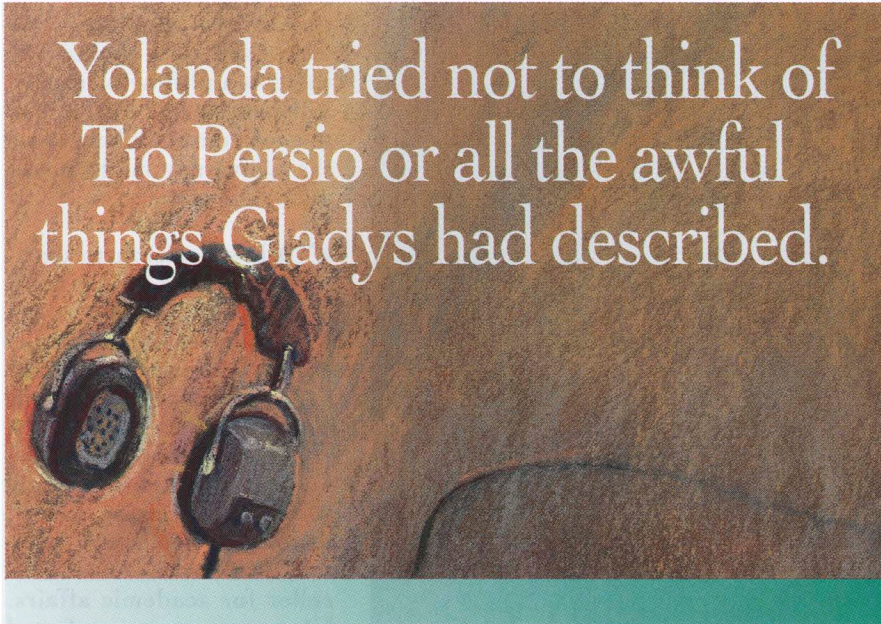
to put on herself. "It doesn't hurt, dear," she said. "Right, Sally?"

"It doesn't hurt," Sally said nicely. "I'm not afraid," she said, lifting her chin.

"This is just a test to see if your ears hear right," Sister Mary Joseph said. At the mention of the word test, Yolanda felt the familiar flutter in her stomach. She had not prepared for it. Now she was sure to get her family in trouble even if she did survive the torture.

But there was nothing she could do now. She bowed her head in submission. Sister Mary Joseph placed the earphones over Yolanda's head. Closing her eyes tightly in case there might be pain, Yolanda tried not to think of Tío Persio or all the awful things Gladys had described. Again, she heard the faint ringing sound of a telephone. Yolanda waited for the other end to be picked up, hoping whoever answered spoke Spanish so she could pass this test. ■

Yolanda tried not to think of Tío Persio or all the awful things Gladys had described.



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CHILDHOOD TRANSLATIONS

Julia Alvarez was 10 when she moved to the United States from the Dominican Republic. She expected it to be a magical experience, having heard stories of skyscrapers and stores full of toys. Instead, she was terrified.

"I've often wondered why America scared me so much," says Alvarez, whose first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, was loosely based on her family's adjustment to life in the United

States. *Disappeared Does Not Take a Helping Verb in English* is her attempt to comprehend that fear.

"The story was an effort to understand the terror that comes from not having the language," says Alvarez. "But it's also about the terror that comes from



growing up in a police state where you live with a sense of fear in the air, and as a kid, don't really understand what's going on."

Alvarez, who received her master's degree in creative writing from SU in 1975, has published poetry and short stories in numerous anthologies and literary magazines. Her poem "Bookmaking" was chosen as one of the best poems of the year in *The Best American Poetry 1991*. For the *Garcia Girls*, she received a Notable Book award from the American Library Association and the 1991 Pen Oakland/Josephine Miles Book Award. A professor of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, Alvarez began her literary career as a poet and later added fiction to her repertoire.

"I see my poems now as being much more narrative than lyric," says Alvarez, who's currently working on a volume of poetry to be published early next year. "It's as if the poetry itself was telling me I needed to tell some stories."

Alvarez has a novel due for publication this fall. *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a fictionalized historical account of women's lives in the Dominican Republic under the dictatorship of General Trujillo. Alvarez traces the lives of the Mirabar sisters, who were prominent figures in the underground movement against Trujillo. She explores how the women became politicized and tells the story of their 1960 assassination, a story Alvarez recalls hearing as a young girl, just about the time she came to America.

—ANDREA C. MARSH