**Entre Lucas y Juan Mejía**

by Julia Alvarez

1. There’s an expression in the Dominican Republic, hard to translate into English. If you ask a Dominican how he is, and he doesn’t have a simple answer to give you, he might say “Entre Lucas y Juan Mejía” if he’s doing well. Or, if he’s doing poorly, “Entre Lucas y Juan Mejía[[1]](#footnote-1).”
2. “I’m fine.” “I’m not feeling so good.” These are straightforward responses, the black and white world of fact. And out of these two states of being, straightforward explanations usually follow. “I’m flying high because I just won the lottery.” Or, “I’m in the pits because my man left me.” But in that third, in-between space, where you cannot easily get at what you feel, you need a story to render[[2]](#footnote-2) full justice to your emotions.
3. Let’s go back to the saying for a minute. What does it actually mean, “entre Lucas y Juan Mejía”? “Between the devil and the deep blue sea” isn’t right, because you’re not describing the sensation of being caught between a pair of bad alternatives—“a rock and a hard place.” No. “So-so” isn’t the meaning either, because the Dominican expression isn’t at all meant to suggest bland stasis, mediocrity. It’s much more intriguing than that. “How are you doing?” “I’m between Lucas and Juan Mejía.
4. But who are these two guys? Who knows? The very story that inspired the saying is gone. So of course, what happens is, you have to go on and tell the tale of why you feel the way you do. What are the forces you’re caught between? How did you get there? And how does it feel to be there? For me, that moment of crisis, that being-in-the-middle, is always the nexus[[3]](#footnote-3) of a story.
5. So what does all this have to do with Hispanic writers living in the United States? Or rather, since I don’t like to speak for all of the others, what does it have to do with me, a Dominican-American novelist?
6. Already that description of myself tells you something. I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend together. In fact, if it hadn’t been for my coming to the United States at the age of ten, if I’d just grown up Dominican with no hyphen, I don’t think I’d be doing what I’m doing today. I’m definitely not one of those born writers. I was an active little kid, not bookish, not solitary in the least. Although I did always love a good story.
7. My parents sent me to the local American school, Carol Morgan, so I could learn my English. (That’s how everyone spoke of it. It was always “your English.” “You have to learn your English.”) And I did a poor job of it. I flunked the subject in every grade and kept having to go to summer school. I played hooky by hiding under the bed when all the cousins would gather in the morning to be driven off to school so they could go learn their English. I wasn’t interested in Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff.[[4]](#footnote-4) No one could sit me down to those dull pastel puppets when, all around me, the women who cooked and cleaned—Gladys, Rosario, Altagracia y Iluminada—were full of stories about the witch that scared Juanita, who went out after dark one night and gave birth, and the baby had an extra finger. Or about the boy with warts all over his arms, Porfirio, who made Ignacio count those warts one afternoon and, next morning, Porfirio’s arms were smooth as an infant’s but Ignacio had twenty-seven warts on his. Or about how Fulanita was seen going into Arturo’s room when Ana-Flor was out of the house and she wasn’t carrying her cleaning bucket, no señor.
8. Those first ten years on the island, we were living in the bloody Trujillo dictatorship. My father, already exiled once, was now back home and had again become involved in the underground. Our house was under constant surveillance.
9. In the way of children, I didn’t think anything adults did could go wrong. Then suddenly one day we were on a plane to New York, because the SIM,[[5]](#footnote-5) the secret police, were after my father. In a sense, I felt lucky. After all, I had heard from Rosario and Altagracia and Gladys about Nueva York. Now I would get to see the miracle of snow… stores full of anything you could think of to buy… buildings that pricked the sky with their roofs… and a host of other marvels that, up till then, had existed only in the province of story.
10. We arrived in New York City in August. Nothing I’d been told prepared me for the shock of America. I was silenced with astonishment. The doors of huge edifices[[6]](#footnote-6) swung open when you approached them. Elevators carried you up into the sky like a ride at la féria.[[7]](#footnote-7) And all around me, people were speaking English. But not the slow, carefully enunciated English of my Dominican classroom. This was gibberish[[8]](#footnote-8)—or at best, talk I had to strain to understand. It was like finding yourself at the foot of the Tower of Babel[[9]](#footnote-9). And as the months went by, the most frightening thing of all happened. I began losing my Spanish before getting a foothold[[10]](#footnote-10) in English. I was without a language, without any way to fend for myself, without solid ground to stand on.
11. Determined to make myself understood, I began reading. I began studying words in a precise, self-conscious, intentional way, which is perfect training for a writer. And I began writing. In self-imposed solitude, I started making sense of my new life in this country. I discovered that the act of writing was a way of bringing together those two worlds that would often clash in my own head, driving me in different directions. A way of reconciling[[11]](#footnote-11) two cultures that mixed together in such odd combinations. At my desk, I could sort out and understand those combinations.
12. I grew older and made my life here. Not here in the United States, and not alla[[12]](#footnote-12) in Santo Domingo, but here in the world of words. They give me ground to stand on as I pushed away from my family and their Old World ideas of what my role as a female should be. They gave me ground to stand on as I resisted being labeled in the New World as an “other,” an outsider who had better assimilate if she expected to share in the goodies.
13. In a sense I was in no man’s land. No woman’s land. But that land is any writer’s blank page. Or as Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet and immigrant, once put it, language is the only homeland.
14. What I’ve discovered, then, is that this in-between place is not just one of friction and tension but one that offers unique perspectives, visions, energy, choices. And our stories chart these. And our poems name them. And this naming and charting are crucial for understanding ourselves, for validating ourselves as individuals and as members of communities that happen to be of neither one world nor another… that happen to be entre Lucas y Juan Mejía.

1. *between Lucas and Juan Mejía* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. give [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. connection between two ideas [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. References to American childrens’ books. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Servicio de Inteligencia Militar, the Dominican secret police under the dictator, Trujillo. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. large buildings [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Spanish: the fair, carnival [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. nonsense [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, an immense tower in the city of Babel dedicated to the glory of humanity. God made them speak many conflicting languages rather than a universal one and scattered the people (and their languages) around the earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. grasp [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Making sense of two conflicting ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Spanish: over there [↑](#footnote-ref-12)