

Out the house In the plane Off the ground.

Floating in the sky.

On the ground Off the plane In the street.

You grip your new bright red USA tracksuit to your chest as the New York traffic zooms by. Ready to wear your new life. Bright red. Hello Democracy. Nice to meet you.

Your expectations are as empty as the backpack you carry through the heavy wooden doors.

The school is big, brick. The schedule not split between morning and afternoon shifts like you are used to. The hallways are packed. You go to your classes, make friends.

You're grateful you speak English better than your brother. You're also grateful that they give you a translation dictionary to use on tests. And even though you struggle because you have to spend so much time translating words, you're a good student. You enjoy school.

But on Saturday in your special class for kids of representatives from your country, you belong. All of you have been transplanted temporarily. Language, History, Marxism, Geography. You need to keep up with the studies of your homeland while you are growing new roots in this foreign land. All of you carry empty backpacks and heavy burdens.

Your P.E. teacher approaches you with an unimaginable proposal. Girls don't play soccer... You help start the first girls' soccer team at your high school. You tell your brother you'll play forward, and he laughs. But by the end of the season, you have scored 24 out of 25 goals and accomplished the fabled hat trick.

Your brother stops laughing. He is proud.

Your biology teacher approaches you about a specialized pre-college medical program. You apply. You are accepted. For an entire semester, you spent 2 - 3 hours after school at the local hospital doing a rotation in different wards. You see some of the first AIDS patients in New York. You observe an autopsy on a lady you had just spoken to the day before.

Your backpack is a little fuller than when you stepped off that plane and bought that tracksuit.

History class – no, not your special Saturday class. Memorization Memorization Memorization
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Memori-- *Better Dead Than Red.*

The teacher is looking straight at you.

You drop your backpack and your things fall out.

You tell your family what happened that evening when you get home. You are all so shocked
you laugh about it. Who would we be to go report the teacher...

Americans are strange. America is strange.

That's the tax we pay to get to come here and taste the American Dream.

Back to school. Memorization. Playing soccer. Memorization. Hospital Work. Memorization.

You get a compliment on your bright red bow tie from the supermodel-like fashionable Italian girl.

Saturday.

Family time. Homework. Friends.

Monday.

Math, Gym, Science. Girls chase you in the hallway trying to cover you in shaving cream, again. This time you clench your fists and tell them through your teeth that you will kill them if they ever come near you again. You've had enough.

You don't wear your tracksuit anymore. Maybe you had to give it up as part of the tax.

You had a pretty usual childhood, you say. Decades later in California, in your 50s, you still have the red USA tracksuit. It is not as bright as it used to be. Sometimes your mother – now a grandmother – uses it as work clothing for gardening when she comes to visit.

Otherwise, it sleeps in the same drawer undisturbed.
You don't carry a backpack anymore either.

Well, I guess you can be American now.