“My First Free Summer”
by Julia Alvarez

I never had summer—I had summer school. First grade, summer school. Second grade, summer school. Third grade, summer school. Fourth grade, summer school. In fifth grade, I vowed I would get interested in fractions, the presidents of the United States, Mesopotamia; I would learn my English.

That was the problem. English. My mother had decided to send her children to the American school so we could learn the language of the nation that would soon be liberating us. For thirty years, the Dominican Republic had endured a bloody and repressive dictatorship [a government under an absolute ruler, or dictator]. From my father, who was involved in an underground plot, my mother knew that los americanos [Spanish: the Americans] had promised to help bring democracy to the island.

“You have to learn your English!” Mami kept scolding me.

“But why?” I’d ask. I didn’t know about my father’s activities. I didn’t know the dictator was bad. All I knew was that my friends who were attending Dominican schools were often on holiday to honor the dictator’s birthday, the dictator’s saint day, the day the dictator became the dictator, the day the dictator’s oldest son was born, and so on. They marched in parades and visited the palace and had their picture in the paper.

Meanwhile, I had to learn about the pilgrims with their funny witch hats, about the 50 states and where they were on the map, about Dick and Jane [characters in a children’s reading textbook] and their tame little pets, Puff and Spot, about freedom and liberty and justice for all—while being imprisoned in a hot classroom with a
picture of a man wearing a silly wig hanging above the blackboard. And all of this learning I had to do in that impossibly difficult, rocks-in-your-mouth language of English!

Somehow, I managed to scrape by. Every June, when my prospects looked iffy, Mami and I met with the principal. I squirmed in my seat while they arranged for my special summer lessons.

“She is going to work extra hard. Aren’t you, young lady?” the principal would quiz me at the end of our session.

My mother’s eye on me, I’d murmur, “Yeah.”

“Yes, what?” Mami coached.

“Yes.” I sighed. “Sir.”

It’s a wonder that I just wasn’t thrown out, which was what I secretly hoped for. But there were extenuating circumstances [a situation or condition that proves an excuse for an action], the grounds on which the American school stood had been donated by my grandfather. In fact, it had been my grandmother who had encouraged Carol Morgan to start her school. The bulk of the student body was made up of the sons and daughters of American diplomats and business people, but a few Dominicans—most of them friends or members of my family—were allowed to attend.

“You should be grateful!” Mami scolded on the way home from our meeting.

“Not every girl is lucky enough to go to the Carol Morgan School!”

In fifth grade, I straightened out. “Yes, ma’am!” I learned to say brightly.

“Yes, sir!” To wave my hand in sword-wielding swoops so I could get called on with the right answer. What had changed me? Gratitude? A realization of my luckiness? No, sir! The thought of a fun summer? Yes, ma’am! I wanted to run with the pack of cousins and friends in the common yard that connected all our properties. To play on
the trampoline and go off to la playa [Spanish: the beach] and get brown as a berry. I wanted to be free. Maybe American principles had finally sunk in!

The summer of 1960 began in bliss: I did not have to go to summer school! Attitude much improved. Her English progressing nicely. Attentive and cooperative in classroom. I grinned as Mami read off the note that accompanied my report card of Bs.

But the yard replete [abundantly supplied] with cousins and friends that I had dreamed about all year was deserted. Family members were leaving for the United States, using whatever connections they could drum up. The plot had unraveled [to undo; come apart]. Every day there were massive arrests. The United States had closed its embassy and was advising Americans to return home.

My own parents were terrified. Every night black Volkswagens blocked our driveway and stayed there until morning. “Secret police,” my older sister whispered.

“Why are they secret if they’re the police?” I asked.

“Shut up!” my sister hissed. “Do you want to get us all killed?”

Day after day, I kicked a deflated beach ball around the empty yard, feeling as if I’d been tricked into good behavior by whomever God put in charge of the lives of 10-year-olds. I was bored. Even summer school would have been better than this!

One day toward the end of the summer, my mother summoned my sisters and me. She wore that too-bright smile she sometimes pasted on her terrified face.

“Good news, girls! Our papers and tickets came! We’re leaving for the United States!”

Our mouths dropped. We hadn’t been told we were going on a trip anywhere, no less to some place so far away.

I was the first to speak up. “But why?”
My mother flashed me the same look she used to give me when I’d ask why I had to learn English.

I was about to tell her that I didn’t want to go to the United States, where summer school had been invented and everyone spoke English. But my mother lifted a hand for silence. “We’re leaving in a few hours. I want you all to go get ready! I’ll be in to pack soon.” The desperate look in her eyes did not allow for contradiction [a denial; an expression that is opposite to]. We raced off, wondering how to fit the contents of our Dominican lives into four small suitcases.

Our flight was scheduled for that afternoon, but the airplane did not appear. The terminal filled with soldiers, wielding machine guns, checking papers, escorting passengers into a small interrogation [an official or formal questioning] room. Not everyone returned.

“It’s a trap,” I heard my mother whisper to my father.

This had happened before, a cat-and-mouse [cruel, playful game to torment another] game the dictator liked to play. Pretend that he was letting someone go, and then at the last minute, their family and friends conveniently gathered together — wham! The secret police would haul the whole clan away.

Of course, I didn’t know that this was what my parents were dreading. But as the hours ticked away, and afternoon turned into evening and evening into night and night into midnight with no plane in sight, a light came on in my head. If the light could be translated into words, instead, they would say: Freedom and liberty and justice for all . . . I knew that ours was not a trip, but an escape. We had to get to the United States.

The rest of that night is a blur. It is one, then two the next morning. A plane lands, lights flashing. We are walking on the runway, climbing up the stairs into the cabin. An American lady wearing a cap welcomes us. We sit down, ready to depart.
But suddenly, soldiers come on board. They go seat by seat, looking at our faces. Finally, they leave, the door closes, and with a powerful roar, we lift off and I fall asleep.

Next morning, we are standing inside a large, echoing hall as a stern American official reviews our documents. What if he doesn't let us in? What if we have to go back? I am holding my breath. My parents' terror has become mine.

He checks our faces against the passport pictures. When he is done, he asks, “You girls ready for school?” I swear he is looking at me.

“Yes, sir!” I speak up.

The man laughs. He stamps our papers and hands them to my father. Then, wonderfully, a smile spreads across his face. “Welcome to the United States,” he says, waving us in.