

SYRIAN NEWCOMER OBJECTS:
A STUDY IN MATERIAL CULTURE AND FORCED MIGRATION

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the world of material belongings of Muslim Syrian newcomer/refugee families as they establish themselves in Canada since 2015. The study centers the cultural and emotional meanings of the material belongings by looking at both those that are brought with the newcomers and those that are left behind. It aims to shed light on how these objects hold memories and connect refugees to their cultural and personal histories while also examining the role of displacement in this context. Additionally, it investigates the different perspectives between generations by looking into how the value and meaning of belongings may alter between older and younger family members. The key questions of the study develop at the intersection of material culture and forced migration. It first examines whether material belongings hold a significant place in the everyday lives of refugees and how this reflects on their memories. Secondly, it considers if migration and the experience that comes with it alters refugees' attachments to their material belongings and leads to changing their sentimental value over time. Thirdly, it evaluates whether the decision-making process behind what refugees choose to bring with them and what they decide to leave behind is affected under distressing circumstances. Methodologically, the study offers an alternative ethnographic approach by braiding migrant narratives with object biographies, shifting the subject of the narrative toward a demonstration of the interrelationships of persons and things.

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CHAPTER 1: METHOD AND THEORY

I always find it hard to choose the right words to put where I need them at exactly when I need them. This, for example, is when I need them. I could have come up with something better, but I couldn't find the right words for this very sentence. I know some perfect words, yet they just don't fit in here. They must wait for their right place. Treating words as if they were my belongings, this is what I have been trying to do. I keep substituting them until I'm at peace with their present place. They must look contented with their place so that the readers could feel what they really mean.

The hardest thing I've done so far was to put the right words together for this project. The at least twelve-year-old stories embedded within them stood in front of me whenever I tried to find a suitable place for them. I didn't want to do injustice to the stories of my interlocutors and to their trust, for the way you tell a story is often more significant than the story itself. My quest for a finer storytelling took longer than I anticipated—to the point where I fell behind on all the timelines I had set to follow, and I still can't say when I'll see it complete. Even actually holding the thesis might serve only as the beginning rather than the end. Yet one day, when I was talking to a random traveler in Niagara Falls about this project in the most simple and compact way possible, she told me that any way I draft it she would still happily enjoy reading it—for the idea behind it was just enough to arouse curiosity and wonder what happened. That's when I realized that respecting the stories would just require writing them one way or another.

The first spark of an object-related project came out after my visit to the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 2020. The objects exhibited there were personal or family belongings of war-impacted people during their childhood. Each object was

attached to a short story written by the object-donors about their war-related experiences and memories as reflected through the object (either directly or indirectly). The collection I saw included mostly everyday objects such as clothing, toys, jewelry, cutlery, shoes, bicycles, cans, even plastic wrappings of used snacks and more. During my one hour stay, I was surprised to realize how everyday objects that we often take for granted as our belongings could accommodate memories and preserve them—so that we could go back to as it was, after we go through challenges and experience incidents that turn life upside down. The story of a perfume was among those that stuck with me in the museum:

My father bought this perfume. He loved its scent. He asked my mother to hide it in the closet so it would last longer. One day, on his way to work, a shell hit his car. He died before he could finish this bottle of perfume. My mother and I took it with us when we fled to Lebanon. When one of our neighbors came for a visit, she saw the perfume and started smelling it. Suddenly, the bottle slipped out of her hands and broke. Crying, I ran quickly to try my best to capture the rest of the perfume and move it into another bottle. Though this is a new bottle, you can still smell my father's scent. (Yahya, 2007)

Another impressive story displayed there was that of an X-ray image. Even though storing documents for one's medical history sounded perfectly natural, what their presence could truly mean to patients even after years was intensive to witness:

I was wounded on May 5, 1993, during shelling of Tuzla. That same shell killed my parents. Soon after the wounding, I was sent to Germany for recovery. Grandma went with me. This is one of the X-ray images that grandma and I would show to the doctors during our 1-year stay in Germany. That showing of the X-ray remains etched in my memory, more than anything else. Together with the image, we would also show some pieces of shrapnel

removed from my body soon after the wounding. A year passed, and in 1994 we returned to BiH. Several other shrapnel pieces were removed in the meantime, making this image irrelevant to doctors. For me, however, it still showed the time when it was made. (Alen, 1988)

Encouraged by the exhibition, I began brainstorming for my research project proposal. Only later did I realize that I had various connections to objects from my personal biography that built up over the previous years. In the same way that certain questions might have multiple answers, the journey that brought me to this undertaking was accumulated by a variety of occurrences, recollections, experiences, and emotions that unfolded over an extended period of time.

Growing up in my hometown, Trabzon, in Turkey, I visited my grandparents almost every week. I frequently stayed at their place, spent time with them and observed their way of life through our talks. I enjoyed asking them casual questions about anything and wondering what they had to say; they took pleasure in explaining too, for they repeatedly described what happened even before my mother was born with great enthusiasm. What I noticed from the way their house functioned was that everything had its own place just like a jigsaw puzzle, and everyone had to respect the order and follow the instructions of my grandmother. Her rules were simple: she knew the best place for every little item in the house and asked everyone, including her husband, to maintain the precise order that she established. There was no need for surprise; things stay in their place: end of story. This continued to apply to her children, even after they had their own children, including myself.

As a child there were certain items that I was allowed to touch besides many others that I had better not. For those I could interact with, I had to put them where they belonged after each and every time (e.g., the light green alarm clock on the right corner of the vanity table in the second

bedroom). Although this might sound a little obsessive, it did not feel so strict at the time. I guess I admired how she respected everything in the house. That's what she taught me, valuing each belonging and taking good care of them. And this practice was not just hers alone. There were only a few options of things available to purchase at the limited stores back then. My grandparents didn't buy a new item every day; they kept what they owned in mint condition. And there was a particular piece of furniture that hosted the most exclusive items in their house: *vitrin*, the wooden glass showcase.

Having a *vitrin* to display family pictures, miscellaneous dinnerware and glassware sets, family heirlooms, fine examples of porcelains, trophies, tokens, souvenirs from towns visited and whatnot was a common exercise among the neighborhoods. And it was usually located somewhere inside the guest room, which was (without exception) the best room of the whole house. Hospitality is one of the fundamental components of Turkish culture: welcoming the guest and making them feel at home is of utmost importance (Toprak 2019). Hence, the best of everything was reserved for the guests only, including the best room of the house. I loved having visitors to my grandparents so that I, too, could be granted access to the guest room by means of their presence. Everything inside the room, from carpets to sofas, from curtains to cups and *vitrin*, were waiting to be used by guests. Since everyday usage would easily wear off the items, the household would visit the guest room mostly for housekeeping and making sure that all is neat and tidy.

Raised by my grandparents, my mother continued this habit of taking care of her belongings as long as possible, until they could no longer be used. Getting bored of what's at home and changing them as soon as new products hit the marketplace was not her thing. She looked after all the household items, yet there was one that she specifically cared for: her walnut brown mid-size wooden hope chest, *çeyiz sandığı*. Despite its pre-Islamic origins, the dowry system is still an

integral part of Turkish wedding customs today. Originally, it referred to everything the bride brought with her from her parents' or grandparents' house including money, furnishings, fabrics, lands as well as her cultural background and view of life (Özdemir 2021). I don't precisely remember when she began but I can tell that she'd been preparing my *çeyiz* even back when I was a little girl. Every two or three years, we would open the chest and see what's going on there both to ensure nothing is in bad shape and to keep it updated.

As I grew older, its contents got enriched and diversified. Inside were many embroideries handcrafted by my mother that she flourished slowly and carefully over many years, decoration fabrics gifted by my grandmother, my aunt, my mother's aunts and some other people, scarves, prayer rugs, dresses, some pieces from my mother's own *çeyiz* that's yet to be used, some of my fancy baby clothes that I have worn only a few times that she couldn't let go so that I could touch something from my babyhood and many more that I sadly fail to remember. In a way she combined pieces from her past and my forthcoming future inside one chest.

When I was 18, we decided to move out to İstanbul and during our relocation this chest was somehow stolen. Disappeared. We tried very hard, but we couldn't find who took it or where it was taken. I felt sorry but I didn't even know what exactly I lost, for I didn't remember the last time we opened it. My mother, on the other hand, was devastated. If you had seen her, you would have thought she lost a beloved one, or a friend, she was in such pain. In fact, it was just a chest with some *objects*. Yet what she felt was beyond description. I tried to comfort her so many times. She didn't even try to explain what she was feeling. She said I would have no idea. She was right, but at least I realized there for the first time that objects might mean more than what they are. Years later when I attempted to talk about it, she shared the story of her close friend with me.

This friend had lost her mother while having tea with her in the living room: *one minute she was fine, the next she was gone*. Every time she set foot in that room and saw the sofa where her mother last sat, she instantly went back to that day and experienced a similar suffering. So, they had no chance but to release the sofa set to help her overcome this feeling. I noticed my mother shows a similar reaction, too. Whenever someone says anything about “dowry,” she can’t help but go back to her memories joylessly.

The first time I left abroad for a long-term stay was in 2014 as an exchange student during my undergrad. A week before my departure to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I asked for some personal advice from a fellow student who’d recently returned from the same institution. *Don’t bring there anything precious which you would be afraid to lose or can’t maintain* was what she said. I knew the weather there would be hot and humid all year long so it was not hard to guess that I would need to pay extra attention to preserve especially my clothes. But the possibility of losing what is precious to me was not something I could easily neglect. I left almost all my favorite belongings at home and packed only a few things to carry with me. I both affirmed and regretted this decision during my 10-month-stay in Malaysia. Sometimes I wished to see something from where I came on my desk, even a small piece as a keychain—not that I forgot my hometown but seeing it perhaps would make distances seem smaller. One of my friends kept the last of her *tarhana*, a traditional dried food ingredient for making quick soup, unused until the week of her return, for it was the only remaining piece of her connection with Turkey. She could sacrifice the soup only when her return was finally in sight. Yet, by then she noticed that it was already spoiled. I didn’t feel upset when I saw it had spoilt last week, she told me, because its presence had given me strength this whole time.

On my way to Canada in August 2021, I carried two suitcases, one carry on, one small backpack and one mini crossbody bag. It was the biggest luggage that I've ever prepared for a journey. It mostly consisted of clothing, bedding and linens, towels, bags and shoes, medicine and cosmetics, documents, and some food. More or less typical luggage components. This time, however, I added some more. I brought some pieces that belonged to people I cared about including my mother's necklace and earrings, my brother's sweater, a desk calendar made by a friend, a purse owned by another friend, and a necklace handed to me by yet another friend. Since these once belonged to those whom I loved, I believed remnants of their energy were somehow still embodied inside and their presence would revive my memories and make a difference. It really did.

I lost my grandfather on the last day of 2021. I was so far from him that even if I had taken the earliest flight from Toronto all the way to Trabzon, I would not have made it there for 2 days. I faceted my cousin while they were saying goodbye to him when they were taking him to the mosque, for his final service. I hadn't lost someone from my close family during the first two years of Covid-19 when people couldn't say farewell to their beloved ones even if they lived in the same house, let alone the same city. I can't even guess their pain those days. But the call on the first day of 2022 was the heaviest virtual attendance experience of my life. Two or three weeks later, my mother sent me a mini bag via my friend travelling to Toronto. Inside were some of my grandpa's belongings: his black *tespih* (prayer beads), his white handkerchief with colorful linings outside, and his dark grey kufi prayer hat. The three things I was well accustomed to seeing him with at all times. Having those objects physically inside my hands helped me overcome my immediate sorrow of missing his funeral, and served as a vessel which allowed me to say my goodbyes to some degree.

I don't exactly remember when my interest in migration began, though I still remember how I felt after meeting many migrants in Malaysia in 2014 and 2015. I thought my fellow international students decided to come to Kuala Lumpur to study just like how I did. However, as I heard each of their stories, I realized it was more than education: many can't go back to their homelands even if they wanted to. I didn't know the difference between a migrant and a refugee back then and it was not easy to tell who belonged to which group. The university, UIA, was hosting students from over a hundred different countries, and chances are I could meet someone from a different corner of the world almost every day. What I noticed while my stay in such an international environment for two semesters over 10 months was that refugee students had an incredible talent in creating their communities and keeping them alive, nearest, and dearest. I tried to catch up with all the events about diverse diasporas from Palestine to Bosnia, Afghanistan to Rohingya, Somalia to Syria... I met some strong, articulate young people, learned about their life struggles, admired their proficiency in expressing their feelings in simple yet unique words as well as their sense of humor and natural modesty.

I took a beginner level language class of *Bahasa Melayu* for international students in UIA that was around three months long. Among my classmates were some Syrian and Palestinian students, who were all older than me and had recently migrated to Malaysia with their nuclear families. I enjoyed learning about the Malaysian language and culture together, alongside briefly illustrating one another's culture when the time came. Throughout our conversations, I tried not to ask the delicate questions related to why they left their country unless they decided to share with me on their own. One day while we were talking about IDs and passports in this language class, the lecturer mentioned that possessing a Malaysian passport grants them the privilege of visa-free travel to several countries. I still haven't been able to get over the following comment of my

classmate. He said *I have two passports, one Palestinian and one Syrian, but both are good-for-nothing*. I don't remember what we talked about later on in that class, but I will never forget the impression that one sentence gave me.

After getting a glimpse of their world, the following year, in 2016, I decided to educate myself on forced migration. While I was abroad, the number of refugees and asylum seekers hosted in Turkey had significantly increased, reaching around 3.2 million people by the end of 2016 (UNHCR 2016). Since Syrians constituted almost 90 percent of this figure, I based my bachelor's thesis on the social impacts of the refugee flow from Syria to Turkey with very limited resources addressing this issue. I began following the news and media content about refugees, especially Syrians, more seriously. When the certain type of representation that promotes hate and distrust for refugees got on my nerves, I joined a social media platform, Human Movie Team, as a volunteer and began creating social media content for raising awareness about disadvantaged people around the world, mostly for the people of war and conflicts who are displaced, starting with those regions surrounding Turkey. Between 2017 and 2019, I had the chance to volunteer at humanitarian aid projects for orphan kids at refugee camps near the Turkey-Syria border a few times.

There I met people living in diaspora within their own country, people who were the guests in their own house. A lot could change within less than a 10-minute-drive, from where we stayed the night until we reached across the border. The bumpy roads, empty streets (or, what was once roads and streets), vast lands of abandoned olive trees, remnants of the houses and cars, the broken power grid lines, checkpoints, the local men curiously looking at any moving vehicles, doubtful faces of children to any of us, the outsiders, and the women behind *niqab*, the veil...I was carefully observing my surroundings, trying to catch every single story that took place right around me. All

the answers to the first question of *how are you* that we asked upon meeting locals either at their camp units, tents, shelters, or briquette houses were *Alhamdulillah* (All praise be to Allah). The remaining conversations were a variety of tailor-made narratives. Yet, what came home with me was that they had their life until they no longer had it. There was something else that left an impression on me. Despite lacking much furnishings, almost all these domestic spaces where refugees live featured some objects they carried from their homes or hometowns in Syria: a family picture, a scarf, a Qur'an, some Arabic calligraphy painting featuring Qur'anic verses or hadith, some toys, and so on. I heard the journey of refugees begins unexpectedly, without adequate time to pack or prepare for the road that is full of uncertainties, long and challenging. But how about what they chose to carry along? Were those everyday objects that refugees preserved and carried freighted with significance and implications far beyond their everyday functions?

My initial intention for the beginning of this thesis was to keep it simple and straightforward after thanking my supervisor, my interlocutors, and some other people who made this study come true. It wouldn't have been complete, though, if I hadn't clarified what I had in mind all this time that led me to the final form of my research, even if I didn't trace it back to the stage when *our earth was born in a cloud of dust* (National Geographic 2023). Even though I have not moved under such duress, I have realized that I too chose to carry some objects with me: as a notebook, a necklace, earrings, a sweater, a purse, prayer beads that reminded me of my connections with my community, people I love and my hometown here to Canada, which made me wonder about the existence of such objects in the eyes of refugees, and what these objects embody and signify. Often seen as a leading country in terms of its migration management and promotion of a multicultural environment, accommodating a significant number of immigrants and refugees (Doytcheva 2009, 10), Canada appeared an appropriate place to carry out such a

study. And my familiarity with Syrians since 2015 both via personal interactions and volunteering experiences encouraged me to be a host to their stories.

According to the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada data, over 93,000 Syrian refugees has been resettled in Canada during the period spanning from January 2015 to August 2023. The Greater Toronto Area has emerged as the primary destination for the majority of these individuals (IRCC 2023). They fall into the categories of government-assisted refugees (GAR), privately sponsored refugees (PSR) and blended sponsorship refugees (BVOR). 46,440 of those belong to the first group (GAR), which is supported through non-governmental agencies by the government of Canada or Quebec. 41,260 individuals are privately sponsored (PSR) by groups of Canadian residents, faith-based organizations and by groups established at places of employment, educational institutions, and other community gathering places (Reynolds and Hyndman 2021, 30). The remaining 5,650 individuals (BVOR) are matched by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with private sponsors in Canada (Agrawal 2019, 942).

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is not only people that move. Objects accompany people in motion, being carried along, preserved, taken from and to places. Even though it might be people who use the objects, the interaction is not one-sided. “Things make people as much as people make things” (Miller 2010, 135). People’s engagement with everyday objects can be constructive in varied means. From social life regulations to triggering emotions, objects help develop new ways of living. “Things are no longer just products of culture but co-producers of culture and society” (Lauser, et al. 2022, 7).

In order to find out a person’s story, and their personal history, one might take a look at their objects. Certain personal belongings shape a considerable part of one’s biography (Strathern

1988). Over the course of history, human beings have been in interaction with things along with attributing certain properties to them (Appadurai 1986, 5). Accordingly, if taken into consideration, material culture might allow one to disclose people's aspirations and hopes for the present as well as the future (Tuckett 2018)

It is not only words that speak. Words can describe the events of the past, yet objects can communicate the sensation of experiencing them, as well. Objects allow for the formation of open-ended stories in one's personal history. They don't stay quiet; they can be used in a variety of ways to communicate with others. Having them in the house, for example, sets a precedent for certain behaviors. They are exhibited, praised, despised, shattered, and discarded. They go missing and are later discovered. They evoke strong feelings and recollections in just about everyone who sees them. The memories that objects evoke might become ingrained in our everyday lives as a result of our interactions with them. They are regarded as evocative artefacts that may bring back memories of the past (Auslander 2005, 1019-1021).

The objects that people carry along with them produce a sense of home wherever they go, regardless of time and space. Especially for refugees, material culture might be of notable importance in terms of preserving their memories and identity (Mould 2018). Objects could be helpful especially for refugees in creating a similar "home" atmosphere in the new land they reside. In her research, for instance, Kathy Burrell explores the material lives of eight Polish women and their migration journey to the UK over four main groups of objects which are passports, those related to car and coach journeys, suitcases, and laptops in airport lounges. This could be one example in which migration and material culture is examined in relation to one another (Burrell 2008).

In a study conducted by Yi-Neumann, personal objects of forced migrants are examined as an attempt to find out their biographies (Yi-Neumann 2022). Two Syrian women, who both fled the war and migrated to Germany across Turkey, had objects that they carried with them and preserved for years during and after their exile to Germany. In one striking statement made by one of the interlocutors while looking at her bangle, she commented: “I recall my childhood in Syria via these things. They are the memories of my country” (Yi-Neumann 2022, 114). Objects can become a means to one’s memory and what’s more, to one’s biography.

This biography is not only individual but also collective and social. Jenna Klassen (Klassen 2019, 1) examined hundreds of objects that are owned by Russländer, people who migrated from Soviet Union to Canada in 1920s, and later donated to Mennonite Heritage Village, a museum in Manitoba. She discovers that immigrants and their descendants had carefully saved these objects for almost a century as reminders of how they lived before the revolution, how they survived the war and starvation, and how they made Canada their new home. She examines the effects of objects that are passed down from one generation to another, even more, on creating a transnational memory and preserving cultural identity.

In his study with migrants crossing the Arizona desert on foot to enter the United States undetected, Jason De León analyzes three classes of artifact (water bottles, shoes, and clothes) to demonstrate that border crossers and objects have a dialectical interaction wherein material culture is embraced, how it functions both in private and public spheres, and how it gets embedded with human misery (De León 2012, 478).

Gerdien Jonker narrates that one of her interlocutors began to see her husband’s shoes and her grandmother’s cookbook differently when they were both gone, both as sources of despair and encouragement (Jonker 2018, 236). Here, the significance of the object is mutable: it shifts after

the loss of its person. By contrast, there are examples of cases where refugees decide to leave their objects on purpose (Dudley 2018, 280), for example at refugee camps or transit points such as Lesbos Beach (Ma 2017) or, perhaps as an attempt to abandon the connotations that they carry, such as the Turkish currency coins left at a border town of Hungary on their way to Europe (McGonigal 2015). Here, the meaning of the object is not only contextual and political but also has a bearing on one's current life (it is not only related to a relationship to the past).

Even in the moments of life-threatening danger, amidst the chaos of fleeing for one's life, individuals might find solace and a sense of identity in the physical remnants of their past lives. Being Jewish in Prague in 1939, Roth was planning to escape Prague with her furniture, which couldn't happen. However, safely reaching to the UK and reuniting with the furniture years later, her daughter, Milena, relates her mother's sensitivity to her belongings resulting from the terrible conditions that Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe had to go through. For Milena, the furniture was in truth a profound and vital status signal. So, even if her mother lived, she would have become a maid and lost any indication of her old home and culture, in a sense losing her identity. Years after her mother's loss, Milena adopts a similar behavior, and feels connected to her late mother every day when she uses her furniture (Roth 2004, 83-85).

When it comes to family possessions and passing objects from one generation to another, the absence of this connection might result in a loss of meaning and vagueness in one's personal history. Having lost all her relatives in the Holocaust, Nunally (Auslander and Tara 2018, 15-16), for example, had nothing remaining of her relatives, not even their graves. She regards this material disconnection from her past as something that creates a feeling of being lost. For her, the only way to prove that they ever existed is by reading their last letters, which are the only objects that remind her of them, which she believes to be important for this reason.

Apart from academic study, a number of photographers, journalists, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the globe examine forced migration via a lens of materiality and/or bodily experience (Kingsley and Diab 2015) (Mollison 2015) (Sokol 2016). “The Most Important Thing” by Sokol, for example, depicts refugees with objects of emotional and practical value: a Syrian man holding the keys to an apartment (which may no longer exist), a little child holding a pair of pants, and a lady in her wheelchair (Sokol 2016).

In light of this literature, it is possible to suggest that objects hold a deeply personal and ever-shifting significance throughout one’s life journey as well as migration journey. They are more than simply objects; they are bits of refugees’ stories, identities, and homes that refugees carry with them. These objects are like silent witnesses to history, linking what’s been left behind and is yet to come. For many, they are comforting symbols of continuity in the midst of change, but their meanings can shift within time, representing loss, hope, or new beginnings. In essence, though inanimate, objects are deeply woven into the refugee’s unfolding narrative, embodying the complex interplay between the past, present, and future. And this study aims to illuminate the profound connections between forced migrants and their belongings, exploring how they mark past memories and future hopes.

METHODOLOGY

The material belongings of Muslim Syrian newcomer refugee families lie at the center of this project. These include the objects that were carried to Canada from Syria, as well as those that were left behind, abandoned, concealed, lost, stolen, or seized along the route. How everyday objects contribute to building memories, the role of displacement during this process and how each

generation experiences it are the focal points of the project. The main questions of this study are the following:

- Do material belongings have a place in the memories of refugees?
- Do years of displacement and distant residences change refugees' attachment to material belongings?
- How would refugees choose over what to bring and what to leave?
- What differences exist among generations within the same family?

Participants for the study were selected amongst Muslim Syrian refugee family members, both female and male, who are over 18, have English proficiency, residing in Hamilton and Greater Toronto Area and migrated to Canada after 2015. By including different generations within the same families, the study could consider intergenerational relationships, diverse perspectives that exist among generations, as well as multiple relations with the objects. The requirement of English proficiency was to minimize the risk of losing phrases in translation, allowing participants to communicate in a language that they can speak with the words they choose rather than relying on a third-party translation on their behalf.

For recruitment of the participants, I reached out to my initial contacts among the Syrian refugee community in Hamilton and Toronto. One family from my earlier contacts agreed to participate and pass along the study information to their contacts. With their help I found the second family who introduced me to the third family. I recruited at least 2 people from each family, reaching a total of 7 members from 3 different families.

The research project relied on semi-structured, object-based conversational interviews and personal narrations. Participating members from each family were interviewed individually. This data collection took place between March 2023 and May 2023, over a period of 3 months. All

participants were interviewed three times with sessions ranging from 40 minutes to over 2 hours. Holding more than one interview session was to provide participants more chance to express their thoughts and scheduling each session over a period of three months was to give family members some time to reflect on the topic, discover what they could add more, or do changes if they want to.

Participants were asked to identify themselves and provide basic demographic information about their lives, such as their age, ethnicity, gender, and occupations at the beginning of the first interview session. The main body of the session was based on the stories behind the participants' migration, their everyday lives before and after, both back in their home country, Syria and later in Canada, as well as any other country they've been to throughout the journey. During the second interview sessions, participants were asked to depict the houses in which they had lived, as much as their memory served them. For young participants, that is, the children of the family, this step included mostly the houses they had stayed in for the last fifteen years, while for the elder participants, the parents, it went all the way back to the houses of their childhood. The descriptions developed verbally or by means of quick simple drawings on paper. Questions about the houses included the overall structure of the house, the decoration of the rooms, the materials used, the furniture as well as the sense-related details such as colors, smells, texture, noise, feelings within the house. In addition, participants were also requested to describe the surroundings such as the local community, neighborhood, and human relations in the region.

The third and final interview session was based on the objects of the participants and their importance. Participants were inquired about their personal experiences regarding connections that they have with the objects, both in the past and at present, especially with the ones that they carried to Canada. The final interview questions were centred around the following:

- Which objects did/could you bring to Canada, and is there any reason behind?
- Which objects did you left/ have to leave in Syria, or lose on your way to Canada?
- What do you think about feelings embodied in objects?
- Are there any objects that you attach a special importance? If yes, could you share with me a little bit about those objects?
- Could you share with me some memories that you associate with certain objects in your life, past or present?
- Have you felt any change in your attachment to objects throughout the years especially after your relocation?

During the interview sessions, participants were given the option to pause and continue at any second as they wished. Participants were free not to answer any questions that would make them uncomfortable and to talk in the direction of their choice. In order to minimize the possible emotional setbacks the interviews might cause in case objects bring up memories related to participants' personal history, questions were directed towards the objects. Any silence, inability to describe feelings, or refusal to express themselves in between questions or during the interviews were paid attention to. In addition, a list of support resources was shared with participants in case they might need support and/or counselling.

All interviews took place separately and each participant was interviewed individually to create a safe space where they would feel comfortable to talk about and are not interrupted while sharing their opinions. Participants did not hear other family members' answers during the interviews; what was said in each session was not disclosed to other members of the family unless the participants wanted to share it themselves. In between the interviews, the researcher observed the family when they were having a family time and reflected about the project in an informal

setting, for observing their family conversations, bits of talk and reactions on the project questions. Their thoughts and feelings about the everyday objects had evolved while living as a family, so observing these family group interactions was important to the study. There were no financial benefits to participating in this study, and participation relied completely on a volunteer basis.

Upon completing the final interviews, participants were asked to evaluate the project by sharing their overall opinions. This evaluation questions were as follows:

- How did the project go? How were your experiences with the interviews and overall, with the project?
- Have the interviews revealed anything that took you by surprise?
- Has participating this project affected how you think about the objects?

Each interview was audio recorded to better facilitate the transcription of the conversations; detailed ethnographic field notes and a reflexivity journal was kept by the researcher in her personal computer.

The analysis and drafting of the project developed in the second half of 2023. Since the objects were the main focus of this study, the houses of participants where the objects are located was the preferred location for conducting the interviews in objects' real setting. Participants' everyday places were practical for the participants to speak about and also for myself, the researcher, to observe the objects in their own place. However, participants were also given the preference to attend the interviews at a place of their choosing in accordance with their needs. In the end, the interviews took place at the houses of participants, at public meeting places such as university libraries, cafés and masjids (prayer rooms), as well as over online meeting platforms such as zoom. Out of 21 interview sessions, 13 were in person while 8 took place online. An interpretive biographical method was used during the analysis of this object-based qualitative

study. Participants were asked about their connections with the objects mainly in three dimensions: materiality, practices, and biography (of the objects) during the interviews.

From the start of taking the field notes during each interview until the end of data collection, each participant was addressed in their pseudonyms that they chose. In written field notes and hence in the transcriptions, their real names were not mentioned. After the transcription of the audio recordings of the interviews, each audio file was deleted, which anonymized the data from the participants' own voices.

CREATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING

In developing this study's draft, I drew inspiration from a diverse range of sources. In fact, I was first encouraged by all the lecturers that I took a course with during my first two semesters at McMaster Anthropology, Prof. Petra Rethmann, Assoc. Prof. Kee Howe Yong, Asst. Prof. Yana Stainova, and Asst. Prof. Basit Iqbal, to experiment with creative writing by finding my own voice. This idea began developing with the pieces we followed throughout the course semesters and grew with the reading suggestions of my committee members, Asst. Prof Yana Stainova and Asst. Prof Basit Iqbal, over the research writing semesters. Under this section, I will outline the main body of literature that helped me discover the design that I put into use for this study.

Homes: A Refugee Story (Al Rabeeah and Yeung 2018) is based on the story of a young boy who had to flee from Iraq to escape the war with his family only to be caught up to another one later in Syria, which brought them all the way to Edmonton, Canada. The memoir develops within a timeline of moments and events portraying their everyday life in different cities and countries; before and after war and conflicts; moments of panic and laughter; loss and hope:

February 2014. "... Father got the idea to plant rose bushes in the bakery's courtyard because they reminded him of his grandfather's farm back in Iraq. He said we needed to make things beautiful again." (Al Rabeeah and Yeung 2018, 128)

Adapting a similar timeline structure as in *Homes* could create an accommodating space to reflect on the everyday life of my interlocutors, talking more about their lives based on small moments and how they experienced the whole process of relocation. I wanted to mirror what was shared during the interviews as much as possible without limiting the narration only to object-related moments. Just like how objects are scattered around our lives, within our houses or at other places, I tried to locate them within my interlocutor's daily life fractions. Thus, I designed the overall structure of the main chapter in the form of a timeline with object biographies accommodated in between. Sometimes called "braided narrative", this alternating in the subject of the narrative (between persons and things) also emphasizes the fragmentary nature of experience which narratives coordinate and draw together.

I was particularly moved by how Seremetakis talks about the anthropology of everyday life and the importance of daily life as well as material culture in memory production in *The Senses Still* (Seremetakis 2019). From the most ordinary moments to life-altering experiences, memories are all formed in our everyday life even when there's nothing but silence. Getting to know someone requires spending time with them, and learning about their past and present, their lifestyle and experience, thoughts, beliefs, and memories. This usually doesn't happen in a chronological order, for something always remains yet to be told, overlooked, or forgotten. Consequently, the process of meeting could exhibit a cyclical nature, with information being revisited and revisited again. By placing the memories in a disorganised fashion within the timeline, what might first seem disconnected could display a more natural setting of getting acquaintance with the interlocutors.

Seremetakis also suggests that material culture is where not only memories, but also history, knowledge, feeling, and senses are embedded in. Thus, objects become the visual history of their possessors, which could persevere even during their absence, or passed down on to forthcoming generations of their families. She explains this over the example of a peach that is known as the breast of Aphrodite: “*The younger generation, whenever present, heard these stories as if listening to a captivating fairy tale. For me the peach had been both eaten and remembered, but for the younger generation it was now digested through memory and language*” (Seremetakis 2019, 2). Recruiting object biographies within the timeline could thereby exhibit this relationship of objects with the interlocutors’ memory reflections.

Touching on the object biographies, here I need to introduce *The Implosion Project* (Dumit 2014). In *Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time*, Joseph Dumit encourages his students to brainstorm about the different dimensions to address an object, taking into account its constituent components, imagining its history and exploring creative ways to tell its stories. Inspired by Donna Haraway’s definition of implosion (Dumit 2014, 349), which is how world histories are not just contained inside objects, rather each object is composed of imploded histories, Dumit says: “The multiple dimensions that make up objects also make up ourselves, as well as our categories. Telling the stories of an object therefore begins unpacking our own cliché’s, our certainties, our affects” (Dumit 2014, 349). The reason I included object biographies within the migrant narratives was a similar attempt of connecting oneself with the objects.

In doing so, I let the objects speak and tell their stories at first hand. The object biographies included those my interlocutors brought all the way to Canada, as well as those that were gone along the way. Since those objects were companions to my interlocutors for years, I wanted to treat them the same way I treated their caretakers. Impersonating them seemed a suitable approach

to show this connection, to help grasp their place besides their caretakers from their perspective this time by placing the emphasis on them. *Alive in the Writing* (Narayan 2012) and *From Notes to Narrative* (Ghodsee 2016) have been my guidebooks on creative ethnographic writing during this whole process. Briefed by both books on how to turn my fieldnotes into a readable writing and following the how-about-this writing prompts and experimenting creativity, I imagined objects as my supporting interlocutors and constructed the biographies without explicitly expressing what they are right from the beginning.

Here I also appreciated how Sienna Craig explained Walter Benjamin's opinion about storytelling, where "the power of stories rests precisely in what is evoked rather than explained" (Craig 2020, 12). My motivation to disclose the object's identity towards the end of each biography was partly an example of this assumption and partly an endeavour to prevent the readers' undervaluing the object's biography. In her *Ends of Kinship*, Craig emphasises new ways of seeing and articulating ethnography with a little aid of fiction: "Fiction shapes the stories held within "data" into complex sensory, affective, and dramatic experiences that speak to and beyond the generalizations of theory, the specifics of culture" (Craig 2020, 11-12). The fiction I chose to apply to biographies, thence, is partly for creating an alive narrative, as well.

When it came to developing the narrative, I put myself in the shoes of the objects and presumed that when they look at the refugees they see humans, nothing else, no second thoughts, no bias. I imagined the main text unfolding in a likewise fashion, and so I refrained from employing the word *refugee* and its undertones as much as I could, hoping to achieve an impartial representation that facilitates prioritising the narrative. I could relate how Lisa Stevenson emphasized listening in her *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* (Stevenson 2014) where she guides the readers thorough two epidemics, tuberculosis and suicide, that have

posed challenges for the Inuit community in Canada. Stevenson posits that the act of listening may be seen as a manifestation of caring, demonstrating one's concern for the one being listened to, irrespective of their identity or status. The act of actively listening to someone encompasses not only the explicit content of their words, but also the subtle nuances of their tone, attitude, and even the moments of silence. This comprehensive approach to listening allows for a greater understanding of the underlying messages that extend beyond the mere words being said. My decision to withhold from utilizing the word *refugee* in the main section was also made to discourage readers from diminishing the many other qualities possessed by my interlocutors, and to instead encourage them to really listen to and appreciate their comprehensive identities.

In this regard, I was taken aback by the account of Shahram Khosravi's border crossing as described in his auto-ethnography entitled *Illegal Traveller* (Khosravi 2007). His tangled journey to participate in a workshop started at the Bristol airport, when a security officer issued warnings of potential detainment for a duration of up to nine days, citing provisions under the Anti-Terrorism Act. The author had Swedish citizenship and successfully underwent immigration check procedures. However, he was subjected to further scrutiny by a security officer based on his Middle Eastern physical appearance. When Khosravi voiced his objection to the officer's discriminatory targeting, he was not refused and was informed of his obligation to respond to any inquiries asked. The occurrence was described by the author as follows: "Put into a petrifying immobility, I could neither move in nor out. I was indistinguishable from the border; I was the border" (Khosravi 2007, 332). I feel that seeing the word *refugee* itself is also enough to create a similar type of border in the minds of people like the aforementioned officer.

In her *Making Refuge*, Catherine Besteman traces the migratory journey of Somali Bantus from their places of origin in Somalia prior to the commencement of Somalia's civil war in 1991

(Besteman 2016). She then explores their subsequent displacement to refugee camps in Kenya, followed by their relocation to various cities in the United States and eventual settlement in Lewiston, Maine. Alternating between chapters, Besteman discusses various stages within the lives of Somali Bantus including everyday photographs and family portraits of Somali Bantus. What I found astounding is that these photos illustrate the time period before the civil war and after their settlement in Lewiston, giving a contrast between the lives of Somali Bantus back then and their most recent existence in the United States, which perhaps the title itself is also explaining. This comparison made me realize that everyday life of the refugees before they become refugees is something that needs to be paid attention, in order to portray the whole process of their making refuge comprehensively.

Finally, Lisa Malkki offers a critique of the exclusive reliance on standardised textual and visual portrayals of refugees inside various media outlets, aid, and refugee agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations (Malkki 1996). Such representation does not facilitate the recognition of the individuals, who possess distinct identities, perspectives, familial connections, and personal backgrounds. By constructing a specific narrative surrounding the refugees, certain attributes such as helplessness are imposed upon them, resulting in their marginalization and their transformation into mere numerical figures within expansive images, indistinguishable from the mass. The author's one-sentence-portrayal of a non-descriptive photograph in this article was notably impactful: "The photo was a very large one, but there was no story to go with it" (Malkki 1996, 389). No matter how many refugees fit into a single frame or how many stories are waiting to be told, it may go without description or, at best, depart with a clichéd representation or a non-existent story as long as humanitarian administrators or media outlets continue to silence the narrative ironically by being their voice as the mere authority to be addressed to. In accordance

with this criticism, I tried to incorporate the refugees' actual narratives into this study on a more natural and relatable basis, similar to their everyday lives.

Inspired by the diverse academic perspectives and the commitment to authentic, heartfelt storytelling discussed in this chapter, I consider this study a personal exploration of the stories of refugees and the histories of their belongings. Through this study, I aim to challenge how we view refugees by shedding light on the recurring and disjointed aspects of their existence, and the stories woven into the objects they hold dear by amplifying the voices that might be frequently muted and painting a fuller portrait of migration together with the importance of personal belongings, and the diverse places that have become home to those who have been displaced. In undertaking this, I focus on the theme of interruption to better capture the connections refugees have with their belongings and to tell their stories in a way that breaks away from the usual narrative.

With each chapter representing a point of transition or interruption, the lives of refugees are like a constantly developing story. Just as they begin to feel settled, they might find themselves having to relocate and start over once more. Their delicate lives are shaped by an array of events, risks taken, missed chances, and what-ifs that linger in the back of their minds. Their personal items, objects, silently witness all these chapters, staying with them through everything. As they traverse through changing landscapes, from one city to another, across borders and cultures, their belongings too undergo a transformation, bearing the imprints of this journey.

These personal belongings are more than just possessions; they become ethnographic artifacts embodying the narratives of displacement and belonging. They hold memories of the daily life, past homes, missed communities, and fractured histories. In my observation, they are not passive; they actively participate in the life courses of their owners, helping them remember who they are and where they've come from by connecting the different moments of their interrupted

life chapters. Through these objects, refugees carry with them not just physical reminders, but also the intangible essence of places and times left behind.

In conclusion, this study is crafted through the weaving of object biographies in between the timeline of everyday life of the participants, as an attempt to highlight the power of each object in connecting an individual to their past. With its own history, each object serves as a doorway back in time, offering a glimpse into the life that once was. This allows for a deeper, more layered understanding of the refugee experience, going beyond simple accounts of displacement. The study uncovers a complex mosaic of resilience, adaptation, and continuity, illuminating the ways in which these individuals navigate and make sense of their ever-changing worlds. It shows us that the journey of displacement is not only about the places the refugees had to leave behind but also deeply about the memories and meanings carried forward, embedded within the objects accompanying them on their journey, as well.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION

As explored in the literature review, research on forced migration has not fully addressed the connections between materiality and embodied experience, despite both are important areas of study on their own. Delving into the daily experiences of forced migrants, with special emphasis on material culture holds the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of forced migration. By exploring the material forms valued by refugees, we can begin to unravel the complex connections these objects have to memories, nostalgia, and the places left behind. Understanding how these items are produced and used in the present, as well as their ties to future aspirations, can offer insights into the ways refugees seek to create a sense of familiarity in their new and often uncertain environments.

Objects possess a unique ability to illuminate the less understood facets of forced migration, through their impersonal nature and capacity to embody memory and emotion. In the quest to comprehend what it means to be human amid the turmoil of uncertainty and forced mobility such as what refugees face for some period in their life, looking beyond the words and visuals can be incredibly revealing. Focusing on the objects might be helpful in discovering a new narrative in this area of research. These objects, whether carried, gifted, lost, or left behind, carry within them potent narratives waiting to be told. They have the potential not only to challenge and expand upon the conventional narratives of refugee experiences but also to pave new pathways for understanding and engaging with these stories.

By focusing on the objects that accompany refugees on their journeys, we enter a realm of research ripe with possibilities for uncovering new narratives, those that acknowledge the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement as well as the physical and geographical ones. These narratives can offer a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of displacement, highlighting the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of those who have been forced to leave their homes. It can inform the creation of more effective integration policies, foster better communication methods, and encourage direct and meaningful engagement with refugee populations.

CHAPTER 2: MIGRANT NARRATIVES & OBJECT BIOGRAPHIES

JANUARY 2011- CAN YOU IMAGINE THE SAME THING HAPPENING HERE? (IDLIB, SYRIA)

It was a quiet night. The kids were back in their rooms while we were having tea in the living room. I would typically enjoy this quietness, especially after a long day, but that night I gave up on that and felt the urge to turn on the TV. It might not be the best idea, but I had a bad feeling, and I had to see it for myself. After switching channels to avoid commercials and rebroadcast dramas, I stayed with the news.

Last month, a street vendor whose scales were taken set himself alight in front of some governor's offices in Tunisia when no officer addressed his complaint. The people of Tunisia have been protesting this incident ever since, particularly after he passed away. And the public anger went up to the point that the president even fled the country, as we learned from the news. At first, we thought that this incident was just regular bad news from another country, so you have no urgent reason to be worried. You pray for the best for them, and life goes back to normal. Plus, Tunisia was not our neighbour—not even nearby, somewhere far away—so what else could we do? But that night, I had a bad feeling. What I saw when I looked at the screen was more than what's happening in Tunisia. I remembered our past, everything I heard or witnessed from back in the 1980s: how we heard the city of Hama was destroyed, thousands of civilians killed, lost, or injured; how my hometown, Jisr al Shughur, was rocketed, many lives lost; how we found out my four cousins had been killed in prison; how my father-in-law served 21 years in prison in vain, just like many others. A lot had happened. One scene from another part of the world was enough to bring all those memories back.

While I was busy dealing with the past, my husband Shadi was silently staring at the screen, taking a sip of cardamom black tea now and again. The volume was not so high, not so low, enough for us to talk and catch up and listen if need be. I looked at Shadi's face. He seemed pretty engaged, but I couldn't tell what he was really feeling, for his face was only half visible under the distant dim lights by the screen. I had to ask him:

Can you imagine the same thing happening in here?

He opened his mouth as if he were going to describe all the possible scenarios. Yet only two words came out: No idea.

A GIFT TO MY DAUGHTER

Freezing the moments. That's what I'm known for. Just like the weather in Moscow. Almost. Separate. Small. Single. Moments. Or some crowded ones. It all depends on who's in it or what the occasion is. As long as there is light, I can work it.

It was winter. Again. A father walked into the store, a traveler. He wanted all of us at the table. He seemed like he was not sure of what he wanted, could get easily confused, and was nevertheless open to suggestions, negotiations, and changes of plans. Things were getting quite puzzled around here. So, he could be my ticket out, and I wouldn't say no to that. Let's see some other lands like we were meant to. Some warm lands if possible. I didn't know where this guy was coming from, but would it make so much difference? How would I have known?

All of us who were at the table were impatient to hear his final decision. He told the owner that this would be a gift. A gift to his daughter, who is an architect to be. Hmm, I liked that. He must have liked us all, too, or found us worthy or affordable; I can't really remember. But he got

not just one, not just two, not three, not four, but in total, the five of us. All for one person. A day to remember. We were packed and ready to leave to meet our new holder.

When we were unpacked, we were in Syria. Our holder was a 3rd-year student in architecture. I still remember her astonishment the minute she realized that we were all there for her. And that it was not only us but also many more accessories: different filters, lenses, and lights. She knew her father was into photography, but even she wouldn't expect this much equipment all at once.

She started experiencing us, trying one by one. It wasn't much longer until she affirmed that I was her favourite one, the professional, as in her words. I travelled here and there with her and contributed to her architecture projects. But she also enjoyed nature, and she was really passionate about capturing every season of it.

One place I couldn't accompany her was Saudi Arabia, where she travelled to perform hajj. I was too big to carry, and she was not allowed to have me with her. So, she took one of the small ones because it was easier to conceal. She could only take a couple of pictures, as my friend told me. But among these were three pictures that were printed out as posters and stayed hung on the walls of the guest room and the living room until we left Syria: one in Mecca in front of the Kaabah with her father, mother, uncle and his wife, aunt, and maybe some more; one in Medina with the minarets of Masjid al-Nabawi; and the last one, I don't remember.

Now we're here in Canada. I'm the only one that she brought here among us five. I'm with her, but ever since she's got the smart phone, she's so used to taking pictures with it rather than with me. I can't say that it's not sad to see that she chose the easy way, even though she admits that there's no feeling in that. It's so quick, and you don't feel touched by them the moment you

see the results, she says. I understand her, though. And I'm still glad that I'm here with her, even though we're not the same as in the old days.

DECEMBER 2013- GENERATIONS OF CATS (ALEPPO, SYRIA)

Whenever it's cold outside, like today, I wonder where Nana is and what she's doing out there. She's probably already lived out all her nine lives, and I still can't help but imagine her returning to our backyard one day. She had been here long before I was born; she had celebrated my 15th birthday with us this year, giving us a proud look as if she owned this place. Just when we began questioning her suspiciously long life, she was no longer there. She has gone missing, and we were left with all those generations of cats as a constant reminder of her. Most of them didn't stick around like their great-grandmother did for years, though, and disappeared after a couple of months. But I've never seen this backyard catless. We have a smaller but nicer front yard, yet the wildlife seems to find our backyard more peaceful. It is probably because of all the plants, flowers, and fruit trees that my father planted, which attract insects all the time. This makes me scared, especially at night—I'm not a fan of hornets or bats—whereas our cats seem to enjoy that there's always something to play with. There's something about the backyard that I enjoy as much as the cats do, which is the smell after the rain, the freshness of the soil, and the flowers.

There's something else, however, that I can't forget about our backyard. A few months ago, when my sister Leen was watching the cats play in the backyard, something almost hit her head. A bullet fell from the sky. She was not directly shot at, but we all knew that it might be just enough to end her life if she were hit. And suddenly, our backyard was no longer a safe place. Leen remained speechless for a couple of minutes. Then she collected the bullet from the ground, entered inside, and put it in a box, which was going to be the first item in our collection: the

collection of bullets and shell casings. We have already been hearing countless gunshots and seeing bullets and shells on almost every street for a long time. That day, we decided to make a collection out of them. Our collection has been growing day by day, and we are still surprised to see how many different kinds there are. Until this incident, our neighbourhood felt safe. Ever since I was born, I have been living here, in the house my grandfather built in West Aleppo. He had bought this piece of land at the same time as a couple of his friends, and together they formed a little community that spread throughout the entire neighborhood. Almost everyone here knows everyone (or at least, everyone knows my grandfather), and the other units in our building belong to my uncles and aunt. That's why it felt safe. Being on the ground floor in this family apartment that was made of beige stones—the Aleppo stone, like the majority of the buildings in Aleppo—is something I love: the backyard is almost as big as our unit, and we're the ones that mostly use it. I'm sharing my room with my two sisters, so my mom has been planning to expand the house towards the backyard to create more space in the house as we grow, but I don't exactly know when. She's an architect; I'm sure she'll find the best solution, perhaps in another 15 years. Meanwhile, my father keeps reminding us that, until further reconstruction, the safest place in our house is the kitchen. Apparently, its walls are thicker and made with more steel, so it should be the first place to take shelter if anything happens. We didn't need to test this out so far, and I hope we won't have to.

SEPTEMBER 2022- SATURDAY MORNING CALL (TORONTO, CANADA)

How was your breakfast? asked my aunt.

I said, Good, alhamdulillah, and how was your dinner?

I've been feeling we live in two completely different worlds in too many respects. The time difference is the least of it. I still wonder if we could ever live within the same time zone again, to start the day and end the night together, as simple as that. My grandpa took the lead and talked about food for a few minutes. (His love language has never changed: I'm sure he's kept stocking chocolates and chips in his closet in case there's a kid in the house, fresh fruits if nothing else. The house obviously seems less busy than before, but you'd never know.) When he was done, my aunt asked about the weather. She looked beautiful as always. The rest of our discussion went as usual, as if we strictly followed a syllabus, which I didn't mind, for it's always nice to see them and hear their voices, even for a single word. After we ran out of all the words, everyone said goodbye and left one another in the care of God until this time next week. It's been nine years since I have seen them in person—just a little less than half my age. Sometimes I wish I could be there, and sometimes I wish they could be here. I don't know which wish is better.

I took the phone, headed out to my room, and my time with Nula began. This was our usual practice when we needed more than just a family call. She loved my dress, and I loved her outfit. We talked about what I couldn't say in front of everyone. I hope she always stays as my secret keeper. Then came my favourite part. She gave me a little house tour for a few minutes, starting from her room, which's my favourite of them all. It was my go-to place; I just loved to jump in her closet and get lost among her accessories for hours. The room hasn't lost its charm over the years; it was looking perfect even on the phone screen. It just did not seem as big as I remember it being. And this was the case for the whole house. I used to think it was a castle. I could run with my sisters all day from one room to another, up and down, inside and outside, and still feel like the more I ran, the more rooms I would find, as if it were impossible to explore the house entirely. Now, all it takes is three minutes. Is this because I'm no longer a child?

After her room, Nula took me to where I spent the first and last parts of my childhood—the best times of my life. The pink blanket that I shared with my sisters was still there, although it was paler, or perhaps it was the video quality. She quickly passed the kitchen before going downstairs, which filled my nose with the smell of freshly ground coffee and cinnamon. I don't know how this keeps happening every single time.

She then took me to my father's room and complained about how he never stops begging her to ship some of those books to Canada. My dad used to live in that very room, where he wrote some of his own books. He had a really hard time leaving them behind, as any poet would do. He used to sit with us in front of the stove and read to us passionately, even under the dim light. They were his most precious belongings, and he couldn't risk them getting taken or lost during our journeys. Maybe he can meet them in the near future, but this room surely would look way emptier without them. I was not ready to see the outside yet; last week, Nula told us that the lemon tree and the jasmine were no longer there. But how? The backyard wouldn't feel the same without those trees. It was already dark, so we postponed this encounter to a later meeting. As much as I didn't like it, I knew I had to face it sooner or later. Watching the house that I was born in change slowly but surely was not easy for me to get used to. But I've also been changing every day, so expecting everything to remain the same would not make any sense. Except for Nula. She always remains just as I've seen her the last time. I wish she could be here.

LET THIS BE YOUR COMPANION ON YOUR JOURNEY!

And just before they were about to leave, Nula said, "Wait!" I didn't hear much of what they were saying since they were literally at the front door, far from me. But this one word I definitely heard. The bags had been checked, road trip meals packed, all goodbyes said, gazes

given to all family members one after another, and again and again, tears shed and dried up. What now? All eyes were on Nula.

She dashed inside and was heading straight to me. What is it that she's going to give them? I couldn't wait to see. My curiosity lasted for three seconds before she grabbed me. I was outside the box now. She unclasped me compassionately and handed me to Nara. "Let this be your companion on your journey," she said, as a small memory from me. I still cannot tell if that was impromptu or if Nula had been meaning to do it and waited for the perfect moment.

If it had been someone other than Nara, I would have felt depressed. Why me? But I knew Nara; I knew her childhood, the countless hours she spent with Nula at this house, and especially in her room. I always felt that she was Nula's favourite niece. I was not ready for a last-minute journey, but at least I knew with Nara I was not going to feel estranged. And neither was Nula sorry to see me leave, for I was going with Nara.

And there I was in Nara's hands. She was my new protector. Yes, not an owner. I could see it in her eyes; she held me too tight when she got me and gave me the "I'm always going to keep an eye on you" look. We travelled for a long time, through different cities, countries, days, and nights. She grew up with me, and I was there for her. She did not always wear me because she was unsure how to style me. So fancy, she would say, with that gold stone.

One day, I fell down. It happened too fast, and I didn't see it coming. It was a nightmare—not my falling, but waiting to see what Nara would do after. My stone was scattered, so she could easily get rid of me. Where would I go, then? Could I return home, all the way back, by myself, all alone? How far were we? What if I got lost on the way? What if Nula doesn't remember me? What if I can't recognize her after all? What if she was not home? As I was calculating all the possibilities, Nara collected me and my pieces from the ground. She was simply sad. I could see

she was also guessing what to do. In the moment of truth, I held my breath. She put me on the table, and she went. I was not feeling any pain other than uncertainty. She returned with glue and began to fix me. Such a relief. She tried her best. I don't look as good as I used to, but still, I'm with her. I noticed something after that day, though. She is scared. She is scared to wear me because she doesn't want to lose me.

For a long time now, I have been staying in a box. Every now and then, Nara takes me out, holds me, puts me on, and makes sure I'm still safe and sound. Then she carefully places me back inside the box. Back to where I've always been.

FEBRUARY 2013- FIVE COUNTRIES, NO HOME (TURKEY, EGYPT, JORDAN, SYRIA, LEBANON)

My dad's brother Yusuf had been living in Jordan for a long time, and he was somehow sure that it would be a good place for us to settle, too. It had been six months since we moved to Istanbul, and my dad couldn't find a proper job to look after us. Thanks to my uncle's countless calls over this time, my dad was finally convinced to give Jordan a go. Farewell, Istanbul; our time is up, and you will undoubtedly be missed.

During our small stay in this city, we were blessed with the best neighbors. Even though, at first, we could barely communicate with them because of the language barriers, when it was time for us to leave, they tried their best not to let us go. But we couldn't stay any longer, so we headed for the airport.

We booked flights to Jordan with a transit in Lebanon. During our check-in, we were told that Jordan might not be accepting us because we have Syrian identity cards. A moment of confusion and choice: we weren't expecting this. Uncle Yusuf hadn't told us anything in this

regard, so we wanted to trust him, and we decided to take our first flight to Beirut. At least we wanted to try. I was having mixed feelings during the whole flight, so I didn't even grasp when we took off and when we landed. A ride full of thoughts: What if they don't let us in? What does Lebanon look like? Would we come back to Istanbul again?

We landed in Beirut, and not much later we got the answers. They didn't accept us on our second flight. It was a recent regulation or something, as dad tried to explain. It didn't make sense to me—it still doesn't—but somehow, they provided us with two options. We could either take a flight to Cairo, Egypt, or we could take another flight back home to Latakia, Syria. Our vote was unanimous: it was time for Cairo. I couldn't see what Lebanon looked like, for we took off without leaving the Beirut airport, but I was so curious.

It was my first time in Egypt. Cairo is another city in which I have no clue for how long we'll be staying. Some relatives from my mom's side, maybe their acquaintances, came and picked us up from the airport. There are too many cousins to be met; I always lose count. They were a sweet old couple, and whenever I think about them, I can't help but smile. They hosted us for three nights, and we felt some sense of home at their place. While we were spending time with them, my father was trying to get an overall idea of the job market and if he could make any money here. Three nights were quite enough for him to realize that what he could earn would suffice for only our rent. So, we had no chance to stick to our initial plan, which was to reach Jordan one way or another.

Uncle Yusuf arranged for us to ride to Aqaba, the nearest border to Jordan. It was more than a single ride, for we had to get on almost all kinds of transportation, from buses to ferries, over deserts and the Dead Sea. Such a long trip. Eventually we reached our destination. The border

officers chose my father to interrogate, and we impatiently waited to hear from him. I don't know how long he stayed in there, but when he came back, he looked like he was already a different age.

Apparently, visiting my brother was not a convincing purpose of travel, he said.

We were not allowed to enter Jordan. We weren't allowed to return to Egypt, either. So, they placed us in a van and drove us all the way to the Syrian border. And we had to pay for the ride. I still cannot decide which one was longer, our trip from Egypt to Jordan or the one from Jordan to Syria.

It was the middle of the night when we arrived at the border. Just an empty land with people waiting. We were back to where we started, or maybe even worse, far from where we used to call home, yet still in the same country (at least according to the map). We didn't know what to do, but we found ourselves waiting with all those people to get a second chance to set foot in Jordan.

Why would they let us in now if it's them who drove us here in the first place? I asked myself. But you never know; sometimes it all depends on the numbers. And being more was maybe an advantage. Maybe not. We were soon to discover.

The night was cold—really cold. Uncertainties made us feel even colder. We had our coats, but it was not enough to last for the whole night outside. We decided to look for a roof over our heads. Everyone had thought the same, so any place we could find was packed, even the nearest mosque, which was still better than the outside—so we waited the night out inside with many others. Our second day of waiting, my father got sick. We didn't have any food or drink; I guess his diabetes must not have liked it. I began worrying for him, and hearing shooting from the border was not helping. After our second night, we agreed to take my dad to a hospital, so we left for Damascus.

I had always wanted to visit Damascus, the capital. I always heard how beautiful it is, with all its ruins and monuments, even from the time before 0 C.E., and the architecture of diverse civilizations and religions. But we met at the wrong time. This couldn't be the city I had imagined! I couldn't feel this unsafe or defenseless! But there it was. We found a hotel and settled. My father was better, and we again didn't know what to do.

We're staying at a hotel, and we don't know anyone here—no one to ask for help or anyone to trust. How long can we afford to do this? We tried to visualize our options thoroughly. Another unanimous vote came: Lebanon.

Maybe this time I will get to see what it looks like.

We packed and headed to the Masnaa border crossing. We waited and waited. It was our turn. My father was carrying all our passports, so he passed them to the officer. He was reviewing our passports, one by one. After he went through all of them, he called for some other officers. It got a little crowded, and I started to be worried. I could sense something was wrong, but I couldn't tell it from their faces; they all looked impassive and serious. Then he only said one word: Turkey? This stamp shows the date you left Turkey, but there's no stamp that shows when you entered.

How on earth did we forget about this? Our journey to Turkey was not an easy one; we had to cross the border illegally. That's why we had neither a departure stamp on our passports by the Syrian authorities nor an arrival stamp by the Turkish authorities. And now that the Turkish departure stamp was there, our story was brought to light. We simply didn't have any possible explanations, and they didn't bother to ask a second question.

It was petrifying. Waiting at the border has never been peaceful; it was always something to be anxious about—but waiting for the final verdict at that moment felt no less than being in a courtroom and hearing whether or not we had been found guilty. I have never been to prison but

what I have heard about being behind bars there was enough for me to pray ceaselessly for our immediate release. I could see the same attempt in the eyes of my siblings and parents. It was just horrible.

What if they detain all of us, or worse, only some of us—just my father and my brothers? What would we do?

While I was occupied with going through all the possibilities, in between my prayers, they decided to let us go. It might have happened within a few minutes for them, but it felt like a lifetime to me. We said goodbye to our passports and headed for Damascus. We were back to where we started, but this time, I was glad that we were in this together and could come so far as a whole family.

Now that we had no passports, I thought this must be the end. We will stay here, make do with what we have, and pray to live to see another day. However, during our second week, I noticed that my parents were up to something. One night, I caught them while they were discussing a new plan and asked about it. It's nice to be the eldest child once in a while, to be able to join the brainstorming of the parents and be the first one to get the news among the children. They said there's one way, and it is a little risky, but we want to try our luck one last time. The plan was super easy: we were to try entering Lebanon again, this time with our IDs.

But we don't even have IDs!

I don't know why, but we had to wait until we're at least 14 to get our IDs. Even though I had already qualified and made my application months ago, I was still waiting for my ID, and now that we were somewhere in Damascus instead of our hometown, I didn't see any chance I was ever going to have one, and none of my siblings, either.

How are we going to do that?

My father described an agreement between Syria and Lebanon that made it possible to travel with our local identity documents. Since we had only 2 ID holders in the family, which are my mom and dad, he would try to get official papers similar to or equivalent to IDs from some government office for each of us, the children.

If I can get those papers soon enough, we should be fine; IDs are all we need. However, if they registered our passports and matched your mother's and mine with our IDs, then they might question us again, and we might be facing some more problems, he said.

That's the risky part.

There was a time when I used to wish I were an adult, but that night, being an adult, having to make a decision that will affect not only you but also your whole family, seemed so precarious and awful.

I am sure that you'll decide what's best for us, I told my father.

I put my trust first in Allah, then in my parents. And then I went to sleep.

The next day, my father told us about our new plan. The first step was to get the necessary documents, and the second step was to get ready for another shot. It took him a week or two to get our travel documents. We prepared to cross the border. Both en route to the border, and while waiting for our turn to show our IDs, all of us were utterly nervous. Yet everything happened so fast, and suddenly we found ourselves on the other side of the border. We had been here just a month ago, and our experiences then and now were completely different. It was the same border and the same people. But a small piece of paper, which in fact has all the personal information except for that stamp, was enough to change the outcome. One single document. Was it really enough to define our identity?

MY SECOND DECADE

It's been 20 years since I was given to her, roughly six months after she had her second sweet baby girl. She was only 27 back then and had a beautiful smile. Whoever looks at me always says the same thing: I've never seen such a great headshot; you are so beautiful! In recent years, the second part has turned into: you *were* so beautiful! Well, she still is, if only people could see with their hearts. Maybe I'm the one who prevents this from happening in the first place. It's almost impossible for anyone to unsee what they've learned about her through me and leave the thinking to their hearts. They know what she looks like, how old she is, where she was born, where she lives, the colour of her face, the colour of her eyes, and even the possibility of her having a scar on the face. And for many, these are quite essential in providing an overall opinion about her. Each is part of her, yes, but how big is this part of her life?

I was quite inattentive to her during my first decade. She used to keep me in the deepest corner of her wallet and only take me out when she really needed me, which rarely happened. However, in the beginning of my second decade, things changed really quickly. I became her number-one priority after they seized her passport. I didn't know I meant this much to her until that day, and it was only going to get better. She took care of me, constantly checked on me, and made sure that I always stayed in the safest place, wherever they may have been. This went on for about three years until we took that long flight.

I had no idea what I was about to deal with, but something felt off. I was right. I had a competitor—someone fresh, looking nice, well-off, and shining bright. Many told me that I had no chance at winning this. I wasn't ready to leave her, but if it ever came down to this, I would respect her choice. She took me out of her wallet, held me for a few minutes, and placed me inside her phone case card holder. I was even closer to her now. How did that happen? I asked myself

countless times. I still ask it every now and then, for I'm standing in my place even as we speak. I guess she likes to see her picture. She likes to see the city she was born in, where it all began. She likes seeing her home address whose roads she watched being built, where she left many family, friends, and pictures. She likes to see anything about her past and she finds a perfect way to do it every time.

AUGUST 2014- WHAT DO I WANT TO FORGET? (BEIRUT REFIG HARIRI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, LEBANON)

We're waiting to board our flight. It's been only two days since we left Grandpa's, but I felt like it took us forever to reach here. Finally. We're here; we made it after all the fuss, yet my dad's still tense, and I guess it won't go away until he sees the plane on the air. So, while waiting, I'm going to note this journey down so that I don't forget any of it. Well, except for some parts. I'll think about that later. We're sitting so close to one another on these cold metal waiting chairs, and I'm struggling to prevent anyone from reading my notes. Here we go.

From one border to another. Even though my grandpa's house was way closer to the Jordanian border, my dad chose to fly over Beirut. Maybe it wasn't a choice, or it was the only choice. Whatever he thought, I knew he decided what's best for all of us. He planned each step extremely carefully to put it all together. When we left Daraa, Alissa thought we headed out to visit our uncle in Damascus, whereas Nara and I knew that this was a goodbye to everyone here. I had heard many things about checkpoints over the past three years—many horrible things. Anything could happen there. That's why I did exactly what my father told us to do. He said they might aim for our youngest to make her speak out about where we're going, so he didn't tell her the truth until we made it to the flight.

He didn't tell us many details, and we didn't ask him many questions, for we knew that he's doing all this to keep us safe. Passing countless checkpoints one after another was exhausting. I hated every second of it. It was a really hot day—an extreme hot day. Mom brought some abayas and scarves; she made us wear a suitable one for each checkpoint or take them off, for each was controlled by a different group. It's crazy that there are so many groups! We could barely fit in the car; the constant struggle of changing and arranging ourselves before each checkpoint was real. God helped, and we crossed the border safe and sound. We stayed the night at the place of one of my dad's distant relatives. I was grateful that he opened his house for us. But, in two words, last night was disgustingly scary. I don't really want to remember, but I don't believe I'll ever forget the experience in any way.

The house was small, or, in other words, a tiny house, which was understandable because this relative was living alone. Even though it was already evening when we reached there, the weather was still really hot. And the house was even hotter. We were exhausted from the trip, so we split the rooms and went to sleep. There was only one tiny room and another tiny living room. My mom and dad gave the tiny room and the only bed in the house to me and my sisters, and they shared the sofa in the living room together. From my mom falling asleep on this uncomfortable chair and my dad able to keep himself awake solely by means of anxiety, I don't think they could get a wink of sleep last night. But I didn't hear them complain. I can't say the same thing about us, though. In fact, I was doing okay at first. I couldn't sleep because every time I closed my eyes, I was getting ready for another checkpoint and imagining what would go wrong there (not the first time I've done this). My sisters were already dreaming under the fan that stayed on while I was busy dealing with my emotions. When I felt cold, I got afraid that I might catch a cold in the morning if this fan kept running for the whole night. I stood up to turn it off. And that's when I

saw them—the cockroaches. I blinked and blinked again to make sure I was not shadow-imagining them like I often do at night. They were moving. Oh my God.

The house was on the ground level, and the bed we were sharing was only six inches above the ground. I didn't want to wake anyone, but I couldn't keep it to myself, for they could have easily climbed up to our bed. What if they already have? Starting from my feet, I checked my body over. I tried so hard not to scream, but after this action, along with my mid-loud cry, Nara was awake. At this point, I was glad that I didn't have to deal with this alone. We struggled to get through the night. The checkpoint scene was now turned into cockroaches moving inside the bed. Trying to sleep was hard, and being awake was harder. The night felt like a year, and I don't even know how it ended. But finally, here we are, waiting to board our flight. It's been less than two days since we left grandpa's, and I still feel like it took forever.

A SIMPLE WAY TO TRAVEL

I don't really have a memory, but I help people remember. In other words, I am a reminder. And that's what I'm going to do now—take you back to that day.

She was probably six or seven. Maybe eight. It was spring. Maybe in the summer or fall. I can hear you asking, “How is this reminding me?” Well, we are not there yet, and I haven't promised you all the details. I was certain of at least one thing, which is where we met. It was her grandmother's funeral. Or maybe some hours later at her grandpa's house, where people visited to offer their condolences. Still, it was the same day.

I was handed down to her, as I was to every other visitor, along with a couple of dates in a small bag. It's usually either dates, some other sweet, like halva, or a meal that is given to the acquaintances during their visit. And at that time, it was me and the dates. She had only been to

one or two funerals, so she's been doubting many parts of it. Luckily. She even barely remembers her grandmother. She was simply a little child. Well, she's 20 now, and I'm still with her, somewhere far away from where we started.

She is not a child anymore, but I'm almost the same, only a few drops less. Years can't change me, yet it's also her passionate care that helped me survive. I can be quite vulnerable on the road. Still, she managed to keep me safe during all those journeys and movings. When we finally landed in Toronto, at this house, she put me in a box placed in a special corner. Carefully. I don't see her that often. She takes me out only when she wants to travel. A simple way to travel in time by means of a scent.

Sometimes we go back to her grandmother's house. It was the house of good smells, she says. Mostly bakhoor, varied spices, or oud. She's not sure if it was me or some other scent, but there had not been a single day that her grandparents didn't smell nice. We walk through the rooms of the house, one door opening after another. Each one is peculiar, yet together they make one particular smell. Me.

Sometimes we go back to that day. Another farewell to Grandma. And one minute later, we came back. Back to the box again until the next visit.

JANUARY 2016- BACKPACKING FOR ONE LAST TIME (BEIRUT RAFIC HARIRI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, LEBANON)

It's almost been three years since we crossed that border. We were in here, and that was pretty much all about it. I still got used to it somehow, but if you asked my mom, she would say: "Life here felt more like jail time. The only difference was that instead of a room or a facility, we were trapped in a country. I had not travelled outside my own country before all this happened.

But at least I had the chance to leave, to wander, and to come back. It was optional; I didn't have to rush; I could set out one day or another, just when I wanted to."

She's right; I'll give you that. Back then, I was a kid—I still am—and I hadn't developed a desire to see the world yet. But even if I had, it was going to be out of curiosity, not out of luck. So, this sharp transition must have impacted her deeply.

Sitting in the airport's uncomfortable, cool chairs and waiting for our flight to Canada, I had enough time to think about how my time passed in Lebanon. It was not so awful. I changed five schools, had good and bad memories, and made a lot of friends. Time passed in some way, but so did my childhood. The last time I felt my age was when I was nine, when my head was in the clouds and there were no planes in the sky. All the following years I had to spend with absolute caution. It was as if I had skipped my childhood for an unknown period of time. I was not an adult either, so I spent my last years in between. I realized I was still a child when I made friends at school here, but I noticed that I was more mature than most of them as well. Being together with people around my age made it easier to adjust to my real age, even if I felt more than that.

Perhaps this was the easiest packing so far. We had even fewer belongings after years of temporary residence, and we handed out most of them to people around us. One backpack for each, and that's it. There was one thing parting from that was not that easy: my dress for Eid. My mom got it for me back in Syria for one Eid, and I wore it many times more, both in Syria and even in Turkey. I carried it here, too, my little red companion. Even though I could not fully experience my childhood as a normal child, my body still persisted in growing, and here I was not fitting in it anymore. It was something I really loved, something that reminded me of our old joyful times back home, so I tried to hold onto it for so long. But I met so many wonderful children here—children

just like us. And I wanted to leave my dress to one of them so that she could continue to bring joy to someone else's life.

ROCKY AND SIMPSON

It was the two of us. We were sitting at this little shop watching over the kids all day. I was always amazed at how they never stood still. Running around, trying to touch everything, they fall in love with something until they fall for another just two seconds later and forget about the former, and this goes on and on forever. We were lucky; my best friend and I, in our seats, had the perfect view. Not too high, not too low; it was as if we were seeing everyone, but it was not that easy to be seen by the others.

One day, some lady walked in, and she looked around until, within less than a minute, she saw us. We were surprised to be exposed this quickly for the first time. She slowly walked towards us, looking at me and my friend. Then she gently took me in her hands and gave me a close check. I was very afraid that she would take me away without letting me say a proper goodbye to him. She must have noticed my anxiety when she placed me back. I felt relieved, but I didn't know something worse was about to happen. Right after she left me, she grabbed my friend and headed to the cashier. We were quite alike, and I always thought of him as my big brother. Now, somebody was taking him, and I had no clue where. We knew this day would come, but we always wished that when it did, they would take us both to the same house. Well, obviously, it's not happening today.

And then he left. I didn't know how my life was going to be without him. I had all the time to figure it out, so I decided to take it. Maybe it's only when you don't push things forward that they happen on their own. Two days later, I was sitting at the shop as always. Inside, it was busy

with children and their parents. In disparate conversations, I eavesdropped on someone. She was talking about a kid who underwent an operation. Any surgery must be very difficult for kids; it occurred to me. My heart was warm for the child I haven't even met yet. She stood in front of me, and I was certain that I was ready for this mission. Alright, let's get started. What was left to lose now that my big brother's already gone?

Inside a fancy gift box, I was headed to my first home, a very spacious apartment with two children, the nieces of this lady. The older child has recently undergone surgery and was resting in her room. I was brought to her room as a surprise, but I was the one who was actually startled. Inside, just at her bedside, was my big brother. I couldn't believe it, and neither did he. It turns out that we were both gifted to her by her two aunts. And that our wish has indeed come true. They put me next to him, and all I could think about was the chances. I mean, what are the odds?

After the visitors left, the parents came into the room, and they met me. The kid was happy, but there was something going on, and I felt that. Not on that day, but a few days later, when the father was talking to my girl, he asked him to share us with her younger sister. Look at them; they're so similar; one bunny is bigger and orange, the other one's tinier and pink. Give one of them to your sister, won't you?

Both kids were very sweet, so I wouldn't feel sad if they gave me to the five-year-old. But I remember that just because she was asked to do it, she didn't want to do it. And she was a caring sister; she was probably going to give me to her sister any time soon when she did the math. She finally said fine, and here I was, another child's.

The days with the kids were going amazing. They named me Rocky and my brother Simpson. They never left us by their bedsides, telling us all about their lives. In everything they've been going through, we have been there for them. One day, something we never expected

happened. As they were growing, they must have noticed that they'd changed. So they wanted to change us, too. They took our little baskets and hats. We felt a little naked without them. They made us clothes, jackets, and everything else, but they didn't last long. And they cut off our beards, thinking they would grow again. We had been warned about this back in the store—that kids can make such modifications. And that was the day when we received our share. It's funny how kids are predictable and unreliable at the same time.

Over the years, they had some toys other than me and Simpson. But there's this connection between them and us. In a way, I could see that we've slowly become mini versions of these kids. We travelled across the world with them and started a new life in another house after everything that happened in between this one and our first one. They are not kids any more, but we are still by their bedside. Always.

JANUARY 2016- A SIMPLE AND BASIC LIFE (TORONTO PEARSON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, CANADA)

The simple and basic everyday life that ordinary people live. That's what I was longing for. Just like how that song asks, "Oh simple thing, where have you gone?" I was excited that I would finally find it after a very long time. If someone had told me that I would miss the ordinary routines of life that I once found boring, such as waking up in my home, doing everyday chores, getting ready for school, taking care of my younger brothers and sister, cooking meals or helping with what's in the making, eating with my family, visiting relatives and friends and eating with them once more, doing my homework, watching the latest dramas with my mom, and going to bed when it's time, I would not believe it. I wouldn't think that these could be taken, for they were the

default settings of any family. There was one thing I forgot to take into consideration: one's life safety. If it's not there anymore, your routine can go upside down.

From the moment we left our home, we struggled to find peace and steadiness. We changed many houses, but none felt like home. Now we have a new shot. We might be finally building the ordinary life that we've been missing on the other side of the planet.

NEITHER ALIVE NOR DEAD.

I don't remember where I came from. Maybe you can tell by looking at me the colour or patterns of my coating, which I'd like to call my travelling armor. Yes, I travelled too much, and still, I don't know if this is my final destination. How could anyone be sure about that? It can all change with one single wave; it's just as easy as that, and I'm here today, gone tomorrow. Or a stranger I just met could pick me up, and I might end up halfway across the globe. My case is the latter one.

The last time I remember, I was by the Mediterranean Sea, lying on the shore, observing people around me. One thing I learned is that, when it comes to people, there are always ups and downs. Peaks and valleys. Whatever you call it, I've encountered numerous curious stares throughout my existence. Some were accidental, while strolling along the shore, buried in deep thoughts and worries, so they barely noticed me. Some were gleaming with wonder, recognizing me immediately but being indecisive about choosing me and my friends, which ones to collect. Oh, it takes forever when they are in doubt. I can't deny that I enjoy feeling the warmth of their bodies the minute they hold me, though. And when they hold me against their ears to see if they're really going to hear an echo of the sea's sound, that's one of my favourite moments. It's usually

the children, for they don't know what they will hear, which is actually the background noise. The sounds of the waves in a different frequency. But it's always delightful to see them try every time.

I'm not alive, but I'm not dead, either. It's like I am in between the two worlds. Perhaps that's the reason people are so tempted to collect me. Or is it because I'm easier to carry, small and each piece being all unique? I carry different parts of the world within me.

MAY 2018- EXTREMELY LUCKY AND UNLUCKY (FULDA, GERMANY)

Get ready; you have one month to be here, she said. Have a good one.

This sentence took her less than five seconds, and by the end of those seconds, I had already travelled through the past five years in my memory. Five years, three applications, three countries—and I still remember every single detail about them. Perhaps if I could have forgotten half of these, I wouldn't already be feeling ninety-eight, which is exactly double my age. Why do I remember each house that we left since I was three years old? Why did we move that much in the first place? Was it why I studied architecture? After we do this, I don't want to relocate any more, not even to the next door. But what if I want to go back to Syria someday? I might probably get arrested, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. Not the greatest idea. At least for now. What is Ziyad doing out there in Jeddah all alone by himself, oh boy? Could he complete the final steps of his application, book his flight, and reach there in one piece? He's not a child anymore; he should be good on his own. I still don't know how my husband took that boat and made it to Greece. I was so angry at him for not asking us about this or even telling us for so long. What if he couldn't make it? We wouldn't even know he was there. I wouldn't probably visit Turkey ever again. If my friends in Turkey hadn't forgotten to submit my first application documents that I mailed them to the Canadian consulate in 2013, he wouldn't have had to go through all of these. But what

happened was meant to happen. I guess, after all, the third time is really the charm. My second attempt failed with only one point. When I applied for the third time and had not heard a single word for almost a year, we decided to proceed with the family reunion application that my husband started, during which Ziyad turned 18 and was thus found not eligible. It was so hard to leave him behind, but I didn't have another choice, and at least he was going to start his university, which was something great. God, I love teaching math, science, and English but wish I could also be practicing architecture. Perhaps I should have stayed in Southampton and never returned. But I was just a child; my parents wouldn't leave me there. I wish I could have brought more of what I treasured back home; I'm going to need them in Toronto. I wonder if the people who go to further lands miss what they left in their homes more. Does math deceive us all? What were the chances of us finally being called from Canada the same week we booked our flights to Germany? Just when I gave up on our case. It was the closest that I've ever gotten in years, so I had to reschedule our flight and take the shot to attend the interview in Medina. From the moment I opened that taxi door, I could see myself moving forward all the way to the end. Respect. They showed me real respect. I am aware that there's no heaven here on earth. But it felt nice to see some understanding. Being able to communicate is such a difficulty. I miss my friends in Aleppo. I might not have left if it weren't for my children. I don't really think so.

Hello, are you there? She asked again.

Yes, sorry, and thank you for the update. Have a good one, I replied.

IF I LIKE HIM, I'LL STAY

It was an arranged marriage, and the first time she saw him was on the engagement day. He completed his military service, returned home, and now it was time to get married. The women

of the family started searching for a suitable candidate; word spread, and soon after, it was decided that it was going to be her, the chosen one.

The night before the engagement day, the bride-to-be was worried. She was not sure how or what tomorrow was going to be. Luckily, the matchmaker was her aunt, so she talked to her and asked, "I haven't even seen him! What if I don't like him when I see him tomorrow?" Her aunt replied, "Well, if you had told us about this before tonight, it may have been acceptable, but it's all arranged now; it's a little late to walk away." She was quiet for a few seconds, then her response to her aunt was, "If I like him, I'll stay. But if I don't like him, I don't want it, so I'll leave, okay?" "And what happened on the engagement day? Did she like him?" was the next question. The answer was, "My mother did stay, so she must have liked my father."

This was the story of my first day. I was the groom's gift to the bride. After they were engaged, I was carefully taken out of my case and placed on the bride's wrist. As soon as I sensed her pulse, I began ticking. It was time, and I was the time. The power to get me moving was coming from her pulse, the movement inside her veins. I was her daily and constant reminder that she was in this life and alive.

I was pretty small, carrying pieces of gold and diamonds, and she was carrying me. We have been to many houses, cities, and even countries together. I told her about the time for a really long time until the numbers began to make no difference, and within time, I lost her pulse. So, it's accurate what everyone says about resisting time. Home truth.

Then I was home. Inside a drawer or on a vanity desk, I can't remember. I was waiting to be discovered and recovered. One of my carrier's daughters noticed my absence one day. She told her mother that she would happily take me to repair shops. And with her, we travelled to different shops. It took so long for me to recover; perhaps I was not totally ready to come back. It was long

and pricey, but the daughter didn't give up on me. Finally, she took me back to my carrier, ticking again. And she decided to give me to her, for she's been caring for me. "Why don't you use it this time?"

There began my second life. I moved with her to another house, and then to another, and then another. It was a rather exhausting journey, so I couldn't keep up my pace, and I had to pause after all this hassle. She was merciful; she always carried me, even when I stopped. Once in a while, I hear her say that she could have gotten a brand-new watch with all this money she spent getting me repaired. She still didn't. Maybe I can take her all the way back to those days whenever she has me, even though time only moves forward. At least on paper.

MARCH 2017, SNOW SNOW (JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA)

The house looked exactly as we found it two and a half years ago: empty. A lot had happened during these years, but now that everything inside was removed, I felt like I had jumped back in time. It was as if I were reliving my first day in Jeddah. But this time, I was all by myself. I tried hard to hold myself together when saying goodbye to my mom and sisters, and the result was quite surprising. I cried like crazy. I went back inside and cried another round. Crying alone is an indescribable activity. I felt both better and worse. When my eyes finally stopped, I didn't know what to do or where to begin. I called my father and asked him, "What am I going to do now?" All these years he'd been living away from us, all alone, so he must have had some solution, I thought. How can I help you from here? I'm in Germany. There's nothing much that I could tell, he replied. And now I was even more tearful. I knew that his story was not an easy one to share over a phone call; he didn't come here with us to go to Europe, which he could only do after first visiting Malaysia, Yemen, and Turkey for almost three years. I was still waiting to hear a way out

from him, yet it didn't happen that day. At least he was going to see his wife and daughters after years; that was a relief. And I had to keep myself strong until our next meeting. I needed help, so I called one of my friends.

With my friend's help, I could finally leave the house and head to my university's dorm. It was such a small room that needed some restoration or perhaps decoration. But I had neither the strength nor any motivation to lift my arms to do anything. I threw all my belongings on the ground, and I didn't do anything except stare at the ceiling for about a week. I had to dig into my luggage if I needed to get something, only after convincing myself that I seriously needed it. During one such effort one day, I saw some biscuits and was instantly shedding tears because the last time I ate those biscuits, I was with my sister. It felt weirdly uncomfortable to eat them without her, so I placed the box on my shelf and never touched it again until I moved out the following year.

After my first week, I began to realize that this room was actually my new home, whether I liked it or not, so I slowly tried to turn it into one. I placed all my belongings inside the room to remove my luggage right from the centre and take it out of the way. Among my clothes, I saw one bar of Aleppo soap, made of olive oil and bay laurel oil. Just as my father used to store his clothes according to season, I placed the soap between my clothes to give them a nice nostalgic smell. And later on, whenever I wanted to feel more nostalgic, especially during the hottest days in Saudi Arabia, I would open my computer and play Talj Talj (Snow Snow) by Fairuz, imagining that I was back in Syria and it's snowing. I miss my home, but I guess it's not the same anymore.

1%

When they started selling the furniture, I told myself that this was it. If not today, I'll be gone eventually, for there was no way that they would leave with me. Dad highlighted it too many

times for the kids to pack as if they were never coming back. I might have been valuable but not the best for carrying around, especially for an open-destination trip, so I wasn't to be included. However, since there is always room for possibility, I was still holding on to the tiny hope of the 1%, yet it didn't go any higher than that. After they sent that poor 98, I knew that I was the next. Strangely, I hadn't picked up any farewell signs from Ziyad yet. Maybe they would leave me with somebody on route on the trip day, I guessed. And I patiently waited for that day.

Then that 1% happened, and Ziyad didn't let me go. I travelled right next to the cutlery set, wrapped in a pile of clothes. The border was only 2 hours away, so we should have been there any moment. When we finally reached Mersin, it had already been two days. I was the first that Ziyad unpacked right after we got to our new home. It was the summer of 2014, and this city was among the most humid regions in Turkey. We were on the fourth floor, and the sun was inside the house for at least half of the day. Luckily, he set me up in the bedroom that has AC. I accommodated myself with the furniture of the room from the first moment. And I could see in Ziyad's eyes that he was super happy with my presence, and so was I, likewise.

Our mutual happiness lasted for only a couple of months, and it was time to leave again. Leaving this bright room, stable hydro, fast-speed internet, and the AC was quite hard. My departure anxiety kicked off even though I was almost sure that I was going to be a part of this journey as well. He was more attached to me than ever, but I knew that most people are just like that until they aren't, so I saw my chances were this time 50-50. I was back inside that luggage, and we flew to Jeddah, which was even hotter than here. One way or another, I also got used to living there, and I was trying my best to make Ziyad ready for his university life. There were too many steps we followed, forms we filled out, and applications we made together, which took almost two years, but we eventually heard the good news. He was ready to start. Just before he

started, we saw some bad news, too. I moved with him to his university dorm, while Mom and sisters moved all the way to Germany. For about a week, he didn't even take me out of my box. I was worried that he might never go back to normal.

During the second week, he had to catch up with the classes, so he somehow managed to get himself together. With a busy lecture schedule and making some friends, his crazy energy was finally back. But this didn't last very long, either. Yes, there was time for another trip. Yet, it was only to reach his final destination, at which he could reunite with his family.

I was so happy for him, but deep down, I was petrified by the journey. We had to take two flights, and I wasn't sure if I would make it in one piece. He must have felt my anxiety, so before packing me, he whispered to me that he would keep me by his side no matter what happens. It was going to be our longest trip, yet I was never more peaceful.

It took around a week for him to unbox me one last time. He saw me arrive in one piece, yet he couldn't make me start. Just like how he disassembled his grandfather's 98 when he was a small kid, he deconstructed me to see what had gone wrong. He couldn't find it. It was time for him to get himself a new computer. And he did. My worst fears had come true. There was no reason for him not to let me go. Except for his promise, which he kept until this very day. I'm still by his side, maybe not as close as before, but right inside his closet.

CHAPTER 3: THE OBJECTS

This chapter includes images of the objects described in the object biographies or mentioned throughout the text, each accompanied by a caption.



Fig. 1: Zenit Camera that was described in the object biography titled “A gift to my daughter” which currently still functions.



Fig. 2: The three lens filters of Zenit camera named in both Arabic and English which are Fog, Spectrum and Galaxy Spectrum.



Fig. 3: Rocky the toy that was described in the object biography titled “Rocky and Simpson”.



Fig. 4: Simpson the toy that was described in the object biography titled “Rocky and Simpson”.



Fig. 5: The Omega watch that was described in the object biography titled “If I like him, I’ll stay”, which currently still functions.



Fig. 6: The key to participant's house in Syria which they had to leave.



Fig. 7: The necklace that was gifted to one participant by their grandparents who purchased it during their pilgrimage(hajj) to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.



Fig. 8: The necklace that was described in the object biography titled “Let this be your companion on your journey!” which was glued after it fell to pieces.



Fig. 9: The computer case that was described in the object biography titled “1%” which currently is broken and out of function.



Fig. 10: The ID that was described in the object biography titled “My second decade” which is currently invalid yet kept inside the card holder of participant’s phone case.

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