

The salt burns Aqil's eyes as the white foam slaps his face, blue knuckles knocking him. His arms searing, his body tearing into two: half pulled down with the rest of them by the vast hands of the blue below, the other half pulled upward by the strength of the white hand that won't let him go. إن شاء الله In shā'a llāh. God willing, he may survive this too.

A shriek rings shrill in his ears. He clings with everything he has to the dark fingers slipping. With a resolving swipe the blue hand snatches her, drags her below. Released, in an instant he is hoisted onto a heap of bodies: frigid, frightened. Together they're carried to the island by the giant steel 'Valiant.'

Suddenly he's in a dark room, sitting at a small table across from a pale woman with piercing, icy eyes and fair hair pulled tight on her head.

"Deport him" she orders.

A strong hand seizes his shoulder. He feels his arm twisting behind his back, cold metal snap onto his wrists. He shouts, tries to pull away from the iron grip that holds him. They'll send him to a cold, stale cell where he'll wither in despair, writhe in fear through long nights until they put him on a boat and send him back across the sea whose grasp he narrowly escaped. They will force him onto a coffin with wings and deposit him straight into the hands that dug his grave while he was away. He cannot go back.

He wakes so abruptly he can hear his own scream fade into the walls. His wife, Myryam is not in bed. He sees a light in the hallway and hears her soft voice humming أكثر من الدنيا "Fagadtak." He must have woken the baby. He rolls out of bed to change his shirt, now cold and damp with sweat.

At the dresser by the window he watches the snow swirling under the street lamp outside. He's entranced by these white flakes twisting and weaving with the wind, suspended between the dark, stormy cloud they fell from and the place where they'll finally rest, grounded. Their path, their form shaped by the cold breath which heedlessly guides them.

He didn't know he would end up in Canada. He had apparently been referred to the Canadian government for resettlement from the United Nations Refugee Agency. He was told to complete another application, that he'd have another interview. Six months later he landed at the airport in a place called Calgary. At the time, his wife and daughters were already on their way to Greece and he was terrified he'd never see them again. He tried to refuse to leave, horrified at the thought of them landing on the ragged rocks of a spiteful island without anyone there to hold them or show them the way.

But, like the days he spent walking across the Zagros mountains, the countless hours curled up in the back of a trailer driving and hiding all the way from Yüksekova to Ayvalık, the weeks he spent shivering in an abandoned squat by Badavut Beach, he was always at the mercy of those willing to move him. And at the mercy of God. لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله La hawla wala quwata illa billah. There is no strength except through Allah. Eight long months later, his wife and two daughters were brought to Canada to join him. By then he'd found a job, had a home for them. They applied for permanent residency together.

Three glowing lines on the small black box beside him show the time. 1:11. Just under 12 hours until his Canadian citizenship test. With this he hoped that finally he would no longer be a powerless flake tossing and turning in constant flight but a part of the earth he'd slowly melt into, giving life back to the place that let him keep his. And, he thought, maybe as a citizen the elderly women would not cross the road to avoid him. Maybe the strong white men would unfurl their biceps standing near him on the bus. Maybe the kids at school would be nice to his girls, and the teachers would speak more slowly, repeat hard words, help them with their spelling. Maybe they would finally see past the colour of his skin, the thickness of his beard: neon signs blinking "intruder."

In the hallway, on his way to the kitchen to help Myryam, he notices a pink-yellow glow sweeping beneath the door to his daughters' room. He peaks in. Arezou is sprawled across the bed in the far corner, fast asleep, Sesame Street sheets kicked to the foot of her bed. Her sister, Zaidia is crouched by a doll house in the middle of the room, a pink scarf hanging over the lamp beside her to dampen its fluorescent glow.

"Yes, dear, I'll make the adas bil hamod, you just rest. You deserve it after all of your hard work" her Ken doll says to Barbie in whispered Arabic.

The first thing Zadia did when she got her Ken doll from "Toys for Tots" was remove his left leg and craft a small cane for him to use instead, "so he can be just like Said akhw al'um" she told Aqil as she taped the cane around Ken's arm. She moves her doll awkwardly around its miniature abode, struggling to keep it upright without her right thumb: scythed off by shrapnel, replaced with a firework scar. She keeps asking Aqil when they'll go back home, when she'll see Uncle Said again. He doesn't know how to tell her that Iraq is as lost to them as her dear uncle.

As he watches her, a shallow sadness starts to surface. He hopes that soon her memories of the chickens she would chase, the sandy soil where their lentils and sunflowers would sprout each year, dinners on the floor, of her cousins and her friends would fade away. He hopes that with enough afternoons riding a wooden board down a slick white hill, enough evenings falling asleep by the fire, enough summer days giggling in the grass, with enough new adventures, and with softer heartbreaks, she'll forget she misses Iraq and begin to realize she's in a new world she wouldn't want to leave behind.

He feels a soft hand on his shoulder. Maryam gently guides Aqil back toward their room. She'll rub his back and hum to him as well, until he's laid still for long enough to convince her he's fallen asleep. Before long she'll start to snore and if he's lucky eventually he'll drift off too.

He awakens as the dark speckled sheet in the sky begins to pull away, leaves a grey-purple dust behind. Groggily, methodically he changes into his silk garments and gathers his family for their morning نماز Salah. The sun's rays begin to spill over the valley outside, seep into the katama carpet in the living room where they pray. The back of Aqil's hands and neck warm as he rests in sujud, heat slowly begins to trickle through him. He becomes aware of how gently the floor presses against his forehead, just enough to hold him up. He feels heavy, but not in the way that he used to: like his bones were made of lead and his heart was too weak to hold him. Instead, he realizes, he feels soft and full as if his lead frame is now a basin for a thick warm... something. Something golden. He lifts himself into julus, looks across the white valley sprawled out in front of him, fresh snow shimmering in the bright sunlight.

His head swims with the thought of his girls trotting through the light powder in their head-to-toe snowsuits, giggling with red roses on their cheeks, streams of snot frozen to their upper lips. He can smell the concoction of eggplant simmering in tomato sauce- Myryam preparing her margat bamia- mixed with dates roasting in the oven and green tea steeping on the counter. He thinks of his friends, Mohammad and Zahra, Alex and Chloe gathered together around his kitchen table asking him all about the questions he'd had on his citizenship test, teasing him about his english, teasing each other about the number of questions they don't know how to answer.

As he raises into al-qiyyam, he feels his uneasiness from the night before evaporating from his shoulders. His heart is a cloud of calm and content, and for this small moment at least he forgets about Iraq, about all of the loved ones he's lost, the pain he's endured, the horrors he's witnessed, and about the agonizing journey he and his family were made to brave to get to safety. For a moment he lets himself feel at home, and for that moment his heart could burst it's so full of that golden something.