



Coming Through Slaughter

By Taylor Lambert

Photos by Leah Henkel

The calls came out of the blue: "Are you willing to move to Canada?" Eight months after some 30 Syrian families said yes and were settled in a single townhouse complex in Forest Lawn, the surprises keep coming.

Fatima al-Rajab is unhappy. This much is clear even without knowing her story. The sadness is evident on her face, in her demeanor, in her voice as she answers questions in her Forest Lawn townhouse.

How long have you been in Canada?

She came Jan. 14.

Where in Syria did you live?

Homs.

When did you leave Syria?

April 2013.

Her answers come through a translator, but she speaks Arabic flatly, with a sadness in her eyes that hints at a terrible story not yet fully resolved.

Fatima lived in Homs with her husband, Abdulkafi, and their four children. Abdulkafi worked in construction until one day in 2011 he went out

Fatima al-Rajab fled Homs with her four children after her husband was killed by a sniper.

to buy bread and was shot dead by a sniper, one more victim in Syria's ongoing civil war.

With the violence escalating—bombs and rocket fire were common—and the government threatening to surround the city to crush the rebels, Fatima had no choice but to flee. She took her children and left on a large truck with several other families, including relatives of her late husband. They sought shelter in a small town, staying five months before the violence came there as well. The group of families left for another town, but after two months, war followed.

This went on for a year and a half, with Fatima and her four children moving around Syria, trying to stay alive by sheltering in abandoned houses. She made her way to a refugee camp in Lebanon. Her tent was cold at night and had a mud floor. The United Nations provided coupons for food and supplies. Her older daughter, Hanadi, was eight years old and started school during this time.

After three years of this life, she got the call. The United Nations asked her in December 2015 if she wanted to go to Canada. Fatima was thrilled, but the reality soon dawned on her: she would be leaving her family, travelling to a foreign country she knew nothing about, charged with caring for four children as a single mother who couldn't speak English.

Fatima asked the UN if she could bring her sister to assist with her situation. The request was refused. Reluctantly, Fatima accepted the offer to go to Canada despite her fears, believing it was the best chance for her children.

On Jan. 13, she got another call telling her she was leaving the next day. Fatima hurriedly packed and said farewells to family and friends. Soon she was on an airplane. Within days she was in her new home in Calgary, in a Forest Lawn townhouse complex with dozens of other Syrian refugees soon dubbed Little Syria.

Two months later, modestly dressed in a black hijab and abaya, sitting in her home with me, photographer Leah Hennel and our translator Raed Qatanani, Fatima politely offers tea and coffee.

As she answers our questions, it becomes clear that her tragic ordeal before arriving in Canada forms only part of her sadness. She hasn't been accepted into the English school program for adult refugees, though her children are in public school. While it has been nice having other Syrians around—there are nearly 20 large families in the surrounding townhouses at this point, and more will come—Fatima is alone for most of the day while her children and the other refugees go to school.

Coming to a new country is easier than shaking a lifetime of cultural habits. As a single woman, Fatima does not feel comfortable going out on her own, particularly given the language barrier and unfamiliar surroundings. She is therefore trapped alone each day in her home, waiting for her children and friends to return, waiting for the school to call and offer her a space in a class.

"It's difficult here for me," she says. "I don't have a man to help me with hospital, schools, everything. I don't speak English."

I ask if her children are happy here. "They like school. They like living here. They like the neighbourhood. They feel safe. No bombs."

I ask Fatima how old she is and she gives me a look, feigning shock at

Fatima al-Rajab (photo at left above) says her children have adjusted reasonably well. She, however, has often felt isolated.



the indelicate question. It's a moment of levity and we all laugh. She answers that she is 30. I tell Fatima that I'm only asking for the story, but she says the question doesn't bother her.

"If you know my age, you don't know my age."

Trevella Park is a sprawling complex comprised of 45 buildings housing 218 townhomes constructed around parking lots and lawns. The development was under construction when the town of Forest Lawn was annexed by the city of Calgary in 1961.

While Syrian refugees have been placed in various locations around the city, Little Syria is a special case. When we first began this story in February, there were 17 refugee families in the area; today there are more than 30. Most of them are young couples with more than three children. Estimating five people per family—a conservative number—there are close to two hundred Syrians in Trevella Park.

For our first visit, Raed takes Leah and I on a tour of Little Syria. He knows most of the refugees already, and he texts or calls them before leading us to another townhouse to meet another family. A 56-year-old Jordanian immigrant who came to Canada several years ago, Raed lives just blocks away and has become an invaluable resource for a group of Arabic-speakers struggling to adjust to a foreign land.

He drives them to appointments and shopping, he translates documents, he provides advice on how to get transit passes and other essentials. Since losing his job as a school-bus driver in December, Raed has had plenty of free time to volunteer to the Syrians. For us, he is part translator, part tour guide.

Each home has identical front and back doors, one leading to the living room, the other to the kitchen. The homes are modest and a bit dated, but clean and comfortable. The federal government provided new beds and a kitchen table; charity groups supplied the rest of the furnishings.

Every home we enter is a similar experience despite the range of personalities we encounter. Each family is unfailingly friendly and hospitable, asking repeatedly if we would like something to drink. We sit and I ask about their lives in Syria, their experiences during the war and their few weeks in Canada. By the fourth house, Raed doesn't wait for me to ask the same questions again. He goes back and forth with the family in Arabic, then translates their answers for me.

The stories of their war experiences share a singular terribleness. Mohammad and Amal fled Damascus for Lebanon with their three children while Amal was pregnant. They considered trying for Europe, Mohammad says, but "I'm not ready to lose my kids in the sea."

Bilal and Rodana had their home in Dooma completely destroyed. They fled with their four children to Jordan but were refused entry, then became trapped in no man's land when Syria refused to let them back in. After two weeks, they took the risk of sneaking into Jordan illegally, where they rented a cellar infested with insects for an obscene amount of money, later upgrading to a "horrible, rotten" apartment.

Most of the people we speak to had fled in desperation to Jordan or Lebanon, illegally if necessary. There they stayed in camps or rented apartments, often in terrible conditions, but at least without the threat of bullets and bombs.

It was during this time that most of them, registered as refugees with the United Nations, were offered, out of the blue, a chance to come to

Canada, a country that the vast majority of them knew nothing about.

Now, quite suddenly, they are here in a strange city where they don't speak the language, have no family or friends—and they are incredibly grateful and happy. “Good! I love you, Canada!” shouts Yahya al-Masalma, one of the more boisterous refugees, who with his tracksuit, gregarious demeanour and hand gestures seems like a Syrian extra from *The Sopranos*.

At that point in February, none of the refugees we met had explored much during their few weeks in Calgary. Soon both children and adults would begin their government-sponsored English classes. Canada was strange, but it was safe, and that was enough for now.

This clustering of people fleeing war and persecution is reminiscent of the immigrant enclaves that emerged in many North American cities in the 19th and 20th centuries. Chinatown, Germantown, Little Italy—these areas were populated by immigrants who held on to their language and customs within the bounds of their neighbourhoods.

But whether forced into these areas through ghettoization or allowed to create them through freedom of association, these areas often had a significant drawback: when everyone around you speaks your language, you lose the motivation to learn a new one.

“It’s a characteristic of human settlement (to) co-locate” with those who share your culture, language or religion, says Lorne Jaques, associate professor of international social work at the University of Calgary. Such communities have “lots of benefits in the immediate term, at least,” and potentially long-term benefits as well, given that refugees are often traumatized.

Jaques’ colleague Yahya El-Lahib, an assistant professor of social work, notes that in the case of Little Syria, two important points must be considered. “When we talk about immigration and refugee issues, they’re not the same,” says El-Lahib. While immigrants make a conscious choice to move to a new country and have time to prepare themselves for that, refugees are often at the whim of forces beyond their control. “From the get-go, that’s an advantage that an immigrant has over a refugee.” Secondly, Little Syria is “the product of necessity,” meaning that with the compressed time frame and huge numbers of people, the primary concern was likely finding housing and not the social impact of a Syrian enclave.

True enough, says the CEO of the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, which is responsible for handling the government-sponsored Syrian refugees bound for the city. “We really tried everything possible not to put them in one location because that’s not the best practice,” says Fariborz Birjandian. But he points out that more than 1,600 Syrian refugees have settled in Calgary. “Even if 200 of them are in Forest Lawn? Not bad.”

Two hundred Syrians in a few square blocks is still a sizable contingent. Still, however it came about, the situation does have inherent benefits for the newcomers. “I wouldn’t be as concerned about learning the language as much as trying to move away from the traumatic experiences,” says El-Lahib.

In a small classroom just off International Avenue, 11 adult students crowd around plastic folding tables with their notebooks. The space is so cramped that their teacher, a cheerful man with greying hair named Merv Graham, can barely squeeze between them and the whiteboard at the front.



Rodana Shikh (above at right) and her husband, Bilal, hit the books in an English class in Forest Lawn.



Younger Syrians, left and below, are also putting in class time.



Prompted by Graham, they take turns introducing themselves and saying how many children they have.

“My name is Ali, and I have four children.”

“My name is Ahmed and I have five children.”

After an exercise to count the number of offspring from the class, Graham moves on to vocabulary. Worksheets are handed out and the words are written on the whiteboard. Despite it being March, the theme is Valentine’s Day, and the first word is “candy.”

“Do you like candy?” Graham asks. Some answer yes, some simply repeat “candy.”

The class spells “card” and “chocolate” before getting to “cuddle.” Graham turns to Bilal, who is seated near the front of the class next to his wife, Rodana. “Bilal, take your arms ...” He gestures for Bilal to embrace his wife. There is some uncertainty and discomfort in the room of new immigrants, but Bilal defuses it.

“Not here!” Everyone laughs.

It seems a strange choice of vocabulary, perhaps not what is needed in day-to-day life or to find a job. Nevertheless, Graham, who has been teaching English for more than 20 years, tells me later that he’s felt pressed for time with the condensed schedule of this class, having only eight weeks to teach 12 weeks’ worth of material.

Words like “rose” and “snuggle” give way to vocabulary about weather and temperature, with Graham leading the class through worksheets. Graham is popular with the students, who are mostly Syrian, especially after taking them on a field trip to see *The Whale* at the Eau Claire cinema.

“The show and the dialogue was probably too high above their level, but I wanted to bring them for the experience,” he says. The excursion was useful for lessons about maps, transit, and getting around. Afterwards, he let some of them take the bus back to Forest Lawn by themselves. “I’m surprised at how well-adjusted they are,” Graham says of the Syrians. “I find them very motivated. I think Bilal is competing with his wife. He’s trying to show her up. He’s got a sharp sense of humour.”

On a warm Sunday in early April, Little Syria comes to life. Volunteers organize a community block party on Trevella’s common lawn for Syrians and their neighbours alike. Children of all sorts sit for face-painting and play in a bouncy castle. A long row of tables offers delicious food, much of it Syrian and Arabic, cooked and donated by volunteers and local companies. Nearby, RCMP officers chat amicably with residents. Syrian men puff cigarettes and laugh in groups while women in hijabs and abayas chat together and mind the children. Residents of the complex and beyond join the celebration.

With the cheerful show of diversity, neighbourliness and beautiful weather, the day seems an idealistic vision of the Canadian dream, of what Calgary looks like at its best.

Saima Jamal, Sam Namourra and other volunteer leaders give speeches to the crowd in Arabic and English. Raed gives a short speech in Arabic that is welcomed by applause. I ask him to translate it for me afterward. “I am helping you like people helped me before... What I expect from you is to help the people who come (after) you. This is the message for you.”

Welcome Wagon

From the Bike Lady to broader efforts on the part of organizations, Calgarians mobilized to help arriving Syrians.

Despite the often heated political debate last year over the number of refugees Canada would accept and the screening process used, Calgarians proved to be not only welcoming but generous and helpful towards the Syrian refugees.

The Syrian Refugees Support Group Calgary (SRSRG) served as something of an umbrella for a wide variety of volunteer efforts related to the Syrian newcomers. Founded by Saima Jamal and Sam Nammoura, a pair of community activists, SRSRG’s most important early role was

tude, in Arabic or English.

One volunteer, Gina Eaton, took it upon herself to collect as many used bicycles as she could get her hands on in order to fix them up and deliver them to refugee families. The bikes were meaningful gifts, practical transport, social facilitators and empowering machines all in one, particularly for the youngsters. Eaton became well-known among the refugees as the Bike Lady.

There were numerous such instances of Calgarians organizing to improve the lives of the refugees. One group of local high-school students formed Canadian Youth For Syria and raised more than \$4,000 to operate volunteer-run summer day camps for Syrian youth.

Countless individual acts of generosity and support both complemented and enabled the larger-scale organized efforts. People flocked to the airport to welcome the refugees. Arabic speakers offered translation services or simply a friend to speak with in

facilitating community donations by storing furniture, clothes and other items in a warehouse and distributing them as needed. The warehouse, which was anonymously donated to the cause, became something of a community hub for both volunteers and refugees alike.

The SRSRG Facebook group likewise became a community bulletin board for anything Syrian, from specific donation requests like baby items when new children were born, to calls for help with transportation or translation services. The refugees themselves often post their needs or expressions of grati-

their native tongue. Individuals volunteered to be matched with government-sponsored families to assist them with everyday problems or logistics.

Added to these efforts was the mass donation of clothing, household items, furniture, computers, bicycles and more from individual Calgarians.

The public cost of providing sanctuary and support to thousands of Syrian refugees will no doubt be significant. But their experiences and long-term well-being would be drastically poorer were it not for the broad support of individuals in their new community.



Raed looks around at the people enjoying the celebration and is over- come with joy. “This is the moment. I was waiting for this,” he says with a grin. “I can see the smile on the face of the kids. They feel like, Now we are living, like all the kids of the world.”

I remark that it seems like an ideal of what Canada could be.

“That’s what we say to them,” he says. “You are not just Syrian, you are not just Arab, now you are Canadian. You live with the white, black, Chi- nese, Arab, Vietnamese, Indian—all the nationalities. You are equal, you are human, doesn’t matter where you are from.”

Raed watches Syrian children playing in the bouncy castle with a neighbour’s children. “Now they feel like they are something. They are not just numbers.”

I visit Little Syria again on a warm August evening to see how the people I’d met were adapting to their new lives. Raed and I don’t walk far be- fore Sami approaches with his son Omar.

I ask how he and his family are doing. In Arabic, he says that they are very good, becoming used to life in Calgary. The one problem was language. Sami only began his English classes two weeks earlier despite having arrived in January. In Syria he was a carpenter, but with high unemployment in Al- berta, there aren’t many opportunities for people who can’t speak English, so he hasn’t been working.

I ask if he is worried about what will happen after the one year of gov- ernment support ends. Sami sighs and his face takes on a resigned expres- sion. “I hope after one year we know how to speak English and we start to work before the government will stop the financial (assistance),” is how Raed translates his response.

Raed and I walk around one group of townhouses to the field and park- ing lot shared by several units. Many of the Syrians are out enjoying the nice weather. A group of women sit on a stoop chatting as children of various ages play around them. One of the women is Fatima, and we smile at each other. Raed introduces me to the group, and Fatima tells him she remembers me.

With Raed translating, I ask Fatima how she’s adapted after seven months. She answers that things are good, that they are better able to get around, that they are more independent. Fatima is still not in school—she inquired again, but was told to wait for a space to open up.

It’s obvious that Fatima is happier than when I saw her last. She is ani- mated and laughing with her friends, speaking in Arabic as they watch their children play in the sunshine.

A man approaches Raed and they greet each other, speaking in Arabic with occasional subtle gestures towards me. The man is Hwaiidi al-Hossein, one of the more recent arrivals to Little Syria.

Hwaiidi is a short man with an athletic build and a distinctive, slightly nasal voice. He and his wife, Khalidia (who is sitting with Fatima on the stoop), have four children. Originally from Idlib, a city in northwest Syria where Hwaiidi drove a taxi, the family arrived in Calgary about ten weeks earlier.

I ask him what it was like arriving to find himself living amidst a com- munity of Syrians. “I was so happy,” he says. He expected to be alone and isolated in a strange land. Having people who shared his language and cul- ture made the transition far easier.

I ask Hwaiidi how he finds life in Calgary. “Better than in an Arabic country.” Why is that? Raed paraphrases Hwaiidi’s response: “At least here he feels safe, guaranteed education for kids, health, everything.”

Hwaiidi agrees with my observation that it must have been a culture

shock moving to a Western country for the first time, but repeats that he is happy here. I ask about his treatment here, specifically whether he’s encoun- tered any racism. He has not.

“Have you heard stories about racism from any of the other Syrians?” Hwaiidi shakes his head and clicks his tongue in disapproval of the sugges- tion. No racism at all.

“He’s not in the U.S., he’s in Canada,” says Raed with a laugh.

I thank Hwaiidi for talking to me and turn my attention back to Fatima, who is still sitting on the stoop. What do you do with your day? I ask.

She spends time with neighbours and friends, and her housework and cooking keep her busy. Khalidia says something as Raed is translating this to me, and everyone laughs. “She said she is on the phone most of the time.”

I ask Fatima what she thinks will happen when her year of government support ends, since it’s more than half over and she still hasn’t been accepted into school. She responds at length in an even tone with a calm expression.

She’s not worried about what will happen. She’s heard that it’s possible to get a job even without basic English skills. But Fatima believes that the government won’t let a single mother fall through the cracks. After all, she’s



done nothing wrong. “I tried my best to go to school here, but they didn’t call me,” she says in Arabic. “What I have to do, if I don’t learn English. If I don’t find job after one year and if my situation will be very bad here, I will go back to my country.”

I say goodbye to the women and walk a short distance with Raed towards another row of townhouses when a familiar face appears: Bilal. We shake hands. “Hello,” he says to me, “how are you?” I’m taken aback and Raed laughs.

“He speaks English now!”

“So, seven months you’ve been here,” I say to Bilal.

“Yes, seven months.”

“How is your life now? Have you adapted well?” Bilal hesitates. “You can speak in Arabic, it’s okay,” I assure him.

He tells me in his mother tongue that he’s adapted well, and his English has improved—he can understand most of what is said even if he can’t always express himself. Bilal has found work as a furniture maker, his profession before fleeing Syria. Working among English-speakers has evidently helped his lan- guage skills. Sometimes the other Syrians will come to him for translation help.

I ask Bilal if he thought it was helpful to have this community of Syrians

living together. It did help in the beginning, he replies. But now things are dif- ferent. People are more settled now, less nervous about their new surroundings. They are still a community, but each family leads increasingly separate lives. “Now they see each other maybe once a week,” says Raed, and Bilal agrees.

We chat and catch up. Bilal, like many others, is looking for cheaper housing options once the year of support ends. He now has a modest used car, as do most of the families, which makes the logistics of life far easier. Right now his biggest problem is bedbugs: he and Rodana had to throw out all the beds and couches given to them because of an infestation, likely due to donated materials.

“Okay,” I say to him, “so now you know English—” He nods; “—you have a job, you’re settled.” Nod. “Now you have to learn about hockey.” Raed translates this for him and Bilal laughs and responds in Arabic.

“Not him, maybe his kids,” says Raed.

Kids usually have an easier time adjusting to new environments than their parents, I point out. “Yeah, because the parents always think about the kids,” quips Raed, “and the kids always think about themselves.”

My final visit to Little Syria is my first one without Raed along to translate. Yaser al-Dalati, 18, and his 16-year-old sister, Basma, speak English well enough to converse with me. They had some opportunity to learn English while in a refugee camp in Jordan, but the bulk of their learning has come since arriving in Calgary in January, which makes their command of the language all the more impressive.

Yaser and Basma are in the same English class of roughly 20 teenagers from all over the world. “If they want to speak to each other, they must speak English,” says Basma.

They have both made many friends here, in their class or through other Syrians. Their friends are all over the city, which has given them a chance to explore. “I like the city,” says Yaser. “So many people from other countries.”

Among the many differences between Calgary and Syria he’s noticed: “I learned that in Calgary they have four weathers in one day.”

I ask how difficult it has been over the past eight months to adapt to their new home. “I don’t find it very difficult because all my neighbours (are) Syr- ians,” says Basma.

I mention that other Syrians have told me that Little Syria inhibits their learning of English, which gets a big laugh of agreement. They are sweet and likable teenagers, bright, friendly and funny. Basma likes to crochet in her spare time, while Yaser is a video gamer. He wants to be a plumber like his father, Jihad. Basma wants to be a lawyer—both to help people, she says, and to understand why people do what they do.

They must finish their English classes before starting high school, which could take two years. But they aren’t fazed by this delay. Both are cheer- ful and optimistic about their future. “Maybe find a job. Make family. Like everybody,” says Yaser. It’s a complete change from the refugee camp, which was a “miserable life... you can’t imagine the future there.”

I ask whether they think the community bonds forged by the refugees in Little Syria will weaken once families begin to move to other areas of the city after the year of government support. They both say no.

“We speak one language, we’ve lived together for months,” says Yaser. “If somebody goes to another place, he can’t lose everybody.”

“We are like a family now.” 

Rodana Shikh prays alongside her six-year-old daughter, Alma.