

**To the city that holds my home**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Over the years, I realized that once you leave home, you will understand its value and meaning. In the early stages of the Syrian war, I left my home for a summer break with one suitcase. I left without a last goodbye or intention of leaving forever, but I could not return or see my home for more than eight years. I found myself revisiting the memories of my home, Aleppo, asking questions about my identity, home, and belonging. I was eager to find ways to tell my story and the understanding I have gained from my experience so far.

Memory work and self-study were the methods to tap into my past, untangle my identity, and understand why these memories are registered the way they are: cold and warm, sweet and sour. With these vivid memories and my narrative in mind, I provided each chapter of my life with a title and graphic illustration. Over the last couple of months, I put my emotions, mind, and soul into these pages. For years, I was searching for a place to write and tell my narrative, this was it.

**Keywords:** Syria, Aleppo, home and belonging, identity, displacement and war trauma

## **To the city that holds my home**

This year marks the tenth year of leaving my home behind due to war.

Imagine losing everything, family, friends, job, a place you call home... That is the aftermath of war. It is hard to measure its effect on people or understand how to react to its impact, especially when one is at the age of forming and shaping identity. This capstone is a self-study focusing on the influence of the Syrian war on teenagehood and understanding its influence through my personal experience. Migration and displacement from one country to another is not new, but the Syrian war has marked its place in the history of wars. In early 2011 the war started in the outskirts of the country.. Protests turned into attacks and conflicts on the streets; eventually, the situation escalated rapidly within a few months and the war was brought to people's homes and towns. My city, Aleppo, was one of them.

I was only eleven when the first attack, three suicide car bombs, took place on February 10, 2012 . That one bombing turned into many in the span of one month; it meant sleepless nights and restless mornings for many Syrians. Aleppo had become one of the most petrifying cities to be in. During Eid-Al-Adha, known as the Islamic festival of sacrifice, my father decided to make a quick summer trip to Europe, to take us out of Aleppo for a month until the situation calmed down. Right when my family and I landed in Belgium, Brussels, the situation escalated even more with a major attack against government officials. The airports shut down, and we could no longer return home.

The factual and historical side of the Syrian war is told differently, depending on which side of the conflict you agreed with; however, my research piece does not focus on the political aspect of the Syrian war. Throughout this research study, I provide background information, to

understand the complexity of dealing with war as a teenager who is shaping her identity and to explore the formation of "belonging." What does it mean to feel like you belong? How is identity formed when you do not have a place to call home? How does war affect a child's future and why is identity crisis a common issue? The purpose is to give a story and provide researched material for individuals who cannot feel they belong anywhere, have lost their sense of home, and are still figuring out their identity within the chaos and aftermath of war.

You will hear similar stories like mine, but you will also hear much more horrifying stories than mine. My capstone project aims to shed light on the story of an eleven-year-old girl who left her home without saying goodbye and was forced to find a new home. There is already existing research on war trauma and identity crisis, which are the topics I touch upon in my research. The missing fragment, which I fill in, is to bring in the perspective of a Syrian-Armenian teenager, trying to figure out which box of identity she should tick and where she belongs after being displaced. Although the main focus and research revolve around the Syrian community and war, war trauma and identity issues can be applied to anyone going through the same situation.

### **Literature review & *its elements***

The literature reviewed for this capstone explores the formation of identity and finding "the self" after the war, especially the Syrian war that struck in late 2011. It also explores the concept of storytelling and creative writing through tackling a war event, re-telling past experiences and stories, and working with memories and the consequences of war such as identity crisis, being a refugee, and war trauma. Even though a decade has passed, the Syrian

war is still a fresh wound for many. The context of this research is influenced by similar yet distinct experiences and understandings of others.

### **Self-Study and re-telling vulnerable stories**

Working with past memory can be one of the most challenging forms of research, it is illustrated to be so by oral historians. People tend to mix up information or misplace the details, while others do not want to mention a single word about their past. The complex structure of this research study is to recall the Syrian war in the early stages, specifically in Aleppo. The unsafe and unclear feeling of war, the uncertainty of starting a new life without having the chance to say a final goodbye, to beginning a new life in a new country. When facing such issues, there is the feeling of starting everything from scratch and forming a new sense of belonging. In a book chapter on self-study and vulnerability, "The Sand Diaries", Kamanos-Gamelin introduces this idea of starting life from scratch. Reading through the chapter gave me the courage to dig deep into my own experience and bring out what was buried for years. She states, "I also had to overcome the sense of beginning from nothing, of starting from nowhere" (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2002, p. 188). In her work, you can see that one still has the urge and need to build an ongoing life, career, and education within those memories, despite the fact that one's inner world is falling apart. Finding oneself in those memories is a continuing process and as Mitchell and Weber explain, autobiographical memory is about "making the past usable" (Mitchell & Weber as cited in Kamanos-Gamelin, 2002, p. 183). Self-study is "becoming" your work, in this case, the capstone itself. Parallel to self-study, Attarian argues that understanding a story and finding its logic and connection is re-telling it. Through the process of re-telling your story, it starts with "making sense to you," (Attarian, 2009, p. 14). The power of understanding the "self" after war is to re-tell and reflect on the past to understand the frictions of identity,



war, and trauma. Therefore, the research and self-study becomes the work itself, because through the process of studying the past and present self one falls into the process of memory work: peeling parts of current self/identity which raises the discomfort of vulnerability, past trauma and memory. The discomfort and obstacles become the work itself.

### **Memory and storytelling**

When one hears “war trauma” or “displacement after the war,” it is easy to imagine the hardship and struggle of the leading events. However, including storytelling elements in research makes the story compelling and impactful. In this case, storytelling could also be explained as the “show, do not tell” methodology. Take the example of Syrian-Armenians moving to Armenia after the Syrian war. Syrian-Armenians who grew up in Syria were taught the western Armenian dialect. After the war, most Syrian-Armenians moved to Armenia, their motherland, hoping not to have cultural and language barriers, yet the eastern Armenian dialect and Soviet discourse was a complex challenge. When one deals with war displacement, and there is nowhere else to go, the only way to move forward is to adapt.

Kamanos-Gamelin addresses how shifting between various identities and environments felt like “living between two worlds and two languages; between the modern and the traditional, between voice and silence” (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2002, pp. 189). In my case, some parts of my identity stayed silent and back at home, as I was building a new identity in Armenia. Even if I were to go back to those identity traits, I felt like a stranger. However, there’s the battle between your past self and present self that tells you to give voice to the silenced part. That feeling and inner war between your two identities, silencing one and voicing the other, is what leads to identity crisis. To elaborate on the complexity of being in two places at once and being

forced into another language, culture, Hyland sees meaning in the formation of the story itself and identity. He explains, "Narrative theorists argue that by analyzing the stories people tell about themselves, we can understand how they make their lives coherent and meaningful" (Hyland, 2018, p. 2). Tapping into memory and storytelling is also untangling identity and its formation because stories tell how people lived their lives, social status, belonging, and what gives their experience meaning and value.

### **Identity Crisis after the war**

The Armenian community was and still is a minority in Syria. We aimed to keep our Armenian-Christian roots alive by going to Armenian schools, living in towns inhabited by Armenians, following Armenian traditions such as memorial day to remember the Armenian genocide and many more. Keeping the Armenian identity and belonging in an Islamic country already had its challenges, because being a minority meant that people were afraid of losing touch with their Armenian heritage and culture. This might contradict the argument of belonging, but when you are born and raised in a specific country, it automatically becomes home. After the war, the Armenian community living in Syria moved to Armenia, and that is when they were faced with the same issue. As diasporans, many thought that Armenia was their motherland, culture, carried a language they could speak and the barriers were in the past. That was not the case, because in Armenia people spoke eastern Armenian and Syrian-Armenians spoke the western dialect which made it harder for both sides to understand each other. In Armenia most documents, bills, items in the supermarket were in Russian, since Armenia was still under the Soviet influence. Some days meant leaving the supermarkets empty handed as the food labels were not legible and searching for the exact ingredients to cook meals closer to home. On other

days, we had to attend schools where math and science were taught in eastern Armenian with some Russian words. The culture of Armenia felt completely strange to the Syrian-Armenian diaspora. The traditions were not the same.. One of the reasons for the culture shock is that most of the Armenian traditions were highly tied to Christian traditions. In the first couple of years we lived in Armenia, I remember going to an empty church on Palm Sunday and Easter. In Syria the churches would be full of families and their kids dressed up, carrying colorful candles, running around and going to each other's houses to celebrate.

These are the little details used in storytelling to explain the intensity of the identity crisis and feeling like even "home" does not feel like home. While cultural identity and being a diasporan is the central debating point, Hall, a Jamaican-born cultural theorist who lived in London, paints a vivid picture of losing self and identity and growing up in the diaspora. As a Jamaican living in London, Hall allowed me to see that the word "diaspora" does not refer only to the Armenian community. After the 1915 Armenian Genocide and facing ethnic cleansing, Armenians living in the diaspora aimed to keep their identity and ethnicity alive. That is why as an Armenian diasporan living in Syria, it was crucial to be true to your roots and celebrate your identity. However, living in Armenia that sense of patriotism and Armenian identity changed due to the fact that the eastern dialect was hard to understand at first. We were the same yet so different, and it did not feel "homey" initially. A diasporan can be anyone living away from their indigenous area, and finding all ways to keep their roots and identity alive. Looking at this from personal experience, a diasporan might live in fear of losing their identity or adapting to a new culture different from theirs, because they want to preserve what was once passed to them. Hall argued that "cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of 'being;' it belongs to the future as much as it belongs to the past" (Hall, 2003, p. 225). It was at this point when I

realized I am half Armenian, trying to preserve my heritage, and half Syrian. What caused the crisis was that Syria felt closer to home. We are raised and shaped by our surroundings, which form identity. Displacing a person from their surroundings can create clashes and barriers. It is about the crisis of finding peace in the present and past. This is what Hall meant by stating that identity "belongs to the future as much as it belongs to the past" (Hall, 2003, p. 225). One can say identity is like a thread, one might be in the middle, lost and confused. But one needs the beginning and the end of the thread to make sense of it, to make sense of identity.

The concept of identity is explored through culture and social changes, since "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a positioning" (Hall, 2003, p. 225). In response to the Syrian-Armenian crisis and Hall's theory, the conclusion is that identity is fluid and is affected by our historical and social changes. As the years went on and both identities felt mine under my skin, identity became fluid and there is no one explanation to it. Everyone creates their own box to tick when it comes to identifying themselves. Identity goes through constant change over time and space.

### **Traces of olfactory imprints in identity and memory**

Memory is highly attached to the five senses, smell being one of them. One single smell can take one to an exact memory and bring up many things left or forgotten in the past. With the power of storytelling and memory, smells can paint the picture and travel to a different time. The scent of middle eastern coffee, made with cardamom, takes a Syrian to the streets of their home. Ackerman states the phenomena of scents and scenes by saying that "senses don't just make sense of life in bold or subtle acts of clarity, they tear reality apart into vibrant morsels

and reassemble them into a meaningful pattern” (Ackerman, 2009, p. 14). As Ackerman argues, scents can be “unexpected, momentary and fleeting” (Ackerman, 2009, p. 17), because one never knows how or what memory they will trigger, especially when dealing with identity and trauma.

### **Teenagehood and identity formation during war**

War can affect each person differently. Teenagehood is a fragile stage because that is when a person makes sense of themselves and goes out into the real world to experience and make meaning of life. But what leads to an identity crisis is when the outer world is no longer what they know. As Santa Barbara argues, children “wait for years in miserable circumstances for normal life to resume, if it ever does,” especially for those who were forced out of their homes and had to become refugees (Santa Barbara, 2006, p. 1). As a teenager, I recall telling myself that being a refugee does not define who I am, but at the end of the day, I could clearly see how different I was in a new environment.

While parents are going through the struggle of raising children in a new, unknown country, for the kid it is another form of challenge to feel that they do not belong in that new place. Putting war aside, teenagers tend to struggle with reassurance. The majority of teenagers need friend groups and communities to feel they belong somewhere, and that feeling is perfectly depicted in Satrapi’s work. An Iranian-French novelist known for her graphic novel *Persepolis*, Satrapi displays her childhood and adulthood living in pre- and post-revolution Iran. In the first volume of her novel, as she became a teenager, her parents got her a passport to move to Europe and live a better life. However, she was miserable there. The novel perfectly shows how her life and character evolves in Iran and outside Iran, and how her identity is in constant change. One

night, before moving to Vienna, her grandmother says "...always keep your dignity and be true to yourself" (Satrapi, 2004, p. 150). When Satrapi lived in Europe, her grandmother's words lingered in her head and that is what always took her back to her roots. Even when she pretended to be French, convinced herself that she is one of "them" (her friends), and had all the freedom in the world, she still preferred going back to Iran, even if it meant wearing a veil.

In the second volume of the novel, we see how Satrapi falls into depression and deals with an identity crisis when she comes back to Iran. A lot had changed during the revolution in Iran. The streets were no longer the same. Her friends had changed, and her room felt smaller than ever. Coming back home and seeing those changes and how you are outside that change causes an identity crisis because the home you thought you knew is no longer the same.

Marjane Satrapi's novel contributes to this explanation and research, as she says, "I needed so badly to go home," (Satrapi, 2004, p. 91), since every part of this capstone feels like going back home and remembering a part of it. Marjane's novel supports the argument of teenagers struggling through a revolution or war. The scenes in her work depict a teenager's life, feeling like a refugee and trying to find ways to belong, but failing miserably. In the second volume, Marjian returns home and says "I was overjoyed to finally have a place of my own and this reassured me. I did not want to turn on the light. I could not bear to see everything again so quickly" (Satrapi, 2004, p. 93).

Going back to Hall's definition of identity and looking at Sarapi's evolution as a character, identity is fluid and questioning your identity is a part of the equation. Satrapi's novel proves the same point simply by stating that "freedom had a price" (Satrapi, 2004, p.187). When living

in a country under attack, all one thinks is, "I do not want to die," but a part of us dies when we leave the place we love most.

While storytelling is the tool that delivers the narrative and finds meaning in autobiographies, self-study also becomes the research itself. When it comes to researching identity, there is no right or wrong, but simply a similar pattern, and that pattern is "identity is fluid." It is shaped based on the current surroundings, cultural and social changes.

### **War Trauma and psychological scars**

There is a misconception that only physical pain causes trauma or a scar. When I started talking to people who also witnessed war and shared similar stories, one said, "war leaves a psychological scar, even if you are not affected physically." That is when I looked at trauma from a new perspective. As I grew up, it was not until I visited back home in 2019 that I acknowledged I was also dealing with war trauma. Every time I left or had to say goodbye to a city, a loved one, or home, I wanted to say "fully" goodbye because there is a chance I might not come back. For many years I was unaware of the concept of "war trauma." I was only eleven. I am convinced that most kids in war or dealing with the consequences of war do not realize that being in a life threatening situation is a traumatic event, even if you are not physically injured. Remembering and retelling my stories felt like a healing process, it felt as if my mind and body could not rest until I got the words out. As Judith Herman writes in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, "we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future" (Herman, 1992, p. 1). We come to this realization that working with trauma means rediscovering yourself, your past, and how these historical events shaped us into who we are today.

With trauma comes the fear of vulnerability and fragility. We become so fragile and scared to face the past, sometimes our brain does not have the capacity to understand the flow of traumatic events. Herman explains how traumatic events are traumatic, not because they happen often but because they “overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman, 1992, p. 24). All it takes is one bombing, one kidnap, one gunshot, a goodbye without closure, to feel helpless and vulnerable for the long run. As I went deep into memory-work and started writing about the first bombing I experienced in class, one of the first traumatic events I witnessed, I felt like my body and mind could vividly remember the intense fear, loss of control, and grief all in one. Recalling can sometimes be the hardest, because we could be opening a scar that was never healed, yet our body found ways to forget it to move on. But, to this day, my body carries it all and that is what shaped me into the person I am today - Even to the point that a firework could evoke the response of bombing or seeing people protesting can create the anxiety of unsafety and chaos.

### **Research Question**

The primary aim of my research is to understand how one can navigate through a war memory and reflect on its effects as the years go on and we age. From a young age, we build attachment and a sense of belonging around our home, neighborhood, school, and friends. Our surroundings become us, we can easily identify ourselves by our surroundings, but that can get distorted when you are forced to find a new home after war. That sense of belonging is closely tied to understanding identity and how it is formed. If I had the chance to ask every reader of this piece a question, it would be “what is home?” The longer I think about the notion of home, the more I understand that each person wraps a special meaning around home. Some might attach it to material things, a building, a roof. For others, it is their loved ones and family.



Home can be a city, home can be people, home is what makes breathing easier. Home is a place we feel safe.

When going through the stages of self-study, I could not avoid how strongly home is tied to identity formation. When displacement occurs, the understanding of identity shifts as it is exposed to new society, culture, lifestyle, and beliefs because there is a conflicting barrier between what is familiar and what is strange and new. After understanding the formation of identity, the secondary question is how does war impact identity. During my self-study and understanding of the impact of war on my identity, I asked myself questions such as, what makes me feel like I belong? Is it the community, culture, or the city? If I cannot feel a sense of home and belonging anywhere, will I ever find it?

### **Methodology**

*This capstone project is dedicated to my eleven-year-old self and the journey she had to go through to get where she is now.*

In my sophomore year, I pictured writing my capstone to be on three things I was highly interested in: Syria (my hometown), women's rights or social media. Looking back at the academic work I completed over the past 4 years, I acknowledged how much I touched upon the notion of home and self-identification. Pacing myself into the research phase, I came across many research topics, but something kept pulling me to the concept of identity shaped by war and memoir writing. I went into my first research methods session with a notebook, filled with many options such as fashion, social media and content creation, things that resonated with my current self. On the very bottom part of the page I had written, "home, war and identity." Looking back at that stage of my life, I told myself I could not research myself - how do I even

trust my own thoughts and experiences to write a memoir? What if I cannot remember my past experiences? What if some of those memories are inaccurate and are flashbacks that seem vague? At the time, I was still unaware of the concept of self-study and memory work. I even told myself there were much bigger war stories to be told, mine was minor. Now I know, that was a sign of survival guilt, something many go through when recalling and working with difficult past memories. In the movie *Midnight in Paris*, a quote by Ernest Hemingway was mentioned, "No subject is terrible if the story is true, and if the prose is clean and honest, and if it affirms courage and grace under pressure" (Allen, 2011, 0:26:24) .

I wanted my thesis to be my narrative, I knew I wanted to write about my story and my definition of home and identity, but I was not sure where to start. When I was thinking about my narrative and the connection of war and identity, many questions came to the surface,

- What is identity?
- Where did I lose it? What happened to it?
- What did it feel like leaving home and seeking a new place to call home?
- What pulled me back to Syria
- What did it feel like going back to the city that hurt me the most?

The answers to these questions were in the narrative to be written and the stories were more than stories because they had a purpose and meaning. Even if I was going to open a somewhat healed wound and pick it again, I had to. Memory work and self-study carried the discomfort of understanding a wound and going back to a painful memory. I had to challenge my silenced self. So, I did. I started diving deep into the notion of home, how home shaped my identity as a teenage girl moving from one country to another with one suitcase of thin summer clothes, seeking a new home.

During my field work and research period, I realized that qualitative research was what fit best with my approach and narrative. Self-study and memory work was my way to unfold my narrative and show the reader what home meant to me and how home was connected with my identity. I aimed to shape the understanding of home when I felt home.

### **Self-study**

As I got interested in self-study, I immersed myself in a lot of reading to comprehend how one can write about themselves and make meaning out of their culture and surroundings and what were the factors that shaped the person into who they are now. In my case, self-study was diving into a difficult past war memory that occurred a decade ago, but that decade passed so fast and changed a lot that I never had the time to sit and reflect. According to Chase in the Sage Qualitative Research handbook, writing a narrative meant making sense of my actions, events, the objects around me “into a meaningful whole of connection and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2005, p. 421). Going back and remembering my classroom, home, and my family around that time and connecting those events together made a meaning that was worth analyzing. I was always debating whether my narrative was worth writing, and I eventually understood that “stories inform, inspire, teach and guide us” (Riessman, 2013, p. 949). Stories mattered because not only did they deserve a place to be told and heard, but they also preserved history.

In *Lives in Context*, a book on qualitative research of reliving the past and doing historical research, Gary Knowles describes how “memoir is the intersection of narrative and reflection of storytelling,” also indicating that memoir meant reflecting on the story and seeing what meaning it can give you (Knowles, 2001, p. 16). Knowles even explains how a narrative can

mean more than a personal story and become a research subject. My narrative was a way to convey the meaning I have made of home and identity away from home. At this point, writing a memoir was not about me retelling the story but using the memoir as research space which allowed me to understand myself and the world around me and how that connects to my present self. As Knowles states, "The stories we remember and tell about our lives reflect who we are, how we see ourselves, and perhaps, how we wish to be seen" (Knowles, 2001, p. 119).

As Kamanos wrote, "writing this book felt like coming home" (Kamanos, 2020, p. 17). For me, it felt like going back home. *Home and away* (Kamanos, 2020), an auto-ethnography of the author's life, was the book that helped me understand the importance of my narrative. Going through the process, and working with my memory, was one of the most vulnerable experiences I have had. I shut the world around me, immersed myself in my writing, and felt as if I were back in Syria, pacing around the room and writing the words and feelings out. The painful part of the self-study was when I realized how much I have changed over the years. I went through my childhood photos and tapes and tried to get into my eleven-year-old self. It felt like I was no longer her. It is normal to grow old into a new person, but it is far more complex when you are influenced by a new culture and surroundings, and that goes back to my first couple of years in Armenia. Kamanos's book felt close to my heart as she explains how "the move to a new culture also meant leaving certain things behind, habits in hand, mind, and heart, once so familiar suddenly seemed foreign and mundane (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2020, p. 22). Facing war and displacement, questioning my identity molded me into a new person, to a point that I feel like a stranger to myself. Questioning my identity crisis feels like a battle with myself and the world around me, because I cannot find a sense of belonging and peace within myself and under my skin. This feeling of uncertainty and displacement makes me feel

voiceless. Kamanos writes about how sometimes she felt like a part of her was missing, and she felt invisible, which made her frustrated. "I have to close my eyes at such times to remember myself" (Kamanos, 2020, p. 22). The only way I can get closer to home is through my memory. Self-study also meant "making the past usable" (Kamanos. 2020, p. 9). In my case, usable meant answering the question of "what is identity?" Making sense of the past and going over the events allowed me to understand that identity is a constant "flux and renewal" (Kamanos, 2020, p. 48). As Greene says, "we are always becoming" (Greene, 1995).

Self-study means getting vulnerable, and that is what people fear the most. In her book chapter, "The Sand Diaries", Kamanos-Gamelin, explains how she fears self-study because it makes her feel naked to everyone's eyes (Kamanos-Gamelin, 1995, p. 184). Besides the discomfort of understanding a past wound, there is also the fear of vulnerability. In my narrative, I recall events that revolve around my family, and those are more than stories. They are personal and painful, and the question I ask myself is, "am I opening up too much?" Vulnerability is what connects us, humans, it is a way to make the person in front of you understand you, and without vulnerability, things are just emotionless.

### **Memory work: Unpacking the past just like unpacking another one of my suitcases**

"The first draft is often full of lies and half-truths -what one seems to remember" (Hampl, 1999, p. 206).

I have written my story many times over the years. Writing is my way to cope and find my peace within the pages as I always felt the urge to tell my story to others. However, rereading my texts was a process of asking myself, "did this really happen?" and sometimes it was a "no."

As Weber and Mitchell write in *Reinventing ourselves as teachers*, a book designed for teachers and educators that dives deep into the understanding of memory work, memory and the planned act of remembering is “a form of willed creation” (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 48). They explain that during memory work it is important to understand how exact memory appears and why it appeared in that form, place, or way, not what is true or not true. In my stories, when the Aleppo airport shut down and I was “stuck” in Belgium, I described Europe as a cold place to be in. When looking at the “right” or “wrong,” I was in Belgium during the summer, but the mental state and conditions I was in, convinced my brain and memory that Europe was, in fact, cold.

Working with past memories has been one of my biggest challenges. It is similar to peeling an orange to get to the juicy part where things can get sour and sweet. I had a day where I had to sit down and think of five major events that changed my life and I could not think of anything. Usually, we have a lot of memories lingering in our subconscious mind, and we know exactly how that memory smells, tastes, feels, whether it’s hot or cold, because our body has experienced it on our own skin. I had to find ways to trigger my memory, to find ways to bring that memory back and put myself in the frame. The scary part of going back is realizing how much you have changed over time and realizing you are no longer the same, you have a different perspective on the world around you.

It all started with a cup of coffee with my mum, where we sat down and I placed my phone on the side to record our conversation. I knew that if she knew there was a phone, she would try to make her sentences sound beautiful and formal. She delivered her story as if she was painting a picture in my head. She sounded beautiful and painful at the same time, but there

was so much in her words that I had to keep the audio recording. The aim of the recording was for me to have something to go back to when I want to recall the past. Through my research, I understand that as time passes, we tend to leave the details behind because, after all, they are a memory. I wanted to have a piece of that memory in some tangible form.

My next way to trigger past memories was to look at old photos and understand what happened and why I no longer identify as the eleven year old girl. We grow up and change, but it is different when you are pushed to grow and think of things that you are not familiar with, like the idea of war. I did not know what war was. Now, the word carries fear and pain around it.

Some of the questions I had when I was working with memory:

- How do I remember past memory and experiences since my body has a way of recovering from past pain and trauma
- What if I am missing parts of my memory
- I cannot remember anything!
- What if I remember something I don't want to remember?
- How do I unpack the past

The primary methodology to work on the project is to use the "show, do not tell" and use oral history as a part of historical research to write from a personal experience. It is not about telling people the difficulty of being forced to leave home after or the effects of war on teenagehood. Rather, it shows them through a fiction piece, with bits and pieces of realism, and eventually 4 stories that I strongly reflect back on.

In the end, my memory did come back, it did not matter if it was complete or in snippets, but it did, and the wound felt fresh. It was a relief to remember those days because ten years had passed but writing about it always feels like reliving the same exact moment and rushing to write down all the details on your page not to leave anything out. It seems scary and strange, an experience your mind and body had, yet you ask yourself, "did it really happen, or is it my body trying to deal with the pain and the mental scar it left."

Re-telling the past is picking on an unhealing scar and making it bleed again.



## **To the city that holds my home**

Writing this capstone meant diving deep into my childhood, my past, which was vulnerable and surreal. To this day, this process has led me to remember snippets of my past, like how I loved doing my homework in the kitchen or how I spent the afternoons getting creative and drawing. My creative expression back then was through drawing and I could vividly recall how my father used to take me to a store down the street to pick my new painting set. I even recall going to art classes in the afternoon and how eager I would be to come back home and show my new painting. I think the reason I remember these instances so well is because they made me feel something, anything.

With these stories, I went through moments that I was able to channel my eleven-year-old self and walk into her shoes after many years. The first thing I said to myself after looking at my childhood photos was, "I don't recognize you anymore." I know it was me, but she and I seem different and distant now.

This capstone started off with a series of stories and main events revolving around my life, before the war and during the war, and the aftermath of those events. The stories start from 2011 in Syria and I begin with giving you a typical day in my life in Syria, some of our family traditions, habits, and routine. As the storyline goes on, I gradually dive into the war to the first blast in Aleppo on February 10, 2012. The years go on, the situation escalates making it harder to go back to a normal life. Within those years, the stories convey identity, belonging and trauma issues. Eventually the story ends with me revisiting Aleppo in 2019 and hoping to find my answers, make sense of my identity, and get the closure I wanted. In fact, I left Syria then

feeling even more confused about myself and identity, because things were no longer like they were when I was a kid.

The story might even seem fluid up until the end, because a decade later, I am still searching and building my identity. I have accepted the fact that it is fluid. Each year, I learn something new about myself. Before writing this capstone, I wanted to give the reader a solid answer or “a cure” to these issues I was having, but there is no quick answer. Finding your identity, feeling comfortable in your own skin, and finding where you belong is an ongoing process, not only for those dealing with war, but for everyone in general.

During my memory-work and self-study, I started clearly seeing the vision and memory in front of my eyes. It all felt so real, as if it was happening all over again. I am a visual person; I remember numbers, details, stories through pictures. I was seeing those images, the rooms, the feeling of that room, the objects around me and everything. I want the reader to experience the story from my image, since it was the best way to communicate my vulnerability and memories of the past. I eventually thought of having an illustration for each story, before the reader got to the story itself. The aim of the images is to allow the reader to visualize the scene, get in touch with the emotional flow of the story, feel present, already have an image to work with and see this while reading. I want to thank Vana Hampartsoumian again for agreeing to create these images to match the stories.

The stories have Arabic titles for a reason, many readers might not understand it but the aim is to have an Arabic element within these stories. When I first landed in Syria after 9 years, the first thing I saw written on a banner was , “اهلا بك في سوريا” which translates to “Welcome to Syria.” As Armenian was my first language, Arabic was my second, but it was still my language. I was still able to read the letters, connect the words and understand; I am still able to speak Arabic. Even when I was far away from my home, I kept my limited knowledge of

Arabic alive. Seeing an Arabic word and being able to read it brings me joy and it still feels I am in touch with my Syrian side. I wanted to have arabic titles to each story to preserve a piece of my language, culture and home. I might speak broken Arabic, but I will understand it and carry it with me for the rest of my life and now officially, in my capstone.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Every person is a child at home**

كل شخص طفل في منزله



I tried to get into the mind of a child solely to see life from a fresh start. As kids, we wake up every day to follow those goals and ambitions of conquering the world. We have faith and trust

in the silliest things. It is funny to think that the most challenging part of life was taking our first step. We put our feet up straight, not knowing there is a chance of falling down and bruising our knee, because we do not know the painful and evil side of the world. Our toys were our valued possessions, and our room was our safe space. Home is just a place we go to after school and we never form a meaning around home until it is taken away from us. There is a sense of purity and peace in our safe space, and you can be as fearless as possible. Imagine having that space taken away from you, leaving you homeless, with one suitcase in your hand, searching for a place to call home. True maturity is refinding what you lost when you grew up, which in my case was my childhood.

Every person is a child at home, I was a child in mine. The sweet memories of Aleppo still linger in my mind. The memory of my cousins and I riding our bikes in the yard, my mother drinking her cardamom coffee under the sunset, with the church bells ringing and the birds chirping. The memories of secretly calling my friends when it was time to do homework or Sunday lunch gathering with my family.

I was born into a traditional Armenian-Christian family. We loved spending our Sundays having lunch with my grandparents and then driving around the city till sunset. My dad would stop by my favorite pastry store to get me something sweet and we would go home and watch television for the rest of the day. Weekdays were simple, it consisted of me going to school, seeing my friends, and spending the rest of my afternoon doing homework. We also loved enjoying our breaks by traveling here and there, but returning home always felt relieving.

We had just returned from Australia for our Christmas break in 2011. It was officially cold in February. To this day, February still always feels cold and dull. The sound of my alarm would wake me up every morning. The first thing I would do is open the curtains in my room to have a bit of sunlight in all the darkness. I put on my pink shirt, which was a part of the girl's uniform at my school and my mother joined me every morning to help me get dressed. I would hand her a box full of hair ties and she would ask me to sit on the bed to brush my hair and tie it into a lovely ponytail. She gave me a different hairstyle every day and that was my favorite part of the morning. We sat in the kitchen as she reviewed my homework with me and made sure I was ready for the day by putting a spoon of *za'tar* [thyme] in my mouth. She would say, "*za'tar* is good for the brain," and then watched me jump into the bus from our balcony. Sometimes she tried to yell things from the balcony like, "stay warm," or "I put a sandwich in your backpack, make sure you eat it." Every day she made a nice sandwich and wrapped it in a soft napkin.

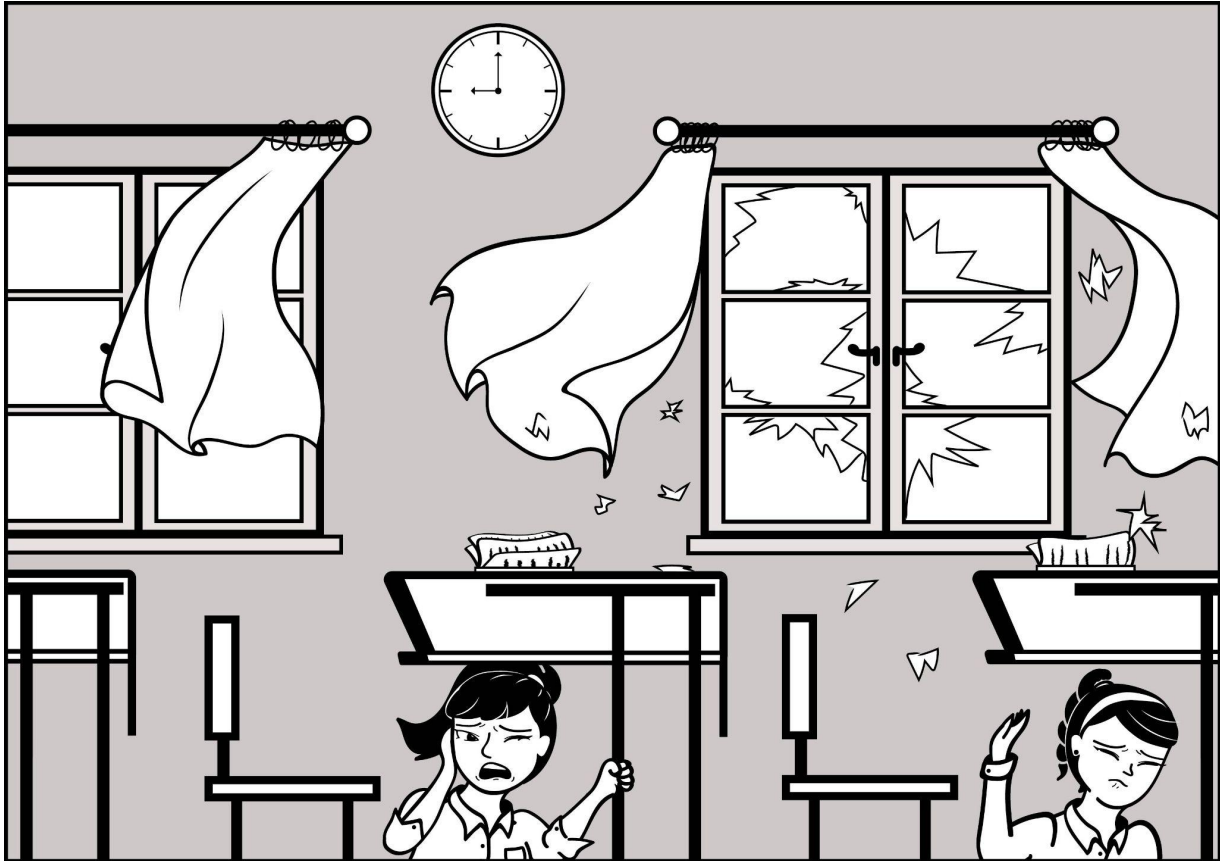
Our school bus would pick up the students in my neighborhood. The bus would stand near our building and those in the neighborhood who attended the same school would rush out of their building into our big blue bus. Our bus teacher would be sitting in the front seat, clinching a paper that seemed to be the list of students that needed to get on the bus. She always greeted us with the biggest smile, even though it was 7 in the morning, and she always made sure we picked up every student to make it to class on time. Our classes started around 8:00 am. I was one of those students who would stare at the clock in the classroom so it would hit 9:00, and we would go out for our break. We would always go to the courtyard, stand near the staircase and chat about our weekends, some of the gossip going around in class, and always complain about classes.

I was in Armenian history class and I was impatient, waiting for the bell to ring and run out to the courtyard to my friends. It was Friday. I wanted to talk to my friends as the weekend was ahead of us, and we would not see each other for two days. I kept staring at the watch, it was 8:58... it almost felt like those two minutes would not pass. But it did... in a heartbeat. An intense blast pushed us all abruptly, the windows opened by themselves and the glasses shattered in the air. The intensity of the blast made us all cower under our school desks. I was not sure if I was shocked or scared by the alarming sound or the wave of wind that had pushed into the entire classroom.

## Chapter 2

8:59

Λ:09



It was the first time I had heard an explosion ever. I was unaware of the sound or its meaning. I cannot recall if I felt small, fragile, shocked, it was all at once. It was loud. After the first blast, my teacher barely uttered the words “drop on the floor and go under your desk.” She was holding back her tears, but she seemed helpless and clueless just like us. We were on the floor when we heard the second explosion, it was heavier than the first. I was clenching the feet of my desk with my hands as if the desk was going to get me out of this room to my parents. It was already 9 am.

Everyone around me kept whispering, "what is happening," "what was that?" We kept whispering anxiously, because the loud blast filled the quietness in the room. Ten minutes had passed and I was still holding onto my desk, staring at the floor, when I heard my father's voice. He barged into my classroom, pushed the door open and kept yelling my name restlessly. "Galine..." I turned around to see him, his pale face and that is when I felt that the situation was bad. He was breathless from running up the stairs to get to me. My father was the first parent in our classroom who made it to school to take me home. I looked at my teacher to get her permission to leave as I pushed the books into my bag. I held my father's hand and left the classroom quickly. In my head, I kept asking, "what's going to happen to my classmates? Who is taking them home?" But the hall was already filled with parents running around hysterically and asking to take their kids home. It was the fear of the unknown.

We quickly sat in the car and started driving home. I was sitting in the back of the car when my mother called and said there were gunshots going around town and we should hurry home. My father speeded up the car and asked me to pull my head down in the back. Crouching in the back, I was finally able to ask my father "what is happening?" and all he said was, "I do not know." He parked the car near our home entrance, covered me with his jacket, and we ran into the building. My mother already had the door open, she was on the phone with my grandmother, checking in on them. The television was on, the volume was up and I wanted to take a peak. I slowly put my backpack down as I watched the reporter showing dead civilians on the street. A street that was only 40 minutes away from my home was now covered in blood. When my mother saw me watching, she got angry and asked me to get to my room immediately as she did not want me to see the horrifying images. I went into my room and sat on the corner of my bed, crouching on my knees, replaying the whole day in my head, the



sound in my eyes, the pressure of the blast on my body, and the bloody images running in front of my eyes. For a second, I thought I was unsafe in my own room, what if they got here. But who are "they?" Who could possibly do this? "What is a terrorist?" From the age of eleven, I started learning these terms and got introduced to the evil side of life, war. I picked up the phone to call my friend when my mother had finally finished making many calls and I kept asking her if she made sense of the things happening. She did not either.

The first explosion is the one that haunts us the most, the one we remember vividly and replay in our head. Our mind and body go through this strange feeling of the unknown and unsafe, but we also feel small and fragile like there is no place to escape. As for what came next, after the third or fourth explosion we started "normalizing" it. That's the strangest part of war, when people expect you to tell them terrifying and sob stories, we showcase an abnormal reality that is normalized when in reality, it was living hell.

We often sat in our garden with our heads up and watched the rockets striking in the air with red and green lights, attacking villages. With our heads up, we would say, "they cannot get to us," or "I am sure this is our government protecting us and our territory."

After the first explosion, the whole city was in shock, we left the house only when it was urgent for the first couple of weeks. The government was in shock. There was even a story going around town about how an innocent kid was shot that same night. Apparently, one family was driving home as fast as possible to escape the unsafe part of town on high speed and they were mistakenly identified as attackers. In the resulting gunshot the kid sitting in the back of the car was wounded and still struggles with health conditions to this day.

The scariest part was the suicide bomb attempts.. Some of those were a couple of minutes away from my home. For an entire month, during nighttime, gunshots were always heard. It was a civil war. Everything escalated fast, people were getting kidnapped and money was being asked for in return. We did not go to school properly. There were families getting threats who decided to leave the country once and for all. Another morning, a man's shoe was found near his car as he was kidnapped on his way to work. Two months had passed, and the situation was never getting better. My sister was only five, and every night she would ask me "what are these sounds," I was never able to give her an answer, because I did not have the answer myself. I distracted her by showing her the stars on our room's ceiling. They were shiny and bright.

It was April and Easter was around the corner when my grandmother invited us to go over their place to paint Easter eggs and make cookies. My mother, sister, and I decided to go out and get some of the essentials in the afternoon. As we left the house, we started getting chased by a car. My mother felt unprotected because she had a five-year-old and an eleven-year-old in her arms and was being chased by a strange man. I remember how tight she was holding my hand and whispering to walk faster to keep on track. She kept asking me to call my father, and I dialed the numbers in a hurry. We decided to walk into shops and stores to stall the man, but he would appear as soon as we left. We eventually ran into a restaurant and asked someone inside to help us until my father could pick us up. We did not go to our grandmother's house that day. All we wanted to do was stay home inside our safe walls.

Every morning my mother would take me to school herself, and my grandfather would take my sister to kindergarten. I no longer took the blue bus to school.

## Chapter 3

### Goodbye without closure

وداع من دون خاتمة



*The departure: July 18, 2012... 3:30am*

I finished my sixth grade successfully and we had a little graduation dinner that summer. Every time we cut a cake or had a celebration, all anyone wished for was peace, when before, we

wished for crayons, toys, and all the colorful things kids ask for. It was July. The summer heat had just begun in Aleppo, and the war kept escalating. Eid-Al-Adha, known as the Islamic festival of sacrifice, was celebrated by sacrificing a cow, sheep or goat. My father had a gut feeling that things would worsen during the Eid that month. He wanted to get us out of Aleppo for a month until the situation calmed down and it was also a summer vacation. My parents decided to book a flight to Europe for July 18, 2012. We packed our summer clothes and woke up at 3 am to get to the airport. As we were still home, my uncle called saying it was not safe to get on the road at 3 in the morning as it could arise suspicions but we had to. We locked everything. I kept wanting to take more things with me, as if I knew something, but I also knew I was going to come back. I was eager to take one of my teddy bears, but my mother kept saying we had no space, that I would come back to my toys within a month. We switched off the lights, locked the door and stepped out of our house. My parents were busy putting our luggage in the car when I noticed an old car with four men inside. They kept looking at us and analyzing how we were packing our things. I pulled my dad's jacket and pointed at the car with my head. He got worried as well. We sat in the car quickly, and my father fixed the front mirror only to see that they were still looking at us. As my father turned on his engine, they did as well. We sat in the car anxiously, taking different routes to chase them off, but they kept following us. My uncle's words and the many stories of kidnappings or shootings were playing in our heads. My dad said, "Don't look back, they will see us." He asked us to sit calmly and never turn our heads back and look at them, as that would seem more suspicious if someone was following us. After an hour of anxiously driving and counting all the possibilities of getting kidnapped or getting shot in the head, they left us alone and changed their path. As we got closer to the airport, I looked out the window and saw burning buses and cars. The fire was fresh, turning everything into ashes, and you could feel its warmth from the window. To distract

us from the ashes and fire, my father turned on the radio and started humming to the lyrics. I asked him what the song was, and he said, "It's [Fairuz](#). Listen, listen" as he turned up the volume.

The sun had just started rising, the birds were chirping loud and clear, and people were rushing in and out of the airport. My mother was praying since we got to the airport safely. It was the typical airport you imagine, someone was yelling to get help with the luggage, another was hysterical checking bags to find their lost passport. I could never forget the strong aroma of *oud*, a fragrant dark resinous wood used in perfume, filling the corners of the airport. The freshly brewed coffee with cardamom made you want to sit in the corner and feel like you are on an exciting adventure. To this day, these scents take me back to this exact moment. As a kid, traveling was exciting, it meant seeing a new place and finding more about the outside world, but I was naive. The outside world might be pretty and soothing for a while, but at the end of the day you want to rush back home and curl up in your bed.

After hours of waiting in lines, passing borders, we landed in Belgium. As soon as we got off the plane, my father received a message that a major explosion had occurred killing government officials. That one message turned into multiple over the span of one month, and this brought fear and anxiety in the homes of many Syrians. My perfect summer vacation in Belgium turned into sitting in our rental home, glued to the television and scanning through news channels. I recall my mother asking me to leave the room as she watched terrorism take over my city, our streets, and people getting kidnapped, raped and murdered.

From July to September, our hope of going back home kept shrinking. It was in September when terrorists took over a block away from our home back in Aleppo. Later on, they used

barrel bombs on houses and buildings, which was a threat to people living in high buildings, just like my grandparents. My grandparents packed their stuff and moved to our house for a few months during that time.

September came in with its gloomy weather. I was turning 12 and missing home. I did not want to watch the news. I wanted to watch flowers bloom, see my family in peace, and sleep in my own bed. We had to go back to school, but the situation was confusing. No one knew if we could return home. It was getting cold and all we had were summer clothes. My father decided that it was best to start school and the best thing that could come out of all this is that I would learn French. I never did. I was supposed to be in 7th grade when I sat in 4th grade instead and never understood a word my teacher said. I was depressed and never wanted to go to school. One day, I asked if someone spoke or understood a few words of Arabic or English. The guy sitting next to me spoke Arabic and I bursted into tears. I found someone who understood my words, my language, maybe even where I came from, maybe he would understand my homesickness. I kept telling him I was from Aleppo in Arabic, but he never knew where it was on the map. One night I was in the room alone and my parents were watching the news. I remember spending the night talking to God and asking him to make things better. I begged him to make things better so we could go home. The same night, I woke up from my mother's crying at two in the morning because she had just found out from the news that her uncle had been killed on his way home from the Aleppo airport.

The airport closed at the end of 2012—no last goodbyes. I would wake up from sweet dreams of my home every morning, but it was all in my head. Europe felt cold and lonely, the outside world was not pleasant. I remember the miserable feeling of people looking at me as a refugee,

a child who no longer had a home to go to. I was stuck in the middle of nowhere, and no place felt like home. Some days I blamed the people around me. Other days, I reminded myself that I had taken a step into the airport, I chose to take the plane to fly out without looking back. What do you tell a kid who could no longer belong? No one knew how to help a kid who desperately needed identity reassurance and a home. You find love for the things around you and the things within you, that's the mind of a child. However, the things around me and inside me were dark. I spent months in Europe wanting to go back home, and that made me hate Europe when it was a beautiful place to be in. I remember spending most of my time at the mall, walking around from one store to another. In particular, I lingered in an accessory/jewelry store that made me feel like a child again. One day, my mother bought me a bracelet from that store to cheer me up and said "I want to go back home, too." She started giving me waffles in the morning instead of *za'tar*. I got tired of waffles. They were too sweet.



## Chapter 4

### Scrub, scrub, scrub

تنظيف، تنظيف، تنظيف



Over the past year, all I had and could have were visions and dreams of my home. These dreams felt real to a point where I would walk into my room, sit on the bed and look around. I would walk through the doors of our house, sniffing the floral arrangement my mother kept on the kitchen counter, my room with the teddy bear I never went back to, and a picture of my

sister sitting on the shelf. Dreams that I soaked every inch of and that was the only way to get back the sense of my home. And then I would open my eyes in a home that was not mine. It felt like my childhood was trapped in that house, and no one had the key to open it. No one had the secret potion of coping with war, closure, being a refugee...No one understood this could lead to an identity crisis.

Europe was the place we felt like a refugee the most, that was not a pleasant feeling. At this point in my life, I was hopping from one plane to another, looking out of the window and trying to see where I would land next. We spent Christmas in Lebanon, we stayed at this motel where mostly Syrians stayed because they had also escaped the war. Lebanon felt closer to home for a while, I was able to speak the language, the culture was similar to mine, and my cousins stayed with us for some time. However, that did not last long, because home was different. I skipped school in Lebanon because we were not sure if we were going to stay there. We hopped into another plane and our next destination was Armenia. Armenia was my next stop that has lasted to this day.

Every time I came to a new country, I felt a burst of hope that maybe it would not be as bad. Although Armenia was the country I stayed in the longest, it took me years to find myself. I still realize new things about my identity over the years. Sometimes to this day, I feel like an outsider, a stranger.

It was January 2, 2013, nighttime, when we landed in Armenia. Airports have this bittersweet feeling, everyone was waiting for their relatives as they arrived, while we had absolutely no one waiting. I was wearing a thin jacket when I stepped out of the plane into snowy Armenia. This

was the first time I felt and saw snow. We had rented a house in the city, and on our way there in the car, I watched the road. It is strange to look back and see how I felt like a stranger in the streets of Yerevan, but now I know all these streets by heart. The roads were empty, snow was hitting the window, lights of the Christmas tree glowed as soon as we drove past the Republic Square, there was a Santa Claus ringing a bell in the darkness. As the sound of the bell filled the wintry air, I felt it was Christmas and I was in my summer clothes. It was -10 celsius and the heater was not working in the house. It almost felt like things were intentionally going wrong to make me feel unwelcome in any home. As it was 2 in the morning, I decided to layer socks and jackets and force myself to sleep. I stayed up for hours in that bed thinking to myself, how it was already winter, snowing, and I was still wearing the same summer clothing. It was like the weather and the circumstances were telling me to move on and start building a new life, but I refused. The clothes on me were no longer keeping me warm.

I stayed up thinking for hours at night and felt like the sun was beaming from the window inside the room, at this point, my new room. My room felt dull. It was a regular yet very uncomfortable bed, a wooden cupboard, and a window without any curtains. I sat on the bed that morning and stared around the place, trying to feel comfortable, but I never did. It was only then that I heard my mum running the waters and maneuvering around the house. I opened the door to see her cleaning the entire house. She unpacked our bags, put on her gloves, spread the detergent all over the house, and started scrubbing. I sat in the corner of the room and watched her scrub for hours. She wanted to clean the house to make it feel like hers, to make it easier to sit and breathe in, to make it homey for us. She scrubbed her frustration away, she scrubbed someone else's belongings to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of home. She wanted to recreate her past belongings. She kept saying how it was never clean

enough. It was never clean enough because it was not home. Here's a secret no one told us, no matter how much we scrubbed a rental house, it was never going to feel like home, because we could get kicked out any minute.

Armenia felt brutally cold at first and I am not talking about the weather. The western dialect I spoke was never understandable to locals, and neither did I understand the eastern dialect. For many years, we were told that Armenia is our motherland, but we could not even understand each other's dialect. Most of the time, locals mixed up Russian words. We got bills that we were never able to read. I could not even buy or read the products in the supermarket as most of the labels were in Russian. At that point, my parents decided to enroll me in a Russian school, so I could learn the language. I never did.

I walked into class the first day and even if the students were speaking Armenian to me, I still could not understand them. I just smiled and nodded, but I wanted to go to my dull apartment instead. Many times I was treated with pity by the teachers and that is what I could not stand the most. I remember we would have the news individuals coming to school with cameras right into my face, asking me to tell them how I was adapting and how I left my country. I would always say I am doing well, when deep inside, I was dealing with displacement, an identity crisis that I was unaware of, bullying, and the fear of never feeling like I will belong. I could never explain all this because I was alone in this. Others who also came from Syria were new to this feeling as well. How could a 14-year-old know about the term identity crisis itself anyway?

My teachers never pushed me to try hard because "I was the child who came from war." I felt like a stranger in my classroom, at birthday parties, the entire country itself. At one point, I

would go to school, sit in the back of the class, and sometimes put my head down on the desk till it was time to go home. I lost all sorts of emotions and motivation, I never even tried. I would be making friends from time to time, but I still felt like a complete stranger. Sometimes I felt like a brat because I was now under a safe sky, but a lot was missing. I guess that's the price you pay for freedom and peace.

When I got home, I jumped into bed and watched tv shows and YouTube. That's how I spent my middle school and high school. My comfort was found in the content and creative world of social media, it was the only thing that got me excited.

Things started looking up when my parents decided to buy a house in Armenia. I remember how my dad one day came in and showed us the plan of the house on paper and promised us to have a tour one day. It was April 2015 when I entered our current home. It is genuinely my home and safe space now.

When I walked into our new home, the first thing I noticed was the sunlight. The sun warmed me up and invited me in. I walked around the room and found hope and serenity within the house's safe walls. The first question I asked was, "Which one is my room?" It was completely empty when I walked in, but I felt safe. I remember sitting on the empty floor for hours or next to the window and staring at the empty walls and thinking to myself, "this is going to be my home."

A couple of months passed by until it was finally time to move in. We all helped each other to move our stuff from the rental home to our own apartment. We had all this new stuff we got

over the years that was hard to move because we built an entirely new life here. The first night we moved in, my mother, sister, and I had coffee in our own kitchen. My mother looked at us and said, "this is it, girls. You finally have a place to call home." She no longer had to scrub all the way through to feel at home.

Although I was still struggling to find my place in the community, friend groups, and high school, it was not until university that I felt motivated to study for a degree. University was the place that lifted my identity the most, it made me proud to feel Syrian-Armenian. I avoided talking about my identity because it brought a lot of baggage with it, but as I grew up, I found peace and love in it. I wrote essays and poems about Syria and kept it alive in my work over the years. Whenever I walked into a room, I wanted to talk about my identity. I tried avoiding talking about or bringing up the war, but it is who I am.

## Chapter 5

### *To the city I love most, but also hurt me the most*

إلى المدينة التي أحببتها كثيراً لكنها اذنتني كثيراً



*The return: July 19, 2019... (7 years and 1 day later)*

I have been living in Yerevan for over nine years. I built a new life, a career for myself, received the education I wanted and made new friends. However, my past was lingering around all along, I did not feel like I belonged anywhere. The talk around town was that the airport opened in Syria and Syrians who lived in Armenia were finally able to visit their homes and come back. Some went and never came back, while others simply had no home to go to. Even

before the airport opened, some went back to Syria through hours of car ride because they could not stand the chance of being away. In all this I learned how someone was only able to breathe comfortably in their birthplace. My parents were one of those people. My sister and I were at that age when we were able to construct new meaning, new community, we were open to change, but it was always hard for the older people. My parents waited for years until it was safe enough to visit back home. When the time came everyone was excited, but I felt oddly distant that month. My sister was fond of the idea, because she was only five when she left Aleppo and does not remember much. My parents were over the moon, because Armenia never felt like home for them. I was anxious. Anxiety was silent, I never saw it coming, yet it was the loudest feeling in my chest.

We decided to go back to Aleppo with our family for the first time through Damascus, because Aleppo airport was still not operating, and it was not safe. Interestingly, the day we had to go back was exactly the same month we left with only one day difference. In Yerevan airport I looked at the screen listing the flight names. I read the word Damascus many times, to tell my brain that I was actually going home.

I woke up feeling sick to my stomach because I knew I was returning to the place I had left untouched for years. It was a closed wound, unhealed and broken, and I was going to open it again. It felt like I was going to face my eleven-year-old self, and I could not look into her eyes because it felt like I had let her down. I destroyed her peace and filled her up with things she did not even want to deal with. As I sat on the plane, I kept questioning what I was doing. For years I wanted to go back home, but now I wanted to jump off the plane and escape the feeling of guilt and grief building up in my chest. The plane took longer than usual, because it



had to fly over the safe territories, when in old times it was a one-hour flight distance between Yerevan and Syria.

Two hours later, I looked out the window to see that the green landscapes of Armenia had changed to burnt yellow grass, destroyed and shattered buildings, and lifeless cities. I knew I was home. As the captain announced our landing, he uttered his first words in Arabic to welcome us to Damascus, and that's when the wound opened. The Damascus airport was the closest I could get to Aleppo airport, but it was lifeless and dark. The aroma of *oud* was still there, but the smell of coffee and the rush of people faded. At some points, I felt nothing, but seeing signs such as "Welcome to Syria" and pictures of the president triggered my memory. As the doors opened to leave the airport, the warm desert heat of Syria warmed up my shaken body, and I was no longer numb. My heart was going to pound out of my chest. I sat in the taxi to start our eight-hour car ride to Aleppo. As the driver turned on the engine, his radio switched on as well. It was [Fairuz](#) playing, and this time it was not my father humming to the lyrics, it was me. Fairuz's album played for eight hours as I watched the sunset and found ourselves getting one step closer to home. For eight hours, my eyes were wide open. I could not believe I was getting one step closer to home. I sometimes got anxious, because I was getting to my eleven year old self, it's like I had left her in that room.

## Chapter 6

### "You made it home, sweetheart"

لقد وصلتني إلى منزلك عزيزتي



We were in front of the house. I was silent. The neighborhood was quiet and empty, dark. I was standing in the same place I was eight years later. I was a different person, I was no longer the same eleven-year-old, but everything else was the same. I broke out of my thoughts when I heard my grandmother bursting into tears and calling my name from our balcony. Without thinking for a second, I rushed into the building, up the stairs, and hugged her. She

kept saying, "You saw this day. You made it home, sweetheart. I am alive to see this day come. Do you remember your home?" I had not realized that I had walked into my childhood home until she said the words out loud. I left everyone and slowly walked my way through the rooms. It was all there, but everything was misplaced over the years. Our kitchen cloth was placed right, the toys in my room went in different places. My grandparents were taking care of our house over the years and my grandmother tried to arrange everything the way it was as much as possible. She noticed how I was looking around the room and could not utter a word and she said, "I tried to make it look as it was, but a lot changed," trying to hold back her tears.

I did not remember where most things went, but it was getting back to me over time. there was this familiar smell, the smell of home. I could not describe the aroma, but it took me back. My room seemed smaller than I imagined. The room where I formulated my hopes and dreams, my fears and secrets shoved in the corners. I opened each drawer and went through my memories, my clothes, which I could no longer fit into. I sat on my bed, looked around the room, and got the closure I had wanted for years. I felt complete, but I could not find my eleven-year-old self. I could no longer find her.

My home still felt like my home but also felt completely distant, a disbelief that I once lived there. Maybe the child I was got lost in all this. Every person is a child at home, but I grew far away from my home and carried a lot of pain. I tried to get into the mind of my eleven-year-old self but failed. Forgive me.

That night, I slept in my bed. I stared at the emptiness of the room and kept repeating to myself "My room! My room!" I felt like for years I tried to get here and feel reassured, now I

was here, in those walls. Everything was small, my desk was squeezing my legs, and my bed was small. No matter how small it was, that night, I curled up in my bed, stared at the stars on the ceiling and finally found my peace.

## Epilogue

What we live through, lives within us. I had to come face-to-face with my past, the days I felt helpless and small. The days I felt like I lost control over everything. Ten years have passed and I am still in search of a place to call home. I have days when I get angry for not letting go of the past, but everything has its timing. Before starting this process, I thought I would have all the answers to my questions, answers to questions I gave myself from the very start. As I start my research with, "this capstone project is dedicated to my eleven-year-old self and the journey she had to go through to get where she is now" (p. 17), I hope I have done her justice. My home is my heart, my loved ones, and my childhood memories.

I want to end with a poem on nostalgia, homesickness, growing up and identity. This poem is inspired by Mahmoud Darwish's poem Identity Card, Passport.

*On the darkest day of my life, I write*

*-Free me of this question.*

*I was only 15 when I applied for my first job. In a city that felt strange and cold.*

*"Maybe this time you will belong," I told my 15-year-old self.*

*I wanted to be a script writer.*

*I was asked to write a love story, so I began... I spent hours at my desk, clenching, sweating, shredding and throwing papers left and right to have the best script.*

*My first script was in my hands, the pages explored the beauty of diversity and finding home. I submitted the script.*

*The next day I received a call... They had done a background check on my ethnicity and I was asked to conceal my identity if I wanted to continue working with the company.*

*I felt sick to my stomach and angry. I was angry at myself and the world around me. I felt  
voiceless.*

*I refused and quit.*

*Now I am 21. The same girl, same history, same question.*

*"Who are you?"*

*in the shadows that  
absorbed my color  
Pressed into the passport  
and my wound was for them like an exhibition in a gallery  
for a tourist who loves collecting pictures*

*At home...  
The birds follow me  
The trees know me  
All the fields of wheat  
All the borders  
All the eyes  
Far away from the airports and passport pages.*

*Ask me again, "Who are you?"  
I will answer, all hearts of all humans and all cities that touched me, is my identity.*

*Free me of this question.*

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