THE RELUCTANT REFUGEE

I was one of the first Syrian refugees to land in Canada in 2014. The settlement process was confusing, prolonged and alienating. How Canada finally became home.

By Danny Ramadan

In September of 2014, I was one of the first Syrian refugees to make it to Canada. Upon my arrival, I became a newcomer. Then, a couple of years later, I became Canadian. It is awkward to call myself a refugee. I used to be one, but I am not anymore. How can I introduce myself, then, in a simple, succinct way? Should I call myself a Syrian Canadian with refugee experience? That's a mouthful. When someone lives a life complicated by civil wars, revolutions, homophobia and borders, is there really a way to simply identify? How do I encompass the years of refuge, diaspora and community-building into one noun? Does a refugee ever stop being a refugee?

I was displaced long before I left Syria. I was a queer man born in Damascus to a conservative Muslim family. I knew my father's religion rejected me, condemning me to a death sentence. Syria's civil laws were more lenient: suspected homosexuals were punished with a mere three years' imprisonment and public shaming in local newspapers. When I came out in my late teens, my parents kicked me out to live in the streets. Long before the city became a war zone, I hid in the nooks and corners of the underground queer community and found solace and companionship there.

During the day, I worked as a journalist, writing under pseudonyms for Western news outlets. I reported on anti-regime protests, sneaking information from under the iron-fenced borders to journalists in Beirut and Cairo. At night, my home was a meeting hub for members of the queer and trans community in Syria. Many of us had nowhere to go other than these little gathering places, where we could be ourselves truthfully and authentically. We needed that secrecy: local journalists and community builders were routinely rounded up by the Syrian regime.

In 2011, the unrest that started as a revolution swiftly became a civil war. We heard the explosions in the distance. We saw the fires. We looked up to the skies and gazed at the jets zooming across the

Ramadan now lives in Vancouver with his husband, Matthew, and their French bulldogs, Freddie and Dolly

Photograph by Jennilee Marigomen

clouds. We shared photos of protests in villages and cities. The backgrounds were familiar to us; the bloody, angry faces were not. The ground shook, as if we all stood on the surface of a volcano ready to erupt. Many Syrians were not ready for this upheaval. I was. As a queer man, I'd grown up with the intensity of both internal and external wars.

A year later, I was arrested by the Mukhabarat, the regime's intelligence agency, at Damascus International Airport. I was held in a dungeon with 30-odd other prisoners without an explanation or an accusation. I was released unceremoniously six weeks later. On my last day, I was offered a choice: either spy on my own people for the regime or face re-arrest. That day, I escaped to Lebanon, becoming a Syrian refugee overnight.

NO ONE AT THE BORDER hands you a manual on how to become a refugee. Over the next few months, I had to figure it out on my own. In Beirut, I found a room to rent in a dilapidated old building, where I had to bathe and wash clothes in seawater that my roommates and I carried up a staircase in buckets. A former colleague at the *Washington Post* offered me a fixer job under the table in the local bureau. Every day, I reported on the civil war in Syria and the lives of other refugees in Lebanon, as if I was just a spectator to the tragedy. At night, I lay awake, wondering what would happen if I was fired or evicted. I feared ending up in a refugee camp tent, like so many other Syrians.

I came to learn that there are several ways one can permanently stop being a refugee. First, and most rarely, your host country can accept you as a citizen. Another option is that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees can resettle you. It runs offices in all the host countries around Syria. But there are over 5.5 million Syrian refugees in the region; in 2022, UNHCR managed to resettle just 22,800 of them. Don't ask a writer to do math, but this seems like a very small number. Another option is private sponsorship. In Canada's program, citizens and permanent residents actively bring in refugees. Forming sponsorship groups, they can apply to the government to sponsor a specific person or family, committing to raise funds and support the newcomers' social integration. Organizations like non-profits and churches often participate in this program, which has settled more than 327,000 refugees in Canada since it was created in the 1970s.

By the early 2010s, anti-refugee sentiments were already buzzing in the Lebanese streets. I knew my days of humble stability in the country were numbered. One afternoon, I registered with UNHCR for resettlement, based on my queer identity. "Homosexuality is a sin," the settlement officer told me. "The people of Lot were lifted then smashed into the ground for this sin." I left the UNHCR offices discouraged.

During my years in Damascus, and in my first months in Lebanon, I had connected online with a Syrian-Canadian man who lived in Vancouver. He followed me on Twitter, and I followed him back because he was handsome. Soon, we passed the flirtation phase and became friends. He followed my journey extensively on social media. When he heard of what happened at UNHCR, he offered to put me in touch with a local organization, Rainbow Refugee Society, to bring me to Canada. The organization privately sponsors queer and trans refugees from across the globe. Soon, a quick phone call took place. A Rainbow Refugee volunteer asked me to fill out a one-page form and promised to get in touch.

Canada was merely a concept to me at that time. My knowledge of what it meant to live in a North American society came from watching sitcoms like *Friends* and *Full House*. I assumed that everyone had a quick wit, lived in massive homes and spent their free time hanging out in rustic-looking cafés. In my years living across the Middle East, I'd befriended many Canadian expats who spoke of tall buildings, cosmopolitan cities and gay bars. YouTube videos of Vancouver focused on its scenic mountains, bustling nightlife and active and diverse communities. My concept of Canada was formed by the slow drizzle of information that made it back to Beirut, filtered through Western lenses.

In October of 2012, I got the call that I'd been chosen for the private sponsorship program and started imagining my future. I was naive—completely unaware of the socio-economic challenges refugees face upon arrival in a new destination. Back in Vancouver, a Rainbow Refugee volunteer planned a dinner party to recruit sponsors for my case. Dozens of gay men were invited. My online friend spoke about me to the crowd while they ate finger food and clinked glasses of wine. He asked for volunteers. A handful of people, all well-meaning, older gay Canadians, signed up. The whole thing happened so hastily I doubted its authenticity. Few of the sponsors attempted to know me as a person. They only knew me for my status: as a refugee.

One sponsor introduced me to his friends as "my refugee"—a term that weighed heavily on my shoulders. I didn't recall signing up for ownership, nor was I still a refugee by then.

The next step was filling out a government application. This was one of the biggest hurdles I faced: the application and supporting documents were over 150 pages. Some of the mandatory questions made no sense, like asking for the postal code for my previous addresses in a country that does not use the postal code system. I was also asked to describe the events that led me to leave my country of origin. *How far back did they want me to*

go? I wondered. Should I describe the day, in a Damascene mosque, that I learned that homosexuality is a sin? Maybe the day I kissed a boy for the first time? Or the palm of my father's hand landing on my face when I came out? Should I narrate the explosions I witnessed personally, or is a general description enough? I wrote down much more about my traumatic childhood and my troubled time in Syria than I care to repeat. Some of the things I documented in that application I haven't shared with another living soul since. My therapist and I joked once that the only people who really know my history are some administrators in Ottawa.

The sponsors in Canada needed to raise at least $15,000 to cover the expenses of my first year in Canada. In Lebanon, that sounded like a lot. In Canada, it was a laughable idea that $15,000 was anywhere near enough to support someone for a whole year. My sponsors set up a fundraising event where some people dressed up in what I can only describe as generalized Arabian getup.

Have you ever been the poster child of a cause before? It's not an empowering feeling. As grateful as I was for all the people raising money for my sponsorship, I often felt small, incapable and worthy of pity. I was a refugee, and refugees have no dignity. We have no agency. We only have others to provide us with care. Otherwise, we are doomed.

A couple of days after the fundraiser, I met with one of my sponsors on Skype. He spoke softly to me, as if speaking to a child, and told me that they were facing challenges raising money for my cause because I'd posted photos of a trip to the beach with a few other Syrian queers—a break from our mundane life. "It's hard to raise funds for you to come to Canada if you looked like you were having fun in Beirut," my sponsor said.

"So, I'm not allowed to have fun here?" I asked bluntly. "No. That's not what I meant," he said, "but image is everything." I changed the privacy settings on my social media.

Six months after first contact, my sponsors had raised the funds and my application was submitted to the Canadian government. We wouldn't hear anything for the next 14 months. During this time, my life was frozen. I lived in constant dread. I had no option other than to wait for approval. Everything was paused: aspirations, dreams, hopes for the future. I met my basic needs. I ate my food and slept on my dusty bed. But I wasn't truly living. Why would I write in Arabic, when no one could read it in my future home? Why would I hang a piece of art on a wall, when I knew I couldn't bring it with me? Why would I meet a new friend or start a loving relationship, when I would have to leave it all behind? Why would I try to build anything there, when I knew it was all temporary? I slept with my phone under my pillow every night, fearing that the embassy would call and I would miss it. I got in the habit of checking if it was working dozens of times every day.

Then, in June of 2014, almost two years to the date of my arrival in Lebanon, the Canadian embassy called—and I missed it. I was in the shower. In that moment, I died and lived again, beating myself up for leaving my phone behind. I called back, but the embassy operator refused to put me through to the visa department. Three days later, they called me again and invited me to an interview. The meeting I had anticipated for almost two years lasted less than seven minutes. I was told that I was approved, handed a medical exam requisition and told that I'd leave the country in three months.

That's it? I thought to myself as I exited the embassy. The doubt was quickly replaced with uncontrollable glee. I danced in the streets of Beirut. A few months later, I said my goodbyes, pushed my bags through the airport doors and flew away to Canada.

HERE, USUALLY, IS WHERE the narrative of refuge ends. The arrival in Canada had been my goal for two years. Never did it cross my mind to think further than that. The urgency to leave overpowered any desire to examine what the future might look like.

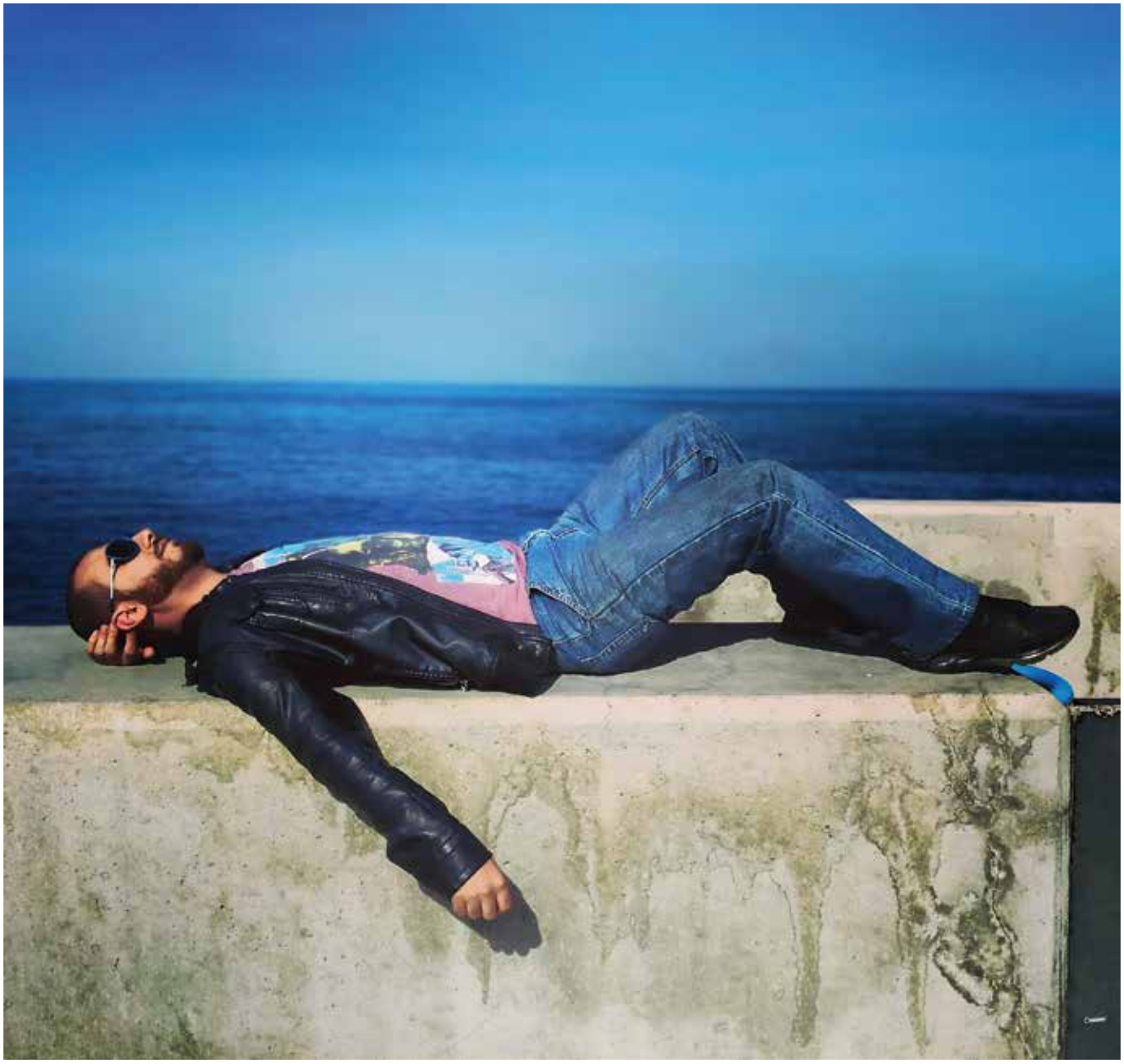
At the airport in Vancouver, I met a nonprofit worker who handed me my documents and walked me through security to the immigration offices. Among the papers I received was a small brochure in Arabic welcoming me to Canada. The eight pages introduced me to Canada with photos of mountains, bustling cities, Pride parades and dancing Indigenous folks in regalia. The pamphlet described a land of diverse backgrounds and mosaic societies. It invited me to find support with local organizations, which it failed to name.

Some of my sponsors were waiting for me outside. I hugged people I'd never met and accepted flowers and coffee. A journalist, eager to interview one of the first Syrians to arrive in Canada, asked me what I was most excited to experience here. "I want to ride a roller coaster," I responded. This childish answer became the title of a viral article about my arrival that appeared on the CBC website. I cringe every time I think of it.

One of my sponsors had found me an apartment on the outskirts of the city, near a highway—a small one-bedroom on the ground floor, filled with donated furniture. Other than a gas station, there were no amenities close by. A sponsor would drive me to the nearest grocery store, too far to reach on foot, and drop me back at home. When my funds arrived, I quickly realized how limited my budget was. Almost instantly, I began searching for a job. I sent dozens of applications every day for weeks, but heard nothing. "Canadian employers look for Canadian education or Canadian experience," one of my sponsors explained. My resumé had neither. During these months of searching, I would leave my home, walk for 20 minutes to the nearest SkyTrain station, then find my way into the city. It felt like an arranged marriage: I was matched with a place I'd never been before and told it was my home. Now, all that was left was for me to fall madly in love.

At first, there was a honeymoon period: the city was attractive, with its glass buildings, wide roads and gay bars. The weed was plentiful and the gaybourhood had a party on every corner. My sponsors walked me to the bank and helped me open an account, took me cellphone shopping, taught me how to figure out the city map.

Then the estrangement hit: I had left behind the homophobia and the years of refuge, but I had also left behind all my friends. I learned how to buy groceries from Costco, but had nowhere I could get my favourite candy from back home.



Ramadan spent nearly two years in limbo in Beirut before his refugee application to Canada was approved

Photograph courtesy of Ramadan

At night, while the city slept, I was awake, typing messages to my friends back home.

One big hurdle I had was driving. Back in the Middle East, transportation was easy: a heavy network of buses and trains connected neighbourhoods and cities. But North America is made for cars, with highways and intersections and gas stations everywhere. With limited resources—and no driver's licence—I couldn't just buy a car. I ended up spending much of my day figuring out transportation, waiting for delayed buses and walking for hours instead.

My sponsors disagreed about my future. Some wanted me to work at Starbucks, others argued I should find a job in journalism and one insisted that I should just relax for six months and learn my way around the city. Some wanted me to go to language school, while others wanted me to seek university-level education. One sponsor even introduced me to his friends as "my refugee"—a term that weighed heavily on my shoulders. I didn't recall signing up for ownership, nor was I still a refugee by then. Chris, the founder of Rainbow Refugee Society, stood by me during a difficult adjustment. When I came to her, tired of the constant pull from the sponsors, she encouraged me to make my own decisions. "Whatever you do, Rainbow Refugee will support you," she said.

One sponsor I stayed close to was David, a retired banker with a sweet smile and self-deprecating sense of humour, who helped me figure out the bus system and took me in for my BC Health Card appointment. After six months of job hunting, I'd landed a position at Qmunity, a non-profit that offers services to queer communities. I wanted to move downtown to be closer

to it. When I told David, he promised to help. Soon, he was walking me around the city, offering me insights on every place. Finally, when I found an apartment I liked, he signed as my guarantor. Then, he offered me a piece of art for my wall: one that I'd admired in his living room. By listening to me, David made me feel valued. By consulting me in decisions about my life, he earned himself my friendship.

Much of my success is due to the opportunities I was offered here in Canada: opportunities that I cherish, that I appreciate. But how do we protect a refugee's independence in a situation where the power is inherently uneven, where the sponsors have all the knowledge about Canada, while the newcomer has none?

IT HAS BEEN 10 YEARS since I arrived in Canada. I now live in a home in Vancouver that I own with Matthew, my husband of eight years. We have two French bulldogs: Freddie, named after Mercury, and Dolly, named after Parton. My sponsor David became a father figure in my life. On my wedding day, he walked me down the aisle.

I am a successful author, with novels, children's books and non-fiction memoirs on the shelves in your local library and bookstores. I will always be grateful to the many teachers, educators and librarians who supported my books and offered me opportunities to read at their schools and teach in their classrooms. To the thousands of people who spent their hard-earned money and their precious hours to read my words.

Since I arrived in Canada, I have been personally involved in sponsoring 28 refugees from my region of the world. Through an annual fundraiser I organize, I've raised over $300,000 for Rainbow Refugee. The event, an annual one-night affair that I plan for months with my husband and friends, offers a space for Canadians to experience an authentic Damascene evening, one full of food, wine and dance, but free of homophobia. The way I hope Syria one day will be. There are Syrian performers, a Middle Eastern belly-dancer and drag queens of colour to entertain the audience. A group of Syrian refugee women cook authentic Syrian food, and the decor replicates a Damascene home.

Refugee-processing time has increased drastically over the past decade. In Lebanon, it takes an average of 35 months—almost three years—to process an application, compared to the 14 months I waited. Not all refugees are processed equally. I've seen applications from some African nations that take over seven years to process. Advocacy also makes a difference. Sponsors with a sympathetic member of Parliament might get their applications processed faster than those without.

Private sponsors in Canada navigate difficult terrain. It's not only about teaching someone how to buy tickets on the SkyTrain. It's also about easing them into a new society, fostering a loving community around a lonely newcomer, and ensuring they respect a refugee's culture, religion, racial background, orientation and tradition. Sponsors should complete some kind of training to ensure they're ready for this responsibility. I wish my sponsors had been taught to ask more questions, rather than make decisions on my behalf. That they'd been taught how to see the totality of my identity, rather than my refugee status. I would love to see a more transparent government process, one where the refugee can receive a clear schedule of how the application will be handled, a specific deadline for its approval or denial and updates on its status.

Sponsorship is not only about teaching someone how to buy tickets on the SkyTrain. It's also about integrating them into a new society.

I often worry how I will be perceived when I criticize the system. Refugees are welcomed in Canada, as long as they are grateful. What's not to be grateful about? I am in a safe, prosperous country with a future, full of aspirations and dreams and success and community. Still, as a person who went through the refugee experience, I am allowed to also be critical. Critical of the country that I call home and the system that got me here, even as I proudly carry my Canadian passport. I wholeheartedly believe that wanting Canada to do better is part of my duty as a Canadian.

Currently, along with my husband and a few friends, I am the proud sponsor of an LGBTQ+ man from the Middle East. Let's call him Josh. He contacted Rainbow Refugee in 2020 looking for sponsors. We were put in touch with him two years ago. I reached out to a transmasculine friend of mine and asked them to be part of the group to ensure that Josh had someone with a similar experience. In our first meeting with this man, we gathered on Zoom. Each of us offered a quick introduction of themselves, and explained, in detail, what roles we hoped to play in his life. During his application process, we went over the requirements with him, walked him through the paperwork and supported him through the harder questions. We started a group chat with Josh, checking in on him periodically, answering his questions, he'd have friends when he arrived. His interview took place in early May.

I think there will always be a power dynamic in the system. As the sponsor, I know everything there is to know about Canada, while Josh knows very little. My friends and I are trying our best to work within these conditions. We are ready to welcome him with curiosity: to ask questions, to investigate his needs and wants, and to find out the best way we can support him. I hope he'll have an easier time of it than I did. ■

DANNY RAMADAN'S latest book is *Crooked Teeth: A Queer Syrian Refugee Memoir.*