

For Amir

By Julie Meier

The sky is a pure liquid blue. When Rima first arrived, she worried that perhaps one day it would all come pouring down - the air being too thin in this northern country to hold the insubstantial sky in its rightful place. She wonders how much longer it will take before she is accustomed to this wide expanse above her and often finds herself longing for the sky of her homeland, which always held her reliably in its warm embrace.

She pushes the stroller with care through snowy streets, stopping periodically to tuck Amir's blanket tightly under his chin and to jostle snow loose from the small wheels. As she trudges towards the bus stop, she reflects on the day when she and Nazif received the letter stating where their new home was to be: Saskatoon. She practiced saying it a hundred times or more - the unfamiliar sibilant sounds whistling through her teeth like the winter winds playing a tune in the frozen bones of the poplar trees.

"I worry about you, my sweet." Her mother's voice feels warm against Rima's ear, like the air that used to lay heavily around their shoulders as she sat on her mother's lap as a child.

She speaks to her mother on the telephone once per week, and every week when it is time to say goodbye Rima feels that the world has expanded until she is three times farther from Syria than when their conversation began.

"You needn't worry, mother." Rima speaks with false bravado.

They have come here for Amir - to build a life where he can play without fear and learn without censorship - and her mother understands. But, although she is happy her grandson has been given

these opportunities, she worries about the harsh climate and has nightmares about the small family frozen on the ground like three stone statues.

As mother and daughter share the events of their week, Rima appreciates the way words in her native tongue dripping off their lips like honey, unlike her attempts at English in which the words come out in a stilted pattern, sticking to her mouth like paste.

Rima boards a bus, watching attentively for the correct stop. In Saskatoon, the buildings stand tall against the icy blue skies and the bus does not halt at military checkpoints or reroute around streets which have been reduced to rubble overnight. She exits at their stop and walks into the large grocery store. She still marvels at each aisle, taking far longer than needed to select her staple ingredients. She moves around the store, admiring the abundance - touching plump oranges and perfectly round grapes - until Amir, usually content, begins to gnaw his fist and fuss in his seat, and she is forced to move away from the bountiful treasures and pay for her meager supplies.

She keeps her head low at the check-out counter - still shy to interact in English - as the cashier, a tattoo of a sunflower peering out over her exposed left shoulder, hums to herself.

“What a beautiful little boy,” the cashier exclaims, with a smile and wink towards Amir.

“Thank you,” Rima responds politely, her head dipping lower as she self-consciously worries about whether she needs to say more.

“Aren’t you just a little muffin!” The woman speaks in a sing-song voice to the small boy, who responds by blowing spit-ridden bubbles in her direction.

Rima thanks her again and hastily leaves the store. This language is a constant puzzle with no logical solution. It was her understanding that a muffin was a small cake people eat as a mid-

morning snack with their coffee, not the description of a child. She files the word away under the growing list of items which baffle her about her new home.

As they return, she realizes that she now thinks of this place as home - this small house where she rocks her baby to sleep, and whispers stories of her ancestors into his tiny seashell ears and creates grand tales of what his future may hold.

Rima and Nazif stop in the doorway of their son's room before retiring to their bed that night and watch him sleep, one arm flung above his downy head. The trees line up in tidy rows on their quiet street and a snowman stands at attention in a yard two houses down. His carrot nose is a punctuation mark of color in this otherwise monochromatic landscape. No air raid sirens or machine gun reports mar the peaceful night, only the scraping of a snowplow as it clears the streets and the subdued noise of an airplane passing overhead.

In the morning, Rima will take Amir to play with other children at their community center and she will try her best to fit in, speaking to the other Canadian mothers about diaper rash and potty training and organic baby food. And Nasif will travel across the city to a job which allows him to provide for his family.

Together they are creating a path for Amir which will bring him light and joy, here in this northern land where his future waits - as big as the wide-open prairie skies.