

RESETTLED

By Ian Parker

In the office of a refugee-resettlement nonprofit in New Haven, Connecticut, last week, a volunteer showed a colleague her wedding photographs, on a laptop. A Syrian man, in his early forties, wearing a leather jacket and a mustache, joined them; the volunteer laughed, and switched to Arabic. The man, who used to own a takeout grilled-meat shop in a now ruined and emptied neighborhood of Homs, smiled at a photograph of Central Park in driving rain.

He had been in the United States for ten weeks, and although he spoke only a few words of English, and although his classes in cultural orientation had not introduced him to the notion of Donald Trump, he was conscious of the fact that, in the days since the terrorist attacks in Paris, the United States had discovered an appetite for unwelcoming rhetoric about people like him. Thirty-one governors had declared their states unwilling to accept more Syrian refugees; the House of Representatives had passed a bill calling for increased security checks; and the owner of an air-conditioning firm in Danbury, an hour away, had begun an online petition, addressed to Dannel Malloy, Connecticut's still welcoming governor, decorated with two photographs— young blond children; a phalanx of armed ISIS fighters—and the caption “Mommy! Daddy! Our new neighbors are moving in!” Against this backdrop, but primarily because he feared Syrian-government reprisals against relatives still in his home country, the refugee wanted to be known only by his first initial, M.

At the office of IRIS—Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services—M. had picked up a bag of donated winter coats; he also accepted, with a moment’s awkwardness, a bundle of Walmart gift cards. Heba Gowayed, the volunteer—an Egyptian-American who is researching refugee resettlement for a Ph.D. at Princeton—drove him home. M. talked about the early days of the Syrian revolution, in 2011, when he turned on Al Jazeera, tried to explain the events to his children, and wondered if an odd smell in the air came from chemical weapons.

His new home is a second-floor apartment on a quiet street east of the Yale campus. Gowayed hugged M.’s wife. They were joined by three children: a fifteen-year-old boy with a firm handshake, the suggestion of a mustache, and a tendency to blush; a thirteen-year-old girl, in a blue hijab, who said she had ambitions to become a nutritionist; and a girl aged seven, who, according to her parents, cried every day before and after school, defeated by the language. She sat forward on the sofa, looking through binoculars made by looped fingers, and at one point asked her parents if they’d been kidding when they promised her a laptop if she persevered at school. They had been. M. has not yet found a job, and IRIS will stop contributing to his rent before the end of the year.

In 2011, Homs became a battleground. In the spring of the following year, the family—Sunni Muslims—reached Amman, in Jordan, and registered as refugees. There then began a screening process that included two interviews with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and three with the International Organization for Migration. The family didn’t request a destination. But, for reasons unknown to them, the U.N.H.C.R. asked if they would like to be considered for settlement in the United States. (Between 2012 and September of this year, the U.S. accepted fewer than two thousand Syrian refugees; Germany took ninety thousand.)

M. replied, “Of course!” His wife had a moment’s unease about American acceptance of the hijab. Their son was giddy. “It’s the *strongest* citizenship,” he recalled thinking. His mother added, “The world’s armies move for Americans.” (The son has hopes of becoming an F.B.I. agent; the most memorable sight on a recent school trip to New York was a Batmobile in a museum exhibit.) He quoted a family song: “It was ‘Let’s go to America, where they’ll mend our broken hearts.’ ” He laughed, and—under the

influence of family pride, and embarrassment about family goofiness—reddened. “That was the only line.”

M. and his family were repeatedly fingerprinted. In interviews, they were asked the same biographical questions again and again. The boy summarized the process in two questions: “Do you want to go to America?” “Did you engage in terrorist activities?” If this was burdensome, it was not offensive, at least seen from the perspective of eventual success: “I don’t want the people who destroyed Syria to come to America,” M. said. “I’m trying to *escape* terrorism.” In February, in Amman, the family was interviewed by an agent from the Department of Homeland Security, who spoke to them from behind glass.

The family reached the United States on September 17th. After the Paris attacks, M. said, “I’m more anxious than before, when my wife and daughter go out on the street.” But he made the case that talk of making the resettlement of Syrian Muslims to the U.S. harder was merely “a political conversation,” not the discovery of national heartlessness. He was more keen to contemplate the behavior of a teacher at his older daughter’s school, who, on her first alarming day in class, had said how pleased he was to see a hijab in the room, and noted that it gave her great character. ♦

Ian Parker contributed his first piece to The New Yorker in 1994 and became a staff writer in 2000.

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