




# Refugee

FICTION  
Alan Gratz  
2017




## Introduction

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While he initially envisioned *Refugee* as three separate narratives, a life-changing trip to Florida convinced author Alan Gratz (b. 1972) to unite the three narratives together into one epic novel. *Refugee*'s parallel narratives are set in different times but united by common threads throughout, suggesting that cultures and personalities are not always as dissimilar as they may appear. In this excerpt, Mahmoud, a Syrian boy, struggles to cope with the dramatic changes happening all around him.

“Mahmoud Bishara was invisible, and that’s exactly how he wanted it. Being invisible was how he survived.”

## NOTES

 Skill: Language, Style, and Audience

The author uses the word *you*. It feels like the narrator is speaking directly to me, and it pulls me into the story to see Mahmoud. The author also uses words and phrases to describe the dangerous situation that Mahmoud is in daily.

## MAHMOUD

## ALEPPO, SYRIA—2015

- 1 Mahmoud Bishara was invisible, and that’s exactly how he wanted it. Being invisible was how he survived.
- 2 He wasn’t literally invisible. If you really looked at Mahmoud, got a glimpse under the hoodie he kept pulled down over his face, you would see a twelve-year-old boy with a long, strong nose, thick black eyebrows, and short-cropped black hair. He was stocky, his shoulders wide and muscular despite the food shortages. But Mahmoud did everything he could to hide his size and his face, to stay under the radar. Random death from a fighter jet’s missile or a soldier’s rocket launcher might come at any moment, when you least expected it. To walk around getting noticed by the Syrian army or the rebels fighting them was just inviting trouble.
- 3 Mahmoud sat in the middle row of desks in his classroom, where the teacher wouldn’t call on him. The desks were wide enough for three students at each, and Mahmoud sat between two other boys named Ahmed and Nedhal.
- 4 Ahmed and Nedhal weren’t his friends. Mahmoud didn’t have any friends.
- 5 It was easier to stay invisible that way.
- 6 One of the teachers walked up and down the hall ringing a handbell, and Mahmoud collected his backpack and went to find his little brother, Waleed.
- 7 Waleed was ten years old and two grades below Mahmoud in school. He too wore his black hair cropped short, but he looked more like their mother, with narrower shoulders, thinner eyebrows, a flatter nose, and bigger ears. His teeth looked too big for his head, and when he smiled he looked like a cartoon squirrel. Not that Waleed smiled much anymore. Mahmoud couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his brother laugh, or cry, or show any emotion whatsoever.

## NOTES

The war had made Mahmoud nervous. Twitchy. **Paranoid**. It had made his little brother a robot.

Even though their apartment wasn’t far away, Mahmoud led Waleed on a different route home every day. Sometimes it was the back alleys; there could be fighters in the streets, who were always targets for the opposition. Bombed-out buildings were good too. Mahmoud and Waleed could disappear among the heaps of twisted metal and broken cement, and there were no walls to fall on them if an artillery shell went whizzing overhead. If a plane dropped a barrel bomb, though, you needed walls. Barrel bombs were filled with nails and scrap metal, and if you didn’t have a wall to duck behind you’d be shredded to pieces.

It hadn’t always been this way. Just four years ago, their home city of Aleppo had been the biggest, brightest, most modern city in Syria. A crown jewel of the Middle East. Mahmoud remembered neon malls, glittering skyscrapers, soccer stadiums, movie theaters, museums. Aleppo had history too—a long history. The Old City, at the heart of Aleppo, was built in the 12th century, and people had lived in the area as early as 8,000 years ago. Aleppo had been an amazing city to grow up in.

Until 2011, when the Arab Spring came to Syria.

They didn’t call it that then. Nobody knew a wave of **revolutions** would sweep through the Middle East, toppling governments and overthrowing dictators and starting civil wars. All they knew from images on TV and posts on Facebook and Twitter was that people in Tunisia and Libya and Yemen were rioting in the streets, and as each country stood up and said “Enough!” so did the next one, and the next one, until at last the Arab Spring came to Syria.

But Syrians knew protesting in the streets was dangerous. Syria was ruled by Bashar al-Assad, who had twice been “elected” president when no one was allowed to run against him. Assad made people who didn’t like him disappear. Forever. Everyone was afraid of what he would do if the Arab Spring swept through Syria. There was an old Arabic proverb that said, “Close the door that brings the wind and relax,” and that’s exactly what they did; while the rest of the Middle East was rioting, Syrians stayed inside and locked their doors and waited to see what would happen.

But they hadn’t closed the door tight enough. A man in Damascus, the capital of Syria, was imprisoned for speaking out against Assad. Some kids in Daraa, a city in southern Syria, were arrested and abused by the police for writing anti-Assad slogans on walls. And then the whole country seemed to go crazy all at once. Tens of thousands of people poured into the streets, demanding the release of political prisoners and more freedom for everyone. Within a



month, Assad had turned his tanks and soldiers and bombers on the protestors—on his own *people*—and ever since then, all Mahmoud and Waleed and anyone else in Syria had known was war.

- 15 Mahmoud and Waleed turned down a different rubble-strewn alley than the day before and stopped dead. Just ahead of them, two boys had another boy up against what was left of a wall, about to take the bag of bread he carried.
- 16 Mahmoud pulled Waleed behind a burned-out car, his heart racing. **Incidents** like this were common in Aleppo lately. It was getting harder and harder to get food in the city. But for Mahmoud, the scene brought back memories of another time, just after the war had begun.
- 17 Mahmoud had been going to meet his best friend, Khalid. Down a side street just like this one, Mahmoud found Khalid getting beaten up by two older boys. Khalid was a Shia Muslim<sup>1</sup> in a country of mostly Sunni Muslims<sup>2</sup>. Khalid was clever. Smart. Always quick to raise his hand in class, and always with the right answer. He and Mahmoud had known each other for years, and even though Mahmoud was Sunni and Khalid was Shia, that had never mattered to them. They liked to spend their afternoons and weekends reading comic books and watching superhero movies and playing video games.
- 18 But right then, Khalid had been curled into a ball on the ground, his hands around his head while the older boys kicked him.
- 19 “Not so smart now, are you, pig?” one of them had said.
- 20 “Shia should know their place! This is Syria, not Iran!”
- 21 Mahmoud had **bristled**. The differences between Sunnis and Shiites was an excuse. These boys had just wanted to beat someone up.
- 22 With a battle cry that would have made Wolverine proud, Mahmoud had launched himself at Khalid’s attackers.
- 23 And he had been beaten up as badly as Khalid.
- 24 From that day forward, Mahmoud and Khalid were marked. The two older boys became Mahmoud’s and Khalid’s own personal bullies, delivering repeated beatdowns between classes and after school.

1. **Shia** a minority branch of Islam which holds that the Islamic prophet Muhammad designated Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor—in contrast with the Sunni belief that Muhammad did not appoint a successor
2. **Sunni** the largest denomination of Islam, Sunni Muslims elected Muhammad’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr, as the first caliph, believing that the prophet did not appoint a direct successor



25 That’s when Mahmoud and Khalid had learned how valuable it was to be invisible. Mahmoud stayed in the classroom all day, never going to the bathroom or the playground. Khalid never answered another question in class, not even when the teacher called on him directly. If the bullies didn’t notice you, they didn’t hit you. That’s when Mahmoud had realized that together, he and Khalid were bigger targets; alone, it was easier to be invisible. It was nothing they ever said to each other, just something they each came to understand, and within a year they had drifted apart, not even speaking to each other as they passed in the hall.

Excerpted from *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, published by Scholastic Press.