

Ayat Alkhatib

Professor: Greg Graham

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# Finding Home

“Is this where we’re going to live?” I asked my mom before entering the apartment.

“Yes, we’re going to live here,” she said.

If I said I was excited, I would be lying. In fact, I was in tears walking into an apartment this small compared to the house I had in my home country. Leaving a three-story house to live in an apartment the size of our front yard, if not smaller, was heartbreaking. Moving from the Middle East to the United States was a huge cultural change. Life began to shift, going from a home where I had my own personal space to one where privacy was difficult to find.

My house in the Middle East had ten bedrooms, five bathrooms, nine living rooms, and three kitchens. It also had a huge front yard and backyard. The house was built in the 1980s. My grandpa was a well-known man in town and had many children. It was a family home where my uncles, cousins, and grandparents all lived together. It was a generational house, and it will forever be my favorite place. Each room in that house holds a memory. I lived there for eleven years. My dad constantly renovated parts of it, such as the kitchen or bedrooms. At one point, three families were living in the house. It was hectic but absolutely worth it because we created the best memories together.

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Our house was divided into three floors, and each floor practically served as its own home. Every family had their own space, but we still used the whole house together. Some floors had better accommodations than others, which is why we all shared the house as one big family.

My room had the most beautiful smell, and the bed was incredibly comfortable. I had plenty of space to play. The walls were painted light green, and I had a desk and a huge closet. One of the closets was built into the wall, and I used it for shoe storage but also as my secret hiding place. Whenever my dad's mother's side of the family came over, I would hide there because they loved to tease me. Fun fact: about ten people came into my room one night, and no one ever noticed I was hiding there. My mom even thought I went to my aunt's house. That is why I called the closet my cave, because no one ever bothered to look inside.

The second-best place in the house was the kitchen. It was spacious, with warm brownish tones. One day, my dad decided to surprise my mom by remodeling it. That day was unforgettable. I came home from school, ran to the kitchen for a snack, and saw the entire place turned upside down. The workers looked at me and said, "Oh, hi, Ayat." One of them often worked with my dad, so seeing him did not surprise me, but seeing the kitchen in chaos did.

I ran to find my dad and yelled, "WHAT DID YOU DO?" He laughed and said, "It's an early gift for your mother's birthday." "I'm hungry! How are we supposed to cook or clean?" I said, exhausted from school and starving after skipping breakfast and lunch. "We'll use the other kitchen upstairs," he replied.

When the renovation was finished, the kitchen looked stunning, so aesthetically pleasing and perfectly fitting for our home. The kitchen held many memories, too. My cousins and I spent countless hours there doing random things, like making drinks, sandwiches, baking, or even making slime. Even though our house had three kitchens, the one on the first floor was the heart of the home. It was where everyone gathered, talking, cooking, laughing, and sharing life.

At night, my cousins, neighbors, and I would stay up late playing in the front yard. We laughed endlessly, running around and enjoying childhood while our families watched us, letting us burn off energy before going inside. I would ride my bike around the house or help my mom hang laundry on the clothesline. We never had a dryer; we let the sun dry our clothes, which made them feel fresher, and we never had to worry about shrinking.

Moving into an apartment was a very different experience. Three bedrooms barely big enough to fit six people, a living room that could only hold three, and a kitchen too small for even one person. I fell into depression. I was thirteen, the age when you start needing privacy, but it was impossible to find. I remember going outside in 100-degree weather just to be alone, but I would end up with a horrible headache after only five minutes. I missed home. I missed being able to run around freely. I missed kids being kids. When I got here, I noticed no one played outside. The loneliness and sadness I felt can't be fully understood. I missed my grandparents' house, the one they built for their children and grandchildren, and I still haven't gotten the chance to go back and visit.

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Now, when I say “I miss home,” I don’t mean the apartment here in the United States. I mean my eleven beautiful years in the Middle East, where my house had a warm heart that made me never want to leave.