As his ship passed by a lonely island, Odysseus heard beautiful voices singing a haunting melody. It was a melody that could lure even the most seasoned sailors to wreck their ships on the rocky shores, trapping them forever. Odysseus was warned about the dangers of the beautiful part-bird part-human Sirens and their magical song, but he was curious. Not wanting to be tempted away from his ship, he ordered his men to plug their ears with wax and tie him to the ship. The song pulled at Odysseus’s heartstrings, and he fought to free himself. He begged his men to untie him, but they stayed true to their word and kept him from losing himself to the Siren’s song. His run-in with the Sirens was only one of many trials that the legendary Odysseus faced during his 10-year journey home. Pitted against gods, monsters, and men, the one thing that kept him going through temptation and danger was nostalgia for home and family. Nostalgia, or the longing for the past, is part of the human condition. It was first observed in melancholy Swiss soldiers who were fighting far from home. A medical student named Johannes Hofer saw that these homesick soldiers suffered from heart palpitations, loss of appetite, and anxiety. This condition was often fatal, and the only cure was being sent home. Hofer called it Nostalgia, a combination of the word “Nostos” (Greek for “homecoming”) with “Algos” (Greek for “pain”). In the past, nostalgia was considered a disease, but today we think of nostalgia much differently. Nostalgia is no longer merely homesickness. For most people, nostalgia is a mixture of pleasant memories and a sense of loss. Most people feel this bittersweet longing for the past at least once a week. And nearly half experience it three or four times a week. Psychology professor, Dr. Constantine Sedikides says that nostalgia counteracts loneliness, boredom, and anxiety. That makes sense if you think about it. Nostalgic memories are often positive ones of friends and family. These memories give people a sense of belonging. And anxiety decreases when a person has more optimism and faith, which nostalgia has also been shown to provide. While too much nostalgia can lead to depression, in moderation, nostalgia does seem beneficial. Perhaps most mysterious of all, nostalgia has been shown to make people feel physically warmer. Researchers in the Netherlands and China have done experiments where participants reported feeling warmer after listening to nostalgic music. So, the next time you are feeling cold or lonely, break out those CDs, cassettes or records from high school. It just might do you good.

Twelve-year-old Georgi had been sleeping for nearly a year. He had lost consciousness shortly after his family found out they would be kicked out of Sweden. Georgi and his family are refugees. Seven years before, they escaped religious persecution in their home country. They had made a new home in Sweden. Although Sweden is one of Europe’s most welcoming countries for refugees, it has become stricter. When the official-looking letter arrived from the government, Georgi’s parents couldn’t read Swedish, so Georgi read it out loud to his entire family. The letter said that the family would be deported. That’s when things took a turn for the worse. Georgi dropped the letter on the floor and went to bed. He would remain in a mysterious deep sleep for nearly a year. His family tried everything to wake him. And his friends and teacher visited him daily and wrote him letters. Nothing worked. Georgi wasn’t alone, and he wasn’t faking it. He was wasting away. Like many other refugee children facing deportation, a feeding tube was inserted down his throat to keep him alive. In Sweden, in the early 2000s, many children whose families were being deported began to fall into a deep sleep. By 2005, more than 400 children were affected, remaining in bed, sometimes for years. Since then, many more have suffered, including Georgi. Georgi’s doctor said, “I think it is a form of protection, this coma they are in…They are like Snow White. They just fall away from the world.” When the government heard about Georgi’s condition from his doctor, they allowed the family to stay put in Sweden. Within two weeks of hearing the good news, Georgi began to wake up. Though his recovery was arduous, he slowly learned to open his eyes, walk and talk. Within a few months, he was strong enough to start school again. Georgi says he was completely unaware of the outside world during his months in bed. He describes feeling as if he were in a glass box deep in the ocean. He said he had to remain still and silent or the glass would break causing the water to rush in and kill him. He says, “Now I understand that it wasn’t real at all. But, at that time, it was very difficult, because every move could kill you. I was living there.” Doctors remain baffled by the hundreds of sleeping refugee children that have only been found in Sweden. So far, the only theory is that the children are so afraid to return to their home country, and they feel so helpless, that they give up hope. Basically, they lose the will to live. And the only cure is being allowed to stay.