

IMMIGRATING TO CANADA
A Personal Story



Hamid S. Atiyyah, Ph.D.

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Introduction

On a scale of 2 to 10 on the Sleep Satisfaction Scale, how much do you think Canada would score? You will not find this scale on the internet because I made it up. The base score is two rather than zero because even a person placed in the stocks may get two points worth of sleep or stupor in one night. The scale measures the hours and quality of sleep on an average night. A score of ten is the maximum but an eight or a seven is my goal. If national scores on this scale were aggregated and made public, Canada would surely be ahead of Somalia, Afghanistan and my native country Iraq. A higher score than the US would be another consolation if Canada's national hockey team loses to the Americans again.

My wife is a life-long seeker of the perfect pillow and after few bad nights, she heads to the mall to buy another pillow. Since arriving in Canada, she must have used and discarded tens of pillows. Pillows are admittedly important but other reasons keep me awake at night. A friendly cashier at a supermarket blames it on her 'cluttered' head. My mind was cluttered before immigrating to Canada and it became even more cluttered with responsibilities and worries here. Since my sleep and my experience of Canadian life are closely related, it would be premature and meaningless to reveal my score on the Sleep Satisfaction Scale before the end of this book.

Being Canadian has undeniable advantages, and foremost of these is safety and security from political harassment and persecution. Going back to Iraq during the reign of the tyrant Saddam Hussain would have risked incarceration in the terrifying 'palace of the end' prison. It was originally built as a palace for the Iraqi royal family executed in the 1958 military coup d'état before it became a prison for dissenters. After the fall of Saddam, this was replaced by the infamous US-run Abu Ghraib jail. A number of my relatives were abducted for ransom, injured, or killed after the American invasion and its aftermath of carnage and chaos. Canada is certainly a safe haven for someone who lived most of his adult life in fear of being the next name on the

Iraqi secret police's wanted list. Nevertheless, it is difficult to forget that the Canadian Maher Arar may have felt the same false sense of security before he was delivered to his torturers.

There were also many disappointments in my experience of Canadian life and in time these piled up and composted into utter bitterness. The Arab adage says that what drives one to a bitter place must be an even more bitter situation. This logic, however, does not justify the less bitter life in Canada which I suffered for more than two decades.

Let me be the first to admit my failure as an immigrant. Others may have been more fortunate, better prepared or more skilled in dealing with the challenges facing them and achieving what they came here for. Regrettably, I am not one of them. Some of the responsibility for this failure falls on me but most of it, in my judgment, rests with forces in the Canadian institutions and society. This book tells the story of my arrival at this sad conclusion a short time after arriving here.

Like most immigrants, I did not come to this country hoping to be fed, clothed and housed by the government but at the same time, I did not expect to be treated as a second-class human being whose previous existence and all his knowledge and experience - except his financial assets- are of little or no value to Canada. My qualifications, experience and motivation are more than average by my standards. If my talents, skills and attitudes which helped me to survive elsewhere are unsuitable or insufficient for success here then Canadian authorities should not have approved my immigration application. No one alerted me to the dire possibility of failure before committing much of my efforts, limited resources and hopes into making a decent living and a future for my family here. Instead, Canadian officials fed me false promises raising my hopes and expectations unrealistically and my naivety or desperation led me to believe them.

Adapting to a new country is a stressful experience for most immigrants but it should not be traumatic. All immigrants come here with great hopes, expectations and the determination to succeed but some of them like me are overwhelmed by the many challenges facing them in the first few years after arrival. They

are left to rely on their own meager resources or scrounge for assistance and advice from others, mainly helpless immigrants like them. In spite of all the difficulties I did not give up during the first months or year, pack up my belongings and go back like many immigrants do—one in five according to one source. I did try repeatedly and persistently to overcome the obstacles facing me in this country in order to transform my life and those of members of my family to the better. Unfortunately, all my efforts came to naught and persistent failures and disappointment exhausted my resources and patience.

I am hopeful that this book will give voice to silent new immigrants who are struggling to survive here. Most of them are probably unwilling to share their experiences and innermost mixed feelings except with members of their families and close friends. They are the ones who will always answer in the positive the inane question put to them by some Canadians -mainly of European origin: ‘How do you find living here?’ They either do this to save face or out of fear of the repercussions, real or imagined, of total honesty.

Though I hate to see other immigrants repeating my painful experience I did not write this book primarily for their sake nor for the benefit of Canadian immigration institutions which fed me false promises and offered me no help. Before these institutions can benefit from my experience and become more sensitive and responsive to immigrants’ needs, they need first to rethink their perspectives. My main reason behind writing this book is to get back at the liars, racists, scammers, murderers and other selfish and uncaring people who made my life here bitter. My satisfaction with this book would be complete if it provokes the indignation of readers at the forces behind the problems and difficulties facing me and other new immigrants. The problems and anguishes of new immigrants certainly deserve the attention of all caring Canadians who must also become more involved in helping to solve them.

Finally, I did not write this book to amuse Canadian readers or win their sympathy. If its title shocks them, then they should brace themselves for more of the same. Let them be forewarned that

much of its contents are disturbing. I care less if they will resent me for being completely honest in expressing my grievances or for being ungrateful to this country and less than totally appreciative of its positive qualities. Given this lingering discontent, is it possible for me to be completely objective in representing and evaluating my experience as a new immigrant? What matters most in my opinion is that my grievances are legitimate and my sentiments are genuine. Finally, the stories and opinions included here are mine alone. My experience is not unique, and many immigrants may have encountered similar difficulties and suffered more or less the same consequences. However, no claim is made here that my experience and conclusions are representative of those of recent immigrants.

I. Oh Oh Canada!

In 1996, we became landed immigrants. The date was much later than planned and hoped for, more than ten years late to be exact. My attempts to immigrate to Canada began in 1984 and by 1996, the time, circumstances and the people were not the same and perhaps most importantly I was a different person. Although the bygone years added to my experience, improved my finances, and hopefully made me wiser I was by then past the prime of my life and full of apprehension of what lay in store for me in a foreign and distant country. Some of my worst fears did come true and surviving them took a heavy toll on my health and peace of mind.

The first few years after our arrival in Canada were certainly the most critical and the most difficult times. However, the beginning of my story goes back to an earlier time, many years before arriving here and no story is complete without a beginning.

My native country is Iraq, the nation of Sinbad–Sindabad in Arabic—the famed fictitious sea traveler. Unlike him, I am not an adventurer and never learned how to swim. The river was only few steps away from our front door but my overprotective mother told me so many terrifying tales of mothers grieving over their reckless children devoured by river ghouls or swept under water by strong river currents that I eventually developed a pathological fear of the river and all large bodies of water.

Two significant women in my life, my mother and wife, are not of the same mind on the subject of traveling. My mother disapproved of traveling except for pilgrimage to holy places. Travel was hazardous in her time, and she wanted her children under the safety of her wings all the time. To engrave on my young impressionable mind the dangers of traveling, she told me numerous stories of strong men drowning after their canoes capsized or women falling off a bucking donkey and breaking their necks and children being trampled to death by rogue camels. Moreover, there was always the risk of getting your throat slit by merciless highway bandits. She tried her best to dissuade her

children from leaving her side, probably out of fear of abandonment, and her most potent means was telling stories about the perils of traveling and she knew how to tell them.

I never suspected that the lesson behind one of my mother's fairy tales was to warn us of the sinister dangers of straying from home until I was old enough to travel on my own. The story is about a discontented young man who left his parents and kin in search of a better life elsewhere. He finally settled down in a city officially known as 'where none died or became hungry'. Who could not like a city with such a name, especially someone who often went to bed hungry? True to its name, the city was generous to its newcomer and for the first time in his life he had a steady job and a decent income, ate his fill, and made friends easily. Very soon after his arrival, he was sporting a potbelly, previously a sign of wealth and prestige reserved for landowners and moneylenders. The city people went out of their way to make him welcome. One day, his neighbour fell ill and being a neighbourly person he went to visit him. The man was seriously ill and dying. There he learned from his neighbour a terrifying secret about the city. They ate people whom they thought were on the verge of death. They were occasional cannibals of a sort. This explained the name of the city: 'none died', by natural causes that is, because they were euthanized and consumed before that. There was no escape from the fortified and guarded city, and the young man who had abandoned his mother lived the rest of his life in fear of falling ill and ending on the dinner table of his neighbours.

I left my country only after my mother died. My wife who liked to travel was not happy because we traveled to places which she disliked. If my mother could hear me now I can assure her there are food banks in Canada to keep me from starving and they do not eat dying people here but soon after arrival my spirit was consumed.

If only the immigration consultant was truthful

Contracting the services of an immigration consultant to secure immigration visas for my family and myself seemed to be the best

policy. Actually, my in-laws chose this particular consultant. I was living in exile in Syria and had no access to information on Canadian immigration consultants or lawyers. Their choice was unfortunate in view of my experience with this consultant that goes back to the mid-1980. At that time, I was working in Saudi Arabia and became seriously interested in immigrating to Canada. Obtaining a passport other than my Iraqi one was made necessary by my imminent stateless status; the Iraqi authorities had earlier asked the Saudi government to expel me. During a visit to the Iraqi Embassy in Riyadh to register the birth of my son, the Iraqi consular official offered me a soda can. My suspicion kept me from accepting his hospitality because it was rumored then that Iraqi dissidents were poisoned with Thallium mixed with tea or drink presented to them at Iraqi embassies. He then informed me that they were instructed by their superiors in Baghdad to seize my passport at the first opportunity. Since my visit was not for the sake of renewing my passport, he returned my passport but warned me that next time he would have no choice but to confiscate it. My passport was going to expire in two years and waiting until the last minute in the hope of a change of regime would have been unwise, if not extremely foolish.

Canada was at the top of my list of countries for alternative passports. My brother who was facing a similar problem had given me the address of the immigration office at the Canadian embassy in Cairo. According to him, it was the only office providing immigrant services to Middle Eastern Arabs then. Such services were evidently unavailable at the Embassy in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, my letter to the Canadian Embassy in Cairo indicating my interest in immigrating to Canada was unanswered.

At that time, those interested in applying for immigration had to rely on advice and assistance either from an embassy, someone who had recently immigrated or knew about immigration requirements and procedures or an immigration consultant or lawyer. Since the nearest embassy did not offer such services and none of my friends or acquaintances knew much about immigration to Canada, there was no option but to seek the help

of an immigration consultant. My search of the classified pages of the International Herald Tribune and the Economist came up with few names and addresses.

My letters of inquiry to the few immigration consultants on my list netted only one response. In his reply, this consultant, who was of Arab descent and stationed in Quebec, assured me of obtaining a visa on my behalf, conditional on proof of having seventy thousand US dollars in my bank account. He claimed it was the only sure way of securing an immigration visa. My savings at that time fell widely short of the required sum. Disappointment turned into despair after my attempts to borrow enough money to qualify failed. Sadly, my plan to immigrate to Canada had to be abandoned, at least for the time being.

It did not occur to me then that the advice given to me by that immigration consultant was not the best. Indeed, he was not telling me the truth -or at least not the whole truth. Only much later, I became aware of other less demanding official routes for immigration. Given my qualifications, age and family status, there was a good chance of obtaining immigration visas to Canada without necessarily having tens of thousands of dollars in my bank account. At that time, the Canadian immigration authorities were lax in applying residency and other conditions. It was not uncommon for someone who was less eligible than me to become a citizen after making only two short trips to Canada to obtain his or her landing papers and then to receive his or her passport. A long-time friend who passed on recently obtained his Canadian nationality, passport, health card and driving license after spending less than three months in total on its soil.

That bad advice or half-truth given to me by the immigration consultant cost me dearly. Few years later, my Iraqi passport expired and the authorities refused to renew it leaving me with no option but to seek refuge in Syria, the only country that accepted stateless Iraqis at short notice in the whole world at that time. Instead of obtaining a Canadian passport and either settling down in Canada or returning to my job in Saudi Arabia, I spent eight long years in Syria, stateless and unemployed. Every single day in these eight years of exile was marred by feelings of despair,

and anger, despair of ever working again and supporting my family and anger at the world for putting me in that hopeless situation.

Ten years later he was still the same

You can imagine my frustration when more than a decade later my in-laws informed me that the immigration consultant whose services they have contracted was the same person who had earlier misled me. “Accept him or find your own consultant!” my in-laws, irritated by my objection, reacted with this ultimatum. I accepted their choice grudgingly and against my better judgment.

Actually, we had contacted another agent before him but he turned out to be a total disappointment. He was a Canadian of European origin and our hopes naturally soared when he came to Damascus. We went to see him in his five-star hotel. He insisted on meeting with us in his room rather than the hotel lobby or café. After the introductions, we sat huddled together. Before telling us about his plan to obtain immigration papers for our family, he turned the room radio on and raised the volume. He then told us that we must speak in whispers in case a listening device is hidden in the room. At that point, my hopes vanished and were replaced by apprehension. I was wondering whether we had done the wrong thing by seeing this foreigner and in his hotel room of all places. Who could be eavesdropping in this country on foreign guests in a luxury hotel except the secret police? Moreover, why should they be interested in an immigration consultant? Unless of course he was a spy and his immigration business was a cover-up. There was also another, more convincing, explanation: he was another Westerner whose main source of information on the area is Hollywood films and as soon as he walked down from the plane and before even seeing the first camel, his paranoia became active. My suspicions and his strange behaviour favoured the second explanation.

The Syrian authorities were aware that many of their people wanted to immigrate to Canada or other destinations and apparently had no objection. Scores daily visited the Canadian

embassy in broad daylight to apply for immigration. Once a week, the Embassy held an immigration sweepstake. Anyone can take part by simply filling a special form with basic biographical information, including name, occupation and personal assets and deposit it in a box. Applicants had to wait for hours before the names of the lucky few were announced and the coveted prize was an interview to assess his or her eligibility for immigration. I tried my luck once assuming that my qualifications and finances are better than the average Syrian. There were already a crowd of anxious applicants milling about and I stood among them in the embassy's garden for hours, silently praying that I would be among the few chosen that day. My feelings were a jumble of suspense and humiliation and reminded me of the many times I spent at the door of a bureaucrat just to get a signature on a paper. I could barely manage to stop my resentment from leading my feet out of the Embassy by telling myself that it was another sacrifice for the sake of my family. My name was not among the winners that day. My wounded pride stopped me from going back again for another repeat of the degrading experience.

The plan described by the paranoid immigration consultant required us to deposit half a million dollar in a locked investment account in a financial institution of his choice with no entitlement to any accrued revenues. These preposterous conditions confirmed our suspicions regarding the man's unbalanced state of mind. We did not have that much money and even if we did, we would be extremely foolish to entrust him and his cohorts with it.

Given a choice between the paranoid consultant with the ridiculous scheme and the one who misled me earlier, we opted for the latter's lesser evil. During the following months, we carefully followed his instructions: collecting the required documents, translating them into English, filling in the necessary applications and submitting them on time. We did that in appreciation for my in-laws without giving much consideration to getting the immigration visas. As soon as my part in the process was completed, the whole thing was tucked away in the deepest recesses of my mind and forgotten.

The hollow sound of the Canadian promise

An immigration application is not complete without an interview with a Canadian embassy official. When our immigration consultant informed us of the date of the interview, our hopes of obtaining immigration status were boosted. The venue for the interview was intriguing, Larnaka in Cyprus rather than Damascus. This would not have been possible if Saddam had not invaded Kuwait. This disastrous blunder resulted in the creation of an autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. Iraqis including myself could then apply for and receive passports from this administration. The trip to Cyprus was a much-needed break in my eight-year long exile and statelessness. Cyprus is a beautiful island. Euripides mentioned in one of his plays that the ancient Greeks called Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, the Cyprian.

The interviewer, a young Canadian woman, was most cordial, and her cheerful and friendly demeanor was certainly the best advertisement for Canada and its people. She expressed her admiration of my academic achievements—a Ph.D. in management from a British university— and assured me of finding work without any difficulty. She then turned to my wife and repeated the same optimistic prediction. My wife made one request to the interviewer: could she arrange to have the visas issued before the beginning of school year?

Regrettably, the assurances of the cheerful Embassy official proved to be entirely untrue -not exaggerated but utterly false. She may have raised our hopes unwittingly or under the assumption that if she or someone like her, white of European origin, had the same qualifications and experience she or he would have no problem in finding suitable employment. Regardless of her good intentions, what she told us was false and caused me much disappointment and pain.

One Embassy official who promises more than Canada can or is willing to offer to new immigrants may be an exception but two makes it almost a ruse. My wife heard the details of his undiplomatic conduct from her friend. That friend's daughter was

introduced to the consular official in a social function and she listened avidly to his enumeration of the many advantages of life in his country. It is the duty of a diplomat to project a positive image of his country, positive but truthful and unexaggerated of course.

That diplomat was anything but honest that day. They heard him boasting that the parents of a child born in Canada, and regardless of whether they are citizens or not, receive from the social insurance program a monthly check for one thousand dollars. My wife told me that her friend who comes from a very wealthy Saudi Arabian family was probably planning to send her pregnant daughter, first class as usual, on the first flight to Toronto. However, she is not the type that acts before she is reasonably certain of the consequences so she asked my wife just to be sure. My wife laughed at the preposterous idea and told her greedy friend that if this were true no one would need to work in Canada. After hearing this piece of disappointing news, my wife's friend called the consular official who retracted his earlier statement saying that it was just a joke. Would that lady's daughter be laughing at his humor if she found out that there is no one thousand dollar check in the mail every month for her child after making the transatlantic trip by first class?

We have all read or heard about the goose that laid golden eggs, but any immigrant can tell you that the fairy-tale goose was definitely not of the Canadian species. The greedy woman is fortunate to have my wife as a friend and a trusted source of correct information on Canada but we had no such person to educate us about Canada and the Canadian way of life and had to experience every disappointment firsthand.

“Taza, madam, taza!”

Months passed after the promising interview in Cyprus and immigration to Canada was again a distant possibility. Returning to our small apartment in Damascus one day, I was greeted with a large piece of cardboard on which my elder daughter scribbled in bold letters the words: We are going to Canada. My emotions

were torn between rising expectations for a better future and the looming pains of separation from our culture and a life further distant from my native country and relatives. Almost three years had passed since applying for immigration. It was a long wait but our immigration consultant finally did it. He called to tell us that our immigration documents had been dispatched to our address in Syria by express mail and urged us to waste no time in processing them with the Canadian embassy. This prompted my wife to ask him about the date on which these papers were issued and his answer in Arabic was “*Taza, Madam, taza,*”. *Taza* in colloquial Arabic means fresh or in this case recently issued.

Few days later, the immigration documents arrived by courier mail. After checking them, we discovered that our immigration approval was dated more than five months earlier, which meant that we had less than one month to get our visas processed and everything else done before departure. The immigration consultant had lied again, and we suffered the consequences of his unethical conduct. Our plan was completely disrupted. It was my intention to leave to Canada at the beginning of summer, soon after my children have their summer holiday. This would have given us three months to check firsthand the situation in Canada, and if it proves unsuitable, we would go back to Syria before the reopening of schools in autumn. Instead, we received the papers in September and even if we were to get everything ready in the remaining three weeks, we were worried that we may not make it in time to enroll our children in schools. Returning to Syria that same summer was no longer feasible. If we decide to leave to Canada, it would be on a one-way ticket because there was no coming back, in the short-run at least.

Until today, I sometimes wonder why he did not send us the papers soon after receiving them. Could anyone be that negligent or incompetent or was it intentional? My wife is convinced that he was probably on holiday and his mail including our immigration papers was left unopened until his return. No matter what his reason or excuse is we have not forgiven him and still remember his irresponsible conduct with bitterness. This raised

in my mind some troubling questions about work values and general ethical standards in Canada.

X-ray, blood tests and interrogation!

When we received our immigration approval from Ottawa, we assumed that it was going to be smooth sailing until our arrival in Canada. This proved to be a wrong assumption, as we found out firsthand. The hard time given to us by some Embassy officials was so vexing that at times we thought they did not want us to immigrate to Canada.

The medical doctor assigned by the Embassy to give us the required physical check-up tried very hard to find a pretext to deny us final permission to immigrate. When my blood pressure turned up slightly higher than the norm for my age, the young doctor treated the matter as a serious issue insisting that I must work with my personal physician to achieve a better control over my blood pressure. It was probably a case of white-coat hypertension but there was no way of proving that. Ignoring my repeated assertion of taking my hypertension medication regularly, the doctor warned me that approval would be withheld if my heart appears in the x-ray image to be enlarged because of untreated high blood pressure.

A heart in Arabic lyrics and poetry becomes large when it is full of love, kindness and trust. In contrast, a heart more inclined to suspicion and hatred is bound to shrink and shrivel. Apparently, what is good for your heart in poetry may be fatal in medicine. It was a huge relief when my x-ray results showed no signs of an enlarged heart but that did not put an end to my medical woes.

Few days later, my wife answered a call from the Embassy's doctor who told her that my presence at the clinic was urgently needed. My wife was naturally alarmed by the summon at short notice and repeatedly pleaded with the implacable doctor to tell her the reason behind the urgency to no avail. The doctor curtly informed her that it was a medical issue which can only be discussed with me. My wife became frantic assuming that a

serious medical problem had been diagnosed in the check-up. I hurried to the clinic bracing myself for the worse.

When my turn came to see the doctor, and in response to my polite greeting, she firmly instructed me to walk back to the end of the waiting room, in front of all the waiting patients, and then walk back again into her office. The request was unexpected and bizarre. My reaction was a mixture of surprise, bewilderment and annoyance

Extreme humiliation conjures images of being admonished by a parent or a teacher in public, or receiving a sound thrashing by a bully without the satisfaction of putting up some resistance, or being tarred, feathered and forced to ride a donkey facing backward in the marketplace of my village. Walking the length of the waiting and examination rooms toward the doctor's desk was on that day added to my personal cache of extreme humiliating experiences. I meekly complied because I was sure that refusing to obey the doctor's unusual order would have resulted in failing the medical exam and losing our immigration visas. I was back in her office when the doctor with a stern look on her face sprang the following question at me, in more or less the same words after translation:

“Was your back ever broken?”

I have answered many medical questionnaires and seen numerous doctors before and after coming to Canada but this was the first and only time, in which I heard this question. It was unanticipated, to say the least. Surely, a broken spine would leave a scar or some other obvious mark that would show on an x-ray. I assured the doctor that my back has always been in one piece and remains in perfect health.

“Why do you then walk in this odd way?” she asked, almost provocatively.

Was I limping like Igor, Count Frankenstein's loyal servant? I thought to myself.

Before I answered this question, another one, equally unreasonable, came: “Did you ever break a leg?” the doctor persisted in her line of belligerent interrogation.

In a Laurel and Hardy classic comedy, entitled *A Chump in Oxford*, Laurel regained his long-lost memory to discover that he is Lord Paddington. He then employed a grumpy Hardy as his valet. In one scene of this comedy, Laurel as Lord Paddington criticized Hardy's poise instructing him to lift his chin, both chins of course, to the deep indignation of Hardy. In that doctor's office and undergoing that unusual interrogation, I deeply empathized with Hardy.

"None of my bones were ever broken," I replied. My only explanation of my 'odd' step was to say that God made me like this.

The doctor relentlessly continued this line of questioning: "Have you ever undergone major surgery?"

My patience was by then near its end but I managed to control my anger in fear of antagonizing the doctor.

My ordeal at the doctor's clinic was finally over and I went home to my wife who was impatiently waiting to learn the reason behind the unanticipated 'urgent' summon by the doctor. She, having braced herself for the worse, was astonished by my detailed and animated description of the doctor's behavior. No doctor is that incompetent, I said to my wife, in conclusion. This made even the most outlandish reason a possibility; I was ready to believe that 'they', at my paranoia's suggestion, are trying to find a reason to stop us from immigrating. Later on, I wished they had.

The results of my medical check-up exonerated me of attempting to conceal any serious condition, past or present, and thus there was no cause to disqualify me from immigrating to Canada. The doctor must have been very disappointed. My wife was relieved but memories of the handling by the Embassy's doctors weighed on my mind and dignity. How dare that doctor, in a flagrant abuse of medical authority and ethics, question my integrity? I was deemed guilty of lying or concealment until proven otherwise by x-rays and blood tests. Although I fully understood and accepted the Canadian authorities' concern in ensuring that all those seeking immigration must meet certain health conditions, that requirement did not justify humiliation by

the Canadian embassy' doctor. After my arrival in Canada, I met several new immigrants who were admitted in spite of having serious medical conditions and none of them was subjected to the same belligerent nitpicking treatment from embassy's doctors.

Until this day, I still wonder about the motive behind that doctor's odd behaviour. I did try, in fairness and as much as my wounded self-esteem allowed, to find a justifiable cause. It was a much-sought lucrative engagement and disqualifying some applicants on medical grounds was expected. On the other hand, it may also be a display of an overwhelmingly obnoxious disposition by an inexperienced doctor on a power trip. There was also the possibility that the doctor simply disliked me because of any of the petty reasons for which Middle Easterners loathe each other sometimes to the extent of committing murder or waging war. If this was an attempt to provoke me—Iraqis are known to be hot tempered—and had I fallen for that gambit I would have been quite probably denied my immigration visa.

Years later, unpleasant memories of the episode with the Embassy's doctor came back strongly and vividly. The clean bill of health given to me then served to confirm, at least in my mind, the possible origin of a more serious life-threatening health complaint diagnosed in Canada. More details about this will be revealed later.

On route to Canada and no Good Samaritan

On our flight to Toronto, the sight of fellow passengers in deep sleep only made my insomnia more painful. The thought of having to endure more of this in future travels from and back to Canada was depressing. After hours of this agony, even a contortionist would tire of the economy class seat. The airline instruction sheet advised standing up and walking around to maintain proper blood circulation but this was not having the desired effect on one fellow passenger. He was walking, or rather reeling, past our seats when his body suddenly sagged and he fell to the floor with a soft thud. He was a middle-aged man of South Asian origin. For what appeared to be a long time, we just gawked

at him and did nothing, which finally prompted me to jump to his aid. I lifted him and was maneuvering him to the nearest empty seat when I felt a firm hug from behind. It was an awkward situation; I was sandwiched by the faint passenger and a hostess who came to render assistance. After a while, the man regained full consciousness and stood up to thank all for their kindness. Those near us listened and smiled back at him acknowledging his misplaced gratitude. That sickly first-generation Asian Canadian was pathetically naïve to assume that all were equally concerned with his health and welfare. No one corrected him by indicating that the flight attendant and I came to his help while everyone else sat, watched and did absolutely nothing. If those fellow travelers made up a representative sample of Canadians, it can be safely assumed that Good Samaritans are rare to come by in Canada.

It was not love at first sight

“It looks like Riyadh from here,” I told my wife looking down from the plane as it descended toward Toronto.

My wife looked at me in consternation. She disliked living in Riyadh, the Saudi Arabian capital.

“Except it is all green,” I added to placate her.

Likening Toronto to Riyadh was not a compliment for sure. The Saudi capital stretched tens of kilometers in every direction and looks from above like a giant oases in the middle of a vast desert, without the redeeming water holes and palm dates groves

We arrived with eleven large suitcases. The eleventh suitcase was not among our luggage and did not go through customs. Actually, it was an imaginary suitcase in which we packed all our hopes and dreams. Its contents were most valuable and extremely perishable. We still have most of what we brought with us except that eleventh suitcase and all its irreplaceable contents that did not stand the test of wear and tear in this country.

II. First Encounters and Negative Impressions

All new immigrants, especially those from warm regions, must enter Canada in spring or early summer. This would spare them the painful shock of arriving here in the midst of a Canadian winter blizzard. Nothing can drain an immigrant's spirit more effectively and thoroughly than a 20 below zero centigrade wind-chill. When we arrived here, winter was still a month away, and the first snow even further ahead. There were other miseries experienced that winter besides the frigid temperatures. We had a short time and a long list of things to attend to before the beginning of the school year. My age was perhaps a disadvantage; I was in my late forties and had already suffered hardship, disappointments and two difficult relocations. It took a lot of my residual discipline and determination to endure the agonies of the first winter season.

As a result of the irresponsible behavior of our immigration consultant, we arrived in Canada three weeks after the start of schools. We were frantically worried that our children would lose a whole school year. There was no time to search carefully before deciding on a suitable city and neighbourhood to settle down in. I feel stupid every time I remember how we came to settle down in Markham, one of several satellite towns of Toronto. Actually, no real choice was involved. We landed in Toronto with absolutely no information about alternative places for residency. We based our decision on one advice from a family who few years later became disenchanted with Canadian life and went back home.

We were lonely and helpless in a strange country. Rescue came, not from a Canadian institution, but from a distant cousin of my wife. It was an awkward situation because my wife had never met her distant cousin before. Having no one else to look to for assistance, we swallowed our pride and decorum and imposed ourselves on the hospitality and kindness of my wife's

relative and her husband. We learned from them that a permanent address, not a hotel room, was needed to register our children in school and to obtain our social insurance and health cards. Looking for a house to rent then rose to the top of our list of priorities. Schools have already started and there was no time to lose or be meticulous. Few months later, we were convinced that we had settled down in the wrong neighbourhood because few people with our ethnic origin live here. In a little over ten years, Markham changed from a semi-rural town dotted with farms and green areas into a crowded noisy commuter or bedroom city.

Renting a house was our first real experience in dealing with Canadians in this country. It is worth highlighting here because it was bound to impact subsequent encounters. The real estate agent we contacted to help us in searching for a rental house was a friendly young man. We had endless questions about renting and buying a house and numerous other concerns and he patiently answered all of them. After taking us to view a couple of properties, he vanished. He stopped calling us and did not answer our calls. Weeks after renting a house through another agent, he called telling us that he had been away on holiday in Cuba but he was back and eager to show us few more rental properties. He was disappointed and even a little annoyed with us upon learning that in his long absence we enlisted the assistance of another real estate agent. He was the second Canadian whose work ethics shocked us; the first one was the immigration consultant who kept our immigration documents for five months before forwarding them. Our second close encounter with Canadians was disappointing but we told ourselves that first and even second impressions could be wrong.

We needed a permanent address in order to enroll our children in schools and there were few houses for lease to new immigrants and not far from my wife's cousin. We decided on the first house that allowed us to move in without further delay. The monthly rent was close to two thousand dollars, almost the same as a one-year rent for our apartment in Syria. Our landlord insisted on payment in advance for 12 months in the form of postdated checks. It was an unfurnished small house and because the master

bedroom was located on top of the uninsulated garage, it was difficult falling asleep on cold nights that winter. We spent a whole day cleaning the house and especially a filthy bathroom. At the end of our lease, and after the owner inspected his property he admitted it was much cleaner than before leasing it to us.

Go to your people!

The first of few honest advices given to me in Canada came from another new immigrant. I needed to go to the airport to fetch a delayed suitcase. The taxi company dispatched him because he drove an old station wagon with ample space to accommodate my bulky suitcase. Soon after taking off toward the airport, we were exchanging information about our national backgrounds. He had recently emigrated from the Ukraine. His English was rudimentary but I managed to understand much of what he said. After learning about the difficulties I was experiencing as a new immigrant, he offered me one piece of advice: “go to your people”. He meant my national, ethnic, religious, and sectarian group. It was an unexpected piece of advice after travelling tens of thousands of kilometers across one continent and an ocean and incurred so much expense only to be told to go to my people.

My mind raced to digest the counsel of the well-meaning taxi driver. The implication of his suggestion was quite clear and very alarming. In Canada, immigrants should not expect any genuine assistance from anyone except their own people. No one other than them will extend a hand to help them in meeting the challenges and overcoming the difficulties of settling down. What would become of us if my people were not helpful? I have always believed, and still do, that the main reasons for the turmoil in my native country Iraq, and much of the developing world, are factional identities and loyalties, such as tribalism, sectarianism, ethnocentrism etc., and their negative consequences. What the advice of the taxi driver implied is that Canada is another factious society.

Exposed to the elements

The ancient Spartans exposed their children to the elements because they believed that only the fittest deserves to survive. However, that was a harsh militarist society in which all citizens of the city-state, including children of both sexes, received military training. Canada is certainly far removed socially and politically from Sparta, but surviving our first winter in Canada was a Spartan ordeal par excellence.

My driver's license had expired a long time before my arrival here and I could not renew it because of my stateless status. The Canadian authorities refused to recognize my expired license and allow me to take my road test. As a result, I had to wait more than six months before obtaining my driver license. During the winter of 1996-7, my family and I were like newborn Spartans exposed to the harsh elements. We survived that winter, but the bitter memories of the experience lingered.

There is a common belief among uninformed members of the Shia sect in Islam that descendants of the Prophet Mohammed - my late mother was one of them- who err from the righteous path are destined to an eternal life in a private *Gehennum* or hell. While sinful common people languish in fire and brimstones, descendants of the Prophet spend eternity in an arctic hell. This was based on the assumption that a frigid hell is much less painful than a scorching one. Obviously, whoever thought of this never experienced a Canadian winter.

During that unforgettable winter, my wife and I used the buses or taxis and sometimes walked to get to supermarkets and do other essential errands. To economize on taxi fares, we sometimes walked to the nearest supermarket in a nearby plaza pulling a small carrier suitcase behind us. Nothing could have prepared me for the three-mile walk back from the plaza pulling behind me ten to fifteen pounds of groceries and trying to keep the bulging suitcase balanced and moving on the slippery icy sidewalks. The misery was almost unbearable on days when we had to make the trek under falling snow. Before the snow season was over, the suitcase's handle came loose and another suitcase was needed. It

was even more painful seeing my young children walking back and forth from their schools during the harsh winter weather. Indeed, I have come to believe that one of the undeclared missions of the Transportation Ministry of Ontario which regulates driver licenses is to test the endurance of new immigrants.

Our experience of the first winter in Toronto without a car was a torture, both physically and mentally. Since then I have come to believe that Canada is a wilderness, a habitat suitable only for squirrels, badgers and other such creatures. Human beings, especially large numbers of settlers, are intruders on this wilderness and not all of them including my wife and I have the physical stamina to endure its cruel weather. However, adapting to this inhumane weather proved to be a walk in the park compared to surviving the harsh conditions of living in this country.

Among my people

I did not go to my people, as the kind taxi driver advised me. They eventually came to me. I was too busy wrestling with the numerous needs and challenges of the first months in Canada to look for them. The first one of my people we met was also a taxi driver. It took us few minutes after boarding his battered old taxi to recognize the cultural bonds between us. We actually shared not only a common language but also the same religion, sect and rural roots. After learning about my situation, he offered to take me to the local *husainia*, or Shia mosque, next weekend. In a gesture of friendship and generosity typical of our rural people, he adamantly refused to take his fare.

My expectations of any support from my people did not exceed those of a certain blackbird. There is a story worth telling here. One day, my wife looking from the kitchen's window in our Canadian home noticed an unusually large number of noisy birds darting from one tree to another and landing briefly near the swimming pool. The loud noises and panicky movements of the birds told her that something was amiss. She became curious and

went out to investigate. She found a bird floating in the pool, its head bobbing over the water surface. It was either dead or drowning. She rushed to fetch the pool leaf skimmer, fished the bird out and put it down gently on the concrete surface beside the pool. It was listless and apparently dead. Returning to her place behind the kitchen's window, she noticed other birds were alighting beside the drowned bird. One of the birds poked and pushed the comatose bird with its peak as if checking for life signs or was it perhaps trying to revive it, my wife wondered. She told me that what looked to her as an attempt to resuscitate the unfortunate bird continued relentlessly for several minutes until it actually stirred. The 'paramedic' birds that did more than shriek and dart between branches maintained their vigil beside their comrade until his feathers were dry enough to carry him. It was an amazing show of solidarity among creatures of the same species. Instincts seem to serve birds better than brains do humans. If such a virtue were common among my people, the thought of immigrating to Canada would never have crossed my mind. All of humanity, including Canadians, can learn some valuable lessons from those blackbirds.

I was finally among my people in the makeshift mosque but the feeling of being at home with them was missing. After so many years of statelessness and unemployment forced on me by the government of my native country, my resentment against those responsible for my predicament refused to go away. The Iraqi dictator Saddam and his henchmen perpetrated this crime and their accomplices included his party members and the cowed silent majority. My alienation, still festering in the deep recesses of my mind, came out that evening to find fault with almost everyone and everything that was said and done. The fact that some of them may have been victims of the regime like me did not make my resentment any less intense.

It was a disappointing encounter with my people. The kind taxi driver must have sensed my inner feelings. As he drove me back home, he said that I would be "better off with Mr. S," another Iraqi immigrant who happened to be from the same rural town.

My compatriot turned out to be helpful and generous. On his second visit, he brought us a gift of several pounds of *halal* meat. We never became real friends. It is true that friends made in the first half of your life are lost in the second half. My friend-making years were already gone by then. He became more than an acquaintance and less than a friend and he deserved all the credit for that achievement. When he proposed an arranged marriage between his son and my youngest daughter, my refusal angered him and he eventually stopped calling me. My daughter was only seventeen then and still in high school.

Buying a house

Meeting people and growing social roots are important for new immigrants. However, these social challenges facing us in the first few months were not as important or persistent as other concerns. Buying a house, on the other hand, was certainly at the top of our priority list. It is indeed the ultimate cherished dream of all new immigrants. After an average immigrant family lived in an apartment in one of Toronto's high-rise building for few years paying a monthly rent of around one thousand, a house of their own was their primary objective or dream. However, most of them have to wait many years before realizing this dream, if ever.

Living in a rented property was not a reasonable long-term option for a family with three teenage children. Before arriving here, we heard that we have to pay only five per cent of the price of a house to get a mortgage on it from the banks. This turned out to be another misinformation about Canada, and in fact, only Canadians with permanent well-paid jobs receive such preferential terms from banks. New immigrants like us are required to pay the full price of a house in cash or must advance half the price to qualify for a mortgage and have a steady income to cover mortgage payments.

Our second lesson in doing business with Canadians came from another real estate agent.

“We don’t do such things here in Canada,” our realtor indignantly asserted. He spoke like a true patriot protesting the slur directed at the good name of his esteemed people and country. His vehement defense of Canadian integrity was in response to an innocent and reasonable remark by my wife. The house we were negotiating to buy was cluttered with junk. There were odd wooden planks, a broken refrigerator, an assortment of old cans and bottles, a rusty wreck of a garden swing and a busted bicycle among other things littering the garage and backyard. After deciding to buy the house, we naturally sought the agent’s assurance that the owners would remove all the junk and trash and clean the house. At that point, he made his double-edged holier than thou statement in which he affirmed the high standards of conduct held by all Canadians versus others including obviously us, new comers of lower standards and lesser faith.

We were ashamed of ourselves for expecting Canadians -they were white of course- to do nothing less than the decent thing and for doubting the solemn promises of an honourable Canadian real estate agent. We even believed him when he relayed to us the owners’ assurance that the water heater for the swimming pool was in working order. It was winter and we could not verify this but who needed that when you have the earnest word of civilised Canadians. Asking for a confirmation of this in writing or withholding some of the money due to the owners was unthinkable.

When the great day of moving to our new home came, the owners, their furniture and personal belongings were gone, but they left behind them enough to remember them by. All their junk and trash were still there, strewn in the garage and befouling the back garden.

We called the real estate agent to complain. He was surprised, or so he claimed, but not apologetic. Since the previous owners have already cashed our check, there was no way of making them clear their mess. What about the water heater you may ask? Our faith in the Canadian word of honour took another blow when summer came and it was time to open the swimming pool and turn on the water heater.

III. Education Comes First

Immigrants who come to Canada make tremendous sacrifices before their feet even touch Canadian soil. They leave behind them many of their dear relatives and friends and all the special and familiar places. Their memories which until then had only a time dimension become even more remote as they become separated from them by distance also. With their boarding passes, they receive complimentary membership in the club of the loneliest people on earth. They exchange all of these for a promise and a dream of a secure and better future for themselves and their children.

A decent education for our children was our foremost, and for me the only, objective behind immigrating to this country. Canada, we were assured, is a world's leader in educational standards and achievements. We were prepared to make any necessary sacrifice and endure all the social, psychological and financial hardship of immigration if in return our children can get the promised first-class Canadian education.

My children shall never be cowherds

My main inspiration for seeking educational achievements was my father. He was a wealthy man by local standards and he owned enough agricultural land, real estate and cash to support all of his four wives and a dozen children. He was also a tribal chieftain with sufficient social authority to maintain a respectable social status for himself and his progeny for generations to come. None of these inherited and acquired achievements was enough for him. He wanted more for his children, much more than what he had, and he strongly believed that the only way to obtain them was through modern education.

My father lived most of his life in a rural area where almost all inhabitants were illiterate. Being the son of a tribal chieftain, he was one of the very few fortunate persons to receive basic literacy education at a traditional school. He never tired of describing to

his sons the difficult circumstances of his school days. It was not a school by even the most informal standards. Classes were conducted in the open air weather permitting, inside a mud house during the short winter season or in the shade of a palm tree grove during hot days of summer. The school staff consisted of one private tutor, employed by my grandfather and he knew just enough to teach his pupils reading, writing and rudimentary arithmetic. Corporal punishment was usually the only form of discipline in such schools but I doubt very much my father's tutor dared to use it on sons of chieftains. The most poignant bit of detail about my father's school days was the stationary. Instead of paper, they had to use tin sheets and a piece of charcoal for a pen. Whenever my educational motivation weakened, I conjured in my mind my father scribbling his charcoal-black alphabets on a roughly cut metal sheet.

My father was a strong man who was entrusted by his elder brother with running the affairs of the tribe and our large extended family. He applied himself to his duties diligently. He seldom used force to enforce his authority but he did not spare the rod when circumstances called for firm discipline, and he would not hesitate to give a good thrashing to any transgressor, man, woman or child. Nevertheless, no paternal and tribal authority or menacing rod could convince three of his seven sons to complete their education. None of them was ever fully appreciative of the disappointment and heartache they caused our father. He got back at them by calling them the 'cowherds', a name that any chieftain's son would find immensely offensive.

Like my father, I hoped my children would develop a love for reading and learning. Some students hated books that became associated in their minds with strict uncaring teachers. I was one of the lucky students who discovered and relished the informative and entertaining world of books. During my school years, much of my free time was spent reading books rather than athletics or making many friends. I read everything I could lay my hand on: books, magazines, newspapers, and comics. Every week I took the double-decker bus across the Tigris River to the used books and magazines market to buy old novels and other works of

literature. Most of the little money my father gave me as my weekly allowance ended in the pockets of used books vendors. Being a regular customer, I was given a special treatment, warmly greeted and favoured with discounts.

Passing on the gift of education

My wife and I were fortunate enough to have parents who believed in the great promise of modern education and rich enough to pay for our education in the best schools in the Middle East. My father sent me to an American Jesuit-run high school in Baghdad and then to the American University of Beirut and finally to Bath University in England. Occasionally, he bought me books—other than school textbooks—which I could not afford to buy with my pocket money.

We felt it was our duty to preserve this tradition. The least we could do for our children is to provide them with an education that is on par with our own, if not better. We hoped that Canada would make this possible for us and counted on the Canadian education system to give our children not only the best knowledge and skills but also the positive attitudes and behaviour necessary for becoming mature, creative individuals. Our expectations were admittedly high, possibly higher than Canada and most advanced countries can offer, and were eventually proven highly unrealistic.

At first, we had to get the schools to recognize our children previous educational achievements so that they would not have to repeat grades unnecessarily and lag behind their peers. To our dismay, school administrations followed a simple rule in placing students from overseas based solely on the age of the student. As a result, my two daughters suffered. My eldest daughter was admitted in the twelfth grade although she had already taken all of this grade's subjects back in Syria. Also, my younger daughter who had fast-tracked to keep in pace with her older brother was required to repeat a grade. My wife tried her best to convince the school administrators to change their minds but to no avail. Our daughters made the sacrifices but we all shared in the disappointment.

We came to Canada to escape injustice and we counted on its educational institutions to be exemplary in their fairness. Regrettably, these institutions did not live to our expectations. It was a learning process for me. There were more lessons to be learned about our new country from our children's experiences at school.

As soon as our children were enrolled in school, their cultural adjustment process and shock began. Since Canada is an immigrant country, the presence of other first-generation immigrants in their schools was expected to mitigate some of the difficulties and pain involved in this adjustment. It was a wrong assumption, and my children suffered as a result.

High school shocks

High schools are probably the first places where an immigrant's commitment to his or her native culture is put to the test. How this meeting of cultures was going to be in the case of our children and its influences on them was a nagging worry for us. We did not expect the clash of cultures to be frictionless, and we were even prepared for sparks flying sometimes, but we hoped no lasting burn scars would result.

My elder daughter, who was seventeen when we arrived here, was the first of my children to go through this harrowing experience. She had to endure two years of high school. It was an experience similar in harshness to arriving in Canada during a severe snowstorm. An accumulation of 15-cm of snow does not happen every day in Canada but you are not certified 100 per cent Canadian unless you have survived one and did not run for the nearest travel agency. Similarly, enduring high school is part of the initiation process for young Canadian immigrants. It is truly the place where the metal of young people is tested. After reading so much about all the bad and some very nasty habits high school children acquire from their peers, you end up questioning your sanity for bringing them here and exposing them to these risks. We had confidence in the good sense of our children, and the strength of our family values, to see them and us through this

ordeal. What surprised and shocked us was the indifference of school administrations and staff which we thought to be a major flaw in the educational system.

First impressions stick like glue to the mind. Nothing can erase that scene of a cluster of adolescents huddled together against early morning cold weather in front of my daughter's school. I assumed the mist circulating around their heads was condensation resulting from their warm breaths mixing with the cold air, until I came closer and saw the cigarettes in their hands. My first thought was that they were irresponsible teenagers defying the authority of the school by smoking in public on its campus. Only later I found out that they were smoking outside the school's premises and therefore beyond its jurisdiction. If any of my teachers from my village school or Jesuit-run high school saw me smoking anywhere, even at my doorstep, he would not hesitate to knock the cigarette out of my mouth and lead me by the ear to my father or the principal for a more serious punishment.

We were not the only Canadians shocked by what was going in high schools around us. Most of these discontented parents are first or second generation Canadians like us. One of them actually vowed to leave Canada, permanently if necessary, and go back to his turbulent native country once his first child reaches the ninth grade. More recently, another immigrant who came to install security cameras in our home planned to take his family back to war-torn Yemen to 'cure' his elder son of the bad habits acquired in high school.

We never expected a white Canadian whose ancestors came to this country when it was still a British colony to disapprove of high school policies. He was a missionary and the story he told us occurred few years before our arrival. One day his adopted daughter who was a high school student then told him that her class had a new assignment. She was eager to give him all the details and he, like all caring fathers, listened attentively. Before she was done, he was shocked and angry. He decided to go to school next day and express his disapproval to the class teacher, or even the principal if necessary. The assignment that strongly irked the missionary-father was a role-playing exercise in which

each female student would act, for a whole day, as the slave for one of her male classmates. He told my wife that the school official, and after listening to his objections, turned to his daughter and said defiantly: “In two years—she was fourteen then—you will be old enough to do whatever you want.”

Teachers teach only!

“We have a new student in our class, the teacher announced. “She comes from a distant country. Please give her all the assistance you can.” the students looked, smiled and nodded in greeting at the new student. The new student who was a little apprehensive on her first day at school felt a tremendous relief.

This did not happen in Canada, not to my son and two daughters for sure. This pleasant orientation given to a new student may have occurred in the rural school portrayed in the children’s television series, *The Little House on the Prairie*.

When two months went by with our daughter complaining repeatedly that she spent every day at school alone, my wife decided to pay a visit to her teacher. We were worried that our daughter’s isolation would not only make her days at school intolerable but also depress her grades. Our daughter was shy but she did not have any difficulties in making friends in her previous schools in Saudi Arabia or Syria. The language was not a barrier since she spoke fluent English. Moreover, there should be an orientation program for new students which is customary in American universities we attended. After discussing the matter with my wife, she became determined to do something about it, and the following day she went to see our daughter’s class teacher. After describing to the teacher our daughter’s predicament and its potential negative impact on her scholastic performance, she wondered if he could ask one of her classmates to give her a tour of the school and introduce her to other students. To her surprise, the teacher said that he could not do it because students would not listen to him. My wife, surprised by his reply and a little doubtful of its sincerity, told him that where we came from the teacher’s words in class were the law and students in

general venerated and obeyed their teachers. “How lucky those teachers are!” the Canadian teacher said with genuine envy.

Our daughter survived her high school years. She even managed to do well enough to be accepted at the University of Toronto but for two years she was almost a total stranger in her school. While she attended her classes regularly, she never saw the school’s cafeteria from the inside. On many days, her mother went to her school to keep her company during breaks.

Recently, circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a student reported in the news reminded me of our daughter’s ordeal. The police went to the school of the missing student to gather information about her from her classmates. Sadly, no one remembered her because she was a new student and a recent immigrant.

Her two years in a Canadian high school had an enduring impact on our daughter’s career choices. Before that, she wanted to become a schoolteacher after graduating from university. After high school, she would not hear of it. Her only reason for her newly acquired aversion to teaching was the way students treated their teachers. At the time, we thought she was exaggerating but several years later confirmation came from none else but a teacher. We met that teacher, a first generation Canadian, in a social function, and like us, she came from a traditional society where teachers are held in high esteem. In her answer to my question about her job satisfaction, she spoke at length about the abuse and harassment she regularly gets from her students. “They are rude,” she complained “and love to remind me that their parents pay for my salary.” She was eager to get back at her teenage Canadian torturers. “White Canadians think they are more intelligent than us. But you have my word as a teacher that they are not.” The issue of intelligence brings us to blue eyes and A marks.

Blue eyes rule

A high correlation between two things means only that they vary or move together. I remember clearly my statistics professor

at the university warning us not to assume automatically that there is a cause-effect relationship between two correlates. He must have demonstrated this fact with the often-used example of the high correlation between the number of fire engines taking part in extinguishing a fire and the damage resulting from it. It would be foolish to conclude that the real causal factor behind the damage is the number of fire engines and not the magnitude of the fire which determines both the number of dispatched fire engines and the extent of damages.

My son came back from school one day to tell us about a disturbing ‘scientific’ correlation their class teacher had told them about. This correlation indicated that blue-eyed persons have superior intelligence. What his teacher overlooked is that a correlation between having blue eyes and high intelligence is not proof of causality. Undoubtedly, the eye color of my son’s teacher and the author and publisher of this survey is not brown.

At that time, my son was in elementary school. To the best of my knowledge, the curricula of elementary schools do not include social psychology or any other subject which requires a discussion of intelligence and its correlates. What was the purpose then of teaching this ridiculous and spurious finding to a class in which many students, including my son, do not have blue eyes? Surely, it was not done in the interest of learning. On the other hand, it would have made a very suitable prologue to a purposeful discussion of race issues among students. However, the teacher was not emulating the American tutor Jane Elliot and her remarkable experiments on racial discrimination among her third grade students. Instead, we were reminded of the Nazis who classified people on the basis of their ancestry and physical features and like my son’s teacher considered blue-eyed persons to be more superior.

My refutation of the blue-eyed superiority myth

The racist claim of my son’s teacher prompted me to educate my son on the evils of prejudice, regardless of whether its source

is blue or brown-eyed people. My lesson began on a humorous note by reciting few lines from the lyrics of a popular Iraqi song which compares the beauty of eyes of different colors. The singer, a brown-eyed diva, described blue eyes as utterly devoid of any beauty and advised the application of a lot of mascara.

In our part of the world, having blue eyes could be a great disadvantage. Many traditional people believe that blue-eyed persons, as well as those who have a gap between their front teeth, are prone by genetic or some mysterious effect, to be envious. My maternal uncle had a story about the alleged evil spell cast by blue eyes. On the day a blue-eyed man visited his small grain mill, the machine belt surprisingly broke not once but twice. Finally, he politely asked the man to leave and come back another day and only then he was able to repair his machine and get it working again.

After demonstrating to my son how social beliefs and personal attitudes can unfairly bias a person's views, my attention turned to countering any possible negative effects his teacher's nonsensical claim on blue eyes and intelligence may have had on his morale and self-esteem. My son of course knew that his Mesopotamian ancestors discovered farming, writing and established the first civilization in the world. While our ancestors lived in cities, erected hanging gardens and lofty ziggurats, and laid down the foundations of mathematics and medicine, the blue-eyed forefathers of his teacher were cave dwellers. What about the proverbial dumb blonde-haired woman? I added sarcastically or is she also more intelligent than we are, brown-eyed people are? And what did his ignorant teacher think the color of Jesus Christ' eyes was? It was not blue as they portray him in paintings, icons and statutes but brown like us.

Half an hour later, my anger at the teacher's remark was still far from spent. I was too upset then to realize how much my thinking and attitude were manipulated by that teacher's remarks. I had unwittingly allowed his words to burrow deep into my mind, climb over all its high walls of moral principles and good judgment, and take control of it. I was disappointed to find out that I myself was not entirely free of ethnocentrism, and when I

felt that my son and the rest of my family were threatened by that teacher's bias I did not hesitate to retaliate with the same ammunition and this is regrettably a serious Canadian malaise.

I soon learned that my son's teacher was not alone in believing in the superiority of blue-eyed people. One fine afternoon I was walking out of the Reference Library in downtown Toronto and there at the intersection of Bloor and Yonge streets was a large billboard displaying an advertisement for coloured contact lenses. It posed the following question, rhetorical of course: "Wouldn't you, like everyone else, prefer to have blue eyes instead of your brown ones?" or words to the same effect.

At school my children learned their true colour

Eventually it was my younger daughter's turn to become aware of her brown 'race'. "Hello brown people," said the white girls to my daughter and a group of her classmates of West Asian origin. It was the day we discovered our ethnic identity. We brown people, with brown skins and brown eyes are thus less intelligent than blue-eyed white people are.

They should have the decency of waiting until my children were in university or college and old enough to deal with the cultural shock of discovering their pre-ordained status in Canadian society. Springing it on them in elementary or high school was adding injury to insult, or was it perhaps intended to depress their morale and discourage them from competing for higher education against their supposedly more intelligent white classmates? The possibility that my children will always be subjected to racial discrimination, in one form or another at school, work and in society at large, filled me with dread. Is the frying pan of Canadian society any less painful than the fire of my country of origin, Iraq?

My children were also the victims of bullying but they survived with no apparent scars to their psyches. However, an acquaintance's son, a first-generation immigrant from Egypt, was not so lucky. Repeated bullying at school left its lasting impacts

on his educational achievements and psychological well-being. He eventually stopped going to classes and needed psychological treatment for bullying-related issues. His psychological and emotional health disorder was severe enough to qualify him for permanent disability benefits. He is currently unemployed, single and blames his parents for his predicament because they immigrated to Canada.

New immigrants do not get As

Contrary to the corollary on the inferiority of brown-eyed people upheld by my son's class teacher, our children were doing fine in their studies. We were thus surprised and disappointed when both of our younger children, and after receiving A grades on tests and homework assignments, were given B averages in their report cards. My wife went to their school to demand an explanation. What she heard from the teacher of our younger daughter was shockingly absurd. The teacher admitted that they are good students deserving higher grades, but giving them A averages would be 'unfair' to other students who are not new immigrants. According to that teacher, it is the 'norm' that new immigrant students do not perform as well as others and this dictated giving our children Bs even if they deserved As.

How many new immigrants dealing with this teacher and her likes would complain to the education board or their federal or provincial member of parliament? Very few probably because most of us brown-eyed immigrants have been conditioned by tyrannical regimes and patriarchal families to bow to authority figures, including schoolteachers.

Many years later, I read a similar story told by another unsatisfied immigrant. He was in his 20's when he arrived here and decided to add two more university degrees to the one he already had. He remembered one Canadian professor telling him that although he deserved A plus he gave him an A minus "to be fair to other students". It is interesting that both my children's elementary teacher and the university professor of this immigrant

are both of the same mind and used the term ‘fairness’ to justify their discriminatory and unjust behaviour.

“We don’t correct mistakes...”

The teachers in my village elementary school were rarely seen in school without their canes or thick wooden rulers with sharp metal edges. The morning inspection performed by the principal or vice principal was particularly distressing. Students stood in rows with both hands extended full length holding a handkerchief neatly folded and held by the index of the right hand. The morning frigid air thick with tension allowed us only shallow breaths as we waited in anxious anticipation for the approaching footsteps, which stopped only to unleash harsh words of scolding and few raps to students’ knuckles for forgetting to bring a hanky, clip their nails, or wash their faces. The most painful and humiliating corporal punishment was *falaqa*, or lashing of the soles with a cane.

While *falaqa* could make the toughest of students howl with pain and grovel for mercy, the red pen dealt them the greatest social and financial harm. The red pens used by our teachers in correcting our homework and exam papers foretold whether students succeeded and became doctors, engineers and schoolteachers or failed and ended up as ‘cowherds’, to borrow my father’s harsh label. Eventually corporal punishment was banned in schools back home but no one would ever dare abolish the red pen, the last and most effective weapon in the hands of teachers— but not Canadian teachers

All students need writing skills. My pre-university school assignments included writing hundreds of essays and each one of them was meticulously corrected and graded by my teachers. Basking in the praise of the teacher for writing a good essay and then asked to read it aloud to the class was one of the few relished memories of my school days. The quality of an essay was measured by the number of times the teacher’s red pen left its marks on your paper, the fewer the better of course.

When it was time for one of my younger children to write and submit essays, I was prepared to see as much of the teacher's red ink as my son's black or blue on it. I was surprised and happy at first to find only uplifting words of praise but after reading the composition my glee dissipated. What dismayed me was not the quality of the composition—its creativity and logical arguments were good—but there were several grammatical and spelling mistakes which the teacher chose to ignore.

The teacher's negligence annoyed my wife enough to pay the school a visit next day. "We don't correct grammatical and spelling mistakes," the teacher told her. He explained that their main concern is cultivating the students' writing skills rather than his grammar and spelling. My wife protested that this left students with no clues about their mistakes and they would never make the effort to correct them. After all, proper grammar must be taught and their vocabulary needs to be developed. The teacher listened politely to my wife's critical remarks but was adamant. Incidentally, he was the same teacher who thought blue-eyed persons were more intelligent and my wife of course has brown eyes.

What about motivation?

My father, the chieftain with four wives and twelve sons and daughters who could barely write and read strongly believed in the great promise of education. Education on earth was like paradise in heavens; it gave you all you ever dreamt of and then some more. The greatest disappointments of his life were his sons who dropped out of school before graduating from university, i.e. the 'cowherds'.

My wife and I were stunned when our son came back from school one day with an advice from his teacher. He told his students that a high school certificate might be all one needs to succeed in life. My father would have immediately transferred me to another school if my teacher gave me such an advice. Granted not all of us can fulfill our dreams of becoming brain surgeons or astronauts but high school graduates are not awarded the noble

prizes in sciences and medicine. A skilled mechanic or plumber may make more money than a university professor but without these academics, our lives would be barren and our future bleak. If we thought that a high school education was all my children needed to live a full life, we would have certainly remained in Syria and saved ourselves the expenses and anguish of immigration. What brought us here are the promised freedom to choose and the opportunity to realize our choices - at least for our children. This teacher was essentially encouraging our children to forego the only thing that made all our toils and sacrifices bearable.

The story of the son of another immigrant family deserves mention here. This young man graduated from a university with a degree in political science. Full of pride in his recent achievement, he decided to travel to his country of origin, Iran, to show off his newly acquired laurels in front of his relatives. His mother told my wife that he boarded the plane to Iran a proud and happy young man and came back long-faced and grumbling. He told her that his diploma paled in comparison with his cousins' medical and engineering degrees. He was determined to become a medical doctor like many of his relatives and he was prepared to go anywhere to finish his studies. The only university that accepted him was somewhere in the frigid northern territories where few students are willing to go and experience an all-year round bitter winter. Oddly, it took this Canadian young man a trip to his native country, Iran, to gain the motivation to seek further education.

And then came the army recruiters

There were others beside schoolteachers who wanted our children to abandon our cherished educational objectives. My son told us one day that he was approached in the local mall by army recruiters who encouraged him to join the Canadian armed forces. He then showed us the enlistment papers they gave him. They told him that he only needed the signature of a parent on his application to enlist.

I was horrified. In 1970, I served six months in the Iraqi army as a conscript and it was the worst time of my life. I left my country Iraq in 1982 in protest against the militaristic policies of its government, which eventually led me to immigrate to Canada.

My wife and I were happy that our son had the good sense to reject the idea of becoming a soldier. He was more fortunate than the son of another new immigrant family whose story was related to my wife by an acquaintance of his mother. This only son came across army recruiters in a mall also. The teenage boy was very impressed with all the promised privileges awaiting him in army life. He took the enlistment application and talked his illiterate mother into signing it. Later on and after learning more about military training and discipline, he had a change of mind -the Canadian army was not involved in Afghanistan then. When the army recruiters came to his door to escort him to his unit, his mother found him hiding in his room and begged her to tell them that he was nowhere to be found.

Tutoring my children was necessary to fill in the gaps in my children's education. Helping them in doing their homework and giving them guidelines on how to write reports and do library searches occupied many hours of my time every week. I never received this kind of assistance when I was a student, not from my parents who were uneducated or my elder brother who was sent to a boarding school. More of our time and efforts was needed also to counter the negative impressions and bad examples our children were exposed to at school.

Grading Canadian education

In spite of the thinly disguised racism and the unsupportive school environment, our children managed to complete their university education. They may have done it partly to please me but without their inner motivation and hard work, it would not have been accomplished. Fortunately, they were not influenced by the ambivalent stand of some of their Canadian teachers on higher education. However, my son sometimes voice his doubts

about the practical benefits of higher education in Canada because many of his co-workers and superiors never attended university.

For failing to support me in my effort to promote my children's education at a level equivalent or better than what I received from my father, I give Canadian educational institutions a failing grade. In my opinion, Canadian education deserves this negative evaluation because it did not meet my minimum expectations. I expected every Canadian teacher to be at least as good as the Arabic language teacher who praised and sometimes criticized my compositions, the Jesuit school librarian who gave me free access to the library because I was an avid reader and my British academic advisor who taught me the cosmopolitan wisdom that we must attempt to experience and understand the world of others through their eyes and beliefs. For sure, some Canadian teachers such as the blue-eyed teacher and the one who does not give A grades to new immigrant students should not be in the teaching profession.

Great expectations propelled us to come to this country. Some of them may be based on promises made by official and unofficial sources. Others may have been nothing but figments of our wishful thinking. When many of these expectations, promises, and dreams could not be fulfilled, we naturally became disappointed. Most of these disappointments were tucked away in the deepest recesses of our memories for the sake of our peace of mind but not the unfulfilled promise of a better education for our children. Our fathers received a better education than their ancestors and we were certainly luckier than all of them but regrettably, the education of our children was much less than what we had expected.

IV. Establishing our Business

Most of our expectations regarding Canadian life were either unrealistic or excessively optimistic. There were more cold months and snowstorms than we had anticipated but fortunately not beyond our endurance. We never imagined there would be so much cultural diversity here like so many colorful balls of yarn in one basket that look like a nice theme for a painting but may never be woven into one tapestry. The social milieu, schools, employment opportunities, among other things, were disappointing. Our confidence in finding a tranquil haven in Canada after a long turbulent stretch in our lives was seriously shaken by our first encounters with the Canadian scene but we managed to cope with the difficulties and learned to live with our disappointments, albeit at a high cost to our physical, psychological and financial well-being.

Our lives during these eventful first years reminded me of a childhood game I used to play with other village children. Walking barefooted on scorching sand was one of the daring acts the neighbourhood boys in my villages loved to compete at on hot summer days. One must keep moving to avoid burning the soles of his feet. Jumping up and down on the searing sand was enough to avoid the painful ridicule of my playmates and this is all I managed to accomplish when it was time to establish my business and comply with the conditions attached to our immigration visas. This was the next important item on our agenda, after settling down in our new home and putting our children in their new schools, and it proved to be the most difficult and frustrating of all challenges facing us.

New immigrants lie or perish

Our immigration visas were conditional on the successful establishment or purchase of a viable business within two years. An immigrant family who fails to meet this condition by the end of this period faces the possibility of having their visas revoked. The difficulty of this task and the time constraints may drive some

immigrants to desperate measures. These immigrants may seek to formally fulfill this condition only to see its removal and soon after terminate their businesses. In essence, they comply with the letter of the regulations but not their spirit and this was essentially deceptive. Other forms of deception and subterfuge were also common among some immigrants and asylum seekers.

The primary targets of new immigrants' deception are the immigration and other government authorities with which they maintain mandatory transactions. These would-be Canadian justified these illegitimate and often unethical practices as necessary for shielding themselves and their families from unsympathetic bureaucrats and their rigid interpretations of the laws. For some of them, subterfuge was more rewarding than learning new skills, improving their knowledge of the English language or extending their social networks. They argued that unless they lied or 'hid the truth' about their marital status, earnings and real or fake disabilities, it would have been extremely difficult for them to maintain their immigration status and sustain their families at the same time. There was apparently no moral dilemma involved here; if their survival called upon them to lie then they would simply do it and repeatedly. None had any qualms about breaking their cherished religious, moral and ethical codes, because it was dictated by necessity. Some even boasted about hoodwinking the system and scoring a victory on it. We were also encouraged to resort to deception.

The double-life of these immigrants reminded me of the tribal character in my birth country folklore known as *sab'a al-lail*, literally the night lion. This is the nickname bestowed by tribesmen on some burglars. These were not your ordinary run-of-the-mill thieves, at least not in the eyes of my tribesmen. They were reputable men who in the daytime led a normal, decent life by general social standards but at night they become burglars by necessity. A thief by night was better than a beggar in daylight, traditional tribesmen argued. They called these thieves 'lions' because stealing was a highly risky activity since a home owner may kill a burglar knowing very well that he would be exempt by tribal codes from paying his kinsmen blood money.

Many immigrants apparently managed to maintain this dual existence quite well; they were always one step ahead of the immigration and other officials who were out to catch them. Outwitting the immigration and other authorities is not simply a quick fix option chosen by some unscrupulous immigrants but a survival strategy. Who am I to judge these desperate people who struggled most of the time, but occasionally broke a bureaucratic rule, to keep their wives and children fed and clothed?

Does honesty in dealing with immigration officials pay?

In the survival game played by immigrants, especially during their first years in this country, one cannot count on the immigration officials' understanding and sympathy. An immigrant may risk a speedy exit if the attached visa conditions are violated regardless of any force majeure. In any contract, the acute illness or death of one party ordinarily relieves him or her of contractual obligations but not in the case of visa conditions. The case of a relative of mine is proof of this. He wrongly assumed that the immigration officials would consider his force majeure in their evaluation of his case and as a result his family suffered for a long time.

My distant relative was a successful man who had a remarkable career in the financial sector in an oil-rich Arab country. In the late 1990s, he was admitted into Canada as an entrepreneur immigrant with the condition of establishing or buying a sustainable business. He was certainly better prepared to comply with this condition than me. He had more savings, was many years younger and had more knowledge and experience in business investment. Indeed, given all these qualifications and privileges, establishing a business, running it successfully and obtaining the approval of the immigration people should have been as easy as a walk in the park in summer and certainly nothing like a bare foot hop on hot sand. As the Arab proverb tells us, the wind does not always favour the sailor's plan. Soon after his arrival, he became seriously ill and was diagnosed with cancer. It was a devastating blow to his family and their dream of

establishing a safe and comfortable future in this country. As expected, all his resources, attention and time were diverted into getting his health back to normal. Any one in his place could think of nothing except his serious illness. I know this firsthand as shall be revealed later.

The two-year deadline for meeting his entrepreneur visa condition eventually passed and it was time to meet with immigration officials. Expecting a person who is terminally ill and emotionally overwrought to find the time and energy to set up and manage a business is extremely ludicrous and undoubtedly callous. My ailing relative was confident that the immigration authority would make an exception in his case setting aside the investment condition or at least giving him a time extension. He went to the interview with nothing but medical records of his serious illness and his faith in the fairness and compassion of the Canadian system but the immigration people strictly adhered to the rules and revoked his visas.

His last opportunity for remaining in Canada was filing an appeal with the immigration court. He did and lost the case. After hearing his plea, the immigration judge said: "This is not my business." Few months later, he died and was buried in Canada. From a different, albeit macabre perspective, he did score a win over the immigration people. They could not turn him out of this country after all but he left his young wife and three children stranded in a foreign country and under the constant threat of losing their temporary residency with nowhere else to go. Ten years later his family, and after many appeals that depleted much of their financial resources and patience, was still struggling to put their status in this country in order.

My dead relative bought a house and deposited a large sum of money in a Canadian bank and if it were not for his terminal cancer, he would have fulfilled the immigration's conditions. Another immigrant who made his fortune brokering arms sales to a Middle Eastern government met none of these conditions and his only proof of residency in Canada was renting a basement apartment yet he became a citizen.

The immigration authority had more sympathy for a convicted fraudster than my relatives. According to an article published in Toronto Life, he was still a landed immigrant when the police charged him twice for fraud. On the second time, he was convicted and sentenced to 12-month conditional discharge. A year later, the immigration authority granted him Canadian citizenship. When the police finally caught up with him ten years later, he had managed to rob millions of dollars from Canadians.

Several years ago, Canadian immigration authorities rejected my sister a visitor visa in spite of meeting all their conditions. We will probably not see each other in this life because we are now too old and frail to make the transatlantic journey. In contrast, these authorities saw fit to grant two of my Iraqi tormentors Canadian citizenship.

My joy was immense when my son told me that he wanted to propose to a nice girl originally from Iraq also. Some of my joy evaporated after learning her full name. My son was surprised when I told him that I could not possibly shake the hand of his intended father-in-law. He was one of my tormentors, a Saddam's partisan, who informed on me, reported my critical remarks to his superiors and threatened more serious repercussions. He disapproved also of my vehement refusal to give lectures to employees of the Saddam's security administration. I told my son that he would have my blessings but not my active participation in his marriage. He changed his mind after learning this.

My other ex-tormentor and current Canadian citizen was also a member of Saddam's Ba'th party. He was frequently absent from work on 'secret' paramilitary missions. He came back to boast of taking part in sabotage operations in a neighbouring country. Working as my assistant on a research project, he proved to be incapable of performing even the simplest of assignments. This confessed child molester was accused by the office secretary of harassment and stalking but his like-minded party members absolved him of any misconduct. His main reason for immigrating to Canada is probably fear of reprisal by Iraqi victims of Saddam's regime.

Granting these and possibly other Saddam's henchmen Canadian citizenship is like adding rotten apples to the proverbial barrel. A larder in which you store spoiled food is no longer a larder but a garbage can.

Choosing a business investment

We were landed immigrants or temporary residents until we prove ourselves worthy of Canadian citizenship. Two years was certainly a short time to accomplish this. My worst recurring nightmare is going to an exam unprepared and these two years were a continuous similar ordeal of a worse magnitude.

As if settling down in a new country, finding a home, looking after your children's education, getting accustomed to a different social environment and the frigid weather, and all the accompanying worries and difficulties were not enough we had to come up with a new business venture, launch and operate it successfully or buy an already established business. Before the end of our second year of residency, we were required to meet with immigration officials and convince them that we have met all conditions attached to our entrepreneur visa. If at the end of this period, we fail to satisfy these conditions or the immigration people are unhappy with the results of our efforts then it is farewell Canada.

My first business experience was managing my father's farm in Iraq for few months. Before harvest time, my half brothers chased me out and retook control. For very wealthy immigrants admitted in this category with business skills and experience, meeting the immigration conditions should be relatively easy. Immigrants who have limited funds, on the other hand, tend to procrastinate and as the deadline loomed nearer they would probably panic and rush into an investment that may not stand the rigorous and unsympathetic scrutiny of immigration officials. These timid entrepreneurs risk not only losing their immigration status, possible ejection from Canada and at least two years of their lives but also their precious savings.

Some wealthy new immigrants may have dishonestly amassed their fortunes. Most immigrants, however, have modest means and expect to make their fortunes here. They bring with them their hard-earned savings to cover expenses of the first months or years and pay a down payment on a house. They would probably agree with the Syrian proverb that likens the money a person earns with hard work to the blood running through his veins. Some may dismiss this as an exaggeration, but not for us who spent most of our adult lives working in tedious jobs, putting in long hours daily, and sometimes in countries far from home and family. This brings to my mind a story which spoiled nationals of oil-rich Gulf countries are fond of repeating to expatriates. An expatriate who had resigned his job and was finally returning to his country emptied the contents of his pockets and briefcase including a large amount of cash in front of the Saudi Arabian customs inspector. He was asked for an explanation and the expatriate answered: “This is my savings from working here for over 20 years,” and boastfully added: “It is your country’s money and I am taking it with me.” The customs official dryly commented: “You are taking our money but we took your youth in exchange”.

From a senior consultant to an apprentice

Before coming to Canada, I worked as a management consultant and advised private and public managers on how best to achieve their objectives and run their companies and ministries effectively and efficiently. After arrival, I went through an unpleasant transformation from a full-fledged senior consultant into an apprentice. Instead of giving consultations to others and being paid handsomely for them, it was my turn to seek help and advice regarding investment in Canada. My compulsory apprenticeship was made even more intolerable by the scarcity of mentors and other useful resources.

My only option was a self-taught crash course in business opportunities with nothing but other immigrants’ experiences to learn from. Unfortunately, most of the cases that came to my attention were of the ‘copycat’ variety, i.e. investments by

imitation. Relying on information provided by other immigrant investors was unwise given the possibility that an immigrant bragging about the success of his dollar store or gas station may simply be saving his face rather than helping you to find a good investment opportunity.

My brief education on businesses by new immigrants led me to identify two types of investors. There is first the kind who has enough capital for investment to afford buying a franchise from Macdonald, Tim Hortons or other reputable franchiser or engage in a business activity such as export and import in which he or she has some previous experience. These individuals have sufficient funds earmarked for this purpose and enough collateral to convince the most conservative of credit bankers to lend them additional funds to finance the establishment and initial operation of their businesses. In essence, the risk involved in these business ventures is relatively minimal, or at least adequately explored and accepted.

The second type of investor immigrants has limited funds, perhaps one hundred thousand dollars or less, and his or her investment options are severely constrained by his or her inability to raise more investment capital through borrowing and the fear of losing all or most of it due to high uncertainty and risk. It is common knowledge that the smaller the business the higher is the risk of failure, especially in the first years of operation.

I wanted to fully comply with the conditions laid down by the immigration people in order to obtain our Canadian citizenships in due time and to support my family without breaking any of my cherished values. Making the most of my limited financial resources was high on my list of priorities in my search for an investment venture. Buying a franchise certainly has its obvious appeal; the franchiser would not only assist in setting up the business but would also help in acquiring the needed additional capital and in the efficient running of the business. Although I suspected that my funds fell short of what is needed to buy a franchise, I decided to explore this alternative anyhow.

Buying a franchise

Much to my dismay, the capital requirements of most well-known and much-sought franchises such as Tom Hortons and Macdonald were beyond our limited finances. There were still few left on our list, and the most promising of them was a popular supermarket chain. My wife volunteered to contact their franchise department. The initial results were encouraging. The required minimum investment was within our means and they wanted us to undergo training for few weeks in one of their stores.

We were so excited about the idea of owning our supermarket franchise and almost certain of getting the final approval that we began planning the details of its day-to-day management. My wife made another telephone call to ask about how to proceed in applying for a franchise. The franchise manager, and after inquiring about our background, had a change of mind about our eligibility. In order to qualify for a franchise, he told her, one of us must have been working in one of their stores for five years at least. There was no mention of this condition during our first call and it would be impossible for anyone working in this chain for minimal wages to save enough money to qualify in five years or even fifty years. Naturally, our suspicion of discrimination was aroused and we speculated, admittedly without any concrete proof, that our names and background might have triggered red lights in the minds of the franchise owners or managers. That put an end to the franchise option.

If not a franchise then a store in the mall

Our second choice was a store in a mall. If my wife and children were to help in running the store, I wanted to make sure that they do it in a safe and secure environment. Commercial plazas do not provide the same degree of security for stores' staff as malls. An immigrant from my native country Iraq told me that he was robbed twice while working in a grocery chain store located in a plaza. During the first incident, the armed robber found only few dollars in the till—the bulk of the shift's proceeds were safely

deposited in a safe on the premises—and some zigzag papers. I never imagined that some Canadians still rolled their own cigarettes. Perhaps we could make a *muzaban* business here. I asked him in jest. During my childhood years, rural people in Iraq either rolled their own cigarettes or bought ready-made hand-rolled *muzaban*. It was one of the few businesses left to rural women to own and operate because men thought it was beneath them. Incidentally, these hard-working women may have discovered filtered cigarettes before international cigarette companies. The foot of their *muzaban* cigarettes is intentionally kept empty to collect some of the harmful tar. He assured me that Canadians would not be interested in our cigarettes and the man who robbed him intended to use the zigzag papers to roll marijuana or hashish joints.

My compatriot was better prepared for the second attempted robbery. Instead of opening the till and handing out the cash as ordered by the thief and required by the store's policy which strictly prohibit any confrontation in hold-ups, he took out a wooden club from under the counter. He was determined not to go through the humiliation and loss of face of another robbery again. His ploy worked. The robber lost heart and fled, and he chased him through the parking lot and into the main street nearby until he was out of breath.

My wife called a nearby mall to inquire about the availability of commercial properties and she was told there was one, and the rent was a quarter of a million dollar per annum. On top of that they had a profit-sharing condition; the mall took a percentage of your profit, as if there would be any profit remaining after paying the enormous rent. It was absurd; no small or medium-sized store in that mall could earn enough to pay that kind of rent and then give up part of its profits as well.

The first two options on our list of investment ideas were quickly shot down. We were disappointed naturally but the immigration people do not give you credit for unsuccessful attempts. It was time to learn from lessons of experience of other immigrants who went through the same ordeal before us.

Convenience store, newspapers stand etc.

The three most popular choices for immigrants with modest investment capital were a convenience store, a newspaper stall or a one-dollar store. We enlisted the help of a real estate agent in exploring these remaining options. He provided us with a voluminous printed list of all available commercial properties.

First, we tried the convenience stores. Since there only few stores for sale in the neighbourhood, we decided to draw a larger circle for our search and include properties within an hour drive from our home. After spending many hours of driving and checking out properties for sale, we concluded that none of them was a safe investment. One could tell by the amount of merchandise haphazardly stacked on shelves, the dirty and unkempt premises, and the disheveled appearance of the owner/salesperson that these stores were barely surviving or running at a loss. It appeared that no profit-making convenience stores were for sale at that time, which stood to reason. Could we buy any of the available ones and turn it around? It was highly improbable due to chronic inefficient management, bad locations, intense competition, or some or all of the above.

A newspaper stand or booth, preferably in a mall or even in a plaza located in a safe area, was next on our list of prospective commercial properties. A recent immigrant who was previously employed by my in-laws recommended that strongly. He bought a newspaper and tobacco store in a mall in Quebec and earned enough from it to support his large family. He used to call my in-laws from his store while he served a customer. “Do you hear the music *habibi*, my dear one, of the cash register? Dollars! Dollars!” he bragged happily on the phone. After the police served a warning on his son for selling cigarettes to minors, he sold his business and left Canada.

Selling newspapers and magazines may not be the crowning achievement of twenty-five years of formal education, a doctorate degree, several publications in Arabic and English and many years of valuable experience. Nevertheless, I had a deadline to meet and no time for wallowing in self-pity. There were few

newspaper stalls on sale, and one of them seemed to be the perfect choice. It was located within a supermarket which is a short drive from our home. It happened to be my wife's favorite supermarket, a gourmet emporium packed with continental connoisseur food. We went there several times to study it on location and were very much satisfied with it especially since it was much safer than a store in a plaza.

There was one issue which we thought minor at the time. We were prepared to buy the store and sign the long-term lease with the supermarket provided we do not have to sell lottery tickets, cigarettes or pornographic magazines. We are against these on religious, moral and ethical grounds. We called our friendly real estate agent to inform him of our decision. He doubted that the stall sold pornography but without the lottery tickets and the cigarettes, it was a worthless investment. Newspaper stores made most of their profit from the sale of lottery tickets and cigarettes. The location of the booth was very suitable and the asking price was within our means but we had to let it go.

We went back to the printed list of commercial properties provided by the real estate agent. We must have leafed through it more than ten times but we still could not find an attractive property. By then we were willing to consider what appeared at us at first as unthinkable or even outlandish. To illustrate our desperate situation we even looked into investing in a mushroom farm. It was made up of a small warehouse full of hay or whatever they use to stimulate mushroom spores into sprouting. The cost was ridiculously high for a damp and dark corner in a warehouse and few pales of hay but we looked into it seriously and because its success depended more on marketing the produce than anything else we dismissed it.

We returned the list to the real estate agent with our thanks and turned to 'our people', our last resort, for help.

Suggestions please!

If you were mainly interested in satisfying the immigration authorities rather than establishing a sustainable business, one

advised me, there are a number of businesses which are usually bought by immigrants for this purpose only. One of these businesses is bound to be on sale, he assured me. We can buy and run it until the immigration people lift the conditions on our visas and then sell it at more or less the buying price, but be prepared to incur a loss, he warned me. The cost is around 20 thousand dollars.

Another immigrant who claimed to be better informed, warned me against this. The immigration people may be lax sometimes but so many immigrants have used this scheme that the mere mention of it would ring Cathedral-size warning bells and awaken even the most somnolent of the immigration bureaucrats. Furthermore, it was rumored, according to my cautious advisor, that the immigration department had compiled a blacklist of all suspicious business properties that have changed hands many times among new immigrants.

Adam's butcher shop

It was essentially a wit pitting game between immigrants and the immigration officials. Immigrants want to establish or obtain a business with minimum investment and risk but must contend with immigration inspectors who disapprove of investments made for the sake of meeting their conditions only.

Almost everyone contacted in my search for an investment idea knew or heard about this butcher shop, which I shall refer to here by the fictitious name 'Adam's butcher shop' because to tell the truth its real name has completely slipped my mind. Even if I were to remember it, I could not possibly divulge it and betray the trust of fellow immigrants who confided in me. It is the unwritten code of conduct of new immigrants and we all are expected to honor it.

This butcher shop was, and may still be, part of the web of deception in which many immigrants weave around themselves as a protective shield against the rigid and complicated rules of their host country and its bureaucracy. The story of Adam's butcher shop was so widely known among immigrants that the

name eventually became a soubriquet or a code name used to refer to any business bought and sold by immigrants solely for the sake of complying with immigration conditions. When an immigrant looking for a business was thus asked if he wanted to buy Adam's butcher shop, he was not necessarily offered this particular property but any other similar business for the same purpose.

Choosing Adam's butcher shop has its appeal to the weak-hearted first-time investor who is terrified of the possibility of losing some of his hard-earned savings. I admit that I was tempted to walk the trusted and well-trodden path of purchasing a similar business, but finally my ethical values turned me away from this option. I chose the difficult and riskier alternative of starting my own business and paid a heavy price for it.

A company of my own

Incorporating my company was the easiest step in the process. It was deceptively too easy. Only two things were required: choosing a corporate name and paying the lawyer's fee. I finally chose to call my company after my father. At the time, I thought I was honoring his memory and I kept the company as long as it was possible. Our company was officially in the export and import business, a genre that was bound to impress all, but not the immigration people without the mandatory accounting proof. The suggestion came from my in-laws who also pledged their support in giving us some business. Soon after the incorporation of our company and true to their word, they put a number of orders through us for Canadian products including electronic systems, furniture and others. Negotiations were also under way to acquire multi-million businesses for my clients. However, the export-import business does not pay dividends until it acquires a niche, a clientele and a good reputation. Time was running out fast for us. Only months were left before the deadline and I was frantic with worries.

My constant preoccupation with diversifying my business finally paid off; I woke up one day with the idea of making educational board games. My products may not become as

successful as Monopoly or Trivial Pursuit but may at least improve our chances of getting immigration's approval. My wife and children were excited. We obtained our board games from supermarkets and toy stores but making one ourselves was a new experience. I am not an avid board game player but when my children wanted to play a board game, I usually indulged them. I enjoyed a game of Scrabble with my family, especially if I am winning, until the age of electronic games arrived and parental participation became superfluous.

My wife has always been my first and only fan; she encouraged me to let my thoughts and dreams carry me far, farther than other sensible wives usually allowed their husbands. I was confident our board game would be a success. The only evidence offered in support of my optimism was an invitation to visit the nearest Wal-Mart store to see that board games are still popular in Canada. When you hear Canadians proudly describing Trivial Pursuit as a successful Canadian 'invention' you would think it was a national achievement as significant as landing a man on the moon to the Americans.

My board game is about novels. It is played more or less like most board games. It consists of a board, die, tokens and three sets of cards: titles, plots and characters. Each player receives a number of cards bearing the titles of novels. He or she must then throw the die, move his or her token accordingly on the board, and draw more cards to find the two additional cards for each title, a plot card and a main character card, to complete a novel suit. The winner is the player who first gets full suits for all his or her title cards.

The book titles included a number of popular novels and classic plays most of which were made into films more than once. Since this game was intended for the whole family, it included three sets of titles, one each for children, teenagers and adults. The children titles consisted of fables and fairy tales such as Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty and the like. Adventure stories like Treasure Island and Ivanhoe made up most of the titles for teenagers. The adult titles were carefully selected to fall within the interests of average readers.

This was going to be the first of a series of educational games. A complete line of games was planned with new ones introduced every year in addition to new versions of the old ones. The list of titles and character and plot cards were ready, the board drawn and everything was all set for production, but for one obstacle. I had absolutely no idea where to print and package it. We searched the yellow pages and came up with few names and telephone numbers.

A thousand dollar fraud

The search for someone to make our board game proved to be more grueling than expected. After getting negative replies from several companies and just before despairing of ever finding one, there came a positive reply from a local company. The manager of this company, a first-generation immigrant like us, assured me that our product could be made here in Canada and at a cost well within our budget. We later met with one of his employee who reiterated her superior's promises, and asked for a retainer of one thousand dollars. Few weeks later, they called to say they were ready with a plan of action for our product, and an appointment was set for a meeting within few days.

A team of two female employees arrived to meet with us at our company's offices. Both of them came clad in short-length, body-tight skirts. It took the two women about five minutes to deliver their presentation and submit their recommendations. The gist of their proposal was to produce at twice our budgeted cost and to finance the deficit with a bank loan. Moreover, our company may be eligible for a government grant, a low-interest loan or some other form of financial support. They said they could lend us a printed volume of information on all government assistance programs.

Their proposal envisaged a unit cost of production at thirty dollars and a unit sale price of forty dollars. How many do you think are willing to pay that much for an ordinary board game when they can buy an electronic one for the same price or less? I asked. They did not bat their heavily mascaraed eyes as they

continued their relentless attempt to sell us their ludicrous ideas. After much patience on our part, I finally had to tell them that their suggestion was unacceptable because it widely deviated from my instructions and demanded a full reimbursement of my one thousand dollars. They refused to return the retainer claiming that their company incurred expenses in putting together this proposal. Next day, my wife insisted on calling the company manager to demand our money back and he refused claiming that as an Allah-fearing man he would never take our money unlawfully and then buy food with it for his children.

Finally a glimmer of hope

My hope of producing the board game was revived when by sheer coincidence I met someone who offered to help. He was in the publishing business which was unusual for a new immigrant. He confided in me that his business was not doing well and he needed to supplement his income. He obviously had the expertise and connections to produce a board game. His other favourable quality was our common cultural background. However, what finally made me put my trust in him was the story of his experience with the Iraqi dreaded security police. He told me that some time before coming to Canada he was summoned to appear at the headquarters of the security police in Baghdad. Anyone in his place would not have slept a wink, made his final will and testament and bid farewell to his family and friends, if he does not opt to go underground or flee the country altogether to avoid ending up in the torture chambers of Saddam's henchmen. He did none of these desperate measures and on the fixed date, he walked into the headquarters of the secret police quite unperturbed.

I worked for over three years in a government office not far from this security police headquarters. As I daily drove by it on my way to and back from work, I never gave it more than a cursory glimpse so that no one would ever suspect me of casing it up for an attack or giving it a disapproving look. The absurdity of our fear of the regime was that much and more. The enormous

structure was a virtual fortress surrounded by high concrete walls and towers with gun turrets inside.

Like him I was summoned by the security police but in Syria not Iraq. I was living in exile there after the Iraqi Ba'th regime refused to renew my passport. Many Iraqi victims of the draconian policies of their government resided in Syria which was ruled by a rival faction of the Ba'th party. Since my views on the Syrian government were kept to myself, there was no cause to worry. After presenting the summon, a security employee in civilian clothes led me to a chair under a staircase and instructed me to wait until my name was called. I sat in the uncomfortable wicker chair in that dank place inhaling the fumes of stale tea brewing on an antiquated kerosene primus nearby for about four hours. Many security officers came to order tea or chat with the tea boy, mostly ignoring me except for an occasional hasty glance. They were probably accustomed to the sight of persons confined to that chair waiting for their turn. It gradually dawned on me that the discomfort and humiliation of the long wait were intended to heighten my state of anxiety and soften my willpower for the ensuing interrogation. When it was my turn to face the interrogators, they were surprised to find me more irate than scared. My interrogation was short and focused on a letter to a former work colleague in Saudi Arabia. The suspicions of the secret police were aroused by the name of my colleague who shared the same family name of the Iraqi president retired by Saddam Hussain. They opened and read my letter and became even more suspicious by its contents. The letter expressed my gratitude for my colleague and others who refused to deliver to the Iraqi Embassy in Riyadh the contents of my employment record and noted that most Iraqi foreign service officials were either employees or informers of the security police. The Syrian interrogator who limped like Herr Flick the Gestapo character in the British comedy *Allo! Allo!*, wanted me to reveal the source for my claim regarding Iraqi diplomats and embassies personnel. It was common knowledge among Iraqis especially after Saddam came to power and transferred or removed all non-party members from the Foreign Ministry and enrolled all remaining and new

officials in ‘security’ training programs. A senior Syrian security officer sternly instructed me to return after few days with a solid proof of my allegation or else. My conclusion was that the Syrian interrogators were either total morons, working secretly for the Iraqis or were using intimidation to get a bribe. Bribes were often paid by Iraqis detained on false accusations to secure their release. Fortunately, their suspicions were eventually diffused not by lack of evidence but by a higher officer whom a relative interceded with him to vouch for my innocence.

There was a story going around in Iraq before my departure to voluntary exile that a university professor had a fatal heart attack while waiting for an audience with Saddam Hussein. Supporters of the regime said that the dictator expressed sadness upon learning of the incident. A more plausible reaction of the dictator to this tragic incident would be self-satisfaction with himself for living to his Machiavellian ideals by striking mortal fear rather than affection in the hearts of his subjects.

The person who was prepared to print my board game was also led to a reception area of the security police headquarters. He was not angry like me, did not panic as most people in his position would have and was not about to have a heart attack like the ill-fated professor. What actually happened, as he told me, was that he was overcome by heat in the reception area, became drowsy and fell asleep.

How could anyone hesitate to do business with a person with so much equanimity or inner peace of mind to fall asleep at the gates of Hades? I agreed to his terms without much negotiation. He delivered on time but the quality was below standard and the cost was excessive to the extent of making marketing my board game at a competitive price difficult, if possible at all. I also overestimated his courage because when he visited me at hospital after undergoing a major surgery he looked paler and more frightened than I was. As for innocence, even if one does have it initially, doing business in Canada, or perhaps anywhere in the world nowadays, would certainly cure him or her of it.

The marketing obstacle

Small businesses are the backbone of every economy in the world but are also the most prone to folding over. Our business was small and in its delicate infant years. To survive we needed to sell our products and since we had no experience in marketing it in Canada, we thought best to go to the experts. Most of the contacted marketing companies showed no interest in our small business or were fully engaged. The only one who was prepared to market our product demanded a hefty fee and his offer was unimpressive.

To make the story of our board game short, we managed to sell about a hundred of the thousand units we produced, and at one third of the cost of production. A bookstore manager agreed to take few but after about a month returned them claiming that none was sold because average Canadians do not read classic literature. After giving away a good number of them as gifts, we stored those left in our basement and eventually hauled them to the nearest recycling depot.

A number of bad decisions contributed to the failure of my project. Production costs were unduly high and a more economical venue for making it would have been China. Lack of a marketing plan was another critical flaw. However, this project may have been initially doomed in misjudging the reading habits of average Canadians by assuming that many of them must have read and still remembered the literary masterpieces of Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo and the plays of Shakespeare, or at least saw the Hollywood versions.

A consolation

Our board game was not a total loss, or so we liked to believe. We did lose many thousand dollars in making it but it had its undeniable benefits. We went to the fateful interview with the immigration people prepared with all the legal papers for our company and its business transactions.

The immigration interviewer looked into our documents and had few questions which I answered carefully. We had brought two board games with us as well tucked in a plastic bag and out of sight of the interviewer. My wife, without bothering to check with me, pulled out one of them and placed it on the desk, where it was bound to catch the attention of the interviewer. When the interviewer finally asked about it, she eagerly explained that it was our company's first product and it was made entirely in Canada, she added emphatically. Moments later, the interviewer collected our papers and the board game, disappeared into a back office, and after tense moments reappeared to inform us that the conditions on our landed immigrant status have been lifted. My wife still proudly remembers how impressed the immigration people were with our board game. They said it was different from the usual investments in a convenience store and never before a new immigrant came up with a new product, totally made in Canada.

V. The Hard Task of Making a Living

In my grand life plan, a postgraduate degree was all one needed to have a steady academic career, a respectable social status and sufficient income to support a family. Avoiding the stigma of being called a cowherd by my father was an additional motivator for pursuing a higher degree. What my tried and tested life blueprint did not anticipate was the disruptive force of a dictatorship. It took one decision by a lowly minion of the dictator to erase it.

Immigrating to Canada rekindled my hopes of putting my career and life back on track. My determination and optimism was at least as high as my fellow rural Iraqis who left their homes every day with the bucolic wisdom that promises an opportunity awaiting them between their front door and the road. I travelled a thousand times that distance and by the laws of probability I was entitled to one opportunity at least. And if my board game is not trivial enough to succeed in Canada, then surely my Western education would qualify me for a job. The immigration officer who interviewed us in Cyprus assured us of finding employment in Canada, and we believed her. She would not have raised our expectations without justification and she must have meant employment suitable for my qualifications and reasonable expectations.

Why was I confident of finding employment?

The answer to this question is bound to include some self-aggrandizement and if this is deemed immodest and boring, I suggest skipping this section.

I am not the kind of person who goes around flaunting his doctorate degree and it embarrasses me every time my wife insists on mentioning it. When my academic supervisor informed me that my student days are over and would soon go home with my degree, I was not jubilant. I remember saying to him, on a rather serious note, that it was only the beginning of another phase in

my life, and it was going to be a much more challenging one indeed. My wife reminded me the other day that we did not celebrate that occasion and less than ten days after graduation we returned to our home country. Since then, most days of my life were occupied with some work, on a job, in a library or at home. If circumstances beyond my control forced me to deviate from this rigid life routine, my guilt feelings were habitually triggered and demanded compensating for lost idle time sooner than later.

Maintaining an active life was relatively easy during my employment years but long stretches of unemployment in Syria and Canada severely tested my self-control and discipline. It was admittedly difficult but no matter how depressed and embittered my mood was I still managed to follow my self-imposed daily regimen. During the eight years of compulsory occasional employment in Syria, I managed to fill my days by reading, writing, translating and corresponding with colleagues in my field. I wrote and published books in English and Arabic, contributed numerous articles to prestigious academic and professional journals and maintained an active membership in academic associations. A distinguished British scholar who was also an editor of a leading scholarly journal wrote to me one day expressing his amazement at my ability to produce publishable manuscripts without any institutional support and in Syria of all places, a developing country lacking in modern rudimentary research resources at that time.

You can imagine my pride and frustration when one day an invitation arrived from the organizer of a conference on management in Arab countries to deliver the keynote address. I regrettably declined the invitation for lack of travel documents. The convener later informed me that the late King Hussein of Jordan agreed to address the conference.

A major publishing house approved my proposal to launch a new journal and offered me a place on its editorial board. It is ironic that few years after arriving here, my place on the board was lost. What was gained in Syria with tremendous effort and against all odds vanished in Canada.

Hobbies filled up most of available little free time. My favourite two hobbies were painting and poetry and a number of my poems composed in Syria were published in poetry magazines in the U.K., the U.S. and Canada.

To test my eligibility for employment, applications were sent to few academic institutions in Western countries knowing in advance that it was a lost case because of my expired passport. There were a number of rejections but also two colleges in the U.S. were interested in interviewing me. Staying abreast of developments in my field of specialization, and writing and publishing research papers were expected to bolster my chances of getting a job when my compulsory idleness is over. Fortified with confidence in my qualification, abilities and passion for work, my search for employment in Canada began in earnest.

One hundred+ job applications

Given my academic qualifications and previous employment record, a teaching job was naturally my first preference. Surely, there must be an open spot right for me in one of the many Canadian universities and any university in any province would have been good enough.

Several visits to the Reference Library in downtown Toronto produced a comprehensive list of all universities and details about their academic schools and faculties. A number of these universities advertised their need for candidates with my qualifications and applications were promptly sent to these and other Canadian universities. My readiness to accept any suitable position was made abundantly clear in my applications. My willingness to put aside what my years of experience and numerous publications entitled me to and accept any junior academic position was a major but necessary sacrifice. Some may consider this a tactical mistake because it could be interpreted as a sign of low self-confidence and desperation.

Most universities wrote back assuring me that my application was under consideration. The first rejection letter was disappointing but hope was not lost. More similar—almost

identical—letters followed beginning with the same expression of regret and ending with the monotonous best wishes for me in my search for employment elsewhere and then there was none. All Canadian universities rejected me.

Giving up was not an option. If Canadian universities were not impressed with my credentials then perhaps colleges would find them good enough. A doctorate is not usually a prerequisite qualification for a teaching post in a college and my many years of training experience were a certain advantage. With undiminished enthusiasm, applications were dispatched to several colleges inquiring about employment opportunities. All responses were negative and further inquiries about part-time work received similar replies.

When you come from a rural area in a third-world country and painstakingly climb up the educational and job ladder to reach a spot near the top you expect to spend the rest of your career basking in the warmth of your accomplishments. Coming to Canada to see all this warmth dissipates with the frost of the first two winters is a devastating shock.

Eventually, a local university invited me for a job interview. It came in response to my application for a part-time summer teaching job in an MBA course in human resources management. After such a long dry spell in my job hunting, even a small catch would have been enough. My determination to make it a success led me to read every available source on the subject of human resources in Canada. To my satisfaction, my knowledge of management principles in Western countries including Canada was adequately up-to-date but on the day of the interview I was more nervous than on my first actual job interview.

There were two academics waiting for me but only one of them asked questions while the other watched and listened. The interviewer's line of questioning was unusual and provocative. At the end of the interview, he asked me to prepare a course plan with details on the topic for discussion, case studies and other sources.

My curiosity about the other silent interviewer led me to look up her resume on the university's website. It is sufficient to say

that after learning about the nationality and affiliation of that silent participant, my hopes of getting that assignment were dashed. To my satisfaction, I also found out that my publications in prestigious academic journals exceeded those of both interviewers. The possibility that my interview was a mere gesture to pay lip service to recruitment policies crossed my mind but did not affect my determination to present an impressive course plan.

Weeks passed without a reply from the university. After the beginning of summer session, there was doubt that someone else was chosen to give the course. Their neglect to inform me of their final decision was not only grossly unprofessional but also downright inconsiderate and rude. Several phone calls and voicemail messages to the professor went unanswered. After a long delay, he finally replied informing me that another candidate was found more suitable. He also added that my knowledge of management in my part of the world was undeniable, or words to that effect. There must be many better-qualified Canadians in this field although it is doubtful that many of them would be interested in accepting a part-time summer assignment at that university. The second part of his statement merited more attention. His recognition of my expertise on Arab management was a novel variation on the same old reason mentioned ad nauseum for not accepting me, i.e. irrelevant experience or lack of Canadian experience. After spending more than ten years of my life studying Western management theories and applications and then ten more years doing research, training and consulting work based on the same principles, a mediocre academic in an obscure Canadian university had the gall to justify his prejudiced decision by telling me that my knowledge and experience are relevant only to my country of origin.

If my knowledge and experience are worthless in Canada as judged by that academic and the likes of him then my chances of succeeding as either an entrepreneur or an employee are slim and the immigration authorities should not have admitted me into this country in the first place. The lesson learned is that highly qualified immigrants should stay away from Canada.

Losing heart

Like a stubborn boxer in the twilight years of his career, I was willing to take the humiliation of repeated defeats by younger and more ambitious boxers for the sake of another match. That boxer's mind—even if now muddled by countless punishing punches and nagging worries—is keenly aware of the heavy odds against him. Like that hopeless boxer, I was prepared to downgrade my expectations and seek bouts or challenges much below my qualifications.

After giving up on a teaching post, my next target was the management consulting market and there was nothing for me there except more knockouts. My descent to the bottom rung on my career ladder left me with two options: quit searching or jump to another career. Any job was better than nothing so the search went on with a completely open mind to all possibilities and very modest expectations. A daily browse through the classified ads in major newspapers netted a number of job opportunities within my field of expertise. None of these were managerial positions or senior positions requiring more than five or more years of experience. My applications were mostly ignored and the few replies usually pointed out my lack of Canadian experience.

I know why they rejected you!

My wife told me that she had found out why Canadian employers would not give me a job while we drove from Pearson International airport to our home. She had arrived from her cross-Atlantic flight with the usual excess luggage and this revelation. Even her jet lag did not stop her from telling me the story of how she stumbled on this. On her flight from London, she struck up an acquaintance with a young woman sitting next to her. After the customary questions about nationality—she is English—marital status and other demographics exchanged by fellow travelers on long trips, she told my wife that she was on her way to take an academic position in a Canadian university. Her traveling acquaintance also told her that she managed to obtain this position

thanks to the ‘good word’ put by a friend who happened to know someone at that Canadian university. At that point, my wife mentioned the difficulties facing me in getting even an interview. The English academic was not surprised to hear that because she knew from firsthand experience that in most cases they already have a candidate groomed for the job. An insider or a member of the applicant’s network often recommended the lucky candidate who got the jobs. What about the applications sent by my husbands and others, my wife asked. After the initial acknowledgment replies, if any, these are thrown in the dustbin. “I have seen them doing it,” the English woman confided in my wife.

I had suspected that all along but refused to believe it before hearing this confirmation and then all the supporting evidence came back to my mind. It was my turn to remind my travel-weary wife about the experiences of two friend in academia in the U.S. and one neighbour here. A friend whom I helped in getting job offers and several highly rewarding part-time assignments in the Middle East told me how he obtained his job in a North American university. He was near graduation and desperate for a job to pay his student debts and had asked me to help him in his search at my end. He later told me that before that job offer from my end arrived he received a call from an ex-classmate. Apparently, this acquaintance was then working in another university, heard about a job opportunity, and wrote to ask if he was interested. My friend who preferred to stay in the US did apply and with the support of his ex-classmate landed the job.

If you do not know someone in a university your chances of getting a job there are quite slim, another friend who is now a college dean in a prestigious American advised me. He was kind enough to give me a good recommendation and solicited the help of an acquaintance at a Canadian university but his request was ignored.

This was the typical case not only in universities but also in public and private establishments, as one neighbour told us. We were invited to this neighbour’s house, a rare honour in our experience of the Canadian social scene, and our hostess

introduced us to another guest. She referred to him as her benefactor or patron whose help was instrumental in securing her senior position at Markham municipality. New immigrants like me are frequently patronized by other Canadians but never offered the help of a patron.

By then, my wife was thoroughly exhausted by the long flight and my lengthy much-repeated and boring denunciation of Canadians in general and especially employers and could not overcome her jetlag any longer. Was there any consolation in finding another piece of evidence proving that my joblessness was the result of employers' prejudices rather than my qualifications? Absolutely none!

Other immigrants also complained

During a cursory search of the internet lately, two legal cases of highly qualified new immigrant alleging discrimination by Canadian academic institutes came to my attention. It was good to know that because if others also suffered such discrimination then it cannot be my paranoia. In the first case, the plaintiff was an academic of East Indian origin who fought it all the way to the high court. The gist of her lawsuit can be gleaned from the following excerpt from the court's ruling:

“...The plaintiff is a highly educated woman of East Indian origin with an earned Ph.D. degree in mathematics. She holds a valid Ontario teaching certificate and has had seven years' teaching experience in the field of mathematics. In response to newspaper advertisements placed by the defendant College, the plaintiff made some ten separate applications for a teaching position... She was never given an interview nor any reason for the rejection of her applications. She alleged that the positions for which she applied were filled by others without her high qualifications but who were not of East Indian origin. She claimed that there was discrimination against her because of her origin...She claimed damages for being deprived of

teaching opportunities at the College in which she was still interested and for being deprived of the opportunity to earn a teaching salary. Moreover, she suffered mental distress, frustration, loss of self-esteem and dignity, and lost time in repeatedly applying for advertised positions for which she was denied the opportunity to compete.

The second case that came to my attention at random also involved a highly qualified recent immigrant who sued a Canadian university for the same reason. While two cases do not prove that Canadian academia systematically discriminate against new immigrants, these serve to confirm my worst assumptions about them. Whether these immigrants won or lost their cases was of no concern to me because even if they did win how many new immigrants have the resources, time and patience to pursue litigation. If these employers systematically discriminate against immigrants, or certain categories of them, then one may win one legal battle against them but not the war that would put an end to all discrimination.

“Embellish your c.v.”

We were always told that honesty is the best policy even by people who neither believed in this moral principle nor lived by it. It is admittedly easier said than practiced most of the time. It was even more difficult in my country of origin Iraq where an honest opinion may land you in jail or even on the gallows. My fellow Iraqis learned the necessity of ingratiating themselves with tyrannical regimes and its henchmen. It was a survival strategy. My immigration in Canada was the price paid for refusing to join their ranks.

In Canada where personal freedoms, and especially freedom of opinion, are highly cherished, people presumably uphold the truth and are aptly rewarded for it. The retired immigrant whom we encountered one afternoon while taking a walk around the neighbourhood strongly disagreed with that assumption. He believed that in order to survive here one must not tell the whole truth and lie sometimes.

It was recognition at first sight which serves to prove that national character or ethnic type can be identified from facial features and other culturally or ethnically determined behaviours. After exchanging few words on the sad situation back in the old country and the harsh Canadian winter, he asked about my work. He was not surprised to learn of my unemployment in spite of my better than average credentials and then he asked about the contents of my resume. He shook his head in disapproval at my assertion that my resume truthfully reflected my qualifications. He told me that after his arrival almost twenty years ago, he wrote a nice resume with details of his degrees and work experience, mailed it to potential employers, and waited for their replies. He remained unemployed until one day someone gave him the advice which he was now going to pass on to me. ‘Embellish your resume!’ he said. If they want Canadian experience on your resume then by all means give it to them. The next day he wrote a new version of his resume with fake Canadian work experiences of the variety and length that would satisfy Canadian employers. Not long after, he found a suitable job and continued to work until his retirement few years ago. The unexpected encounter with the resume embellisher was disturbing. I spent thirty years of my life building up my resume with genuine academic achievements, work experience and several publications only to be told that it must be ‘enhanced’ with fabrications. It was a disturbing revelation because if employment can only be obtained through dishonesty then hoping to find work in Canada was futile. This also raised in my mind the question of who should be blamed: the resume embellisher and his mentor(s) or Canadian employers and their prejudices. In my opinion, all of them are guilty as charged.

My resume the culprit

The resume embellisher was not alone in practicing this kind of deception. Actually, there was more of his kind than of mine. More than half of all job applicants in a survey sample reportedly lied in their resume and the percentage of college graduates prepared to do that was even higher, according to one source. In

a recent article in Forbes published on the internet, it was assumed that almost every resume includes a lie of one kind or another. Contrary to what dramaturgical sociologists would expect, not only the meek low-grade employees indulged in it but also powerful business executives and senior government bureaucrats.

Almost everyone else who knew about my unsuccessful search for employment wanted me to rewrite my resume. A photocopy store owner and after looking at my resume before feeding it to his machine told me that my resume needed the touch of someone who knew what Canadian employers expected to see in it. He offered to do it for a bargain fee of two hundred dollars as a special gesture for a fellow Muslim, *Alhamdulillah*, Allah be thanked. My resume he claimed was cluttered and if given the opportunity and fees he would remove all those unnecessary details. Though he was right in assuming that employers may be discouraged by my academic qualifications, omitting them by itself is not only a deception of a sort but would also leave a yawning gap in my resume which can only be covered with more lies.

Recruiting agency

It was a very tempting advertisement, especially for a desperate person like me. The recruiting agency claimed to have access to thousands of jobs in all fields of specializations including higher education. I called the same day and made an appointment for the following week.

The recruiter asked me few questions and then gave me a brief presentation of their services. As recruiters for numerous employers in Canada and the U.S., his company has inside knowledge of job vacancies in hundreds of companies and public agencies. His staff will carefully study my resume and provide me with a list of opportunities suitable for my qualifications and preferences. Their services fees was around five thousand dollars to be paid in advance. My initial excitement evaporated leaving me with just enough curiosity to ask if employment is guaranteed. Although no assurance of employment was given, their clients

usually found jobs. He also insisted on payment of their fees in advance rather than in the form of deductions from future pay earned in jobs 'secured' by his firm.

He must have misread my body language because he then offered to arrange for a second meeting in my wife's presence to finalize the agreement. By that time, my disappointment and self-pity stopped me from asking him about the reason for bringing my wife to the second meeting. What kind of a person stoops to profit from the despair of a new immigrant? A typical con artist usually takes advantage of the greed of his victims but these sham recruiters exploit the need of immigrants to find employment and provide for their families with dignity. They were not the first scoundrels I came across in Canada and certainly not the last but they were undoubtedly some of the worst.

A distant relative of mine by marriage succumbed to the machinations of this recruiting agency or a similar one. His wife told us that in exchange for four thousand dollars her husband received a website address featuring a list of suitable jobs. It must take many gullible victims like my relative to pay for the expenses and salaries of these scoundrels.

Networking is the solution!

After my encounter with the recruitment's scammers who were out to get my last dollar, I decided to pay a visit to the nearest human resources centre. A cordial receptionist, and after inquiring about my need, instructed me to fill out a form. After checking all the qualifications and other requirements for posted jobs at the centre, my desperate situation became all clear to me. If my age was not the obstacle then it was the wrong gender, being overqualified, and lacking Canadian experience. My chances of getting even a beginner's job were practically nil.

The following week, my despondency sent me to the same human resources centre to attend a seminar on improving my job-hunting skills. The trainer turned out to be a young woman, probably the same age as my elder daughter. It was a humbling experience being lectured by someone who probably had just

finished high school and with little if any experience. She admittedly had one significant advantage all over us—being employed. The delicate moment arrived when it was my turn to introduce myself and mention my qualifications. Neither she nor fellow attendees were surprised at my presence among them. Apparently, it was a common thing for a man in his fifties with my qualifications to attend such a seminar.

The gist of her message to all of us wretched trainees was to network. She was obviously ignorant of how difficult networking is to new immigrants whose few acquaintances are new or recent immigrants struggling to make a living, working in odd jobs or living off social security. She managed to skirt my question and move to another topic

Back in our native country, networking is similar to *wasta* or intercession by which a person gains preferential consideration or benefits regardless of eligibility. Resort to intercession deprives other better-qualified candidates from getting a fair chance of consideration for jobs. Here in Canada, they put another label on this unethical corrupt practice and it becomes legitimate and acceptable.

The last resort

During my next visit to the human resources centre, a receptionist told me that the only available jobs were in warehouses. My willingness to apply for one of these jobs was vehemently opposed by the young man who encouraged me to continue my search for a more suitable position. Did the young man take pity on me or did he consider my request an affront to his country where highly qualified people do not work in menial jobs?

After breaking the self-pride barrier in my job hunt, I applied for all jobs advertised in the help wanted columns. If my applications were ever read, then my qualifications must have been deemed unsuitable for a variety of jobs including library assistant for stacking books in a public library, bookkeeper, low-level administrator and the like.

New immigrants tell many stories about fellow university professors, doctors, engineers and other professional who had to work as gas station attendants, taxi drivers and grocery store salesmen. One university professor from my native country was hired to collect medical samples from clinics and transport them to designated laboratories. More recently, an immigrant who worked as a night guard along with his son, a graduate of York University, had this honest advice for his son-in-law who expressed his desire to immigrate to Canada: “unless you are prepared to forget your present well-paid job and accept any kind of position such as night guard or pizza delivery boy STAY PUT!” Though his wife and daughter were disappointed with this advice, they could not deny it was the bitter truth.

Medical doctors with non-Canadian certificates must bear the agony of attending classes and sitting for exams before being permitted to practice their professions here. To begin with, they have to compete for the few available spots. What advice did one critic of the current licensing system had for immigrants with foreign medical diplomas? Stay away! Two medical doctors who did not heed this advice had to make tremendous adjustments and sacrifices. One of them is currently working as a medical technician after taking the necessary training program. The other doctor obtained his license after completing the required program of training in a remote city in northern Canada which he said was as cold as the North Pole. He has the right to be proud of his achievement though it may have come late because by then he was near retirement. He advised me to follow his example. He was only an acquaintance and it would have been impolite to tell him off by reminding him that his degree is from a university in a third-world country while mine is from a fully-accredited British university and since graduation my publications entitled me to more than one additional doctorate. Even if his advice was taken, what guarantee there is of getting an academic job after spending three more years of my life and tens of thousands of dollars of my shrinking funds in studying for another degree?

Self-employment

After exhausting all other options, there was nothing left but self-employment. Describing oneself as self-employed is sometimes misconstrued as a cover-up for chronic unemployment and if this is the case, it is better to admit the truth rather than be branded as unemployed and a liar on top of it. By then, even bogus promises of earning thousands of dollars weekly from working at home were appealing but my good judgment was stronger than my desperation and stopped me from buying their guidebooks.

My first serious self-employment project involved marketing brochures. Trainers in the Middle East like myself frequently made use of training hardware and software, such as overhead projectors, transparencies and training films. Most of these were bought from local dealers of American and European suppliers but many companies did not have dealers or representatives in the area and their share of the market was marginal. This inspired the idea of compiling a directory of training aids businesses interested in selling their products in Middle Eastern markets. Training films was the theme of my first directory which would offer small and medium-size companies exposure in these high-demand markets.

The first phase of this project involved visiting a number of libraries in search for targeted companies and this culminated in a list of the names and addresses of tens of Canadian and American companies. Letters were sent to all of them informing them of my proposed directory and offering to include them in it in return for a commitment to pay a very reasonable fee. Their sponsorship would also entitle each of them to a copy of the directory. Other copies would be forwarded to all universities, training companies and agencies and other potential customers in Middle Eastern countries. It should be mentioned here that this was before widespread use of the internet. The fee demanded was much less than the cheapest airfare for a one economy class round trip to the area. Few replies came back and most of them declined my offer. One wrote saying that he would be interested in having

his company listed in my second directory after seeing the first one.

The idea for the next directory or guidebook came to me after few visits to one of the most prestigious cultural establishment in Toronto. According to the ticket clerk who answered my query, this establishment did not offer its thousands of visitors every year a guidebook for future visits and as a memento. Preparing a guidebook with information about its mission and exhibits occupied my thoughts on our drive home. My wife listened attentively to my plan about promoting the opening of similar establishments in Middle Eastern countries, especially oil-rich nations that would probably be interested in such a project for prestigious reasons if nothing else.

That same day, a letter was sent to the management of that establishment outlining my two-prong proposal. First, my company undertakes to collect necessary material, photograph exhibits and print the brochure in return for a profit-sharing arrangement. Second, consulting and marketing services will be provided in launching similar establishments in Middle Eastern countries in partnership with local governments or private investors. Few days later, someone from the establishment called to inform me rather curtly that they have been working on a guidebook for some time and therefore my services are not needed. After that call, my attempts at self-employment came to an abrupt end.

A writing business?

One of my cherished dreams was becoming a poet, a novelist and an author of important works of fiction and nonfiction. This dream was stronger than all the stories about the wretched lives led by many writers and artists and the confessions of some aspiring writers who sometimes resorted to shoplifting to feed themselves. Dedicating my life to the pursuit of the sublime letters was a highly risky choice but my aspirations remained strong. At an early stage in my life, a compromise was reached between my creative inclinations and real life obligations; my

professional career would always take precedence while my writing would remain in the background as my principal hobby.

During my unemployment years in Canada, my hobby became my main preoccupation producing several books and numerous articles and poems. While I sat and wrote for endless hours, I could not rid myself of feelings of guilt for indulging my hobbies rather than doing gainful work. Unfortunately, all my attempts to get my works published failed and no literary agent or publisher here bothered to read any of them.

How do I explain my unemployment to my children?

There is a virtual pulpit in our family room from which my sermons on the value of education were repeatedly delivered to my children until my voice became hoarse and their boredom was visible. I wanted them to believe that education is necessary for finding gainful employment here and for achieving a better understanding of their world. However, my chronic unemployment was threatening to undermine all my well-thought and eloquently composed arguments. My children were old enough to observe my unsuccessful attempts to find any job and witness my frustration and pain. My fervent defense of higher education was pure theory unsupported by the fact that not all my diplomas could get me one humble job.

Fearing that our children would lose faith in education, my mind toyed with the idea of pretending there was a job. This would be for the sole reason of maintaining their delicate trust in education and not protecting my image as the breadwinner in my family. My wife was more saddened than shocked by my preposterous idea. By then, my sense of self-pride was in negative territory for an unhealthy long stretch. I imagined myself waking up like all employed people, putting on a formal work suit, picking up my briefcase, and then driving my children to their schools on my way to my fictitious job. In the afternoon, the charade of coming back from work would be acted. The possibility of my children discovering my ruse finally buried this terrible thought.

Lie about your job to preserve your face

Another immigrant who actually had a job decided to lie to her family about what it really was. She worked as a salesperson in a chain department store. My wife worked in the same store for few months and became acquainted with her. Before immigrating with her family from Iran to Canada, she was a high school science teacher. Like many immigrants, her diploma and work experience were not recognized here and she had to work as a sales assistant in a store to supplement her husband's wages, who also had to put aside his engineering qualifications and work as an unskilled labourer in construction. My wife remembers her anger at her husband when he showed up at her place of work one day in his stained work jumpsuit.

The ex-school teacher was unhappy with her job which she thought to be beneath her social status. It was unthinkable for her, she told my wife, to tell her family in her home country that she worked as a sales assistant. It would cause her tremendous embarrassment and loss of face. She would be ashamed to go back to visit them after that because every time one of them laughed she would wonder if it were at her and her lowly job.

There was only one way out of her predicament, she said. She made up a story about being the owner-manager of a large company with many employees. She told this fabricated story to all her relatives including her old mother. In that tall tale, my wife was one of her company's employees in addition to all the sales assistants who worked with her. She was determined to carry on with this make-belief story if her mother decided to visit her in Canada one day and wanted my wife to promise to act her part.

Lessons learned in unemployment land

In the beginning, there is a cultural shock and then the inevitable acculturation or alternatively packing your suitcases and going back to where you came from. All immigrants who choose to stay go through a process of acculturation in which they adjust their old attitudes and behaviours and acquire new ones.

The dynamics and pace of this process differ from one person to another depending on the nature of his or her original culture and individual characteristics.

In the Middle East, the rule of thumb on acculturation is as follows: you become a full member of a community after living forty days among them. No one knows exactly why it takes one forty days and not thirty or a hundred to become like a native. The number forty, however, does feature prominently in the belief systems of Middle Eastern people. Forty is believed to be the age of maturity and full manhood. In addition, the dead is mourned on the fortieth day after burial.

If on the fortieth day an immigrant becomes a true Canadian what does he or she learn in such a short time regarding securing his or her means of livelihood? Regardless of whether one is an immigrant or not, first priority is always given to survival here. The dictates of survival must be heeded at all costs. Surviving in Canada is a tremendous challenge for many immigrants. Walking from Bloor Street south on Yonge Street in Toronto, any immigrant can witness in person the nightmarish consequences of failing in the survival game in this country. Ending up homeless or living in a shelter and subsisting on soup chicken handouts is a fate worse than death for many. I sometimes suspect Canadian authorities of intentionally keeping a good number of vagrants in downtown Toronto as a dire warning to immigrants of what awaits them if they fail to adjust and follow the established rules in the Canadian game of survival.

When an immigrant is discriminated against in the labour market, he or she may do things that one normally would not do. Many immigrants experience their first months in Canada as a crisis inviting desperate measures. This is why some of them are prepared to break some of their honoured moral values and ethical codes, if necessary, to increase their chances of survival.

Survival was first on the minds of those who advised me to embellish my resume, omit some of my credentials from it or buy inside information on the job market. If it is the only way then you have to do it provided you can escape retribution. In this situation, survival becomes the supreme law and its dictates

supersede both divine and civic laws. We see this also in the readiness of some immigrants to hide some of their earnings from the tax authority and to falsify their marital status in order to claim more benefits. These immigrants may suffer no moral qualms or guilt in defrauding the government because to begin with their perception and experience of all governments are generally negative.

A new immigrant is expected to seek the advice of other immigrants who arrived before him or her on how to maximize his or her gains in all official transaction. Soon after arrival, this immigrant would learn that he and his wife could significantly increase their welfare payments or after-tax income by claiming to be separated or divorced. The additional income obtained through this fraud would still keep the immigrant barely above the subsistence level. Since they blame the Canadian authorities and society for some or all of their ordeals, immigrants may pursue this fraud vigorously. These immigrants, convinced that the Canadian government has lied to them in promising more than it actually delivers, will not hesitate to lie back at it.

This divorce fraud put my wife in an embarrassing situation one day. She was actually trying to be helpful when she strongly denied the claim of a Canadian official that an immigrant couple whom we knew were divorced. When she mentioned this to one of their neighbours, she was surprised to learn that they were also into the divorce fraud.

Was I a victim of job discrimination?

My failures in finding employment also gave me few valuable perspectives on the general work practices of Canadian employers and especially their attitudes toward employing new immigrants. Lack of Canadian experience is the favored justification used by employers to dismiss job applicants. There is no doubt in my mind that it is simply a pretext to exclude new immigrants from the job market. It may not always be motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious prejudices or chauvinism; members

of a profession may use it solely to keep immigrants out of their professional job market because the fewer of them the higher their earnings. To illustrate, if restrictions on the accreditation of immigrant medical doctors were lifted, locally qualified doctors would earn less.

Before the federal and provincial governments issued human rights codes, exclusionary covenants were formed aimed at discriminating against ‘undesirable elements’ or people of ‘objectionable nationality’. One of these covenants known as the Asiatic Exclusion League lobbied for imposing restrictions on the entry of Asian nationals and the preservation of a ‘white Canada’. Asian workers who were subjected to harassment by the Leaguers protested by refusing to go to work resulting in a halt of production in factories and mills and as a result the need for Asian labourers became painfully evident. In 1945, a ruling by the Ontario High Court deemed such covenants unlawful and invalid.

Exclusionary covenants are outdated but the objectives and sentiments behind them are still alive. Employers nowadays are more subtle when they refuse a candidate on grounds other than merit. It is usually difficult to determine that an employer has discriminated against a candidate on the bases of creed, colour, race, national origin or simply for being a recent immigrant. However, immigrants whom I met are of one mind in assuming that when an employer cites lack of Canadian experience as the reason for not giving them jobs it is often a pretext.

Many of the immigrants known to me blame cultural barriers and prejudices for the serious problems they encountered here and especially finding suitable jobs. Most of them may not be as fortunate as the first-generation immigrant who told me this story: “I came here almost twenty years ago. For many months I searched everywhere for a job and everywhere I went they told me we could not employ you because you do not have Canadian experience. Finally, my luck changed and I found a job in a major electronics company. After I got to know the people in the company well I told the human resources manager about the difficulties I faced in finding

a job and he admitted that recruiters insist on Canadian experience because they prefer to employ their own kind and not new immigrants.”

If immigrants are denied employment, how can they ever get the required Canadian experience? Whether it is a ploy to exclude them from employment or not, the lack of Canadian experience has effectively deprived many immigrants from working in their fields of expertise.

In Ontario where I live but could not find a job, it is the law that every person is free and equal in dignity and rights without regard to race, creed, colour, sex, marital status, nationality, ancestry or place of origin. However, some employers do not always adhere to this norm. A recent study by a University of British Columbia Economics professor Paul Oreopoulos showed that applicants with English names are 40 per cent more likely to get responses than those with non-English names. It should be noted here that all resumes presented to employers reported identical Canadian work experiences and educational backgrounds. In a newspaper article published by the Vancouver Sun, the researcher gave the following explanation for these alarming results: “In cases where the employer requires the hire to be very good at English, then consciously or unconsciously, they may have a concern when looking at their resume. The other possibility is preference-based discrimination: the employer, consciously or unconsciously, prefers to have applicants of the same ethnicity working for them.” If all applicants have ‘identical Canadian work experiences and educational background’ as the article confirmed then the language proficiency explanation should be dismissed leaving only ethnic discrimination. Should I have changed my name as some immigrants do? With all due respect to them, changing my name will not cover up my ethnic identity and I am unwilling to sacrifice this in order to curry favour with bigoted employers.

It was interesting to read some of the comments on this article posted on the website of the Vancouver Sun. While many commentators decried what they saw as blatant ethnic discrimination by employers, a significant number of readers

either denied the existence of any discrimination or justified it by claiming that employers from all ethnic groups in Canada favour members of their ethnic group.

The knowledge that I am one of countless victims of employment discrimination in Canada does not give me any relief. Nothing can be said or done that will take away or lessen my feelings of bitterness against the numerous employers who rejected my job applications outright and without giving me the opportunity to advance my case through an interview.

We have a wise saying back in our home country: A poor person is a stranger in his own country. Failing to find gainful employment to support my family and myself was a terrible blow but worse than that was my eventual admission that it was permanent. Assuring me of abundant work opportunities in Canada was a deception and I fell for it out of desperation and against my better judgment. The assurances of the immigration official who interviewed us in Cyprus and eight years of forced unemployment led me to believe her. Had she been more candid about my work prospects, she and her superiors in the Canadian government would be blameless of any deception, intentional or not.

Is it unrealistic to expect government officials to give us all the facts about the labour market for immigrants before issuing us with immigration visas? If these officials had performed their duties properly, our visas would have been given to another family in which the major breadwinner is not burdened by graduate degrees and previous experience and more willing to accept any job Canadian employers are willing to throw at him.

VI. No Wealth How about Health Then?

One of the major attractions of Canada is its health services. Every one praised the high quality of these services, and the fact that it was free. Most of these testimonials came from relatives and friends who read or heard about them. We were ready to believe everything good said about Canada. Being in our late forties, my wife and I were at the age when health concerns forced themselves on our attention and we wanted the best in everything for our children, including health services of course. The free high-quality health services offered by Canada were definitely the icings on the Canadian cake, or so we thought

Regrettably, Canadian health services sometimes did not measure up to our high expectations. My closest encounter with the health establishment came during the diagnosis of my lung cancer and subsequent surgery and this left me with lingering doubts and aggravations. My evaluation of these services is from the perspective of the lay patient only. An oriental sage once said: the best gift anyone could give me is an inventory of my faults and shortcomings. I hope that my critical comments on Canadian health services will be received with a pinch of this wisdom.

A minor surgery

My wife believed that my hard labour in the garden during our first year precipitated my first operation. Our backyard was in a state of neglect, like almost everything else in the house we bought and with the onset of spring, I was busy cutting down overgrown trees, trimming bushes, weeding and cleaning. Whether it was pulling the roots or shoveling our first snow, my hernia became persistently painful by our second winter and sent me to visit a family doctor who referred me to a surgeon in a nearby hospital.

After performing the usual examination, the surgeon put his hands under the running water for few seconds, rubbed his fingers twice and turned off the tap. If any of my children washed his

hands in the same manner after only handling crayons, my instant reproach would result in a repeat of the ablution with soap. It was certainly not coloring crayons that the surgeon has just handled and with bare hands.

The surgeon gave me a choice between two surgical procedures for a hernia operation and my preference went naturally for the option with the least possibility of a recurrence. All the time in his clinic, my attention was divided between listening to his words and observing, as surreptitiously as possible, his toying with a ballpoint pen. His finger repeatedly pressed the knob of the pen on and off. The surgeon who was going to perform my hernia operation have unacceptable hygiene habits and was a very nervous person or had a nervous tic. What if his twitching fingers snapped one of my arteries or a critical nerve in my scrotum, and rendered me impotent.

If patients must stick with their family doctors, they must also accept their choice of surgeons. Furthermore, since the operation is free, patients like beggars cannot be choosers. This wrong deduction stopped me from asking for a second opinion or another surgeon to perform the operation.

In preparation for the operation, a number of tests including a chest x-ray were performed. After the x-ray, I was told to wait outside. A number of patients took their x-rays and left before it was my turn to be dismissed. The look of sympathy the x-ray doctor or technician gave me before sending me away was somewhat alarming. Being a habitual worrier, it did cross my mind that he may have found something seriously wrong with me but by the time the date of the hernia operation was confirmed that worry was superseded by more pressing concerns.

The third surprising discovery about the surgeon in addition to his cursory washing habit and twitch was made rather too late for me to do anything about it, except to intensify my anxiety.

Lying on the operation table, my attention focused on the words exchanged around me in case it carried some instructions for me but much of it was small talk. The anesthesia nurse, still holding my hand as if to stop me from making a dash to the door, turned to the surgeon standing on the other side of the operating

table and said: “So this is your first Shouldice operation?” or words to that effect. Shouldice stuck in my mind because it is the name of a hospital specializing in hernia operations. The revelation came too late with only few seconds before the sedation took effect.

Hair saloons usually give their clients a choice between having their hair done by their proficient hairstylists or the ‘new talents’ who are less experienced and the cost of their services is cheaper. A patient deserves the same treatment given to patrons of hair salons. Blurting this piece of information was an unfeeling act by the nurse and it was too late for me to do anything about it. This incident left me wondering whether new immigrants are intentionally selected for surgeries by inexperienced surgeons.

Was I lucky to have that surgery?

A month after my hernia surgery, the scar was almost healed, the pain abated and my normal routine resumed. The call from the surgeons almost three months after the hernia surgery was unexpected and alarming. My wife took the call and gave me the details.

The surgeon told her that they were concerned by the x-ray and needed to do more tests. My wife asked him about the delay and the surgeon replied that it usually took that long for the specialist to look into such cases. My wife was angry with the surgeon and had very strong words about his professional conduct and that of all concerned.

All cancer patient may experience denial, at least in the initial diagnosis stages. My mind favoured a number of less disastrous diagnoses just to downgrade the possibility of having cancer. The radiologist encouraged this by telling us that a mild case of Tuberculosis may leave similar bruises.

If it was not TB, it could very well be a scar left by the clock part forced down my throat. My mother told me the story which invariably brought tears to her eyes. She was the fourth and youngest wife of my father, the tribal chieftain. After her marriage and for several traumatic years, she shared the same

house with his other three wives, their children and few maids. Being his last and youngest wife, she was the target of their envy and sometimes evil schemes. Some of her stories are horrific; to illustrate, a stepson one day brought a young wild boar into their home and locked it in a room vowing to keep it until it is big and strong enough to devour her children. After the death of her second son whom she believed was murdered by another wife, they targeted me. Being her youngest son, killing or hurting me would have been their ultimate vendetta, breaking my mother's heart and undermining my father's power and pride. One of their malicious plots resulted in weaning me prematurely and my mother had to sell her jewelry to buy a cow. Every day, my maternal grandmother who lived across the river milked the cow and carried the milk that kept me alive to my mother.

The second attempt on my life was almost successful; a maid was bribed to suffocate me using a large part of a broken alarm clock. The maid later confessed all this to my mother and asked for her forgiveness. On that day, my mother sat me beside her while she did our laundry. She was having a hard time keeping me from crawling toward the open fire and boiling water and gladly welcomed the maid's offer to look after me. Before long, my mother heard chocking noises, looked at my direction and saw me struggling for air. Had my mother lost her nerves at the sight of her dying son, wailed, and cried for help I would have been dead in two minutes. It was divine intervention, she insisted, that inspired her to push her soapy hand down my throat and pluck the blood-covered clock part from my throat. Every time I feel an unusual lump in my throat, I remember this story and wonder if it is a scar left by that clock part. When that shadow showed up on my chest x-ray, my mind recalled that attempt on my life and weaved an unlikely thread of connection between the two.

The final diagnosis

The shape of the suspicious growth on my chest x-ray was a light gray circle in the middle of dark gray substance. I told my wife it looked like a bullet hole. Since the MRI results were not

conclusive, a bronchoscopy was scheduled. After describing the procedure, my oncologist asked for my permission to allow some of her trainees to attend. The administered sedatives were not strong enough to ease the pain and I could hear everything said in the room. The specialist emphatically pointed out the presence of blood in my lung as a sure symptom of cancer. She had told me earlier that only the results of the biopsy would determine whether it is cancer or not. The possibility of having cancer was more than moderate but knowing it in a half-conscious state with a tube down my throat was nevertheless distressful and indicated lack of sympathy and professional integrity by the oncologist.

Days later at the clinic, the doctor said the results of the biopsy conveyed good and bad news. The bad news was it was cancer but it was a slow-growing cancer, which is good news. It was the best kind of cancer one could hope for, she added.

The oncologist gave me the choice of removing it then or defer the operation until it reached some critical stage. It could take as long as fifteen years before an operation becomes urgent. I opted for a speedy operation because there would be no peace of mind with the knowledge of having a tumor, no matter how small or slow growing.

The cancer surgery

After deciding to go ahead with the surgery, it was time to choose the surgeon and location. My first choice was the nearby local hospital to spare my family the inconvenience of daily trips to a distant hospital. However, the local surgeon recommended by my oncologist had never before performed a thoracic operation. My reservations about having him operate on me met with a strong objection from the oncologist: “But he needs the experience!” My choice was naturally the experienced surgeon in a Toronto hospital.

More tests and several visits to the hospital were needed before surgery. During one of these visits, a doctor asked me a number of questions from a questionnaire. He told me that as a rule of thumb, cancer patients defecate more than healthy persons on

average. If this is a scientifically proven symptom, it should be called the toilet-paper test of cancer; the more toilet paper you use in a day the more likelihood of having cancer.

Awake during surgery and no anesthesia!

In the horror film *Awake*, a patient undergoing surgery becomes conscious of his surroundings but not fully awake. During my operation and after the epidural IV became disentangled, I did regain my consciousness and could feel pain and hear voices. Someone was repeatedly asking me whether 'it' was hot or cold. My confused and terrified mind hopelessly tried to fathom the question and come up with an answer. Renewed loss of consciousness saved me from further pain and verbal torture. Later, a doctor told me that they were trying to put the anesthetic tube back in place and wanted me to tell them if the spot felt cold or hot. My wife was angry after hearing about my ordeal during the operation. She was beside me when the anesthetist showed up at the recovery room. During that brief encounter, she had few choice words for her and none of them were complimentary. The presence of interns must have made her public humiliation more hurtful.

As if the pain of the recovery room was not enough then, a Kuwaiti appeared to compound it with worry and stress. He was one of the interns in charge of my recovery. Kuwait was occupied and plundered by fellow Iraqis under the command of the dictator Saddam Hussain. At the time of the occupation, I was living in exile in Syria and openly opposed the Iraqi regime while most countries of the world including Kuwait and Canada either supported him or ignored his oppression and war crimes before occupying Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government gave him billions of dollars to finance his war against Iran and every real or fictitious minor victory announced by the Iraqi army prompted thousands of Kuwaitis to express their jubilation by sacrificing animals and dancing in the streets. Many dissident Iraqis gloated over the plight of Kuwaitis.

The Kuwaiti doctor looked somewhat irritated every time he looked in my direction or perhaps the residual effects of the anesthesia played tricks on my anxious mind. The first time he came into my room I told him about my opposition to the Iraqi regime and its occupation of his country. His face was blank and registered no emotions, and my anxieties lingered until someone else took his place and I was finally moved to the intensive care.

That Kuwaiti doctor could be the top of his class and his ethical standards the highest among his peers, however, waking up after having a good portion of my lung removed to find him, a foreign intern from a third-world country, looking after my recovery was for me a deeply distressing experience. Regardless of his nationality and the bad blood between his country and mine, he did not give me the feeling of being looked after by the best and most competent in Canada. In his place, there should have been a specialist or at least a medical doctor who has recently immigrated to Canada and needed the internship to obtain his license and practice here.

My hospital stay was prolonged by post-operation complications. On the last day, an overweight nurse yanked a large adhesive band off my chest and removed all my hair and the outer layer of my skin with it.

Was it really cancer?

From the very beginning, my wife was convinced there was no cancer. When modern medicine first came to our countries in the Middle East, people did not have much confidence in it. Our rural people had their traditional medicine and local healers. Although some ailments are blamed on supernatural forces such as envy or the evil eye and black magic, sick people frequently consulted herbalist and Bedouin doctors. When large painful growths appeared in my brother's armpits, my father called upon the services of a bedouin healer who performed three cauterization on his nape and the tumors disappeared. My brother, however, never forgave the healer for scaring him for life. It may surprise many to know that our rural people practiced inoculation before

it was copied by European doctors. My grandmother told me that during smallpox epidemics they took a large needle from a date palm tree, inserted it into a boil in a recovering person and then injected the needle into the skin of a healthy person. Although these rural people were not aware that this was essentially inoculation, it did save many lives.

After the initial rejection of the untried medicine brought by city doctors, there was a drastic reversal in public attitude; the suspicion was gone and in its place, there was a new esteem bordering on adoration. Medical doctors were suddenly elevated in status to a height previously reserved for holy men only. We were born at the time when this drastic change of attitude took place. However, my wife lost some of her faith in the medical profession when her mother suddenly died of a stroke after having undergone heart valve replacement surgery in the U.S. When I was diagnosed with lung cancer, she recalled an incident involving a doctor in the American hospital where her mother had her surgery. Few days after the surgery, this doctor, who was not her surgeon, told her mother that after examining her x-ray he believed she had a cancerous tumor in one of her kidneys. She said the American doctor who gave them this disturbing news was drunk at the time. Her mother refused to accept the doctor's diagnosis insisting she did not have cancer. After that and for several days, she drank copious amounts of water every day and then had another X-ray which disproved the drunk doctor's diagnosis.

My wife's suspicious intensified after she asked the surgeon if she could see the cancerous tissues. It is customary for surgeons in our native countries to present patients and their families with evidence of the diseased body part such as an appendix or a kidney's stone. My surgeon provided no such evidence because my cancer was even smaller than they thought at first. Her doubts were infectious and led me to search the internet for more information. Research findings threw doubts on the reliability of X-rays for diagnosing cancer. An article in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute (Christine Berg: December 21, 2005) confirmed that benign tissues in the lung can sometimes resemble

tumors on an X-ray. Pathologist can also make horrific errors with devastating consequences in diagnosing biopsies as the case of pathologist Charles Smith of Toronto Sick Kids hospital proves. Recently, a Canadian man who was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer refused to undergo chemotherapy and after further laboratory tests in the U.S. was found to have a rarely lethal lung disease instead. Moreover, doctors consulted here and overseas told me that they have never heard of a slow-growing lung cancer that takes 15 years to become life threatening. One of these doctors, the specialist who conducted my colonoscopy in Markham, wrote in his report that based on my description he thought that I had a benign tumor. These conflicting diagnoses have not eased my constant worries of a return of the disease but at the same time raised serious doubts about having lung cancer in the first place and contributed to my deteriorating faith in Canadian medical services.

Did Canada give me cancer?

The doctor who examined me for the immigration visa made doubly sure that my spine was intact and vowed to check my x-ray minutely for signs of an enlarged heart or any other possible chest ailments. The only medical condition reported was high blood pressure.

There is plenty of evidence in support of blaming Canada for my cancer. Air and water pollution is at high levels; Ontario is one of the highly polluted areas in North America. The presence of chemical pollutants in human bodies is so extensive that traces of it have been found in mothers' milk. The odours of garden pesticide and herbicide foul the air in my neighbourhood in spring and summer. No one told us about the health risks of having high levels of radon gas, a major cause of lung cancer in Canadian homes. Lung cancer attributed to exposure to radon gas killed 1,589 Canadians in 2001, a number higher than death by accidental poisonings, homicides and drowning in the same year.

If none of the above contributed to my illness then it could be the lake trout. We had them for dinner at least once a week for

years until we found out that according to one report these were full of chemical toxins ‘up to the gills’. Moreover, like many new immigrants, my immunity was weakened by the stress and anxiety of adapting and living in a strange country and culture. All these factors explain why 1 in 2 Canadians is diagnosed with cancer and the rates are expected to rise in the future. Lung cancer is the leading cause of death in Canada.

My insufferable family doctor

Having a family doctor is necessary in Canada. During our first visit to the doctor’s clinic to obtain health certificates for our children, the nurse asked us to fill and sign a form but did not tell us that this meant that her boss would be our family doctor for more than two decades. We tried to register with another doctor months later only to be told that this was forbidden unless we move to another area. We were either misinformed then or health regulations have since changed allowing patients more freedom in this regard.

We treated our family doctor with due respect but this was not always reciprocated. Our family doctor has an overbearing and patronizing demeanor bordering on rudeness and once accused us of lying. The clinic is often full with patients and a wait of two to three our hours was the norm. As a result, my blood pressure reading was unusually high. Before coming to Canada, my doctors kept me on the same hypertension medication for ten years and my Canadian doctor continued these medications for nearly 20 years. Other doctors here and overseas described these first-generation medications as ‘old’ and advised replacing them with newer medications with fewer negative side effects but my family doctor would not hear of it. At least, I was not prescribed Valsartan for my high blood pressure. This medication manufactured in Canada contains a carcinogenic substance imported from China. For six years, doctors prescribed this medication before Health Canada became aware of its harmful effects and ordered a recall.

After contracting pneumonia, it came to my knowledge that my family doctor has disregarded Canada's health guidelines requiring all family doctors to vaccinate patients over 65 against pneumonia, tetanus and shingles. This serious noncompliance prompted me to complain to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. The Academy admonished my family doctors for untidy charts and unacceptable vaccine regimen and recommended attending a course in medical record keeping. In reviews published on the internet, my family doctor is criticized for lack of caring, patients' abuse, rudeness, wrong prescriptions and being materialistic.

My family doctor was not a unique case. When my family doctor was on leave 18 years ago, I went to see another doctor in the same clinic. Results of my non-fasting blood analysis showed an elevated glucose level. A big breakfast on that morning was probably the cause, but the doctor insisted on putting me on medication for diabetes. I contested his diagnosis and refused to take the medications. Since then, countless blood analyses proved him wrong.

Health services in Canada

Comprehensive, timely and high-quality health services are Canada's main attractions to immigrants. In fact, these services are not comprehensive and exclude many necessities such as dental care, eye examinations, prescription drugs and physiotherapy. Many patients complain of long delays before seeing specialists and receiving non-emergency surgeries. Shortages of general practitioners or family doctors in densely populated provinces such as Ontario are chronic. Consequently, available doctors may be unable to deliver the high quality care and regular monitoring necessary to fulfill their roles as family doctors.

Some of the weaknesses inherent in the Canadian health system became evident in its response to the SARS (severe acute respiratory system) epidemics in 2003. This called for the quarantine of 25000 residents of Toronto and before the crisis

ended 44 died from the epidemic. A recent report found that six out of 10 Canadians fear medical errors and a slightly higher percentage dread going to hospitals where they may catch a serious infection. These apprehensions are justified by statistical evidence and numerous published stories of medical errors by health professionals and preventable infections in hospitals. In 2014-2015, one out of 18 hospital patients suffered some medical error and one in eight of them died as a result. Many other serious cases go unreported. In 2017, a nurse confessed to killing eight patients with lethal insulin injections because they were 'mean'. Given these shortcomings, health services in Canada unsurprisingly ranked 10th among 11 major developed countries in a US-based Commonwealth Fund's report published in 2013. In view of these facts, it is not surprising also that Canada ranked 10th on the United Nations Human Development Index in 2017, only two ranks above Hong Kong.

Immigrants especially those from Middle Eastern countries must be aware of a specific health risk facing them in Canada. This is best illustrated by the following sad story. My wife and I were at the mall when he approached us with a smile and a warm greeting. After introducing himself, we stood chatting for few minutes. Only later, we found out that we knew his parents who live in our neighbourhood. Our second encounter with the affable young man was very sad. He told us that he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). He was limping and had difficulties controlling his facial muscles but was still working as a teacher in another province. MS is a neurological disease of the brain and spinal cord and may result in paralysis, blindness and death. The highest number of MS cases worldwide are reported in Canada. There are at present nearly 100000 Canadians living with this debilitating disease. In comparison, people from Middle Eastern countries have the lowest incidence of MS. The causes of MS are yet unknown but environmental factors are suspected and there are no cures. One research finding reported a high risk of MS among Middle Eastern immigrants in Canada. Some expensive medical drugs prescribed for MS and cancer taken outside

hospitals are not covered by public health insurance in some provinces such as Ontario.

VII. Community: What and Where?

New immigrants are keenly aware that no person can live as an island. Social needs come in importance immediately after survival needs. This is why immigration laws and regulations in Canada and other countries give some preference to immigration applicants having relatives in a destination country. Support from these relatives may be instrumental in overcoming difficulties encountered by new immigrants, especially their feelings of isolation and alienation. Only years after our arrival, we became aware of having Canadian relatives and our relationships with them were regrettably marred by past disagreements.

Canadian culture is significantly different from our native culture. We expected this but we were ill prepared for its implications and consequences. We never thought that after more than twenty-two years of living here, we would still think and feel as outsiders.

A new immigrant needs to regard his adopted country as a home away from home, not a temporary stopover in his life journey. A brother-in-law told us just before leaving to Canada to burn our bridges. His advice was intentionally hurtful. Every immigrant is bound to feel homesick after arriving here, and this feeling may become strong enough for some to drive them back. Many of them, like us, did not sell or discard the oversize suitcases they brought with them—only perhaps to replace the worn out ones—in case they decide to give up and leave. All of them probably spend their first years like potted plants, adapting and seeking support but establishing deep roots within Canadian society can only begin when a sense of belonging to this society is achieved. Landing papers, a citizenship card or a passport are official document of identity but belonging requires satisfactory social interactions, civil neighbours, a sense of security and trust in fellow citizens.

A stranger among my people

“Go to your people!” the Ukrainian immigrant advised me and his advice was followed but the support offered by my people was conditional.

One of my people, a taxi driver, took me one night to the *husainia*, the Iraqi Shia place of worship where there was a religious function. He was a generous man and refused to take his fare despite my persistent protests. My compatriots were curious and asked me all sort of questions about my background, tribal affiliation and my reasons for immigrating to Canada. Anyone could see that we had many things in common: religion, sect, cultural background—we all had rural roots—and we shared opposition to Saddam’s regime. It was some kind of a tribal sorting ritual and all tribal societies have them. Candidates for induction in the tribe must undergo an initiation process to ascertain their eligibility for membership. Conformity to group values and norms are prerequisites. Those who defy these rules are shunned or driven out. In pre-Islamic times, tribal protection was withdrawn from members who repeatedly defied tribal norms and customs and if they were killed, the tribe would not avenge them or demand blood money in compensation. These tribal customs continued after Islam in one form or another. In my tribe, several families were driven out and their homes burned down in punishment for disobedience. That evening, my sympathies went to those wronged people.

I tried my best to win the acceptance of my people that evening. Unfortunately, all my efforts to fit in the group failed and before the evening was over, they or whoever was leading them judged me to be an undesirable nonconformist. However, they took pity on me and promised to ask someone to assist me. He was not a member of this group and did not worship with them. He boycotted them after learning that the benefactor who paid for the construction of this place of worship forbade any criticism of Saddam’s regime.

Why my people shunned me?

It was the early 1960s and walking home from my Jesuit high school in Baghdad, I came across the unfamiliar sight of a man wearing Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt and leading a big dog on a leash. Next day, a classmate told me about this man whom they called Hassoun ‘the American. He was an Iraqi by nationality and had never set foot in America. A male nurse by profession, he fancied wearing American style clothes, walking his dog in public and uttering few words of greetings in English. He learned all this from American movies. According to his unofficial biographers, he lived all his adult life known to most people not by his family or tribal surname but by his nickname, ‘the American’.

I could not find my place among my people not because I had chosen to identify with another culture like Hassoun the American but because my people insisted on total conformity.

I totally understand why my people excluded me from their small community. They had come to this country before me and observed and experienced the vast cultural chasm between them and other Canadian cultural groups. They correctly arrived at the conclusion that only by being strict in enforcing membership rules they can maintain the true character, integrity and cohesiveness of their small community. Even the slightest deviation was not acceptable because it will lead to more concessions until eventually their identity is compromised.

They had put me under scrutiny that evening and found me unfit to join their mini community. The same persons who refused to admit me into their group may have been more sociable and hospitable back in our country. Here they became less tolerant and more defensive of their group and its identity because they felt threatened by Canadian society and its strange culture. I was excluded from membership because I carried the germs of their destruction, or so they thought. They wanted total loyalty and I was not the person expected to give it.

My fellow townsman who was sent to help me also rejected me eventually for refusing to act in accordance with his cherished

tribal customs. He wanted to arrange the marriage of his unemployed, uneducated son to my teenage daughter who was still in high school. I naturally said no and he stopped calling or visiting us.

My loyalty to my people was tested

I did go back to my people because it was simply inevitable. By then I had reexamined my idea of who my people are and decided to include others with whom I shared fewer cultural traits. After spending only few months in Canada, it was clear to me that people of the same ethnic or cultural origin flocked together. They not only lived in the same neighbourhood, worked together, employed people who spoke their language but they also preferred to do business with each other. Thus for example if one of our neighbours needed to replace his windows he would more likely than not hire a contractor from his cultural community. Since if in Canada do as other Canadians do, I looked for people from my own redefined community whenever I needed a service.

When I needed someone to make my board game I went looking for one of my people. He took one thousand dollars of my money and gave me in return a useless piece of advice. And when I demanded my money back, he protested saying: “I would never take money from you improperly and buy with it food for my children because it is *haram*—unlawful in Islam.” It was the usual expression of indignation you hear from scoundrels; an honest person would have taken offense, threw back the money in my face, and avenged his wounded honor and pride verbally, physically or legally.

Another one of my people promised to make my board game. He did deliver on his promise but at a cost that made it impossible for me to market it and make any profit. He did not even finish the job he was paid to do. My family and I had to assemble the board game and put the components in their boxes ourselves. When he brought the contents of the board game, I was too weak from my cancer surgery to leave bed and greet him downstairs

and he was upset because I had failed to treat him with due respect and proper hospitality.

You would think that after my initial disappointing and costly transactions with those members of my people, I would learn my lesson and take my business elsewhere but I kept going back and there were more disappointments. Did I like many new immigrants develop a tribal kind of loyalty to my people? Despite all these negative experiences, I sought my people's help because it is the norm in Canada. Just before going to hospital for my cancer surgery I decided to buy a satellite dish receiver. With the possibility of death in hospital in the back of my mind, a satellite dish with Arabic channels would have been my farewell gift to them. The cost was almost a thousand dollar but who cared about that when you are on the doorstep of the afterlife and tormented by feelings of guilt for not having done enough for you family. How could I not trust the satellite receiver installers when in the middle of doing their job they stopped to perform their timely prayers? A visitor who came to see me after my surgery told me the satellite receiver was an old model and would soon be obsolete. It seemed everyone knew this except me. A short time after installation, my reception of Arabic channels stopped and we were left with only the Christian evangelical channels. My wife called the vendor to complain and he said he would fix it for an additional two hundred dollars. "Your conduct will not stop us from dealing with others from our people," my wife told the unscrupulous vendor "because there must be honest people among them."

The religious cover displayed by the satellite dish installers was the oldest ploy in our traditional society. If I had learned the lessons of my mother's stories I would have suspected foul play when I saw them praying in my garden. There was not one but two tales which my mother told me repeatedly to caution me against trusting all those who claimed religious devotion but did not act accordingly. In the first tale, a fox after failing repeatedly to capture and kill any of the hens in the farmer's coop appeared one day wearing a turban and carrying a rosary—the two main accessories of religious men. The hens eventually believed his

ruse and opened the coop's door and needless to say none of them lived to tell the story. There was also another tale about the fake holy man who suddenly arrived in a village wearing jingling anklets. The curious villagers asked him why he was wearing these female ornaments and he told them he loved all creatures and the jingling of his anklets was intended to warn ants and other small insects to stay out of his path. He turned out to be a scoundrel and ran away with the villagers' meager possessions. I should have been wary of praying satellite receivers' vendors because a truly religious person would live on alms rather than make his living from this kind of work.

These negative encounters did not deter us from associating with members of our ethnic and religious groups. It is the norm in social relations in this country. We needed them, even more than they needed us. A short visit to the mall would prove this. Malls are a necessity for Canadians especially during winter months. They frequent malls to shop, socialize and exercise. The cultural and ethnic diversity of Canadian society is well represented in malls near my home. Members of each ethnic group usually flock together and communicate using their native languages. Whether they are seniors looking after their grandchildren or students from a nearby high school, they tend to associate along ethnic lines. Judging by mall visitors, intermarriages between ethnic groups must be rare. These scenes emphasize the need felt by Canadians for socialization and support from their ethnic groups. This need was even more acute in the case of our children because they went to schools, worked and made friends. We were naturally worried that they would suffer without the support of our people but we never suspected anyone, especially not the Canadian establishment, of having secret designs on them.

They only want our children

It was the most shocking statement heard in Canada. "They only want our children," a new immigrant told me. His statement conjured a fascist or communist ruling regime determined to take

over the family's role in shaping the personalities of future generations through indoctrination and brainwashing. Alternatively, these could possibly be cult leaders who usually recruit young people to serve the cult's twisted objectives. Ignorant and prejudiced villagers would sometimes suspect gypsies of planning to abduct their young ones. The new immigrant, however, was not referring to a totalitarian regime, a religious cult or gypsies but to the Canadian establishment.

The troubling implication of this statement is that we, the first-generation parents admitted into this country as immigrants, are the unwanted excess luggage that our children arrive with. Ideally, they would prefer to admit only our children in this country but they allow us to come along to look after them until maturity. Although Canada does not have the Spartan gymnasium system which forcibly separated children from their families, forcing children of the indigenous people of Canada into the infamous residential schools bears much similarity to the Spartan model.

When all my attempts to establish a viable business or find gainful employment failed, my mind resurrected this statement for further consideration and found it to be less unbelievable. Is this why they ask about the number of your children when you apply for immigration? Mr. 'Ching-Ching' who used to call my in-laws from his smoke store in Montreal and ask them to listen to the sound of his cash register told them that during his immigration interview he was assured of approval because he has seven children.

Immigrant families are entitled to few hundred dollars every month to keep their children well fed and there was an educational fund and loans if they want to continue their education in a university or college, but no job counseling or retraining for the parents. Did they want our children to grow up with a divided sense of loyalty and gratitude, little of it for the parents and the rest for the benevolent government? Since the government happens to be providing most of the support, especially in the later stages of our sons and daughters' education then surely that would stick to their minds and may even eclipse all the years of

parental toil and care. If anyone still thinks that this is the brainchild of a paranoid mind, a quick review of Plato's Republic, the history of Sparta and the practices of the Communist regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China would convince him otherwise.

The suspicious little voice that whispers in my ear—the left one according to our traditional beliefs receives all negative messages—had more evidence of the Canadian scheme to rob us of our children, not physically of course but culturally and even emotionally. Who could forget what Canadian governments did to the children of the natives of this country? They wanted only the children of these natives and for this purpose, they established residential schools. Beginning in the twenties of the last century and for several decades, 150,000 native children were forcibly taken away from their families and homes and inducted into these boarding schools. They were forbidden to speak their native languages, compelled to convert to the Christian faith and were completely cut off from their traditional family and cultural roots. They called it aggressive assimilation but in fact it was nothing but official kidnapping and forced cultural and religious indoctrination. This could not be achieved without first making them ashamed of their culture. These schools were administered by Catholic and Protestant churches with the approval and blessing of the Canadian government. This continued until the 1970s and only in 2007, the government of Canada acknowledged its responsibility for allowing it and issued an apology.

The suspicious little voice, inside my left ear of course, had won the day and I was almost convinced that the Canadian government was only interested in our children before my wife corrected me.

“That’s not what the Canadian consul told my friend,” she said. The consul was the same one who loved to tell his audience the ‘joke’ about the Canadian government generous one thousand dollar monthly check for every child.

“He told her that we aren’t really interested in the parents we admit as immigrants because they are very much attached to their cultural ways and their children who come with them as well

because they are also conditioned by their native cultures through their parents. We expect only the grandchildren to become fully adapted Canadians.”

Soon after we arrived here, we learned that a law regulates viewing our children’s report card. My wife discovered this when she went to school to discuss the scholastic performance of our son with his teacher.

“Before I can discuss this matter with you,” he told my wife with a note of authority. “I must first check your child’s age and make sure you are allowed by him to see his grades.” My wife could not believe what the teacher has just said. We, the parents, need the consent of our child whom we raised and supported fully, to see his grades! Since there is absolutely no logic behind this restriction except to encourage teenagers to rebel against parental authority, it only served to strengthen my worst suspicions about the Canadian government’s intentions over our children.

After being turned out by my people, and exploited by some of them, and having my suspicions aroused by the alleged intentions of the Canadian government over our children, it was only natural for us to be apprehensive about our neighbours.

What do we expect from neighbours?

Neighbours are very important for a healthy social life. Our elders impressed upon us the great value of neighbourliness. They never tired from repeating the old wisdom that before buying or building your home inquire about your neighbours. A religious commandment instructs the faithful to cherish their neighbours, not just the ones next-door but seven neighbours in every direction, a total of 28 families at least. Back in the old country, our neighbours are often our relatives and friends also. Neighbours usually shared in occasions of happiness and sorrow. They can be expected to lend a hand in wedding parties and may wear black, shed few tears and accept condolences with a mourning neighbour. On the other hand, in the absence of good neighbourly relations, a minor disagreement between two

children in the neighbourhood may escalate into a feud between their families. However, in most cases reason prevails and other neighbours intercede to resolve disagreements.

It is also customary in my native country for neighbours to treat a new family in their neighbourhood with a special courtesy. Every day for a whole week, they would send food to their new neighbours assuming that they are too busy to cook a proper meal. Sometimes a good deed may have undesirable consequences, specifically if the husband expresses immoderate appreciation of the neighbours' cuisine in front of his wife.

Good neighbours

We knew enough about the state of neighbourhoods in both suburbia and inner cities in Western societies not to expect a welcoming committee. My wife cooked our first meal in our new home because it did not even cross our minds that a neighbour would send us a meat casserole but there was indeed a surprising expression of welcome.

In our first week and after getting our few belongings out of the way, we were busy removing the debris and rubbish left by the previous owners, whom the real estate agent assured us would remove them. One of their unwanted relics was an old rusty refrigerator filling one corner of our cluttered garage. It took me more than ten minutes to move it out of the garage and was a couple of feet away from the curb when suddenly there was another pair of hands pushing and shoving with me. The helpful man introduced himself as our next-door neighbour. He had seen me struggling with the refrigerator and despite his advanced age and frail health decided to come out and lend me a hand. The most we had expected from neighbours in Canada was total ignorance and peaceful coexistence but this neighbour was a complete and pleasant exception.

The neighbour's wife was equally friendly. Soon after settling down, my attention turned to our back garden which years of neglect had turned into virtual woodland. My helpful neighbour showed up with a chainsaw to remove few tree stumps. He even

cut down a tree on their side which was intruding on our garden. We were fortunate to have them as our neighbours for many years and we were saddened when they sold their house and moved further north. They were not our typical Canadian neighbours. They had rural roots and practiced the moral and ethical principles predominant in many farming communities.

The family that bought the house of the friendly neighbour came from Hong Cong. The wife who could not speak a single word of English was very cordial. She always stopped by our front door to say hello after arriving from a long stay in her country of origin, and often with a gift in hand and her daughter beside her to translate. She died few years later and we attended her funeral and cremation.

There was another good neighbour who treated us with respect, greeted us every time and stopped to chat, and we were even invited into that neighbour's home once. We almost never visited empty-handed in accordance with our traditional customs and that neighbour relished my wife's dishes. We were sad to see that neighbour move also and we kept in touch until the terrorist attack on nine eleven when she told us that associating with people of our background became ill-advised.

A bad neighbour

One bad neighbour may be enough to spoil the neighbourhood and drive you to contemplate selling and moving. He disliked us from day one but only lately showed the extent of his animosity toward us. He is condescending and patronizing, a characteristic typical of some Canadian whites and medical doctors which I find extremely rude. He had the audacity to inquire about the reason for keeping our pool closed and instructed me to have it filled up. Instead of thanking me for hiring an arborist to prune a maple tree so that it would not shed its leaves in his backyard, he was furious accusing me of trying to kill the tree

Almost every summer for many years, a municipality employee knocked on our door to inform us that there was a complaint regarding standing water in our backyard. The identity

of the complainant was never revealed but we assumed it was the annoying neighbour. Every time, the municipality inspector failed to find any standing water but nothing was done to stop the neighbour from making the same false complaint again. One employee told us that annoying neighbours forced him to move to a remote rural area.

The neighbour escalated his aggression toward us by dumping his garbage in our backyard. What irritated and offended us most are the empty beer cans: he must have known that we are practicing Muslims and refrain from drinking alcohol because my wife wears a hijab. It was obviously a religious hate crime but we decided not to report him. Last year, he saw me trimming the trees along the fence between our properties and told me emphatically that he does not want to see my face. The following summer, I planted double-rows of 90 evergreen trees along our shared fence at a cost of \$1800 to satisfy his wish of not seeing my face. My neighbourly gesture did not stop him from hurling foul insults on my family and me using words which I cannot repeat here. He then applied to replace the existing sturdy fence which is a shared property between us with a higher fence, almost 8 feet in one section. The municipality hastened to approve his application without the slightest regard to my objections. The police constable who was dispatched to look into my complaint found no fault in the unilateral act of my neighbour claiming that the Fence By-Laws allowed it. Instead of protesting, I was advised to be grateful to my neighbour and maintain good neighbourly relations. In short, the neighbour, Markham City and the police were all of one mind in dispossessing me of my 50% share in the division fence. From my perspective, it is no longer a fence between neighbours but a wall of separation and discrimination between Canada and us. By then I had my full of Canada and was prepared to leave permanently if only my country of origin Iraq had not been thoroughly destroyed by tyranny and the American occupation and its devastating aftermath. Incidentally, a neighbour in Canada who builds a fence or another structure on your property with or without your knowledge and goes

unchallenged gains title to that property by force of what is known as the ‘squatter rights’ law.

The abandonment of Katkat

It was Katkat who told me that the our city Markham is heartless. It was in a bad shape, terrified, hungry and cold, when we met for the first time. It had been snowing all night and God only knew when it had its last meal.

It was our second winter in Canada and we woke up one day to find our backyard under almost two feet of snow dumped by a squall on the previous night. I opened the patio door for a breath of fresh air, found the air unbearably arctic and was about to go back when I heard the distressful feline calls. The noises came from the direction of our next-door neighbour. I put on my boots and stepped ankle deep into the soft snow to investigate. The source of the pleading meows was the neighbours’ black cat. Apparently, the neighbours who had left yesterday—we could tell by the moving truck that parked in their driveway for hours—had forgotten to take their pet cat with them or abandoned it. At that time, my wife and children were all congregated in the kitchen to monitor the progress of the unfolding drama.

The cat, obviously in a very distressed state, kept a vigil by one of the neighbour’s back window and persistently ignored my attempts to lure it into our backyard. The animal was frantic and probably hungry and could not possibly forage for food in this snow. Throwing bits of food on the snow did not succeed in entice it to come nearer. Almost ten minutes passed and I was ready to give up and retreat to the warmth of my kitchen when the desperate cat finally gave up on its original owners and decided to move into our backyard.

Building a shed for the cat close to the patio door was the only option given the emotional state of the cat. After much hesitation and making frightful sounds, it took few steps into the insulated structure and then panicked and darted out. Eventually, it settled down in its new home. Its owners never showed up and it stayed with us for almost a year. We were worried over the safety of

Katkat because it disappeared close to Halloween and there was a news report about young hooligans killing black cats on that day.

We called the deserted cat Katkat. Kat is pronounced like the Arabic word for cat. We still wonder how its owners could have abandoned their helpless pet in winter. Deserting a pet cat, untrained to hunt for food on its own, and in winter was a virtual death sentence. Its owners should have taken it to an animal shelter where it could have a chance of being adopted. We were certainly glad the cat's previous owner moved away. Incidentally, Prophet Muhammad said that a woman who locked up a cat and neither gave it food or water nor allowed it to forage for its nourishment was destined for eternal hell.

Murder, suicide and lesser evils in our neighbourhood

One of our main objectives for coming here was security. It is something appreciated only by those who have lived and suffered for years under a dictatorial regime. After the Iraqi government refused to renew my passport and ordered me to go back or else, we became stateless persons and lived in constant fear for our lives. For many years, we woke up every day with the possibility of expulsion from the country of exile and having nowhere to go to without official documents. We expected all of this to end once we arrived in Canada and these anxiety feelings did vanish but only to be replaced by new ones resulting from health problems, unemployment, financial worries, and an unsupportive social environment.

Acts of violence were common in rural areas in my native country Iraq. At night, the sound of gunfire was a usual occurrence. Carcasses of dead animals are left to rot in abandoned fields. Crime scenes and images of the dead and injured are difficult to erase from a child's mind. My revulsion kept me from joining other children watching with morbid interest a man whose leg was speared with a trident used for fish hunting being carried on a donkey cart to the nearest hospital. Another recollection from my childhood memories places me in a teahouse where my father

left me in its owner's care. The owner served me cups of sweet tea and hot lemon and treated me with the attention accorded to sons of tribal chiefs. Suddenly, there was a commotion and a crowd of shoppers and street peddlers came running and shouting and their ranks opened to allow a man to pass through them and into the local police station. It turned out the fugitive was a murderer who had seconds before shot another man dead in the market and then surrendered himself to the police. A glimpse of the murderer's face was enough to identify him as the same person who only ten minutes earlier was sitting near me on the same bench and calmly sipping his tea.

The second time I came close to a murder scene was in Canada. Not far from we lived, the dead body of a woman was found by a man walking his dog one evening. Police investigation revealed that a paid assassin hired by her husband from overseas stabbed the woman to death. When criminal hands strike close to your home, you cannot help feeling apprehensive. The house was later put on sale and was bought by a family from our native country, who kept it for few years and then sold it and moved away.

There was another crime in our street, even more appalling and grisly. Five minutes after leaving my driveway to take my children to school one morning, I saw several police cars parked in front of a nearby house. The evening news bulletins detailed the gruesome events of that day. Our neighbour, another recent immigrant like us, could not cope with the imminent break-up of his marriage and his despondency turned into self-destruction. After killing his son, he set fire to their house and attempted suicide. The firefighters and paramedics arrived in time to put out the fire out and rescue the suicidal murderer. It was a terrible tragedy and the fact that the perpetrator and victim were recent immigrants like us made it even more alarming. We pondered whether the hardship encountered by this recent immigrant strained his marriage and drove him to commit infanticide and attempt suicide. Although our thoughts on the incident were pure uninformed speculations, we felt that at least some of the blame could be put on the possible lack of social support. If a person

experiences a crisis in traditional societies like that of our wretched neighbour, he or she would probably confide his troubles to family members and friends and receive their advice and support.

Suicide was another act of violence that disturbed the peace and tranquility of our neighbourhood. It was the second suicide that touched me deeply. The first was the suicide of friend and a colleague at the university. All his friends were surprised and shocked by news of his suicide. He was born to a wealthy Saudi family, married at an early age and was living in an expensive apartment. Unlike poor students who had to study hard to keep their scholarships, his family paid his tuition and other expenses. If he was under stress for one reason or another, he kept it well hidden from all of us even his wife. She was the one who found his limp body hanging from the hook of the dining room's chandelier after returning from a stroll with their newborn baby.

Almost forty years later, the second suicide occurred in our neighbourhood in Canada. It was untypical of our neighbour to barge into our house without an invitation but he was apparently eager to speak to us. He was mostly incoherent with excitement or distress and it took me few seconds to understand that something terribly wrong had happened to his son. Only after looking into his eyes and witnessing his agony, my mind could rearrange his words and grasped that his son had committed suicide in his garage. He had just learned the heartbreaking news and came to share his grief with us. My words of condolences sounded hollow and inadequate to me. Our neighbour's son always greeted us politely, undoubtedly a sign of good breeding. We knew his parents well and the tragedy of his death left us sad and confused. No parents should suffer the loss of a child. Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian statesman of the nineteenth century, once said that he considered himself fortunate—not because he unified Germany but—to have lived so long without losing a child.

After murder and suicide, divorce may appear to be insignificant but it is also a sign of a weak community. We were saddened by the news of the separation of a couple in the neighbourhood especially after witnessing the pain it was causing

both of them. My wife wanted to offer her help in trying to reconcile them before the divorce became final but I reminded her that in Canada this might be misconstrued as meddling into their private affairs. If something like this happened in our traditional society, parents, relatives and friends may possibly take sides and deepen the rift but others will definitely intervene to attempt resolving the differences and preserving the marriage ties.

Any farmer knows that when the fruits on a tree start falling off before they are ripe there must be something wrong with that tree. Like a strong tree, a healthy society must carry all of its fruits until they are ready for reaping. No society is free of murder, suicide or divorce but when these instances occurred in our vicinity, I could not help feeling uneasy and wonder what the future holds for our children here. If my mother were alive, she would probably tell me another fairy tale, and most probably the one about the ingrate son whose restless feet finally took him to the city of cannibals known as ‘where no one died’.

Overcoming our fear of policemen

Immigrants cannot live in peace without the police who at the same time remind some of them of the most hated people in their lives before coming to Canada. Security, to repeat myself again, ranks high on our needs and list of reasons for coming here. However, we need to learn first to trust the police before we can feel secure rather than apprehensive at the sight of a policeman. Even those who have always lived on the right side of the law cannot help this feeling. We have been conditioned to fear them by oppressive regimes and this conditioning does not disappear as soon as we set foot here.

My wife was annoyed by the reaction of her friend, a usually composed professional woman who had emigrated from Iraq, to the sight of a Canadian police constable. The police constable, who had earlier signaled my wife to stop her car, was walking towards them when my wife noticed her friend’s sudden panic. She was almost angry with my wife for putting them in this position. My wife assured her that she had not broken any traffic

regulation but her companion was too distressed by the impending encounter with the police constable to listen to reason. It was some time after the police constable politely greeted them, reminded my wife to paste the registration renewal sticker on the license plate and walked away that the distressed woman regained some of her calm and composure. Such traumatic reactions to a man in uniform can only be understood by a person who has lived all his or her life under an oppressive regime and its menacing security apparatus.

Immigrants, like my wife's friend, are unable to overcome their learned fear and mistrust of the police and indeed all persons of authority. However, in the case of our neighbourhood pharmacist, a first-generation immigrant like us, her fear was not triggered by the negative police image from memory but the actual conduct of a Canadian policewoman. One day, that armed policewoman walked into the pharmacy and demanded narcotics without producing a prescription. The offending policewoman was later apprehended, put on trial and given a suspended sentence. A story like this is bound to bring back memories of the police in our native countries and all the negative feelings associated with it.

Whom can I trust here?

A healthy social life is based on interpersonal trust. It does not have to be the blind trust reserved only for close family members and friends but that minimal degree emanating from a belief in the goodness of human nature in general. An extreme case of lack of trust was the billionaire Howard Hughes in his last days, distrustful of everyone and living in isolation. However, few people have his resources and can afford his choices. The best approach in my view is to give others the benefit of the doubt by assuming their trustworthiness until proven otherwise.

Every student in my native country must have read this folk tale on the importance of trust. The story begins with a man on horseback on a desert road. This horseman was known for his gallantry, compassion and helpfulness, and people all over Arabia

and other realms praised his benevolence and taught their children to look up to him. As he rode on his thoroughbred Arabian mare one day, he was completely unaware of the highway robber who was waiting for him in ambush behind a dense thorny bush. The bandit who usually preyed on defenseless solitary travelers knew his limits and would not have survived an armed confrontation with the gallant hero, so he was going to try deceit. When he saw our hero approaching, he lay on his back, threw sand on his face and clothes and started yelling for help. The brave man hurried to the side of the highway robber, gave him water from his waterskin, carried him on his shoulder and placed him on the saddle of his horse and was about to ride behind him to the nearest traveler's inn when the robber suddenly snatched the reins and galloped away. The gallant man, after overcoming his initial shock, shouted after the fleeing thief: "My horse is yours, I swear it by the Almighty, but I beg of you to grant me one small request." The robbers, his curiosity aroused, stopped at a distance to listen to what the chivalrous man wanted. "I ask you not to tell anyone about what happened today, not out of fear over my reputation," he beseeched the robber, "but so that people who hear about it would not stop trusting others and doing good deeds."

Trusting others would be extremely difficult, if not foolish, if you are frequently lied to or encouraged to lie to others. Ever since the first lie about the streets of Canada paved with job opportunities fed to me by the embassy officer I was either lied to repeatedly or advised to tell lies myself. They advised me to embellish my resume, fabricate experiences on demand, omit my postgraduate degrees, and promised me inside information about job vacancies in return for thousands of dollars—only to give few examples of these lies. Moreover, there are also plenty of fraudsters in Canada ready to take advantage of us.

I became aware of the extent of defrauding and its impact on the lives of immigrants in Canada after repeatedly coming into the gun sights of some of them. Scammers are resourceful and usually home on unsuspecting new immigrants. If my experience is typical, then an immigrant must ward off the persistent attempts

of several scammers every month of his or her life here. Every country in the world has its share of scoundrels but their number in Canada appears to exceed the average, judging by media reports and relevant statistics.

My first Canadian acquaintance was a scammer

During my university years in Lebanon in the 1960s, a friend of mine introduced me to my first Canadian acquaintance. The shabby looking Canadian hippie did not respond to my greeting, and his unfriendly behavior gave me a negative first impression about Canada and its people. He was apparently in an alcohol or hashish-induced stupor but that did not justify his rudeness. Some months later, my friend told me that his Canadian guest managed to obtain a job with a major Lebanese travel agency and after winning the trust of its management—being a white Canadian certainly made it easy for him—embezzled tens of thousands of dollars from the agency before fleeing the country.

In my native country, the story of the kind but foolish man and the snake is passed from one generation to another. The story begins with the scene of a man going home after a long day of toil in his farm. It was a cold evening and before reaching his home the kind man found a snake half dead from the cold by the side of the road. He took pity on the dying creature, picked it up and put it under his shirt next to his warm body. Revived by the man's body warmth, the viper bit and killed him. After my first and only Canadian acquaintance turned to be a villain, I developed an aversion for anything Canadian, and for some time afterward, the mere mention of Canada was enough to conjure the image of that hippie who repaid the kindness of his host with treachery and theft.

The memory of that Canadian crook came back to me after immigrating to Canada. There were so many fraudulent attempts on our resources to leave me in no doubt that scammers seek out new immigrants in particular as prime targets for their fraudulent schemes. After incurring great expenses in the first months or years, immigrants are ready to listen to anyone offering them a

free service. Some immigrants who have little knowledge and experience about Canada would incorrectly assume that scammers would not dare work in broad daylight and that they can always count on the protection of the law.

Scammers target new immigrants!

In old Hollywood movies, criminals fleeing a posse of lawmen usually head to the Mexican or Canadian borders. In reality nowadays, scammers operating here or overseas prosper from preying on unsuspecting and gullible Canadians. Billions of dollars are lost every year by Canadians to fraud. We were also the target of an elaborate fraud scheme which deserves to be told in detail here.

Few months after arrival, my wife answered a phone call from someone claiming to represent a corporation who told her that she has been selected among a few to win one of many prizes including a television set. The lure of a free television set was stronger in my wife's mind than my warning against believing such an incredulously generous offer. My wife insisted and I went along just to prove to her that it was a fraud. We drove more than an hour to reach their location, somewhere near Pearson airport in Toronto. It was already dark when we entered the building and stood in line to register and listen to instructions and contest regulations. Later, we were ushered into an auditorium where we were shown a video about the company and listened to a brief speech by its American founder and CEO. We were told that having this rare opportunity to meet with the founder was a great privilege and honour.

The speeches and accompanying visual aids and fanfare were all designed to inspire our awe and wonder. "The first thing I do is give them a jab in their side, and they always react to this by stretching their spines. At that moment when their necks are widely exposed, I swing the sword for a clean slice." We did not hear this statement during the introductory meeting with the people giving away free television sets among other things. This was the description of a public beheading by the sword which I

heard years before from a Saudi executioner. These lengthy introductions proved to be very much like the jab in the side before a person loses his or her good sense and money to the scammers.

The company offered cheap travel packages and their specialty was ocean cruises. At the end of the boring presentations, the speaker asked us to accompany his colleagues to another hall where they will provide us with full details of the benefits and terms of their offers.

All the company employees, except their American chief and his entourage, belonged to visible minorities like us. That was a smart ploy intended to put us at ease. However, it was having exactly the opposite effect on me. By then, my mood shifted from patient curiosity to irritation and disgust directed at the scammer and his lackeys who assumed we were stupid enough to give them our money in return for some farcical offer.

We sat quietly listening to one of the company's employee explaining his company's services. In brief, he wanted us to join some kind of clients' club which would entitle us to huge discounts on holiday cruisers. He dwelt at large on the attractions of the packages aided by glossy pictures of exotic resorts all over the world. My mind started drifting thinking of the long drive back home late at night until he caught my attention by mentioning the word fees. The salesman ignored my inquiries about the amount of the fees and continued his memorized presentation. After my third attempt, he told us it is a mere twenty thousand dollars

At that moment, another company representative from another table stood up and loudly announced the enlistment of a new member in their club. With a big grin of satisfaction on his face, he began clapping and all his fellow representatives and some of their unsuspecting marks joined in the brief glee. It was probably a rehearsed scene in the scammer's charade intended to encourage others to follow suit. It reminded me of the shill or accomplice of a three-card Monte artist who took part in the game and was allowed to win to attract more victims. After the excitement died down, I told the company's representative that

we are not interested in the offer because we simply did not have the money. He was not ready to give up yet and after disappearing for few minutes came back with a bearded heavy-built man, a Muslim, like us. They probably assumed that a fellow Muslim, bearded in accordance with the strictest interpretations of the religious laws, would have a better chance of convincing us to enlist in their club. He was wrong and my patience was wearing thin.

I had seen and heard enough to confirm that this was a fraud and judging by the features of the targeted group including us it was obviously aimed at immigrants of non-European origin. This called for a change in my resistance tactics from dismissing or ignoring their aggressive sales pitch to attacking their credibility. The following account of the dialogue that went on between me and the bearded man and his associate is only a rough recollection:

“Could you give me your business card?” My request took the bearded man by surprise. After whispering something to his associate, he assured me that their business cards have not yet arrived from the printer’s shop.

“Can I see your company’s brochure then?” I asked, continuing my attempt to unmask their racket.

In response, the shaven man pushed toward us the glossy travel magazines and brochures of reputable travel agencies which he had previously used in marketing their services.

“Not these,” I explained calmly. “I want to see your company’s brochure, a flyer or any piece of paper embossed with your company’s name and business address. Surely you must have at least one letterhead?”

Apparently, their superiors did not coach them to answer these queries but they continued relentlessly. One of them leaned toward us across the table and told us in almost a whisper that he was authorized by his supervisor to make us a special offer. We have been singled out to get full benefits for only half the price, i.e. ten thousand dollars. I could barely stop myself from laughing at his face. They must really think we are brain-dead. I said *NO!* They huddled again in mock conference and then came up with a

new price: they will accept five thousands now, but only as a down payment and until we are satisfied with their services. I was scoring against the scoundrels and it felt wonderful.

Other men and women lured here by the prospects of going home with prizes were still being subjected to the manipulation of the scammers and few of them had already fallen victims to it judging by the repeated ritual of announcement of enlistment followed by clapping. Exposing this swindle to these potential victims would have been the peak of my triumph over the scammers that evening but fear of their possible retaliation stopped me. However, it was still one of my few finest moments in Canada. All feelings of unspent anger at the scammers for insulting my intelligence with their moronic scheme evaporated. The irritation of having a long drive home ahead of me also disappeared. All of these negative emotions suffered during the past two hours were gone and replaced by the delicious feelings of power and triumph.

Finally, the scammers conceding defeat told us we could claim our promised and long-awaited prize before leaving. We were then ushered out of the hall and after taking one step toward the front door they stopped us, rather sternly, and directed us toward the back of the building. Our prize was waiting for us at the back door. Unsurprisingly, our prize was not a 40 or so inch television or any of the other tempting prizes on their list but a three-day trip to a Caribbean destination. After reading the fine prints requiring us to pay more than the trip's worth, we declined the offer and left. I exercised my right to gloat all the way home while my good-spirited wife graciously admitted her mistake.

Scammers in my home

Most of my relatives treated me with either resentment or apathy and some to the extent of doing everything legal and illegal to deprive me of my meagre possessions in my native country. They were probably pleased to hear of my self-imposed exile and eventual immigration to Canada. My first cousin once removed Zulfikar was different from these relatives and that was

enough reason to like him. He was admitted here as a humanitarian refugee. He was unemployed although unlike me he was willing to hide his architectural engineering degree and accept any job. He had a good mind and often made good use of it. Sometimes desperate new immigrants believe even the most blatantly preposterous devious schemes. Zulfikar fell victim to one of these frauds.

One day, he called to tell me about a 'club' he had joined lately. He paid two hundred dollars in membership fees but was confident that it would eventually earn him thousands of dollars every month. All he had to do is convince others to join this club and the more members enlisted by him the sooner and higher his payoff would be. According to his calculations, he expected to earn as much as three thousand dollars every month after only few years, provided he can recruit the required number of members. It was a typical pyramid fraud.

The scammers put me in a difficult position. Should I tell my relative who is acting on behalf of the scammer off and risk offending him or should I instead humor him and give away unwillingly some of my hard-earned money to the despicable scammers. I wanted to tell him what I really thought about this club. Even if he believed me, it was probably too late to redeem his money. He would have to admit that he had been deceived and this was a serious loss of face, and for some of us it is worse than losing few hundred dollars. After giving the matter careful consideration and for the sake of my relative's self-respect, I decided it would be unwise to confront him with his thoughtless naiveté at least for the time being. An Iraqi adage claims that everyone is content with the brains in his head but not with the money in his purse and telling my relative that he had been the victim of a trickster is an affront to his brains and his purse.

The next time he breached the subject with me it was under different circumstances. He was paying me a visit in Toronto. He did not have a car and told us he was given a ride by some acquaintances. We were all happy to see him. After exchanging the usual comments about the tragic situation in our native country, he mentioned the club. Apparently, it had become his

new pet project, the goose that will lay golden eggs for him and his small family. Since our last telephone call, he became deeply involved with the people running the pyramid fraud. They promised to pay him soon his first annual dividend, less than twenty dollars if I remember correctly.

I should join the club as well, he advised me again. It would be good for all of us earning me an extra income eventually and bringing him nearer to realizing his dream of having a decent regular income. It was extremely difficult and painful to reject his advice but I had to do it. The loss of two hundred dollars was an irritation but it was not the main reason for my stubborn resistance to my relative's attempts to enlist me in the scammer's club. I could not live with the knowledge of walking open-eyed into the obvious snare of stupid tricksters. I tried every evasive technique: asking him at length about his children and his parents and inquiring about his plans for the future, but he persisted in steering our conversation back to the subject of the club.

To advise by example was my last resort. There was this story of two Egyptian swindlers who used religion to cover up their scheme. They donned white robes and let their beards grow to the length prescribed by religious zealots. The financial institution they had legally established in Egypt was on the surface a phenomenal success. Within few months of going public, they had attracted thousands of clients who poured their savings amounting to tens of millions of dollars and Egyptian pounds in their investment scheme. They assured their clients that their funds would be invested in accordance with Islamic principles which prohibit usury and investment in immoral business activities. However, these inducements were not enough to account for their huge success since there were already several so-called Islamic banks and financial institutions that offered the same services. It was actually the 20% return on investment—not interest rate because it would have been religiously unlawful—guaranteed by them that attracted their clients. A highly qualified work colleague of mine told me that he had invested all his savings from years of work as an expatriate in Saudi Arabia in this company and encouraged me to do the same. When I voiced

my doubts about the integrity of a financial institution offering such high return on investment, he assured me that it was 'divinely blessed'. The financial activities of the two swindlers finally attracted the attention of Egyptian authorities exposing its fraudulent nature. The secret behind the exceptionally generous dividends of the pyramid fraud was not divine favour but paying first comers with the money of their last victims.

My relative chose to ignore the lesson of this story leaving me with no option but to be blunt. He was disappointed but fortunately not to the extent of souring our relationship.

The next time I heard about the scammer's club it was from the scammers themselves, or specifically their representatives in Ontario. My relative called one evening to tell me that he was in Toronto and would like to drop by with two friends for a short visit. These friends, a white man and a first-generation female immigrant, turned out to be the scammer's representatives making a vigorous last attempt to win me over. They acted with the authority and confidence of the owners or senior staff of the club. I hid my annoyance with my relative for bringing them into my home because he was my favourite relation and came with a gift of two pounds of baklava, a Middle Eastern sweet.

Scammers apparently love a challenge; the more you resist their ploy the more persistent they become. It is our custom that once a person enters our home he or she becomes our guest and we are bound by centuries-old tradition to treat with courtesy and generosity. My wife was the perfect hostess, as always. It took all my patience to listen to the scammers' false promises and watch them abuse our hospitality for hours. They claimed to represent a multinational company with branches and franchises in many countries of the world. They eventually left without convincing me to join their fraudulent group and pay the two-hundred dollars membership fee. My relative stayed for a while longer and then I drove him to a hotel in North York where he told me delegates from the club branches from all over Ontario were holding a conference. It was the last time I saw my relative, but not because we had a fall-out over my refusal to join the scammers' club.

By picking me as their targets, swindlers are implying that I am gullible and do not have enough common sense to recognize their deceptions and lack the strength of character to resist their aggressive sales tactics. After warding off scammers so many times and for so many years, I wonder about the effectiveness of law-enforcing agencies in Canada and sadly, my faith in human nature and trust in fellow human beings dropped few points.

Is immigration a scam?

Every year, Canada admits hundreds of thousands of new immigrants. The principal and often the only justification for this policy repeated by politicians from all parties is economic necessity. Immigrants are needed to work, earn money and pay taxes because the rising number of seniors combined with a low birth rate results in labour shortages and decreasing revenues from taxes. Accordingly, immigrants are nothing more than a number to balance the demand and supply for labour and the taxes paid by them are needed to pay for the burgeoning financial cost of health and social services for an increasingly graying Canadian population. In short, new immigrants work, pay taxes, the government collects, and the elderly benefit. In a typical pyramid fraud, the old contributors are paid with some of the money obtained from new entrants and the scammers get to keep the rest. This kind of fraud continues as long as new victims can be persuaded to join in and similarly the continuity of the Canadian way of life depends on attracting the right number of immigrants every year. In the light of this evidence, immigration has, in my view, all the distinguishing features of a pyramid fraud.

Other immigrants may disagree with this view but I was personally scammed into immigrating to this country. The rainbow I chased across the ocean was a figment of the minds of those who encouraged me to immigrate and I had to come up with a pot of money to pay for my stay.

They tell me to wait until I am a senior to appreciate Canadian welfare services in full. After my wife came back from a visit to the hospital for a foot x-ray the other day, she said she does not

want to grow old in this country. The sight of many senior persons in wheel chairs, on crutches and walkers put the fear of spending her old age in Canada in her heart. If my reasons for calling immigration a scam are not convincing enough so far then perhaps it is time to turn our attention to the next topic.

Is my religion an issue?

Religion is supposed to bring people closer to their maker and each other. Regrettably, this has not always been the case, and more often than not unscrupulous political leaders and some religious extremists abused religions to create barriers between people and incite violence among followers of different faiths. As Middle Easterners, we are painfully aware of the catastrophic consequences of conflicts with religious roots or façades. Religious intolerance and political oppression are the two reasons that drove us to immigrate.

We did not expect religious differences to have any significant impact on how we will be treated in Canada. Canada after all is a secular state and discrimination based on religious affiliation is unlawful. Our faith in the impartiality of Canadian institutions did not diminish even after hearing rumors about religious dignitaries receiving favorable treatment by Canadian diplomats. It was widely believed by Iraqis refugees in Syria that a visa application submitted on your behalf by a Christian clergyman has a better chance of getting accepted and fast-tracked by Canadian diplomats.

My wife and I thoroughly discussed whether religious differences would become an issue for us in Canada. Although religious freedom is constitutionally and legally guaranteed in Canada, we were worried that the social, cultural and other influences in Canada would weaken our children's commitment to their religion and culture. However, since we believed that true faith could only stem from free choice, it was a risk we were willing to take in coming here.

I was taught by Jesuit priests in high school, went to a university established by Protestant missionaries and made

friends and socialized with persons from different religious and cultural backgrounds but I never saw in these experiences and associations a threat to my personal beliefs. Religious differences were never an important factor in my social life and I did not expect them to become as such in Canada.

Having arrived here with this tolerant, cosmopolitan attitude, I was more than surprised when going to enroll my children in school I was confronted with a choice between Catholic and non-Catholic schools. I naturally chose the non-Catholic school assuming that only Catholics study in Catholic schools. When we bought our house the real estate agent, and after explaining to us that part of our real estate tax goes to fund education, told us that we had the right to decide whether our tax money is given to Catholic or non-Catholic educational boards. He assumed that we would opt for the non-Catholic one. The true picture of the Canadian education system became even foggier after a recent immigrant told us about the religious lessons given to students in Catholic schools. We were also surprised to learn that the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario recites the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of each session.

After spending more than two decades here, I am no longer sure that religion is not an issue in social relations. People are generally tolerant of religious differences but religion is not totally confined to the personal domain. "Are you a nun," a store assistant at the mall asked my wife one day. She wears a headscarf and so do nuns. Another person was curious to know why we do not shop for Christmas and had to ask: "Don't you celebrate Christmas?" It is not expected of people of other faiths to learn much about yours but anyone who watch the news on TV occasionally would know enough not to ask such questions. Being informed about other people's religions and cultures is expected to lessen intolerance.

Curiosity about our religious practices does not offend us but the ignorance is troubling. Even when a local bakery sold us a cake with liqueur in it we did not suspect him of doing it intentionally knowing that Muslims do not drink or use alcohol in their food but we thought he should have at least listed the

ingredients on the box. However, religious intolerance and hatred was undoubtedly behind throwing empty beer cans and female underwear in my backyard. We also wonder why the people who sell poppies on Remembrance Day have a large cross displayed on their table as if thousands of Muslims did not take part and die in the so-called world wars.

My wife suspects that we get more stares from people in the mall than others. I try to allay her worries that it is not her scarf but her fair skin which may make others wonder why a fair-skinned woman is wearing a hijab. After all these years and with so many Muslim women wearing head scarves, the rude stares continue to annoy her. She vividly remembers the day when waiting for the traffic light to change, a barrage of profanities made her turn her face and see the angry man who was swearing at her and vilifying our religion and noticed the large crucifix hanging from his rearview mirror. My eldest daughter took off her hijab after the terrorist attack on 9/11, to be on the safe side.

There are now more Muslim women in headscarves working in shops at the nearby mall. Is this a sign of increasing religious tolerance or a marketing tactics to attract local Muslim shoppers? The experience of the Muslim owner of a franchised coffee shop in a predominately-white town does not support the increased tolerance hypothesis; the franchiser representative told his partner that the presence of his wife in her Muslim attire might drive some customers away.

Everyone is entitled to his own religious or secular beliefs but the bible-totting missionaries who knock on my door and want me to change my religion obviously think otherwise. Some people slam the door in their faces or even swear at them but it is against my nature to treat anyone rudely. After listening politely to missionaries for the umpteenth time, it was time for them to savour a taste of their medicine. I wrote and typed a brief rejoinder entitled 'what I always wanted to say to the missionary', made copies of it and waited for them. They did come and this time I gave them my leaflet in exchange for their own and after that their visits became less often.

Labeling it as Islamophobia does not represent the full scale of the problem facing Muslims here and elsewhere. Many Canadians of other faiths not only fear Muslims and their religion but also hate and vilify them. Results of a recent survey confirm that 54% of Canadian respondents held an ‘unfavourable’ view of Islam compared to 46% in 2009. This hatred drove a man to open fire on worshippers in a Quebec mosque killing six and wounding dozens of them. Incidentally, media reports described him as a ‘gunman’ not a terrorist. The Ontario Human Rights Commission earlier expressed its concern “that since the September 2001 attacks, Islamophobic attitudes are becoming more prevalent in society and Muslims are increasingly the target of intolerance, including an unwillingness to consider accommodating some of their religious beliefs and practices.

Good Samaritan God forbid!

The age of chivalry is long gone but there is still need for a degree of compassion that will impel drivers passing by the scene of an accident to stop, give aid to the injured and distressed and call for an ambulance. If this noble human sentiment has not sadly diminished, it would not have been necessary for some countries, including Canada, to enact Good Samaritan laws.

I admit hesitating for few seconds before helping the fellow passenger who fainted on our first flight to Canada, hoping for someone else to do it instead. My dismay at the apathy of other passengers who sat there and did nothing raised in my mind the worrying question whether this is characteristic of the general population.

Canada undoubtedly has its share of good Samaritans though I have not come across many of them. One day while we struggled to free our car from a heap of snow, a young man stopped his car to ask if we needed any help. My first act of compassion after arrival here was ruined by a communication failure. I was driving slowly behind an old man on a bicycle not far from where I lived. The elderly man was pedaling hard to navigate the sharp climb in the road when an object fell off his bicycle. I caught up with him

after few minutes and before I could tell him about the object he had dropped, he lashed at me menacingly with a barrage of obscenities.

My second act of compassion was appreciated by the recipient but not by a suspicious neighbour. One day my wife called my attention to a car parked in front of our house. I looked out of the window and saw a battered car and nearby there was its young driver talking excitedly on his mobile phone. His car's front tire was punctured. After some hesitation, I went out to ask if he needed any help. He asked for a jack and fifteen minutes later we finished changing the tire but he was in no hurry to leave. He told me he wanted to call his fiancé, who lived overseas, and tell her how I came out and helped him. He also wanted me to say few words to her and I obliged him. He was preparing to leave when a neighbour suddenly approached us and started rebuking the driver for loitering and babbling on. The lesson learned is that helping a stranger in need may earn you a neighbour's disfavour.

The next time I came out of my defensive shell to help someone, an acquaintance was critical of my behaviour. It was early evening one fall day when a young woman rang our doorbell. She told me a man with a dog had been stalking her and she was afraid to walk alone through the small nearby park on her way home. It was the typical case of a damsel in distress and there was no option but to come to her aid although the alleged stalker was much younger, heavily built and his dog looked menacing. When we reached about halfway through the park path, she told me she could manage on her own since the man with the dog had since gone in a different direction. When I returned home there was a visitor waiting for me in my driveway—he came here few years before us and considered himself more knowledgeable of Canadians. After hearing about my trifling rescue and instead of congratulating me, he described my behaviour as reckless and advised me not to believe any stranger unexpectedly showing up at my door. He said the woman and the man with the dog could have been criminals in league intent on robbing me.

My neighbour and visitor may have valid reasons for suspecting strangers, whether in need or not. There are people

who exploit the compassion of others to rob or hurt them but I have always been impressed by the chivalrous horseman in the folk tale who was prepared to forgive the highway robber for stealing his horse if only he would keep it a secret so as not to discourage others from helping stranded persons. He was an exemplary Good Samaritan but here in Canada he would have lost all his horses or whatever he used in his travels. Recently, a young Canadian Samaritan originally from Iraq lost his life while attempting to ward off an assault on an old man. The two assailant turned on Yosif Al-Hasnawi, a 19-year old medical student and critically stabbed him. Two paramedics and the police constables who attended to the victim allegedly failed to give his wounds due attention and care and he eventually died. Like many immigrants from my native country, his family chose to bury him in Iraq rather than here.

My deteriorating English skills!

My birth town is an hour drive from the ruins of the ancient city Babylon whose erring residents, according to a biblical story, woke up one day speaking in different tongues and were thus unable to communicate with each other. God may not be that angry at Canada but communicating with Canadians can sometimes be difficult and exasperating.

My wife told me about the elderly woman whom she gave a lift on a rainy day and did not speak a single word of English. She was a Canadian of European origin who had been in this country for more than twenty years. She worked in a bakery with other first-generation immigrants from her native country and did not have the opportunity or motivation to learn English.

The average first-generation immigrant must have a rudimentary knowledge of English, sufficient to pass the naturalization exam at least but this is not always the case. In conversing with Canadians, I often find myself raking my mind in search for the simplest expressions and the most basic vocabulary. When I am lost for words, my hands come up to help

with gestures and then I look like an immigrant struggling to speak English.

Some Canadians who came here before us assume that all new immigrants have limited command of the English language. One can tell that by the manner of their speech and body language. They speak slowly, emphasizing words and stopping after every sentence to read my expressions for signs of understanding. They also use hand signs frequently. Once I am allowed to speak my piece, they are surprised when they find out that all the trouble they went through was unnecessary.

Canadians are shocked to hear me saying that I used to write and speak better English before coming here. It is true that my English language skills have deteriorated in Canada. The only new words added to my English vocabulary—and against my good taste and sense of propriety—are expletives and profanities abundantly used in movies, novels and everyday communications overheard in public places. Before immigrating, I encouraged my family to speak in English but since our arrival here, I have switched to Arabic so that my children would not forget their mother tongue.

The other day I was amused to listen to a bulletin issued by Weather Canada forecasting ‘copious’ amounts of snowfall. Whoever composed this bulletin deserves our gratitude for adding a new word to the limited vocabulary of many Canadians.

“Don’t you know English?” the uncivil ‘civil’ servant working at Pearson airport’s customs asked me sarcastically. He made his unkind comment after noticing what he assumed to be an error in filling my custom declaration form. I calmly explained to him that my visit had a dual purpose which made me put marks on both options instead of just one. I should have demanded to see his supervisor and submit a formal complaint but I was exhausted after a long cross-Atlantic flight and did not want to keep my family waiting at the airport any longer. Few days later, I wrote a letter to the minister in charge of customs describing the incident and accusing his employee at the airport of racial stereotyping. I suggested changing the welcoming message posted at the airport to specify arrivals of European descent only. They sent me a

polite reply and telephoned to express their regret over the incident but they claimed the information included in my letter was not sufficient to identify the errant employee.

I read the other day an article in a local newspaper assuring new immigrants of better jobs after improving their English skills. My wife urged me to write to the editor about all my diplomas and several publications in English, and especially my published poetry, and to tell them how Canadian employers refused to give me any job, even as a library clerk arranging books on shelves. I reminded my wife that it is not for lack of English skills that I never got a job here.

Is Canada really multicultural?

There are obvious differences between an explorer and an immigrant. An explorer knows that he or she will go into an uncharted territory and is mentally prepared to encounter new things and indeed would be greatly disappointed if not. Unlike an explorer or an adventurer, an immigrant must know enough about the destination country before making the critical decision to immigrate because while new discoveries gratify the explorer, surprises would shock and upset the unsuspecting immigrant. The information booklet for new immigrants given to us by the Canadian embassy was obviously designed to minimize this possibility.

This invaluable booklet described Canada as a multicultural society. The word multicultural evokes different interpretations by different people. After living in Canada for over two decades in Canada, I am convinced that the multicultural society, promised by the immigrant booklet is just a political slogan meant to encourage more immigrants from different cultures to take the plunge. The presence of several cultures in Canada is a fact, and admirably the constitution and charter of freedom and rights guarantee all persons from all cultural groups equal rights and freedoms as well as protection from prejudice and discrimination. The proof of the multicultural characteristic of Canadian society is in our experience of it and here again our experience of reality

is widely different from what the dictionary definition and the politicians' promise. In the real world, members of different cultures in Canada are not encouraged to integrate and are not treated equally. Cultural groups exist side by side but are separated by high invisible walls which make it difficult for them to have more than limited interactions. Though people no longer express or exercise their racist attitudes openly, racism or cultural ethnicity still influence attitudes and behavior.

Not all those who have cultural biases bother to hide them; a new immigrant was surprised to hear a white Canadian woman expressing her strong negative opinions on the cleanliness of peoples from other racial or ethnic background: "I do not eat in restaurants where service is provided by non-whites," she declared, "because they are not clean." My daughter also stopped eating in a cafeteria after she saw one of its staff, a white woman, use the bathroom without washing her hands afterward.

One can tell that cultural tolerance is at a low degree when people complain about the 'nasty' odours of their neighbours' cooking. The local municipality employee who came to investigate a complaint from an undisclosed source concerning stagnant water in our backyard—which was completely unfounded—told me about this intolerance to ethnic food odours. Do Canadians of Indian or Chinese origin also complain about the pungent smell of barbecued hot dogs?

The other day, one of my neighbours complained that an elderly white woman told him to go back to China because his cigarette smoke annoyed her. Would she make a similar suggestion to a smoking white person? My son was also told to go back to his native country. He was playing a friendly game of football with a group of young people of both sexes. A white player roughly pushed a young female player and in response, my son politely asked him to stop. The rude young man had these harsh words for my son: "this is how we behave in Canada and if you do not like it go back to where you came from". Some new immigrants may respond to this by reminding the offender that he or she came here on an earlier boat or flight.

Racial and ethnic biases sometimes influence attitudes and behaviours and may even decide election results. In democratic countries, voting is a civic duty and the voters must participate and choose the candidates most capable of representing their common interests regardless of any other consideration. Contrary to this cherished democratic principle, other considerations appear to have influenced voters' choices in recent local elections in two mixed ethnic Canadian cities. Voters elected a sex offender, two candidates with racist attitudes and almost reelected a confessed thief. One of the racist winner thought it best to win votes by pointing out that her coloured opponent was born and raised in a poor country before immigrating to Canada. Without evidence to the contrary, it would be difficult to dismiss the possibility of ethnic or racial biases influencing the preferences of voters in these elections.

Will someone please show us our place?

Everyone must know his place. This was the social norm in European societies, at least until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonialist described natives of their Asian and African colonies as the white man's burden until well into the last century. It was still alive in the thinking of President Bush in this century when he said that invading my birth country Iraq was necessary to bring democracy to its people, after his earlier justifications proved to be blatantly baseless.

President Bush reminds me of Jane's father in Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan. In a classic Tarzan movie, Jane is accompanying her father on his search for the legendary elephant graveyard in the African jungle. Jane, her father and a third white man followed by a group of native helpers were precariously climbing up a narrow mountain path when one of the natives slipped and fell to his death. Jane's father had only two words of eulogy for the man who lost his life in their service: 'poor devil'. In the same breath, he urged his white companion to use his whip on the remaining African helpers. It is alarming to know that the

mindset of Jane's father may not have entirely faded away with black and white films.

This kind of thinking was common among early colonial settlers who believed in their racial superiority over the indigenous people of North America. It must also be behind the discrimination reported by various ethnic and national groups that came after them to this country. New immigrants mainly of non-European extractions like us learn sooner rather than later the necessity of turning to their people for solidarity and comfort against ethnocentrism. This is why the Ukrainian immigrant advised me to go to my people. Sadly, one form of ethnocentrism frequently elicits counter ethnocentrism. Accordingly, those who call us 'brown people' are reviled by some of us as 'white trash'. Describing Canada as a multicultural society cannot camouflage the fact that members of almost every cultural group here prefer to live huddled together in the same neighbourhood pretending it was a fortress and the enemy is at the gate with a battering ram.

Safety is in number but only if they count you as one of their own. In my view, persons of the same cultural background choose to flock together here out of necessity. They not only prefer to have neighbours of their own race or native country but also they do business with them, and take strolls with them in the neighbourhood. In the malls, there appears to be a minimum of intercultural interaction, as evidenced by the cacophony of foreign languages heard on any day. When my children get on my nerves by neglecting to speak their mother language, I tell them go to the mall and listen to the Chinese speaking mostly in Cantonese or Mandarin and to the Pakistanis and Indians, Russians, and the Italians.

We are fond of repeating that white people tend to sell their houses and move elsewhere when the number of homeowners from a different cultural background increases in their neighbourhood. At the same time, we would be extremely pleased if people from our ethnic group bought more houses in our neighbourhood.

In short, we are all clinging very hard to our cultural roots and identities, to the extent of excluding others and nurturing

prejudices against them. This is unfortunately the true nature of the so-called multicultural society and not what the politicians tell us or the pamphlet for new immigrants propagates. We should all be grateful for the malls that bring all Canadians from all cultures together to stare at each other, sometimes nod at each other but otherwise recognize the sad fact that the only common things between us are our humanity and the Canadian passport.

Why are they depressed?

Canadians complain of cabin fever in winter months. This condition refers to the state of irritation, boredom, claustrophobia and loneliness resulting from prolonged isolation and limited human contacts. From my experience, it appears that many Canadians suffer cabin fever during all four seasons of the year. One sign of this loneliness is their eagerness to share their family problems even with total strangers. “Whom the employees will complain to?” the manager said to my wife after resigning her temporary position. An acquaintance at the mall sought us one day just to express her bitter disappointment with her adult sons who have not visited their incapacitated father for years and did not come to see her in hospital after a serious car accident. Another old lady never tires of lamenting her loneliness in every encounter with us in the same mall. A neighbour told us that she felt like a zombie every night she spent alone in her house dining on take-out pizzas and watching television. Her loneliness led her to invite two European male internet acquaintances as her home guests only to find out that they were HIV positive and had to call for an ambulance to take them to the hospital one night. These and other casual acquaintances are obviously lonely and possibly depressed. In 2016, 28.2% of all households in Canada have just one person living in them. Loneliness and depression may also be the main reasons why 1 in 5 of Canadians living in the capital Ottawa subscribes to Ashley Madison website which promotes adultery. A Reuters report found that many of these potential adulterers have the postal code of Parliament Hill where the

government and elected politicians work. These findings also indicate a serious flaw in the basic fabric of Canadian society.

“Now that is a lucky man,” my acquaintance said enviously about a fellow new immigrant. I expected him to say the man is blessed with a loving family or won the national lottery. It was a piece of paper all right but not the winning 649-lottery ticket. It was a medical report confirming that the ‘lucky’ man suffered from chronic depression. You do not expect sensible persons to wish illness for themselves but my acquaintance did and believed it would put an end to all his troubles. He explained to me that with such a report he would be automatically eligible for a disability pay and would no longer need the welfare checks he gets as a refugee. It would also mean deliverance from the humiliation of another visit from government welfare inspectors who unexpectedly show up at his door to search his closets and rudely expect him to prove that his winter jacket or his daughter’s new toy was not bought with the extra dollars he made from a part-time job. He did work part-time jobs but if certified with manic depression he would never have to work the night shifts in grocery stores and experience another traumatic hold-up.

It was not the first time I heard a man wishing to be diagnosed with a serious mental or psychological illness. During the Iraqi – Iran war, young Iraqis anxiously waiting for their conscription orders fantasized about having a medical reason such as schizophrenia to qualify for exemption from military service at the front. Could making a living in Canada for some be as bad as going to war?

Not all cases of depression among new immigrants are made-up, and sometimes it affects the least likely candidate. He is a self-made successful businessman. Motivational speakers should mention his success story in their lectures and seminars and even MBA students could learn few lessons from it. I first met him more than twenty-five years ago and if he were depressed then I would not have been surprised. He was an expatriate in an oil-rich country who had just lost his job and was working as a janitor in a furnished apartment building. The accommodation that came with the job was a single makeshift shed he put together in the

building's backyard but he was not going to let his miserable situation sap his determination to succeed. In a blatant defiance to adversity, he got married and brought his wife to live with him in the garden shed, and soon after she became pregnant. Within few years, he managed to turn a small loan from his employer into a small fortune.

When he immigrated to Canada, he was already a multimillionaire and the proud owner of a thriving import business. He bought a house and a condominium, enrolled his children in private school and relocated some of his business activities to Canada. He was a religious man and thanked Allah for his blessings every day. Given all these achievements, his complaint of depression and taking antidepressants was surprising. He has since then gone back but his children are studying or working here and he visits them regularly. He recently told me that every time he stays in Canada for even a short spell he gets depressed again and must take antidepressants but as soon as he leaves his condition improves and he stops taking medications.

He is not the only immigrant who came to Canada and became depressed. The mother of my wife's friend was also put on antidepressant soon after arriving here. Her daughter was at loss in finding a reasonable explanation for her mother's condition. Anyone in her position would have been at least relieved, if not happy, to exchange the terrors of civil strife in their native country for a comfortable life with her loving daughter, or so the daughter thought. Why this mother and the successful rags-to-riches man became depressed in Canada when they should have been content and happy? Unusual occurrences call for unusual explanations, and this could be found in the following anecdote.

Fourteen centuries ago, my native country Iraq was part of the Umayyad Empire which ruled from Syria. Iraq was then, as it has been recently, a hotbed of dissent and insurrections. The Umayyad caliph in Damascus, concerned by this situation, thought it best to appoint a lenient governor in Iraq. The first appointee, a mild-mannered person, became a ruthless autocrat shortly after assuming his responsibilities, so he had him

replaced. The second and third governors all went through the same strange transformation, prompting the bewildered caliph to convene his councillors. Only one of them offered him an explanation. It must be something in the Iraqi soil which changes these temperate men into brutal governors. To prove his point, the councillor brought a load of Iraqi soil and invited the caliph to ask a person who is well known for his peaceful and nonviolent disposition to step on it. The caliph ordered that and to his surprise and all those present, the man suddenly became aggressive and belligerent.

This account reported in ancient history books is obviously a fabrication. A more plausible explanation for the turbulent state of my native country is its opposition to being ruled by the oppressive Umayyad dynasty. I would not be surprised if the indigenous people of Canada suffered from depression knowing that all of this land and its riches were once their own alone. I thought once of writing to the first nation's council of chiefs requesting their permission to reside with my family here because they and not the Canadian government have the moral right to do that. The squirrels running about in my backyard also have a good reason for becoming depressed—if this was possible—because we all trespass on what used to be their habitat. When my wife expresses her resentment toward the annoying squirrels pilfering our flower bulbs or the hedgehog squatting under our deck, I remind her that this was once their land.

The Iraqi soil does not have the germs of despotism that infect its rulers and in the same manner the bitter winters of Canada cannot be the real or major cause for the depression that affects some new immigrants. However, the man of Asian descent who helped my wife in loading the bags of topsoil into our van had genuine reasons to be depressed. Last summer, my wife, feeling guilty for not helping me in tending our garden, decided to surprise me by bringing a dozen of topsoil bags from the garden centre. One of the center's employee carried the topsoil bags into the van and refused to take any tip. After loading the last bag, he asked her, "Is it true that you Muslims believe the world is coming to an end soon?" His question surprised her and she told him she

would have to ask her husband. He then expressed his wish for the world to end soon. He went on to tell her that he had recently lost his job, his wife had left him and was considering going back to where he came from. However, he was not sure of managing in his native country because he came to Canada a young boy and does not speak his native language well. The garden center was closed soon after the first sign of fall but my wife cannot help worrying over the fate of the depressed employee.

VIII. Et Tu Canada: Mourning Zulfikar

He was ten years younger than me and called me uncle since his father is my cousin. Relationships among clan members are frequently marred by old grievances and jealousies that may develop into feuds. His grandfather being the youngest of his father's sons harboured a grudge against his brothers for giving him a smaller share of their father's inheritance. Such animosities are usually passed from one generation to another until restitution or a quid pro quo is achieved. Zulfikar knew of this injustice but never showed any sign of it in his behaviour toward me.

Undoubtedly, he was one of the few good persons I came to know well in my extended family. This was indeed a great achievement given his family background; my nephew had a difficult childhood and his relationship with his father was turbulent. He was almost thirty when I met him for the first time in Syria where we were both living in exile. His father often belittled him in public because he was studying engineering rather than medicine and progressing slowly in his studies. During his final year at university, he needed money for his graduation project and since his father was out of the country he came to me for a loan, and I gladly gave him the money. I also attended the oral examination of his graduation project, while his father stayed away. He passed the exam and his father offered to pay back the loan for the project but I told him it was my graduation present.

Our apartment in Damascus needed major innovations and I decided to hire him to oversee the project. He was a recent graduate with little experience but he was reliable, and needed the work and extra cash. His work on my apartment was the first of a string of small renovation projects keeping him in business for many months after.

For the first time in his life, he was supporting himself and did not have to beg and nag his father for his meager pocket money. He was emboldened by his new independence enough to take the plunge. He brought his fiancé to meet us and proudly showed her

the work he did in our apartment. We attended his wedding unmindful of antagonizing his father who wanted him to marry a relative, or at least someone of his own social status instead. It was a modest ceremony in a poor district where other Iraqi refugees lived but he looked happy at the time. The marriage lasted only three months and the divorce was a declaration of his surrender in the face of a fierce and relentless opposition from his father. Soon after the divorce, he was remarried, and this time with the blessing of his father who arranged the marriage.

My emotional reaction to his sudden arrival in Canada was a mixture of gloom and relief. The arrival of more Iraqis indicated a worsening of the situation in my native country and diminishing hopes in any improvement in the short run. I remembered how he used to scorn asylum seekers who lived off the charity of host countries. At the same time, I was relieved to know that my relative had finally taken control of his life and would fill some of the void in our social life here, at least until there is a regime change in Iraq and we could all go back to resume our interrupted lives.

He chose to live in another city but we managed to get together few times. We exchanged news about our family back home, reminisced about the years spent in exile in Syria, and discussed what the future here held in store for us and our children. Unlike me, he was optimistic of finding work and making enough money to give his family a comfortable life. He was also prepared to swallow his pride, bury his diploma and accept any job. He worked as a taxi driver but only temporarily, he told me, and until he saves the down payment on a semi-trailer truck. That dream never came true.

I was overseas looking for work when it happened. My wife called to tell me that he was dead. His friends and neighbours were saying it was the doing of sectarian terrorist killers. The police found his dead body in his taxi, strangled with a metal wire. His taxi was equipped with an alarm but it was not activated. Few days later, his murderers were identified and apprehended and they confessed killing him in retaliation for taking a stand against them in a dispute. His murderers had collected donations for a

new prayer hall and after undue delays, my nephew led a campaign to retrieve the money. These criminals were members of ‘our people’ with whom we shared our cultural roots and looked to them for support. Our shock and horror increased with every new information about the crime, its motives and the grisly details.

A police detective told my wife who went to stay with his widow and children that it must have been a very painful death. My nephew suffered many stab wounds to his head and hands before his throat was slashed from ear to ear, almost decapitating his head. He pleaded with the killers to let him go: “I won’t do anything. I won’t bother you again. Spare me for the sake of my children,” as unfeelingly reported by one of the convicted slayers. The police determined from the evidence at the scene of the crime that he did put a resistance but he was overwhelmed.

He was buried in his native country leaving behind him a wife and three young children. He also left his unfulfilled dreams in Canada. He is still remembered by his family, friends and fellow taxi drivers who added his name to the list of the then almost 200 taxi drivers killed on the job in Canada.

History books tell us about violent men gouging the eyes of their opponents, pulling out their tongues or even chopping off their heads. The likes of these ruthless men still live in my native country, killing innocent people and assassinating their opponents. However, we never imagined that vile tribal customs would follow us all the way to Canada.

All my personal grievances against Canadian institutions and individuals described in this book pale in comparison with this tragedy and its implications. This was undoubtedly the ultimate betrayal of all of us who came here for a new beginning and a safe refuge from all the injustices, oppression and prejudices in our native countries only to be confronted with our worst fears, and in the case of Zulfikar pay the heavy price of losing his life.

Epilogue

The special day which all new immigrants impatiently wait for finally arrived. We were at the designated location an hour early and it was already half full. The atmosphere was festive, with people wearing their best clothes and broadest smiles. It was also a time for reflection on our hopes, sacrifices and disappointments during the four years since our arrival here. We have fulfilled all our immigration obligations to the best of our abilities and this was going to be the day on which our efforts will be rewarded with Canadian nationalities.

Regrettably, not all the promises that attracted us to this country proved to be true. I could not help wondering whether it was worth all our struggles and disappointments. Having a Canadian citizenship will mean regaining one basic right and freedom which the government in my native country has deprived me of, namely the right to have a passport and the freedom to travel. However, having a passport proved to be a small compensation for all our sacrifices and agonies. By then, I had reached the conclusion that our future will bring nothing new, and that was certainly much less than what I hoped for and much worse than what I had feared.

On that day, our status changed from landed immigrants to citizens. Although we were told we were all equal, that was true only in law. In reality, we were admitted through the back door of Canada, and this reminded me of servants who use a separate entrance and must never forget their place in their employer's home.

My recollection of that day would be incomplete without the image of the young plumb female official. As we rose to recite the oath of citizenship, she paced up and down the aisle with a severe look on her face stopping at every row to cast her scrutinizing eyes on those standing in it. Did her eyes linger on my family and me or did I imagine that? I suspected her of trying to read our lips to ensure that we were reciting the oath and nothing else. My excitement at the prospect of having a passport again was dampened at the passport office, to which I hurried

immediately after the citizenship ceremony. I was told there that no passport would be issued unless my application bears the authenticating signature of a guarantor, a professional such as a medical doctor, pharmacist, or accountant etc. Even after becoming a citizen, I needed someone to vouch for me.

If I were asked to list all the positive qualities which endeared Canada to me, in a descending order of importance the passport would certainly tops the list. The passport is significant in itself because it enabled me to practice one of my basic God-given freedoms but also because of its symbolic value as a confirmation of my status as a free man having rights and freedoms that no government can take away without the due process of law. As a father and a husband, I also came to Canada to ensure the safety of my family by distancing them as far as possible from the turmoil and oppression in my native country. Who could also deny the other privileges of being a Canadian such as free medical and educational services, even though the quality of these services could still be significantly improved?

These privileges, which my family and I relish immensely, make up the sweet part of my experience in Canada. As painstakingly expounded in this book, there was a bitter part also, and often it weighed heavily on my total assessment of this experience. The bitterness, even in small measure or only for a short time, tend to linger in your mouth and memory. The feeling of bitterness and disappointment acquired here refuses to go away. This is due primarily to the fact that all my efforts to earn an income and support my family here failed completely. My information about the Canadian business and work environment may have been incomplete or partially incorrect and this led me to assume that I have what is needed to establish a successful small business or find suitable employment. If this is indeed the case then much of the blame for my unrealistic expectations in this regard rests with the Canadian authorities that misled me into believing that my qualifications are sufficient and suitable for working here. The financial cost of this situation was heavy, and after spending all our savings I had to borrow hundreds of thousands of dollars to sustain my family here.

At the social level, my understanding of the meaning of multiculturalism in Canada was very wrong. To our dismay, we found a fragmented society in which each cultural group lived behind high walls separating it from other cultural groups and allowing only limited interactions among them. We could not even find social support among our cultural group because it is disorganized and each subgroup imposes strict and rigid membership conditions. While I alone had to carry the burden of my difficult family's finances and debt, my whole family suffered the consequences of social isolation.

No one should take the crucial decision to immigrate before getting all necessary information about what lays ahead of him or her. What I learned about Canada before making that decision was clearly insufficient, and my only excuse for not doing my homework is that I was desperate enough to overlook even some of the obvious warning signs. This is even more inexcusable because I of all people should have known better. One of my two books published in English was written for the purpose of helping people who wanted to work and live in oil-rich Arab countries. I was an expatriate myself then and came across numerous cases in which expatriates lost their jobs, had their work licenses revoked or were jailed because they did not have beforehand all the needed information about local laws, culture and other salient features of their host countries.

The little available information about Canada did alert me to the possibility of facing problems but nothing like the worst-case scenario we experienced. If my intolerable situation and hopeful thinking suspended my better judgment, what excuse do Canadian authorities have for misleading me? By simply granting me immigration visa, the Canadian authorities implicitly assured me of having more than a fair chance of success in my new adopted country. This was certainly a bad judgment on their part. If I were living in 1910 and had applied for immigration to Canada then I would probably be denied a visa. At that time, an immigration act classified certain applicants as 'undesirable' because their cultural background or their education and experience made their adjustment to working and living

conditions here unlikely. I am actually one of these ‘undesirables’ or unsuitable candidates for immigration and yet, and contrary to the best interest of both Canada and me, I was granted a visa.

According to the official biography of the late Queen mother by William Shawcross, she is reported to have loved Canada. On one of her royal trips to this country, her plane made an unscheduled stop at a military base because of an electrical storm and she cheerfully commented then that she loved it “because in the royal family it is more fun when things go wrong. Usually everything runs like clockwork”. In the more than two decades of our life Canada, many things did go wrong and none of them was fun for us.

It is time to reveal Canada’s score on my Sleep Satisfaction Scale—in case some have not guessed it already. I promised to do that in the first paragraph of the Introduction. I usually average six hours of sleep but of a very low quality and therefore I give Canada the low score of three on this Scale.

Why do I choose to stay if I am unhappy here? Unlike the despondent Canadian of Asian origin, I am not praying for an end of the world soon to put me out of my misery. When the American forces invaded my native country Iraq and toppled the regime that made my life desperate enough to consider immigration, my hopes of going back were raised only to be erased again by the ensuing turmoil and carnage. I still hope to go back when the occupation ends and the situation is back to normal.