

years in the life

his name is sami daoud and he is seven years old, and he has moved to a new city.

seven years old is his baba leaving for long hours, working long jobs, but coming back smiling.

it is his mama trying her hardest to make ends meet without their family around to support them and scraping by.

seven years old is the new school, the new language.

it is the neighborhood boys calling to him to come play, his running to catch up.

seven years old is not knowing their language, their words, but knowing how to play their games.

it is peaceful, with hours spent talking to his twin sisters, malika and maysa.

and most of all, seven years old is happiness.

his name is sam daoud and he is eight years old, and he is learning how to fit in.

eight years old is the new name, the american name, the new school's name.

it is his baba working only one job, finally, and his mama thinking about college for malika and maysa, happily.

eight years old is trying to learn the cropped words the boys say, trying to learn the names of their favorite bands, their favorite movies, their favorite sports stars, because none of that never seems to come naturally to him.

it is spending hours in front of the tv, imitating the people's voices and learning, always learning.

eight years old is not really knowing what his work means yet, but knowing that it will help him be like the other kids.

it is trying to feel like the neighborhood boys, to make everything perfect and normal, but never

feeling like them.

and most of all, eight years old is looking up.

his name is sam, just sam, and he is nine years old, and he has the world figured out.

nine years old is asking his mama and baba to call him sam, asking them to speak english when the boys come to play.

it is his sisters telling him off for his mispronunciation of arabic words, making him gargle so he doesn't lose his throaty 3ayns and ghayns.

nine years old is befriending the older boys in an attempt to seem more like an american boy, befriending their families to seem more like an american.

it is eating hamburgers and hot dogs with the neighbors instead of coming home.

nine years old is figuring out school, figuring out the social circles.

it is laughing at the jokes the boys make in an effort to seem more like them, even though he knows malika and maysa would kill him if they knew.

and most of all, nine years old is looking for acceptance.

his name is sammy (with two ms and a y) and he is ten years old and he is slowly realizing what life is like for people like him.

ten years old is teaching his sisters what they call american, teaching them how to stop the words from skipping through their still-heavy accents, part arab, part new yorker, barely the smooth speech of their neighbors.

it is watching his mama instruct his sisters on how to go on a plane, instructing them on how to be the quiet, docile, friendly american that she says the men in the airport can't see in them.

ten years old is seeing malika and maysa hug his parents, seeing them walk through the plastic arch that his mama tells him senses the metal.

it is seeing a tall man pull them both aside, pointing to their hijabs, and malika glancing back at him, afraid.

ten years old is hearing his mama sobbing at night, hearing his baba's consoling and yet empty words, devoid of any real ability to confirm or deny anything.

it is wondering what will happen when he goes to college, what the tall man will say to him when he passes under the plastic arch in the airport.

and most of all, ten years old is about realization.

his name is sami daoud again and he is eleven and he isn't sure what's going on anymore.

eleven years old is tumbling into middle school, tumbling into new classes with new teachers who couldn't care less about how to pronounce his name.

it is meeting a new group of kids who laugh at his teacher's pronunciation of his name and make fun of his still noticeable accent.

eleven years old is not knowing why his skin is different than the skin of the new kids, not knowing why they care.

it is waiting for malika or maysa to call so he can talk in the arabic he once hated.

eleven years old is living in the school library, living in the stacks of books that can't shout at him like the kids at school do.

it is finding solace in the stories of adventurers and swashbucklers, residing in worlds of magic and mystery so infinitely better than his own.

and most of all, eleven years old is about coping.

his name is still sami daoud and he is twelve years old and he is trying to make a place for himself.

twelve years old is trying to keep up with the neighborhood boys, trying to keep up with their constant flow of slang in a language that has suddenly become again unintelligible to him.

it is hearing the new phrases slip from their mouths, hand-me-downs from their parents.

twelve years old is rethinking playing with the neighborhood boys, rethinking his relationships and himself.

it is malika and maysa returning from their first year of college wide-eyed and talkative, telling stories of their classes and the people they've met.

twelve years old is seeing maysa going out without her hijab, seeing his baba speak quietly and quickly to his mama behind maysa's back.

it is malika telling him all about her classes on psychology and gender and how interesting the world really is.

and most of all, twelve years old is learning of a new perspective.

his name is sami daoud and he is thirteen years old and he is trying to process what he sees through the eyes malika and maysa have given him.

thirteen years old is teetering on the beginning of a new start, teetering on the edge of an ending.

it is learning more and more about everything he possibly can, under malika's guidance, of course.

thirteen years old is talking to the librarians constantly, talking enough that sometimes they bring books from home on science and philosophy and identity for him to read.

it is ignoring his classmates, who whisper about how he never talks.

thirteen years old is reassessing his life in segments, reassessing his existence small bits at a time.

it is maysa bringing him to the city, hours and worlds outside of their small town, to meet some of her friends from college, different and wild people with hair dyed strange colors and beautiful, outlandish clothing, all of them talking quickly and laughing loudly.

thirteen years old is trying his hardest to find a group to call home, trying his hardest to find people to relate to in the small town so unlike the big city.

it is begging maysa to again bring him with her, longing for another taste of the world beyond his own.

and most of all, thirteen years old is discovering his own perspective.

their name is possibly sami daoud and they are fourteen years old and they are finding their niche in the world, ish.

fourteen years old is starting over, starting high school in a place with more students and a bigger library than ever.

it is befriending the other kids who don't align with their town's normality, like maysa's friends, like sami themselves.

fourteen years old is discovering a world they didn't even know existed, discovering a world independent of the expectations their parents implied of binary and beauty became more like suggestions.

it is spending less time at home or engulfed in stacks of books and more time running around their town with their new friends in the dim, warm light of the streetlamps.

fourteen years old is finding a yemeni friend, finding someone their age to talk to in the language they've come to love.

it is their baba smiling when he hears them speaking arabic to him again.

and most of all, fourteen years old is a beginning.

their name is samiya daoud and they are fifteen years old and they are in a time of transition, in every sense of the word.

fifteen years old is malika and maysa finishing college, an era in their lives over while at home another era in their life is unfolding.

it is malika deciding to go back to school, getting her master's degree in psychology, to their baba's pride and delight, and maysa deciding to move into the city, starting her life as a stylist to the city's rich and famous, to their baba's pride and dismay.

fifteen years old is introducing maysa to their friends, introducing maysa to the brightly colored family she'd always been a part of.

it is college looming on the horizon, their mama printing out lists of top colleges and their baba pestering them about their classes at school and standardized tests and scholarships.

fifteen years old is changing their name, changing the way they think about themselves.

it is finding their way back to the librarians, telling them all the stories they've lived over the years.

and most of all, fifteen years is choices.

their name is samiya daoud and they are sixteen years old and they are experiencing a mild upheaval.

sixteen years old is their baba announcing that he has been promoted, announcing a move to another town, miles and worlds away.

it is saying their goodbyes to their friends, a final ma'a salama to the colorful group of friends they've come to know as family.

sixteen years old is driving into the now familiar city to see maysa, driving to see someone they love for the last time, at least in this era of his life.

it is smiling when maysa offhandedly calls them by their new name, the happiness that comes with knowing the people they love love them for themselves.

sixteen years old is turning a corner onto a new street, turning a corner onto a new life.

it is a bittersweet ending of an era, a true fresh start.

and most of all, sixteen years old is new.

their name is samiya daoud and they are seventeen years old and they are adapting surprisingly well to their new state of change.

seventeen years old is gearing up for the end of yet another phase of their life, gearing up for the start of another.

it is trying to decide on a college, on a major, on a career, a life, talking over the phone to malika endlessly about applications.

seventeen years old is disappearing into their school's library again, disappearing into a world of studying and test scores.

it is completely devoting themselves to getting into the world beyond their small town, new and yet, somehow, the same.

seventeen years old is contemplating telling their mama and baba about their new name, contemplating telling them about their new happiness.

it is crying with relief when their acceptance letter to the school in the city arrives.

and most of all, seventeen years old is hope.

her name is samiya daoud and she is eighteen years old and she is finally herself.

eighteen years old is settling into her new identity, settling into her new city.

it is standing tall as the airport security officer looks her up and down and refusing to be humiliated.

eighteen years old is running through the night with her new friends, running with a pack of people who wear glitter on their faces and hold hope in their hearts.

it is reveling in her new life as samiya daoud, whom maysa has dubbed girl wonder, and malika has, amused, embraced.

eighteen years old is wearing her new hijab home, wearing it amidst the questioning stares of her mama and the endless explanations she gives to her baba, who, eventually, smiles and nods, giving his approval.

and most of all, eighteen years old is happiness.

