[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** First of all, you have to understand I tell him not to do it. I tell him why not to do it. My little brother is hardheaded. Nine years old, gets into his little head, he's going to take his little money from cutting people's lawns, from weeding Mrs. Chalmers' garden, he's going to not get the candy, not get comic books, he's going to be a good little saver. And instead, he's going to buy an aquarium. Now, I'm 13 years old. So, I see the future written large, clear as day, don't do it.

He does it. Purchases this huge aquarium with lights, filters, plants, rocks, all the fixings. And every couple of weeks, he can convince my parents to take him to the aquarium supply store. He buys fish for his brand-new tank. First, the zebra danios, then the bettas, the mollys, the damselfish, tetras, angelfish, firemouth. And before he knew it, the tank is beautiful. This menagerie of multicolored darts flitting in and out between the greenery and the shelters he's carefully placed. My brother, never takes care of anything. He takes care of this. He's a natural. It sounds crazy, but each individual fish has their own personality. One of the bettas, Sanford, who even let him gently stroke their underbelly like he's petting a dog. It's cool.

Then, an entirely predictable thing happens. Pops tells us, "We're moving, this week." To a new house, a new school on the other side of the state. Of course, we are. We move every single year. Different reasons like rent, cantankerous neighbors, somebody talking about pressing charges, whatever. He says, "Pack up all your stuff. Not going to be a lot of room in the U-Haul. Most things got to get left behind."

[upbeat music]

Like I said, I'm 13 years old. I've seen too much. I've been to many places. I've learned too many hard lessons. So, I don't tell my little brother that most things means his fish. Only after my father tells him to flush them down the toilet, he comes to me panicked. "I told you not to get those fish." You've got to help me." "Didn’t I tell you--" "You've got to help me, please help me, help me, help me, help me." I'm not going to lie, I didn't like fish. But now, I kind of like fish. "Aight, knucklehead." So, we prepare, we practice, we'll get everything ready Then, we wait, wait until the very last minute, the very last moment, because you know when you put the fish in the plastic bags, the race is on, every second counts. If we don't get them back in the aquarium soon, they die. If it is too hot, too cold in between our legs in the back of a station wagon, they die. If the water leaks, they die. And I'll never forget that look on my little brother's face as he checks and rechecks the seals on the plastic bags, as we ride down I-96 toward Grand Rapids.

And today, we're going on a different type of journey with an entirely different sort of animal.

[upbeat music]

Snap proudly presents, Love Cats. My name is Glynn Washington. And believe me, sometimes we don't know how we're doing until we know how they're doing, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, Rasha Elass, she knows the road. She grew up in multiple countries, spent her 20s and 30s reporting on events around the world. And this piece contains some graphic imagery and description of wartime violence because by 2010, Rasha was covering religious affairs in the Middle East where she began looking for something deeper than a story. So, she left her full-time job to freelance in Damascus, Syria, where she was born. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Rasha:** The reason I wanted to go back to Syria so badly was because for a long time, I did feel nostalgic for something that never was there, as if it were just a mirage. And I thought, I have to go to Syria. This was the country that for my entire life, I felt I needed to connect with, to understand. I had always felt some sense of belonging, but I wanted to cement that belonging, even if it was an illusion. I mean, maybe all our sense of belonging is an illusion.

**David:** Rasha booked the flight on Middle East Airlines and boarded with everything important to her.

**Rasha:** When we boarded the flight, Gremlin kept pushing with her head, the zipper popped, and she climbed onto my stomach and just stayed there. I could feel her belly against mine, like completely frozen, her paws hugging me and her nails going through my sweater. And then suddenly, the one flight attendant just stopped in her tracks and was like, "Is that a cat?" Like, "Yeah. Sorry, she's scared."

**David:** Rasha's travel companions were two kittens. She had adopted them a few months earlier.

[cats mewling]

**Rasha:** When I first saw them, I thought they were hilariously cute. Just so adorable. But I did not want to take on any responsibility. I didn't want any pets. A friend of mine said, "It's okay. Just bring them just to foster them." And then that same day, they spent the night at my place. By the morning, I'm like, "Yeah, they're not going anywhere. I'm not giving them up." And this one is Pumpkin and that one's Gremlin.

Gremlin resembled the gremlins that I recall from the movie, *Gremlins*, before they hatch into monsters. Fuzzy and gray with huge blue eyes and just funny looking. Pumpkin is orange, and he really did look like a pumpkin on Halloween. Just his head hanging low and looking kind of sad. I think I relate a little bit to both. I definitely relate to Pumpkin's restlessness and pushing boundaries and getting into trouble here and there. And I definitely relate to Gremlin's interest in just lounging by the fireplace and eating delicious, fatty food and just hanging out in the sunshine.

**David:** Rasha landed in Damascus with her two cats and a few suitcases.

**Rasha:** So, I arrived at the family home, knocked on the door. I heard my mom's footsteps walked toward the door. She was expecting me, of course. I walked in. I immediately opened the cats' carriers, and they came out of their carriers. It was nice to see that the cats, they weren't scared. Immediately, they started investigating the house, smelling, sniffing and all that stuff and settled in pretty quickly actually. It felt like they were always there. It was just very natural to have them there.

When I returned to Syria, it was very pleasant. It's a nocturnal culture, so before 3 AM, 4 AM restaurants would be just like a beehive. Coffee and more tea and more food and the sour and salty aromas. It was very safe. Sometimes, I would return home by myself at 3 AM. It was very nice.

**David:** On the surface, Damascus was treating Rasha well. The parties were lively. Her friends and family were close. But there was a feeling she couldn't quite shake.

**Rasha:** I felt like that would manifest itself in very simple ways, like in the small talk that people do that I never quite pinned down. Even like buying a cup of coffee from the coffee shop, and the barista would be like, "Oh, you have a slight heaviness to the tongue," as in as in you have a slight accent. Even though I'm fluent in the language and I grew up with the same food and all that stuff, I was still an outsider. The one that left and comes back sometimes.

[somber music]

**David:** Even though she lived there with her cats and spoke fluent Arabic, Rasha struggled to call Syria home. As a journalist, it seemed like no one cared about stories from Syria, a closed-off country where nothing new seems to happen. But then, she started to notice something.

**Rasha:** If you're listened hard enough or you looked hard enough, you could see something seething beneath the surface. I mean, there were a lot of problems. Everything seemed to be unsustainable, starting with the corruption, for example. Simple things, like the cop might pull you over for running a redlight. But immediately, you just tip him and he'd let you go. The authorities coming in and demanding bribes in return for not evicting you. And the same like with education, all my cousins, they had to bribe college professors, pay them extra so that they would help them pass the exams. So, these things were just everywhere. And they were very frustrating, because you could see where disaster could potentially explode.

[protestors chanting]

**Rasha:** Sometime in December 2010, the protests and the uprising, that's when it began. First, there were peaceful protests, and then they were met by live bullets from the regime. My family was also like, "Oh, no, they'll stop. It's just going to resolve itself in a few days, you'll see." That's what everybody kept saying, but it kept getting worse. It's an uprising turned civil war turned regional war. And I was like, "Under no condition, am I going to leave now," because international media had very limited access inside Syria. And so, the reports would come out like, "300 people were slaughtered overnight in a village," but we could not independently verify it. This disclaimer to me was so upsetting, and actually, many times it was the reason I risked my own life, just so I could say in my report, that this is verified, that this is indeed what happened.

**David:** Rasha committed to staying in Syria and witnessing what was about to happen, and she had a plan. First, she got her family out.

**Rasha:** Frankly, I kept pushing my mom to leave. I'm like, "Just go. Just go to the US. Just stay there for a while." So, yeah, she left.

**David:** Next, she set a base in a third-floor apartment in Damascus with her cats.

**Rasha:** I did have emergency protocols. Here's my passport, my extra water, my extra battery. And then on good days, I would practice with the cats. I would just like scoop them up, put them in their carrier, see how long that took.

**David:** Finally, in order to work as a journalist, she had to get a permit from the Ministry of Information, but it was rare that they ever handed those out.

**Rasha:** And even if they did, they would seriously hinder the ability for anyone to report because if you go around as "licensed journalist," the people you interview realize that this person is working with the blessings of the Information Ministry, and they censor themselves. So, I decided, "Okay, I'm not going to go apply for a permit."

**David:** Rasha was feeling isolated before the war. But now, as a journalist, working under the regime's nose--

**Rasha:** I couldn't trust anybody. And frankly, nobody trusted me. There were so many aspects to worry, about being followed, personnel safety and security, someone being spooked by my asking too many questions and reporting me. There's really no such thing as undercover reporter, because that's just being a spy. So, it's just me and the two cats. I would wake up in the morning, leave the apartment, and I would see a new death notice.

We would see the death notices announced on flyers, plastered on walls in the neighborhood where the dead people used to live, or where they might have relatives.

Every day was a reminder to me of grief that parents and children were going through all around me. And I would just come home and see Pumpkin and Gremlin, and just to relax, I would take one of the cats and on the balcony and start like combing their fur over and over and over again and the cat would just be purring, and relaxing and I would be just sort of in a hypnotic state, just kind of brushing and brushing.

[cat purring]

[somber music]

**David:** Rasha snuck in and out of regime in rebel-controlled areas, watching the clothing she wore and who she talked to. At home, the phone barely rang anymore. And when the power was cut, she and the cats were left alone in the dark with the sounds of war.

**Rasha:** We heard a whistle. The cats, they seem to hear the whistle before I heard it, and they looked in the same direction and ran off to hide someplace. My brain actually processed the reaction of the cat before processing what the sound was about. The whistle was like building, it came from one side, went over the building, and then--

[blast sound]

A blast on the other side of the building, where my living room overlooked. The whole apartment shook. And then, all I could think was basically seek lower ground or risk death. No time to look for the cats. I mean, it was instinct. The cats' instinct was to just scramble and hide. And my instinct was to seek lower ground because I felt so vulnerable and exposed on the third floor.

I'm going down the stairs, and there's another missile coming, another whistle, another blast. And I remember skipping over steps, as I was running down the stairs. And, again, my brain is like, "Lower ground or risk death. Lower ground or risk death." That's all that was going through my brain. At the ground level, the street level, I saw one of my neighbors and she was just sort of hypnotized, standing by the lobby door. She's like, "My kids, my kids, they should be on their way home from school. My kids, my kids." And I'm like, "They're fine. I'm sure school is in lockdown." Of course, I didn't know that. It didn't matter. All I knew was she had to come down to the basement with me. I grabbed her hand, and then another blast, and then she pulled away and she's like, "No, my kids, my kids," and then I pulled her back. And finally, we're both at basement level.

Most apartment buildings in Damascus, they don't have bunkers or anything like that. And the basement floor is usually someone's home. And this was someone's home, and there were a few other neighbors there already, and that's where we stayed waiting out the attack to end.

I remember just being quiet and hearing the people around me breathing and listening really, really intently. "Is there another whistle? Is there another projectile flying toward us?" I started thinking about the cats in the midst of fire and the high heat. And, of course, I was feeling tormented.

Slowly, we ventured up from the basement. We saw some government guards on the street level and they were outside. So, that was kind of a visual cue that the attack was over. I went upstairs and I opened the door, immediately visual scan. Everything is in its rightful place. "Okay, thank God. Thank God." And then, "Pumpkin, Gremlin," where are they? Where are they? "Pumpkin, Gremlin?" [voice echoes]

The minute I saw them, it was just relief. And it was like, "[relieved sigh] I knew it, I knew it." I had convinced myself that they would sort of know where to hide and survive a mortar attack. That's what kept me calm.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Will Rasha find the connection she's been looking for, or will the mirage of her home country finally disappear into the fog of war? Stay tuned.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Love Cats episode. When last we left Rasha, and her two cats. They just survived or mortar attack. And as such, this story does contain graphic imagery and descriptions of wartime violence, because there's more danger awaiting in Damascus.

**David:** Over the next weeks, another mortar attack struck near the apartment. And then, another, the cats always sprinting for cover.

**Rasha:** There was one time when I kept a litterbox on the balcony in a protected area. One time, Gremlin was using the litter box and then boom, there was a blast while she was doing her business. And poor thing, she jumped high in the air and scrambled. And then, she stopped using that litterbox. They just have such strong instinct. They reacted differently to a mortar shell than to a car bomb, for example. Before I heard anything, I would notice both of them would crouch low, and then start moving, kind of slowly, but quickly with their tail being really heavy, dragging behind them on the floor. And as my brain is processing that visual, that's when I would usually hear the boom [explosion] of a car bomb. I got to a point where I learned to watch their reaction to help me ascertain whether the blast we had just heard was more likely a car bomb or a mortar shell that exploded.

What always stood out to me was how the cats could never lie. As a journalist, you're working with words, you're working with narrative and stories, and you're sifting through the propaganda and the human biases and you're sifting through your own bias. None of that is relevant when it comes to animals.

**David:** The cats' raw honesty was a reminder that being in a warzone would affect Rasha, even if she didn't realize it.

**Rasha:** I do remember one time, a rebel-held town agreed to put down their weapons and surrender themselves to the Syrian authorities, and their sick and injured would be transported out. So, I went there and we were waiting for them to come out. And then finally, UN vans and buses started bringing them out. They all were quiet, and they looked gaunt. Even little babies that were being held by their moms were not crying, they were silent. I remember this one man was transferred out in a medical van. And then, he was unloaded from the van on a gurney, and his leg was straight up in the air, like it was stuck in that position. And I looked and I just felt hot tears on my face before I realized I was crying.

[upbeat music]

**David:** Rasha covered the war for three straight years, and she started taking routine trips out of Damascus to Beirut.

**Rasha:** During wartime in Syria, I would say I was actually in control. The minute I went to Beirut just to relax, that's when I would come undone.

**David:** Rasha usually left the cats in Damascus. But one day while packing for her usual trip to Beirut, she decided to do something different.

**Rasha:** So, I didn't pack everything, but I did bring the cats. For some reason, I just had this hunch I wanted to bring them with me. Usually, they like to sit in the passenger seat. At every checkpoint, you go through the same routine ID check, car check, car search. They bang on your trunk to open the trunk for searching. They just open the doors of your car and shove themselves in the car to look under the seat and whatnot. Someone would do that, and he'd just be startled at the cats. They'd be sitting there and they'd be looking at him and he'd be looking at them.

I remember one young conscript and he's like, "What are those?" I'm like, "They're cats." And he's like, "Not like the cats in my village." [laughs] They kind of would soften all this edginess at the checkpoints on the way to the border.

A couple of days after we arrived safely in Beirut, as I was starting to recalibrate and plan my return and plan more stories to cover back in Syria, I received a phone call from a friend in Damascus advising me not to return. "Don't come back. There are people asking after you." Had I been "caught" reporting without a license, that's reason to detain arrest, torture, disappear, for sure. I accepted it was time to stop reporting on war. I did not want to take the risk that my mom would endure getting that call. The call in the middle of the night or a knock on the door during dinner, it's just not fair to her. I was telling loved ones back in Syria that I was not returning to Damascus, then they would be like, "Please, pack me into a suitcase and take me with you." [chuckles] "I wish I were your cat." They wrap it in humor, but it's heart wrenching. These are relatives, uncles and aunts, and cousins. They envy the cat, and the cat is in a very enviable position.

**David:** Rasha told Pumpkin and Gremlin that they weren't going back to the war, or the family home, or the homeland she had tried so hard to connect with. They were flying to the United States.

**Rasha:** I was no longer nostalgic. Just if you think of a photograph of a house or something, and it's burning slowly, the image of the house is disappearing into the flame. And that, I think, captures this image of something that I had always held as home. And it turned into ash, literally. That's it, I was done.

That flight, I put the cat next to me on the empty seat and they were fine, they'd fallen asleep. It meant so much because not only were they a constant in my life, when nothing off has been constant. They also resembled innocence. The innocence we want to protect in the middle of cruelty, and they survived the war with their innocence intact. I mean, who else can say that? No one. No one else can say that.

[riveting music]

**Glynn:** Now, that's the end, right? Rasha gets to the United States, all's well that ends well. Pumpkin and Gremlin curl up, while she types away at a keyboard in Washington DC. And continues to cover stories in the Middle East to this very day. But then came a pandemic and with it, the ultimate distraction, Zoom.

**Rasha:** That morning, I also happened to be on a meeting for work on Zoom, and I got distracted. And then, I checked where Pumpkin was, and I couldn't find him. I couldn't find him anywhere in the house and I couldn't find him in the yard. When I realized that Pumpkin was missing, my mind was frantic and I started imagining him being run over by a car or being stolen, because people steal good-looking pets all the time.

**Glynn:** Let's just stop right there, and hear that again.

**Rasha:** People steal good-looking pets all the time.

**Glynn:** And Pumpkin is all kinds of handsome.

**Rasha:** So, I started looking for him. I went out, I was disheveled and shoes on backwards or something and just kind of very frantic. "Excuse me. Excuse me. Have you seen an orange fluffy cat?" "No, sorry, good luck. We'll keep an eye." And I went into the back alley behind my house and had one of his food cans and just tapping on a can. And I would sort of call his name "Pumpkin. [foreign word]" I was so engrossed in my own frantic search for Pumpkin, and all the thoughts and emotions that were involved in that search.

It wasn't just that the cat went missing, "Oh, no." It was more like, after all that, after all that we've been through, surviving everything, this is it? This would be the end? Just like that? And then, finally I looked and there's a neighbor of mine. And he's like, "Excuse me. Are you looking for a cat?" And I'm like, "Yeah." "Yeah, there's a cat here in the yard, next to ours." "Well, is he orange? Is he fluffy?" "Yeah, he is orange and fluffy. He's complaining." And indeed, Pumpkin was right there in the yard next to theirs. And then, I like coached like, "Yeah, jump here, jump here, jump here," and then I grabbed him from on top of the fence, and literally took him home. [laughs] It was such a relief. It just felt like being whole again, like, "Everything is fine again.

Anywhere I found myself in my life, it was very much a temporary place. That was my normal, everything is temporary. After the move, I wanted something constant, something familiar. And Pumpkin and Gremlin were this constant.

**Glynn:** And there was something beautiful and constant about having your animals nearby. But please understand, please, if there's one thing you can take away from this--

**David:** People steal good-looking pets all the time.

**Glynn:** Do not leave your furry friends unattended. Thanks to Rasha again for sharing this story. And a reminder, of course, that dogs are better than cats. Rasha's career as a journalist is still going strong. She's an Editorial Director at New Lines Magazine, where she first shared this story. And she's working on a memoir about her childhood and reporting days in Syria. Follow what she's working on next at *rashaelass.com* or *snapjudgment.org.* Original score for that story is by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by David Exumé.

[upbeat music]

**David:** See? See? Snap time flies by. If you want your time to fly by, doing chores, long drives, carpool with that Tom from down the street, stick with Tom, I've got the solution at hand. Find Snap Judgment on any podcast platform to hear more incredible stories. Download the journey. If you're looking to meet the best people, just look around for who's wearing a Snap Judgment t-shirt. Guaranteed, that person will be awesome. If you want to be awesome too, yours is available right now at *snapjudgment.org.*

Snap is brought to you by the team that would never tell the cat, to go sleep outside so the dog can have the entire couch all to himself, because he's such a good boy. No one would do that except for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Davey Kim, Bo Walsh, and Annie Nguyen.

Now, this is not the news, no way is this the news. In fact, while you're juggling bags of your brother's aquarium creatures between your legs in the back of the station wagon, your dad could ask if you want to pull over for Filet-O-Fish sandwich, "Very funny, Pops," and you will still, still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX."

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript produced by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*