



Source: Louise Roug, 'In Syria, choice is for shoppers, not voters', *LA Times*, 23/04/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [literature](#)

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My mother taught me everything I know about moving, and I've had occasion to use her careful lessons more times in the past few years than I care to count. I've nestled the same ceramics carefully in a triple layer of newspaper before bedding them down in the same boxes; religiously packed my clothing only in garbage bags, the better to cram them in the trunk's available space; elaborately wrapped loaded boxes with Byzantine layers of clear packing tape. (Though in her defense, she did *not* teach me to break the tape with my teeth and swear loudly every time the end got lost in the roll again.) She taught me how to pack up my life and label each box with its contents, though never neatly.

And once the drive or the flight has been made—was it she who taught me to chainsmoke my way across the country, front seat littered with cans of Coke?—she taught me how to unpack, too: to make my bed before tackling any of the boxes scattered around my new nest, before even sitting down to catch my breath; to find my toiletries and towels before loading up a new dresser or closet; to eat a fast-food taco salad for dinner among the piles of junk I can't believe I own.

But even more than that, she taught me about setting up shop wherever I land, how to set about finding grocery stores and dentists and mechanics and post offices. But even once you've found those places and even once you know where to find a pair of shoelaces or an allen wrench, she said it's getting a library card that really makes a place your home.

I got my first library card of my very own when I was five years old, a month or so after we moved into the tiny house where I'd spend the rest of my childhood, where my bedroom had French doors inside and the backyard seemed to go on for miles. I don't remember missing the old house, but I do remember missing the old library with the giant rainbow-striped partition surrounding the children's sections. We went to storytime every week, my mother and brother and me, and after the stories had all been told, we each got to pick out two books to take home: an agonizing and delightful ritual. How could I possibly choose? How could two books hold me until the next Wednesday afternoon? When we moved, she

promised, we'd get our own cards, get to take out as many books as we wanted.

So, once we were in the new house and we'd already checked out the new children's room and selected books that she borrowed on her temporary card, she made the calculated mistake of telling me that kids with library cards have to know how to write their own names. For days, it was all I wanted to do. Long pigtales brushing my face, I would hunch over the table in our new dining room, holding close a fistful of lined yellow paper that had my name written out in my mother's careful capitals. Eventually, my name wriggled out of the mess I made of the paper, the first time I recognized myself in it. 'What about cursive?' I asked. 'Big kids write in cursive.' Another set of lined papers with letters to train my hand, and eventually I wrote each letter in careful script, connecting them each with little curves added after the fact.

With that, I was ready for the library, for an orange plastic card with my name typed into the front. Performance anxiety: I bragged to the librarian that I knew how to write my name, but I hesitated once I was faced with the empty line. It was so small! I remember my mother's steady hand on my shoulder, my teeth digging into my lip. Eventually there it was—there I was—carefully carved, with ballpoint, into the back.

I took out too many books that day, a habit I haven't shaken, though it was a while before I had so serious a problem with library fines as I do now. Here I was, for the first time: a home that was made not just by my mother, but by my own stubborn desire, my own careful making. Home was two places now: with my mother, always, and with myself, forever.

Without her now, I still do all the things she taught me. The boxes, the bed linen and towels, the taco salad, the library card. Though I am afraid that home can't be with her anymore, with someone so resolutely gone, I still have left the homes that she helped me learn to make, no matter how strange the place, how foreign. I see her in my name these days, the same way I see myself in it.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Jacqui Shine.*