

(AP)

Anyone who has ever had a toddler knows the pose. Conked out, face down, arms at the sides, dead to the world.

Except in this photo, Alan Kurdi isn't asleep. His little body lies at surf's edge on a popular tourist beach in Bodrum, Turkey, with the warm waves gently lapping at his dark hair. We know that the three-year-old is lifeless, having drowned along with his brother Galib, 5, their mother Reham, 35, and 10 other Syrian migrants when their overcrowded dinghy capsized far off the shore in the middle of the night. But somehow Alan still looks like he could be awakened with a loving touch.

There's a policeman standing nearby. It's difficult to tell whether he's fiddling with a cellphone or scribbling down the terse, cop-speak details—"Just the facts, ma'am"—in a notebook. It hardly matters. Either option speaks to his—and our—puny and powerless response to one of the greatest refugee crises the world has ever known. Four million Syrians and counting have fled their endless, bloody civil war. Joined by Afghans, Iraqis, Eritreans, Libyans and others—all desperate for opportunity and asylum—more than 400,000 migrants have breached Europe's borders so far this year, mostly by sea. The grim running tally kept by the Missing Migrants Project suggests 2,898 more have died trying.

There's no end to the heart-wrenching photos of victims, both known and anonymous, if you can bear to look. In Alan's case, there's even video. Having put on some white latex gloves, the Turkish policeman gently lifts him from the sand and cradles him toward the nearby road. Water drips from the boy's red T-shirt and blue shorts. His dangling limbs put paid to the illusion that it might all be a dream.

Delve a little further on the Internet and you can find the story of Adil Demirtas, the teenage barman who found the Kurdi brothers' bodies on the beach—pausing to close their eyes—on his way to a breakfast shift at the neighbouring Woxxie Hotel. It looks like a lovely place, with plenty of loungers by the pool, and wide restaurant terraces overlooking the azure waters of the Aegean. The resort even boasts a brightly coloured play structure for kids, with swings, a teeter-totter and three different slides.

There are also photos of German tourists plucking "evidence" from the sea, adding to the growing pile of personal effects on the shore. There's a woman's watch, a pair of blue jeans and a single loafer, along with a cheap cellphone and a wallet-sized picture of a little girl in pigtails.

Further along Golden Beach—for, God help us, that's its name—there are a number of deflated dinghies. Not robust Zodiacs, but rather, the cheap, rubber-toy version you buy down at the hardware store and fill with a foot pump. Suitable for the pool or cottage, and spectacularly ill-suited to ferry 17 people across the four kilometres of open ocean to the Greek island of Kos, the nearest part of the European Union.

First World luxury has been colliding with developing world's desperation for months now. More than 800 people, many of them children, died when a single boat sank off the coast of Italy in April, littering the ocean with backpacks and stuffed animals. That same week, tourists and the Greek Coast Guard joined together to pluck survivors of another wreck from the surf in Rhodes. All summer long there have been pictures of holiday-makers soaking up the sun in deck chairs as refugees struggle ashore, clutching kids and their meagre possessions. The world took some notice when migrants blocked the French

entrance to the Eurostar “Chunnel” in late July. (It happened again this week.) And the deaths of 71 people who suffocated in the back of a sealed truck last month, abandoned by smugglers on the side of an Austrian highway, made for shocking headlines. Yet little has changed. European efforts concentrate on trying to keep people out through fences, checkpoints and maritime patrols. Here in Canada, the Conservative government has largely treated it as someone else’s problem, pledging to take in a total of 10,000 Syrians by the end of 2018. In a statement released Thursday, Chris Alexander, the Immigration minister, claimed 2,300 have been resettled to date.



Three-year-old Alan Kurdi with his brother Galib and father Abdullah. (REX Shutterstock)

Will this picture change things? Perhaps. Its jarring juxtaposition of innocence and impotence should trouble everyone who has so far stood by and watched the crisis unfold. But reports that the Kurdis had unsuccessfully sought to come to Canada and join relatives in British Columbia might have an even greater effect, if true. Indifference has a price, along with a name and a face.

Alan isn’t a stranger. He looks just like the little boys we know and cherish. Far happier family photos show him clutching a white teddy bear, smiling alongside his brother, and holding hands with his father, Abdullah, now a numb survivor.

“We could drive ourselves crazy with grief if we look at the millions of people in danger,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in response to a question about the image on Thursday. “We do what we can to help.”

For Alan Kurdi, it wasn’t enough.