

Twelve-year-old Gus is miserable when he moves with his mom and sister to a smaller city to live with his grandad after his parents' divorce. Not only has he left behind his friends and the only life he's known, but the new kids make fun of his name. When his grandad has memory problems and has to go live in seniors' home, Gus comes to commiserate with him, because Grandad has the same objections to moving as Gus.

For several days, Gus is ignored on the playground until a boy who is a Syrian refugee befriends him. Yussuf tells Gus of his horrendous relocation experiences and introduces him to Isaac, an Indigenous boy with his own story of transitions. The three share being 'outsiders' on the playground and the connection of readjusting after moving.

When Gus gets a school assignment to research his family tree, and he feels doomed to failure in every aspect of his life. He knows he can't get information from his dad's family. His mom's family is small and boring, having lived in the same city all their lives. Or so he thinks. Grandad offers to help but isn't often able to remember vital things, although Gus learns some surprising facts he's never known before or never thought to ask, and he has to re-evaluate his whole life. Gus also learns he was named after his granddad, who doesn't like his name either, and he feels more connected to him.

Gus needs documentation to prove the dates for his family chart, and Grandad sends him to search in an old desk in the attic. Gus goes through mounds of papers and finds a small wooden box filled with artefacts that seem like junk. When he touches a piece of ribbon caught in the hinges, he's suddenly transported to another world. He stumbles through a burned-out forest, escaping from pillaging mercenaries during the Thirty Year's War in the 1600s in Europe. And so begins his adventures into the past, each time he searches through the desk and accidentally touches a certain object in the little box.

A piece of map takes him into the trenches of a German army in WWII. There he saves a drowning young woman with a baby from a capsized boat on the river, and they defect to a new country to start a new life. Back in the burned-out forest life a second time, Gus rescues an elderly woman trapped in a collapsed building after the plundering of their homes and the burning of their crops. With nothing left, everyone in the community has to move. A feather takes Gus into a life as a boy in a time when the horrible Great Frost of 1709 descends over Europe, freezes all their crops, livestock dies, and their means of livelihood is gone. They too have to move and start over again.

At first, Gus doesn't understand how he shifts into the past or why, nor how he is able to return. He eventually realizes these harrowing incidents are connected to his ancestors, but who, how, and why is a mystery. Then Gus realized they are all forced to move for one reason or another, reflecting his own life, but they have far worse circumstances.

Interspersed with his jaunts back to the past, Gus has problems with a series of bullying

incidents at school. With subtle racism directed at Gus's new acquaintances when it comes to who can and can't play basketball on the playground, they support one another and decide none of them will play. Then Gus and his two friends try out for a new school soccer team. So do the bullies, but they cheat during tryouts and are barred from the team. This causes more friction for Gus and his friends who make the team. Gus doesn't want to say anything for fear the bullying will get worse.

Gus's home life takes some undesirable turns too when he can't connect to his old friends and Grandad falls and sprains an ankle. Grandad's memory seems to be getting worse, and Gus knows he has to somehow encourage him to move to the seniors' home for his own safety and reassure him it will be okay when he gets used to it.

Gus continues to search for information for his family chart, but the names on the documents don't seem to match anyone in Gus's time shift adventures. Then his mom takes them to the farm where she grew up and to a cemetery where Gus discovers more family members. One turns out to be Grandad's uncle, who had been rescued as baby from a capsized boat on a river. Gus realizes he has experienced the life of his great-grandfather in WWII and the rescued woman had been his great-grandmother. Now the time shifts start making sense.

Then a bullying incident puts Gus into serious harms way, and he ends up rescuing one of the bullies. This is the turning point for Gus. He finally goes to the principal about the bullying done to him and others. The bullies are disciplined because he spoke up and then others come forward too. Gus, Yussuf, and Isaac start a noon hour basketball pick-up game for any kid in the school, regardless of age or ability. They have a fun time, working with the younger kids.

Gus presents his report to the class and gets great marks for his innovative research and attention to detail, without revealing how he got some of the information. At home, Gus reflects on his time shift and comes to terms with moving and starting a new life in the present. He comes to understand that although there are sacrifices and it's uncomfortable, it's sometime necessary to move to have a better life and you have to make the best of it. He knows this doesn't mean forgetting about the past, just like his ancestors hadn't. One had made the little 'treasure box' and family members over the centuries had put mementos in it to remind them of the lives they'd left behind. Maybe he will add something one day too. Gus also realizes the male names in the family have been passed down through generations too and feels a bond. But Gus and Grandad decide they still don't like their names. But they will try harder to fit into their new lives and make new friends.