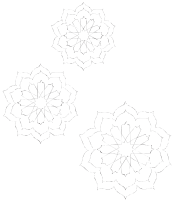


THE
SOLDIER



M.G. HIGGINS



MEET THE



Kim

Age: 22

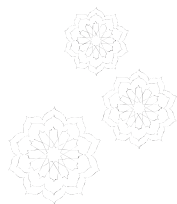
Hobby: playing in a rock band with her brothers

Future Goal: to be an FBI agent

Pet at Home: black cat named Chip

Best Quality: courage

CHARACTERS



Leyla

Age: 12

Hobby: collecting wildflowers from the desert

Future Goal: to go to college in France

Least Favorite Chore: washing dishes

Best Quality: determination

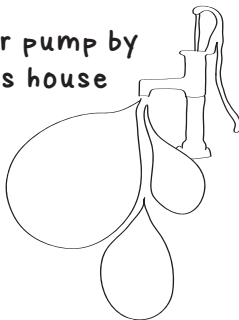
I

IRAQ, 2004

My village is broken. It wasn't always this way. When I was younger, it was beautiful. Now I am 12. War has torn the village apart. The buildings are shattered. Many of the people are too.

I walk to the water pump with my pail. As I pass Abra's house, I feel sad. Not long ago, I spent a lot of time there. Now, only a pile of bricks remains.

Water pump by
Abra's house



Abra was my best friend. She and I used to play together. Then one day, a bomb went off. Her father and brother were killed. Abra and her mother moved away. I don't know where they went. We didn't get to say goodbye.



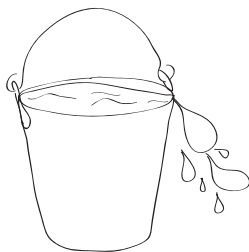
I stop in the alley between two buildings. Carefully, I study the market. My father taught me to do that. Every day, my mother reminds me. “See who is there,” she says. “Make sure it is peaceful.”

As usual, there are three U.S. soldiers there. Some people call them GIs. They carry big guns.

Calmly, they walk by the people. One GI greets the men and women. He speaks in Arabic. That is our language. Another gives candy to children. A boy kicks a soccer ball to a girl. The ball gets away. A GI picks it up. He tosses it back to them.

I take a big breath and leave the alley. At the pump, I put my pail under the spout. Slowly, I move the crank up and down. Water comes out and the pail fills quickly. It is so heavy. I have to use both hands to pick it up.

Quickly, I walk away. I am supposed to go right home.

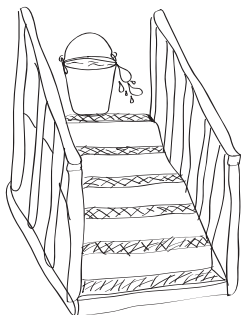


“You are very strong,” a GI says to me in Arabic.

I stop. It is not good Arabic. But I can understand her. *Her*, I think. *It is a woman’s voice.*

All GIs look alike. They wear helmets and big brown uniforms. Their heads and bodies look the same. Could one be a woman? I glance up. A friendly smile greets me. This GI is a woman.

My eyes look back to the ground. *Father can’t see me with a GI*, I think. *He will scold me.* I get going again. Slowly, I carry the pail to my house. Water spills as I lift it up the stairs.



I pour the water into a big container. But I keep thinking about the woman GI. *Does she live with the men soldiers? Can she shoot that gun? Has she killed anyone?* Her life seems so different from mine. It is hard for me to imagine.

That night I tell my father about the woman. His face turns sour.

“It is not right,” he says. “Women should not be soldiers. Another reason those people should not be here.” He looks me in the eyes. “Stay away from her. Understand? Do not go near the Americans.”

Frowning, I nod. My father is a good man. I trust him.



**My father is
strict, but wise.**

Later, there is a meeting in our house. My father has many meetings. Fadi and Sifet, my older brothers, are there. I stay with my mother in the kitchen. There is gunfire in the distance. *Please don't come closer, I think.*

It doesn't. I go to bed. When I close my eyes, sleep comes easily.

2

HIDDEN ROOM

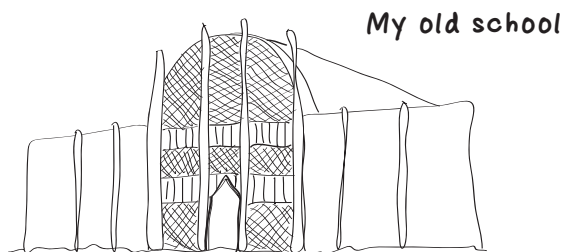
My mother sews. She works at a shop in our village. It has been there many years. Bombs have not touched it. The women in the village are glad. Sewing together is important to them.



Before the war, I went to school. Now, the school is closed. There are no teachers. I go to the sewing shop with my mother instead.



Mother has me cut cloth, snip thread, and sew hems by hand. The women talk. They gossip. *So boring*, I think.



After a while, I turn to my mother. “May I go home?” I ask.

My mother tilts her head. “Okay. Go straight there.” She wouldn’t let me go if it wasn’t safe. But there is no fighting now. For two months it has been quiet. The GIs fought their way in. Now they are keeping the peace. *So far, so good*, I think.

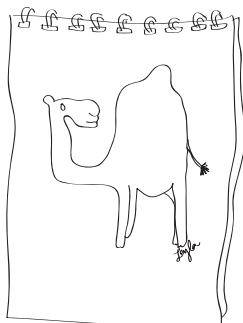
I leave the sewing shop. But I don’t go straight home. There is a small building

between the shop and our house. It is one room. The roof is damaged. A big hole gapes in the back wall. Once, a family lived there. They moved out.

Two weeks ago, I moved in. Well, I sort of moved in.

The family left almost nothing behind. There's just a large wooden box. It is in the middle of the room. I bring my pad of paper and my colored pencils there. These were birthday gifts from my grandmother. The box is my table.

Drawing makes me feel safe. It takes me to another place. When I draw, I am not afraid.



I sketch what is on my mind. Sometimes I draw my dreams. Animals are fun to draw too. Dogs and birds are my favorites.

Today I open my pad to a new page. The woman GI is on my mind. Her face looked soft and kind. Faces are hard for me to draw. Still, I try.

After a while, I finish the drawing. When I hold up the pad, something is not right. Her eyes and cheeks seem off. She looks better than what I drew. I need to see her again to check.

Suddenly, I remember the time. Drawing has made me lose track. My mother will be home for lunch. She will be angry if I'm not there. I slide my pad and pencils under the big box. Then I run home.

My mother is not there yet. I am glad. She gets home a few minutes later. We make

lunch for my father and brothers. Then my mother and I eat. After that, it is time to get water.



“Watch, Leyla,” she reminds me. “Be careful. Come straight home.”

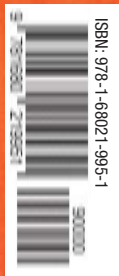
I nod. Then I head down the porch stairs with my pail. In the alley, I study the marketplace. *Is the woman GI here?* I wonder.

THE SOLDIER

I am an American soldier. Leyla is a young Iraqi. We are so different. Can she help me?




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