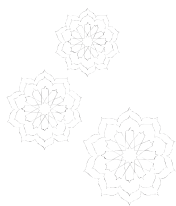


THE SOLDIER



M.G. HIGGINS





MEET THE



Kim

Age: 22

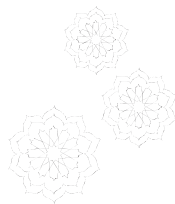
Hobby: playing in a rock band with her brothers

Future Goal: FBI agent

Pet at Home: black cat named Chip

Best Quality: fearlessness

CHARACTERS



Leyla

Age: 11

Hobby: collecting wildflowers from the desert with her friends

Future Goal: to go to college in France

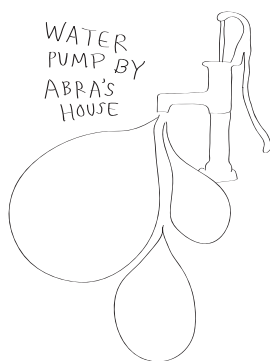
Most Disliked Chore: washing dishes

Best Quality: determination

1

IRAQ, 2004

When I was a young girl, my village was in one piece. Now I am twelve. My village is broken. I walk to the water pump with my pail. I rush past the house where Abra lived. I spent much time there. Now only a pile of bricks remains.



Abra and I played together. She was my best friend. Then a bomb went off. Her father died. So did her brother. Abra and her mother moved away. I don't know where they went. She didn't have time to say good-bye.



I stop in the alley between two buildings. I study the market. My father taught me to do this. Every day my mother reminds me. I need to see who is there. Make sure things are peaceful. As usual, there are three U.S. soldiers. GIs. They carry big guns. They walk calmly. They say “*al salaam a’alaykum*” to the men and women. They

give candy to the children. Hakim kicks a soccer ball to Mika. The ball gets away. A GI picks it up. He tosses it to them.

I take a big breath. Leave the alley. Walk to the water pump. Set the pail under the spout. Move the crank up and down. Water gushes out. The pail fills quickly. I lift it with both hands. It is heavy. I walk away as fast as I can. I am supposed to go right home.

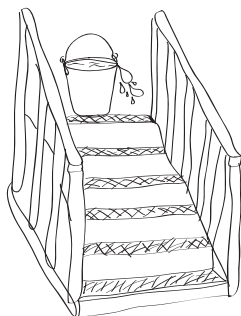


“You are very strong,” a GI says to me in Arabic.

It is not good Arabic. Just good enough to understand. But that is not what makes me stop. It is the voice. A woman’s voice.

All GIs look alike. They wear helmets. They wear bulky brown uniforms. Could one be a woman? I glance up. Pink, smooth skin. A friendly smile. Friendly eyes. Yes, a woman.

I look at the ground. My father would scold me if he saw me with a GI. I get going again. Carry the pail to my house. Water sloshes as I lift it up the porch stairs. I pour the water into a big container. All the while I'm thinking about the woman GI. Does she live with the men? Has she shot that gun? Has she killed anyone? Her life is so different from mine. It is hard to imagine.



That night I ask my father about the woman. His face turns sour. “It is not right. Women should not be soldiers. Another reason they should not be here.” He looks me in the eyes. “Stay away from her. Do you understand? Stay away from all Americans.”

I nod. I trust him. He is my father. I do what he says.



Later, there is a meeting in our house. My father has lots of meetings. My two older brothers, Fadi and Sifet, are there. I don't