

The American Girl

by

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Editor's note: The author's name has been changed at her request to protect her privacy.

The boy's slippers clapped against the cracked cement ground. His Nike t-shirt and shorts were faded but so were the men's military uniforms. Dragging his legs back and forth, his thin feet hit the floor. Clap, clap. Cigarette smoke filled the closet-size room as the soldiers spoke of their late night at a local hotel bar, where they had waited in hopes of spotting a blonde.

We were on a military post in Baghdad. I sat behind the boy, my hands folded tight. The two soldiers glanced at me throughout their conversation, smoke drifting to the corner where I sat. My hair was slightly blond. It was definitely blonder than most Iraqi girls in Baghdad but full of knots, and tangled. The blond streaks could not be hidden and the hot days had lightened them even more. I became known in the streets as the American girl. But I was not American. I was Iraqi. Baba had constantly reminded me of this.

I spoke English, played with Barbies, and had a crush on Dylan from "Beverly Hills, 90210," but I was not American, I was Iraqi.

My closest friend was Ariel from the "The Little Mermaid." She was American. I suppose, an American mermaid. But I was not American. In truth, I was not Iraqi either. I did not speak Arabic or know the sound of war. I did not know the Iraqi anthem and I did not know, like my Iraqi cousins, the webs of whispered secrecy, tyranny and fear that every child learned at school and at home. I had been safe, and had only known safety, but I was unaware of it then when I had it.

The soldiers did not seem to notice my flat chest or baby teeth. They just noticed my dirty, blond hair and puffy lips that reddened from the hot day.

The boy in front of me sold slippers at the end of the street -- he had been beaten by the guards for cussing at them after they blew a kiss to his mother. His slippers were the only things not faded on him. His skin was dark and dusty from the hot desert wind. His hair was filled with sand and his lips were dry and wrinkled like a rotten cherry. I was wearing a shirt with a picture of a smiling Hello Kitty, a big red bow resting on her white ears. Her frozen face comforted me then. I remembered the day I bought it, it came with a bag of Kitty surprises. I got a pencil, a sharpener, some gum, and a coin box. My mom and I had Mrs. Fields chocolate chip cookies afterwards, like always, and I got a milk mustache, like always.

The men smiled as if they could not help but smile. Their thick mustaches and stubbly faces were in shadows under their military caps. Their eyebrows were sharply arched, their rifles hidden. One soldier told the boy he could leave. And I could stay. So I did.

But I was not alone. I had God and the angels my mom had taught me about, watching above my shoulders, and Hello Kitty smiling beneath my throat.

Eight Months Before

It was bright Saturday morning in Anaheim Hills, California.

Our house sat on top of a hill on a private road surrounded by a colorful landscape. Jade, lime and peacock-green trees, metallic gold and copper rocks, rust-red roses, creamy white orchids, and plum tulips. Around the flower plots were the five palm trees, one orange tree, two lemon trees, and four apricot trees my dad had planted when we moved here.

I could smell the syrupy orange tree as I brushed my hair and put on my new outfit. A striped navy coat with white leggings and red shiny sandals. They had little heels that clapped when I walked, like my tap dancing shoes.

Three brown suitcases lay stacked against our wooden doors. One for my eldest brother, Ali, one for my middle brother, Amer, and one for me.

I could hear my parents shouting behind their bedroom doors.

It was hard to chew bubblegum and blow bubbles at the same time, I thought.

I stuffed my pack of bubblegum into the new backpack mama got for my trip. It was so full. I loved to fill my bags with things, shiny, sparkly things. I put in it my new Lisa Frank coloring collection, a sticker book, glittery bracelets, heart- and star- shaped hair pins, a stack of playing cards I got from the Mirage in Las Vegas, Georgie my stuffed rabbit and my newest Barbie, French Barbie. She had a mole and wore a satiny corset dress.

“Say goodbye to your sister, Princessa,” Baba whispered to me as he came out of his room.

Baba always looked handsome. His slim body and large smile made me feel safe. He wore a white visor and a Nike shirt, his usual outfit when he played tennis with his architect friends. Every night he sang me old Arabic lullabies before sleep and every morning he made me tea with milk and three scoops of sugar.

Mama held my two-year-old sister, who looked like a china doll, in her right arm. Her nails matched her red lipstick.

I quickly gave my sister a big kiss. “I will see you soon”

My mom handed her over to our babysitter, Theuraya; she was from Morocco and had a funny accent.

My dad packed the bags into the backseat of his white Cadillac convertible. He'd bought it after his first big business deal went through. That and a bracelet for my mom.

“Turn this song up, Baba,” I said.

“Helllooooo, Baba, pleaseeee turn it up! I love Paula Abdul. Earth to DAD!”

He slightly raised the volume of the Paula Abdul tape I had sneakily stuffed into the tape recorder before we all got into the car.

"You're a cold hearted snake.

Look into his eyes. Uh oh.

He's been telling lies."

Paula Abdul was my second-favorite singer. My best friend Noor and I would always pretend to be husband and wife. I was the wife, Paula, and she was Abdul, the husband, who was also an Arab prince. I had a huge backyard, so that is why we preferred to play at my house. I was not going to be able to play with her for a few weeks because I was going to see my family in Iraq. I wondered if any of my relatives looked exactly like me.

I continued singing to “Cold Hearted Snake” as we entered the freeway.

“Mama, can you believe I am going in an airplane by myself? I am soooo excited!”

“Sara,” my dad said sternly.

He looked at me through the rear view mirror. My mom wore no makeup today. She sat like a statue in the front seat next to him. She kept her face turned to the moving traffic on the 91-West freeway.

I was nervous about meeting my family, but excited. I was missing school for a whole week and I could play for hours there without my parents making me do my homework, go to bed, or do chores.

I did not know why I was going. My dad had just told me the week before and had not talked to me much since then.

I was going to miss him a lot. He was the best dad in the whole world; all my friends thought so too. He would always bring lunch to school for me and my friends, and buy me candy when he got home from work.

“Baba, when are we going to get there? Why is it so far?”

“We are dropping you off in L.A. It is not in the same city we live.”

As we drove further down the freeway, there was a lot more grey. Grey poles, grey electricity lines, grey bridges, grey fences. We moved further away from the green canopy of the Anaheim Hills.

“Why is there so much grey, Baba?”

“BABA, hello?”

He didn't answer. Amer had his headphones on, listening to his new Cranberries CD, and Ali was reading an Islamic book he got the last time he went to Iraq, alone. He had been quiet ever since he came back from that trip, but I didn't want to ask him what was wrong. We were never close and I barely saw him growing up. He was always out for soccer games or with his friends. He was a lot older, too. I was 8 and he was 14.

"Mommy, did you see my clothes?" I flashed a huge head lifting smile.

"Look, Mommy!"

My mom wore her thick Chanel glasses. All I could see were her pale skin and thin lips.

"Mama, why are you not talking to me?" I saw her lips quiver as she turned her face, her cheeks slightly reddening.

The grey around us continued to spread but so did the red Coca Cola posters and yellow McDonald's arches. I held onto my new Hello Kitty backpack. I had connected key chains with my favorite characters and colors. Pink and red. Hot pink. Hello Kitty's body was white and pink and red. Minnie Mouse was white and black with a red bow and dress and Ariel was green with red hair and pink lipstick.

I wore a new outfit that my mom bought me from Espirit, and like always she bought me shoes and accessories to match. I always wore the nicest clothes because my mom loved to dress me. I was her first girl after three boys, and she said she had always wanted a girl.

"Mama, I think my cousins are going to love the gifts. I am soooo excited."

I wanted to look impressive to my new family. My dad let me buy my cousins gifts. He'd taken me to Target the night before to buy them, and Noor had helped me wrap each gift. I was so excited to give them the gifts in my suitcase.

"Dad! I love this song even more. Baba, pleasssse higher it."

He shut the radio.

"Sara, no more music."

"Why Baba? Just this song."

"Sara, be quiet."

The freeway got bumpier as more grey planes filled the Saturday sky.

We pulled up to the whirling roads of the airport. My dad drove into the parking structure. He got out and hauled the luggage towards the orbiting door. My mom walked silently next to me, holding my hand tightly.

The airport was cold. The floors vibrated and the speakers echoed with languages I did not understand. Flashes of paperwork and luggage, people pacing, luggage everywhere. The sound of rolling luggage wheels and voices I did not understand. It was cold.

"Mama?"

“Yes, Sweetheart?” she asked holding my hand tighter.

A strange man lugged my brown suitcase filled with my presents onto a moving track. It quickly went into a dark hole, where I could not see it anymore.

“Maybe I want to stay here with you and Baba.”

She did not respond. Maybe I could not hear her. It was so loud.

“Mama?” I said louder.

She did not respond, only took the elastic from her hand and tied my hair into a stiff ponytail.

“I put you all your clothes in piles. Morning clothes, play clothes, dresses and pajamas. Make sure to match your top with your bottom, and never borrow anyone’s clothes or let anyone borrow yours.”

The line was moving so quickly. People all around us were saying goodbye.

Another brown suitcase went into the hole.

“Baba? Where am I going?”

“To Amman to meet your uncle and he will take you and your brothers to Baghdad to meet your family,” he said as he filled out some paperwork.

“How far is it, Baba?”

He talked to a man at the high desk. I could not see what they were doing and my mom stood behind us. He stamped some papers and passed over little blue books to my dad.

“Not far. Just sleep and you will get there.”

He added, “We are going to meet you there soon.”

“Tonight, Baba?”

He rotated his watch back and forth.

“No, not tonight”

He paused. “Soon, do not worry, Princessa, I am always with you. Who is my number-one Princessa?”

For the first time since morning he looked at me with his soft, wide-set eyes, which were gleaming with tears as he got onto one knee.

“I am right here.” He took his finger and pressed it on my heart, looking deep into my eyes and smiling. I could see his funny chipped tooth.

“Okay, Baba. I love you soooooo much”

A lady in a blue uniform and matching blue cap came and grabbed my hand, but I was not ready. My mom held onto me as the lady continued to hold my hand.

“This nice lady is going to take you now,” my dad said, making his American accent stronger. “Thank you, Becky.” My mom stood away from him and held her Quran necklace in her hand.

He gave me a big bear hug and laughed his Santa Claus laugh. “I love you, girl.” He patted my brothers and told them to watch over me.

The nice lady took the three little blue books from him and took the three of us down a narrow aisle.

With every quick step, Daddy and Mommy looked smaller.

I could not see Daddy's chipped tooth that I loved. I could not see Mommy's Quran necklace. Suddenly they became part of the flash of luggage, paperwork and people pacing. I could no longer see them at all.

A Tired Awakening

We left Amman in the middle of the night in an old white Suburban. The jet lag and late night awakening further deepened my dream-like state. We piled our things into the car and began the 1,000-mile trip to Baghdad.

Hundreds of people filled the little buildings patched on the Jordan-Iraq border. Some had been there for days, some weeks, in hopes of getting a visa to enter Jordan or Libya, the only two countries that allowed Iraqi passport holders in.

With every mile, every turn of the tires, I grew quieter.

"Airplanes once flew the skies of Iraq before the Baghdad airport was shut down," my uncle said solemnly. "Before America shut down our nation and starved us from sanity."

My elder brother grabbed a cigarette from my uncle. "I am planning to tell dad we should all move here soon."

I objected. "Ali we are going back in a few weeks, Dad said. You can stay here, but I am going back."

He laughed and ignored me. "You know nothing, Sara." The steadiness in his voice and the vein that protruded from his forehead quickly silenced me.

"There is Baghdad." The driver pointed ahead. I saw the phantom city which was barely visible, its colorless buildings blended with the desert sand below, and grayish cloud above.

Not quite smoke, not quite dust, not quite humidity, but a blur, a haze, that had the smell of Baghdad.

A faintly burnt aroma and earthy spice that pervades the land. Baghdad in the morning, slowly waking from its slumber but still living the nightmare of its reality.

Symbols of state tyranny and oppression over the last 30 years grossly jutted out of the ground, disfiguring the natural beauty. The clock tower. The communications needle. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The ministries. The Grand Mosque. The green canopy of the national fairgrounds and monuments.

I sat in the back seat, staring at the uncle I had met just hours before.

Ali was possessed by the image of the post-war city and the scarred structures scattered across it. Between the ages of 14 and 15, he had transformed from a junior high jock into a revolutionary. He seemed in search of a depth he could not find on the clipped grass of the soccer field or the glossy lips of his cheerleader girlfriend.

I rolled down my window hoping it was the dirty glass had caused the city to appear as it did. But there it was, faded and murky. Traces of diesel and oil blew into my white face. The main highway took us past the governmental areas, but I watched the other side of the road.

The streets were lined with billboards of Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein. Him praying. Him shooting. Him holding an Iraqi flag. Him waving in a tuxedo. Him in sunglasses. Him waving with sunglasses on. All frozen gestures. Him frozen.

We passed complexes of apartment buildings, made in 80's Russian arabesque geometric design. They had the potential to look like buildings from back home. Half the windows lacked glass. Laundry hung from every third balcony. The walls were stained black and brown. There must have been twenty or thirty of them, arranged in perfect symmetry, labeled with huge numbers on the front. A grand design, failed like everything else here.

My uncle pointed out Michel Aflaq's tomb off the highway, next to the decrepit remains of an Abbasid wall and gate to the old city. Both were sitting off the highway in a field, alone. Testaments to the history of this land, with no one to admire them. The walls and gate, free-standing and still intact, seemingly waiting for some recognition of their past beauty and grandeur before they crumbled into nothingness. Jealous perhaps, that in the West the mere suggestion of an ancient structure marks the site as hallowed ground. The tomb with its turquoise top, strangely free of dirt, gleaming in the sun. A dusted tree, a dry, dead tree framed the picture. Iraq. Tired. Dirty. Dusty. Too exhausted and traumatized to swat the flies that buzz around the corners of its eyes and mouth. Too tired to rain and clean away the filth that has accumulated in its streets, on its buildings, in its trees, and in the hearts of its people.

Exiting the highway we came to the Sha'ra Rashid. I picked my way around potholes and crumbling asphalt, reaching the sidewalk as I followed my uncle's silent lead through the unknown crowd, past the soot-blackened, rusty aluminum gates and the half-open doors of the shuttered shops.

Water hoses and rubber mops pushed grime towards the street. The men stood in their plastic slippers, waiting for us to walk by before they renewed their attempts to clean their little corner of Baghdad. A neon sign marked the coffee shop with its large glass windows. The floor was yellowed Formica tile, which made a high-pitched scratching sound as pebbles ground between it and the soles of my shoes. There was a TV mounted on the wall in the far corner of the room. Plastic chairs surrounded flimsy plastic tables covered with vinyl tablecloths. A fan slowly turned, making the fluorescent light above it pulse. I sat quietly with my uncle and two brothers.

The Letter

Ali stood over me in the late hours of the night.

“You need to be like your cousins...,” he said harshly.

I sat quietly by the cupboard where I kept all my dolls, books and memories safe. I rested my back against the cupboard doors so my dolls could not hear the yelling. Underneath my shirt where it was safe, I hid a black and white picture of my parents. “Shhh, you are safe,” I whispered to them, “We are protecting you.”

“Dad would be ashamed of you. And you think you could go back to America? You will turn into a slut. Like all the other girls there...”

His beard had grown in the months we’d been here.

And my other brother’s belly had grown. My seven aunts overfed him. Many nights he would leave me and stay at their houses. Like tonight. I was not much noticed by them. I did not eat much and maybe they did not like that.

“Or are you already a slut?” he asked.

The two daughters of my uncle did not like me much either. They would rearrange my cupboard the times I left it and stare at me as I ate meat with a fork and knife or when I tried to hug my uncle. And recently I found the sunflower dress my mom bought me covered with black marker stains.

“You are an empty girl...” he continued.

My plastic dolls were safe from him. He could not get to them. I covered the little opening between the cupboard’s two doors.

I whispered to them again, “Go to sleep. It is bed time.”

Ali had yelled himself tired, I supposed. He'd fallen asleep at the edge of the bed.

The depth of darkness in my black bedroom seemed to be never ending. I knew the clothes hanging on the line above my body were bright with puzzle-like patterns because I had seen them in the light. But the fabrics had fallen into a puncture of darkness which did not seem to end. No color. No patterns. Just black.

But outside my window was a glossy pattern of stars. Stars fighting the same blackness. *The stars could see me and my parents at the same time. They could connect us.* The thought made me feel safe for a moment.

I snuck beneath the lines of drying laundry and past my uncle watching an old Arabic movie.

I tiptoed to the only room with a lock, the bathroom. It was my favorite room in the house. Under my arm and ragged hair, I held a sheet of stickers and stationery my dad had bought for me. I placed the pink paper on the cold tile floor and wrote in my best cursive hand writing:

Dear Dad,

I know this is sort of funny but I just realized that I really want to go and live in America. I am crying right now. First thing is my friends. I promised! Them I was going to come back to

America. I also can not leave my language I love it so much and I understand quite well. 3. My energy I use to have is leaving (I could even see it right now) I have nobody at all to play with and I am going the same thing day after day eating fatty foods (no fruits) and sleeping or sitting. I used to have energy and I loved very much because I don't have friends to play with and speak the same language to have energy to exercise and play with them, and to go to school learn with my friends, exercise, speak the same language, play with energy and have a cat. I loved you and made me happy. I am not really happy. I was always pretending here. I was bored, sad, unhappy and of course lonely. There is lots and lots of bad boys and violence in Iraq. Here is lots of violence like raping, killing, and blowing up things. My heart is gone every minute. I think of American and start crying in tears. I love you a lot and I wish I could know how you are doing, but I have to go and I just want you to know you were ALWAYS there for me just when I didn't want to admit it because I thought I was mature of doing things. But I was wrong I just realized I don't want to GROW. I love you a lot I always thought parents were supposed to take care of us only. I thought that a half a year ago and now I have to go not forever, but long enough to make my heart BREAK.

Your daughter, Best friend

P.S. I will always be with you in AMERICA.

I finished by drawing flowers around the letter. I did the circles of each flower first then I put half circles around each big circle. I tried to do it as perfectly as I could but the rough floor made the flowers look bumpy.

I laid my body onto the cool tiles, looking up at the ceiling covered in rusty stains and mildew. Waiting for the hours to pass. My hair had begun to dry from the Iraqi-made shampoo and dirty water. I hoped my mom would not get upset at me for not taking better care of it.

Suddenly, the mosques' speakers echoed off the walls of the houses. *Allahu Akbar* (God is the Greatest), a call to the sunrise prayer. The window in the bathroom was slightly open and I could see men gathering for prayer in the lightening shade of the night. I watched bands of blue, purple and red crack through the black night sky. The *adhan* reverberated from a hundred mosque towers. The call comforted me. It meant another night had passed.

I felt sure that today I would finally get a letter from California, from my mom or dad. I had written them 20 letters now, made them very pretty and sent them. I had to wait for my uncle to bring the mail home. He would put it on the only nice piece of furniture in the house, a wooden hallway table encrusted with golden and rose veins.

It had been forty days since the last letter I got. Forty. But today was special. I was turning nine, so I waited.

I waited.

But no. No letter came that day.

The Doorless Entrance

The afternoon sunlight flushed a pinkish glow onto the mosque's inner wall. Its walls were ornamented in amber and sapphire Arabic, intricate rhythmical designs, and gold-plated patterns hinting at a city that once was the heart of all civilization. The colossal domed ceiling was covered in floral seams. Stained lemon- and violet-colored glass jolted from the dome's center reaching to another realm beyond, beyond the sorrow beneath it.

The women in black gowns stood in track lines behind the men in the white gowns. The bodies rooted in prostration towards the Northeast direction of the holy *Kabba*.

"*Allahu Akbar*." Each man, woman and child lifted a left hand over a right palm and wrist and began a quiet recitation with the one man who led the prayer in front. He lyrically recited Quranic messages of justice and peace. "Pray for the agony to shed."

My hair was wrapped tightly in a ponytail and covered with a black scarf. I blended into the rows of women in the same blackness.

"Allah Akbar." The speaker echoed, signaling us to bow down to the floor in a submissive gesture to God. With my forehead flat to the dirty carpet, I looked at the lady to the side of me. Her nose wrinkled as saliva piled at the corner of her lip and tears hit the carpet. I should not have been looking, but I had been searching for faces of familiarity. What I found instead was a feeling of familiarity. Every night and many times in the long day, tears would fall onto my pillow and my saliva would slide down my mouth as I sucked my thumb to sleep.

"Allah Akbar." Our heads lifted again. We were all one, in this place, praying for an escape that never came. Our bodies crunched so tightly together you could not see any cracks between our black robes.

We were one, knotted in prayer, whispering the same words to the same God.

"*Allahu Akbar*." I closed my eyes to fading memories of my home and my parents.

"*Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah*," (Peace and mercy of Allah be on you), turning our heads from right to left signaling the end of prayer.

The windows reflected beams of golden light and hit the right side of my cheek. It felt like God was the only One who never abandoned me. I was not alone. He was with me.

The bodies began scattering to get the slippers and shoes left behind at the doorless entrance. I searched for my small pink ones. I spotted my aunt outside on the street corner. Her green spandex pants flashed in between the black and white robes that shuffled onto the street. She was smoking and talking to a man who bought and sold gold jewelry. She seemed to be arguing with him over the price of the bracelet she had in her other hand.

I waited.

Shatha promised to show me pictures of my mom that she had boxed somewhere. Although she was not like my mom, I felt close to my mom when I was with her. They were close once. She knew my mom once, she knew her...She must know the playful tone in her voice, the smell of

her skin, the softness of her black hair. She knew her and must have loved her, and would therefore love me.

But she was not like my mom. My mom was so beautiful and classy and she never wore hot green tights or smoked cigarettes.

Shatha said I had my mom's eyes. Our eyes, she said, were both the same. Both the same.

Maybe my mom could see what I see now...

I sat still waiting for Shatha in front of the mosque entrance, the black robe draping my frame. She gestured at me sternly from a distance as she took a bottomless inhalation of her cigarette.

In color, the yellowish cabs matched the corn cobs an old man was selling close to where I sat. He waved a corn cob back and forth in the warm air, slowly, like the sway of the emerald green palm trees rising from the cracked cement behind him. The roasting smell was familiar. Baba used to roast corn, hamburger meat, and chicken for us in the backyard while we would watch the distant display of Disneyland fireworks.

Shatha did not seem to notice, so I walked closer to the comforting aroma. It floated through my nose to my tongue. No longer was there the smell of unknown chemicals, gas and cigarette smoke. The old man sat at the edge of his wheelchair in order to reach his hands above the corn cart. Seeing me, he smiled like my Baba, a large, gigantic, humongous smile.

"Come, would you like a piece of corn?"

"Yes."

He passed me the warm bright corn in a soft tissue.

"What is your name?"

"Sara."

"Where are you from Sasoorah?"

"America."

"Are you American?"

"Yes."

"You are the most beautiful American girl. Where are your parents?"

"America, but I they are coming soon."

"You must say peace be onto them, they have a good girl."

"Thank you, I will tell them when they come, they said soon. I think next week"

"Then you must come again, I will give you another piece, the biggest piece I have."

“The biggest?”

“On my eyes, I promise you.” I looked at his grey, shiny eyes. They were discolored and glassy, not like Baba’s. He turned and smiled and a boy skipped up to us with a basket in his hand.

“This is Ibrahim, my grandson.”

Ibrahim was tan and had an even wider smile than his grandfather’s. He wore pants too short for his long legs and a shirt too big for his skinny arms. In his hand was a basket of black and brown slippers in many different sizes.

“Ibrahim, this is Sara. She is from America.”

“Come, Sara, my sister. I will show you what I sell,” he said in broken English.

I glanced back at Aunt Shatha who was busy lighting another cigarette as the jewelry man dangled the bracelet.

“Look Sasoorah,” Ibrahim had keychains, flags, Quranic verses on fabric, and slippers. Lots of slippers. “I sell all these, and make money for my mom.” The little English he spoke, I’d find out later, he’d learned from his mother, who was once an English major at the University of Baghdad.

I loved him right away, not for all the stuff he showed me but because he spoke some English. It helped me to forget the alien place I was in, and forget I was an alien in this place. And his hairless chest and slender pre-mature body were like mine. Also, he had freckles on his cheeks, like me! I loved him.

My aunt came rushing over, her red heels challenging the ground in wide strides. She quickly pulled me away.

She spoke nervously. “Girl, these people sell at the black market. Do not talk to them! Did they ask where you are from?”

“No.”

“Did they ask if you were Sunni or Shia?”

“No.”

“Did you speak his name?”

“No.”

The silence came again. The stir, the torture, clasp at my heart. The roasting smell was now gone, so my dad was gone too.

He must have gone to sleep early tonight. He probably was too tired from his work to roast anymore. Good night, Baba. Kiss Mama for me.

My Flag

“I am going to meet Ibrahim to play.” I yelled to my aunt who was cooking apricot jam.

I put on my slippers and ran to the corner by the mosque to meet him. The street was less busy, so I spotted him right away. I shouted “Ibrahim!” and ran towards him. He got up and gave me a high five. That was how we would say hi to each other. His mom was sitting on the floor next to him, peeling pistachios and piling them over a little stove.

Ibrahim lived in the lot next to the mosque, in a clay house with a bunch of other kids who sold similar things, mostly slippers, to the passersby. But when I came he would just play with me. He said he would come to America when he made a lot of money. He wanted to go there with his mom. Everyone I talked to told me how they wanted to leave. It felt like we were all here waiting. All waiting. Maybe if I drew a flag, I thought, the American pilots would see it and come and get me like in Gilligan’s Island.

We sat cross-legged on the cement using the leftover white, blue and pink chalk to draw the American flag.

But no airplanes were in sight and when there were planes the Iraqis thought they were being attacked, because all Iraqi airplanes had been seized. Ibrahim tried to explain this to me. He knew a lot more about wars and government than I ever did.

I had forgotten my parents’ voices and their smell. I tried to remember but I could not. It had been six months and only twice had I talked to them on the phone. The line cut both times in the middle of me screaming and crying.

Ibrahim explained how bad the phone lines were here, but he said I was lucky to have electricity and gas.

"I will do the stars and you can do the lines."

We lay over the smoothest area we could find and drew an outline of a huge flag. I did not have red, so we settled on the stripes being pink and white. We split the flag, half for the stripes and half for the stars. “That looks more like a candy cane,” I laughed.

“A what?”

"You have to do it again so the pink will look more red, like the *real* American flag, dummy."

Saddam's soldiers from the military post walked over to Ibrahim’s mom and began taking pistachios without paying. They grabbed handfuls and watched her continue roasting.

Ibrahim watched them and put down his chalk. He left me for a bit and ran back to his mom and began helping her unpeel the nuts until the soldiers finished eating.

I lay in the flag and put my hand up to my heart and loudly started singing.

“Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?”

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

"You are an American, stupid," he giggled.

We lay on the chalky floor waiting for an airplane to pass by.

* * *

Hello Kitty smiled from my shirt on the ground. *Don't be sad, Sara. You are not alone, she said.*

I do not think the soldiers heard her; they were busy. They were massaging me. Like my dad would sometimes do on my shoulders.

The room looked small but so much was in here. God, my two angels, Hello Kitty, two soldiers, and my friend Ibrahim, till only moments ago. He was probably waiting for me outside. Hidden somewhere. Where the soldiers would not see him. "Americiya," the soldier said as he pushed me to the floor. They did not call me by my name. They called me "Americiya." The American. But I was not American. I was Iraqi.



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