

FICTION, 1ST Place: Madilyn Smith

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The Destruction You Bring

The war made Baghdad a desolate place. The city was filled with ruin, filled with despair. It was not always like this, not always tragically destroyed. There was a time of peace before, a time before the tragedy. A time which Aya did not get to enjoy. Aya is an Iraqi girl, who values her tradition tremendously. Yet at times, she finds herself tempted to break it.

Baghdad, Iraq, March 20, 2003

Aya was completely and utterly confused. School was canceled, and no one knew why. She considered asking her sister, Nadia, but thought better of it. Nadia would likely sass her out, she'd probably tell her she shouldn't be nosy. Aya couldn't help it, she was just curious. The curtains of her home were drawn, and her Ommi and Baba were chatting quietly in their native language, Arab. Aya leaned against the wall, trying to catch bits and pieces of their conversation, to no avail. Nadia jumped up behind her, causing her to squeal and smack her away lightly.

"Nadia!" Aya hissed, keeping her voice quiet, as to not disturb the conversation still happening between their parents.

"Being nosy isn't honest, what would Ommi say?" Nadia scolded, arms crossed as she looked down at her younger sister.

"She won't say anything if you keep quiet!" Aya retorted, still peeking over at her parents, who continued speaking in hushed tones.

Nadia huffed, walking up to her room. Aya stayed, trying to continue listening in, but it was too late, the two had already begun making dinner, no longer conversing. *There must be something going on*, she thought to herself. After all, Ommi and Baba never spoke without the entire family present.

"We are an open family," Aya recalled Ommi telling her once, "we keep no secrets." She glanced around at the house, eyeing the drawn curtains. The curtains were always open, always allowing the light of the sun to shine through the windows. *Doesn't look like an open family to me*, Aya thought bitterly, shaking her head as if to shake the thoughts away.

Dinner time came slowly, and Aya sat with her head down as Nadia brought plates to the table. Aya eyed her plate suspiciously, it was merely bread. Just bread, nothing else. Her Ommi always cooked fantastic meals, but this? This made her stomach churn with dread.

"Why only bread?" Aya asked, her curiosity taking over.

Nadia quieted her with a look, but Ommi shook her head. "Resources are valuable," was all Ommi said, sitting and eating quietly. Her Baba stood to greet her, a sign of respect in her culture. Aya frowned, silently wondering if a man would ever respect *her* that way, they sure didn't now. She recalled the time her Baba had attempted to arrange a marriage between her and another Iraqi boy. She shivered at the thought, he was nothing like her Baba was, and it was clear within days of knowing him he held no respect for her. But still, Aya had felt rebellious, sneaking off with the boy to private corners of Baghdad. Even though it wasn't allowed, she loved the thrill. Until she didn't. But that was a story for another time.

After dinner, Aya retreated to her room, grabbing her notebook and scribbling fiercely.

She pulled herself away from the paper at last, glancing at the drawing she'd created. It was nothing special, just a portrait of her family. Her Baba, Ahlam, stood to the right, towering over them. Her Ommi, Sabah, stood beside him, smiling widely. Nadia was to the left, leaving Aya in the middle. She frowned, crumpling the drawing before tucking herself into bed. Thoughts raced through her head. What were her parents talking about? Why was their dinner so...bland? Aya pulled her duvet over her head. It was going to be a long night.

In the morning, Aya awoke to birds chirping. She looked at the time, frowning. It was early, too early for anyone else to be up. She stretched, putting on a simple outfit before sneaking out of the house quietly, as she usually did when it was morning time. She frowned at the sight she was met with. There was dust everywhere, flying through the air. What had caused the dirt to be so active? It was usually settled, resting upon the ground as if it were sleeping deeply. She heard a quiet sound and tensed, whirling towards the noise. There, in the dirt, was a boy.

The boy was much paler than herself, his skin white and polished. His blond hair was ruffled, his eyes as blue as the sky. Aya frowned, he did not belong here. He was far too beautiful to be standing on dirty ground. Aya contemplated flirting, yet she stopped herself. She didn't know this boy, and besides, it was very clear he was not from her culture, meaning it would be forbidden for anything to happen between them. *If I were not Iraqi, could this be different?* She shook the thought away, straightening herself.

"What business do you have here?" Aya asked, tone confrontational as she stepped closer to him. His clothes were immaculate. One look at her own clothing had her scowling and crossing her arms. She suddenly felt as if he could see right through her.

"My father works nearby," the boy replied, his American accent thick and as sweet as *daheen*, her favorite dessert.

"And you?" she retorted, tapping her foot impatiently.

He rolled his eyes, and Aya felt herself reddening. The nerve of Americans. "I do not work. I'm seventeen."

Aya wanted to reply that she'd worked since she was *fifteen*, but she kept herself quiet, schooling her expression into a more neutral one. "Right," she said, shaking her head and standing a bit straighter. "Well, I should get going." She began to walk off, yet froze at his expression, turning back around.

"I was hoping you would... show me around." The boy told her, looking suddenly nervous.

Now it was Aya's turn to roll her eyes. "I don't even know your name."

He stuck his hand out, now grinning. "Nicholas. I arrived with my father yesterday.

"She eyed his hand skeptically, choosing to keep her arms at her side, "Aya," she replied, "welcome to Baghdad."

After a long day of showing Nicholas her favorite places around her city, she was tired as she arrived home. What she did not anticipate, though, was her parents waiting for her, their arms crossed. She sighed, wondering what she had done now.

"You're home late," Ahlam grunted, pointing to the ancient clock they had on their wall. It read 3 pm, and Aya shook her head.

"I was exploring the markets," she told her Baba, handing him a bag full of groceries.

"Did you ask for permission?"

Aya frowned, "Usually I am allowed to leave without permission," she reminded him, wondering what the sudden fuss was about.

He sighed, running a hand through his scruffy hair, "Next time, ask."

Aya walked away, feeling uneasy. Why had her Baba suddenly seemed so... worried? Did it have something to do with the American boy she'd met? Aya didn't know for certain, but she was determined to find out.

Aya spent the rest of the week hanging around Nicholas, ignoring the odd looks locals shot her way. They looked at Nicholas as if he were a fish breathing out of water. When they were finally alone, she stopped him, frown as clear as the sky above.

"What are you not telling me?" She finally asked him, tone accusatory. "Are we not friends?"

Nicholas frowned, "There's nothing to tell," he replied, and that conversation ended as quickly as it came up. Still, Aya had the unsettling feeling that something was happening, something bad.

Aya awoke the next morning to the smell of smoke. She darted up, peeking out her window. Destruction was everywhere. She got up, the loud sounds of machinery booming overtaking her rational thoughts. She rushed to her sister's room.

"What's happening?" She asked Nadia, tone frantic.

Nadia sighed, rubbing her forehead, "War," she replied.

Aya rushed outside, shocked at the familiar face she saw. Nicholas was there, standing a few hundred feet away, right beside a tall American soldier. A tall American soldier who looked like his splitting image. Aya frowned, shaking her head as if in disbelief. A soldier. A soldier meant war, and it seemed to her that her newfound friend was not on her side of it.

Aya approached him, eyeing the man beside him as if she were restraining herself from pouncing.

"Nicholas," she greeted, frowning.

"Aya!" He exclaimed, but his eyes did not meet her own.

She rubbed her forehead, confused. "I'm sorry, who's this?" She questioned, looking the tall man up and down. The way he looked at her made her want to flinch.

"I'm Nicholas' father. You must be the girl I've heard all about." The man said, frowning and assessing her for himself. He hummed, "Shame you're Iraqi."

Aya tensed, now only looking at the man. "I'm sorry?" She replied, arms crossed. "A shame because... *we're* here to destroy your city."

Aya looked between Nicholas and his father, tears suddenly pricking at her eyes. "What? It can't be..."

Nicholas looked as confused as she did, and she realized he must've believed she was American, too. She shook her head, rushing to her house swiftly. She was shocked to find her parents already packing frantically.

"I want answers," she demanded, wiping her tears away quickly.

"The US has invaded," her Baba replied, face solemn. He recovered swiftly, "We're leaving. Pack your things."

Sounds of destruction rang throughout the house, and Aya could taste the ash which filled the outside air. She quickly packed her things, rushing out of her house with her family. They hopped in Baba's truck, and Aya couldn't even watch as her city was destroyed. She closed her eyes, willing it all to end.

Syria, Iraq, August 1st, 2013

It had been ten years since the Iraq war brought destruction to Aya's home. Ten years, and yet she remembered it as if it were yesterday. The sight of buildings collapsing, the smell of the ash which the American machinery exuded, the loud ringing that filled her ears as she witnessed so much death. And then, Nicholas. The sight of him, the scent of his cologne, and the strong feeling of betrayal as he revealed his identity and crushed her world into two.

She'd long since forgiven him, but there were times when she wanted to blame her struggles on the boy. Blame him, because blaming the US didn't feel right. The US hadn't split her in half, Nicholas had. But the war had ended now, and Aya had a strong feeling the Nicholas she once knew would not return to Iraq ever again.