

The Girl and the Soldier

Aline Sax

An extract

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The girl

The sun is shining. The warmth of its rays is enhanced by the windowpane. The girl is sitting at the table. She turns her head, letting the warmth soak into her face, and smiles. Spring is coming again. She likes the smell of spring. The soldiers in the village will become friendlier again, just like last spring. Maybe they'll get so friendly that they stop the war. Then her daddy will come back. The girl listens to the sounds in the house. The noise of the customers sounds like one loud tangle, but she unravels the sounds one by one. The buzz and babble. Laughter and cries that rise above the hum. The scraping of chair legs. The tinkle of glasses against one another and the rattle of cutlery on plates. It's hard work for Mummy. Now Daddy's not there, she has to run the inn on her own. The soldiers can be very rude. Luckily, Auntie helps her. The soldiers are scared of Auntie. She can shout loudly and when she says no, it's no. Then she crosses her arms in front of her chest and nobody dares contradict her.

The girl pushes back her chair and stands up. She doesn't want to stay inside in such lovely weather. She goes outside by the kitchen door. Even the wood of the door has already been warmed by the spring sun. The road in front of the inn is a sandy path leading into the fields. Their house is the last in the village. A strange place for an inn, the people used to say, but her grandfather didn't listen to them and now, forty years on, it's the busiest inn in the village. The girl crosses the road. With measured steps, she walks to the wooden bench directly opposite the inn. It's her bench. She can sit here for hours. She listens to the sounds coming from the fields and from the inn. You can learn quite a lot by listening to the sounds coming from an inn. When people have been drinking, they say things they never would have said otherwise. And no one takes any notice of a girl on a bench across the road.

Seventeen steps. The girl reaches out her hands and, yes, there's the bench. She sits right up against the back. And then she notices.

There's someone else sitting on the bench. A soldier. He smells of sweat and mud and blood. Like all soldiers. But underneath, deep down, barely noticeable now, she smells another scent. A scent she's unfamiliar with. She sniffs hard. A warm scent, like roasted nuts. But nuts she's never smelled before.

He says nothing. She says nothing, too. She turns her face to the sun and feels the soldier next to her do the same.

The soldier

The sun is shining, but its rays don't warm him. Not like at home. The winter cold has got into his bones. It feels as if he will never be warm again. He can hardly remember the warmth of his homeland now. A sun that makes the sky quiver, which warms you right down beneath your skin. You don't get that here. The watery sun that shines here only touches you lightly, like a fleeting caress. All the same, he's enjoying it. It's the first time in ages that the sun has shone. He never could have imagined that the world could be so cold. He's enjoying simply being able to sit on this bench. With the sun on his face. He's enjoying still being alive. To die in winter must be the worst thing that can happen to you, he feels.

On the other side of the road is the inn. The sound of laughing customers spills out of the open windows. The soldier doesn't listen to it. He's can't go in there. They don't want him. They're afraid of him. He can see it in their eyes. He notices it in their step as the hurry past him. But he tries to ignore it. It's not them he's fighting for. He's fighting to be able to go home. To his wife. And his son. They can't understand what he's doing here, so far from home. And actually, he doesn't understand it himself. But asking questions doesn't help. He has to stay alive. To go back to the warmth of his country. That's all.

A little girl comes out of the inn. She's wearing a white dress with a blue bow. It's funny to see something as pretty as that. No mud. No blood. With her head held high and her back as straight as a rod, she crosses the road. She treads carefully. As if considering each step. When she gets to the bench she puts out her hands. She feels the wood. As if she's not sure it's really there. Then she sits down. She wriggles right up against the back of the bench. Her feet dangle above the ground. She says nothing.

The soldier looks at her. A milk-white haze covers her eyes. The soldier wonders if he should say something. Does she know he's sitting there? But he says nothing. He leans back and closes his eyes. He tries, like her, to feel the sun and sense the sounds all around him.

The girl

The next day, he's sitting there again. The girl waits for the soldier to say something, but he doesn't. So she slides right up against the back of the bench. She takes a really deep breath and holds his scent in her nose for a moment before breathing out again. Very vaguely, she can smell it again, that warm scent like roasted nuts. But what is it? There are other smells she can't immediately place, but they're never as... different as this. It makes her curious. She tries to unravel the soldier's scent, as she does with sounds. She peels off the sweat, the mud, the blood and all the other soldier smells. But the strange scent becomes so faint that she can't trace it.

She gives up.

'Where do you come from?' she asks.

The soldier takes a deep breath and says nothing. Perhaps it's rude to ask a soldier where he comes from. Is he cross? Should she apologise?

Then, 'Africa,' he says quietly, as if telling a secret. Africa. The new scent is Africa, the girl thinks, and sniffs deeply. That's something she's never smelled. Africa.

'Aren't you scared of me?' the soldier asks suddenly. He's got a dark voice, which goes with the nut smell.

'Why should I be scared of you?' replies the girl, surprised. Surely he's not cross? He's just sitting here. On the bench. Enjoying the sun. That's nothing to be scared of, is it?

'Everyone seems to be scared of me'.

'Well, I'm not,' says the girl, without thinking twice. The soldier shifts awkwardly on the bench. The girl doesn't understand.

'Why are people scared of you?' The soldier is quiet, as if thinking about her question.

'Are you scared of them?' she asks. Again, he thinks about it.

'Actually, yes, I am,' says the soldier hesitantly. 'When you see all the terrible things they invent for killing each other'.

The girl can't imagine what kind of terrible things the soldiers have invented. But she's quite familiar with the sound of the ambulance wagons that so often drive by the inn into the village. And she's come to know the smell of gangrene and poison gas that clings to the soldiers' uniforms all too well this past year. Every time the ambulance wagon drives by she holds her breath. She doesn't want to smell or taste the scents. But she keeps her ears open, hoping, and at the same time, terrified that she'll recognise Daddy's voice. But all the groaning sounds the same. They're not fathers' voices any longer.

Someone is calling her name. It's Mummy, on the other side of the road. Her voice sounds cross and worried. As if she's doing something dangerous.

The girl slips down from the bench.

'See you tomorrow,' she says to the soldier and takes seventeen steps towards her mother.

The soldier

The soldier smiles when he sees the girl coming out of the inn. When she gets closer, she's smiling, too. She knows he's there. He says nothing, all the same. The girl climbs up onto the bench and slides up against the back. He looks at her. She's wearing the same dress as yesterday. Why is she always sitting here? he wonders. Hasn't she got any friends? He looks at the inn. No brothers or sisters?

'Where do you come from?' The girl asks the question quite simply. He thinks about it for a moment, but can't answer her. There are no words to describe the vast plains of sand that flow into a shimmering sky, the little groups of goats seeking shade beneath meagre trees, languidly chewing on leaves, his spot against the trunk of the mighty baobab, his hut where it's dim and cool and smells of roasted shea fruit, his son's laughter and his wife's soft, warm skin.

'Africa,' he says. All the images in his head fade as he thinks of what that word means for people here. He looks at the girl, still sitting quietly on the bench.

'Aren't you scared of me?' he asks curiously.

'Why should I be scared of you?'

'Everyone seems to be scared of me'. The girl shakes her head.

'Well, I'm not,' she says simply. The soldier smiles.

There are two men coming up the other side of the road.

They stare at him and whisper. But when they see he's watching them, they go quickly into the inn.

'Why are people scared of you?' the girl asks.

The soldier shrugs. He's often asked himself the same thing. He doesn't know the answer. And that makes him sad. So why are people scared of me? In the beginning, he tried being extra friendly. But it didn't help. Now, he turns away from them. And thinks about home.

'Are you scared of them?' asks the girl, suddenly. The soldier had never thought about that.

'Actually, yes, I am' he admits. He doesn't understand them, the men who pull the strings, who can decide over so many lives. Two white soldiers come up to the inn. They give him that strange look, exchange glances, whisper something and look back in his direction. The soldier wants to make himself invisible. Disappear into the bench. There are always the looks. He can never blend into the background, he always stands out. Only once the men have gone inside does he realise he's been holding his breath. The girl doesn't notice his awkwardness. She swings her feet above the ground and seems to be thinking about something. Watching her makes him feel calmer again. He wants to ask her something, but he's not sure what. She's not scared of me, he thinks, leaning back.

The woman from the inn comes out. She looks at him crossly and calls her daughter. The girl slips obediently down from the bench.

'See you tomorrow,' she promises.

'See you tomorrow,' replies the soldier quietly, even though he knows he won't be there tomorrow.