

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Fiction Category

Second Place: “*Sami and Amira,*” by Amber Dimond

Sami felt his father wrap him in another blanket. Then another. And another. Everything still felt cold. His ears felt cold. The blankets pushed roughly against one side of his face. A crackling din coming from outside grew louder. And louder. Finally it crescendoed into a bright, hot clap against his skin. He snapped upright and looked around his dark tent. His sleeping mother’s raspy breathing pulsated steadily beside him.

Instead of trying to go back to sleep, he carefully slipped out of bed, rubbing his cheek where the rough mattress had left an imprint. He gingerly made his way to the other side of the tent, anxious that his small, chubby footsteps on the dirt floor would wake his mother. The darkness was no hindrance to his objective. Every solid object in the small enclosure had imprinted itself onto his mental map a long time ago. His hand reached the smooth wooden box he wasn’t supposed to touch. Inside, he felt the familiar wrinkled paper. He quickly snatched it and snuck outside.

The early gray sun illuminated the warm vapor of his breath as he plopped down beside a tent pole. His father smiled at him from the tattered photograph in his hand. When he closed his eyes, he could feel the frozen moment in the picture. His aunt said it was too long ago for him to remember, that he was too little. But Sami disagreed. He could sense the warmth of his father’s arms around him; he could hear his laugh.

A million undifferentiated dwellings stretched out in front of him. No matter which direction he turned, all he saw was endless canvas. It looked like an indefinite beach, covered in little peaks of white sand. His mother told him this wasn’t their real home. Their real home lay empty in Aleppo. But he couldn’t feel their real home when he closed his eyes, not the way he could feel his father. Their tent felt like his real home. This camp was his real city. For all of the birthdays he could remember, this was where he woke up.

“What’s in your picture?” asked an unfamiliar, pretty voice behind him. When he looked over, he saw a girl, a little older than him. Her dark ringlets twisted out of her ponytail, rebelling against their restraints, fighting for the freedom to bleach in the sun. She knelt down beside him and craned her neck toward his photograph. Sami moved it closer so she could see.

“Is that your papa?” she asked.

Sami nodded.

“Is he here?”

Sami shook his head.

“Do you know where he is?”

Sami shrugged.

“My name is Amira,” the girl continued as she adjusted herself against his tent. “What’s yours?”

“Sami.”

“Nice to meet you, Sami. Do you know all of the people in these tents?” she asked, making a sweeping gesture.

“I know all of them. All of the ones that are next to my tent,” Sami answered proudly.

“Good. If you see someone you don’t know, shake your pinky finger. That will be our signal. I will keep my eye on him. See what my uncle gave me?” She pulled a little jack knife out of her pocket. Sami’s impressed eyes widened as she extended the blade. “My uncle says I wander too much.”

“Aren’t you old enough to go to school?” Sami asked in wonderment.

“I skipped school today to work on my map. Every tent is going to be on it, see?” she unfolded a well-worn piece of cloth, covered in indecipherable shapes. “These are secret symbols. Every row of tents has a different symbol. I draw the symbols on some of the tents when nobody’s watching. That’s how I tell them apart. I’m going to get really good at reading maps. Do you know why?”

Sami shook his head.

“Because we aren’t going to stay in Turkey. My family is moving to Greece. Greece is more beautiful than any place you’ve ever seen. You can get any kind of food you want. Do you ever pray?”

Sami nodded.

“Then you should pray to go to Greece. My papa saved up and soon someone is going to let us ride on his raft. Greece is all the way across the sea. We’re going with lots of people, so it will be kind of crowded. That will be hard for Mama. She doesn’t like to be touched anymore...”—her voice trailed off for a second—“Do you know how to swim?”

Sami shook his head.

“I do. My papa taught me when we went fishing. I was really good at it. I almost dug a hole in the bottom of the river. You have to be really fast to do that because the water keeps trying to cover it up.” They sat together quietly watching the sun rise above the tents. Amira stood up and stretched. “Remember,” she reminded him, “pray to go to Greece. Maybe we’ll see each other there. Also...”

Sami stared at her questioningly as she looked down at her map.

“Pray that I remember how to swim.”

JUDGE’S COMMENTS

I was touched by this snapshot of two young children trying to make sense of their lives in the middle of a catastrophe that we’re all aware of. Sami’s attachment to his father’s photograph and Amira’s faith in her maps and in their family going to Greece say it all. In the first paragraph, the “bright hot clap” isn’t clear—and then we hear nothing more about it. Also, why isn’t Sami in school?

*Catherine Frerichs is retired after many years of teaching writing, literature, and other humanities courses at Glen Oaks Community College, Albion College, and, most recently, Grand Valley State University. She is the author of *Desires of the Heart: A Daughter Remembers Her Missionary Parents* (Cold River Studio, 2010), in which she uses her parents’ letters, journals, and other research to write about her parents’ 40 years of working in Papua New Guinea and the costs to their children. Currently, she is working on a book that explores her relationship with her three Sudanese children whom she foster-parented for seven years and who have remained her children.*