

PART 1

MOHAMMED OF BAGHDAD

CHAPTER 1

Remembering the city



'I remember Baghdad before the war,' said Mohammed. He talked like an old man remembering his life, but he was only eleven. 'It was beautiful,' Mohammed continued. 'I remember the river. I remember the bridges. The river was full of fish. Now there's nothing. But then it was beautiful. It was so beautiful.'

We met Mohammed soon after we moved into the Sheikh Omar area of Baghdad. It is an area of small shops, cafés and garages. Although he was very young, Mohammed worked in one of the garages. He used to go to school, but now he worked instead. He told us he had no choice. His family needed the money.

'What about your father?' we asked.

'His name was Haithem,' Mohammed replied. 'But he

abandoned us.'

He told us that he now lived with his grandmother. They lived in the next street. Sometimes his mother and other relatives visited. But his grandmother was the one who looked after him.

The beautiful city Mohammed remembered wasn't beautiful any more. He had described it to us in the back of a car. We were sitting beside him. A man he worked with was driving us through the centre of Baghdad. We passed destroyed buildings and army checkpoints. Half a kilometre away, thick smoke was rising into the air. People hurried away from it. Was it from a bomb? We couldn't see. But we knew that these things were happening in Baghdad all the time.



We stopped at some traffic lights. An American soldier was standing at the side of the road with a gun in his hand. Nearby, some children were climbing over a pile of bricks. They stopped at the top and gave the soldier questioning looks. He looked back and made funny faces. He was trying to be friendly, but no one was laughing.

We drove on. In other parts of the city things seemed