

Don't Call Me "Refugee" My Name is Lamiya

by **Betty Blair**

"Refugee! Refugee! You're a refugee!" The kids on the playground started calling names and teasing the new girl in their school. Lamiya Safarova [pronounced lah-ME-yah sa-fa-ROH-vah] looked up at them and started to cry.

It wasn't her fault that bombs and missiles had been aimed at her little village of Jabrayil (pronounced ja-brah-YIL) in Azerbaijan and that her family had been afraid that one might explode on their house. It wasn't her fault that the neighboring village, Khalafli, had already been burned to the ground or that enemy soldiers had threatened to kill everybody who didn't leave, or that kids were being kidnapped and held hostage until their parents could pay huge sums of ransom money to get them back.

It wasn't her fault that her family had barely been able to bring anything from their home when they fled, or that she was poor now and didn't have pretty clothes to wear or that she was new at this school and didn't have many friends.

Lamiya often found herself daydreaming about her old village where tulips grew in the springtime, hugging the high mountains of the Caucasus. She often wondered what had happened to the friends she had left behind. Were they still alive and if so, where were they living now? Would she ever see them again? And what about the house that her father had just built? Was it still standing? Had everything inside been looted and destroyed? Or had it been burned to the ground like so many others houses?

It wasn't her fault that there was a war with Armenians who were trying to push the Azer-baijanis off their land, and that nearly a million people like herself had had to flee their homes and find a new place to live, new friends, new schools, new jobs. So when the kids called her "refugee", it hurt her very deeply.

In English, "refugee" means a person who is searching for protection and safety—a shelter from danger. The same word, "gachgin" [pronounced gotch-GIN], in the Azeri language also carries with it the idea of "runner," meaning a person who has run away from something—a person who isn't brave and didn't try to fight but just ran away. But Lamiya knew that wasn't true. And that's why she started crying when they called her "refugee, refugee". She also knew that the kids wouldn't understand what she had lived through. It was too different from their own lives. Baku was too far away from Jabrayil. It would take you five or six hours to drive there by car. How could kids really understand the war that was going on over there?

That night, Lamiya went home and started writing a poem. She knew that she would burst inside if she didn't write it down. She called the poem, "Don't Call Me Refugee." She was nine years old at the time.