

An excerpt from 'AMERICA'S DAUGHTERS' by Lara Morton (c) 2013

Twelve-year-old MINI enters with a camouflage backpack strapped across her chest, pretending it is a guitar and 'rocking out' to the climatic end of 'Hello World.' She is wearing fatigues and is clearly having the time of her life. As the song ends, she picks up a stack of notecards and struts around triumphantly.

MINI

Who's gettin' an A? I'm gettin' an A. I'm gettin' aaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAmerica!
A—mer—ica! God set his grace on thee... And crowned thy good with bro—
therhood... From sea to shining sea! (*throws the notecards triumphantly in the air, they scatter about the room*)

Takes a deep breath, plugs nose and jumps down off the bed. Mimes being under water, collecting notecards from the ocean floor, swimming with effort to the surface and taking a huge gasp of air when she breaks through. We hear the sound of motorized wheelchair and a knock at the door. Mini freezes and drops to the bed.

MINI

Incoming!!! (*rolls to the floor, as if in a military exercise*)

(*offstage voice*) **DAD**

Min, you alright in there?!

MINI

Yeah, Dad! Doin' homework!

(*offstage voice*) **DAD**

That's some noisy homework! Mom says report to the mess hall for supper at 18:30 sharp or you'll be on K.P. all weekend.

MINI

Sir, Yes sir! Love you dad!

(*offstage voice*) **DAD**

Me too, pipsqueak.

Sound of a motorized wheelchair backing up and away. Mini leaps to her feet and grabs a hairbrush from her dresser table, which is populated by a collection of hero-themed Bobbleheads.

MINI

Rock star!!! Next stop: The rock 'n roll center of the Universe!!! Deee-troit, baby! Oh yeah, that's right. I'm already here. New York City! Madison Square Garden! The crowd goes wild for Mini Tiller, Grammy-winning recording artist, best-selling author and decorated military hero! (*Shakes her hair every which way and does a rock star dance.*) Raaaaaa! Raaaaaaa! (*Tapping a hairbrush*) Is this thing on? Can you hear me okay? C'mon brush. Work with me. (*Taps her Bobbleheads to get them to respond in the affirmative*) Oh, hello... paparazzi! (*Pretends to primp her hair.*)... Who've we got here?

Grabs one Bobble-head at a time and sets them in front of her, identifying their respective assignments. We see their nodding faces one at a time depicted on the multi-media screen.

Rolling Stone Magazine, MTV and E! Entertainment Television!

We hear a sound effect of wild applause, cheering, voices clamoring for 'Miss Tiller's' attention, flash bulbs going off.

Oh, thank you all so much for your love and adoration. You know, when I was just a young girl my father gave me my first guitar and I played my fingers raw and bloody. That's the kind of perseverance and dedication it takes to be something in this world!

MINI taps the Bobble-heads with her foot and they nod in agreement; their nodding faces in slow-motion animation are visible on the projection screen. MINI blows kisses.

Thank you, thank you my adoring fans! Especially you, Joseph. (*Whispers*) You know you're my favorite, right? I will grant you an exclusive interview if you promise to tell me where you got those cool shades.

MINI picks up her G.I. Joe Bobblehead and sets him in a prime location at eye level. She pokes him on the nose affectionately. He nods his approval.

So the truth is, Joseph... I'm not exactly a famous rock star... or New York Times bestselling author.... or decorated military hero-- YET. I'm really just biding my time for now— incognito-- posing as a seventh grader at Detroit Merit Charter Academy. I figure it's a good cover while I plan my future domination. I even wear a uniform for disguise. (*Picks up her navy blue polo and khaki pants off of the*

floor and holds them up to her.) Hot stuff, caliente stuff-ay! (Pauses, staring at G.I. Joe) Hey! You know, if you don't have anything nice to say... Do you think I enjoy wearing this? (Holds her uniform right up to his bobbing face.) Hells to the no, Joe, helllls to the no! (Throws the uniform across the room). I figure it's good practice. And besides, I get to show my personality from the ankle down. Check the awesome sneaker collection (she points to a perfectly organized shoe rack, and gives a thumbs up), and these.... the pieces of resistance! Three pairs of combat boots for three generations of Tiller soldiers. Vietnam. Desert Storm. And these are mine! (Picks up her pant legs and shows off her boots) Best birthday present ever!!! They're kinda big now (shakes one off her foot), so I think they'll be perfect when my feet stop growing. I'm gonna wear them through R.O.T.C., all the way to West Point. Or the Citadel. I wanna be an officer, so I can't afford to mess up with bad grades, a bad attitude... or a bad diet. I've got a plan. I call it "Operation G.O.O.D." Get Out of Detroit. (She carefully removes the other boot and places both boots next to the other two pairs at the top of her shoe rack, and then jumps on the bed with her hairbrush and sings loudly and uninhibitedly.)

We... are the champions.... my friend...

Sing with me Joseph!

And we'll keep on fighting till the end....

Come on, you know how the chorus goes!

*We are the champions, WE are the champions,
No time for losers 'cause we are the champions...
OF THE WORLD!*

That was amazing. What? Now, listen, sir. I know you are not a future rock star like me but I mean, who else is gonna hold down the harmonies? (Grabs G.I. Joe and brings him over to the bed, sets him down next to her; head down with a pouty face, trying to work some sympathy out of her friend). I'm an only child....

What's that? (Flips over on her back, holds him up to her ear and listens.) Of course I wanted a brother! Duh! I hate not having a back-up in the trenches. Why? (Shrugs). Mom said they used to want like four kids. They had big dreams of traveling around the world raising Army brats. But then Saddam Hussein started acting like... Saddam Hussein, and before they knew it, my dad was on his way to the Persian Gulf, which is.... way over there... (Pointing to a world map on the

fourth wall, which we see on the screen) and my mom was.... waaaay over.... here (points to Detroit, Michigan on the map, which on the screen features a sticker and an arrow stating in girlish handwriting 'I am Here'). Detroit, Michigan. You see how far that is? And it was the old days, so there was no cell phone, no internet, just letters and sometimes a phone call. She was a mess, Joseph! She couldn't eat or sleep... and I guess that's not good when you're preggo. (Shoves a stuffed animal up her shirt to make herself look pregnant and drops to her knees.)

My mom got down on her knees and prayed every day and night, asking Jesus to watch over my dad and keep him in one piece, but I guess it didn't work 'cause he caught a bunch of shrapnel in his leg... And...You know.... *(She indicates a karate chop to the leg right below the knee)*... They sent dad home and mom splashed her water all over the Handi Mart floor. I wasn't fully cooked yet- three months early. They weren't sure I was gonna make it, so this time it was dad's turn to talk to Jesus. Except, he only had one knee so he sat in his wheelchair when he prayed. That's not funny, Joseph. Anyway, Jesus musta been listening 'cause here I am! *(Yanking the stuffed animal out and holding it in her arms like a baby.)* Ta daaa! I was born a preemie- 2.42 pounds, and that's why they call me 'Mini.' So, there you are Joseph. Now you know the story of my life. I think I'm gonna sing about it. Join in if you feel the inspiration.

Mini grabs her guitar and strums chords while singing a poorly improvised song.

*My name is Mini Frances Tiller,
I may be small but... still---er,
Inside I'm really a... killer.
I mean duh-- I'm a war baby!
And... a future officer in the United States Army...
Or... the United States Marine Corp.....
But... Probably the Army.....
I... guess I'll figure that out later.*

Well, what do you think? Yes, it does need some work. Maybe after dinner, 'cause right now I need to shoot some enemy insurgents! Cover me, Joseph!

MINI throws on a camouflage helmet, grabs a toy automatic weapon and hurls herself behind the bed, pretending to be in a foxhole. We hear sounds of mortar fire and explosions as Mini plays out a warfare scenario. Images of heroes flying across battlefields, amid explosions, bayonets at the ready, play on the screen above. Teddy bears fly across the room. MINI battles with urgency and excitement, eyes wide open with

imagination on full tilt. She makes automatic gunfire sound effects with her voice and found objects in the room, and throws herself acrobatically across the bed to rescue a wounded stuffed tiger, performing an 'amputation' on him right there on her bed-- apparently his leg was already loose, as this is a scenario she plays out regularly.

Hang on, Tiger! You're gonna make it, but we have to lose the leg. Here, bite on this! *(She puts a stuffed zebra Beanie Baby across his mouth).*

When I was little my dad used to take me for rides on his automatic wheelchair, and we'd pretend it was a tank! I'd man the popcorn weapons systems and aim at pigeons and fire hydrants and other menacing foe! I miss those days....

MINI dives under the bed and produces another photo album, old and coming apart a bit in the binding. MINI gingerly turns to a page and shows it to G.I. Joe. We see some photographs and newspaper articles on the screen

My family has so much awesome history, we've got it up the kazoo, and it's all right under my bed! Everybody in Detroit has history—we just don't have much present. I hate looking at all of the empty factories with their broken windows and graffiti walls- I like to imagine them all lit up and full of people doing the awesomest things like back in the day when they used to build the most important machines in the world here. My great-grandfather Raymond Maxwell Tiller didn't fight in WWII but he assembled B-24 Liberators for Ford at the Willow Run plant -- the largest assembly line in the world! See this picture? Those are the pilots sleeping on their cots waiting for the B-24s to come off the line! SO cool!

MINI places the photo album carefully on her pillow and grabs a folded flag in a triangular wooden case from under her bed. It's on the upstage side of the bed so all we see are her legs flailing at the ceiling as she retrieves it. She grabs it and loses her balance, falling down behind the bed. Silence for a beat.

(Deadpan) Oww.

You didn't see that. Stop laughing or you're going back in the box. I mean it this time. Thank you. You know, for a military hero you are kinda unfocused. You might have a touch of the A.D.D., Joseph. What? No, I do NOT! I'm just... very... Imaginative. Like mom says to my teachers all the time. But I always get the job done, and done right. I learned that from my Pop Pop. Did I ever show you this? His flag, from his funeral. It's one of my favorite things, so dad lets me

keep it in here. Joseph Raymond Tiller, First Lieutenant, U.S. Marine Corp. Vietnam War. I miss him so much.... He had the best stories. I wish I recorded all of them, so I could listen to them over and over again, but they are all up here. He died when I was nine. He caught cancer from the Agent Orange, which sounds kinda nice like Florida, but it's nasty stuff. Pops could barely talk sometimes but he'd still tell his stories. He used to say 'History ain't history unless somebody passes it on.' He gave me this book, *The Red Badge of Courage*. It was his favorite. It's like... epic! And it's about heroes, and the things they gave up to protect what they believed in. You should totally read it, Joey. It's like, right up your alley, cat.

MINI puts the book in front of Joseph and jumps over to the map again and pokes all seven continents. We see her hand on the screen pointing at cities she's marked with a pin.

I love to read. I get to visit all these places I've never seen-- which is pretty much everywhere besides Michigan. I'm gonna travel the world in the military, take pictures and write about all of it! I hate to say it because it's not like I'm a wimp but I kinda hope I don't have to fight in a war. I like having two legs. (*Shrugs*) I don't think I will. Wars don't happen every day. I mean, there's Iraq, but it's already been like three years. By the time I'm old enough to go-- that's what? 2010? It'll totally be over... wars don't last that long, right Joe? You should know, because you've fought in all of them.

My parents are definitely worried about me enlisting, but he'll come around—I mean, why else would my dad give me these? (*She grabs a set of dog tags and pulls them out of her shirt, kisses them and puts them back.*) I wear them every day to help remind me of the sacrifices of all of the soldiers who have gone before me, and I always pray for the ones who are overseas right now, looking for Osama Bin Laden. I really hope they find him soon, Joseph.

That was, like, the worst day ever.

The multi-media screen shows a school clock at 9:07 a.m. MINI stands with her hand over her heart, facing the flag on her bedroom wall, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with a recording of her classmates.

MINI / CLASSMATES (*recorded*)

And to the republic, for which it stands, one nation, indivisible....

A loudspeaker announcement interrupts.

(offstage voice) **SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**

Attention Staff of Phoenix Elementary: Please have all students gather their belongings and report in orderly fashion to the auditorium immediately.

MINI

Everybody cheered because it meant no math quiz, but I was looking at adult faces and I could tell that something was really, really wrong. The buses took us home early, and when I walked in the house everybody was watching CNN and crying. My mom didn't want me to see it, but Dad sat me down on his lap, wrapped his arms around me and said, 'Mini, I'm worried... I'm worried about our country. I think things are going to get a lot worse before they get better...if they get better. You're gonna have to be very strong, and brave. Can you handle that, soldier?' That was the first time my daddy called me "soldier." I didn't sleep at all that night. *(Reaches under the bed and pulls out a box, blows off some dust, opens it and pulls out a camouflage-design photo album)* I dug out my dad's old photo albums from when he was in the Army. It's so amazing. Check it out, Joe. Here's his unit in Basic Training— There's my dad, front left, looking SO awesome. And... look. He still had his left leg in this picture... I never got to see it in person *(runs her finger over the leg)*. He never complains about it, and he always says he was one of the lucky ones 'cause some of these guys in his unit never made it home to their kids, and some others are really messed up now, like, inside their head and they can't think right or feel happy anymore. "Hey, but at least I still got my wits about me!" That's what he says when somebody tells him they're sorry about his leg. Once a month my family volunteers at the V.A. shelter. My mom serves hot soup, dad makes coffee and I put the rolls on their salad plates... plus a little bit of respect on the side. *(big smile)* "Would you like a patta butta with that, sir?... Thank you for your service." Some of them say 'welcome' and some of them don't. I always say it anyway.... I asked my dad how things could get so bad for somebody who was a hero, and he just said ..."sometimes a person has just seen too much or felt so bad about something that they are never the same."

The sound of the motorized wheelchair is heard again, along with a 'Shave and a haircut' knock.

MINI

Two bits!

(Offstage Voice) **DAD**

Mini... You know what time it is, right? Tell G.I. Joe that you'll talk to him after dinner.

MINI

He's got separation anxiety, Dad! Can I bring him to the table tonight?

(Offstage Voice) **DAD**

I suppose so, pipsqueak. As long as he helps with the dishes.

MINI

Deal! C'mon Joe, you and me are headed to the mess hall for some grub.

Before she exits, she gently returns the photo album to the under-bed hiding space and kisses the flag case.

Love and miss ya, Pop Pop.