



Calling Doctor Samar!

By Ian Pugh

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‘Calling Doctor Samar! Calling Doctor Samar! Please come to the Emergency Room immediately!’

Dr Roya Samar stopped suddenly near the hospital exit. ‘Great!’ she muttered. It had been a long day and she was about to go home. She also had to pick her daughter up from school.

As Roya entered the ER, a nurse called her over to a bed in which lay an elderly lady who was in obvious pain. Beside the bed, stood her colleague, Dr Omar.

‘Looks like a burst appendix,’ said Dr Omar. ‘We’ll have to operate immediately.’

Roya sighed. It looked like she was going to be late picking up her daughter.

‘Roya? Is that you?’ It was the elderly lady in the bed speaking.

‘Yes, I am Dr Roya Samar,’ Roya replied. ‘I’m sorry, have we met?’

‘It’s been a long time,’ the lady replied weakly. ‘You probably don’t remember...’

It was only now that Roya took a good look at the lady’s face. ‘Ms. Paria?’ she said suddenly.

The old lady nodded weakly and then winced in pain.

‘Ms. Paria, we are going to take good care of you, alright?’ Roya said, before turning to the nurse. ‘Let’s prepare her for surgery.’

‘I’m glad I’m in good hands,’ said Ms. Paria, trying her best to smile.



In the pre-op room, Roya was busy washing her hands when Dr Omar came in.

'You were on your way home weren't you?' he said. 'I can take care of this operation if you like?'

'Thank you,' Roya replied. 'But I'd like to do this one.'

'Sounds like she is someone you know,' said Dr Omar.

'Yes,' Roya nodded. 'She is actually one of the most important people in my life. And I'm ashamed to say that I haven't seen her for close on 20 years.'

'Well, good luck with it then,' said Dr Omar, on his way out the door. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

Roya nodded her thanks and continued to wash her hands. And now her thoughts drifted back to the past. Twenty years! Had it really been that long? It felt like yesterday.



‘Roya, before you go, may I have a word please?’

Roya rolled her eyes in frustration. She was clutching her school bag and was almost about to leave the classroom. Now she had to stop and wait while all the other girls poured out of the classroom past her. Everyone off on their lunch break, except her. She knew exactly why Ms. Paria wanted to talk to her and it was not a conversation she felt like having.

Ms. Paria was seated at her desk, staring down at Roya’s homework book. Roya noticed the pages were covered in red pen.

‘What is going on, Roya?’ Ms. Paria asked. ‘What has happened to my top student? Where is the girl who had dreams of becoming a doctor? With these grades you won’t even be getting into university – and yet I know you can do so much better. What is going on? Is it something at home?’

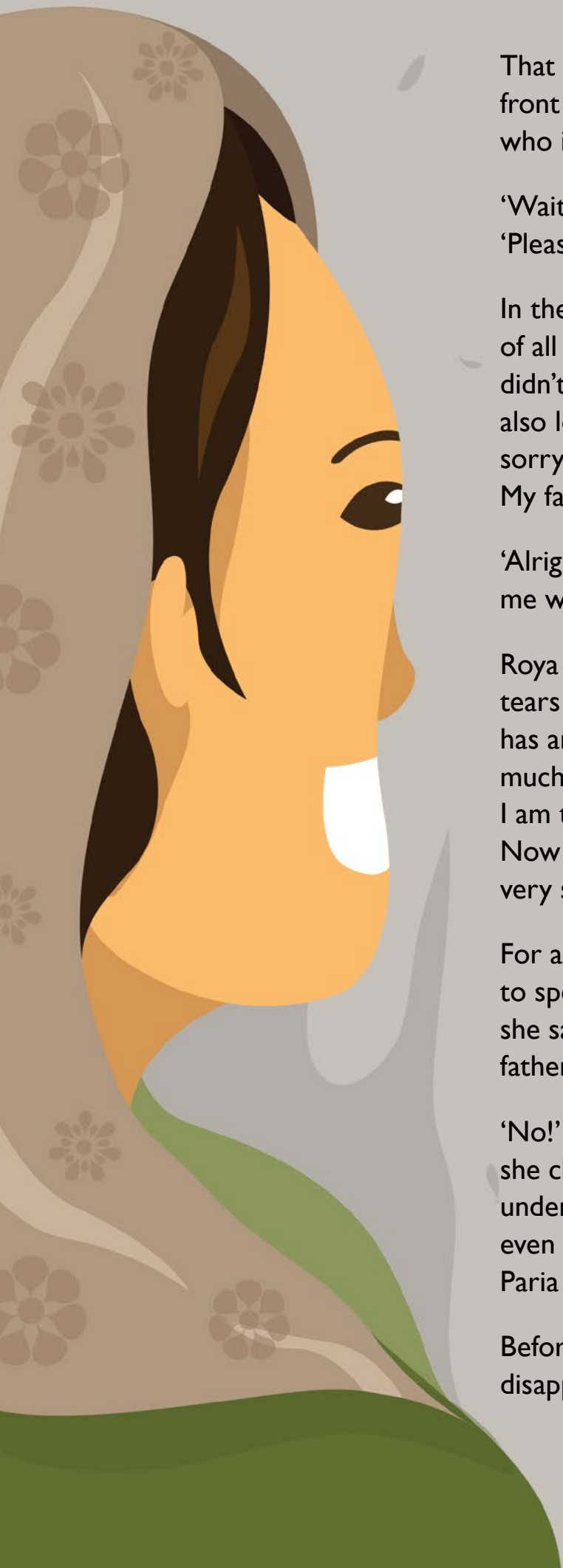
Roya was staring at the floor. ‘I’m sorry, Ms. Paria,’ she said. ‘But I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Roya, you know you can speak to me, right?’ Ms. Paria said. She was now on her feet. She could see that Roya looked close to tears. But as she went to comfort her, Roya turned suddenly and hurried towards the door.

‘Roya!’ Ms. Paria called after her.

But Roya was gone.





That afternoon, Ms. Paria knocked on Roya's front door. When Roya answered and saw who it was, she almost closed the door again.

'Wait, Roya, please!' Ms. Paria pleaded.
'Please can we talk, just for a minute?'

In the house, Ms. Paria could hear the noise of all Roya's brothers and sisters. She clearly didn't want Ms. Paria to go inside and she was also looking anxiously down the street. 'I'm sorry, Ms. Paria,' she said. 'But you can't stay. My father will be home soon.'

'Alright, I won't stay long but please just tell me what the problem is.'

Roya hesitated and Ms. Paria could see the tears welling up in her eyes again. 'My father has arranged for me to get married – to a much older man who I haven't even met yet. I am to be married in a few months' time! Now please I need you to go. My father is a very strict man!'

For a moment, Ms. Paria looked too shocked to speak. 'I'm so sorry to hear that, Roya,' she said eventually. 'Perhaps I can talk to your father about this?'

'No!' Roya said, her eyes suddenly wide as she checked the street again. 'You don't understand! My father would be angry if he even knew you were here! Now please Ms. Paria – I have to go!'

Before Ms. Paria could say more, Roya disappeared back inside and closed the door.



‘Roya, wait please!’ Ms. Paria called.

When she had seen Ms. Paria, Roya had tried walking in the opposite direction but the teacher was now rushing to catch up to her. Roya stopped and waited. She noticed that some of the other girls were already staring.

‘Listen, Roya,’ said Ms. Paria quietly so that no one else could hear. ‘There is a place where you can go and talk to someone about your situation. Do you know World Vision’s youth club?’

Roya nodded.

‘I’m told there are people there that know about these matters,’ Ms. Paria continued. ‘Surely it can’t hurt to talk to someone? You can’t just give up on your dreams, Roya!’

For a moment, Ms. Paria thought that Roya was going to run off again but instead she just stared silently at the floor.

‘I could come with you, if you like?’ Ms. Paria suggested.

For the first time in the conversation, Roya looked at Ms. Paria. ‘It will probably be a waste of time,’ she said.

‘Maybe,’ shrugged Ms. Paria. ‘But we’ll never know unless we try.’



The next day, Roya and Ms. Paria visited the World Vision youth club. It was a busy place, full of friendly people but Roya had very little hope that anyone was going to be able to help her. One of the counsellors, Saima, introduced herself and they sat down to talk.

It was Ms. Paria who ended up explaining Roya's situation while Saima listened carefully. Once she had heard the full story, Saima turned to Roya.

'Unfortunately, this is a story I hear too often,' she said. 'There are a lot of young girls in your situation. But that doesn't mean we can't help. Roya, how would you feel if we sent someone to talk to your father? Perhaps one of my male colleagues?'

'No,' Roya replied. 'You have to understand what my father is like. He is a very religious man and he is also very proud. We lost my mother some years ago and he has had a lot of difficulties supporting our family since. I know the money he will get from agreeing to this marriage is going to help our family a lot, but he does not want people knowing that he is struggling financially. He would be so angry if he knew I was even talking to other people about this.'

Saima nodded like she understood. 'You say your father is a religious man? That gives me an idea. Would you be able to come back here tomorrow, at about the same time?'

Once again Roya was looking unsure but Ms. Paria was full of encouraging smiles.



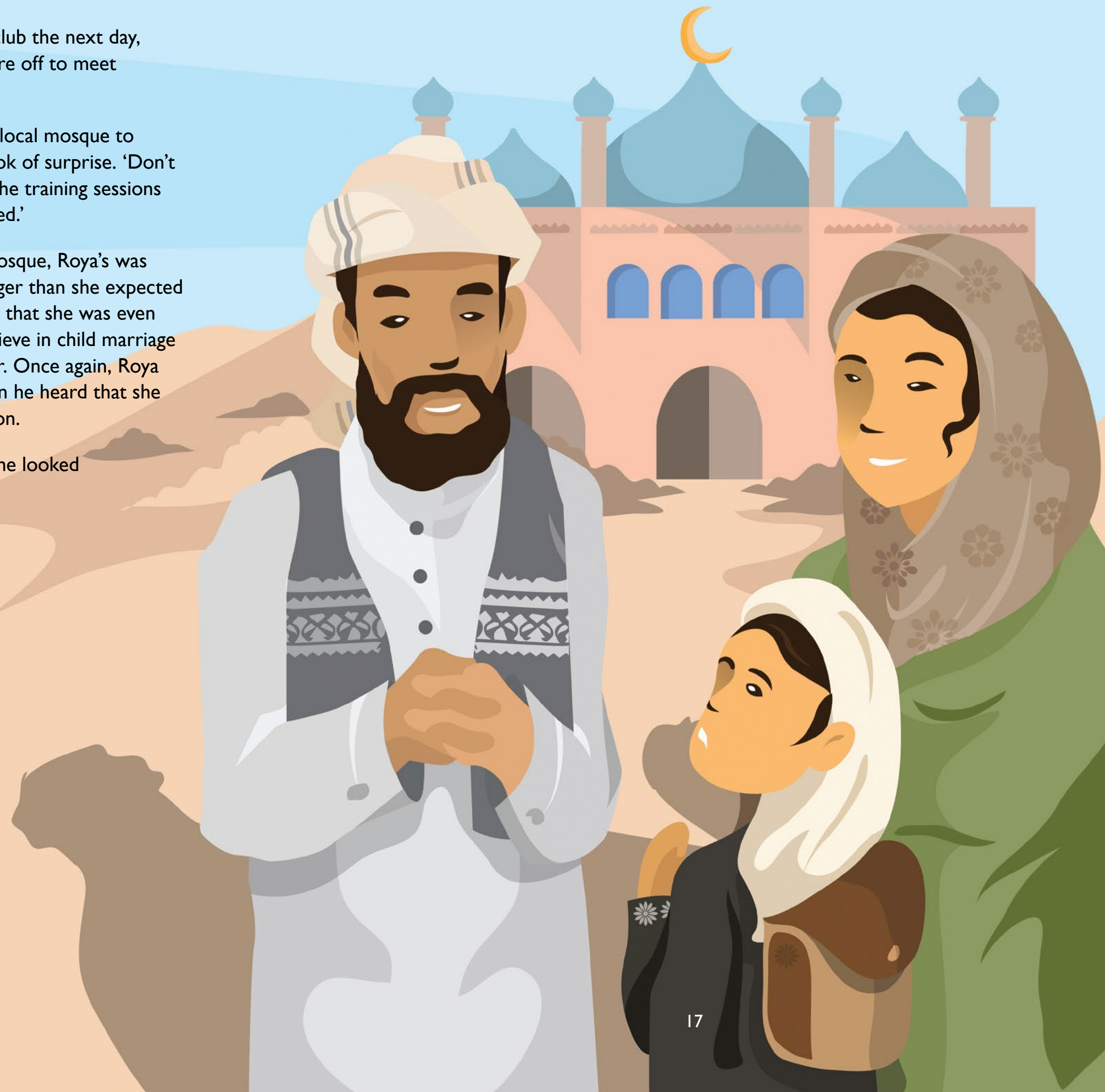
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As soon as Roya and Ms. Paria arrived at the youth club the next day, Saima whisked them away. 'Come on,' she said. 'We're off to meet someone.'

On the way, she explained that they were off to the local mosque to meet a mullah. Saima smiled when she saw Roya's look of surprise. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'This mullah has attended some of the training sessions we have held. I think you might be pleasantly surprised.'

When they met Mullah Khan gul outside the local mosque, Roya's was more than a little surprised. First of all, he was younger than she expected but it was when they started to discuss her situation that she was even more surprised. He made it clear that he did not believe in child marriage and he seemed very keen to speak with Roya's father. Once again, Roya explained how angry her father was likely to be when he heard that she had been speaking to other people about her situation.

'Don't worry,' said Mullah Khan gul, with a smile, as he looked skywards. 'I have connections in high places!'

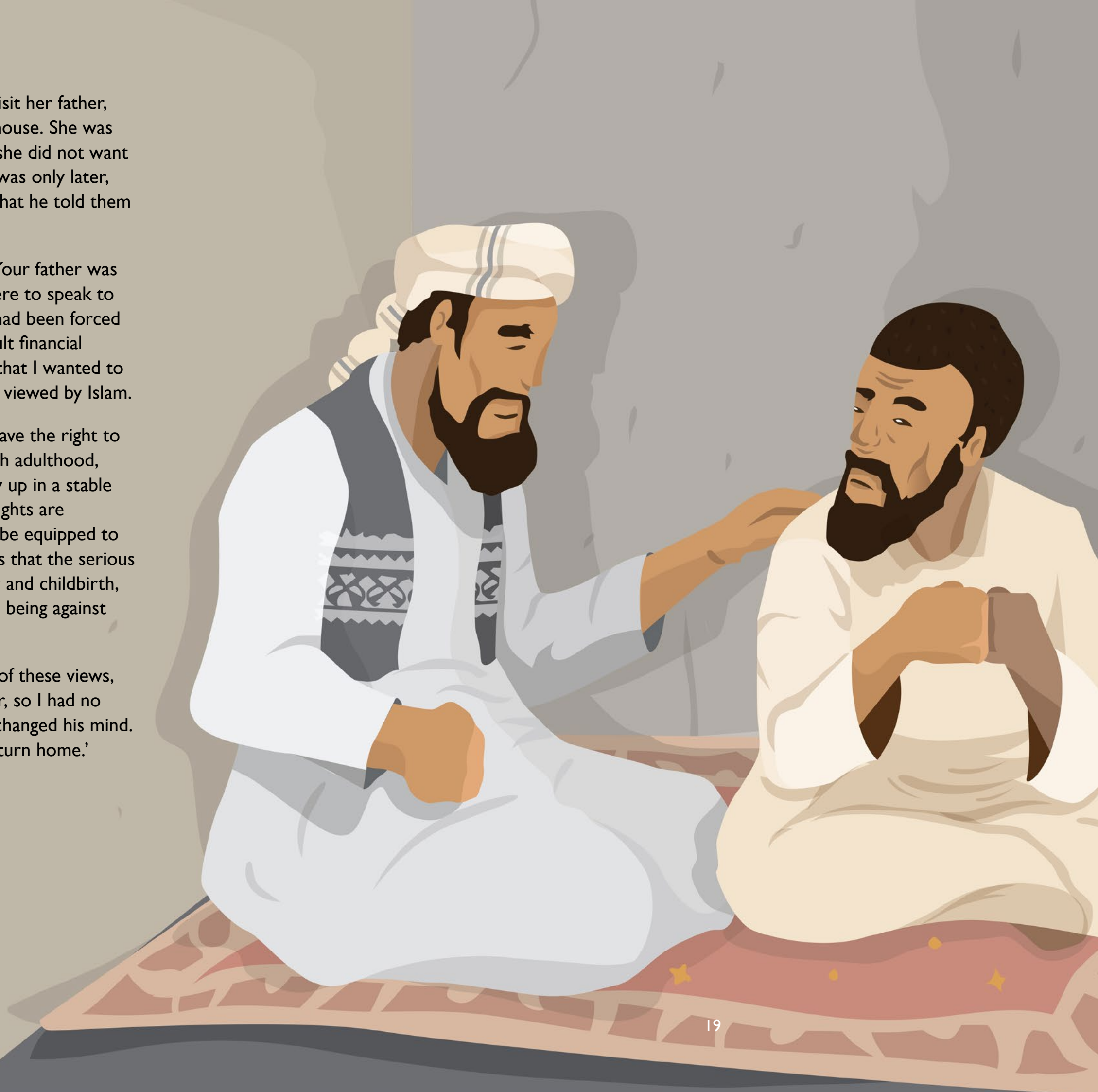



On the day that Mullah Khan gul agreed to visit her father, Roya made sure she was nowhere near the house. She was feeling very nervous about this meeting and she did not want to be around to see her father's reaction. It was only later, when she visited the Mullah with Ms. Paria, that he told them what had happened.

'I will be honest with you,' said the Mullah. 'Your father was not too happy when he heard what I was there to speak to him about. He immediately told me that he had been forced to arrange the marriage because of his difficult financial situation. I said this was understandable but that I wanted to speak to him about how these marriages are viewed by Islam.'

I explained that Islam teaches that children have the right to be fed, clothed and protected until they reach adulthood, as well as receive a good education and grow up in a stable environment. In the Islamic faith, children's rights are important, and it states that children should be equipped to face the difficulties of life. It therefore follows that the serious health risks faced by young girls in pregnancy and childbirth, goes against the teachings of Islam, as well as being against the law of our country.

Your father seemed surprised to hear some of these views, but he didn't want to discuss anything further, so I had no choice but to leave. I do not know if he has changed his mind. I suppose you will only find out when you return home.'



A stylized illustration of a man and a woman sitting at a dark brown table. The man, on the left, has a dark beard and is wearing a light-colored shirt. The woman, on the right, is wearing a white headscarf and a dark blue dress with a floral pattern on the sleeve. They are both looking towards the center of the table. The background is a light gray with some faint, abstract shapes.

Returning home that evening, Roya had never felt so nervous. It was more than just her father's angry reaction that she was worried about. She realised that her whole life hung in the balance.

Roya found her father seated alone in the living room as if in deep thought. He asked her to sit down but then said nothing for a long time. Just when she thought she couldn't stand the awful silence any longer, her father began to speak.

'What would your mother have said if she were alive today?' he asked in a low voice. 'To go behind my back and organise for a mullah to come and speak to me.'

'I'm sorry, Father,' said Roya. 'The last thing I wanted to do was embarrass-'

'Your mother would have agreed with you!' her father interrupted.

Roya wasn't sure if she had heard correctly. 'I beg your pardon, Father?'

'She would have said you did the right thing. That you are right to chase your dreams. She may even have thought that you approached it in quite a clever way. Recruiting a mullah!'

Roya glanced up at her father nervously and then realised that he was looking at her with a smile.

'She always said you would go places,' her father continued. 'And she was usually right.'

Another short silence followed and then her father said the words that would change her life forever.

'I've decided to call off the marriage,' he said.

‘Thank you!’

It was Ms. Paria speaking. She had only woken up from the operation a short time ago and was looking so much better.

‘No,’ said Roya, shaking her head and taking Ms. Paria’s hand. ‘It is I that must thank you!’

Ms. Paria looked confused for a moment. ‘Really?’ she replied.

Roya smiled. ‘Do you not remember what you did for me?’ she asked. ‘If it wasn’t for you I would not even be standing here!’

Now it was Ms. Paria’s turn to smile. ‘Well then, I’m the lucky one, aren’t I?’

There were tears in Roya’s eyes as she squeezed her teacher’s hand. ‘I will come and see you again tomorrow,’ she said. ‘Now I must go. I am late to pick up my daughter.’



Roya's daughter, Palwasha, was waiting outside the school with her teacher, Ms. Nasim.

'I am so sorry to be late,' said Roya to the teacher. 'Thank you for waiting!'

'Did you forget about me?' Palwasha asked, unhappily.

'No,' Roya replied, taking her daughter's hand. 'How could I ever forget about you? It was just that I had to help someone who was very sick at the hospital today. In fact, she was an old teacher of mine. Now, did you say thank you to Ms. Nasim?'

'Thank you, Ms. Nasim,' said Palwasha.

Ms. Nasim waved them goodbye and went back into the school.

As they walked away down the road, Palwasha noticed that her mother was crying.

'Why are you crying, Mama?' she asked.

Roya stopped, crouched down and hugged her daughter. 'These are good tears,' she said. 'Today I was reminded how one person's kindness can change another person's life forever.'

'Are you talking about how you saved your teacher's life today?'

'No,' Roya replied. 'I'm talking about how she saved my life.'

Palwasha looked confused. 'I don't understand,' she said.

'That's OK,' said Roya with a smile. 'One day you will. Now let's get home. Your Dad will be wondering where we are.'

Hand in hand, the mother and daughter continued down the road.





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