



The Beautiful Gift

By Ian Pugh

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Written by Ian Pugh

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‘Mother,’ said my little brother, Musa. ‘Please tell us the story about how you saved Farzanah from Auntie Hajira and Uncle Zemar!’

My mother smiled. She had just settled down for the evening and was looking tired. ‘But you’ve heard it so many times, Musa!’ she replied.

‘That doesn’t matter! It’s our favourite story!’ said Moska, my youngest sister, who was already snuggling up beside my mother under her blanket.

My mother looked across to where I sat doing my homework. ‘But we’ll disturb Farzanah,’ she said. ‘She’s trying to do her homework.’

‘I don’t mind,’ I said. ‘I’ve nearly finished anyway.’

My mother laughed. She was not going to get out of telling the story that easily. Secretly, I think she liked telling this story – almost as much as we liked hearing it.

She waited for everyone to get comfortable and then she began.

“It was just a few days after Farzanah was born that your Auntie Hajira and Uncle Zemar came to visit. As soon as she laid eyes on the baby it was as though she had made up her mind.

‘She will marry my son!’ she announced.

I did not take her seriously. Farzanah was only a few days old and her son, Karim, was only 5 at the time. I couldn’t believe she was actually talking about marriage!

‘Come on! Let them grow up!’ I said with a smile.

But Auntie Hajira was determined. She had a piece of green fabric which she tied around Farzanah’s head. Then she declared, ‘This girl is for my son!’



Over the next 10 years or so, Auntie Hajira and Uncle Zemar would visit regularly. During these visits, Auntie Hajira would often hug Farzanah and call her things 'like my daughter'. Later, when they had gone, Farzanah would complain about this and I would always say things like, 'Don't worry, she is only joking.'

But it was soon after Farzanah's 11th birthday that I realised she wasn't joking at all.

On that day, Auntie Hajira and Uncle Zemar visited with their son, Karim, who was now 16 years old. Soon after their arrival, Hajira surprised me by saying, 'It is time. The girl is now 11 and my son is 16.'

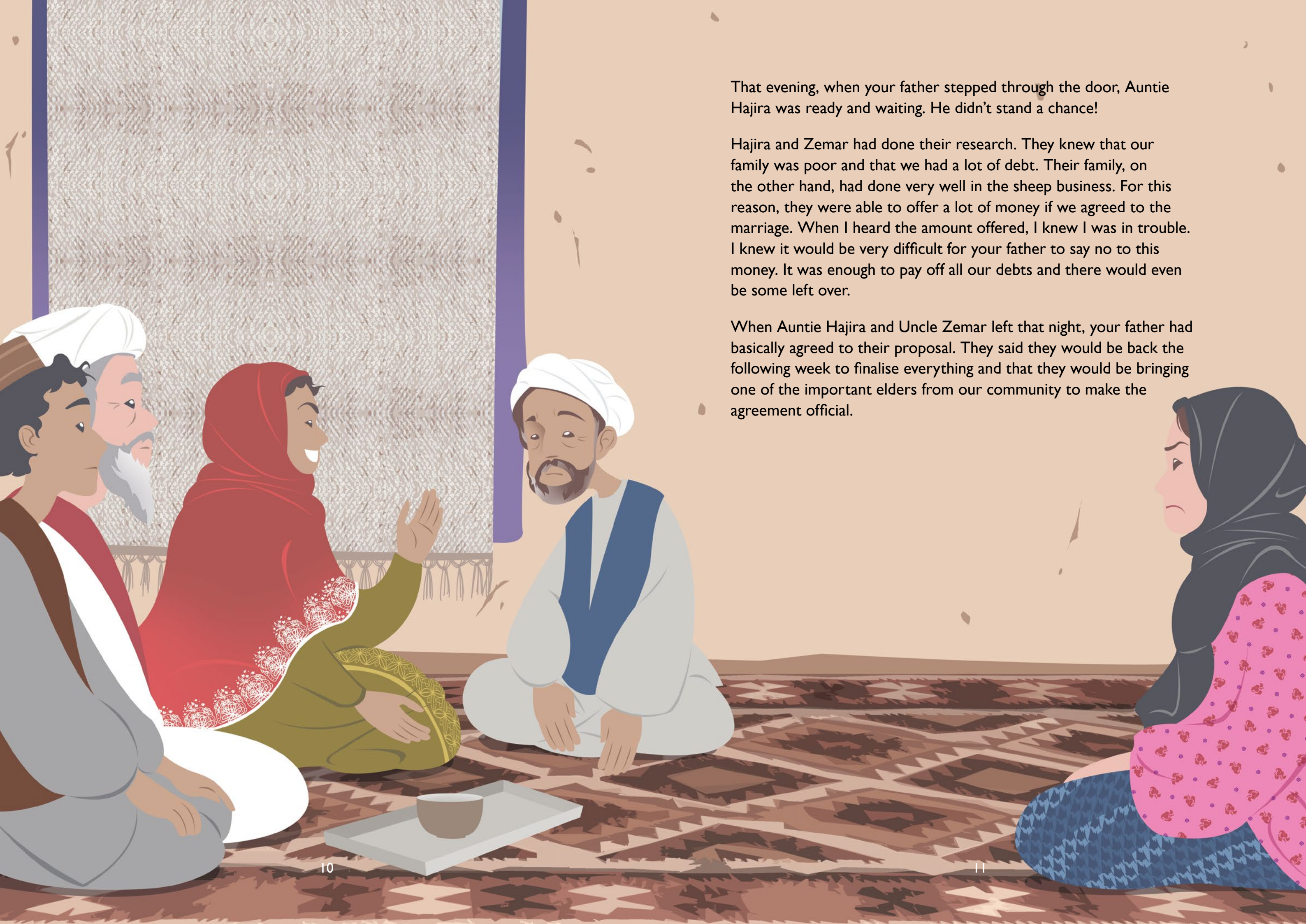
'Time for what?' I asked, confused

'It is time for the girl and my boy to be married,' she announced.

I think she could tell by the shocked look on my face what I thought about this idea. I'm sure that's why she insisted on speaking to your father about this matter.

'We will wait until your husband comes home from his work,' she said.





That evening, when your father stepped through the door, Auntie Hajira was ready and waiting. He didn't stand a chance!

Hajira and Zemar had done their research. They knew that our family was poor and that we had a lot of debt. Their family, on the other hand, had done very well in the sheep business. For this reason, they were able to offer a lot of money if we agreed to the marriage. When I heard the amount offered, I knew I was in trouble. I knew it would be very difficult for your father to say no to this money. It was enough to pay off all our debts and there would even be some left over.

When Auntie Hajira and Uncle Zemar left that night, your father had basically agreed to their proposal. They said they would be back the following week to finalise everything and that they would be bringing one of the important elders from our community to make the agreement official.

That night I couldn't sleep. I was so worried. I could feel Farzanah slipping away from me. I knew when Hajira came with all her money (and this important man from the community) it was going to be very difficult to get your father to change his mind. I felt alone. I knew I needed help, but I had no idea where to find it.

Next day, I remember Farzanah asking me what was wrong. I couldn't tell her the truth. What was I going to say – 'we're sending you off to get married, aged 11'?

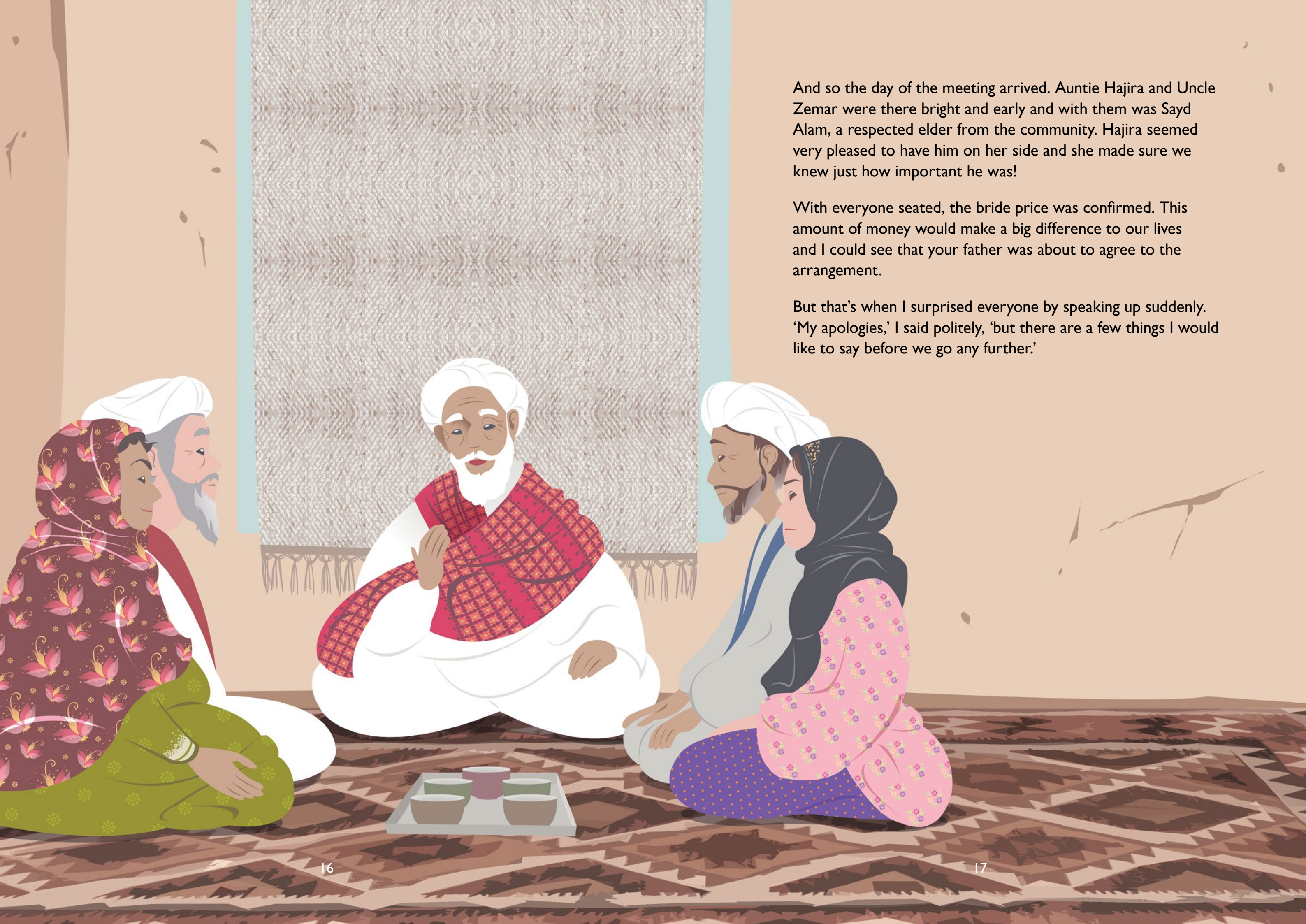
In desperation, I went to see a friend of mine and she told me about something called "a community change group" organised by World Vision. I decided to give it a try. What did I have to lose?





I didn't know what to expect, but the next day I went along to meet the community change group. It turned out to be one of the best things I've ever done. Here was a group of people (just normal people like me) working together to make changes for the better in our community.

I spent the whole day there, talking to people about my situation, and listening to their advice. They had so much information and ideas – so much, in fact, that I went back there the next day and again a few days later. I knew I had to be prepared for everything Hajira and her important guest had to say.



And so the day of the meeting arrived. Auntie Hajira and Uncle Zemar were there bright and early and with them was Sayd Alam, a respected elder from the community. Hajira seemed very pleased to have him on her side and she made sure we knew just how important he was!

With everyone seated, the bride price was confirmed. This amount of money would make a big difference to our lives and I could see that your father was about to agree to the arrangement.

But that's when I surprised everyone by speaking up suddenly. 'My apologies,' I said politely, 'but there are a few things I would like to say before we go any further.'

'I have been speaking to some people, men and women, who know a lot about issues such as this,' I explained. 'And I feel like I have learnt a lot.'

Auntie Hajira sat with her arms folded. 'Tell us what you have learnt?' she said with a smirk.


'Thank you, I will,' I replied. 'The first thing I learnt about is the terrible health risks that face a child bride. At this young age, childbirth is very dangerous for the mother and the baby. In fact, complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among young girls. And then there is the mental health of these young girls to consider. Girls that young are expected to take on the role of grown women – looking after all the needs of their husband, their children, as well as take care of everything in the home. They are not ready for this. It is no wonder that so many young girls consider ending their own lives just to escape this terrible pressure.'

I could see how surprised my husband was to hear this information. Auntie Hajira had also noticed!

'Are you finished?' she asked.

'No, not quite,' I replied.





‘Zemar and Hajira, you have offered a generous bride price which of course would help our family a lot. But it will only really fix a short-term problem. It is important to also look at our family’s financial situation over the long term. Farzanah is doing so well at school. She wants to be a teacher and I believe she can become whatever she wants. If she marries now, her education ends. She will never have a job and the cycle of poverty will continue. But if we give her an education, she has the chance to break out of this cycle of poverty. She can get a good job and give her children a better future as well.’

I then looked at your father. ‘Husband,’ I said. ‘I know we do have debts – but if Farzanah can stay in school, I have some ideas how we can make extra money. Together, we will pay our debts, I promise.’

Hajira was now starting to panic. She could tell that your father was starting to change his mind. It was time for her to call on the authority of Sayd Alam.



Sayd Alam now gave us a long explanation about the importance of tradition. He said it was a long-standing tradition that girls were married when they were young. He also said that we had made an agreement with Hajira 11 years ago and it would be wrong for us to go against this agreement now.

‘Excuse me, Sayd Alam,’ I said. ‘I am sorry to interrupt but the truth is that 11 years ago I agreed to nothing. And, even if I had, I think people should be allowed to change their minds, especially if they have learnt more about something. Just because there has been a long tradition of girls marrying when they are very young, does not make it the right thing to do. It is not what Islam preaches and it is also against the law.’

‘Against the law?’ my husband asked in amazement.

‘Yes,’ I nodded. ‘It is against the law of our country for children to marry under the age of 16.’

It was soon after hearing this that my husband (your dear father) announced that he had changed his mind and that no amount of money would make him agree to this marriage.

I thought Auntie Hajira was going to explode. Your father saw them to the door and we could still hear Hajira shouting and complaining as she went down the street.

So that is the story of how we managed to keep Farzanah. And it is now your bedtime!’



Later, when my brother and sister had gone to bed, I sat alone with my mother. I had told her many times before how much I appreciated what she had done for me. But now I realised there was one question I had never asked her.

'Mother,' I said. 'Why did you fight so hard to prevent this marriage from happening?'

'The reason is simple,' my mother replied. 'When I was 12 years old, the exact same thing happened to me. I was married at an early age. I had no education. I wanted you to have what I could not have.'

'You have given me a beautiful gift,' I told her, as I gave her a hug.

'Keep working hard at school,' she replied with a smile, 'then one day you can give the same gift to your daughter.'





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