



Stories From Around the World

The Beauty of Difference



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An Iranian Tale

Shirin was still a relatively young girl when her parents sent her away from her home in Tehran to live in a big city in England called London.

Shirin did not like the idea of going to live with her cousins in England, but her mother told her, 'It is best, little one. It is no longer safe here and you will have an exciting new life in England and you will make all kinds of new friends.'



Little Shirin wanted to cry because she loved her mother and father very much and she did not want to leave them. Also, she did not know her cousins at all. They had only visited once and Shirin was too little to understand what they were saying because they did not speak Farsi which Shirin thought was very strange indeed.



And so the day arrived and Shirin's mother and father drove her to the airport where she would be escorted onto the plane by her aunty.

'I'm scared,' said Shirin, as her father and mother walked her to the little booth where the man would look at her passport and check her ticket.



‘How can you be scared?’ asked her father. ‘Aren’t you the brave little girl who was never afraid when the bombs could be heard dropping on the city? And aren’t you the girl who always insisted that we take you to school every day even when the other little girls were too afraid and stayed at home with their parents?’

‘That’s different,’ said Shirin. ‘This is my home.’



Shirin's mother knelt down beside the little girl and hugged her and stroked her hair. She said to her daughter: 'I know that you will make us proud, little one.'

And don't you worry, soon your father and I will come to England and you can show us all of the things to see in London. I bet you will be speaking English even better than you do already and you can teach me some new words.'



Shirin liked the idea of teaching her mother new words because Shirin thought that her mother was the cleverest person in the whole wide world.

‘I suppose I could do that,’ said the little girl as her aunty took her hand and explained that it was time to get on to the aeroplane before it flew off without them.



During the long flight to England, little Shirin tried to imagine what her new life would be like. She was determined to do well at school and she told herself that she would make her parents very proud.

‘I can do this,’ she thought. ‘I can do this as easy as picking flowers.’



Then the little girl fell asleep and dreamed of what London would be like.



She dreamed about tall clocks and wide rivers, she pictured: old men in bowler hats, ladies with umbrellas, bright red busses and the big house where the Queen lived with all of her guards in their tall fuzzy hats and long boots.



But when she arrived at the airport in London it was not quite as she had imagined at all. The sky was a horrible grey colour and it was windy and raining.



Shirin wished that she had not decided to wear her sandals because her toes were very cold. And worst of all ... Worst of all was the feeling that everybody was looking at her as if she was an alien with a big head and three eyes.



Shirin noticed with surprise that she was the only one wearing a chador. A girl standing close by pointed and laughed and asked her mummy: 'Why is she wearing a big cloth wrapped around her like that?'

The mother pulled the little girl away and told her that it was rude to point. Shirin wanted to tell the little girl that it was not a big cloth, it was a chador, and in Tehran many of the girls and their mothers and grandmothers wore a chador because it was a part of their culture.



Of course, Shirin wanted to take her chador off because she did not like being stared at in such a way, and she wished that she was back in Tehran where it was sunny and her toes would be warm once more.

‘Let’s get you home,’ said her aunty as she hurried the young little girl into a big black taxi with an orange light on its roof.



Shirin thought that the taxi driver sounded very funny. Not at all like her English teacher Mr Rahimi. He said things like ‘Blimey’ and ‘alright love, where to?’ Little Shirin did not understand these words, but luckily her aunty seemed to understand and they were soon whizzing through the city towards her new home.



Shirin wanted to ask her aunty why she did not wear a chador in England even though she always wore one when she visited her mother in Tehran. 'She must be in disguise,' thought the young girl. But Shirin also remembered that her mother had always told her it was no use trying to hide your true self from others, so Shirin wondered why her aunty chose to be in disguise when in England.



London turned out to be a very strange place indeed. It rained every day for the first week and Shirin didn't think much of British summertime at all. She had trouble understanding what people were saying even though she was told that her English was very good. And it turned out that not just anybody could go and say hello to the Queen in her big house even though there must have been a hundred rooms in which to welcome visitors and have tea.

The young girl was very disappointed in her new home and she missed her mother and father and her friends.



Even the food was different: it was grey like the weather and seemed to come out of boxes from the freezer, not like her mother's loobia polo with saffron, or crispy tah-deeg which was colourful and delicious to eat.



When the day arrived for Shirin to go to her new school, she was very nervous and tried to convince her aunty that she was too sick to get out of bed.

'I don't want to go,' she protested. 'I don't know anybody and people keep staring at me!'

'There are lots of girls at school who wear a chador just like you, little one,' said her aunty. 'I am sure you will make lots of friends today, you just wait and see.'



But it did not go that way at all, not at first. There were indeed other girls who wore a chador, but they were all older than Shirin and they refused to speak to her.



The girls in her own class pointed and laughed. They all had light brown hair or blonde hair and blue eyes, and they did not want to make friends with the new girl because she was different from them and had dark skin and dark eyes and wore a chador. It didn't feel good to be so different from others and Shirin wished once more that she was back home with her mother.



It was during lunch break, as she was sitting in the corner of the playground planning her big escape back to Tehran, that a young boy approached little Shirin.

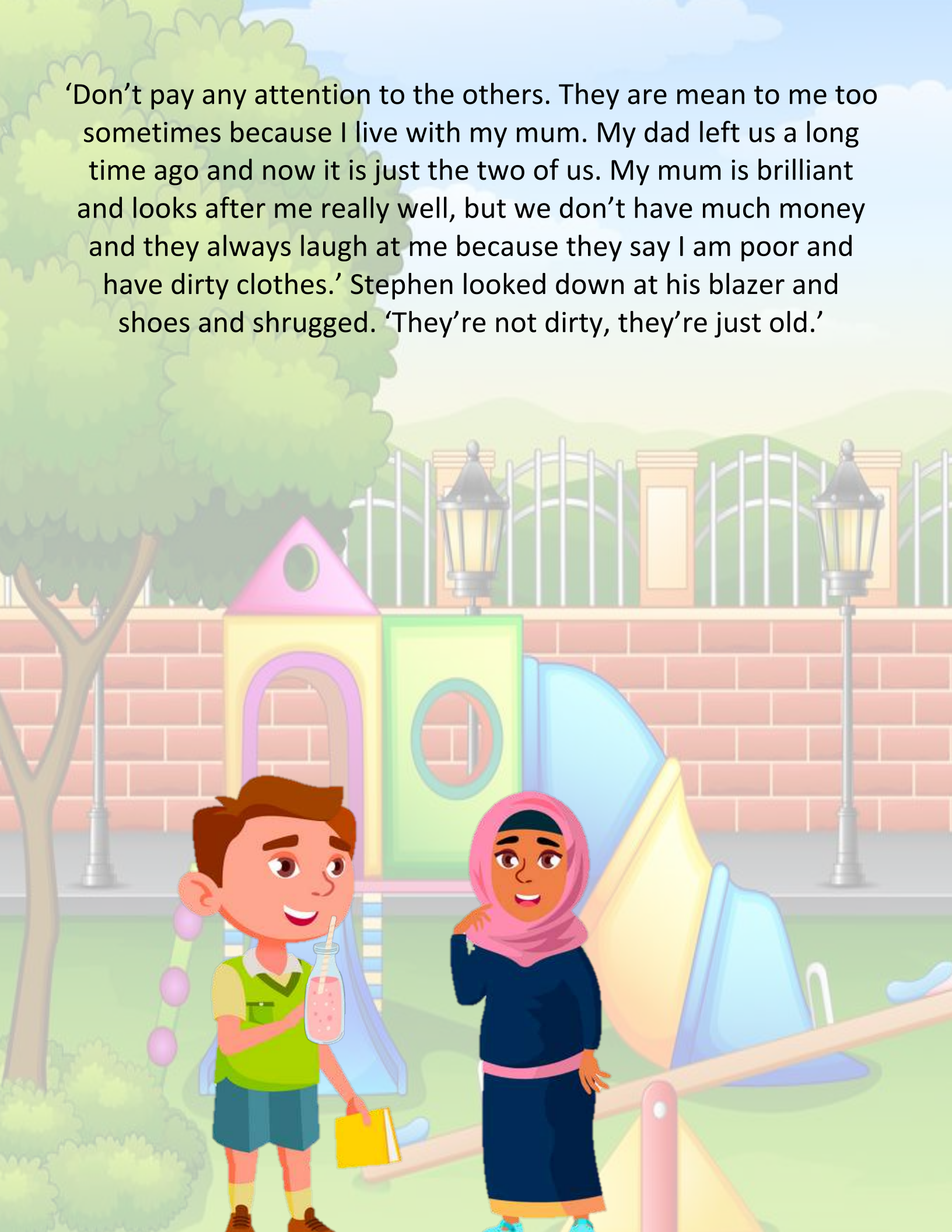
‘My name is Stephen,’ said the boy. ‘Would you like to share some of my milkshake with me?’

And with that, the young boy offered Shirin his strawberry milkshake with a straw in the top.

Shirin thought that the milkshake tasted amazing and had to stop herself from drinking it all up.



‘Don’t pay any attention to the others. They are mean to me too sometimes because I live with my mum. My dad left us a long time ago and now it is just the two of us. My mum is brilliant and looks after me really well, but we don’t have much money and they always laugh at me because they say I am poor and have dirty clothes.’ Stephen looked down at his blazer and shoes and shrugged. ‘They’re not dirty, they’re just old.’



The young boy suddenly broke into a big smile. 'They are silly anyway. What do they know!'

Shirin laughed because Stephen had a lovely smile and he also had a big strawberry moustache from pulling out the straw of his milkshake and drinking straight from the bottle, all down in one with a glug, glugging sound.

The young girl had to admit that she had never let other peoples' opinions bother her before, so why should she start now?

'You're right,' she said. 'What do they know anyway!'



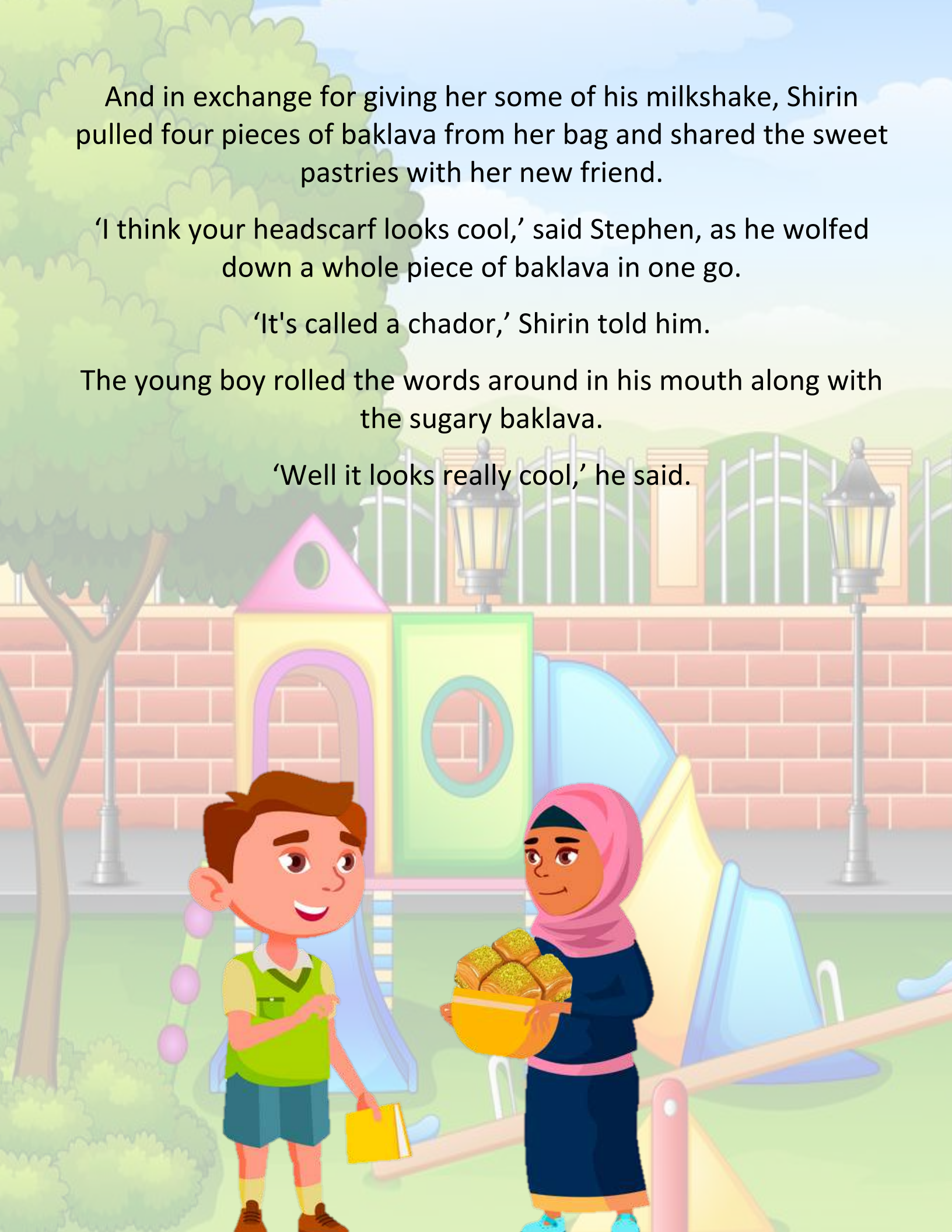
And in exchange for giving her some of his milkshake, Shirin pulled four pieces of baklava from her bag and shared the sweet pastries with her new friend.

‘I think your headscarf looks cool,’ said Stephen, as he wolfed down a whole piece of baklava in one go.

‘It's called a chador,’ Shirin told him.

The young boy rolled the words around in his mouth along with the sugary baklava.

‘Well it looks really cool,’ he said.



Suddenly Stephen pulled out a scarf and wrapped it around his head so that he too was wearing a kind of chador. Shirin had to laugh again as the boy looked very funny indeed. She imagined that her mother and father would like Stephen very much because he was a strong person and always looked on the bright side of life which Shirin's mother said was very important for people to do.



Soon the two were lost in games of make-believe and adventure, running about in the corner of the playground, chasing each other all over the place. They exchanged stories and Shirin told Stephen all about life in Tehran, and Stephen told Shirin about all of the cool things you could do in London, like play in the big park or go to the zoo or the cinema.



There was even a huge wheel that you could ride in.

‘They built it right on the edge of the River Thames. It’s massive!’
he exclaimed as he made a big circle in the air with his arms.

Well it was not too long before the other children noticed how much fun Shirin and Stephen were having, and very soon they began to gather round and join in with the games and the stories.



Before the bell rang to call the children back to class, there was a big group of children all gathered around listening to Shirin tell stories about her life in Tehran; about how she had hidden under her bed when she heard the bombs dropping from the sky at night, or about how she would visit her crazy uncle who lived in a big house on the beach which she went to for holidays.



The children were amazed to hear such stories and could not help asking lots of questions which Shirin was happy to answer.

In turn, Shirin asked about England and why it was so cold even though it was summertime, and why the Queen didn't like visitors. This made the children laugh.



In the end, a teacher had to come out into the playground and call the children back to class because they had not even noticed the bell ringing because they were having so much fun.



On her way across the playground, Shirin felt a great rush of gratitude towards Stephen because he had shown her something very important.

‘It is okay to be different,’ she told herself, ‘in fact, it is really quite beautiful.’ And with this thought held firmly in her head, little Shirin was determined to make a new life for herself in England and make her parents very proud. ‘Who knows,’ she thought, ‘perhaps when my mother and father get here they will know how I can get to meet the Queen.’





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