

### *A party in Ramadan*

Leena twirled around in front of the kitchen table, breathless and excited as her mother pulled out an invitation from the large envelope. “Mom, Julia is going to have a pony at the party, and we get to ride it!” Flecks of confetti fluttered out of the envelope onto the table. “I never rode a pony before.”

Leena stopped twirling when she saw her mother’s expression change. “What’s wrong, Mom?” she asked.

“Leena,” Mrs. Ahmad said gently, “Julia’s party is next Friday during spring break. This year, it will be the first Friday in Ramadan.”

“Ramadan?” Leena looked into her mother’s eyes. “I’m going to fast that day,” she said. “But I can’t miss the party!”

Her mother was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “Leena, I know the party means a lot to you. Do you want to fast on a different day? That would be okay. You are still too young to fast every day.”

“But Auntie Sana’s coming on Friday. We are all going to have *iftar* dinner together after we break the fast. I don’t want to give up fasting that day.”

Leena walked over to her mom. “The party’s in the afternoon. Can I just go and not eat or drink anything? I’ll be home before *iftar* time.”

Her mother hesitated, then nodded.

“Yea! Thanks, Mom!” Leena hugged her mother and then started twirling again.

The day of the pony party finally arrived. In the entryway of Julia’s house, Leena and her mother introduced themselves to Julia’s mother, Mrs. Bernard. Leena’s mother explained that, because Leena was fasting, she would not be eating with the other girls.

“Oh, but we’re not having a meal,” Mrs. Bernard said. “We’re just having cake and punch.”

“She can’t eat or drink anything at all during the fast,” said Leena’s mother, “not even water.”

“Not even water?” asked Mrs. Bernard. Her voice seemed very loud to Leena, who was embarrassed to think her friends might hear.

Julia and some of her party guests came to see who had arrived. “It’s Leena!” they cried. Julia, Amy, and Cindy ran and gave Leena a hug. “Come and see the pony!”

Gratefully, Leena gave her mom a quick hug and headed down the hallway with her friends.

Streamers and balloons decorated the kitchen. On the table, surrounded by pony plates and cups, was a large cake with chocolate icing. Through the kitchen window, Leena saw the pony. She and her friends ran out the door to join the others, who were waiting for their turn to ride.

When Leena’s turn came, she sat high in the saddle and imagined she was a princess. She gently stroked the pony’s neck, running her hand over his shiny, soft skin.

After the pony rides, the girls played tag and laughed and chatted with each other in the warm sunshine. Racing around made them thirsty, and Leena’s classmates decided to have some lemonade. Then Leena remembered that she was fasting. She didn’t care about missing the lemonade. She was having a lot of fun at the party. It was easy to be here and fast at the same time. Her mom had been worried for nothing.

While the girls were having lemonade, Leena decided to swing. She pumped her legs and sailed high in the air. She closed her eyes and imagined she was flying as wind rushed across her, lifting the edges of her *hijab*.

As the swing slowed down, Leena realized she was thirsty. Cold lemonade began to sound good. Leena thought about how refreshingly tart and sweet lemonade tasted, and how she liked to let ice cubes from the drink melt in her mouth. She decided to ask Mom for lemonade at *iftar* time.

After playing tag and swinging so high, Leena was also starting to feel tired. All the girls were going into the house. Leena gladly got off the swing and joined them. The cool air inside felt good.

Mrs. Bernard called the girls to the kitchen for cake. Amy stood by Leena’s side. “I’ll stay with you. I’m not hungry anyway.”

Leena smiled at her friend. “Thanks, Amy, but I’m fine. Go and eat, and then we’ll sit together. Don’t miss the chocolate cake.”

Amy paused. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Leena. But Leena was not so sure. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

While the other girls were eating, Leena walked into another room. She sat down on the edge of a couch. Her stomach growled, and there was a big emptiness in it. Her head was starting to hurt. She felt tired. *Why did God have to make it so hard?* she wondered. *And why did I have to run so much in the hot sun?*

The back of her throat felt dry. Leena longed for a simple sip of water. Being at the party was not fun anymore. She just wanted to go home. Would five o'clock ever come?

Leena lay her head against the armrest. She slipped off her shoes, drew her legs up beside her, and closed her eyes. Soon she was asleep. Leena barely realized when her mom arrived, helped her into the car, and drove her home. When Leena opened her eyes, she was on her own couch in her family room at home. She heard Auntie Sana's voice in the kitchen and her mother's laughter. Light from the kitchen spilled into the family room. She smelled the aroma of baking bread and dinner cooking on the stove.

Leena's father sat down beside her as she sat up and blinked to clear the sleep from her eyes. "How's my fasting girl?" he asked as he hugged her.

She felt safe in his warm embrace. "I'm fine, Daddy. I feel a lot better after sleeping." Leena's head did not hurt anymore, and she was not as tired.

"The first few days of Ramadan are usually the hardest as your body gets used to the new schedule," he said. "I heard you had a rough day. I'm proud of you for hanging in there. It's not easy sometimes. But God knows when you are trying hard to please Him."

"Is it *iftar* time yet?" Leena asked.

"Almost. Would you like to help me open the dates?"

"Sure."

Leena felt even better as she walked into the kitchen with her father. Her mother was stirring food in pots, and Auntie Sana was cutting fruit. They hugged Leena and told her how proud they were of her. The hugs made Leena feel warm and cozy.



The family shared stories as they prepared dinner in the kitchen. Leena's younger sister, Amira, ate dry cereal in the high chair. Leena helped Daddy put dates on a plate and pour water into glasses. Her difficulties at the party seemed as if they had happened a long time ago.

Finally, the time came to break the fast. Leena said the traditional prayer to herself in Arabic as she reached for a date. *God, I fasted for Your sake, and I break my fast with food provided by You. In Your name ...* The sweetness of the date filled her mouth. It was followed by refreshing, cold, clear water.

Then the family spread out sheets in the family room and prayed the *Maghrib* prayer together as they did every night just after sunset. After the prayer, it was time for dinner.

Leena was thankful for everything she ate. The muffins melted in her mouth, the meat was delicious, and even broccoli tasted good.

After finishing her dinner, Leena said, "Please pass the baklava, Mom. And may I have some lemonade with it?"

"I have a surprise for you, Leena," her mother said, pulling a packaged cup from the cabinet. "There is one cup of your favorite chocolate pudding left. I saved it for you. Would you like to have it instead?"

"I sure would!" said Leena. "Thanks, Mom."

"Choca pudding!" yelled Amira as she ran to the table.

"Honey, this is for Leena today," Mrs. Ahmad gently told the toddler. "You can have a cookie."

"Amira, I was fasting today," Leena told her sister. "I didn't get to eat all day."

"Me, too. I was fasting. I didn't eat pudding all day, too," Amira said, looking at her sister.

*I don't have to share today,* Leena thought. *I fasted all day and I should get to eat whatever I want now.* Leena put a spoonful of pudding into her mouth and savored its thick chocolate flavor. She looked into her sister's face. She remembered how she had felt at the party when she really wanted to eat the chocolate icing on Julia's cake and couldn't.

Leena took a second spoonful of pudding. Then she slid the cup in front of her sister. "Here you go, Amira. You can have the rest."

Mom smiled, and Auntie Sana reached over and patted Leena on the shoulder.

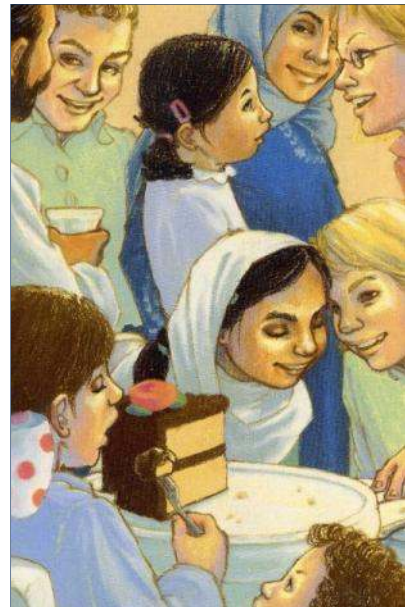
As the family began eating dessert, the doorbell rang. It was Julia and her family and Amy and her mom. They were carrying chocolate cake from the party.

"Hello, Mrs. Ahmad," said Mrs. Bernard. "We thought Leena might like some cake. We saved some for her."

"How kind of you! Please join us for dinner," said Leena's mom, warmly inviting the guests to the table.

Leena ran to greet them and introduced everyone. Her mom brought plates for the guests, and everyone began to talk and eat. Afterward, as the girls ate chocolate cake, their parents sampled baklava and fruit pudding.

Leena thought about how hard the late afternoon had been. She remembered how wonderful dinner had tasted in the evening. Fasting had made her appreciate and feel thankful for her blessings. Fasting also made her want to share what she had. In the warmth of the kitchen, with family and friends, Leena happily finished her piece of cake.



### **Author's Note**

**Ramadan** is the month during which Muslims fast from before dawn until after sunset every day. While fasting, Muslims do not eat or drink anything, even water.

Young Muslim children do not need to fast, but sometimes they practice fasting with their families. Once young people reach the age of puberty, they are supposed to fast if they are physically able to do so. If someone has a health condition, like diabetes, that makes him or her unable to fast, then he or she should not fast.

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