



Ramadan Cake

by Sara Valafar

Art by Katherine Ahmed

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SHIREEN STOOD ON her tippytoes to tie a balloon to the banister rail. “Another green, please.” She struggled to hold back a yawn. “How much longer, Mama?”

Her mom gasped. “You’ll have to wait. I’m almost out of air.”

Shireen giggled. “I meant until sunset.”

“Only ten minutes less than the last time you asked, my darling.”

Shireen tied on the balloon with a sigh. How did her family do this every year? It was so hard to go all day without food or drink. The phone rang. Shireen perked up. It was her friend Amy. “Can I please go to the park with Amy and Maya?” she begged. “They want to show me their new scooters.”

“Better not,” her mom said. “It’s your first day of fasting. You’ll get tired and thirsty running around in the sun. Sorry, sweetie.”

What a treasure, the Spider Family Tree with the Coat of Arms.



For spiders, it oughta be a coat of legs!



Eez nice to know where you’re from, Spider, oui?





Shireen hung up with a pout. Everyone was having fun but her.

“Would you like to help me bake a cake for Babajoon’s birthday?” her mom asked.

Her dad was passing by and overheard. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. It will be too hard for her on an empty stomach.”

Her mom shrugged. “Up to you.”

“It’s not too hard for me,” Shireen decided. She wanted to surprise her grandfather with a cake. A beautiful

cake. A beautiful chocolate cake.

“Remember the pastries we ate in Isfahan last summer?” her dad asked with a dreamy smile. “Baklava filled with pistachios and honey and scented with rose water? He likes those flavors. Or you could make his favorite, *sholeh zard*—rice pudding with saffron.”

Shireen remembered those tasty treats. “But Babajoon will like my chocolate cake,” she insisted. “It will be delicious.”

You bet!



What about your Mayfly family, Sonya?



Babajoon — the nickname for grandfather in the Iranian language Farsi — came from Isfahan — a big city in Iran.



She and her mom set out the ingredients: cocoa powder, sugar, flour, eggs, and butter. Shireen remembered how her mom used to give her a handful of nuts or raisins to snack on while they were baking. Her belly growled. “Why do we have to fast?” she asked. “Why is it so important?”

“When we fast, we’re giving up a meal for someone who doesn’t have one,” her mom said.

Shireen was doubtful. “Are we really?”

“Well, in a way we are, especially when we cook meals to feed other families at the mosque. The most important thing is to know how it feels to be hungry. That’s the first step to compassion.”

Her mom sifted the cocoa and flour. Shireen measured sugar into the mixer and added the butter. She liked watching the mixer whip the separate ingredients into a fluffy yellow paste. She cracked the eggs one by one into the bowl. “Oops! There’s some shell.” She tried scooping it out with a spoon.

Goodness! Our meadow has so many interesting buggies!



¡Si, mi familia es de México! I’m from Mexico!



Et moi, I came over from France as a leetle 'shroom.



Yes, but my mother’s side of the family has been here much longer...



A thought struck like a thunderbolt. “Will I not be able to go to the park for a whole month?”

“We’ll see,” her mom said cheerfully. “Why don’t you invite some of your friends over here? You could play board games or do puzzles.”

“Maybe. But we always offer them a snack,” she pointed out. “Amy loves chickpea cookies.”

“If you explain that you’re fasting for the month of Ramadan, I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“Maybe.”

Her mom added the flour and cocoa powder to the cake batter a little at a time. Soon the batter was ready to pour into pans.

“It’s just so long,” Shireen sighed while her mom slid the cake pans into the oven.

“You don’t have to fast all day,” her brother, Ali, said, passing through the kitchen. “You can do a half-day fast if you want. That’s how I started.”

“Did you fast all day when you were my age?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then I will, too.”

Her brother ruffled her hair. “The first couple of days are the hardest. You get used to it.”

Shireen yawned. She had woken before sunrise for *sahari*, the breakfast meal. She had stuffed herself so full of eggs and bread that she thought she’d never be hungry again. But now her stomach rumbled like a freight train. She lay down on the couch and closed her eyes.



They came over on the Mayflyer. Get it?



Ouch.



Uh... I don't get it.



When she woke up, the cake was cooling on a rack.

“Let’s make frosting!” Shireen said.

Shireen dug out the powdered sugar and grabbed another stick of butter from the fridge. Her mom melted chocolate. Shireen wished she could dip her finger in for a taste. But when she started to frost the cake, she didn’t feel sad anymore. This was Babajoon’s cake now. She wanted to make it beautiful for him. Her mom found sprinkles and tubes of colored frosting. Shireen squeezed out flowers. She scattered rainbow clouds. She wrote *Happy Birthday* in big, flowing letters.

She almost asked her mom how much longer until sunset. But she decided to make a birthday card instead. She spent a long time sketching flowers with her colored pencils because Babajoon loved to garden.

“Time to get ready,” her mom called.



Shireen looked up in surprise.

“Already?”

“Sunset is in less than an hour.”

Well, I’m proud to be part of this long line of Spiders.



¡Arañas Mexicanas por siempre!



Champignons Français!

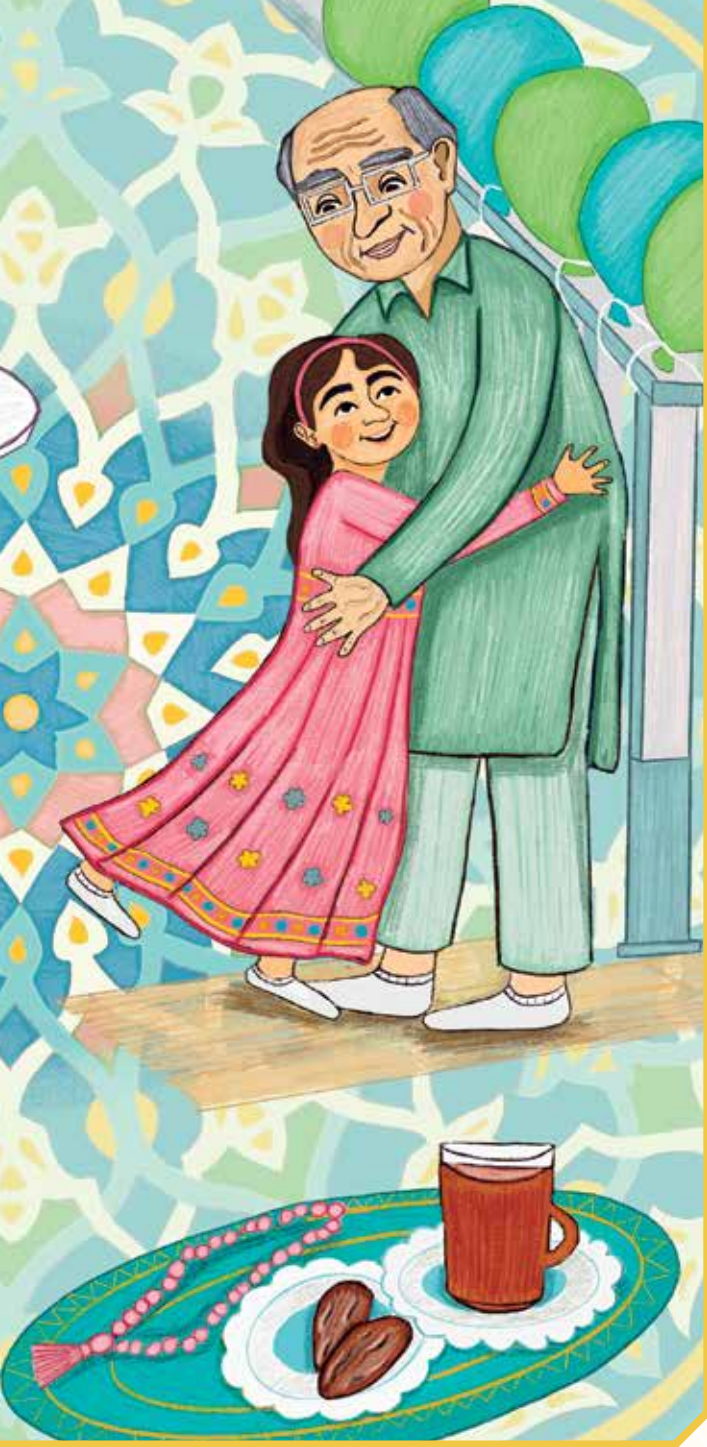


Pill Bug proud!



Hey! What about me?





When Shireen came downstairs in her party dress, she saw that the guests had arrived. “Happy Birthday,”

Why, Thistle dear, you are just my sweet little bug, always.



she called to her grandfather, running up for a hug. “I made a surprise for you.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Babajoon said, folding her in his arms. “This is your first fast, right? I’m so proud of you.”

Her dad checked his watch. “Five minutes,” he reminded everyone.

This year, Shireen received her own cup of tea and a fresh date to break her fast, just like everybody else. The warm tea and sweet, gooey date settled into her empty stomach, easing the hunger pains.

“Are you proud of yourself, *dohktaram*?” her dad whispered. “You did it.”

Shireen nodded, feeling a glow of pride. But best of all was the thought of the surprise waiting for her dear Babajoon. The warm, sweet feeling spread. She couldn’t wait to see her grandfather’s face light up with happiness when he saw the candles shimmering on his beautiful chocolate cake. 🐌

You could almost call her *dohktaram* – my daughter in Farsi.

