

# 1



## The Engagement Party

I opened the closet door and surveyed my casual clothes. “What should I wear to the party?” I groaned with indecisiveness. In an hour I would walk into a gathering of mostly Muslim women.

I had been invited to plenty of these engagement parties and knew what to expect. The women would be wearing their fancy gold jewelry. And lots of it, too. Not just any gold. Gold from the Emirates—Dubai to be exact. Dubai is the gold capital of the world, as I am reminded by my Muslim friends. They all would know if one’s jewelry was not Dubai gold. Nothing else would measure up to that high quality. I thought of my friend Lulu, who loves the finer things and was drawn back to her part of the world, where some of the highest quality gold can be purchased.

I knew, too, that the women would smell like the perfume section of a department store, their various scents drifting through the air. My mind flitted to the time when Safina took me into her bedroom and proudly showed off her collection of

twenty perfumes neatly arranged on a gold, shiny, mirrored tray—all from Dubai, of course. They were lardfree *halal* perfumes, which made them safe to use according to Islamic law. I had to sniff each one and decide which fragrance was my favorite. It was called *Heaven*. Safina then sprayed it on me lavishly.

As I deliberated what to wear, I could picture in my mind's eye the fancy embroidered Arab caftans and gorgeous silk *shalwar kameez* suits the women would be sporting. Sighing quietly, I once again was reminded how plain I was compared to these women. Nothing in my wardrobe was suitable for parties of this nature, and I felt a twinge of apprehension and embarrassment. I do not wear gold jewelry apart from my wedding rings, and I do not wear perfume. "It is amazing I am still invited to their parties," I chuckled to myself.

I thought of my Iranian friend, who smiled at me after I told her I do not dye my hair but wear it "au naturel." "You are free, Joy," she said enviously. "I am not there yet."

Looking over my wardrobe at that moment, I did not feel free. I imagined the women looking me over and whispering to each other, "What a plain-looking woman she is!" I knew their eyebrows would be plucked and formed just right, accentuating their beautiful dark eyes laden with shadow and liner—just like those pictures on couscous boxes. *They know how to highlight their eyes, that's for sure*, I thought to myself.

Then, realizing where my mind had wandered, I spoke firmly to myself. *Enough of this. I am not in a competition. I do not have to prove anything.*

I decided on the well-worn, black and gold, long velvet skirt and long-sleeved top. As I dressed I shored up my courage to drive over to the community hall. I prayed, "Oh, Lord, thank You so much for this wonderful opportunity to represent You before these Muslim women. Please help me to do it well. I

really need You right now because I feel nervous. Help me not to feel alone. You said You would always be with me, and I need You right now. Please direct me to sit or talk with someone You have prepared.”

My dear husband, Ed, gave me a reassuring hug and said comfortingly, “You’ll be just fine, Joy. I will be praying for you.” I felt alone as I walked out the door and got into the car. How I longed for a Christian friend to join me! I wondered if any other women from my culture would be present to alleviate my discomfort or awkwardness.

### A Misfit at Home

Walking into the community hall that Saturday night, I did not expect to hear Christian worship music coming from a room off the entrance. *Hmm, what is that all about?* Sticking my head in the door, I surveyed fifty Christians engaged in a worship service. Did they have any idea that in the next room Muslim women would be having a party? They must have known, I decided, because when I visited the ladies’ room I spotted Christian leaflets on each toilet tank. I knew they did not realize that Muslims consider a bathroom to be an unclean place for holy books and would consider putting those leaflets there a dishonorable act. I combed my hair, took a deep breath and walked into the party room.

It was a fashion show, just as I expected. Approximately two hundred women, lavishly dressed and happily chattering away in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, entered the community hall carrying large pans of fragrant meats and sweet dishes. I knew I was in for a delectable treat of Eastern cuisine. Scanning the room quickly, I realized I was the lone Caucasian woman. I braced myself and asked God to make me stand tall and royal like Queen Esther, whose name my parents had

intentionally chosen for my middle name. As I prayed and viewed all this from the doorway, my nervousness fled and enjoyment rose within me.

The men quickly dropped off their women and scooted away. Once the men were gone and the door closed, some of the women removed their *hijab* head coverings, but others, always cautious and prepared for the unannounced arrival of a man at a party, kept their *hijabs* on. I was not sure what grabbed my attention first: the many colorful balloons or the array of head scarves. I observed brightly colored silk *hijabs*, some with satin ribbon, beaded or embroidered, and the white ones edged with delicate lace. A small group of conservative Muslim women wore their large black cloaks and black head scarves.

Suddenly a hush descended as an Arab woman stepped in front of the large crowd and recited some verses from the Qur'an to invite Allah's blessing upon the auspicious occasion. Then bang! The Arab music began to blast at full volume, and the belly dancing began. *Oh, my goodness!* I thought. *First a recitation from the Qur'an and then belly dancing? How can that be?* But the seemingly contradictory events did not appear to be any problem for the women. One Arab woman, the most talented of them all, began to display her seductive skills. I was intrigued by the way she gyrated her hips without moving the rest of her body. Many of the women, obviously delighted with a night out, tied long scarves around their hips to emphasize the difficult hip movements and joined the lead performer. They belly danced to loud Arab music for hours, seeming never to tire of the action or the racket of happy talking, while children skipped around merrily.

*I really feel at home here among these lovely people,* I mused. I knew I did not really belong, as we were not of the same spirit and faith, yet I felt at home in the sense that I

and they have lived in the East, now share the same Western homeland and have experienced the same passages of womanhood. I was comfortable. *Is this how Jesus felt when He left heaven to live in our world and to identify with us?* I thought. *He went to a lot of parties, too. I wonder what those parties were like for Him. As He identified with another culture, did He remember who He was and where He came from? Did He ever feel confused with His identity or feel like a misfit?* I was sure of one thing: Jesus demonstrated that He was at home in a place far different from His home in heaven and among people who were not like the saints and angels of His heavenly home. He came and made His home among us. He moved in.

*Jesus came and made  
His home among  
us. He moved in.*

### “My Parents Arranged This Marriage”

As I mused on how Jesus might have felt, my eyes caught sight of the bride sitting off to one side on a decorated chair, looking demure and beautiful but unmistakably sad. *Strange that the party is in her honor, I thought, but she does not seem to be receiving much attention.* She looked familiar, and I recalled meeting her a few months earlier.

I had been wandering around a low-income housing complex at dusk trying to find a woman’s apartment and was about to give up when I decided I should knock on someone’s door and ask if they knew where the woman lived. An Afghan woman, judging by her dress, came to the door. In typical Afghan hospitality the stranger invited me inside. She motioned for me to sit on the newly purchased red silk and wool carpet.

“Now we feel at home,” the woman told me as she ran her hand over the intricate pattern of the carpet. “You know, we cannot feel at home until we sit on our carpets.” She served me tea, pistachios and fruit. One by one her children shyly entered the room and politely introduced themselves. The eldest daughter, Sima, was attractive and seemed to be close to marrying age. And now to my surprise, here she was months later, sitting on the bridal chair. Since nobody was paying her much attention, I approached her.

“Remember me?” I asked. She nodded, her eyes looking downward. “Congratulations! You look beautiful. Who are you marrying?”

“Someone in Pakistan,” she replied slowly and sadly.

“Are you happy about it?” I asked, concerned.

“No, but what can I do? My parents arranged this marriage. I have to go live in Pakistan.” My heart went out to her. Fear and apprehension shadowed the bride’s lovely face.

“Will you live with your in-laws or separately, Sima?” I inquired.

“I have to live with my in-laws,” she answered dejectedly. She obviously dreaded what was awaiting her, knowing that a new bride often has to work hard to obey her mother-in-law’s demands. “Pervez told me his mother comes first and I would just have to accept that.” I had no adequate words for this young woman. I simply gave her a hug and continued with some small talk until another woman walked up to us.

### **At Home with Muslims**

I noticed a group of Afghan women who were keeping to themselves. Dressed in extravagantly embroidered, sequined dresses that looked full and heavy, this group of women looked uninvolved in the party. An unmistakable look of

sadness haunted their eyes. Had they lost husbands in the war? Or perhaps their husbands were still missing? I could only guess the trauma that followed them across the ocean, lying unforgotten and unhealed in their memories. Azizeh, one of my Afghan friends, had lost her husband at the hands of the Taliban and for years was unable to sleep soundly at night due to vivid memories of his suffering. I wondered if any of these women had the same struggle.

Slowly I moved closer to them and smiled. “Hi, my name is Joy. You look beautiful.” I had learned a smile is the universal language. When a verbal language cannot be spoken well, a smile communicates many words.

Staring at me in disbelief, their faces suddenly broke out into smiles. I wondered who had last told them they were beautiful. Or perhaps no one had ever told them that before.

Women all over the room watched me as I moved around the room. Their eye communication was a language of its own, which they all seemed to understand. One woman I knew, Khurshid, gave me a slight nod and smile and then came over to say hello. Years before I had given Khurshid the book *I Dared to Call Him Father*, a thrilling true story of a noble Pakistani Muslim woman who had found Jesus as Savior. I had lost touch with Khurshid because she moved to another part of the city two weeks after receiving the book. I got the distinct impression that she wanted to talk with me but something held her back. She left quickly.

*“Where do you think  
my home is?”*

Women whispered to each other. One of them, deciding to check out the lone Caucasian among them, approached me and asked, “What do you do?”

“One of the things I do is help Fatima, over there, with conversational English,” I answered, sweeping my hand to-

ward my English student from Libya who had invited me to the party.

“Are you Canadian?” she pressed further.

“Yes, Canadian and American,” I replied. “Actually, maybe you can tell me where my home is. I was born in Yemen; my early home was in Somalia; I went to elementary school in Ethiopia, high school in Kenya and college in the USA. I met my Canadian husband in college. He brought me to Canada. Then we moved to Pakistan, not too far from the Afghanistan border. After ten years there we moved back to Canada. Where do you think my home is?”

Surprised, she replied, “I guess Yemen. It is where you were born. Are you Muslim?”

“No,” I replied. “I am a Christian. Actually, even though I have lived in many places, I like to say heaven is my real home.”

She smiled at the strange answer. “What were you doing in Pakistan?” she asked in curiosity. “Were you with the embassy?”

“No, we were with the church at a mission hospital,” I answered.

“Oh . . .” Uncertain of what to make of me, a Christian, at a Muslim party for women, her voice trailed off.

“I love Muslims. I enjoy being with you,” I assured her.

Even I was surprised at the strength of my love and affection for Muslim people, many of whom have become my good

friends. We speak different languages and have different customs and religions. Yet I feel at home with Muslims.

But it was not always like that.

*I feel at home with Muslims. But it was not always like that.*