

Khadija and the Elephant Toothpaste Experiment



written by
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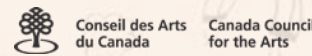
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Khadija drags Amma, Abba, and Omar to her school on a Saturday, after praying Eid salah at the mosque. Today is the big day. The science fair!



“Hey—that’s the dish soap that you use, Abba. Are you a scientist?”
“No, jaan,” he laughs. “I was just doing the dishes.”



There are so many different scientists all wearing safety goggles and lab coats. But why aren't any of the scientists wearing a hijab? she wonders.

"Look, jaan, you can try this one," Amma says.

Uncertain, Khadija asks, "Can I do the elephant toothpaste experiment at home?"

"Of course!" the scientist says. "Ask your parents to help and just follow the instructions, like a recipe."



All morning, Khadija imagines what will happen when she tries the experiment. Will there be a pop or a fizz? Will the mixture change color? But when they get home, Amma says, “We’ll do it later. Everyone’s coming for dinner, remember?”

Khadija hadn’t forgotten. Her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins were all coming to celebrate Eid. But Khadija had already cleaned her room *three times*. She couldn’t wait to make her own mixture change color like magic.

While Amma simmers spices in ghee, Khadija finds yeast in a high kitchen cupboard, right next to the food coloring.

While Abba sets the dinner table, Khadija picks out a mug. It’s big, like the bottle the scientist used, and Amma’s favorite.



Just like the scientist at the fair, Khadija mixes all her ingredients in the mug and adds the dye last. Then she peers over the rim and waits.

But nothing happens.

What went wrong? Khadija wonders. She is about to add more soap to the gloopy mixture when the foam finally begins to rise.



“It worked!” yells Khadija.

The foam bubbles up until it fills the entire mug. It fizzes and froths, spilling over the rim, and it doesn’t stop. Bright foam oozes across the counter and onto the floor.

And the foam keeps coming! “Oh no!”

“Khadija, what’s going on?”

Khadija freezes.





Amma stops in the doorway. “Is that my mug?”

“Jaan! What have you done?” Abba says.

Khadija’s excitement disappears. “I was trying to be like the scientists at the fair.”

Amma picks up her mug, now covered in the bright pink slop, and sighs, “Let’s clean this up.”

Khadija, Amma, and Abba scrub the floors and the counters and the inside of the sink, erasing every trace of the elephant toothpaste. Maybe, Khadija thinks, I’m not meant to be a scientist after all.



Once the bathroom is spotless, they head downstairs for chai and samosas.
“Amma, Abba, I’m so sorry. I just...I wanted to see if I could be a scientist.”

“Well of course you can, jaan, but doing experiments at home alone can be dangerous,” Amma says.

“And messy too,” says Abba. “Why did you do it without us, jaan?”

“I didn’t know if I could be like the scientists we saw today,” Khadija says.

Abba frowns. “Why not?”

But Khadija doesn’t know what to say.



“Khadija?” Amma asks, holding out her arms. Khadija climbs into Amma’s lap, the way little Omar does.

“None of the scientists wore a hijab, like you. What if I want to be a scientist who wears a hijab?” Khadija whispers.

Amma hugs Khadija tighter, and Abba says, “Khadija, anyone can be a scientist. Scientists can wear a hijab like Amma, or glasses like me.”

Khadija looks up at her parents. “Really?”

“Of course, jaan,” Amma says, smiling softly. “And that means you can, too. But do you know what all scientists have in common?”

Khadija shakes her head.

“Curiosity and patience. Scientists ask questions to help us better understand the world.” Amma gives Khadija a gentle squeeze. “Now, go get ready for dinner. Our guests will be here soon.”



The doorbell rings as Khadija spots a beautifully wrapped Eid gift on her bed. Opening the box, she squeals with delight.

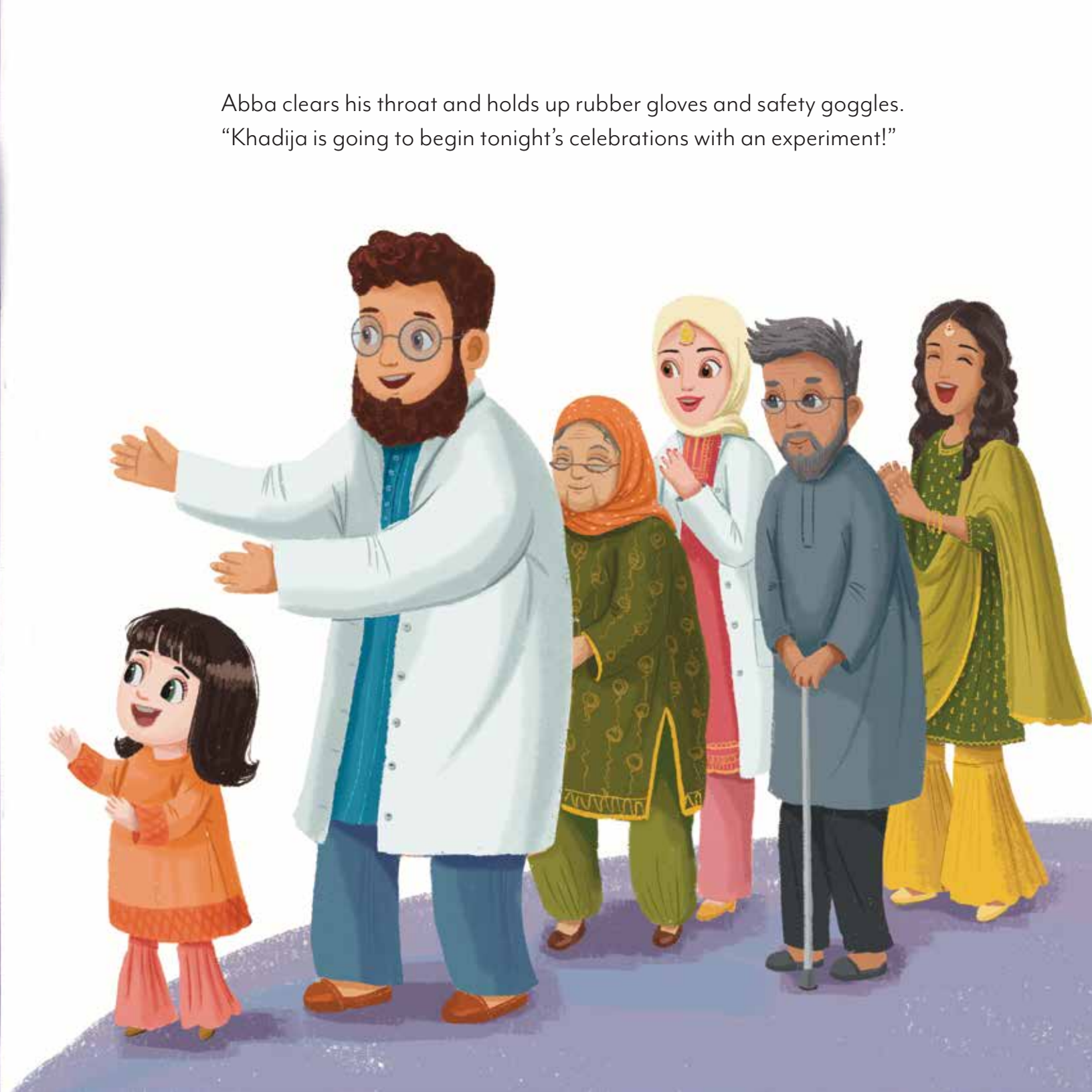


Downstairs, Amma's aloo biryani simmers on the stove, and the smell makes Khadija's stomach grumble. She hurries to join her family.



“Salaam everyone, and Eid Mubarak!” says Khadija.
“When I grow up, I’m going to be a scientist!”

Abba clears his throat and holds up rubber gloves and safety goggles.
“Khadija is going to begin tonight’s celebrations with an experiment!”



With Amma and Abba's help, Khadija mixes the ingredients together. For the last step, she pours in warm water and runs back to her family.

Khadija counts, 1, 2, 3—the elephant toothpaste erupts, this time pink, squirting in all directions! The foam lands on Khadija's face, Abba's hands, and even Amma's hijab.

Her cousins jump and cheer, and her aunts and uncles clap. Khadija gets a round of high-fives from everyone, and a hug from Naani.



The biggest hug comes from Abba and Amma.

“I’m really sorry about your mug, Amma. I didn’t mean to ruin it.”

Amma smiles proudly. “It’s okay, jaan. Now, every time I use my favorite mug, I’ll think of my little scientist!”



Hajer Nakua is a neuroscience researcher currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Toronto. She is passionate about using social media platforms to share research with a diverse audience and working with committees to improve the career trajectories of PhD students. Hajer lives in Mississauga, Canada.

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Everyone can see themselves in science!

Khadija is inspired by her visit to the science fair. There are so many different scientists all wearing safety goggles and lab coats! But how come none of them are wearing a hijab?

After watching a scientist carry out the elephant toothpaste experiment, Khadija attempts to recreate it at home with mixed (and messy!) results. Surrounded by her family as they celebrate Eid, Khadija tries again....

“Salaam everyone, and Eid Mubarak!” she cries. “When I grow up, I’m going to be a scientist!”

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