

Skits

Come On, Fatima! Six Vignettes about Refugees and Sponsors

These vignettes are based on a United Church handout which outlined a number of different uncomfortable interactions that refugees (anonymously) reported having had with their sponsors. They are not based on any particular person or congregation. Names have been pulled out of the air.

The actors sit/stand facing the audience side by side. (Bracketed dialogue is done with speakers back-to-back or turned away from each other.)

Come On, Fatima!

Sometimes in our enthusiasm to help newcomers 'get into' our community and our lifestyle we don't stop to think about why they might be reluctant. We often put their unwillingness to join us in our activities down to cultural differences—which might very well be the reason. Or, it might not....

Jane: Hello, Fatima, this is Jane. We're going swimming and we wondered if you'd like to come.

Fatima: *(Oh, no - not swimming again! Why does she keep asking me?)*

Jane: It's such a lovely day—great for working on a tan! The fresh air and exercise will be good for us. Will you come?

Fatima: I'm not sure. I haven't been swimming since I was a teenager. I don't think I can put on a swimsuit.

Jane: Oh, Fatima! This is Canada! Of course you can put on a swimsuit! Everybody does! *(What is the matter with her? Doesn't she realize this is a good way to get used to life in Canada? She always has a reason for not coming with us! Is she ever going to be part of the community?)*

Fatima: *(I can't put on a swimsuit! People will see my scars. Every time someone looks at me I'll be back in prison, getting another beating....)* Sorry, Jane. I can't come this time. Maybe another time. *(I hope they don't ask me to go to the beach again!)*

Jane: Well, all right, Fatima. Sorry you aren't coming. I'll call you later. *(Sure is hard getting her to participate in OUR life.)*

Hard to Say "No"

Gift-giving is very important in most cultures and, generally we love to get gifts. Sometimes, though, a gift comes with a price....

Miguel: Hello, Bill, come in.

Bill: Hi, Miguel! Thought I'd just drop by with a little something for you. You know this place could use a little brightening up. We'll just get rid of this dreary old picture and put up this new one. *(Why do they want that ugly thing up, anyway? Just a black and white photo of some town.)* I painted this myself! What do you think?

Miguel: Oh... it's very nice. Very bright colors. You did this all yourself? *(It's not very nice. Looks like a child's work. And our picture is of our home—maybe not so bright—but it's our life.)*

Bill: Yep! I'm a painter in my spare time. I can give you more paintings, too.

Miguel: *(Oh, no! What will Maria say when she sees this? And more...?)* That's nice, Bill, but we can't take so many gifts. Uh...it would not be right.

Bill: Oh, it's no problem! I have tons of them!

Miguel: *(I can understand that! How can I say, "No", without making problems. He'll expect it to be there every time he comes...and what about the rest of the church? Will they expect it also?)* Well, thank you very much, Bill. Just this one, thank you. Maria and I will think of you every time we see it. (Oh, yes!) I am sorry she isn't here now to say thank you.

Bill: *(Some people just have no gratitude. You try to help, but...)* Okay, Miguel. I have to go now, but I'll drop by again. Bye.

The Refugee Committee Meeting

We can't underestimate the importance of coming to an agreement about the main issues of sponsorship—before the people arrive....

Alice: Greetings, everyone. Can we call this meeting to order? Let's begin with a review of our sponsorship of Miroslav and the family. How long is it now?

Ben: Seven months. Time to get Miroslav out to work.

Alice: Well, hang on a minute, Ben. His English still needs a lot of work. If he stops studying now he'll pretty much be condemned to the lowest paying jobs. And he has no idea how to even look for a job in Canada. He'll need training for that, too. If he goes to work now his life will hardly be better than it was in Europe.

Ben: Miroslav has had all the basic ESL classes now. (That should be good enough. Lots of people come here with less help than that—and they make it!) And Dina's working. It's good enough for her.

Alice: *(I wish Ben would understand what they're going through. He just doesn't seem to get it.)* I don't think that's quite fair, Ben. Dina works as a cleaner, when there is work. She hasn't had many hours lately. And you know, she doesn't get much chance to talk when she's at work, so her English isn't benefiting from this job at all.

Ben: *(They've got a better life just being in Canada. We can't handfeed them forever.)* They're safe and they have the chance to work. There are lots of others that need our help. We should be directing our money toward them now.

Alice: Well, we've committed to supporting them for a year. I think they should have some say in what they want to do. Miroslav wants to study more, I think. Then, when he gets a decent job, Dina can quit cleaning and go to classes.

Ben: *(I know that Jim Brown would give him a job on his pig farm.)* I still think they can work and study if they want. If they couldn't I wouldn't push for it. I really feel that we should be looking to help a new family now. We gave Miro & Dina their chance.

Alice: Well, what about the kids. They'll be in school. And there'll be a lot of extras coming up for them. Miro had a good job before they had to run. If he gets a good base in English, he should be able to build a career here, too. And a better life.

Ben: *(She needs to be more realistic!)* You're not convincing me, Alice. I thought that we agreed: one year's support or until they got working, whichever came first. So I think we should help him get to work - starting now.

Alice: *(Ben just doesn't see the importance of education. This is not going to be fixed tonight ...)* I don't think we can resolve our differences tonight, Ben. Why don't we all think it over and meet again next week to discuss your ideas further?

Miroslav and Dina's Point of View:

Miroslav: You are late tonight, Dina. How was your day?

Dina: Oh, Miro, I am so tired tonight. We had to clean a house so dirty pigs would not live in it! And the smell! It was terrible!

Miroslav: I feel so bad that you must do this work. As soon as I get a good job you can stop cleaning and stay at home with the children.

Dina: Oh, Miro—I don't know if I want to stay at home. That is lonely, too. And I want to study English, too. It is too bad we both couldn't study together. It's your turn now. And if you study hard then you can get a real job, like back home. Not like me.

Miroslav: But I always have worked for the family. I should be working now—any job!

Dina: No, Miro! We agreed! For one year you study, you get good enough English. Then you get a good job. With the church money and my work we can get by for a while.

Miroslav: Tonight we are tired. We don't argue. Okay? Make us a coffee, eh?

The Shopping Trip

In our enthusiasm to teach refugees how to get ahead in Canada we can sometimes come across as a juggernaut...

Mary: Good morning, Imani. Ready to go? They've got a lot of specials on at the market today. We should be able to get some good deals.

Imani: *(Slow, soft, dignified)* Good morning, Mary. How are you doing today? I am glad to see you well. I am ready.

Mary: Good. It's probably going to be busy so I'd like to get there before the crowds. Have you made a list?

Imani: Yes, but I can change it if there is something better. I am used to doing that!

Mary: Mmm. Well, here's this week's allowance. Let's begin.

Imani: Some cereal, some pop tarts...

Mary: *(She's buying junk!)* Oh, Imani! Pop tarts? Sugared cereal? I think we can do better than that! Let's look over here at these generic brands -they're a good deal-and some healthy cereals. Let's just put these back...

Imani: *(Oh, no! Is she going to direct all my purchases? I can't get my son to eat so many things. At least he likes this cereal and pop tarts.)* But, Mary, my son does not like that cereal and he won't eat. I worry about him.

Later...

Mary: Well, Imani, I guess that's it for now. Let's get to the checkout. Oh... you're buying cigarettes.

Imani: *(My husband has smoked a long time. In our country almost everyone smokes. No one has said it is bad for us. And it is so hard to stop, especially now when we feel so much stress...)* Just one pack, please, for Oliver. It is hard for him without a cigarette.

Mary: *(There is so much Imani needs to know about smart shopping and healthy living! I could teach her if she'd just give me a chance! And the money'd go farther, too!)* Well, I guess that's okay. Is he trying to quit?

Imani: *(No, but I cannot tell her. She doesn't seem to understand how hard it is to get used to this country. And she seems to expect us to change so fast. And I am used to finding food in hard times! I know she's trying to help but right now I only feel more stress.)* Yes, Mary, he is trying.

The Interview

How many times have we jumped in to speak for someone who has difficulty with English?

Art: *(Loudly and slowly)* Good morning, Maung! Ready to go job-hunting?

Maung: Good morning, Art. Yes, I am ready.

Art: Now you understand that you can't work in engineering here, right? At least not until you can speak good English, right?

Maung: *(All right, I am not deaf. even though I speak slowly. English is a difficult language—so different from my language. And the loud voices seem to make me tired...)* Yes, Art, I understand that. I will work any place.

Art: Good! We're next for the in-ter-view.

Official: Good morning, how can I help you?

Art: This is Maung. He's a refugee that my church brought and he's ready to go to work now.

Official: Hello, Maung. Tell me about your skills and experience.

Art: His English isn't too good so I'll just fill you in. Back home he was an engineer in the oil business but I guess that's out of the question here.

Official: Has he any work experience in Canada?

Maung: *(Why are they talking as if I am not here? Am I invisible? Do they think I am stupid? Can I not speak for myself? I know my English is slow but I am sure that I can explain to this official.)*

Art: Not yet...

"We are so grateful, but...:" Things Refugees Might Not like to Say

I'm homesick. Everybody is so kind, but it's terribly hard to have to speak English all the time. I have family back home; I miss them and I'm worried about them. The food here is very good but I'd give anything for the taste and smell of the food I'm used to.

I'm embarrassed. The people brought us a great big pile of clothes they had been given and said we were to take them. Some were okay, but we felt like beggars. The other night somebody left a bag full of old shoes on our doorstep. Today a woman brought me a dress. She said it was brand new, and I could see that it was, but it was ugly and old-fashioned. I look terrible in it, but clearly she expects me to wear it.

I'm confused. These people are Christians, and I don't know whether they expect us to become Christians too. We have our own faith. I don't know whether there is a faith community within reach. I think there must be one in the city, but how could we find out? And we haven't a car. Somebody takes us shopping, but how can we ask for a big favor like a drive to Toronto?

We're Catholic. In our country, Catholics and Protestants don't get along. Will these Protestants be offended if we ask to go to the Catholic church?

We've never been interested in religion. Do we have to go to church?

Our religion forbids alcohol. If we go to somebody's home for a party, will we be expected to drink alcohol?

I'm worried. We don't want to start a family until things are more settled, but I don't know how to get birth control. All the doctors here seem to be men, and in our culture, a woman doesn't talk to a man about something like that.

The church gives us a weekly allowance, and we spend some of it on cigarettes. We've always smoked, nobody in our country ever said it was harmful, and it's hard to stop, especially now because we still feel very stressed. But the gentleman who hands us our cheque makes little jokes every time about "Now you mustn't spend this on cigarettes." One of the ladies who takes us shopping says the foods I buy aren't healthy. Sometimes she takes things out of my cart and puts them back on the shelf.

We bought a radio. We're paying for it on time. It was expensive but it gets a program in our language. We heard somebody at the church saying that if we could buy luxuries like that we were getting too much money; we should be cut back.

I'm lonely. Everybody does things for us, but we need to be useful. Everybody needs to be needed. I need a job, if it's only babysitting or housecleaning! Even a volunteer job would be good; it would give me something to do, put me in touch with more people, let me practice my English, and it would go on my resume.

Back home I was an engineer—but languages aren't my thing. Learning English is tough and tiring. I can only speak slowly. Some people shout at me as if I were deaf. Others talk about us in front of me as if I weren't there. I can understand even when I can't reply. I'm not deaf and I'm not stupid.

The new home is wonderful; but the stove doesn't work very well. We don't like to say anything because everybody has been so kind. We put some of the crockery away because we just didn't like the design. A lady said "Oh, where are the mugs I donated?"

A man brought a painting he'd done and, without asking us, took one of our pictures down and hung it in our living room. My wife cried, but we don't like to take it down in case we offend people in the church.

A nice family have asked us to go swimming. I have scars from ill-treatment in prison; I don't want anybody to see me in a swimsuit. We keep saying "Maybe another time," and "Later," and "Thank you very much," but they keep offering.