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## I'm not happy but I'm not unhappy about it

by Lesley Dawson

Raeda woke early feeling good. She was looking forward to today as the last day of university before the Easter Holidays. She showered and dressed quickly and ran down the stairs to help her mother with breakfast for the rest of the family. As they were putting out the pitta bread and arranging the plates with salads, za'ater and yogurt her mother whispered in her ear. At first, she did not understand what was said until the message was repeated "Come home as soon as classes end today, your father and I have something to discuss with you". Her heart almost stopped as she began to take in the significance of those words.

She had been expecting this since her seventeenth birthday. The family had decided that she must get married and they had shortlisted prospective grooms for her choice. Choice, she thought what choice? Between three gangling, pimply youths from her father's side of the family. She had met all of them at family celebrations and was not impressed with any of them.

Walking to the bus stop she day-dreamed about the handsome boy who sat next to her in anatomy class. His name was Jad and he was from the north. His smile always made her heart beat faster and the times they sat together on the wall outside the cafeteria and talked were the best times in the day. He was so handsome with his glossy black hair curling over his collar and his twinkling brown eyes. Why couldn't she marry someone like him? She knew of course why not. He was a Muslim and her family were Christian. Friends had already warned her about her friendship with Jad, how dangerous it was. What her father and uncles would do to him if they felt he had dishonoured her in any way. They were very keen on family honour.

How she got through the rest of the day she did not know. She was unusually quiet in class and she saw the puzzled frowns exchanged between her friends and the disappointment on Jad's face when she went off with the rest of the girls at lunch time instead of sitting with him. Eventually the last bell of the day rang to announce home time and there was a mad scramble among the Jerusalemites to catch the bus. If they missed this bus the next one was full of workers heading home and the time spent crossing the checkpoint was twice as long. Raeda was in no hurry to get home so she dawdled along the road until one of her neighbours passed by and offered her a lift home. There was no way she could refuse as it was probably all round the village that her father had plans for her betrothal.

Once her mother had shoed the boys out to play football and made Raeda and her father cups of mint tea they sat down at the kitchen table to look at photos of the possible grooms. Raeda knew that she had to choose one of these cousins as she had already turned down one boy and the resulting quarrel had affected all the family. The list included a boy who was a post-grad studying management at her university She had seen him playing the fool on the basketball court to attract attention from all the girls and her lip curled at the thought of him as a husband.

The second photo was of a man who was deputy manager of a local restaurant and the third was a tour guide at the Church of the Nativity. Her parents began extolling the virtues of these men, their financial prospects, their place in society, the pedigrees of their families. Not of which seemed to lift the heavy burden from her. She remained silent while she thought of a way of refusing them all when her father put another photo on the table.

"There is this fellow, Nicola, his father is a second cousin of mine. They are living in Kuwait and he is studying medicine there" He was quite handsome and the thought of being the wife of a doctor and getting away from this place appealed. "His family want him to be betrothed before he goes off to do an elective in the UK but of course he cant get married until he has graduated. It would mean quite a long betrothal" Bells sounded in her ears as the thought occurred to her that this was an excellent way of putting off the day when she would have to be married.

She could still see Jad at university but would have to protection of a betrothal ring. This was a good idea. She nodded her agreement to her father and both her parents sighed with relief. She didn't hear much else of the conversation but when her mother asked if she was happy she smiled shyly and nodded while inside she said, "I'm not happy but I'm not unhappy about it."