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Betrayal

by Lesley Dawson

Eventually I had to return home for my father's funeral. There was no way that I could be absent, whatever our relationship had been. Despite the fact that he had not once communicated with me since my banishment to Italy, as a dutiful daughter I had to be there. By absenting myself from such an important family gathering I would cut myself off from my whole family and my home town. It would have appeared that I had turned my back on my culture and heritage.

My mother greeted me with tears and kisses, my brothers with some unease, their wives viewing me as some exotic creature of whom they had heard but never seen before. The elders in the village still viewed me with suspicion, a woman tainted by intimacy with Muslims, now a foreigner whose Arabic was hesitant and whose clothes and manner proclaimed me an Italian.

The funeral was typically Arabic Catholic with priests dressed in their best silver and gold costumes and clouds of incense causing much coughing amongst the older people present. I had to remember to make my responses in Arabic like a local and not in Latin. I didn't quite pull it off all the time and was aware of the cold stares of people who saw it as further evidence of my difference.

After all the services, food, visits and walks around the village I became bored with myself and my mothers suggested I might want to walk down the hill to the university to see any old friends still around. I wasn't sure this was a good idea but was persuaded that I could help my mother carry the weekly shop back up the hill from the market along the Hebron Road. When we reached the crossroads, my mother said "Off you go. I will meet you back here in a couple of hours and we can walk back together"

I looked up at the statue of the child Christ atop the main building of the university and wondered if I would see anybody I knew, or if I would be stared at as a foreigner? Would I still see courting couples sitting close to each other in corners or had that been banned? As it happened the only people I saw were Brothers who had taught Cultural Studies and a few Palestinian women teachers who had taught me English. The fact that they saw me as one of their successes helped to raise my self esteem and I found myself talking enthusiastically about life in Italy. I observed that very little had changed at the university and felt that my own education was superior to what was on offer here.

Meeting my mother involved not only carrying shopping but chatting to her friends who had also been to the market. I could see how proud my mother was and how my presence increased her status among her friends and my heart sank as I contemplated leaving her a few days hence. I determined to enjoy the present and somehow survived the time until I travelled to Jericho in order to cross into Jordan to catch my plane for Italy.

Back home – but wait a minute was it really home in Italy? Or was it just another place where I lived. I was still emotionally bruised by all that had happened to me in Bet Jala. Could I recover my sense of balance and be happy in Milan? Could I do what my aunt had done? Could I become an Italian and forget that I had ever been a Palestinian? I tried my best but felt betrayed by my heritage and culture. Would I ever belong somewhere or would I always be a stranger?