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## House to Let

by Lesley Dawson

“I am sorry about this Lesley, but my eldest son is getting married and this flat is needed for him and his wife.”

We had not had a perfect landlord- tenant relationship over the past five years, but this announcement came completely out of the blue. I couldn't think that Ahmed was old enough to get married but he obviously was.

“How long have I got before I have to move put?” I asked

“No problems, Lesley. I have made an arrangement with Abu George and you can move into the downstairs flat where Sue used to live”

This news did not fill me with joy as I remembered Sue's difficulties in separating out her electricity bill from the one for the whole house and how often she felt she was supporting the whole family.

Not committing myself to Abu Ahmed, I decided to ask around about houses and flats to let. Knowing what a mine field this was for foreign women I enlisted the help of my friend Majdi. Not only was he the owner of a local souvenir shop and thus knew everybody in town, but his sister-in-law was Scottish and had made him promise to look after me when they had returned to Edinburgh.

I think we must have looked at every flat to rent in Bethlehem. I was very grateful to have Majdi as my interpreter as most of the conversations were carried on in Arabic and at that time my command of the language was rudimentary. I would sit there listening to brisk conversations until Majdi would say to me, “OK Lesley, let's go.”

Once outside he would relate to me the story, common to all these visits that because I was a foreigner the renters were asking top dollar for rent on the assumption that I earned the same salary as those who worked for the UN.

Eventually I found an excellent three bedroom flat at the bottom of the hill to Bet Jala opposite an olive grove. The owners were aunt and uncle to one of my Palestinian colleagues and had both been educated in Europe. Even then I had to negotiate hard to keep the price down to what I could afford. I could add what it cost me to move out of my old flat in terms of redecorating and cleaning, but that is another story.