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Would you like to share your story with me?

by Lesley Dawson

“Good morning Dr Dawson, can you tell me when Mohammed Nasser will be back with us from Gaza?”

I took a deep breath and tried explain the uncertainties that Mohammed would face in his journey and why this meant I couldn’t give her an actual arrival date.

Even over the phone I could tell that she didn’t believe me. As far as she was concerned he was a typical Middle Eastern student playing the system. She sighed deeply and informed me that she would have to report our conversation with the Head of Research who would place this information on the student’s record.

We agreed that I would send Mohammed to her office as soon as he arrived in Eastbourne and suggested she asked him to share the story of his journey with her.

She sighed again, “very well, I will delay reporting his absence for another week, but after that I must follow the rules.”

A very weary but remarkably cheerful Mohammed arrived in my office three days later and entertained me with his stories of Palestinian, Israeli and Egyptian soldiers at the various borders.

He chuckled and admitted, “whether they spoke to me in Arabic or Hebrew they all said the same things.”

We agreed that we would go together to Registration on the following day. Once past the usual gatekeepers we sat and drank coffee in the Registrar's office and I faded into the background as Mohammed told his story.

"I know that you cannot understand why I couldn't give you a fixed date for my arrival. I left my home in Gaza City on the Sunday so I would avoid being held up by the Jewish and Muslim holy days, because on those days the borders close early that the soldiers can go to pray. When I got to the southern border of Gaza I had to deal with an Israeli checkpoint before I could get to the Egyptian border. I had all my papers in order but that is no guarantee of success if some border official is feeling or angry or upset.

I passed through the Palestinian checkpoint easily that day and the queue at the Israeli checkpoint was not too long. After two hours I was through and able to engage with the Egyptians. There seemed to be a hold up there and I was worried I would have to stay there overnight until I saw a man I had been at university with in Cairo. He waved me through and pointed out a shared taxi looking for one last passenger. I happily climbed in and we set off on the thirteen hour journey down to Cairo"

He glossed over the joys of that journey and explained that once in downtown Cairo he needed to get another taxi to the airport.

"Arriving at the airport I was able to book a ticket on the first plane to Heathrow. Once that was done I only had to wait to board the plane, survive the flight and the journey to Eastbourne and here I am."

I looked at the administrator as she struggled to decide if she was going to believe this story. She was never going to be completely convinced but rumour has it that she has dealt with international students with more understanding since that day.