



There are never really endings, happy or otherwise

by Lesley Dawson

To be chosen as the valedictorian of their graduating year was a great honour and fought over by Honours Students in their final year of studies. To be eligible one had to have the best grades, not only in their cohort, but in the whole university. Between the two girls, the issue was the grade to be given by Dr Yusef, the teacher of the Ethics course. Itimad was a traditional religious Muslim girl from a refugee family in Gaza. This could be seen by her long coat dress and head covering and her scepticism that western ways might have something to teach Palestinian Arabs. She had been surprised when her father had allowed her to travel to Bethlehem to study and lived in fear of him changing his mind and calling her home.

Hanan was a West Banker from Ramallah, a very modern, westernized city where the Palestinian Authority headquarters was based. It was the intellectual centre of Palestine and Hanan had imbibed the modern ideas common among the young people there. Her father had died when she was in kindergarten and she and her mother lived with the family of her elder brother. Despite her brother's control, Hanan was a committed feminist and regularly involved in political demonstrations and discussions.

Dr Yusef was an Orthodox Christian with very traditional views on health and women's place in society. Hanan had already argued with him on the topic of arranged marriages and was told she asked too many questions and perhaps should be more willing to listen to someone who was older and knew more about the world. She was concerned that, because of this, he would mark her down on classroom participation, and whilst keen to obtain the best grade, was not willing to sacrifice her principles.

Itimad would never argue with a teacher, even one who was Christian, but started to participate in class discussion when she realized she had said nothing for most of the semester. One of her friends had pointed out that she couldn't be given marks for participation if she never opened her mouth. Speaking in public in front of men was a scary prospect but she found her way in when she began to argue against Hanan's western opinions, that were obviously not approved of by Dr Yusef, who nodded in agreement and smiled briefly at Itimad.

The rest of the class sat back and watched as the two girls fought it out every Tuesday at 11am. The controversy certainly made the class more fun than listening to Dr Yusef droning on as he walked up and down in front of the class without making eye contact with any of them.

Rumours among the student body tipped first one, and then the other, of the two girls all semester. However, when the announcement was made, a student from nursing was given the job. She obviously had participated in the Ethics course but hadn't been too controversial. This had awarded her an Overall Grade Point Average of 4.8 and pipped Itimad and Hannan at the post who had both scored 4.7.

Listening to the winning speech at the Graduation Ceremony they both realized that they were not listening to the words of the girl herself, but her speech had been written for her by the Dean of Students and were grateful that they had not been successful. After all, their education was ending and although they both had to return home, they both had good jobs lined up.