

The House on the Hill

by Lesley Dawson

This house used to be full of laughter and noise. It had been the home of the Kattan family. Ten children had been born here in this village, six girls and four boys, although only five of them survived to adulthood.

Her heart wept when she remembered the fevers, the gunshot wounds and the bombs that had fallen. Her beloved eldest son Samir had been caught in a bomb blast at the factory where he worked. Her beautiful daughter Mariam, newly married and so much in love who had succumbed to the measles. She couldn't bear to think back to the other bad things that had happened. It was too upsetting.

She began to smile, despite herself as she remembered all the children's paintings fastened to the fridge door. Sema had been so talented. Her teacher wanted her to go to the college in the nearby town but how could they afford to pay for that for one child and not for all the others. Sema had swallowed her disappointment and worked in the local market but kept her artistic skills honed by her involvement in the Easter festival each year.

Jorg was the practical one, he could take any piece of machinery apart and put it back together in a better state than it had been before. His skills had kept the old family car on the road for decades longer than it should have been roadworthy. He had been the first one to emigrate to the States. His father-in-law had a cousin who owned a garage in Michigan and was looking for a new partner.

Gradually they had all left, some to the USA, some to South America and some to Australia. At first, they returned to their homeland each summer for a holiday and regularly sent home money that the rest of the family used to improve the house. Indoor bathrooms had been built with showers and western toilets.

Modern kitchen appliances had made her life so much easier and the new car made it up the hill without them having to push halfway up.

The modernized, enlarged house became a prison to Hind and her husband. They rattled around in it like peas in a drum. Then one day when she looked at him, Sami had aged, it seemed in a flash that this had happened. He became more and more disabled until she could not care for him alone and Sema moved back into the village to help her. She said she could work online from anywhere, so the village was just as good as the town. The day Sami died was like a reprieve. She wasn't supposed to think like this, she was a devoted wife. It wasn't accepted at all that caring for her husband had been anything but joyful. She felt like a different woman.

Sema, recognising the change in her mother, suggested selling the house and emigrating to Michigan. Every letter Jorg wrote home urged his mother to come to live in the home of the brave and the land of the free, as he called it. Finally she had agreed and the furniture was given away to cousins and nephews and nieces. All that was left was the mattress she had slept on last night.

She had a last walk round the house while she waited for Sema to collect her. The memories crowded into her mind, both good and bad and she had a momentary regret that she was leaving but no, the house was silent now and she felt like a stranger here.