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Party Pooper

by Lesley Dawson

“Why celebrate your fiftieth? Don’t you want to forget how old you are now?”

Thus said my family in Leeds, but not so my Palestinian colleagues and friends.

“Maskene, Lesley, how will you be able to celebrate your birthday when your family is so far away?”

I would have been very happy to disappear to the camping site at the Dead Sea and spend the weekend barbecuing and drinking red wine with a few chosen fellow expats, but this was not to be. Oh no. “We must have a party.”

To prevent too much excess hospitality my Irish housemate decided to try to take control.

“Lesley doesn’t want lots of presents. Please just bring yourself and we will provide the food and drink.” Fat chance of any of that happening.

The momentum began to build and so many people whispered in my ear that they were coming to the party that I expected the whole university and wondered where we would put them all. I began to regret having let out my secret.

Two other Palestinian colleagues admitted to birthdays, but not ages, and latched on to my party and it quickly became the event of the semester.

Colette organised salads of so many different tastes I grew dizzy with the smell of the different ingredients. This was nothing like the British version of a limp lettuce leaf, a few cucumber slices and quartered tomatoes.

I was commissioned to shop at the local market with one of my students. His mother would have been proud of him as he pulled and prodded various vegetables until he was satisfied we had got to best. Being used to buying for two people and taking home the results in a small basket I was appalled to see crates of veg being packed into the boot of my car. This was nothing compared with the washing of said veg under running water. All I could think of was how quickly the water tank on my roof would empty and how much it would cost me to order a tanker in to fill it up again.

The Irish contingent at the university included a very human Catholic Monseigneur who was a colleague of Colette's. He made the mistake of arriving early and offering to help. She set him to lighting the barbecue, knowing that such work was not considered suitable for women to do. Looking out of the back window she prayed aloud "Please God my mother doesn't hear that I set the Monseigneur to do such demeaning work."

I think the whole town came, including my landlord, the local muktar, who lived downstairs. We detailed one of the Muslim students to keep him away from the alcohol and he did his job successfully, although said student imbibed a fair amount of red wine after the muktar's party left.

Of course, nobody paid the slightest heed to our request for no presents and the table in the corner began to look like the prize drop for a TV competition. Also, nobody thought that we foreigners could supply enough food, so they all brought their own. We could have fed the whole of East Jerusalem without making much space on the table.

I was kissed three times on each cheek by all the women and by some of the men who should have known better. A great time was had by all, and no-one wanted to go home. I despaired of being able to sink onto the couch and put my feet up with a glass of wine. It had been a great joy to celebrate with all these wonderful people, but this joy was beginning to cloy and eventually I went to sit outside on the back balcony. I wasn't left alone for long, just long enough to restore my equilibrium and plaster the smile back on my face. Uncharitably I was willing them all to leave as it was not actually fun anymore, it was just too much birthday.