



Who Has The Last Word?

by Lesley Dawson

“Dr Lesley, Can I speak to you about my assignment?”

“Of course. What about your essay?”

“Forgive me, but I think you might have made a mistake.”

“Really. What mistake have I made?”

“Well, maybe not a mistake but would you please consider remarking my assignment. I think I should have a higher mark.”

This conversation was taking place outside my office after I had returned the assignment papers to the students. Majdi was not happy with his grade. It was too low and more importantly, it would lower his Grade Point Average. He needed a high GPA as he wanted to get a scholarship to study in the USA.

This was not the first time we had disagreed over the value of his written work. The previous semester I had been out to dinner with friends at the Shepard Hotel. Foreigners were usually well looked after there, especially if they thought you were American and would leave a large tip. However, this time it was a bit over the top. After taking our order the waiter sidled up to me so no one else could hear our conversation. Here we go, I thought, he wants to get a place for his son, nephew, cousin in the next physiotherapy intake. I sighed as I turned to him with my brightest smile plastered on my face.

“Doctora, you know that my nephew, Majdi, is hoping for a scholarship to Lewis University in Chicago?”

“Yes?”

“He is a poor refugee and needs high grades from you.”

At this he nodded his head in the direction of the kitchen and lo and behold, Majdi walked towards us bearing a large tray on which a beautiful cream cake glistened in the lamp light. We had certainly not ordered that.

“We would like to present this dessert to you and your friends, as a gift from us.”

“That is very kind of you, but we don’t deserve it.”

“Oh, but you do deserve it. You are a very kind lady.”

I explained to my surprised guests just exactly what this was – a bribe to ensure his nephew got good grades in his next assignment. It probably also meant that the boy hadn’t done the work and was hoping I would overlook his poor performance.

Accepting a slice of the cake would imply an understanding of what I had to do. Refusing it, in this culture was also not an option. What a mess. I couldn’t come to this restaurant ever again.

Majdi sat outside my office, looking very sorry for himself all morning. I saw him as I walked down the corridor from my class. I was in desperate need of a cup of coffee before I could deal with this.

What could I say that would convince him that I was not going to re-mark his essay on the causes of poliomyelitis?

Having gulped down half a cup of terrible instant coffee, I had no excuses left. I went over for what seemed like the hundredth time the reasons he had scored such low marks, gently explaining to him again that students submitted work based on their studies and teachers graded what they found in the work, based on their professional integrity. This was something I had never expected to have to say to any student but there it was out in the open.

I did consider taking him into my office and showing him the poster an American colleague had given me, ‘Which part of the word, No, do you not understand?’ I rejected this idea as too subtle for the boy in front of me.

In the end I said “Majdi, khallas, bekafi (stop, enough). Go to your next class,” and surprisingly, he did.