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My Partner Who Lives Abroad

by Lesley Dawson

We were both new kids on the block, having arrived at the university at more or less the same time. We should not have been attracted to each other, he was a New York Catholic and I was a British Protestant. Despite this, somehow, we became best friends, travelling together, sometimes with other colleagues, to various places in Israel and Sinai and Jordan.

Our views on education were at opposite ends of the spectrum. I was a health care specialist who believed in different approaches to education and practice according to where in the world one was located. Joe was a pragmatic scientist for whom chemistry was the same in Bethlehem or Boston.

For me, working with Palestinians was an important step in my career, for him Bethlehem was a backwater where he was taking a limited time out to offer help to a vulnerable community, but whose ambition and its achievement needed to be in the States.

The first parting of the ways came when he decided to take a job in New Mexico and my contract in Bethlehem was extended. I was asked to stay on until my local colleagues achieved Masters' degrees. We continued to spend time together each summer with visits in North America and Europe on alternate years and began to consider being together permanently.

Neither of us could make up our mind if we could bear to live in the other's homeland and overseas postings combining health care and chemistry were pretty rare. On this basis we decided we would describe each other as, "my partner who lives abroad." This could have continued for decades until the intrusion of a condition called amyloidosis.

I was at a conference in Vancouver and Joe was due to join me for a holiday. His phone call changing our plans indicated that he had a problem with the plasma cells in his bone marrow and needed to go into hospital for a blood transfusion. Being in the medical field I looked up what this meant and my heart sank as I read that with, or without treatment, the prognosis at that time was two years from diagnosis. Friends tactfully tried to tell me what I already knew, I was going to lose him soon.

The last time we were together, I had made the trip to New York to spend time with him. Arriving at JFK airport, I waited for him, or someone else, to pick me up. I could not believe my eyes when I saw this overweight old man stumbling towards me using a walking frame and I realized who it was. I spent the next week helping him connect the equipment for his dialysis, being a chemist he had elected to do this himself at home, rather than go into hospital. I learnt more about the American health system that I wanted to and saw firsthand how patients had to produce their health insurance documents before any health professional would even look at them. It was one of the lowest times in my life and I was hanging on to my faith by my fingertips, on behalf of both of us.

Friends who had been at college with Joe came to see him and wept in my arms with me. The time came to return to the UK and we both knew we would not see each other again. A few days after my return Joe's sister Marti phoned me to say that he had been readmitted to hospital and died the previous evening.

Thus began a different life, without Joe. It took some getting used to. Friends tried to fix with up with brothers, cousins, uncles but, although I met many of them, my heart wasn't in it. Being in love you know, it's not like having a canary in a cage. When you love one sweetheart you can't just go and get another to replace him.