



The Value of Friendship

by Lesley Dawson

Bright he was not, but he thought it did not matter. We met at the Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation where he was a volunteer working with the disabled adults who often needed two strong men to turn them and move them.

The Bethlehem University physiotherapy degree programme was based at the same centre during the closure of the universities. Some students needed to be admitted despite the ban on higher education because of the nature of the subject studied, so nursing, midwifery and hotel management masqueraded in different places to keep the students and teachers safe from fines and imprisonment. Our masquerade was in this rehabilitation centre.

Mahmoud was a willing assistant when any patient needed to be moved. He enjoyed practicing his English on we Brits and was clearly delighted by his relationship with us. Obviously, he felt that we rated him highly because we spoke with him.

I knew nothing about his background until I heard he was planning to apply to join the next cohort of physio students at BU.

Suspecting that this might be problematic, I sought advice from my Palestinian colleagues, who told me that he did not have the appropriate Tawjihi qualifications for university admission.

“Be careful, Lesley, He thinks he is a shoe-in because you are his friend.”

I couldn't believe that this was so, but I was still learning how different Arab culture was to European.

I tried to stay out of the adults' ward to minimise my contact with Mahmoud as preparations began for the selection process for physiotherapy. BU admin staff were responsible for checking all applicants' university entrance scores and they forwarded to us those who might be suitable for interview. Of course, Mahmoud's name did not appear on that list.

The day came when he pushed his way into my office, despite the best efforts of my secretary and demanded to know why he had not received an appointment for selection.

This situation was beyond his English ability and mine to explain in simple English. I called in Ahmed to speak to him in Arabic.

Patient I was not, usually, but this demanded all my effort.

"Ahmed, be kind to him," I suggested anxiously and tried to maintain a neutral look on my face that was not too negative.

"He thinks that he will get a place, because he is your friend," Ahmed interpreted. After this a long discussion ensued in Arabic with lots of dramatic gestures on both sides and what sounded to me like a huge argument.

In the end Mahmoud shook his head and walked angrily out of the room, looking at neither of us. I looked at Ahmed for some clarification.

"I told him it was the fault of the foreigners. This is the way they do things in England. I didn't want him to blame me."

'Thanks', I thought, now I will be seen as the bad one when it is the university who vetoed his application.

"In future I would advise you not to be so friendly with the volunteers. You need to keep your distance and show that you are above them, or they will not respect you."

This was hard to take as it was not my communication style at all. However, Mahmoud made the decision for me, he completely ignored me every time he came anywhere near and all the other volunteers followed suit. I had been sent to the Palestinian equivalent of Coventry.