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A Most Unusual Angel

by Lesley Dawson

He did not look like anything special at all. Nothing to make you think he might be other than a very ordinary man. He barely came up to my shoulder and was almost as broad as he was long. Obviously not a Palestinian Arab, despite his sallow complexion, unruly black hair and bushy black eyebrows. You certainly might be concerned if you met him on a dark night.

I was trying to leave Gaza and had discovered that the Israelis had closed the border, and no one seemed to know when, or if, it would reopen. This was the final straw. Getting in had been hard enough. Leaving Israel hadn't been a problem, if you discounted the massive border post with its signs in Hebrew, its automatic exit gates controlled by flashing red and green lights. Lugging two cases full of books did not help, especially when trying to go through turn style gates, that required a special art.

I had permission to leave Israel and the young soldier, who hailed originally from Manchester, stamped my passport with a flourish and wished me a nice day in a tone that implied that such a day was not possible in a place like Gaza. What I did not know, neither did my colleague Mohammed, as it turned out, I also needed permission from the Hamas administration to enter Gaza. All the contents of my luggage were deftly and efficiently, turned over by a very pleasant policewoman and then we waited and waited and waited.

As was his custom, Mohammed told me not to worry. It would all get sorted out and he proceeded to walk up and down bellowing into his mobile phone as he spoke with all his important contacts.

A man in a black leather jacket, who I assumed was a border guard, asked me why 'my fixer' had not arranged the necessary permission. Eventually I was allowed in, on the understanding that I would complete the appropriate form, with photo, retrospectively.

My five-day visit passed, as I visited all my friends and old colleagues, coping with the power cuts and talking for hours by candlelight whilst eating mountains of rice and various fish and meat dishes and drinking copious amounts of coca cola. In between all this partying we traipsed from one government office to another to purchase the appropriate form, then adding a photo to it, at the official photo booth and finally getting another Hamas official stamp on it. Now I was legal and perhaps they would let me out when my visit ended.

I was on my way out of this open- air prison, but the border was closed. Sighing deeply, I sat down next to this ordinary man, who said to me very confidently, "Don't worry. They will open the gates quite soon."

I wondered at his confidence until he told me he did this trip once a week. Looking more closely at this little man in his heavy black coat I noticed his clerical collar and wondered what he had been doing in Gaza. He regaled me with stories of his small Catholic congregation and their challenges in living in such a strict Islamic society until the crowd began to move forward and we realized that the border was open.

That was when the nightmare really began. Palestinian porters almost shovelled us into a large room where they were directed in their work by Israeli soldiers up on a building high above us, shouting in Hebrew. I began to panic as I did not know what to expect. Father Pablo, as I now knew his name, saw my eyes widen and he patted my arm, "Don't worry, we have to open our cases and put them on that carousel over there. The only thing you can hang on to is your passport and your wallet as you pass through that X-ray machine and hold your arms up."

In one of my cases I had four litres of honey that relatives in Gaza had sent to their son in England. I was sure the Israelis were going to confiscate it. As it happened, only one container was opened, and I managed to get the other three jars safely back to the UK.

Coming out into the cool early evening air my heart rate began to return to its usual level and I looked again at this man who looked so ordinary.

"Thank you so much, Father Pablo. I wouldn't have coped without you."

He shrugged modestly and smiled sympathetically. I had heard about people saying they had met angels and had not believed their stories, but now I couldn't sneer at anyone ever again. I had met my own little South American angel.