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At the Hairdressers

by Lesley Dawson

“Why do you think she is here?”

“What you mean in this salon?”

“No. Why is she here in Palestine?”

This conversation was going on around me as I sat in Lourice’s Hair Salon in Bethlehem, waiting for her to finish back combing the beautiful blue-black tresses of my neighbour, Mimi, who was attending a formal dinner at the Latin Patriarchate that evening with her husband. When the last puff of hairspray had settled and the last flick of Lourice’s comb stopped, she rose out of the chair like Venus emerging from the sea. After paying what was due, she waved at me saying “Ciao, Lesley. See you later,” and scattered dazzling smiles to all the other ladies present.

This provoked another round of discussion about the foreigner in their midst.

“She must be invited to the dinner too.”

“I wonder how she knows the Patriarch? She is not even Catholic.”

As I was invited to sit on the throne Lourice grinned at me and began to speak in English, another source of wonder and topic of conversation in the salon.

“Shall I tell them that you can understand what they are saying? They all think you don’t speak Arabic.”

“No, don’t spoil their fun. Besides you would spoil my fun too. I do enjoy listening to what they have to say about me.”

She smiled enigmatically at those waiting to be seen and regaled them with blatantly untrue and slightly risqué tales of my life in England which fascinated these dear ladies, wearing their traditional Arab dresses and holding their head scarves in their laps ready to receive their annual cropping before the feast.

I came to Lourice when my hair needed cutting because she was the aunt of my secretary and that is how you did things in Bethlehem. All recommendations came by word of mouth via a brother, a cousin, or an uncle, of which there seemed an endless supply. I only had to open my mouth and say I needed new cushions for my sofa, and behold, somebody had a relative with a shop down near Deheisha Refugee Camp. They would take me at the end of the day.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, my presence was always noted at funeral gatherings. Obviously, I was different because I didn’t wear the long thobe and headscarf. It was not expected that foreign women would be happy to sit with Palestinian women as they mourned the death of their relatives or neighbours. But of course, the deceased had been my friend and colleague, killed in a car crash on the road from Bethlehem to Hebron. My Dean and I were dropped by the male members of the university condolence group at the place where the women were mourning. Zahera’s sister-in-law almost swooned at my feet as she said, “Walahi, Lesley, Zahera rahat,” meaning that she had gone.

I followed into a room full of women of all ages, gently weeping as they listened to a reading for the Quran. After about five minutes my presence was the subject of speculation. “Who is she? Why is she here?” Dean Jacqueline explained that Zahera had been a member of my staff and also my friend. At this they smiled as I sat on the floor with them and when tears came to my eyes as I thought of the wonderful life cut off in its prime, women nearest to me patted my hands sympathetically.

I realized then that Palestinian women’s obsession with the lives of foreign women was because they thought we lived different lives. When we joined in everyday activities in their society, they realized we were just like them.