

This is Your Life

by Lesley Dawson

This is your life and it is ending one moment at a time. This is what I am being told daily by my jailers. The problem is that I don't remember what they tell me and I must keep relearning it daily. I am so tired that I don't know if I want tomorrow to come.

How did all this happen, you might ask. I am still not sure about it myself. I had always wanted to be a doctor. As a child I attended an UNRWA school where they encouraged us to reach for the sky. My Tawjihi exam results were excellent, and I got the opportunity to study at the University of Kiev in Ukraine. I originally wanted to study in the UK but our Tawjihi school leaving exam was not considered equivalent to the British system.

I had to learn Russian before I could begin my studies and this took up the first year of my time in Kiev. As I spent time on clinical placements in clinics there, I began to realise that their system was not the same as ours back home. How was I going to practice what I had learned in Ukraine within the healthcare system in Gaza?

It was a lonely time without my family, and I missed my brothers and sisters and especially my mother. I know she found it hard to see me head off to a foreign country where I would not be able to eat her cooking. She believed I would starve because I would not have Arabic food to eat. Her understanding of Russian food was sketchy and her disdain for other types of food was huge.

There were many other Palestinians studying in Kiev and some of them were so lonely that they married Ukrainian wives. I had become engaged to my cousin Zahera before I left Gaza and we kept in touch on Facetime when there was an opportunity for her to charge her mobile phone. I cannot deny that I felt lonely, but I coped until I returned home after graduating and we married in Khan Younis, surrounded by all our friends and relatives.

Part of my life ended in Kiev, but another life began when I started to work at Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City. Al Ahli is run by Christians and is responsible to the Anglican Diocese in Jerusalem but does not discriminate in employing both Muslims and Christians.

I found that I had to work hard to translate what I had learnt in a Soviet context into practice in Gaza but settled back into my home and eventually became an expert in trauma-induced disability. Now having a medical qualification, I was acceptable to the British for further training in my specialty, particularly after many Palestinian doctors began working in the NHS.

Life was never easy in Gaza, described by the UN as “the largest open-air prison in the world.” We were often short of vital medicines and surgical equipment, so many of our patients suffered extreme pain. All goods had to enter Gaza via Israel, and they controlled what they considered we needed and rejected anything they viewed as suspicious that might aid the military wing of Hamas. There were black market opportunities via the tunnels with Egypt, but costs were monumental and choice of goods brought in was determined by the smugglers, not the needs of the community.

October 7th, 2023, changed everything. Nobody expected weedy little Gaza to be able to break out of their confines and invade Israel, but it happened. Israeli reaction was justifiably horrified and the IDF response out of all proportion. We treated an endless queue of men, women and children injured from bomb blasts and houses collapsing. I don't know how the paramedics coped with digging out so many children from the rubble, many of whom lost limbs because we were unable to deal with the fractures and burns sustained.

Every day when I went to work, I worried that my house might not be standing on my return and that my wife and eight children would be homeless and injured. My wife pleaded with me to escort them down to Rafah where most of our family lived but I was conscious of the lines of stretchers waiting for my attention.

Daily hospitals and schools were being targeted by the IDF, and we worked in whatever rooms were available and intact. Everyone was under such pressure and most of our equipment was destroyed. IDF soldiers on the ground came closer and closer to our hospital and many colleagues decided that their families had higher priority than their patients. We began to hear rumours that healthcare professionals were being arrested and sent to Israeli prisons. I managed to send my family south with so many others, as life became more dangerous but felt that I had taken an oath to protect my patients and I should remain where I was.

The fateful day came when we were overrun by Israeli soldiers. I was in the middle of a ward round when they came and handcuffed all who were present. My life ended again as I was stripped of my underwear, blindfolded and bundled into an army jeep. Thank God I didn't understand what would then happen to us.

Life in an Israeli prison is no picnic. We are beaten for minor infringements of rules that we do not know about and shouted at in Hebrew, that most of us do not understand. The food, if you can call it food, is infrequent, dried up, smelly, rotten and rancid. I was never fat; I kept active and was fit. But now I am thin, always thirsty and some days I can't stand up without feeling dizzy.

The few pieces of information that we hear include letters written by medical associations around the world protesting at our treatment and a few stories of men being freed to go home to Gaza. I worry about what my family are hearing about us and if we will ever be freed. This is my life now and each moment could be my last.