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When the telephone rang, Oum George—the mother of George Sakka—pulled her head from underneath the helmet-like hairdryer and shouted, 'The telephone. The telephone.'

Sami said, 'I hear it.'

'It's ringing.'

'I know Oum George. Be calm.'

Sami's hair salon was on the lower road in Bethlehem, the street that ran parallel with Wadi Ma'ali. Sami chose the site because it was central yet quiet. It was Christmas Eve and the noon-day sun was hot. With all the hair dryers going, the salon would have become unbearable if Sami could not leave his door open. There was only a thin curtain across the entrance but in this quiet neighbourhood, Sami's ladies felt certain no one would burst in. This was important. On a big day—for instance, a Muslim wedding when Sami would do the bride and maybe thirty of her relatives—then Sami's ladies needed to know their privacy was as important to him as it was to them.

Today, all of Sami's ladies were Christians. They were having their hair done for the Christmas Eid. Afterwards, those with tickets would go to the church for Mass.

'The telephone is ringing Sami.'

'I only have one pair of hands, Oum Zuzu. I'm sure they will leave a message,' Sami said.

Christmas was one of Sami's busiest days, in part because he was open, in part because he was Christian. His full name was Sami Qassis, meaning 'Sami Vicar' in English. Most of the Christian women would not dream of visiting a Muslim salon and would say that it was because they felt that a Muslim might be 'behind-the-times' or 'lower-standard'. Sami disagreed: he felt that all of his ladies chose him because he was good. Plus he created a certain atmosphere: everyone laughed, everyone gossiped, everyone had fun.

Oum Zuzu was ready to go under the dryer. As Sami guided her across the salon, he flicked his sheet at the other women, telling them to make way for the Queen of Sheba. Oum Zuzu kept giggling.

As he settled her under the helmet, she asked if Sami was going to the church.

'No. It's not my Christmas.'

'He's Orthodox,' said Oum George. 'He has to wait another two weeks.'

'Of course,' said Oum Zuzu. 'But tell me, how is your mother, Sami? Is she any better?'

'She's comfortable. She's still full-of-life.'

'That's positive.'

'She's lucky to have a son like you, Sami.'

Sami's mother may have been lucky but, today, Sami was having a rare night-off. At nine, he met two friends from France in a hotel bar. Afterwards, they walked to Manger Square to watch the celebrations. The tourism figures from both of the ministries—the Palestinian and the

Israeli—had prepared him. He knew the square would be crowded. Yet still the crush took him by surprise. He wondered how the foreign tourists felt, as they were herded into a series of steel pens by the Presidential guards before they were allowed to make their way bit-by-bit into the church.

'Let's get out of here,' Sami said, taking his friends to Efteem restaurant for falafel. Soon, his two friends confessed they would like to go to the church.

Sami wasn't keen. 'This is what everyone has been talking about, all day,' he said. 'But you need tickets, and you need to apply in advance. I know the church in Jerusalem gives tickets to tourists, but you have to apply through a travel agency.'

There was one other factor: it was the last Christmas mass before the current Latin Patriarch retired. Sami found himself explaining to his friends why everyone was so emotional about this old man, Monsignor Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. All Sami could say was that he was a good man, a patriot and a guy with a real spirituality.

'Do you know him?' his friend asked.

Sami shook his head. 'He knew my father. But that was a long time ago.'

By two in the morning, the crowds in the square had dissipated. Sami took his friends into his half of the church: the older side, the Orthodox side. All those who could not get tickets to the Latin mass had congregated in the Orthodox quarter. Many were queuing to visit the grotto where Christ was born. Sami knew one of the priests so he could jump the queue. Once he and his friends were down in the grotto, he discovered the door to St Jerome's Cave was open. Sami did not remember ever seeing this door open before. He took the opportunity to lead his friends through the cellars to the Latin section of the church.

There were less than three hundred people in the chapel. It was so late now, the service was over. The President had gone. The foreign tourists had returned to their coaches and their hotels in Jerusalem.

'Is this it? *Le fin?*' Pascal asked.

Sami thought so. But then Jaime touched his arm and said, 'I think the bishops are coming back.'

They were. A whole line of bishops and archbishops filed back into the church, led by the Patriarch. At once, Sami realised that the three hundred people who had remained inside the church, were waiting to say good-bye to their Patriarch. Flanked by other senior clerics, Michel Sabbah took his time and said good-bye to each in turn.

Sami herded Jaime and Pascal to the front of the church, without admitting why he was doing it. As the Patriarch took his hand, Sami gave his full name, and added that he was the son of Marie and Tawfik Qassis.

The Patriarch gave his blessing, but lingered for a moment afterwards. 'Of course. Give my best wishes to your mother. Tell her, I draw strength from her courage. And also from yours. Truly.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nicholas Blincoe.*