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Musa was obliged to build a wall to repartition the two shops and replace the illuminated board that carried his name with a smaller one to fit the size of one shop. Though Safwat had restored his father's shop according to the deal, he kept it shut. Being a student and not a car penter, he did not know how to run the shop. Keeping it shut at least until his graduation was not a choice but a necessity.

Three weeks had passed. Life had gone back to normal. At ten o'clock, Safwat stretched and yawned lazily. Waking up late was a habit he had since he was little. He got up leisurely and went to wash his face. His younger brother Omar was in the bathroom. Amina was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Safwat said good morning to her and returned to his room to wait for the bathroom to become available. When he was at home, he would spend one or two hours playing backgammon with his grandfather and listening to his reminiscences and his grumbles about youth nowadays.

'Your generation enjoyed the best of everything, *Giddi*,' said Safwat. 'You enjoyed fresher air and more healthful food. Indeed, your generation has more vigour than we have. It's really true that *the old, fat ducks are the tasty ones*.' El-Arabi nodded slowly, his eyes staring absently at the floor as though searching for his old days there. When the bathroom was available, Safwat washed his face, took his breakfast of *ful* and bread, and set out for Maher's house.

Safwat's academic career had changed course completely since his stellar secondary-school performance. Maher's negative impact upon Safwat had been dramatic. He was still in the last year at university,

having failed the previous year. He had barely passed the three years before that, as he had spent most of his time with Maher, chasing girls, smoking, and drinking. Pain squeezed Amina's heart as she saw her elder son heading gradually towards an abyss of failure. She was too old to control him now, or perhaps he was too wild to be controlled.

When he reached the ground floor on his way down, Safwat met Delilah as she came in from outside. They exchanged smiling glances as Safwat passed, smelling her feminine scent, enchanted by her beauty.

Safwat's youth and his obvious admiration of Delilah made both Musa and Sultan feel ill at ease. He was a young playboy and Delilah was still the district's beauty. Though her daughters Isra'e and Kitty were young, beautiful girls with whom all the youths of the district were obsessed, Safwat's mind had not even registered them. Delilah's beauty captivated him. Placing his youth close to her voluptuous beauty would be like putting a tank of oil next to fire. They began by trading fleeting, clandestine glances of admiration. Sensing the hungry looks Safwat was flinging at her, she enjoyed the game and encouraged him with more daring glances and smiles. Maher noticed the new change in his friend and, by instinct, knew who was behind it.

'I don't blame you, mate. She's a hot chick. If I were you I wouldn't leave home at all,' said Maher, laughing mischievously, when Safwat visited him that day.

'She is a real catch, you know, a real catch.' Safwat sighed with a dreamy look.

Up to that moment, Delilah had been just a dazzling woman that Safwat dreamt of having an affair with – and he was not the first man in the district to have such a dream. But after all the problems between the two families, Delilah was not just any woman. Having an affair with her, or even normalising his relationship with her, would enrage his mother and break her heart. In spite of that, it seemed that it was only a matter of time before Delilah's fire reached his tank of oil.

That year, Safwat managed to pass his final exams and officially graduated from university. Amina shed tears of happiness and it was a joyful day in the house. For the first time since the death of Kamal seven years before, she performed a *zagbrouda*, placing her hand over her mouth and trilling her tongue for all to hear. Amina was so overjoyed that she dashed downstairs to buy packages of soft drinks to distribute to the neighbours and people in the street.

When she had mounted the stairs back to her flat, Amina played dancing music loudly and invited a few young girls from the neighbourhood to come and belly dance. It was her day to celebrate, and to feel that her suffering had produced its sweetest fruit at last.

That day, on his way downstairs to see Maher, Safwat saw Delilah standing in front of her flat in her thin nightgown. With a sweet smile, she congratulated him and wished him a bright career. That was the first time she had addressed him directly since the death of his father. She then caught him completely off-guard by hugging him and kissing his cheeks. They were alone in front of her main door, but if someone had seen them, it would not have been an embarrassing scene. On the surface, she made it appear like a sister congratulating her younger brother. As she hugged him, she squeezed her body against his, with both arms around his back, and pushed him against her. Safwat felt her warm breath on his neck and her wet lips pressing against his cheeks. Her hug lasted only two or three seconds, though it seemed longer than any hug a woman would normally give a young neighbour. He felt the warmth of her soft body and his breath quickened instantly. Delilah felt the desired effect of her explosive hug as she loosened herself from him.

When she excused herself and closed the door, Safwat felt as if he were under a spell. That was the first time he had ever come so close to Delilah, and she was not just any woman. For more than a minute, his breath was hot and his heart was throbbing fast.

When Safwat met Maher, he knew that his friend had failed again that year. Maher took the matter lightly and was not in the least disturbed. Safwat told him what had happened with Delilah, and Maher's eyes

glittered with excitement. That kind of news was more important to him than his own graduation.

‘Don’t miss this chance, buddy. Strike while the iron is hot.’

‘What can I do?’

‘See her outside, or in her flat when she’s alone, or you’d better persuade your family to visit the countryside and ask her to go up to your flat. Tell me, how did you feel when she hugged and kissed you?’

‘To tell you the truth, I was about to faint! I was melting in her hands!’

‘Believe me, my friend, it’s now or never! Don’t miss this chance like you missed it with Maha. Don’t hesitate.’

‘I’m not hesitating. I hate hesitation. I’m only thinking of how to do it without stirring up problems,’ said Safwat, looking distant and preoccupied.

Of course, Safwat longed to have an affair with Delilah. His main trouble was his fear that word would spread. How could he stand the wrath of his mother, the revenge of Musa, and the loathing of his family as well as Nagy’s? An internal conflict erupted between his mind and his passion. His inner wish was to see an end to the feud between the two families, though he knew how hard that was. Perhaps approaching Delilah and talking to her would ease the tension and end this bitter conflict, he thought. The idea of being a messenger of peace between his family and Delilah tempted him. No more hatred in their house! From now on, there would be only love! A broad smile played about his lips and his face brightened, as though he had come across a real discovery, a hidden treasure. Finally, the struggle between passion and reason was over, and his emotions now seemed rational and far-sighted.

A few weeks lapsed, during which fleeting glances had turned into bold smiles and brief greetings. Then suddenly it happened.

Safwat was returning home by way of the side street alongside the house. He preferred that route so he could have a peek at Delilah’s

window. This time, she was in her room and their eyes met in a silent smile. She was alone at home, Musa being in his shop and their daughter s out working in a textile factory. It took only a moment for her to be at her front door, making sure nobody was in the lobby or on the landing. She left both the iron and wooden doors ajar and returned quickly to close the window in her bedroom. When Safwat arrived at her flat, he noticed that both doors were open. Having seen Musa in the shop, and knowing that her two daughters were at work, Safwat understood that Delilah had left the doors ajar on purpose. He knocked on the wooden door and heard her musical voice floating from inside, asking him to enter and close both doors behind him. He did as she bade.

Her feminine voice beckoned from the direction of the bedroom. When Safwat entered the room, he was dumbstruck. Delilah was on the bed in her sheer nightgown, which exposed her arms, the swell of her breasts, and her legs all the way up to her thighs. The lusty look in her eyes and the flame that Safwat felt radiating from her sizzling body awakened the sleeping animal within him. He needed no better invitation and the animal in him took charge.

They met whenever they could snatch a chance. They found in each other the missing partner and the other half. Musa was already fifty-seven and had been unable to quench her sexual thirst. Safwat's youth was the answer to her thirst and, likewise, her beauty and experience fulfilled his dreams.

They could not keep their affair secret for long. A few months into it, Safwat was coming out of Delilah's flat when he met Basim descending the stairs. The latter flung a suspicious look at him. Safwat mumbled that he had been asking Delilah to talk with Master Sultan, to ask whether he would mediate a job for him at a good law firm. Basim did not believe him; he sensed that something was going on between the two.

On another occasion, his younger brother Mabruk saw him in that same awkward situation. Neither Basim nor Mabruk uttered a word to a soul. But *the third strike is always fatal*, and the third time, it was Musa! Returning home early one afternoon after feeling suddenly exhausted

and short of breath, he had to knock on the door for a full minute before Delilah opened it. Her face was pale and nervous, like a criminal who had just come face-to-face with a police officer. Musa asked her whether she was fine.

'I'm okay. Just tired from cleaning the flat,' she replied.

'I don't feel well either. I need some rest.'

Musa took off his jacket and headed towards the bedroom. Delilah helped him take off his shoes and clothes. He lay on the bed.

'I'll shut the door so you can sleep.' Delilah pulled the door to close it.

'No. Keep it open. I have difficulty breathing. Keep both the door and the window open. I need some air.'

She did as he asked and then went into the living room. After twenty minutes, when she thought he was finally asleep, she entered her daughters' room and signalled to Safwat to come out from under the bed. She tiptoed to the front door and carefully opened it. Safwat stood at the threshold of the room, waiting for the right moment to escape. Having opened the wooden door, she started to pull the latch of the iron gate. The latch squeaked and so did the door itself when she pushed it open slowly. That squeak alarmed Musa, who had been merely tired but not sleepy. He opened his eyes, sat up, and leaned forward toward the foot of his bed. Seeing a man slip out of the door, he felt as if a scorpion had stung him. He jumped out of bed and ran towards the front door. Terror transfixed Delilah where she stood. Though he did not see Safwat's face, Musa recognised him as he ran upstairs. Musa looked at the terrified Delilah with fury. He attacked her and slapped her with both hands hysterically. She was too afraid to even cry, lest people outside heard about her scandal. A sharp pain squeezed Musa's chest. His face turned blue, his eyes widened in terror, and his breath grew more constricted, as though he were breathing through the eye of a needle. His hands stopped striking Delilah and he started rubbing his neck in a bid to let in more air. He sat on a bench next to the front door and the rhythm of his breathing gradually slowed down.

Delilah froze like a statue where she stood, looking at her dying

husband. After a while, his hands dropped into his lap and his head rested on his chest, motionless. Seeing him dead, Delilah wailed and ran outside to his shop to call his apprentices. She told them that Musa had died from heart failure.

Deep in her heart, Delilah was almost relieved at her husband's death. Had he lived, her scandal would have been like a wad of gum on every tongue. She stopped seeing Safwat for more than a month, after which they carefully resumed their secret love. As for Sultan, after Musa's death he no longer had an excuse to visit Delilah. The only opportunity he had to talk to her was when she came to his shop to buy meat. He felt how important Musa's life had been and felt sad for losing him.

After the requisite forty days of mourning, Delilah shed her black clothes and appeared in colourful dresses. She became herself again – cheery and jocular. When she walked down the street, all eyes were on her sensuous body, just as before. Now, however, she was more vulnerable and available. Some men started to approach her with sweet words. One day, a man even boarded the bus with her when she went to do her shopping. It was just a chance to get close to her in the overcrowded bus, where he could brush his hand or any part of his body against her soft flesh. People started to talk, inventing tales about her adventures with men.

With nobody to take care of her late husband's shop, Delilah feared she might lose it and decided to start her own business selling cassette tapes. Musa's illuminated board was taken down, and the words 'Delilah's Music Club' flashed colourfully in its place. Delilah had a natural instinct for business, and her shop flourished. She herself was the best advertisement for her shop, as men bought tapes regularly just to enjoy talking to her. With her bright smile and jovial spirit, every customer left her shop happy, and with a few tapes in hand.

Now that he could see more of her, Sultan was happy with her new success. 'She's a woman, but she's better than a thousand men,' he would say. Now and again, he went to her shop for a chat. He was getting old,