

The Narrow Window

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This morning, the church bell rang for quite a long while, announcing the death of a notable from our village. It is the traditional call still used in many villages, although in many others it has been replaced by hanging obituary notes on walls.

Nelly, an old friend of mine, who spent most of her life away from Lebanon, inquired about the meaning of the bell strokes. I had invited her to spend a few weeks in my village home. As a sociology teacher, she was interested in rural customs and traditions. So she said:

- I know that a bell toll announces something. Tell me about the different kinds of tolls used in this village.

- Slow, measured strokes, I said, announce death. A hundred strokes designate people with high social ranks, while less represent people of the lower status. Merry, rapid, high-sounding strokes announce happy, exciting events such as feasts, weddings, victories, and sometime a call to assemble for an important matter.

- I counted one hundred strokes, said Nelly. The deceased must be a prominent person. Did you know him?

- Yes, of course. Nadim El-Safi. He is a distant relative of mine and one of my childhood playmates. He had a special and unforgettable character.

- Tell me more about him.

It was a foggy morning, so we sat on a large sheepskin, near the fireplace reviving the atmosphere of a family gathering around a story-teller.

- He was one of my neighbors, I began. We played together with other children of the neighborhood. As we grew up into adolescence, we hardly had the chance to meet again. Traditions forbade contact between teen-agers of different sexes. The last time I saw him was when the inhabitants of the village were alerted of an attack by a group of enemy militias against the village. The inhabitants hurried to seek shelter in the large house of Nadim's father who had been the 'Mukhtar', i.e. the mayor. The house stood like a fortress and sheltered the clan, its servants and the inhabitants of the village in times of calamity. I saw him then, wearing the large mantle woven with camel's hair, while his head was covered with a dainty black velvet cap embroidered with multicolored silk threads. He still had a pinkish finely chiseled face, and the blue eyes with dark eyeglasses, the stately straight figure, the majestic walk and the reserved appearance. My memory jumped over fifty or fifty-five years gone by. We were part of a group of boys and girls whose families spent summer on the sea-shore. My parents occupied a large cottage while his family stayed in a large summer house of their own. I remember his mother, a tall, fat round-faced woman

with blond hair. She was a mother of ten children. She often handled a rosary with her fingers. When one of the boys rode the horse of the family, she stood next to the gate of the house, making the sign of the cross and muttering a short prayer to protect the rider.

Of the five boys and five girls, Nadim was considered 'the shining star of the family', a perfect personification of male beauty. He could read signs of admiration in people's eyes. He smiled and answered salutations without expressing any sign of superiority and arrogance, and would therefore, win their hearts. Like his brothers and sisters, he was talented for singing and excelled in playing the 'Oud' or lute, and joined the festivities at public gatherings and wedding celebrations.

Nadim and his brothers had no other interests besides singing, playing the lute and horseback riding. They relied heavily on their father's wealth instead of learning a profession. They took advantage of that wealth for personal pleasures, and frequented cafés associating with dissolute women.

Nadim was no exception, but he scorned easy preys and sought the conquest of middle class women, thinking that no woman could resist his charm. In fact, he managed to attract a pretty young married woman



from a good family who was childless and had a henpecked husband. She felt it was an honor to have a liaison with such a distinguished and attractive young man. The affair created friction between Nadim and her brother who felt it his duty to defend his sister's honor. He started decrying and irritating the lover. At the café, they exchanged harsh and menacing words. Like most young men of his class, Nadim carried a pistol in his pocket. In a moment of elated drunkenness, he started playing with the loaded firearm, which finally went off, killing the brother instantly.

Nadim felt thunderstruck. The blow was too much for him. He spent two years in prison, followed by a period of terrible isolation. His father had to pay a huge sum of money for his ransom. The event caused a radical change in the young man. He avoided the company of his former associates and started seeking that of intellectuals.

At the time, my brother, Said and I were college students in Beirut. When we come home for vacation, Nadim and his relatives came to visit us. He told me that he had heard of my

success at college and congratulated me earnestly. I could sense the regret he felt for missing the opportunity of getting higher education, which would have made his life different. One of his sisters once told me that he was fond of me, and wanted to propose but was afraid of marrying a woman who was intellectually superior to him.

Nelly interrupted me saying:

- Would you have accepted to marry him?

- I cannot tell, I said. Though we were neighbors and belonging to the same family, his background was different from mine. Physical attraction is not enough and mutual understanding would have been difficult.

Anyway, he never asked. I think he must have realized the difficulty of finding in me a congenial soul. After a while, he married a young girl, like him, who had no intellectual ambitions or background. Yet, it was not a happy marriage.

- Why

- The dramatic experience he had, affected him strongly. He was anxious to have a child to give a different upbringing; a boy he would send to college, train to be a man of correct behavior and high aims. The son would be a source of pride and compensation for the wayward conduct which brought him his misfortune. Unfortunately, he bore no children.

I felt sorry for them because they both believed that childlessness was a curse, an irretrievable disaster.

- This is what happens when people lack the right kind of education, commented Nelly. It is like looking out of a narrow window, with a bleak space ahead.

- That is true, I agreed, but I can also tell you of people who, in spite of education, could not resolve their problems in a rational manner. The profound change that occurred in Nadim El-Safi shows that he had a good disposition. Do you know that, although, he lost part of his properties during the war, he legated a good sum of money to a foundation which takes care of sending needy students to college?