

Hisham Mabrouk parked his car

in front of a barbecue joint on a quiet winter's night in Agami, and got out to order food for himself and his girlfriend.

"What do you want to eat?" he asked her, leaning his head out through the driver's side window.

"I'm coming with you," replied June Entree, "I want to see what they have and choose for myself."

Hisham paused for a minute, stupefied, then said, in a much harsher tone of voice, "What do you think they have? Chicken and salad and stuff. I'm going to get us chicken."

"I want to come and see for myself," June said, and started to get out of the car.

"No," said Hisham, "You are going to stay in the goddamn car," implying the possible use of force to keep her in the vehicle.

"And for what goddamn reason?"

"Because I don't like the way you're dressed."

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?"

"Your skirt is too short, for one thing."

"What are you, a *sa'idi*?" When Hisham's response failed to come out, June's voice rose to a shrill: "We're in Agami man! It doesn't matter what you wear here! I could go out in shorts if I wanted to."

"Shorts?" grunted Hisham, *tayib ya habibti*. As in, go play.

"Listen Hisham, I didn't come here with you to spend the weekend locked up in the apartment."

"So why didn't you wear pants?"

"What's wrong with this skirt? I wear it in Mohandeseen all the time."

"Yea and watch what happens when you walk down the street," Hisham grunted. "Listen June, I didn't come here to get into a fight, not with you, and not with every asshole who tries to pick you up. Now stay in the goddamn car and tell me how much chicken you want to eat." June didn't answer, so Hisham decided that they would share a whole bird.

The instant he left the vicinity of the car, June burst into tears, lit a cigarette and tore open the car door.

"I'll show him," she said under her breath, but her disobedience went no further than a vicious pout, as she leaned against the car door, swaying her ass in a manner she thought most seductive.

What they were doing together was anybody's guess: Hisham, an up-and-coming financier, for now just a lowly accountant, but with "one of the world's top six firms," as he always claimed; and June, an up-and-coming singer, way down-in-the-dumps, wearing a ton of make up, and constantly on the phone in search of a job, any job. For Hisham, marriage was certainly not in the works. June Entree was a fling, one of a series of affairs with women on the wrong side of the tracks, and Hisham never pretended otherwise. He liked to boss these women around, something he couldn't do with *banat el-nass*, the colleagues from work and old university friends he occasionally dated. With June his attitude was always *inty ya bint!* He would pace and prowl the room and only speak in ever more menacing tones of voice. Sometimes, Hisham pretended he was an officer of the law. He may have been bony and didn't look the part, but he played the stereotypical policeman – always in command and constantly threatening – very well. So well, that even if they didn't believe him, in the end most of his "girlfriends" did what he said.

There was a certain pleasure in that, but soon enough Hisham got sick of bossing June around. She was fiercer than any of the others, and the constant fighting was taking a lot out of him, making this Agami trip feel more like an obligation than a

vacation. Hisham knew what he had to do. The next morning he took June into the kitchen, and taught her what's what. He slapped her face a couple of times, then told her he was going to meet some friends of his on the other end of town. In other words, where can I drop you off, babe?

Later on, he and a friend were sitting on the corniche drinking tea.

"Did you ever consider trying to be nice to her?" asked Louis.

"She's a whore!" roared Hisham, "I'd be an asshole to even think of calling her again."

"You're probably right," said Louis. "I mean, that's the only way you can talk to someone like that. Show her who's in charge. I mean, you've got to be like a stone wall..."

Hisham was frantically blowing on his tea. From the moment he had dropped June off in Ramleh Square, leaving her in the care of an elderly gentleman she claimed was her grandfather, he had felt a load lifted off his shoulders. Louis continues : "It's obviously a big release for you, too. You rid yourself of all the tension inside, you get to feel like a man for a little while, to say and do all the things you can't do with *binat-el-nass*."

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Tarek Atia is a young Egyptian who grew up in the United States and graduated from university there. He came home to Cairo some years ago and has been working on the Al-Ahram English weekly newspaper as a journalist doing feature stories. This extract from a short story appeared recently in Alive a new Cairo monthly. Agami is a popular vacation resort outside of Alexandria.

