

## Our Master

By Ibrahim Eissa

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She was dabbing powder on his forehead with the deft fingers of a professional, hoping he would be pleased, as she said: "There we are, Sheikh."

Hatem laughed.

"God bless you, sister Georgette," he replied.

Anwar Osman repeated the same tiresome question that he had been asking over and over since Hatem became his main guest on the programme a year ago.

"How do you think the faithful feel when they come and stand in prayer behind you and study your words, and they see that our Sheikh Hatem puts on make-up before filming?"

"Brother," replied Hatem firmly, "the Prophet, peace be upon him, used to dye his hair with henna and line his eyes with kohl. Shut up, Anwar, and stop those pesky questions of yours!"

Sheikh Hatem couldn't stand Anwar. It had been that way since he first saw him, when Al-Dunya TV station had invited him to be a regular guest on their new programme. They had pitched him the line that, as popular as his lectures and classes were, with his dedicated disciples filling halls up to the rafters to hear him teach and preach, his impact was limited to his congregation and to young people. This daily programme, on the other hand, took questions from viewers of all ages, from every generation and social class, and would bring him a much wider audience. He wasn't quite convinced by this argument, as he himself could see the crowds, the cross-section of society who attended his sermon every Friday at the Sultan Hassan Mosque. They crammed noisily into every corner of the huge space which could hold thousands of worshippers, not to mention those gathering outside the mosque and in the surrounding area. And then there were the hundreds of men and women who flocked to his father's house in the citadel district every Tuesday seeking blessings, advice and alms. The TV channel executives had managed to persuade him to take the job, with the lure of a tempting salary, but right from the

start Anwar seemed to him to have something insect-like about him and he told them so.

“He’s like a pesky fly that gets into the car when you put the air conditioning on and forces you to open the window to get it out. It sits on the glass buzzing away, so you assume it wants to get out, but as soon as you open the window it comes flying right back at you or falls asleep on the back of your neck.”

They laughed at the way he said this so solemnly, in the same voice he used for reciting the Qur’an and with the enthusiasm normally reserved for the Prophet’s *hadith*. His actual words came as a bit of a surprise. They seemed to enjoy his observations and were probably glad to realise that, though he was a preacher and a mufti, he was not averse to the occasional cheeky comment and had physical needs like anyone else. It was as if they could relax in the knowledge that these sheikhs were not in fact close to God, but close to them. Hatem was well aware of the image people had of sheikhs, and every witty remark he made was like graffiti defacing the stereotype, as though he were casting off his dignity as a mufti. The strange thing was that he enjoyed it; he liked doing it and he liked the reaction. Somewhere deep down inside, he longed to disfigure the image of the sheikh as it was perceived in people’s minds, and through the lens of a camera. That very day, he had already found himself chafing against the role fate had determined for him. He had been sitting on the second floor of his house in the citadel which had been turned into a large, open seating area. It was regularly teeming with visitors, all eager to see him for advice, fatwas, charity, mediation with officials or a reference for a job.

In the quiet of the early hours, he was just about to set off for the dawn prayer along with the small group that still remained, when his father came for him and led him to the only private room at the end of the hall. He sat him down in front of him, both of them exhausted. He saw in his father’s features the same ambiguous expression that he had long struggled to decipher. Between them stood the pain of when his father had taken a second wife – a divorcée twenty-five years his junior. Then, Hatem had still been in the early days of his media appearances and was only a preacher at a state mosque, although he was already impressing worshippers with his eloquence: the mosque was starting to fill up and people were recording his sermons on tape. Throughout those years, he had buried the pain of his father’s

actions deep within and neither of them had uttered a word about the marriage. Neither of them confronted it nor could even consider confronting it, not even when his mother came to him, broken and dejected, and told him that his father's new wife was pregnant and that her daughters, his four sisters, had decided to boycott the house. None of them would ever again bring her family to visit. He had remained silent and embraced his mother that day, immersing himself in the primordial intensity of the relationship between a mother and son, something untamed in his carefully structured life. Later, his father's second wife gave birth to a stillborn child. Hatem found out when he was in the studio recording a programme, and in front of the lighting technicians, camera men and studio audience, he had said out loud: "All this medicine and science . . . and still we have children dying as they come out of their mother's bellies. Our Lord does like to remind us that we're nothing!"

He treated the matter lightly at the time, but it always came back to haunt him. Even now he felt a crushing pain on seeing his father. Drained by sadness and grief, his father seemed physically healthy but psychologically broken. He was entering his eighties and had left behind any desire to engage with the world. There in that room, shortly before the dawn prayer and after a long night receiving visitors, Hatem had a rare moment of sitting together with his father, at his request. He felt like the door of destiny had been pushed ajar and there was something new, or renewed, asking permission to enter.

"What's wrong, Hatem?" his father asked.

"What do you mean, Dad?" he replied.

"What's the matter with you? Why can't you believe that you're a Sheikh?"

He was taken aback by the observation. It wasn't because it was so out of the blue or because it had struck a nerve, but, rather, because it had come from someone he had presumed for the last five years was content merely to observe from afar.

"What makes me a Sheikh, Dad?" he countered.

"Well, if you're not a Sheikh, then what are you? You've memorised the Qur'an, you're always reciting it, leading prayers and giving sermons, you memorise fatwas and deliver your own, you're full of stories from the Prophet's life . . . all of that definitely qualifies you to be a Sheikh, no doubt about it. And your success with people puts you at the forefront of them all."

Hatem sighed and then revealed something that he'd never truly admitted even to himself: "Does all of that make me a Sheikh? I suppose it does sound like a Sheikh's job description. But I'm not sure. I just tell what I know." He put his arm around his father, murmuring: "All right, Dad. Shall we say the dawn *salat* together? I can recite *sura* Yasin if you like?"

"No, no need," his father replied, earnestly. "But I'd love you to finish the *salat* with the dawn prayer. You do that so nicely."

"OK," he laughed, touched by his father's opinion of him. "I should have a show called 'The Prayers Request Show!'"

The lighting suddenly came on more brightly and the make-up lady finished powdering Anwar's forehead and cheeks. Anwar straightened his tie and checked his fly before turning to the director.

"Medhat, does my tie look OK? Is it straight?"

Sheikh Hatem no longer felt the shiver of nerves creeping up his throat or the contractions wrapping around his stomach just before they were about to go live on air. He shouted to the control room, where the director sat with his assistants grunting commands and prompts, or soothing words, into Anwar's ears through the tiny headset buried in his ear and attached to a wire coiled around his back.

"Guys, can someone put a picture of me on the monitor so I can check. Quickly, otherwise I'll ask God to curse you!"

They all burst out laughing. Then, after seeing his picture on the screen and being quite reassured, he heard the director's voice. "OK, we're ready to go, Mr Anwar, Sheikh Hatem. Ready in three – two, one, roll."

Anwar smiled and, somehow looking better than he normally did, began.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Peace and God's mercy and blessings be upon you and welcome to another episode of our programme. Today we have with us the preacher and Islamic scholar Sheikh Hatem Shinawi." As he turned to his guest, the camera zoomed in and showed Hatem smiling and nodding.

"And peace be upon you, too, my brother Anwar. I look forward to your questions, sir. Let's see if you've set any traps for us tonight!" They both laughed.

Contemplating the red light that illuminated a rectangle above the camera, Hatem had the sense of being in an enhanced state of readiness, like troops lined up for

review. It was this light that, the instant it was turned on, unleashed the latent potential of its colour. Washed with this blood-red tinge, everything was tainted: human beings were reduced to mere objects to be inspected on television. It forced an introvert out of his shell, lent solemnity to the depraved and dignity to the farcical, added a veneer of respect to those fallen from grace. Hatem had never suffered from the awkwardness most feel when facing this light for the first time. Many people needed time before they adapted to the red light, before they were transformed and could move about comfortably in its glow. They waited like inanimate objects for the light above the camera to bring them to life the second the live broadcast began; they needed this command before they adopted their new persona, wearing another's clothes or assuming the voice or soul of another, which enabled them to sit there in a captive pose of homage to this entrancing light.

But this was Sheikh Hatem. From the first instance, he was fully at ease with it, as though already trained to perform or as though every step he took in his daily life were bathed in this red light. Whether he was at the pulpit or delivering a lecture, on Facebook or on his website, in the company of friends or those who came to study and pray with him, in a restaurant or relaxing at home – he was always in the red spotlight. Even in his car, people would gather round wanting to greet him and shake his hand, praising him, asking him for a blessing or firing questions at him. Like a famous storyteller performing on a street corner, being coaxed into telling another joke, he would find himself surrounded by crowds lurking out of curiosity, hankering after his informed opinion on one thing or another. He even basked in this red light when he went to the bathroom in a restaurant or when he parked his car at his apartment block and had to fight his way through the swarms of security guards and doormen. They would try to push their way into the lift with him, desperate to experience his presence first hand and be able to go home and tell their friends and family they had been blessed with his close proximity, reporting back every detail of the way he whispered or laughed or scowled or walked. For Hatem, this red light seemed to occupy the space between his soul and his body – and Hatem was confused about whether there was an imaginary gap between the two or whether they somehow touched – and it compelled him to obey. As he could never be sure if someone might be looking on, watching and witnessing his life, he tended to his appearance constantly, glancing up every now and then at the ceiling

of his bedroom, as though waiting for the crimson light to flash on, turning him into the self that was open for display. The result was that his real self seemed to have gone astray, and he was no longer sure he would recognise it or its distinguishing features, making him resort permanently to this other self, the reassuring, well-trained performing self. This was why his relatives – who longed to cling to the bond they once had with his rarely seen original self – found him strangely silent. They found the silence of a talkative man strange, just as he too found his own silence strange, though it helped save his energy for facing the moments in the real red spotlight. After all, he needed to be in good shape and fully alert to obey orders to do this and that and go here and there. One day he discovered it was no longer him but rather the well-trained beast of the red light who appeared in the company of his father and his sisters. It had reached the point where the question of his self filled him with such doubts that he no longer knew if Hatem Shinawi had become an entirely new person, replacing the old one altogether, or if he had just become so well-versed and proficient at performing to the red light that he barely seemed the same man he once was.

*Translated by Ruth Ahmedzai*