

# The Televangelist

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THE MAKE-UP ARTIST DABBED POWDER on Sheikh Hatem's forehead with the finesse of a professional.

"That's perfect, Mawlana," she said, looking to him for approval.

"God bless you, Georgette," he replied with a laugh.

Anwar Othman made the same lame remark he'd been making all year long, ever since he became the host of Hatem's program.

"All those people you lead in prayer, your disciples, the people who ask you for fatwas, how do you think they'd feel if they saw you putting on make-up before filming?"

"The Prophet used to henna his hair and put kohl on his eyes. For God's sake, enough of these silly questions of yours, Anwar," Hatem replied, firmly but cheerfully.

Sheikh Hatem had found Anwar unbearable from the first time they met, when the Dunya channel suggested him as his partner in a new program. The channel had persuaded Hatem to change the format of his program to broaden its appeal. Instead of standing among the audience or having young people sit in front of him on stands while he told stories or preached, he now had a daily program in which he took questions from viewers of all ages and social classes. In fact the channel's argument never really convinced Hatem. The people who came to hear his sermon in the Sultan Hassan mosque every Friday were ordinary people too, and they filled

every inch of the mosque, which could hold several thousand people, not counting the ones who sat outside. And when he went to his father's house near the Citadel on Tuesdays, hundreds of men and women came seeking baraka and blessings or asking for fatwas or for money. He deferred to the owners of the television station because the fee they offered him was tempting, but right from the start something about Anwar had reminded him of an insect.

"He's like a pesky fly that gets inside the car when you've put the air conditioning on," he once said, "and you keep opening the window to get it out but it doesn't go, and then it buzzes against the window and you think it's planning to get out, but as soon as you open the window it goes and lands on the back of your neck."

They laughed. Hatem spoke with such solemnity, recited the Quran so eloquently, and was so quick with sayings of the Prophet and stories from the Prophet's life that it came across as a contradiction when he spoke in a way that didn't conform to the usual image. It took people by surprise but, at least as far as Sheikh Hatem could see, they approved of the fact that a preacher who gave fatwas was a man like them, a man who sometimes spoke rudely, who had material demands, and who liked to say outlandish things. They seemed relieved that sheikhs were closer to them than to God. He knew that the image people had of him was shaken when he sprang a joke on them. People would no longer treat him with the respect due a sheikh or a mufti. Oddly he liked that, to see their reaction, because deep down he wanted to subvert the image people had of sheikhs, which television perpetuated.

He still remembered clearly how one day, at a time when he was finding his way out of the cocoon of adolescence and thinking hard about his aptitude for the role in life he had chosen, he had been sitting on the second floor of his father's house near the Citadel. They had turned the room into a large hall where dozens of visitors would come and sit, each

with their own objective—to get a look, to obtain a fatwa or charity, to ask Hatem to intervene with an official, or to seek a recommendation for a job. In a quiet period after a long night, when those who were left were about to go to dawn prayers, his father took him aside in a private room at the end of the hall and sat him down in front of him. They were both exhausted and his father’s face had a mysterious look that he couldn’t decipher. Between them stood a barrier—the painful memory of his father taking a second wife, a divorcee twenty-five years younger than Hatem’s father. His father remarried when Hatem was just starting out in the media. At the time he was only a preacher in a government-run mosque but he had caught the attention of congregants through the quality of his sermons. The mosque would fill up and people recorded his sermons on cassettes. Hatem suppressed the pain of his father’s second marriage and neither of them had said a word about it for all those years. They had never confronted each other on the subject, or even thought of doing so, even when his mother, humiliated and pushed aside, told him that his father’s new wife was pregnant and that his four sisters had decided to boycott their father’s house. None of them ever took their children there again. Hatem had said nothing. He just hugged his mother, in that intense and natural way typical of a son’s relationship with his mother. But as if something was amiss in the order of the world, his father’s second wife gave birth to a boy that died the moment it was born. When they told Hatem, he was in a studio recording his program.

“We have all this medicine and science,” he had told the audience, which was paid to attend. “Yet there are still children who die coming out of their mother’s wombs. Yes, folks, God sometimes likes to remind us that we are nothing.”

His father was entering his eighties in good health but he was willingly turning his back on the world. There in that room, just before dawn prayers and after the gathering had broken up, on

the occasion of this rare meeting that his father had requested, Hatem felt that destiny was knocking on the door and something new or unexpected was about to happen in their lives.

“What’s wrong, Hatem?” asked his father.

“Nothing, Father.”

“Why can’t you believe you’re a sheikh?” his father replied.

He was stunned by the remark, not because it was a surprise, not because it was correct, but because it came from someone he thought had been content just to look on for the past five years.

“But am I a sheikh, Father?”

“What else? If you’re not a sheikh, then what are you? You know the Quran by heart and you know how to recite it, you lead people in prayer and give sermons, you’ve memorized fatwas and you give fatwas of your own, and you have a wealth of stories about the Prophet. All that certainly gives you a place among the sheikhs. In fact your success with people gives you a leading place among them.”

Hatem sighed and revealed something he had never before revealed candidly or comfortably, even to himself.

“Does that make a sheikh! That’s a civil servant with the rank of sheikh. You know what I am, Father? I’m a merchant of learning.”

Then he wrapped his arms around his father and muttered, “Come on, Father, let’s go to dawn prayers. Would you like me to recite the Yassin chapter for you during the prayers?”

“No,” his father replied earnestly. “I want the dawn supplication in the second prostration, because you say it so beautifully.”

Proud of his father’s opinion, Hatem had laughed and said, “Very well. I should do a request program for people who are about to pray.”

The lights went up and the make-up woman finished powdering Anwar’s forehead and cheeks while he did up his buttons.

“Medhat,” he asked the director, “is my tie straight? Could you check?”

Sheikh Hatem no longer had stage fright, those palpitations in his rib cage or the cramps in his guts before the live feed began. The director and his assistants were sitting in the control room, along with the producers who would grunt into Anwar’s ear through the small earpiece attached to a wire strapped to his back, prompting him, encouraging him, or calming him down. Sheikh Hatem shouted to them through the glass:

“Hey guys, could someone put my picture on the monitor so I can check it, or else I’ll lay a curse on all of you.”

They burst out laughing.

The picture came up and he checked everything was in order. Then he heard the director’s voice:

“Everything’s ready. Anwar, Sheikh Hatem, we’re going on air. Three, two, one, action.”

Anwar smiled. He looked nicer than he looked in real life.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening,” he said. “Peace be upon you and the blessings of God. Welcome to a new installment of our program. Today we have with us the preacher and Islamic scholar, his grace Sheikh Hatem el-Shenawi.”

He turned to Hatem and the camera panned out, showing Hatem smiling as he bowed his head.

“And good evening to you too, Anwar. Let’s hear your questions, sir, and see what traps you’ve set for us tonight.”

They both laughed.

Whenever Hatem saw the red light that lit up on the camera, he went on alert like a performer ready to perform. The red light activates latent powers of adaptation. You change from a human being to a televised creature on display, cheerful even if you’re annoyed, serious when you’re feeling flippant, dignified in the midst of a farce, respectable even in the face of lewdness. Hatem had quickly adapted to this style of performing. Many people needed time to get used to the red light

as the signal for adopting a persona or a voice that was not theirs and to become completely captive to the magic light, whereas Sheikh Hatem was a trained creature almost from the first moment. It was as if he had lived by the red light all his life and it was with him wherever he was—in the pulpit, giving a lecture, posting on his Facebook page or on his website, among friends, with his followers, in a restaurant, at a wedding, in his car when people noticed and greeted him, shook hands with him, praised him, asked him for baraka or blessings, or asked him a question like someone asking a famous comedian that they happened to meet on the corner to tell them the latest joke. People were so inquisitive they would even ask for his latest fatwa if they saw him in the bathroom at a fancy fish restaurant. When he got out of his car and went to the elevator, the security men and the doormen would crowd around him, savoring his presence, seeking a memento of having shared a space with him so that they could tell their families or friends about it. His whisper, his laugh, the way he knitted his brow or the way he walked—everything was monitored and followed, so he put on his own red light, somewhere between his mind and his body.

This imaginary divide, or interface, confused him and forced him to constantly obey the red light, because one never knew who might be watching. Often he even caught himself staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, waiting for the red light to flash on so that he could assume the persona he adopted when performing. His real self seemed to have gone missing or been dissolved. He had started to find his real self strange or had forgotten what it looked like, so he would resort to the self that he had trained himself to adopt and that he felt at ease with. Because of this, those close to him—the rare ones who retained old ties to him—thought he was silent and aloof. They thought it odd that a man who was usually so talkative should be silent. He was also surprised by his silence, but he saved his energy so that he would be ready when the

red light came on. He needed to be in perfect health and on the alert so that when he received an order he could obey and when he was summoned he could appear. One day he discovered that in the company of his father and his sisters he was the trained red-light creature and not his real self. He had reached the point where he was no longer certain who he was. He no longer knew if he was a new version of Hatem el-Shenawi, different from the old one that was no more, or whether he had changed into something that combined the human being he used to be with the training and skill of the person who obeyed the red light. All this put the relationship between him and his wife Omayma on ice for years, during which time neither of them ever thought of taking it out of the freezer and putting it under the hot water tap to thaw out. Their feelings were preserved in ice to keep them from going bad but they were never taken out to reinvigorate their marriage. What they had in common was this sense of being adrift as they sought out their true selves. Fame and luxury had changed him, and he had changed her. On the rare evenings when he wasn't caught up with the television programs, the recordings, the soirees or the sessions with businessmen, producers, and sponsors, they would sit together. But the atmosphere would soon chill and the conversation would wither. The links frayed but never broke, and the two of them largely kept their distance.

“God damn the red light,” he said.

He could hear the music of the commercial break after Anwar's dreadful introduction. No ringmaster in any circus could have done better. Hatem thought of the peddlers who used to come round with toys.

“Put it on its chest it lights up, put it on its legs it lights up, it lights up red,” the peddlers cried.

“Welcome back. I can tell you that this episode will, God willing, be very important and very serious, and we'll pose

many of the questions you have in mind about religion and the world. Our telephone numbers and email addresses are on the screen as usual and you can also send SMSs to the number on the screen. Sheikh Hatem el-Shenawi, I welcome you again and I'd like to ask you about the saying that wealth and children are the adornment of life in this world. How can we turn this adornment into something that serves God Almighty?"

Hatem checked that the red light had switched to him this time so that he could start. He followed the light like a sunflower follows the sun. When it came to him it was time to react to what the anchor had said. He smiled, nodded, and sighed to the camera as if Anwar had spoken pearls of wisdom, though what he had said was really quite naive and trivial. Hatem knew that Anwar had hardly read a verse of the Quran and the last book he had read was the textbook of the last subject he was tested on in university. He knew for sure that Anwar didn't pray. Anwar worshiped the red light, a true devotee. Before he came he always memorized the Quranic verses he was going to cite in the conversation and he would jump in whenever there was a gap and recite the verses as if he had been born in a minaret. As a result many people thought he had memorized the whole Quran, and not just the script for the program.

Hatem leaned his head back and held out his hands in front of him with his prayer beads. His vocal cords received orders to sound solemn and impressive. The words came out of his mouth into the microphone attached to the edge of his suit jacket.

"Look, Anwar, what does the verse say? It says 'wealth and children.' So wealth comes first, because if you have children but not wealth that means poverty and want, which you don't want. Then it says 'the adornment of this life.' What are we to understand from that?"

Mischievously, playfully, yet with true professionalism, he pressed Anwar to respond.

“Go on then, what do you think?”

Then with a smile:

“Are you only clever enough to ask questions? Come on, what’s your answer, brother?”

Anwar laughed and looked into the camera lens as though the exchange was part of a script they had worked out months earlier.

“We should read it as meaning that wealth and children are the most important things in the world,” Anwar finally volunteered.

Hatem broke into the end of Anwar’s sentence with a laugh.

“No, my good man, it means that wealth and children are not this life. They are just an adornment, and not the essence of life. They are not life. Isn’t it the All-knowing and Almighty who says in His noble book *We have adorned the lower heaven with lamps*. ‘The lower heaven’ is the sky that we see, rather than the rest of the seven heavens, and the lamps are the stars in the sky. The sky has a role and the stars have a role. The stars appear one day and not the next, but does the world come to a halt? Not at all. If the stars disappeared the sky would continue. Its role lies in rain, sun, the atmosphere, and the ozone layer before they make holes in what’s left of it. And this exactly parallels the relationship between this life and wealth and children. They are an adornment like the lamps, and notice that we use the same word to describe the two—we say ‘the lower life’ and ‘the lower heaven’—because we know that there’s more than one heaven and more than one life. So wealth and children are an adornment, a veneer, a brooch on the lapel of your jacket, dye for gray hair, like the couple that I have.” He stroked his head to get a smile from Anwar, and Anwar complied immediately. The camera moved from Hatem looking at Anwar and stroking his hair, to Anwar’s smile, and when he was sure that the director had caught it, he took his hands off his temples and continued. “Money and children are all well

and good but they're not the issue. They are the crème Chantilly on this lower life, a cherry on the cake but not the cake."

Theatrically, Sheikh Hatem broke off there.

"It looks like you're hungry with all this talk of cake," he added.

"Very well, now that you've made our mouths water, we'll cut for a break, Mawlana, and have a bite to eat before we come back," Anwar answered quickly.

Anwar turned to the camera, proud of how the program was going and confident he had chosen a good moment to stop.

"God willing, we'll resume the conversation with our sheikh, the great promoter of Islam, Hatem el-Shenawi, after a short break," he said. "Stay with us."

As soon as he was off camera, Hatem lost interest. Adverts appeared on the screen—dancing colors, sexy girls running around after soft drinks, with close-up shots of their lips, glossed the color of peaches, as the liquid poured suggestively into their mouths. Then a half-naked young man appeared and an irresistible woman sauntered up to him, took a deep breath, and let her hair loose as if rehearsing for when she would let it down for him. Then a bottle of perfume suddenly appeared on the screen like some new elixir that would attract women and make them fall in love.

The cameraman pulled the earpiece out of his ear and said, "My God, you were brilliant, Mawlana."

"Thanks," Hatem replied.

He turned to the director, who was sitting in the control room, and raised his voice.

"Haven't I told you to speak to the owner of the station or the general manager and tell them that Hatem el-Shenawi doesn't want indecent ads running during his program," he said. "I mean, I go on and on about morals and Islam and then some girl jumps on a guy as soon as Anwar says 'let's cut for a break.' I'm starting to feel that 'break' is a bad word."

The director's guffaws boomed into the studio through the internal loudspeakers and the cameramen laughed in turn. The cameramen often gathered around him as soon as the taping was over or during the breaks, asking him questions about religious matters, most of them trivial and vacuous. He talked himself hoarse explaining to them that they needn't trouble themselves with useless knowledge or worrying that there were things they didn't know. But, as the cameramen changed and new faces appeared asking pretty much the same questions, he realized it was pointless and he had to keep his cool as he swallowed the inane questions. He gave brief, reassuring answers that were no less inane than the questions but that at least poured cold water on their curiosity. All of them—the sound technicians who had earpieces in their ears as if they were palace guards, the workers who did the wiring, the ones who dusted the table where they sat and cleaned it with some foul-smelling substance or wiped away any footprints on the floor, or sprayed a mist to polish the glass, those who spruced up Anwar's and the sheikh's clothes—all of them fell silent and stopped scurrying about and whispering to each other as soon as the voice rang out from the control room:

“Three, two, one, action.”

The red light gave the order to Anwar, who opened his mouth and smiled.

“We're back after the break and we're still with Sheikh Hatem el-Shenawi. Before the break we were talking about wealth and children as the adornment of this lower life.”

Hatem broke into Anwar's sentence to liven up the discussion after Anwar's rather flat introduction.

“Look, dear brother, the verse talks about wealth and children as the adornment of this life. Then you find another verse saying, *The day when man flees from his brother, his mother, his father, his consort, and his children*. Look at the order God has put them in, to show the horror of the Day of Judgment. He says, ‘You with the money and the children, come and

see on the Day of Judgment what you'll do with your children.' On the list, who do you flee from first? Your brother, who's your ally, who comes from the same womb, who is of the same flesh and blood, then your mother, who's the most precious person in your life. In other words there's nothing more terrifying than forgetting and running away from your own mother. I don't think there could be anything more contemptible to show you've reached the level of complete terror. After that comes your father, then the consort, that is your wife, then your children, lovely, and of course the list might be in ascending order of proximity of relationship, starting with the brother, who could handle it if you abandoned him, then your mother, who might forgive you running away. If she saw you as a child running away, she would forgive you. You know what a mother's heart is like. Then the same for your father, then comes your wife, who might shame you in this world if you tried abandoning her. Then comes the ultimate test of the great terror—abandoning the fruit of your loins on the Day of Judgment and running away from them—and they of course are the adornment of this lower life.”

Sheikh Hatem paused for a moment, thinking that the explanation might be hard for Anwar and the audience to understand. He then decided to lighten it up to pull together all the disparate strands.

“That's nice and it's new. So tell me, is that the first time you've heard that?” he said.

Anwar shook his head.

“No, but it's right on the mark, Mawlana.”

Hatem responded with firm dignity in a tone that reproached anyone who might think he was joking. “But see how God finishes off the verse. He asserts His divine wisdom by saying, *And the good deeds that endure are best in the eyes of the Lord as the basis for reward, and for hope.* So not only do the good deeds that survive you bring better rewards. No, here there's an inevitable addition, that they are better as the basis for hope.

That means you should put your hope in what you do that's substantial, not in the adornments you're attached to, whether money or children or whatever."

Anwar, unable to bear these moments of earnestness and Hatem's stern gaze when he started talking like a sheikh in a turban and a caftan, hurriedly looked up and put the palm of his hand to his ear to hear the voice of the producer read him the name of someone who called in by phone.

"We have a telephone call from Samir in Cairo," he said. "Good evening, Samir."

The voice started off as a mumble, saying, "Peace be upon you and the blessings of God, Mr. Anwar and Sheikh Hatem."

"And peace be upon you, Samir," Anwar replied.

"And peace be upon you," Hatem mumbled with him.

The caller broke the moment of silence that broadcasters hate, especially Hatem, because they suggest hesitation, slow thinking, and badly prepared questions, but the substance of Samir's question was very far from welcome.

"What news of Omar, Mawlana, or have you forgotten him?" he asked.

The call was cut off and the phone line made a whistling sound.

The call hit him like a right hook knocking out a tooth, delivered by a boxer that struck and then disappeared in a flash. People who appear on live programs are used to calls that are stupid or weird, or that insult them to their faces and then mysteriously cut off, or that are set up by malicious, envious rivals. This call could have been like one of those, and he could have let it pass, but this one had such an impact on him that Anwar noticed and tried to cover for him. He avoided looking at Hatem's face or making any reference to the phone call, but instead went on with another call. Anwar definitely knew who Omar was, and Hatem knew that Anwar knew who Omar was.



Hatem thought back to when his wife Omayma announced that she was going along with a proposal that their son Omar should go abroad for treatment. Hatem had expected a big battle with the doctors but Omayma had disarmed him by agreeing. Her attitude surprised him and he questioned it:

“It’s strange that you didn’t refuse!”

“Why strange? It’s logical and common sense and it’s in Omar’s interest. I’m sure it’s in his interest,” she said.

“It’s in his interest to leave us, and live alone in a foreign country, and in a place like that?” he answered.

That provoked her.

“I had to agree. The boy needs very special care and therapy. And if you still cared and paid attention, you’d see I’ve run myself ragged looking after him. I’m ready to carry on and even die for his sake, but as long as there’s hope of a solution, why shouldn’t he go away?”

She waited for him to answer but he didn’t, so she continued, “And besides, what does being far away mean? Can you be far away these days, what with cell phones and the Internet and Skype? Thirty years ago people used to talk about ‘being far away.’ And besides, I’ll go and see him to keep an eye on him from time to time, and the whole thing will just take a year or a little longer.”

He remembered how the doctor smiled as he pulled him over to the incubator where they had put Omar moments after he was born.

He had taken Hatem’s hand and said, “Don’t worry. This is just a precautionary measure, I swear the boy will be just fine.”

He pulled the baby in his white wrappings from under a warm light inside a metal crib and lifted him toward Hatem.

“There you are, Hatem, the crown prince,” he said.

Hatem was smitten, instantly and forever. He was overwhelmed with tenderness for this fragile bundle of human flesh. Somewhere deep inside him, perhaps in the lining of his

kidney or somewhere in his heart, there was a burst of emotion and affection that grew inside him until it seemed to prevent him from being himself, because he was so worried about Omar. If Omar had a temperature Hatem was in torment, as though the boy was going to die and he was going to die with him. If Omar fell ill, Hatem was shaken. He went back to his books, searched in all the biographies of the Prophet and looked through all the bound volumes in the hope of chancing upon someone whose child had the same disease, but he found none. When he thought about the death of the Prophet's son Ibrahim and the Prophet's sadness, he fell to pieces. If, in one of his sermons or lectures, he stumbled into a story about a father losing his son, he would break down in tears.

Like all fathers he didn't think any father had ever worried about his son as much as he did. When he saw him asleep in his crib he was in agony because he loved Omar so much and was so attached to him. Omar had been born after years of desperate waiting and frantic efforts by doctors and laboratories. They had calculated peak fertility times for having sex, which made sex more like a laboratory experiment than something intimate, wild, and passionate. He was on the rise at the time and his fame was spreading but every night he was pulled down by the feeling that for some reason they didn't deserve to have children. When Omar finally arrived he tried to protect himself from his weakness toward his son through learning, piety, manliness, and fame. He was strong and self-sufficient, or so he deluded himself, and he had no problem being weak toward a single creature. His weakness toward Omar would strengthen him against the world. Omayma opposed his obsession with his son and consulted psychiatrists (this is what he gathered from her without them discussing it openly), in the hope that he would get over his obsession, but all attempts failed.

Then one day Omar fell into a swimming pool in front of Hatem's eyes on an outing to the club. Omayma screamed

at the pool attendant and the people around Hatem—fans, people seeking fatwas, and a crowd of club members—all dispersed. Hatem didn't hear what Omayma said, but he understood what she meant. He was speechless, paralyzed. Every muscle in his body started to go limp, none of his senses worked properly, and a strange feeling came over him. They pulled Omar out and brought him to Hatem in the arms of his swimming instructor, with his mother behind him, stooped, terrified, anxious, bewildered, and confused. Hatem was very distant and didn't know how he managed to stand up and walk with Omar and Omayma and take the child to the hospital, where Omar lay in a coma for weeks. At night Hatem spent time alone in the dark room, shaking and banging his head on the wall, slapping his cheeks, pulling out his hair, and muffling his cries by biting his hand. Then after two hours he left the room and realized he would have been relieved if he had been told that his son had died. From that day on, his sense of guilt and of abandoning the boy guided his behavior toward his son, who did not die.

He knew that Omar's trip abroad would be a relief for Omayma and a reason for hope. Besides it was what the doctors had recommended. But it pulled a stone out of the wall that was their relationship, like that stone that Sinmar the architect inserted into the palace he built for the king. Sinmar knew how to find the stone that, if removed, would bring down the whole palace. His reward was that the king killed him for fear he might use the secret against him. Omayma was pulling the stone out of its place and finishing off the demolition of the dilapidated wall. Omar was his life.

Hatem didn't hear the question that the next caller threw at Anwar. But, with the red light on, he somehow managed to keep talking, spouting grandiose nonsense interspersed with prayers, Quranic verses, and hadith of the Prophet. It was the kind of material that would serve in response to any

question—his usual recourse whenever he had to improvise. Eventually Anwar, aware that the sheikh hadn't been listening to the viewer's question, stepped in to save him by throwing him a quick clue. Hatem picked up the clue and got back on track immediately. But while this 'game of professionals' was playing out between them, Hatem was asking himself who that first caller that had floored him with the question about Omar was. Was it the father of one of Omar's friends? But the voice sounded old. Was it Omayma? But the caller was a man. Who would know that Sheikh Hatem's son was unwell, in order to be able to ask the question in the first place?

"Thank you for that thorough answer, Sheikh Hatem el-Shenawi, and now we have a call from Raouf in Alexandria. Go ahead, Raouf, we can hear you."

The voice was metallic, as if it came from wires wrapped in plastic rather than the vocal cords in the throat of a human being.

Raouf, or the man who gave his name as Raouf, said, "I'd like to ask Sheikh Hatem el-Shenawi whether it's true that the Prophet ogled his neighbor's wife."

Anwar's heart leapt because this was a question that would enliven the program. In his eyes Hatem saw the gleam of a spectator watching the bull entering the ring and heading for the matador. Anwar interrupted the caller.

"That's a serious question, and it deserves us asking what exactly you mean, brother Raouf."

From the rhythm of Raouf's speech Hatem had the impression he was reading from a piece of paper. Raouf replied:

"One of the Christians who works with us heard me say something about Islam and he got angry and shouted at me, 'Well, you should know for a start what your Prophet did. Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, and I ask mercy of God, looked at the wife of his neighbor and his son, Zeid bin Haritha.'"

Hatem smiled.

“He told you it was Zeid bin Haritha?” he said.

“Yes,” Raouf confirmed.

“And he didn’t mention Zeinab bint Jahsh at all?” asked Hatem.

“He did in fact say a name something like that.”

There were murmurs and an anxious shuffling of feet among the cameramen. Anwar found himself out of the picture so he decided to find a way back in.

“Sheikh Hatem,” he said. “Clearly with some callers we’re getting into a debate with other religions that we shouldn’t get into because it could get acrimonious.”

Hatem laughed, easing the tension in the air.

“Well, it’s clear that Raouf was anxious and confused and that leads us to remind all the viewers and all those in the live audience here with us today—an assembly of learning on which blessings from heaven descend—that they have to ask religious experts so that they don’t get confused or misunderstand things. This remark that the viewer cited, quoting a Christian colleague of his, and I say this with full respect for our fellow human beings and compatriots, is one of a bunch of accusations made by people who hate the Prophet of Islam and are ignorant about him, and that is the incident of the Prophet’s marriage to Zeinab bint Jahsh, may God be pleased with her.”

Anwar realized that this was a climactic moment but the director in the control room, whispering through his earpiece, was giving him frantic instructions.

“Break, Anwar, time for the commercials,” he said.

Everyone was hot to hear Hatem’s answer.

When Anwar cut to the break, Sheikh Hatem cried out, “You sons of devils, how could you do that? Now there are three or four million people watching who are dying to hear the story of this wife of his neighbor.”

He heard the director’s voice shouting boastfully, “See the suspense, Mawlana!”

Anwar submitted to the hands of the woman fixing his make-up.

“But Mawlana, isn’t that Raouf guy a Christian?” he said.

“How would I know?” Hatem cut in. “Ask Georgette who’s wiping your face and doing your make-up.”

Georgette gave them a smile that revealed nothing.

“Every religion has all sorts of people, Mawlana,” she said.

Anwar jumped in jokingly.

“Watch out for your livelihood, Georgette,” he said.

Hatem was almost certain that the call had come from the control room and that the person who made it was from the production team and that his colleagues were impressed when he ended the call so professionally. Hatem leaned back, staring into space and turning away from Anwar and Georgette toward a new cameraman who was always wearing him out with questions such as what Lot’s wife was called and how old Noah was and how the people of Sodom and Gomorrah reproduced if the men had no interest in women and in what language the ant spoke to King Solomon (on that occasion Hatem said he didn’t know but it was probably dubbed into colloquial Syrian, like all the soap operas these days!). After a program they did on how just the Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab was he asked a real stunner: “Was Omar ibn al-Khattab bald?” Hatem thought he might be about to ask another question about Maria, the Prophet’s Egyptian Coptic wife, so he pre-empted him. “Is there any greater baraka than that of Maria the Copt, that Alexandrian beauty who so impressed the men of Medina?” he said.

He looked at the wooden screens behind the cameras and the plastic panels around the room, the technicians sitting on four seats behind a console that looked like an electronic organ, with round headphones on their ears, the frantic movement, and the jostling as they arranged the wires along the ground or rolled them up in enormous spools and plugged them into electrical sockets. He looked at the peeling paint,

the torn wallpaper, and the dark noisy corners that were the antithesis of the corner that the camera filmed, with its cheerful colors, bright lights, and ordered glitter. He looked up and saw all the metal rails and the dozens of interlocking poles, the high ceilings, the aluminum scaffolding, the massive spotlights fixed to the ceiling, carefully distributed and attached, very high up, and that steel arm like the ladder on a fire truck with a camera on the end that moved and turned like the eye of heaven looking down at their fake, artificial patch of light—a little island of smart furniture, bright colors, tailored clothes, and a polished floor amid a world of terrifying chaos, invisible ugliness, and hidden pretense.

“We’re back after the break.”

The red light took everyone by surprise. Anwar repeated the question posed by Raouf, stressing the words and clearly wanting to whet the appetite of the viewers. Then he asked Sheikh Hatem to reply.

“We’d like to hear, Mawlana, your answer to these allegations propagated by the opponents of Islam, this skepticism about the integrity of the Prophet. Apparently they want to portray him as a man who lusted after women and who was driven by his desires, God forbid, whereas we of course deem him to be above all failings.”

Hatem nodded and said, “First of all I’d like to affirm two truths: first, that a Muslim who is well educated and knows how to defend Islam is not afraid of questions and does not tremble in the face of accusations, and second, that Muhammad ibn Abdullah was both a prophet and a human being, in other words there is a human side to the Prophet. Now we’re talking about the story of his marriage to Zeinab bint Jahsh, may God be pleased with her. But we’re not going to say anything that isn’t in the standard texts, and what does that mean? That means the major works of Quranic exegesis by recognized scholars. I’ll keep myself out of this and tell you only what’s in their books. The story has its roots in the

Quranic verse *Behold! You said to one who had received the grace of God and your favor: 'Keep your wife, and fear God.'* But you hid in your heart that which God was about to make manifest: you were afraid of the people, but it is more fitting that you should fear God.

“In Bukhari, citing Anas bin Malik, we find this verse: *You hid in your heart that which God was about to make manifest.* This verse was revealed in connection with Zeinab bint Jahsh and Zeid bin Haritha and it is said that ‘God never revealed to his Prophet a verse harder on him than this verse.’ See, Anwar, how seriously it intrudes on the Prophet’s private affairs. So much so that Hassan and Aisha said, ‘If the Prophet of God had suppressed anything that God revealed to him, he would have suppressed this verse because it is so hard on him.’ And notice, Anwar, how openly that possibility is discussed—‘if the Prophet of God had suppressed anything.’ An impossible assumption and some people imagine that it discredits the Prophet, yet Hassan and Aisha say it and the books of exegesis carry it, so if something had been suppressed this would have been the most likely verse because it has a divine disclosure of private feelings, what the Prophet’s private feelings were on this occasion, and note, these are his feelings as a human being, not as a prophet, first because he wanted Zeinab for himself, second because he hid those feelings, and third, because he was afraid of people ‘and God is more worthy to be feared.’

“In other words, folks, when we find ourselves in a weak position and too embarrassed to declare an opinion or our feelings because we can’t confront people with them and we’re worried what people will say, then this is quite natural. Even the Prophet Muhammad felt it, and the story says that ‘In the evening Zeid took to his bed. And Zeinab said, “Zeid couldn’t handle me. He wouldn’t do things with me, but not because they were things that God had forbidden, but because he wasn’t my equal.”’ Now listen carefully, no one go far from the television, folks, and don’t answer that phone that’s ringing beside you, please, because listening to

only half of what I have to say would be dangerous. Zeinab herself, who would later be the Mother of the Faithful, is narrating the most intimate details of her relationship. She's speaking, in books that will be read by millions of people until the Day of Judgment, about things that happened in the conjugal bed. She even says that her husband wasn't capable. Of course we understand here what she means when she says he wasn't 'capable' and 'he couldn't handle me.' It's clear she was surprised how bad he was in bed. Then Zeid realized. If it had been an ordinary incident, it would have passed without her noticing, and if he hadn't been able to handle her on other nights before, it wouldn't have mattered. But what happened that night suggested such obvious impotence, driven by God's will, that Zeid went to the Prophet the next morning and said, 'Zeinab is tormenting me with her tongue, and going on and on, and I want to divorce her.' And the Prophet said to him, 'Keep your wife, and fear God.' People have disagreed over how to interpret this verse. Some of the commentators, including al-Tabari and others, maintain that the Prophet made some complimentary remarks to Zeinab bint Jahsh while she was married to Zeid and then Zeid told the Prophet that he wanted to leave her and complained that she had been rude and disobedient, that she had insulted him and had boasted of her high birth.

"In other words, we have a wife finding fault with her husband on the grounds that he didn't have a noble pedigree while she was a woman of high rank and good family. This can happen even in the household of a husband and wife who are Companions of the Prophet. So we can also understand the human side of the Companions and don't think they were angels descended from Heaven, but human beings who tried hard to discipline and improve themselves. Then the Prophet said, 'Fear God'—in what you say about her, that is—'and keep your wife.' The commentator Muqatil says, 'The Prophet came looking for Zeid one day, and he saw Zeinab

standing there. She was fair-skinned, beautiful, and buxom, one of the finest women of the Quraysh, and he fell for her and said, 'Praise be to God, who turns men's hearts.' Zeinab heard what he said and mentioned it to Zeid, and Zeid saw what was happening and said, 'Prophet, give me permission to divorce her. She's giving me a hard time and tormenting me with her tongue.' And the Prophet said, 'Keep your wife, and fear God.'"

Hatem leaned his head back and raised his string of amber prayer beads to his chest. He checked that the red light had not gone off and that the story had silenced the studio and that the director and the control room technicians were too enthralled to engage in their usual distractions. A phantom, maybe his old Rifai master, flitted behind the cameraman standing by the camera fixed on Hatem's face. He unexpectedly did something that someone like him just does not do while broadcasting live: he stopped talking for some seconds and stared at a point far from the focal point of the camera lens. Everyone was puzzled, but the machine at work inside Hatem took over, dragging the sounds out of his prodigious memory. The words took shape without passing through any mind or monitoring. His voice was louder when he resumed, as if he were hiding the fact that he was thinking of something completely different.

"It is said that God sent a gust of wind that lifted the curtain when Zeinab was scantily dressed at home," he said. "The Prophet saw Zeinab and she made an impression on him and, when he came asking for Zeid, Zeinab realized that she made an impression on the Prophet. When Zeid came, she told him what had happened, and it occurred to Zeid to divorce her. The Prophet was worried people would gossip if he married Zeinab after Zeid, given that Zeid was his adopted son, since adoption was permissible in Islam at that time, although it was later banned. He had even given his name to Zeid, who was known as Zeid ibn Muhammad."

Hatem came to his senses and heard his voice telling the story, and he decided to stop and break in with an explanation, because he felt that Anwar was trying to interrupt him and catch the camera's attention by reacting to his story with amazement, playing the part of a viewer watching at home.

"But there are imams," Hatem continued, "who think that the Prophet fell in love with Zeinab, Zeid's wife, and there's another text that says, and I quote, 'Perhaps it was some joker who used the word "love" because this could only come from someone who was unaware that the Prophet was incapable of such things or from someone who had little respect for him.' All these stories appear in the works of respected commentators but, if the story is offensive to the Prophet and discredits him, would it have appeared in a text that is recited from high above the seven heavens, the Quran, by which we will worship until the day when people rise from the dead and are gathered together? Even if it does contain things that Muslims are embarrassed about or consider shameful. Folks, would the commentators on the Quran have singled out this verse for all this explanation, of which I have given you only a quarter or maybe less?"

"So Raouf, or whoever you are, the Prophet married Zeinab bint Jahsh to undo the ban on marrying the wife of one's adopted son, because no one could marry the wife of his adopted son unless the Prophet himself had done it, thus lifting the ban. And see what it all led to? Anas bin Malik says, 'When Zeinab's obligatory waiting period was over after the divorce, the Prophet said to Zeid, "Let me get engaged to her." And Zeid went off and found her leavening her dough. And Zeid said, 'When I saw her, the fact that the Prophet wanted to marry her was too much for me and I couldn't look at her. I turned my back on her and withdrew and I said, 'Zeinab, the Prophet has sent asking to marry you,' and she said, 'I can't do anything until God gives instructions.' Then she went off to the place where she prayed and the revelation was revealed, and the Prophet went in to her.'"

## SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

*Whitefly*

by Abdelilah Hamdouchi, translated by Jonathan Smolin

*Time of White Horses*

by Ibrahim Nasrallah, translated by Nancy Roberts

*A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me*

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