

Souhaib Ayoub

Satin Man

رجل من ساتان

Translated by Katharine Halls (English)

SATIN MAN

pp15-16

Ayyush went downstairs to the police sergeant with a pistol in one hand. It belonged to her absent husband. She'd told Mas'uda to wait upstairs.

—Don't you dare come down or I'll kill you.

Mas'uda watched from the balcony as Ayyush rolled up her sleeves and cocked the pistol at the sergeant, who was huddled inside a ring of skinny recruit officers.

—The boy's ours, she announced loudly. Nobody's taking him anywhere.

The sergeant told her he wasn't there to take the boy back.

—He's yours. But I have an arrest warrant for Khalid Akuma, he added pompously. For sending armed gang members to Mahallat al-Tarbi'a to terrorise the locals, break into an apartment full of women, and kidnap the child.

—Go look for him then, she replied with a wave of the pistol.

Ayyush's booming voice had already summoned a crowd of greengrocers, butchers, dry goods traders and shopkeepers, along with al-Sibi'i the mayor, and the imam of Harba mosque. The sergeant fired a shot in the air and Ayyush answered instantly with a bullet of her own. The crowd of men behind her pulled out their pistols and fired a long, echoing series of shots that rattled the sergeant and his men. The recruits whispered urgently, trying to convince their sergeant to leave.

—Those are Ali Akkawi's men behind her. Don't make enemies of them.

The sergeant, who wore his hair combed to the right like a schoolboy's, hadn't been around long. He didn't know anything about the young revolutionary who'd stood up to the Iraqi Ba'th party, defied Military Intelligence and their collaborators, founded the Five Revolutionaries group, and helped incite the starving peasants of Akkar to rise up against the predatory feudalists. It was this man's mutinous followers that stood behind Ayyush now, waiting for her signal.

—We're the men around here. Not the government.

Her powerful voice left the sergeant's ears ringing. There was a long, heavy, silence, until the sergeant gave in and left, vexed and humiliated. Later he wrote in the case file: *Individual named Khalid Akuma does not exist.*

pp 22-24

Mas'uda experimented with the child like he was a new toy. She tied his dark hair up with scraps of yarn, lined his wide little eyes with kohl, painted his lips with lipstick that he quickly rubbed off with his tiny hands. She stared at the birthmark on his face; it looked like a grape. Apparently he got it from his mother. She dressed him in the outfits Ayyush ran up for him on the old sewing machine that sat neglected in the living room. Usually she only used it in emergencies—fixing buttonholes on her son Khalid's shirts, mending the seat of his trousers, patching the holes in her own short abayas—but suddenly she took up dressmaking again with gusto. She started making tops and trousers for the child, who was growing quickly. The colourful little suits she made looked like they'd come straight from the windows of one of the ready-to-wear shops which had started to appear on Azmi Street and Boulevard al-Mina. These days fewer and fewer people were making clothes for their children at home.

Ayyush had dug out some old pattern magazines from her trunk. They were gifts from Abd al-Qadir al-Mi'addam's wife, brought back after a trip to Paris. She'd loved sewing since the very first time she picked up a tape measure one day when she was visiting Marlene, the Christian dressmaker in Zahiriyya. She was planning to open her own shop in Tabbana, but Ali Akuma put his foot down.

—You want people saying my wife's a seamstress? You should be sitting with your feet up, Ayyush.

That's what he said. If only he hadn't. Then she wouldn't have deluded herself that he wasn't going to abandon her like her father did when she was eighteen, the day he handed her over to the Mi'addam clan to work as a maid in their house.

Ayyush was accustomed to losing things. So she made beautiful outfits for the kid, to remind herself what things were like in the good old days, and to remind herself that she could be delightful, that she was loved, that she had a blessed touch in the house. Dressmaking kept her entertained on dull days. She embroidered red roses around the buttonholes, and monogrammed his white collars, copying out the letters with care because she'd never been sent to Qur'an school to learn them.

—They dress that kid up like a little dandy.

So Ali Khaddur's wife often remarked to the women who lived in her building, as she sat dragging sedately on her nargila pipe. Her long arms would rest lazily on her pale thighs, which were always an easy target for the boys who spied on her while they washed and mopped her balcony with its pots of basil and mint.

—Sister, they can dress however they like, they'll always be gypsies, commented Jumpy Sa'do's wife. Dearie me, to this day I've never seen one of them with a proper pair of shoes on their feet.

Ali Khaddur's wife cackled at the huge woman's mockery. Then she turned to Alya al-Da'izli, passing her a piece of the walnut tray bake she bought from the sweet shop in Dafatir Square (people said the owner's wife had killed him with a hunting rifle after she caught him cheating on her with a man. That was a while ago; his sons ran the shop now).

—If you ever want to spread some news, all you need to do is invite this one over for morning coffee. What a chatterbox.

They all fell silent when Ayyush walked in with the kid. With his smooth dark complexion and his smart outfit he looked like a picture in a magazine. They took turns picking him up, showering him with blessings and admiring remarks from every side.

When he learned to make his way down the stairs alone, he became the delight of all the women in the building. They'd rest their fingers on his glistening cheeks, run their palms over his curly hair, feed him segments of orange and clementine or call him into their sitting rooms to eat a cup of rice pudding or blancmange. People started saying that pregnant women should look at him when they were getting cravings, so their babies would turn out just as pretty. Alya al-Da'izli put a talisman around his neck.

—It keeps the eye away, Ayyush. You know what women are like, I swear to God they'll put a curse on him with their envy. With women it's always one disaster after another.

She talked with her mouth open like she was permanently surprised. She'd ditched her black clothes just two months after her husband was killed, and she threw away all his clothes on a dark night. She said she wasn't going to be a sad widow. Love suited her. She took to wearing short sleeveless dresses to show off her lovely body, which had never been ruined by the demands of pregnancy or breastfeeding.

People said the boy, Nabil, got his looks from his mother. None of them had seen her but they'd heard of her.

—Christian women are beautiful, remarked one woman.

—She was Jewish, another corrected her. She hurriedly put a finger to her lips, like she wished she could to swallow her thoughtless comment.

One day, Manhal Othman told them he'd seen Khalid Akuma with her in Sahat al-Tall. Her tummy was big and round and she was wearing a loose dress that fluttered in the spring breeze. Khalid was caressing her belly affectionately, and holding her hand as they walked, so she wouldn't lose her balance. He said the couple had had their picture taken by a street photographer, and eaten grilled meat in a restaurant called Happiness.

That's all they'd heard. Nobody dared ask anything else about her.

Khalid Akuma saw her for the first time at Antoun's bar. She was wearing a satin dress. Her elbows were resting on the table and in one hand was a martini which she sipped at slowly. Now and then she glanced inattentively at the men who were gathered around tables crammed with plates of shanklish, spiced hummus, and sujuk drenched in lemon juice, as they competed to finish the bottles of local Sab'al arak.

Antoun's bar was where journalists and printworkers from the presses around Nijmeh Square gathered, along with trainee lawyers who liked to gamble with the guests staying at the Pyramids Hotel. The door remained permanently ajar for the benefit of the boys who worked at the local food stalls, at Restaurant Jammoul and Mar'ash Bakery, who'd kick it open with feet weary from running back and forth with orders, to deliver crispy bread and plates piled high with food for the drinking men. The men themselves never looked like they were enjoying themselves much until she got up to sing.

They all called her Nahid; only a few knew that her real name was Gloria Mizrahi and that she was the daughter of Menahem Mizrahi the tailor and his wife Mirette Shattah. Antoun had immediately decided he'd keep her identity a secret when Jurji Aqouri introduced her, and instead told everyone she was a distant relative.

—This one just fell a little further from the tree, Antoun would say in his slow drawl.

[...]

Gloria Mizrahi took a pipe out of her handbag and lit it ostentatiously. She blew the smoke out purposefully through her wine-coloured lips. It didn't take long for her to catch Khalid's attention. Her long, wavy hair glinted in the neon lights that Antoun had installed to make the bar look more modern. Just like he'd brought in Gloria Mizrahi to keep the new customers company.

—I need some fresh blood, he'd said to Jurji. The punters like to have something to look at.

His friend Jurji was famed as dressmaker to Tripoli's high society, having learnt the trade from Menahem the master tailor. He praised Gloria in the highest terms.

—She’s a well brought up girl. Went to school. Classy. Sensational voice, too.

When Jurji brought her along for the first time, Antoun took a good look. He watched how her hands fluttered in permanent nervousness. She wasn’t your usual bar girl, he concluded from her economical replies and demure posture.

She usually sat quietly with a drink. She’d whisper with her girlfriends at a table not far from the men’s tables. She’d sing all the classics for the patrons of the bar. They especially loved her rendition of one of Na’ima al-Masriyya’s songs:

Come on, bright spark, let’s take a trip down the river

Be sweet and indulge me, and don’t disappoint

Pass me that bottle and keep me entertained

The mezze are fresh and I’m having a fine time

Charm and delight me, keep my glass overflowing

When I’m with you, precious, I could sing the night away

Khalid Akuma fell in love with her on the spot. He tried all sorts of ruses to make sure he’d cross paths with her. He started following her. Tracking her. He sent flowers and parcels of cream-filled sweets to her apartment, until she told him to stop.

—I’ll meet you for a cup of coffee at Negresco tomorrow.

The proposal took him by surprise.

His thoughts ran wild. He didn’t sleep that night. He stood in a panic before his wardrobe, turning the contents upside down in search of a shirt that would impress her. When the moment finally came, he went for a pinstripe with a white collar, and sprayed some cologne around his neck. When he arrived at the café—whose high-class clientele included Tripoli’s famed film director Georges Nasser, president Sulayman Franjiyeh, and the world-famous wrestler Edmund Zenni—he found her already seated at a table, smoking her pipe.

—Miss Nahid.

—And what’s your name, might I ask? She enquired flirtatiously.

—Khalid, at your service. His heart nearly stopped as he spoke.

—Tell me about yourself.

He told her in detail about his life. About his mother Ayyush, whom he loved; his father, whom he didn’t remember; the way he felt lonely at night. He told her he’d married when he was very young. His wife had died, and he had a daughter called Mas’uda. He said he’d spent his life living in fear, something he’d inherited from his mother. He told her that something gripped at his heart when he watched her sing.

She confided that she was frightened, too. Of this city, of its people and their empty eyes, of its long nights.

—Tripoli has changed, Khalid. It's not the Tripoli I know. I wish my father didn't insist on staying here.

—Where would you like to go?

—Cairo. I want to sing there.

—I'll go with you.

She laughed at him. At his eagerness and his wildness. She found him charming. They started meeting every day, like lovers. She'd finish her set at the bar and they'd go out into the world as if there'd never been a world before. She taught him to smoke a pipe, drink martinis, and play barjees.

—Martini is for the great, she said. Only the broken drink arak.

They'd spend hours sitting at the same table in 'Antouzi restaurant in the port. They'd order fried Sultan Ibrahim fish with olive oil and garlic and lemon. He'd pick out the bones and feed her with his hands. She'd flirt, revel in his attention. She'd bite his long, rough fingers. He'd take hold of her hands and kiss them hungrily.

They started renting a room at a motel far from prying eyes. He kissed her on the mouth, hurriedly, and she taught him to take his time.

—A mouth needs love.

He told her he loved her, but he was confused.

—Doucement. Doucement.

He looked quizzically at the woman talking to him in French like a Catholic nun.

—What's that mean?

—It means *shwayy shwayy*, Monsieur Khokha.

She'd given him a nickname. It meant 'plum.'

He put his tongue in her mouth. He closed his eyes. She spent hours kissing him, pulling away, kissing him, pulling away. Gloria Mizrahi broke him in. She domesticated him with every stroke of her fingers through his hair. She pulled his head to her breasts. He sucked her nipples, bit them gently. Then he moved downwards. He pushed his tongue into the wetness inside her. She gasped, writhed in his arms. Pushed him away. He slipped inside her gently. He was amazed at the pain and pleasure in her gentle voice. He moved faster inside her. His body felt sticky on her skin. He pulled his cock out, rubbed it on her belly. They both laughed.

When she told him, at lunch in Antouzi, the rain was battering the windowpanes alongside their table.

—I'm pregnant, Khokha.

He didn't know what to say.

—Will you marry me? He asked impulsively.

—You're mad.

—Why? I'll go anywhere with you.

—I'm not staying here, Khokha. I'm taking the baby and going to Cairo.

He fell silent. His mind was racing. He was crushed under the weight of his thoughts. He didn't sleep that night. The next morning, he quietly told his mother Ayyush. They were eating breakfast together. He was struggling to decide what to do.

Ayyush frowned in determination.

—Just tell her whatever she wants to hear, she said, dragging on a cigarette. We'll get hold of the kid.