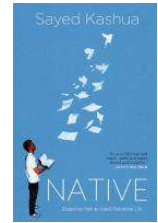


Superman And Me

by Sayed Kashua, published October 29, 2009 in *Ha'aretz*, and included in *Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life*, his fourth novel, published 2016.



"Excuse me," the guy sitting next to me at the bar said to me in Arabic, emitting a strong whiff of cheap whiskey. "I heard you speaking Arabic on the phone," he said as he swayed a bit and nearly tumbled from the high bar stool. "Are you Arab?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered hesitantly, not being too fond of having conversations with drunks, but something in the young man's face exuded goodwill.

"I'm really sorry to bother you," he went on, "but I don't know Hebrew and I would really like to ask the bartender for more peanuts. They're all finished," said the young man in a desperate tone, pointing to the empty peanut bowl in front of him.

"Sure," I told him, and asked the bartender to refill the poor guy's peanut supply.

"Thank you very much," said the drunk Arab, shoving a fistful of peanuts into his mouth. "Maybe you want a little water to wash that down?" I said to him, hoping he wouldn't be offended - you never know how drunks will react.

"I sure do," said the young fellow, "but I don't know how to say 'tap water.' I don't have money for a bottle."

I ordered a glass of water for him, too, and he gulped it quickly, thanked me and asked if I could get him one more, which he promptly chugged with lightning speed.

"Where are you from?" I ventured to ask, wanting to help him. He appeared to be in great distress. He obviously didn't know much about drinking and had come here to drown his sorrows in alcohol.

"From Deir Debwan," he replied. "A small village, you know it?"

"Sure," I said. "I know it. It's out near Ramallah."

"Right," he nodded, happy that someone knew where he was from.

So, I asked, "you have an entry permit for Jerusalem?"

"No." He shook his head and asked for more water and peanuts. "I jumped over the fence and ran here."

Well then. It was a mistake to start up a conversation with this drunk. I smiled faintly and turned my head away from him, hoping that would signal the end of our conversation and that this guy would leave me alone.

"You don't believe me, huh?" he added, and I knew I was in trouble, that I'd have no choice but to get up and leave so as not to let this Arab ruin the one evening a week when I go out to drink a little and forget life's burdens.

"Look down for a second," he said now, and I didn't respond. "Come on," he persisted. "Just look down for a second," he urged, inclining his head toward the legs of the bar stool. "Just look at the floor for a minute and if you still don't believe me, I promise you I'll leave this place right away."

"Fine," I said, exhaling with impatience and turning my gaze to the legs of his bar stool and the floor.

"Whoa!" I shouted, shaking my head in disbelief when I distinctly observed his stool levitating off the floor at least two centimeters in the air.

"Shhh ..." the Arab quickly silenced me, glancing right and left to make sure no one noticed. "I don't want anyone else to know about this," he implored in a panic.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, still unable to believe my eyes.

"I'm the Palestinian Superman," whispered the Arab dejectedly.

"What?"

"Just what you heard," he said, sighing ruefully. Then he started telling me how he was a chemistry student at Bir Zeit University. He pulled out his student ID to prove it. He said it all started with some lab experiment. One day, a colleague of his brought to the lab the remnants of some substance the IDF used against demonstrators. The guy said he ran a few simple procedures, added an acid, and a base or two, and put it all together in a test tube. Just as he was stirring it, a supersonic boom from an air force jet shook the lab. Startled, he dropped the test tube and this substance spilled all over his legs.

"The next day," the guy continued, "I woke up in the morning with a very strange feeling." He said that when he went to open the door of his room, it came off in his hand. When he turned the faucet handle, he pulled up the pipes. When he tried to walk, he found himself passing cars, and when he tried to skip over a puddle, he ended up leaping over the separation fence.

"You're putting me on, right?" I laughed, because it reminded me of a joke about a drunk Superman.

"Not at all," he insisted. "Look." With his eyes he indicated that I should look at the television screen suspended in a corner of the bar, and with just a wink he changed channels, one after the other.

"Whoa, man," I said. "When did all this happen?"

"Just a week ago," Superman replied, his Arabic accent a sure giveaway of his rural origins.

"You know what?" I suddenly got incensed at the guy sitting next to me. "This is messed up. Really messed up. Ya'ani, let's say you are really the Palestinian Superman, the guy every Arab has been waiting for even more than Obama, and instead of saving your people you're sitting here drinking whiskey in some pub in West Jerusalem? Have you no shame?"

My words upset him. "Do you have any idea how happy I was when I discovered my superpowers? I said, that's it. No more settlements, no more stealing of water, no more tanks, no more fence, no more siege. You understand? After just a day or two of adjustment and getting the hang of my superpowers, I was ready to go to work. Olive trees were being uprooted, so I went out to replant them and ..."

"Nu, and ...?"

"Never mind, forget it," said the young man with tears in his eyes. "It's too hard to talk about."

"Speak, man," I said encouragingly, placing my hand on his slumping shoulder and fetching him another glass of water. "What happened?"

"The uniform," he wept, resting his head in the palm of his hand. "The uniform killed me. You see, most of the missions I can't perform without the uniform. Look at it," he undid the top button of his shirt to reveal a little of the tight blue suit. "It's skin-tight. If I make any extra exertion, the clothes disappear and all I'm left with is the tight uniform."

"So? What's the problem with the uniform?"

"As soon as I left the house to go plant olive trees a PA patrol car picked me up and ran me in for a 'talk' in which I was told in no uncertain terms that I had to change the colors of the uniform to the colors of the flag. They wanted the underwear in red, the cape in black and the rest in white and green."

"What?!"

"As soon as I came out of the interrogation by the Preventive Security forces, a Hamas car came and snatched me away. They wanted the cape to be green and instead of an S, to write in Arabic 'There is no God but Allah.'"

"Man," I told him. "Because of that you're ready to give up on your people? Who are those guys anyway? You're Superman. One puff and you blow them all away. You're above the internal Palestinian conflict, man."

"That's what I thought," he sighed. "Until the neighborhood kids started chasing me with stones and taunting me with the most awful insults."

"Why?"

"Because of the tights," he said. "And they're right, you know. The whole thing is too tight. This uniform was really made for an American white guy and it looks totally ridiculous on me."

"It's tough, yeah." I had to agree with him because I would never go around the village wearing a suit like that even if it meant I could wrap Aryeh Eldad around my little finger.

"Whiskey?" I offered.

"I'm flat broke, man," said Superman.

"No problem. It's on me."

Pastrami

by Etgar Keret, from the November 20, 2012 issue of *The New Yorker*, translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverston.

The air-raid siren catches us on the highway, driving to Grandpa Yonatan's place, a few kilometres north of Tel Aviv. My wife, Shira, pulls over to the side of the road and we get out of the car, leaving the badminton rackets and feathered ball on the back seat. Lev holds my hand and says, "Daddy, I'm a little nervous." He's seven, and seven is the age when it's not considered cool to talk about fear, so the word "nervous" is used instead. Following Home Front Command instructions, Shira lies down on the side of the road. I tell Lev that he has to lie down, too. But he keeps standing there, his small, sweaty hand clutching mine.

"Lie down already," Shira says, raising her voice to be heard over the blaring siren.

"How'd you like to play a game of Pastrami Sandwich?" I ask Lev.

"What's that?" he asks, not letting go of my hand.

"Mommy and I are slices of bread," I explain, "and you're a slice of pastrami, and we have to make a pastrami sandwich as fast as we can. Let's go. First, you lie down on Mommy,"

I say, and Lev lies down on Shira's back and hugs her as hard as he can. I lie on top of them, pressing against the damp earth with my hands so as not to crush them.

"This feels good," Lev says and smiles.

"Being the pastrami is the best," Shira says under him.

"Pastrami!" I yell.

"Pastrami!" my wife yells.

"Pastrami!" Lev yells, his voice shaky, either from excitement or fear.

"Daddy," Lev says, "look, there are ants crawling on Mommy."

"Pastrami with ants!" I yell.

"Pastrami with ants!" my wife yells.

"Yech!" Lev yells.

And then we hear the boom. Loud, but far away. We stay lying one on top of the other, without moving, for a long time. My arms are starting to hurt from carrying my weight. From the corner of my eye, I can see other drivers who've been lying on the highway get up and brush the dirt off their clothes. I stand up, too.

"Lie down," Lev tells me, "lie down, Daddy. You're ruining the sandwich."

I lie down for another minute, and say, "O.K., game's over. We won."

"But it's nice," Lev says. "Let's stay like this a little more."

We stay like that a few seconds longer. Mommy on the bottom, Daddy on the top, and in the middle, Lev and a few red ants. When we finally get up, Lev asks where the rocket is. I point in the direction the explosion came from. "It sounded like it exploded not far from our house," I say.

“Oof,” Lev says, disappointed, “now Lahav will probably find a piece again. Yesterday, he came to school with a piece of iron from the last rocket, and it had the symbol of the company on it and the name in Arabic. Why did it have to explode so far away?”

“Better far away than close by,” Shira says as she wipes sand and ants off her pants.

“The best would be if it was far enough away so nothing happens to us, but close enough so I could pick up some pieces,” Lev sums up.

“The best would be badminton on Grandpa’s lawn,” I say, and open the door to the back seat of the car.

“Daddy,” Lev says as I’m buckling him in, “promise that if there’s another siren, you and Mommy will play Pastrami with me again.”

“I promise,” I say, “and if it gets boring, I’ll teach you how to play Grilled Cheese.”

“Great!” Lev says, and a second later, he adds more seriously, “but what if there aren’t any more sirens ever?”

“I think there’ll be at least one or two more,” I reassure him.

“And if not,” his mom adds from the front seat, “we can play it without the sirens, too.”