

Miral al-Tahawy

An Excerpt from the Novel

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Gazelle Tracks

Inshirah is the one in Hind's photograph wearing the short dress and baggy trousers. She was a black woman, strapping and healthy with a voice that Al-Najdiyya could never quite manage to subdue. They say Grandfather Munazi bought her mother from a place called Wad Madani. He was on his way home with the caravans that bring gum and ostrich feathers and scented woods. A long line of men and women walked behind the caravan, their wrists bound to ropes that swing from the camels' backs, the hot sun beating down as young girls are force marched on tired swollen feet across trackless sands, void of any sign save the skeletons of camels, hyenas and humans who expired long ago on some journey along that same route. Every time they stop at a trading post they off-load some of their cargo so that they can reach the Red Sea with less loss of wares, and put the goods on sale for paltry prices. Grandfather Munazi brought back lots of slaves from the Upper Nile and settled them on his land at the bottom of the high hill. People called them the slaves of Clan Munazi. That's where Inshirah lived, where Mubarak the Slave built his house. Later he erected a spacious pavilion for his guests and acquired a Landrover, and whenever a circle of visitors gathered round the coffee pot he would proudly announce to all and sundry: 'Kuwaitis' or 'Saudis.' The guests would set off after him in more luxurious vehicles to chase the gazelles of Ayla and Al-Alaqi. On these hunting trips the slaves of Clan Munazi' became faithful guides. When Amma Mizna visited them she didn't have the audacity to talk to them like she had before, when she used to call them: 'Our dear friends and servants.' But they still stood up the moment they saw her and when she held out her hand they would come up one after the other to kiss it, and address her as they always had: 'Our master's daughter.'

Inshirah still lives there now. Whenever Muhra walks past, Inshirah doesn't recognize her for she no longer remembers anyone, not even her

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own grandchildren who play around the house. From the day they took her out of the dark house her eyes have been filled with a sleepy redness, weary and exhausted, unable to focus unless she squeezes them almost shut. The children, who address Inshirah as 'ya Jidda,' eye Muhra cautiously when she crosses the dirt track behind the gently sloping hills. People say that in the past Inshirah used to tie the dirty old belt, where the keys to the grain store and the pantries hung, round her waist, but now her collar bone protrudes from the neck of her dress to reveal her skinny almost skeletal frame. The *sbunnaf* hanging from her nose has stretched the flesh and it dangles so loosely that she's had to tie it round both sides of her head with a cord that lifts the heavy earrings and leaves a wide rut in her skin. This cord that takes the weight off her ears passes over her head beneath her scarf, though it sticks out in places and you can see it attached to her hair with coloured pins.

Inshirah used to be everywhere, always coming and going, making that racket with her huge anklets and the jangling of the keys and her voice bawling at the servants: 'Do this! Don't do that!' Al-Najdiyya had put her in charge of counting the sacks of flour, seeing to it that the rooms were properly cleaned and making sure the kitchens had all they needed. It was Inshirah who checked the eggs had hatched and the ducks had enough feed, and which animals' udders had dried out or filled up. And at the end of the day she was content to sit at the her mistress's feet and massage them with mustard oil and warm water.

'Ma'am,' she used to say, 'we've filled a jug of gee,' or 'Ma'am, we've opened a pot of cheese,' and 'Ma'am, how many kilos shall we bake tonight?'

It was that very same Inshirah who was charged with taking Al-Najdiyya's gold far away from the prying eyes of the soldiers whenever they turned up. In their hands was a list of names whereby the Basha's land was turned into small holdings each no larger than two *feddans*. Then they built walls round them and dug irrigation ditches to water the land. Other soldiers carried off the horses, camels, ostriches and young gazelles and divided up the land which used to be called 'The Bedouin Estate' into a chess board, leaving the gardens of Clan Al-Basil completely empty; no birds of prey, no mares, no gazelles fenced



in their pens. Al-Najdiyya gathered up all the gold necklaces and ornaments that hung on her daughters' chests, and their thick braided anklets, and their brooches and pendants and wrapped them all up in a dirty old rag and tied it round Inshirah's waist so she could go and sit by the irrigation ditch under a tamarisk tree that spread its branches out over the water. Al-Najdiyya made Inshirah take her baby girl Nawwar with her too, to make her look even more inconspicuous. Inside the little one's tattered dress she hid some gold guineas wrapped up in a cloth. And as Inshirah hummed a lullaby to the little girl sat on her lap the soldiers would say to Al-Najdiyya: 'Slaves'll sell you just like you sell them.' But Inshirah would return in the evening bearing her cargo and there would not be a thing missing. And that's what she continued to do, every time an armoured car turned up.

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There was a time when you could hear Inshirah's voice from the other side of the field, and her vigorous movements made a racket all over the house. But then she stopped talking altogether. Some said it was the shock of losing Sahn, others sadness. It happened over time. She hadn't smelled the fire that caught in Sahn's clothes and burned the whole pavilion down with him inside it until it was too late. No one ever told her how the flames had burnt the body, or how the legs had been tied up. She wandered morosely from the bake house to the pantry to the threshing shed, but she didn't say a word until they bound Hind by the legs and tied her to the bed. Then she said: 'I will stay with my master's daughter until the end.'

Inshirah carried Hind to the building at the end of the garden path, lined with lemon trees and old tumbled down pigeon towers. There was loads of rubbish piled up inside and the remains of an old bed. I used to try and imagine what else was in there. It was an old two-roomed house made of mud and straw. In the ceiling of one of the rooms was a round opening between the wooden slats through which they lowered down the food basket and other items.

Inshirah, who is holding Hind in her lap in the picture, continued to hold her inside that closed house, in the room with that opening in the roof. There was a water pump there and Hind would sit under it every time her dress was soiled with urine or faeces. Inshirah pulled the pump and the water poured over Hind's body which curled up into

a wretched and submissive ball. The water that spilled onto the floor flowed down a little channel through a hole in the wall to drain out at the foot of the lemon trees. Through the opening in the roof they were able to tell the beginning and end of the day, the seasons of orange blossom, the humming of mosquitoes in summer, the dripping of rain on the roof, and the smell of stagnant water around the trees. The windows of the two rooms had been filled in with silt and straw and so it was eerily silent; not a sound was heard from within nor entered from without. Daylight alone came in through the opening in the roof. At the top of each room was a small aperture next to the wooden beams on the ceiling and they allowed the air to circulate a little. The mice knew about them, as did the cats and the little birds and some bats and spiders, but these holes let nothing in. Hind would curl up on the bed and peer towards them. She would weep, and succumb to fits of sobbing and wailing, and scratch the walls with her fingernails. Inshirah's firm hands would hold her during these convulsions until they passed. Then she would lay Hind's head to rest in her lap as she recited spells and incantations and rebraided the locks of her hair (chains of gold Al-Najdiyya used to call them) into one long plait. After a while Hind would quieten down once again to wallow in the torment and anguish of her state.

Inshirah said that towards the end Hind was like a gentle breeze. She stopped slapping her cheeks and banging her head against the wall and focused all her senses on what was going on outside. She would put her ear against the wall to listen to the steady thud of the pestle as it pounded coffee beans or sniff the smell of roasting lamb. Sometimes she would say to herself: 'They'll be in the kitchen now, lighting the fire under the large pans,' or 'Al-Najdiyya still keeps that box of snuff tucked inside the top of her gallabiyah.' Through the opening in the roof she watched the Gazelle Tracks constellation as the few scattered stars running across the sky came into view. She knew when they moved into this position that another year had passed, while she still fingered the walls and listened out for any sound, a mewling cat, a bird's wings flapping in the trees, new leaves falling at the stir of an autumn breeze. She could not see the wrinkles on her face or the white hairs that had encroached suddenly upon her parting. Inshirah



saw them though, as she laid Hind's head in her lap to plait her hair, and sang:

*I've been patient so long I'm bored
And all that patience has done me no good;
The door of hope is closed.*

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Hind increasingly succumbed to abject despair, and that brought on her crying fits again. Then she would stare grave and wide-eyed at unknown things that moved about in the darkness, certain that the door of hope was closed like the taciturn walls around her, and that even if she were to get out, an impregnable barrier of isolation would be set up around her. There was nothing to do but gaze into space. They did not know if she was even aware that she had a child sitting submissively in Sahla's lap. Had she sent out her spirit to search for her? They would say they had seen her kneading dough with them and that, when they looked round, a cat miaowed and then ran away. Some of them saw her as she used to be, making the beds or drinking from the scented water on the edge of the terrace, then rub up against Sahla's legs and come out miaowing and clawing the carpets which were hung up for beating. And although they whispered to one another about the spirits of the living and the dead, every single one of them avoided mentioning her, or going to see her, even if only to peer through that small opening in the middle of the roof. For it seemed as if that would bring all kinds of pain to bear upon them. They simply made do with asking Nawwar: 'Is your mother well, girl?' They never asked about Hind, and it was enough for Nawwar to tilt her head for them to be assured.

This darkness into which she peered did not frighten her any more, nor did the dogs barking in distant fields. She sat huddled up in the fading light or the pitch black of night, piling up grains of sand on the floor of the room that they hadn't covered with wooden boards. They had left the earth for her to dig with her nails and make long furrows, like the intersecting lines she scratched on the walls that were also unpannelled and unpainted. The soil was such that it turned to sand when she scratched it. Armies of ants had constructed barracks in it and crawled hither and thither between their holes. She did not

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try to count the days or to record their passing with marks. It was Inshirah who was able to associate definite signs with the hour and the seasons by the stars that passed over the opening in the roof and the smell of the orange blossom when it bloomed. Perhaps she waited for death but she did not attempt to bring it on. She had lost the ability to do anything except stare and she did not try to run away. She had surrendered completely. With her shoulders hunched over a pile of sand, she would gaze up at the tiny gap in the top of the wall or squat under the meagre portion of sky that rolled over the opening in the roof. She gave up her body to the night dew in a desperate attempt to inhale something other than the fetid air and the smell of stagnant water under the pump. Sores covered her legs from all that sitting on the floor but Inshirah was unable to cure them with onion skin and ashes. Each day new ulcers would appear weeping pus, and a hacking cough afflicted her. 'Poor thing,' they would say as they looked at her body and poured the last water of her death-ablution over it. As Hind neared death they did not place 'the little girl' who ran round Lamloum Basha's house in her lap, not even once, because she would not have remembered it. But then again, perhaps she did remember, often, when she put her ear against the hard deaf walls and picked out no sound save a distant hubbub which she would try to interpret. It was some commotion over a woman with short hair whose waves and curls resembled the hair of Layla Murad and Esmahan. She had a long nose and was called Sahla. They were sewing her a wedding dress with a low-cut neck, so she could go to the same house that Hind had left.

'Your nose belongs to you even if it is crooked.' Lamloum Basha was declaring, over the sobbing of his youngest daughter. 'A girl will marry her cousin even if it is the last thing she wants. An Arab girl's like an obedient she camel: the place you tether her, that's where she kneels, the place you lead her, that's where she goes.'

When Sahla set off for Mutlig's house, carrying the baby girl who's in the photograph wearing a white crochet dress, no one said: 'Poor thing' about her, because that was not how she wanted things to turn out. No longer the little girl who went to Minazi' Primary School carried on Nawwar's shoulders, Muhra now held the end of the thread in her hand. The photographs were blurred images, and it was up to



her to fill in the details, as if there was a path she had to follow to the end, and a similar destiny she would be obliged to repeat. Hind came to her often, telling her to close the box, but she would not be swayed.

Translated by Anthony Calderbank

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NOTES

Amma – Aunt.

Jidda – Grandmother.

Burgu' – long, enveloping garment worn by Bedouin women.

Thobe – sometimes written thawb. Name given in Arab Peninsula and among Bedouin to the ankle-length garment worn by men, in other areas similar garments are known as dishdasha, gallabiyah.