

Excerpt from NIGHTS OF MUSK by Haggag Hasson Oddoul

Long, long ago, south of the rapids, the nights exuded incense and oozed musk. They were watered by the celestial majesty of the Nile and nourished by the green strip of life that lineits banks. Their sky was pure and their air invigorating. There was born generation after generation, dark, dark. We would say: “We are dark, dark, for our sun shines upon our faces.”

Aaaaaah Aaaaaah Aaaaaah

My wife was screaming in pain inside the house. Outside, in the wide courtyard, I sat under the arbor with my family around me. Anxiety gnawed like a frozen blade in my heart. The experienced men offered the usual words of encouragement. “Don’t worry, they are the pains of a first birth. You’ll soon be a father, Ibn Zibeyda.” My uncle Bilal said, “Take this cigarette. Smoke it and learn patience.” He leaned over and whispered in my ear, “It’s packed with the best bango. It’ll calm your nerves.”

Salha’s screams and groans came from the distant room and seared me. She walked up and down the room wailing, supported by the shoulders of her mother and my sister, waiting for the fetus to fall and the swollen belly to relax. Water was boiling on the fire. Salha would not lie down until the time came. I was waiting to hear a sound sweeter than the roll of a drum:

*Waaaaah waaaaah waaaaah
Duum-taka dum-tak duum-taka dum-tak*

In the groom’s house that night, the young men were warming up the drums, trying them out, *duum-taka dum-tak*. Even before we reached puberty I was trying to woo Salha, sometimes politely and other times rudely. I pursued her constantly. I strutted proudly before her at every wedding and danced for her. I sang her the ballad “Your breasts are firm like oranges.” She had a magnificent chest. Her bouncing breasts drove me wild. They kept me awake at night and haunted me during the day.

The sunset twilight drew a line of watery red along the horizon. A young girl ran across the low sands up toward the village. I jumped out from behind a wall. She fell onto me and I was delighted. She was horrified and screamed: “Bismillah!” Sweat ran down her face and neck like branches of the Nile. She pushed me away and cursed me. “Devil, you’re always on fire, Ibn Zibeyda.”

I answered as I did every time. “Don’t blame me. Blame the sun that won’t let us cool down. Blame your bouncing breasts.” She hid a smile and ran off, and the hot thud of the tambourine resounded with the beat of my heart:

*Duum-taka dum-tak duum-taka dum-tak
Aaaaaah Aaaaaah Aaaaaah*

She screamed in the room, leaning on shoulders, moving exhausted up and down. Outside in the yard, I was waiting for the expected one to appear. My sister’s son

Habboub was learning to walk. He fell over and his vest came up and revealed his ebony body. He smiled at me. His tiny soft penis was covered with specks of sand. I went over to him. "You, my lad, are three years older than my daughter who's going to be born any minute now. I wonder . . . will she be for you? Will you chase her across the sand dunes and behind the palm trunks? I wonder if you'll woo her politely or provocatively? Habboub, she will have heavy breasts like her mother's. Will you sing for her 'Your breasts are firm like oranges'?" I lifted him up, and he was still smiling at me, trying to take the cigarette out of my mouth. "Little bastard. Make sure you don't go pestering my daughter rudely." I slapped him playfully on the thigh. A fresh wave of screaming brought me to my senses.

*Weeeek weeeek weeeek
Hooooi hooooi hooooi*

Fawziya hooi, Binyamin hooi, Salha hooi, Ibn Zibeyda hooi. That's how we called to one another as children, boys and girls, running over the soft glowing sand. We drew pure air into our chests and counted the colors of the magic Nile. From the top of the mountain, it wound its way into the distant blueness of the sky. Parts of it were sheets of silver reflecting the sun's rays. As we ran down toward it, its color darkened to intermingling shades of gray. We ran to it through the green bank, and it turned muddy brown. Naked we dove in and found it clear and pure. Wonderful Nile, mighty as the sea. When we got tired, we would stretch out on the bank, and the sun would take us in a warm embrace. The burning fiery rays caused a reaction inside us, and we grew up fast. The girls ripened in a few years, still young, and the older boys snatched them up at fabulous weddings. No one can imagine how delicious the taste of those weddings was without actually experiencing them. Wonderful, sweet, and wild are the weddings of the south.

And on the palm-stalk bed, leg wraps around leg and embrace follows embrace. Bellies swell and the dark-skinned generations come forth, carrying the sun in their faces, screaming:

*Waaaaah waaaaah waaaaah
Eeeeshshshsh eeeeshshshsh eeeeshshshsh*

The rustle of the ears of corn, the branches of the trees, the leaves of the blessed palm, and the ripple of the Nile's gentle waves are questions that do not wait for answers.

The floods passed quickly. The women ululated joyfully at the luscious bunches of dates. Real seasons. We grew up in an instant, Salha. So many presented themselves to your father, and of all the lads obsessed with that magnificent chest, you smiled bashfully only when my name was mentioned. Ibn Zibeyda. You were mine and I was yours. And the happy wedding day finally arrived.

We don't know where the days come from.
And we don't know where they go.

*Eeeeshshshsh eeeeshshshsh eeeeshshshsh
Ya salaaaaam ya salaaaaam ya salaaaaam*

On moonlit nights, my friends and I, young lads happy at the first hairs sprouting on our lips, would sit under the two doum trees, singing the ballad of “The Dark Beauty,” which lavishly celebrated the face of the dark-skinned beloved without naming her. Nearby, under the towering sycamore, you were sitting with the girls, virgins full of desire, enraptured by the effusive beats of the tambourine. Each one of you thought the ballad was for her. There was passion in the hoarse voice of our singer, who began like all balladeers south of the rapids begin: *Ya salaamaam*. Everyone becomes enraptured, and why not? For al-Salaam is one of the names of God. We joined in enthusiastically, singing *Ya salaamaam* after every line, like real professionals. The opening *ya* took our bodies forward, leaning toward you. The *s* was from Salsabeel, wellspring of Paradise. The *l* poured full and fat from moistened mouths, the long *aaaaa* ascended with the rising of our hands to our temples, next to our eyes and dropping lashes. The wide sleeves of our gallabiyas hung calmly, relaxing with the sweet long vowel, as it took away the heat from our loins and soothed our passion. And with the final *m* the hands fell quickly down to show how much, how much we enjoyed the song. We captured your hearts, and they poured forth a flood of potent giving. Your bodies swayed from side to side, and you clapped your henna-dyed hands to the rhythm of the tambourine’s beat. We communicated, and in spite of the sandy distance between the doum and the sycamore, we were one harmonious group, swimming altogether through the heaving sea of the night. We dissolved, sparkling with burning desire and an ardent longing to be lawfully joined on a day we prayed would come soon.

Our grandmothers sat close by. They saw our shapes clearly and smiled. They whispered of their own days that had passed like a sweet dream whose moon has evaporated behind a single sunny day. They looked at the new generation blooming, and with their gleaned wisdom, anticipated what would come to pass between us one day. “Fawziya is for Binyamin, Nebra Tari is for Husayn the Omda’s son, Hawa is for Selimto, Salha is for Ibn Zibeyda . . .”

Ya salaamaam ya salaamaam ya salaamaam
Waaaah waaaaah waaaaah

Good news at last. I threw down the joint and leapt to my feet shouting, “He is the Giver, He is the Granter of all things, praise be to Him.” My uncle Bilal, Salha’s father, laughed and said: “Didn’t I tell you to be patient?” Then, in tears, he embraced me. My sister Miska came out of the room drenched in sweat. She threw her arms around me and kissed me. “Congratulations to us all; you have a daughter, Ibn Zibeyda.”

Waaaah waaaaah waaaaah
Dark dark dark

Dark faces, pure eyes, white teeth, and consciences. Our colors are primary and well-defined. We know nothing of twisted words and half measures. The crowning turban is as white and clear as the dawn, the gallabiya a cup of milk to cover us, the shoes bright red, the young women’s kohl as black as night, the tattoos deep and dark. The gold is

amber, dangling in rings from ears and noses, hanging upon the forehead, treasure upon a young treasure. It shines from the neck and falls playfully onto the unfettered chests, yellow and lucky, plunging, leaping about between the firm round hills. From the top of the head hangs the shaw-shaw, two bands of gold thread covered in beads that follow the movement of the head, dancing and colliding in the air, and making a *shaw shaw* sound.

Shaw shaw shaw

Taraaak trak-trak taraaak

The people are clapping, Salha. They are our people, the people of the south. It is the hands dance. They dance to the beat of their own hands, bringing their palms together with power and zeal. The resounding *taraaak* splits the air in the sandy courtyard under the gentle light of the lamps and the silver moon. *Taraaak trak-trak taraaak*. Everyone is here: men, women, children, old folk, and even the sick. There isn't a Nubian on earth who would miss a wedding. Our grandparents' souls watch contentedly from the cemetery, and when the dance heats up, they come down and mingle with us, longing to be among us again. A wedding party draws the whole village. Even the River People, inhabitants of the cool depths, emerge dripping from the water alone and in groups. We can feel them down on the bank of the river sitting in the branches and among the palm fronds. Their young alight on ears of corn, which dance in ecstasy beneath them and scatter drops of dew, like pearls, *eeeeeshshsh eeeeeeshshsh*. We call to them. "Welcome amon nutto, welcome People of the River." The dance flares up and draws us into intense rhythmic passion, drowning in the thunderous roar of the tambourines *duum-taka dum-tak* and the explosion of clapping palms *taraaak trak-trak taraaak*. We disturb the spirits, the people of the nether world, Lord preserve us from their evil. They slip from deep under the mountain and burst forth like satanic shells from the cracks and crevices of the high peaks. They circle under the stars and then arrange themselves at the edges of the light, dancing and singing mischievously. Their voices echo through the bounds of space and a massive sound engulfs us. And we, in fear and trepidation, sing a prayer: "O God, O Protector, between them and us let Your protection fall."

Just such a night was our night, Salha. Your old mother and my sister with the women sprinkling salt and Daughter of Sudan perfume in the air. They danced the perch dance amid a crowd of women adorned with gold of all shapes and sizes, gleaming and rustling, *shaw shaw shaw*, and the silver anklets on their feet with a clear ring, *klin-klin klin-klin*.

That night, there wasn't a limp body, nor a languid heart, not a single person who did not take part, nor a single tongue that did not congratulate, not a single weary soul. Everyone joined in the dance.

They had a wonderful procession for us, sweet Salha, the bride and groom, and the women's ululations were like brass bells and bird songs.

Lilililililililililililiiiiiv

Dirgid-dirgid dirgid-dirgid

Her sprightly female donkey was carrying her across the rocks. Her mother had sent her to the next village, and now she was coming back. I was lying in wait behind a fold in the mountain, and she rode past me. I followed and she heard the hooves of my

male donkey. When she saw me, she gave her donkey a violent slap and off it leapt over the rocky land, four pairs of hooves beating the rhythm, *dirgid-dirgid dirgid-dirgid*. She turned west and my donkey followed in full chase. The sand dunes started and the she-donkey slowed down as she climbed. I dismounted with the hem of my gallabiya between my teeth. Two steps and I put my hands on the donkey's rump, leapt up with my legs open, and landed on the back of the beast, right up against Salha's back. She screamed.

"Ibn Zibeyda, you filthy rascal, leave me alone!"

She cursed me while she tried to undo my hands from around her waist. The donkey was taking us round in circles, and Salha was losing patience.

"Ibn Zibeyda, someone will see us, then there'll be real trouble."

"No one can see us except God."

"Then may God roast you."

"He'll forgive me when I marry you according to His law, and Prophet Taha's law."

"Haa haa haa."

"Your breasts are firm like oranges."

I almost had the oranges in my hands when she sunk in her ivory teeth and elbowed me sharply in the side. My hands let go, and with a push of her back, she sent me rolling down the dune with sand pouring inside my gallabiya.

Salha laughed.

"Haa haa haa. That's so you'll learn some manners, Ibn Zibeyda."

*Haa haa haa haa haa haa
Kum-ban-kaash kum-ban-kaash*

The children joined in the fun. They drummed on old cans and sang and danced in the courtyard. Dancing and singing are in our blood. We inherit them. Children of the tribe, you have added joy to our joy at the birth of Zibeyda. Two young children came into the yard. One held a bottle between his hands while the other tapped marvelous rhythms with two spoons.

*Kin-klin-lin kin-klin-lin kin-klin-lin
Immmmmmm immmmmmm immmmmmm*

The bride was sulking, refusing even to talk to her hot, impassioned groom. She even wanted him to pay her a real Turkish guinea just to start a conversation.

On the bed you were like dark nocturnal velvet to the touch. They had rubbed you all day with dulka oil from Halfa, with extracts of fragrant oils and herbs. Its sweet smell penetrated your pores and radiated from your body, as if the dulka oil was in you, not on you. I touched your shoulder with nervous fingers. They slid to your breast and your perfect stomach. You laughed as if I was tickling you and your braided African locks, shining with oil, danced about your head. *Ah aaaaaaah* what a girl! How gorgeous you were! Your mother had used her own experience to bring you up to be polite and well mannered, and then to teach you how to have fun on the palm-stalk bed. You surprised me, Salha. You were a whirlpool raging in the flood season, a lavish wave of giving, a lusty jet-black mare. When you turned your legs over and I saw you from behind, my

heart leapt. Our bodies are so sweet, they need no words. Our weather is so perfect, we need no covers. The house was wide and spacious, warm and still, and the silence utterly complete, exhausted after a wedding that made the universe tremble.

Salha, you were a naughty little devil when you were a child, then you changed into a charming and understanding young woman. Your father Bilal gave his consent, and I took you in lawful marriage. And now here you are with me, naughty again as a bride. You've returned to your naughtiness, and now it is allowed. I prefer you this way.

*Aaaaaah aaaaaah aaaaaah
Tudishshsh tudushshsh*

In the darkness before dawn, we jumped into the celestial Nile to perform our ablutions in its pure and holy water. It flows from the springs of Salsabeel in Paradise. The rippling water has its effect. It passes over our bodies and we absorb its silt and fertile mud. My pores draw it into my bones, into my marrow, and it kisses the water of life and gives it its dark color. It embraces your sweet body slowly and deliberately and seeps inside until it rests in the womb, enfolding the tiny beginning, giving it color. There it grows and curls up. And outside, the belly looks like a soft, round sand dune. And on the day God wills, our love comes out to us, a blessed child with the sun in his face, crying.

*Waaaaaah waaaaaah waaaaaah
Kum-ban-kaash kin-klin-lin kum-ban-kaash*

I stood beside the bed. Salha was lying there exhausted, smiling contentedly, holding our child Zibeyda. Her father Bilal stood next to her mother. They were both delighted. Habboub, on his mother's shoulder, was shouting happily and fidgeting. He wanted to get down and play with my daughter. I said, "Bismillah," and picked my daughter up in one arm and Habboub in the other. I whispered into his ear, "Habboub, if the Almighty grant that my daughter be yours, then take her in lawful marriage. Sing to her . . . 'Your breasts are firm like oranges.' She'll like that. And when she screams *weeeeek weeeek* and brings you the *waaaaah waaaaah*, a little girl with dark skin, and the sun in her face, call her after your mother, Miska al-Tayib