

Time of White Horses

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Translated by
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God made horses from wind, and people from dust
(Arabic proverb)

... and (one might add!) houses from people

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Preface

WHEN I BEGAN THIS NOVEL in 1985, I thought it would be “the Palestinian tragicomedy.” Consequently, I set to work preparing for the writing of it by recording testimonies and compiling a library devoted to the relevant topics. However, it sometimes happens that the best events in life are those that don’t go according to plan. In this case, the long time I spent working on this novel turned out to be the door through which five other novels would enter the scene, and thus it transpired that the present novel, which was supposed to be the first in the series, ended up being the last.

I accomplished the task of collecting the lengthy oral testimonies that contributed in particular to *Time of White Horses* during the years 1985 and 1986. A number of witnesses who had been uprooted from their homeland and had gone to live in exile presented me with detailed accounts of the lives they had lived in Palestine. Sadly, every one of these witnesses passed out of our world before the grand hope of returning home could become a reality.

Witnesses from four Palestinian villages—my uncle Jum‘a Khalil, Jum‘a Salah, Martha Khadir, and Kawkab Yasin Tawtah—dreamed the same dream, and died the same death: as foreigners. This novel is dedicated to their memory. As such, it is a salute to them, as well as to the scores of other witnesses who shared so generously of their memories, or whose stories I happened to hear by chance over the course of the twenty

years during which this novel was coming into being. It is also a salute to the Palestinian and other Arab writers whose studies and books have helped light my path, the titles of whose works appear at the end of this book.

There is amazing diversity among the customs proper to the various Palestinian villages and areas. Hence, some of the customs to which reference is made in the novel may strike this or that Palestinian reader as unfamiliar.

The story of the monastery in the village of Hadiya is true from beginning to end. It is the story of my village.

The names of all individuals and families that appear in this work are fictitious, and any resemblance between them and those of real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Book One

Wind

Hamama's Arrival

A PERFECT MIRACLE HAD TAKEN on flesh. . . .

Under the mulberry tree in front of the guesthouse, Hajj Mahmud was sitting with his son Khaled and a number of men from the village, when suddenly they saw a cloud of dust approaching in the distance. A strange feeling came over him. With the passing of the moments the dust began to disperse, and in its place there appeared a whiteness the likes of which they had never seen before. It continued to glow more and more brightly, until it appeared in all its fullness.

There was nothing on the face of the earth that could captivate them more than the beauty of a mare or a stallion.

In a half-stupor, Hajj Mahmud said, "Do you see what I see?"

Hearing no answer, he turned toward the other men, only to find them tongue-tied with amazement.

There was a long silence, broken only by the frenzied galloping of this creature that seemed to have emerged from the world of dreams.

Oblivious to the terrible pain the bridle was causing her, pain that ascended in heart-rending moans with the heat of her panting, the rider was trying his utmost to control the mass of light that bucked wildly beneath him, the mass of light that was offering him such stubborn resistance. Her head upturned, the mass of light began emitting a pained whinny, at which point Hajj Mahmud shouted, "Men!

There's a free spirit calling for help! Take her under your protection!"

The mare came to a halt in front of them, still as a stone. It was as though she had decided it would be better to die than to take a single step farther.

When he saw the men rushing toward him, the rider struck the mare with his stick to get her to move. But she didn't budge. So he dismounted and took off running, tripping and stumbling as he went, in the direction from which he had come.

By the time the men reached the mare, Khaled had flown past her with his own mare, blocking the man's escape.

He circled around him again and again until he saw him fall. "Who did you steal the horse from?" he asked.

The man made no reply.

Khaled came closer. Neighing heatedly, his mare raised her front legs menacingly in the direction of the thief's panic-stricken body.

"From some Arabs on the move!" he shouted.

Khaled turned his mare until her front legs were only an arm's length away from the man's chest.

"Where?"

"West of the river."

"The thoroughbred has exposed you for what you are," Khaled said to him.

As the man cried out for mercy, Khaled went on with his interrogation, saying, "How long ago did you steal her?"

"Two days ago."

"Don't you know that to steal a mare is tantamount to stealing someone's soul? Run for your life now, before the sun sets. Otherwise we'll feed you to the dogs!"

As Khaled made another circle around him, the man reached out for his keffiyeh and his cloak.

"Leave them where they are!" Khaled shouted. "There's no protection for someone who does nothing to protect a free spirit."

At that, the man stumbled away in a mad rush to reach the horizon before sundown.

As the men approached the mare, she spun around madly in circles. They moved back a bit, and she stopped.

“Leave her alone,” Khaled told them.

The men went up the hill toward the guesthouse courtyard, while Khaled lingered nearby. However, he had no thought of coming any closer to her. Gazing at her contemplatively, he saw in her a beauty that had never before crossed this plain, and in the end he realized that the best thing to do was to move away from her. So he went up the hill to join his father and the other men.

The darkness began gradually engulfing the thief’s frame in the distance until he disappeared from view. Still visible, however, was the mare, who might best be described as a piece of sunlight.

“It’s not good for the mare to stay outside,” said one of the men.

“Leave her be,” replied Hajj Mahmud. “She’s a free spirit.”
Then he began to sing:

If someone loses a horse of his,
We protect it as though it were ours to keep.
We give it our lifeblood from morning to night,
Warming it and giving it a place to sleep.

As the evening drew to a close, their gathering broke up and they all headed home. However, Khaled didn’t move. All he could bring himself to do was to keep vigil, his eyes fixed on her. He was afraid of everything: afraid she would leave, afraid she would stay—in which case he’d get more attached to her, even though she wasn’t his—and afraid her rightful owners would appear, since he knew that if he had lost a mare like her, he’d go on looking for her for the rest of his life.

Or isn’t that exactly what happened to him?

Habbab

HABBAB: NO ONE KNEW WHERE the name had come from. Nor did they know whether he had borne some other name before it.

The pride of noblemen and others of high estate, His Excellency, the new district head, or qa'imaqam, had come out on his first tour to inspect his new realm of jurisdiction. His attention was arrested by this man who carried himself with such a self-confident air. Their eyes met. To His Excellency's chagrin and consternation, Habbab wasn't flustered in the least. He called out to Habbab, and the man came up to him. His Excellency patted him on the shoulder, then walked around him, but he remained unfazed, as though the matter was of no concern to him. Needless to say, this was sufficient to arouse the ire of a commander who had barely been in the city for two days, and who had come expecting to find its population in abject submission to him. The commander unsheathed his sword and inverted it so that its handle was on the ground and its tip rocked back and forth between his thumb and his forefinger. He reached out with his right hand toward the man's shoulder while, with his left, he tilted the tip of the sword toward his waist and held it there. The man continued to stand where he was, motionless.

As people gathered to witness the peculiar spectacle, the commander thrust his arm over the man's shoulder and pulled him toward him, toward the sword, which easily found a

tip-hold for itself in his waist's tender flesh. However, Habbab continued to stand there without flinching.

The metal made its way effortlessly into the man's body. Blood began to flow from his waist, then slid down the blade until it reached the grip of the sword that stood planted in the ground. The commander turned and saw a rapidly collecting pool of blood. By this time, he was certain that the last thing the man would do would be to utter a cry of pain, even if his refusal to speak meant paying with his life.

Taking three steps back, the commander asked him, "Where are you from?"

In reply, the man pointed to the expanse that extended eastward, and the distant hills obscured by the morning sun with its ash-colored halo.

The commander invited him to walk with him. So Habbab walked with the commander, who asked him his name and the name of his village. Then he said, "Don't leave this caravansary. Don't go anywhere."

Two days later, three Turkish soldiers came and took him away.

And he was gone.

The Evil's Been Broken

KHALED'S WOUND HAD YET TO heal. The sudden loss he'd suffered still perplexed and galled him. How had she slipped through his fingers? How had death snatched her away from him when he'd been clinging to her so tightly?

He'd fallen in love with her during a season when they'd left Hadiya for Jerusalem. Hajj Mahmud had known her father for a long time.

And no sooner had they reached home again than he grabbed a plate and broke it.

His mother Munira heard the sound of shattering porcelain.

"The evil's been broken!" she exclaimed.

He grabbed another plate and broke it.

"The evil's been broken again!" said his mother.

Turning to her son, she said, "What's wrong with you today?"

Yet before she had a chance to finish her question, another of her rose-colored china plates, which Hajj Mahmud had bought from a Turkish military policeman, had come crashing to the floor.

Seeing her son picking up still another one, she shouted, "Hajj Mahmud, do something about your son before he breaks the whole house!"

Hajj Mahmud came running, realizing that the longing for a woman was pulsing in his son's veins!

Costly though it was, this was the way the young men of that region's villages used to announce that they'd been bachelors long enough!

Truth be told, Munira had been anxiously awaiting the day when she would hear the sound of a plate shattering in her house. But she didn't wish to sacrifice more of her china plates than she had to, no matter what the reason. Consequently, the minute she realized the danger her precious plates were in, she started hollering.

With one plate over his head and the rest of them cradled between his left hand and his waist, Khaled stood poised to carry on with the operation, when Hajj Mahmud walked in.

"Tell me what you want, and we'll do whatever we can," came the words of promise.

The plate's fate remained suspended in his hand.

"Amal, Abu Salim's daughter," he said.

"Abu Salim?"

"The wheat merchant in Jerusalem."

"And what's wrong with the village girls, may I ask?"

"Nothing. But I want Abu Salim's daughter."

"She's a city girl. She won't be of any use to you here."

The plate in Khaled's hand moved. Munira's heart skipped a beat. Her eyes fixed on the hand held high, she said, "Abu Salim's daughter, Abu Salim's daughter. So what's your problem with Abu Salim?"

"What are you saying, woman? These folks wouldn't even give us a she-goat if they had one. And you expect them to give us their daughter?"

Khaled's eyes met his mother's. She got the message: if she was slow to intervene, the plate in which she had taken pride for so long, along with the rest of the set, would soon be in pieces.

"For my sake, Hajj, don't disappoint him," she pleaded. "He's the first of the lot. Give me the joy of seeing him a groom!"

"I'll think about it."

Casting her son a reproachful look, she said, "He said he'd think about it. Now give me the plate."

She tried to reach the end of his upstretched arm, but couldn't. So she grabbed the plates that were nestled between his left hand and his waist, then retreated gleefully with what she had managed to retrieve.

"Besides," she said to her husband, "where would they find a groom for their daughter who's as tall as Khaled?"

Hajj Mahmud remained silent.

"Or this fair? Or with such green eyes?"

Hajj Mahmud gazed thoughtfully at his son.

"We'll hope for the best," he said.

Khaled handed his mother the plate she'd been unable to reach.

For three whole days the plates disappeared as though they'd never been part of the household. For three whole days there was a silence broken by nothing but his mother's words of gentle rebuke: "Really, Khaled! Does your mother mean so little to you that you're willing to break all her plates?"

He made no reply.

She took Hajj Mahmud aside and said, "Now don't let the plates that have been broken go to waste!"

Hajj Mahmud got up and went in search of the rest of the plates so that he could break them, too. Much to Munira's relief, he didn't find them, and she praised God for inspiring her to take her most prized possessions into hiding.

The men sat in a large parlor that bore clear signs of affluence: the large chairs, the pictures that graced the walls, the glass containers artfully arranged on the shelves and on tables in the corners of the room, the large mirror, the peculiar-looking lamps, and the crystal glasses that glistened in a honey-colored buffet.

My late father once told me that Abu Salim was one of the most respected merchants in the country. The villagers would take whatever they

*needed from him, and then, during the harvest season, he would come to get wheat, barley, and sesame seeds in return for what they had taken. They never had any disagreements with him, as the price of grains was known to all, just as the price of stamps is these days!**

The coffee was served. Shaykh Nasir al-Ali, as head of the delegation, took his cup and placed it on the table before him, and the men who had come with him followed suit.

“Drink your coffee, Shaykh Nasir,” said Abu Salim.

“We will drink it, God willing. May God prolong the days of your prosperity and protect you and your household! But we have a request.”

“Tell me what it is, Shaykh.”

“We’ve come to ask for the hand of your filly[†] for Khaled, Hajj Mahmud’s son.”

Silence reigned for several moments. Abu Salim looked around at his guests. Then his gaze settled on the face of Hajj Mahmud.

He said, “We have great respect and affection for you, Shaykh Nasir, and for the goodhearted people who’ve come with you today. Drink your coffee. Where could we find a more pure-bred husband for our daughter?”

The men were so taken by surprise, they took longer than usual to drink their coffee. They had come prepared for an unpleasant encounter, and Shaykh Nasir al-Ali had shared their pessimism.

“We were afraid you’d say that you weren’t prepared to send your filly so far from home, and we would have understood your position,” ventured Hajj Mahmud.

“This country is as big as one’s heart, Hajj,” replied Abu Salim. “Nothing in it is far away, and nothing is foreign.”

* Italicized passages such as these represent memories related by people who were interviewed by the author.

† A term used by villagers out of politeness and respect.

The Seven Respected Ones

HAIJ MAHMUD REMEMBERED WELL THE day when the seven monks arrived. They had said, “We promise you that we’ll be gentler than the breeze that blows over this hill, so gentle that you won’t even notice we’re here. However, we can also assure you that because of us you’ll be stronger. And when we say ‘because of us,’ we mean an entire world that backs us, a world represented by the Church. Perhaps you know that, for many years now, the Ottoman Sultan has chosen the Archbishop of Jerusalem from among the clerics of our denomination. However, we’re subject to the authority of our home country as though we were living there, so we enjoy two types of protection, both of which will benefit the village as well.”

Hajj Mahmud asked them, “And why have you chosen to come to Hadiya in particular?”

“Do you think it was named Hadiya (‘Peaceful’) by chance?” replied the head monk.

Pointing to the plain, which extended as far as the eye could see, he continued, “In a tranquil place like this, with an expanse that contains nothing that would block one’s view or hinder one’s mind, a person can be closer to God.”

“There is no god but God,” murmured Hajj Mahmud.

Honey for Sale!

KHALED'S DELIGHT IN HIS BRIDE was beyond description. He would follow her around the house, pick her up and carry her in his arms. Sometimes he would carry her across the dirt courtyard to where his parents and siblings were sitting and walk around them, crying merrily, "Honey for sale! Roses for sale!" On one occasion, he was about to take her up to the roof, but Hajj Mahmud stopped him at the last minute.

"Settle down, boy," Munira said, although she was happy to see him so happy.

News of Khaled's attachment to his bride started to spread, and soon became the talk of the town. The men of the village disapproved, and the women whispered among themselves, saying, "That's the way a man ought to be! Otherwise, what use is he?" In less than a month's time, the new bride was receiving scathing, envious looks wherever she went.

However, it didn't stop there: one day, Khaled was sitting with a number of young men from the village, and when they began whispering among themselves, he got up suddenly and said, "Why should you be surprised if I act the way I do? If she isn't more beautiful than both the sun and the moon, I'll divorce her!"

They said nothing in reply.

Two days later, when they were eating lunch in the field again, they began challenging what he had said. And again he

said defiantly, “If she isn’t more beautiful than both the sun and the moon, I’ll divorce her!”

“What are you saying, man?” they demanded. “Could there possibly be a woman more beautiful than both the sun and the moon—the most splendid, beautiful things in all of God’s creation? After all, it’s the sun that gives us light during the day, and the moon that lights our way at night!”

As he pondered what they had said to him, Khaled looked at his wife and thought, There’s no doubt about it: she’s more beautiful.

Seven nights later, there was a full moon, which provided an occasion for renewed discussion of the issue. Gazing up at the full moon, Ramadan Nasrallah said, “Look! Is it possible for a human being to be more beautiful than this exquisite part of God’s creation?”

Khaled got the point. Turning to Ramadan, he said, “If she isn’t more beautiful, I’ll divorce her.”

Suddenly everyone fell silent.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Muhammad Shahada replied, “You just divorced the wife you love without realizing it. Who would be crazy enough to say that there’s a woman more beautiful than both the sun and the moon?”*

The catastrophe he had just created pierced him like a stab in the back. He lost his senses. He went running to his father, his mother. He went to see Shaykh Husni, who wrung his turban in dismay.

“Let me think,” said the shaykh. “But how on earth did you bring this disaster on me and on yourself?”

As he looked at his wife, Khaled felt a vast distance separating him from her, as though there were an ocean between them. He went back to Shaykh Husni the next morning, only to

* There is a provision in Islamic law whereby a husband can divorce his wife simply by saying to her, “You are divorced.” If he says it once or even twice, the divorce is not final. If, however, he says it a third time, the divorce is irrevocable.

find him wringing his turban the way he had been the day before. He sat down at the door of the mosque to wait. However, the three following days brought him nothing to set his heart at rest.

He left Hadiya. He went wandering aimlessly until he reached Jerusalem, and whenever he encountered a man of religion, he would beg him to tell him something, and not content himself with silence the way everyone else was doing.

He traversed the entire country from north to south, from east to west, but to no avail. Then one day, Shaykh Nasir al-Ali found him sprawled out at the edge of his field, with his mare standing nearby. He leaned over him and, helping him to sit up, gave him a drink.

Khaled had no idea how he had ended up in Shaykh Nasir al-Ali's field, since there was no one on earth he'd been more anxious to get away from. After all, Shaykh Nasir had personally headed the delegation that had gone to seek her hand on his behalf, and what had he done? He'd gone and besmirched his reputation with his rash words.

"What came over you, son?" he asked. "If we could help you, we would. And if there's anything you need in this country, we'll try to help you find it."

The silence with which he had been met by everyone else had settled deep in his being, and it haunted him wherever he went. Khaled looked over at Shaykh Nasir and burst into tears.

Three days later, the Shaykh asked him the same question, and he burst into tears all over again.

However, there was something gracious and welcoming about Shaykh Nasir's face that loosened his tongue, and he said, "You gave her to me in marriage, and I went and lost her."

And once he'd begun to speak, there was no stopping the torrent of words that followed.

Without saying a word, the shaykh began fiddling with his white beard. He stood up and began pacing the courtyard, his

hands clasped behind his back and his deep-set eyes gazing toward heaven as though he wanted to turn its pages with his short, compact frame and his small, boyish face.

He said, “Your father is dear to me, Khaled, as was your grandfather. You’ve been my guest for three days, and I hope you’ll be my guest for a fourth. Perhaps God will inspire me with a way to resolve this perplexing issue.”

A few hours later, the shaykh came up to him and said, “I know you need to go home more than you need to stay.”

Khaled nodded his head. “Have you found a solution, father?”

“I hope so. Come now, get your mare ready and place your trust in God. Maybe we can pray the mid-afternoon prayer in Hadiya.”

So off they went, riding over hill and dale, traversing the plains, and wending their way around green fields and vineyards. From time to time, the shaykh would encourage him, saying, “Place your trust in God, son. Everything will be all right, God willing.”

After some time, Hadiya appeared atop the large hill. Khaled tugged on the halter. His mare stopped. Lowering his head, he kneaded his brow with the fingers of his left hand. The shaykh pulled his mare back, saying, “Not far now. We’re almost there. You’ve waited a long time, and there’s only a short way to go.”

Hadiya seemed suddenly to rise up over the surrounding hills. The men working in the fields gathered around, many of them stung with remorse for the way they had challenged Khaled to say what he had said. As for Hajj Mahmud, his mother, his brothers, his sister Aziza, and his paternal aunt, Anisa, their joy over seeing him again was beyond words. Before greeting his son, Hajj Mahmud came rushing toward the shaykh, crying, “Shaykh Nasir al-Ali! You’ve brought us back to life by honoring our village with your presence! You’ve brought us back to life by bringing our son home

again. Welcome! Welcome! You'll have dinner with us tonight. In fact, the whole village is invited to dinner!"

He gestured to one of the men, who took off running to choose a number of sheep for slaughter, and work on the meal began straight away.

Shaykh Nasir al-Ali was one of the most prominent clan-based judges in the country, as well as the most courageous and wise of them, which rekindled their hopes.

Khaled turned toward his house in the hope of seeing his wife, but didn't find her.

"She's inside," his father said to him. "But remember, she's forbidden to you."

Khaled nodded regretfully.

When at last they had made their way to the guesthouse, Shaykh Nasir remained silent. He was so silent, in fact, that Hamdan wasn't able to put new coffee in his mortar to prepare it for the guest. He picked up the mortar and moved some distance away, then quietly began grinding the coffee, his tears flowing freely.

When he returned, people noticed the tears in his eyes. Hajj Mahmud's son Salem took the dalla and the coffee cups from him and poured the coffee, tapping the spout against the edge of the cup lest a single drop fall to the ground. Then Hajj Mahmud took the cup in his right hand and presented it personally to Shaykh Nasir al-Ali.*

It was time for the mid-afternoon call to prayer. Shaykh Nasir said to them, "Let's perform the prayer here today. And, with your permission, I'll be the prayer leader."

Shaykh Husni then issued the call to prayer, the worshippers lined up in neat rows, and Shaykh Nasir recited the Fatiha. He then proceeded to recite the chapter of the Qur'an entitled "The Fig," saying: "*In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful: By*

* It is customary for the guest to shake his coffee cup after drinking for the second time, and to refrain out of politeness from drinking a third cup.

the fig, and the olive, and the Mount of Sinai, and this city of security: We have indeed created the sun and the moon in the best of molds. . . .

When the men heard what he had said, some of them burst out, "You made a mistake, Shaykh!"

He fell silent for a moment, and so did they. Then he interrupted the prayer, and, turning toward them, asked, "And what is it that God Almighty says?"

"We have indeed created human beings in the best of molds. . . ." they recited in reply.

The shaykh shook his head as though he were pondering a problem that had no solution. Then he said, "Since you know that this is what God has said, and that human beings are God's most beautiful creation, then why do you separate a man from his wife?"

Silence reigned for a second time. Then, realizing what the shaykh was getting at, Khaled jumped up and threw his arms around him, kissing both his hands. As for Shaykh Husni, he struck himself on the forehead, saying, "Now why hadn't that occurred to me?"

"Because it hadn't occurred to anyone," Hajj Mahmud told him reassuringly.

Alas, however, their happiness was short-lived. One day, hearing a hawker plying his wares on the road, Khaled's wife came outside and traded three eggs for two handfuls of dried figs. That evening, she began crying, "My stomach!"

At first people thought she was about to have a miscarriage. However, when Shinnara, the village midwife, came to check on her, she assured them that it had nothing to do with the child she was carrying. After two hours of indescribable pain, as Khaled held her in his arms, death spirited her away.

For a long time thereafter, he would rant, "How could He take her away from me when I was holding on to her? How?"

"Fear God, man. Fear God!" people would say to him.

Then, suddenly, who should arrive but Hamama.

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me

by Youssef Fadel, translated by Jonathan Smolin

The Televangelist

by Ibrahim Essa, translated by Jonathan Wright

Whitefly

by Abdelilah Hamdouchi, translated by Jonathan Smolin



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