

**SHAHIRA
AL-NAJJAR**

Underfoot

Translated from Arabic by
Catherine Cobham

She settled into her favourite spot

in the heart of the old tree, where its branches were dry and its leaves withered. It spread out wide, extending its thousand fingers over the schoolyard, the scabby wall and part of the dusty road which was like the main square because the mosque was there, and the primary school run by Sheikh Salim the Potbellied, and most of the shops selling tobacco, seed and fertiliser.

The times she went nimbly up the tree there were some who looked at her admiringly – this tough girl in her dark green dress, her long plaited hair burnished by the sun so that it was a mixture of gleaming copper and soft deep brown braids tumbling chaotically on her shoulders. Others cursed the fatherless girl who climbed like a boy, not caring what people thought of her, and the one who cursed most was Sheikh Salim the Potbellied, whose origins people had completely forgotten, referring to him only by his huge belly. This had been fed a rich diet until it grew into a rotund grandiloquent ball-shape preceding him by a considerable distance, and making him easy to pick out from a long way off.

That day in particular she was enjoying sitting in the tree. It was the first day of the big feast, the Feast of the Sacrifice, and it happened to fall on the weekly Friday holiday that year, giving people the chance to socialise more than usual and air their opinions on the event, discussing how much it cost to make the pilgrimage, the millions of pilgrims halting on Mount Arafat, what animals the neighbours had sacrificed. Story after story which she didn't understand, but she was busy watching the boys riding bicycles decorated with coloured paper, the girls parading in their red and yellow dresses, the balloons bobbing in the air, and the men wearing white gallabiyyas with elegantly rolled turbans or their best skullcaps, who intended to make it known – albeit discreetly – that they had bathed the night before, Thursday night when they slept with their wives, and gave off scents of musk and saffron: today was the Feast, and a Friday too.

The girl Shahd wished her two sisters, Hanim and Hasanat, could have been there, but their mother's death had scattered their little family. Sheikh Abu Sama'in, the local headmaster, had taken Hanim on as a live-in maid, while they'd transported Hasanat off to the nearby town because Sheikh Salim the Potbellied swore blind that she'd crept up on him while he was asleep and stolen his wallet. Hasanat had cried and protested that they were wrong and then used phrases, phrases about Sheikh Salim, said that he'd tried to make her... and as a result she was found guilty, because she had accused a venerable and blameless man like the Sheikh, pure as the driven snow, of unspeakable, impossible acts, things that would never happen.

Even while she sobbed over her sister, Shahd thought that perhaps Hasanat had been luckier than her or the third sister, Hanim, who was sometimes branded with a poker in Abu Sama'in's house just for breaking a glass or because they suspected her of taking a big scoop of sesame sweet when she thought nobody was watching.

Shahd loved the huge sycamore fig and everything about it. Best of all were the ripe fruits which she picked with pleasurable anticipation, but nearly as good were the rotten ones she threw at anyone who happened to be passing, in particular men in sparkling white gallabiyyas and girls in gaily coloured dresses. She took aim carefully and generally hit the target, feeling an intoxicating rush of happiness as the fruit landed on the clean

clothes and traced a dark stain which it would be hard to get out.

Sheikh Salim the Potbellied was one of her favourite targets. The best time had been when he was sitting on the bench outside Abd al-Hayy's seedstore opposite the tree. She collected dozens of overripe fruits as he settled down to a huge pile of clams and other seafood he'd bought from. Umm Hussein. He gulped them down one after the other and they descended into the huge belly whose name he bore so worthily. All that separated the two of them was the thudding fruit which was beginning to adorn his brightly striped robe. One struck him on the temple causing the bystanders to laugh without restraint. Abd al-Hayy said that it was a message from above, a sign of divine compassion warning him to stop overloading his belly with clams or it would explode.

It's the Feast for everyone but you, Shahd, all of them in new clothes. with lollipops and extra pocket money from the relatives. The days and nights go by you and you just get more wretched and sad, your pretty, face is gaunt with hunger, and when was the last time you laughed? And what about your mother who died without knowing why? She was perfectly healthy one day and the next they woke up to learn that she was dead, and the sisters went their separate ways.

The last time I saw Hanim in the street by chance she hardly had time to kiss me before she rushed off back to her boss's house where they were, expecting guests. I can't even spend time with my sister, I sleep where I can and never know where my next meal's coming from.

Here's an overripe fruit perfect for that tart shaking her hips at all and sundry down there. Isn't she Halima's daughter? Halima the... like mother like daughter... who had a shack by the station where she sold tea and booze and dope. Now she's really made it. Plenty of backers and hangers-on, and men on her payroll. Her daughter's Wadida, except that they've started to call her Didi these days and her ugly face has disappeared behind layers of make-up. Here you are, Halima's daughter. See how you like this!

The branch bends as if it can't take her weight any longer, or is there a crack in it? Where's the rotten fruit for decorating Wadida's dress? And isn't that Salim the Potbellied coming along? The branch bends more dangerously. What a disaster if it breaks and he sees me. Watch out for yourself, girl, he's on his

way! There's a creaking, rending sound and a fierce rustling of leaves. Shahd jumps across to another branch, her eyes on Salim the Potbellied, who arrives under the tree, moving a fly whisk slowly to and fro in front of his face with an air of pomp and dignity. She clings to the new branch which is covered in dense foliage. It sways violently like a fairground swing.

She didn't understand exactly what happened next. The branch she had believed was rock solid suddenly gave way. She was left clutching on to a single fragile bough and her head hit the tree trunk hard. She recoiled in pain, and blood flowed from a gash on her leg. She landed with her bare feet on a soft, fleshy body clothed in a clean, brightly striped garment.

Salim the Potbellied! She heard a voice shout, "Help me!" Then another: "God preserve us!" Then she heard muffled laughter and her eyes shone with fear. "I swear I couldn't help it," she screamed. "I didn't mean to. By my mother's dust!"

Salim the Potbellied came round from his state of shock. Her legs were dangling down his front. Her bare feet had dirtied his clothes and a bloodstain was spreading along the sleeve of his high-quality striped gallabiyya. He began to curse, then checked himself.

Why did I fall just at that moment? If only I'd landed on the ground instead, even if it meant I broke my neck! I tried to grab a branch on my way down. I tried, by Sidi al-Ghurbawi! But what could I do? It was God's will...

Daughter of a ... Salim the Potbellied's face was the colour of turmeric, his hand searching wildly for something to hit her with. She had slipped down and landed at his feet, her arm raised in supplication, and was sobbing and wailing and pleading in the name of her mother, of the saint Sidi al-Ghurbawi, the village mayor and everyone else she could think of. The cane – where did that come from? It descended on her slender body and through the flood of tears she could see people laughing to themselves. And Shahd came close to doing the same. The cane hurt her and she screamed, and at the same time the sight of her footmarks on Salim the Potbellied's gallabiyya made her want to laugh. The earth spun around her and her thin arms flailed, begging for mercy. Her weak voice gave way and she wept aloud, but a gasp of laughter escaped from her in spite of herself. Umm Hussein, who had sold the seafood to Salim the Potbellied,

**SHAHIRA
AL-NAJJAR**

Underfoot

exclaimed in a mixture of astonishment and admiration, "The girl's laughing and crying at the same time!"

"What's the world coming to?" shouted Salim the Potbellied.

Shahd wailed with laughter in the midst of her tears. Her words disintegrated into shrill cries and the dust swirled up as the cane rose and fell on her body squirming at their feet.

*Shahira Al-Najjar is a short-story writer in Alexandria.
Catherine Cobham teaches Arabic language and literature at
St. Andrews University in Scotland and has translated several
outstanding contemporary Arab novelists.*