

# The Caravan

## A short story by Justin Newland

Zechariah was collecting dew in discarded plastic bottles he'd picked up on the streets of Essaouira. Almost reverently, he poured the minute contents of each of the bottles into a larger leather gourd. It was still dark, so Zechariah had to feel the lip of the plastic bottle, and move it against the lip of the gourd to ensure that not a drop was spilt. When he'd finished, he put the stopper in the lip of the gourd.

"Now," Mussa said, "remind me of the import of water."

Zechariah nodded, "Without water, we perish. Water is sacred - it keeps us alive."

"Good," Mussa whispered. "Your training nears its end."

"All because the teacher is so good," Zechariah said.

"I have to be," Mussa said.

Zechariah loved this time of day. He sighed as first rays of sunlight shot through the darkness of the night. Within a short time, the great orb of the sun had breached the sand-filled horizon, beckoning to the tribe to awake.

"What is this place we call a desert?" Mussa asked.

"It's a timeless void of change; a dance of wind, sand and dune," Zechariah replied.

There was a pause. The silence of the morning was almost material. A slight ripple ran across the pool of water in the oasis. A scorpion emerged from behind a rock, and scampered towards a cactus.

"Now there's a survivor," observed Mussa.

"As does the cacti and our camels, all of them specialists, all of them have adapted to the extreme climate."

"Zechi" Mussa said. "It doesn't matter. The sun shines on all, equally. Likewise, the desert holds no sympathy for man, animal, or plant. All are treated with the same withering justice - drink water or die! That's why the job of water collector is so important."

The quietness of the breaking dawn was broken by the sounds of movement from within the tents. In one of them, Uriah, the tribal headman, awoke. Every day, he educated his ten-year old son, Zoran, in the ways of the world and his ancestry. This morning it was about their tribe, "We are Tuareg," Uriah said proudly. "Our people are wise in the ways of the Sa-ha-ra. She is a harsh mistress. Respect her like the Great Mother. She is alive with the chalice of nourishment or poison. It only depends which of her cups you put to your lips."

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“Where is the Sa-ha-ra?” Zoran asked, innocent eyes ablaze.

“In the Maghreb,” he continued, “In the northern part of this continent of Africa.”

“Who are we?”

“We are the Blue people, who know the great trade routes of the Sa-ha-ra. We travel them all and trade in jewelry, leather, swords, and precious stones...”

He watched his son's face; keen to absorb his father's every word. Uriah was in his early 40's, and supposedly in peak physical and mental condition. But when he looked into the mirror, he saw a care-worn face that wore the ravages of his tribal leadership. The palms of his hands were rough like leather; the tip of his index finger was missing, lost in a knife fight in the high Atlas Mountains.

His wife Zana handed them both a meal of dried raisons, a smidgeon of honey on unleavened bread, all washed down with a cup of hot sweet mint tea. She sat down cross-legged. They ate and drank in silence.

Zana had dark brown, almost black, piercing eyes. With her high cheek bones and noble gait, she was as beautiful and unforgiving as the desert. She wore a long, loose, mid-blue cloak. Just as he was the tribal leader, she was responsible for the women and children.

Even as she supped her mint tea, her expression was one of intense suspicion: she was always wary of threat, not only from enemy tribesman and wild animals, but also from the *djinn*, the unseen forces of the desert. The henna markings on her hands, feet, face and arms were for fertility and luck. Inscribed on the back of the light silver jewelry worn around her neck, wrists and fingers were protective verses of the Koran.

To keep away the *djinn*, Uriah wore calligraphied amulets of silver and leather. He wore a white kaftan, Arab-style. Short and stockily built, he had upper arms like tree-trunks. The great sword plunged deep into his belt denoted his chieftain rank and standing.

After breaking the fast, the caravan set off. They walked in a line of men, women and animals, Uriah in the lead, sometimes taking turns to be last, always the most dangerous position.

The vastness of the sands stretched to the horizon, which shimmered through the heat haze. Dunes rolled like massive ocean waves, frozen in time and space. The sun beat down inexorably. The caravan moved slowly. The sky was ice blue. No clouds, not a breath of wind.

The scorching midday heat could fuse melted sand granules into the famous ‘Rose of the Desert.’ That was when Uriah called them to a halt.

It was then that Jeremiah, the tent-maker, busied himself erecting a long canvas awning to provide a modicum of shelter. He had Umar, his ten-year old son, to help him. When it was ready, Zana led the children and the other women into one corner. She moved silently amongst the children, checking them for signs of de-hydration.

Moses was the tribe's physician and mystic. He watched as Umar walked from attending to the camels. The leather amulet on his wrist was torn, and it kept flapping against a wound underneath the amulet. The little boy tore it off and flung it on the sand, then ran to join the other children under the awning.

"Umar" Moses said sternly.

"Yes?"

"What have you done? The amulet?"

"It tore, and was flapping around on my wrist."

"Umar, listen to me." Moses said, bending down and putting his hand around the boy's shoulder. His tone was mid way between instruction and rebuke. "By throwing away your amulet onto her sands, you have shown disrespect to the Sa-ha-ra. What is she to do with your leather? When we come, we find the desert clean and pure. When we leave, we leave it the same way. That's how we show her respect," Moses said.

Umar looked suitably chastised. But Moses hadn't finished.

"No amulet, means no protection. The djinn, the kazooma, will be after your soul." Moses was deliberately trying to frighten the child. He had to make him remember. "So be more careful."

"I will, I promise," the little boy said.

"Then do what you have to do," Moses invited him, nodding at the discarded amulet.

Umar stood up and walked over to it, and picked it up. As he did, Moses noticed a cut on the boy's wrist. He motioned to Judith, Umar's mother, to tend to her son while he returned to his camel to retrieve his medical supplies of roots and herbs.

In the meantime, Judith found a piece of clean cloth. She soaked it in a tiny amount of water, then carefully dabbed it over the cut. Umar winced and gritted his teeth.

"There, it's all clean now" she said.

With sure quick hands, Moses returned and prepared a poultice, and then applied it to the cut. He mended the amulet, and wrapped it around Umar's other wrist.

"Say thank you to Moses." Judith implored her son. There was a pause. Judith half frowned at her son, as if to hurry him up. "He could be so stubborn at times," she said apologetically.

"Thank you, Moses." Umar said, bowing his head.

"Now learn from this, Umar. It's not just for your survival, it's for the whole tribe's. You must remember that," said Moses slowly, looking the boy directly in the eye. Umar nodded to him, as if to say he now understood. Moses got up, and walked over to join the other men.

Jacob, the fire-maker, had already produced some tinder from his supplies and started a small fire enough to brew up some mint tea. Each man presented his cup to him to be filled in turn, Uriah

first. He noticed his leader's hands were shaking, and he almost spilt a drop of tea.

"Come on, old man!" cried the scout Yisa. "Let us have our tea." At that pejorative, Jacob lost his train of thought, Uriah moved on, and he poured out a tea for Yisa, and all the other men behind him.

The tribe sat under the awning, in the middle of the desert sands, the women and children in one corner, the men in the other. Some dozed, they all waited. When the sun had begun to descend from its zenith, they prepared to disembark. On leaving the place of rest, Moses looked around to ensure that there was no sign of them ever having been there. Other than their foot prints and footmarks, there were none.

When the caravan reached the next oasis, the tribe set their belongings in a broad circle around the patch of water. No-one tethered the animals. Everyone knew they would not stray far from water. The sun sat just above the horizon.

Once all the tents had been erected, Jeremiah visited each one to look for splits and tears in the canvas. He'd seen tents ripped to shreds by ferocious winds, made all the more harrowing by the sand and debris in the airflow. He pulled on the ropes supporting the tents, checking they were taut. Each rope was secured with a heavy rock, or alternatively to the trunk of a nearby date tree. His duties complete, he returned to his own tent.

He searched through his bags, looking for tobacco. He found his pouch, but it was empty. He sighed: he wanted a smoke, his one vice. He picked up a selection of his best hand-made rugs, and set off around the camp. The first tent he approached was that of Uriah and Zana, who was unimpressed.

"Get off with you," Zana said scornfully. "I boiled out there today, leave us in peace."

Jeremiah went over to Jacob, who was building the night fire.

"Salam, Jeremiah. Pass me that piece of wood," Jacob cried, pointing to a small log. Jeremiah did as asked.

"Thanks," Jacob said. Jeremiah didn't think there was going to be any sale there. Picking up his rugs, he walked over to the oasis, where Zechariah was filling the leather water bags.

"Salam, Jeremiah. But not today, my friend," he said amiably. "But if you like," he continued, seeing the disappointment on his friend's face, "I'll give you some tobacco!"

Jeremiah's face lit up.

"Salam. May god protect you from the djinn!" he said, clasping his palms together in front of his chest and bowing slightly. He took the tobacco and was returning to his tent when he passed Zana, carrying a large cooking pot. He paused to watch her go by. He'd always liked her, and wondered how different his life would have been had he made her his wife. Alas she'd chosen Uriah. He'd lived with the disappointment ever since.

He walked back past the camels, where Said and his assistants, the boys Zoran and Umar, were attending to them. The boys had finished watering them, and with Said's permission, rushed off

to play. Said tethered the camels together. Each had his or her own particular character. Some were cantankerous, others benign. Said knew them all.

“Come, beauty, come Pasha!” he whispered. “Sit down now,” he said softly, and the great beast crouched down obediently on the sand. He made sure all their nooses were secure, and then went on his way back to his tent with Jeremiah. They passed Uriah, who was pacing up and down.

There were shouts of joy and play coming from the children running around the camp and hiding in the around the oasis.

“Ow! Ow!” shrieked Zoran, as he ran past Pasha, who grunted at him, and showed her ugly misshapen teeth.

Then Umar did the same, kicking sand at the camel’s feet. Pasha hissed at him. Oblivious, they ran and shouted, moving like gazelles over the cooling oasis sands. Zoran accidentally ran straight into Moses, crashing into his knees.

“By the Lord, you run like the wind,” Moses cried, exasperated.

“Moses, I’m so sorry, forgive me!” implored Zoran.

“Watch where you are going,” he replied sternly.

“Moses,” Zoran said. There was an awkward pause.

Moses turned and said, “Yes, my son.”

“I’ve always wanted to know, but been afraid to ask.”

“What, tell me?”

“Where is the caravan headed, where are we going? We leave the sea, travel to the Mountains, then the desert, then return to the sea. Then we do it again. Why?”

Moses paused before answering. He’d answered this same question many times before. It was a profound question, and like all questions, he knew that the answer was appropriate to the questioner.

“Our tribe has two ways: to walk and to sojourn. We move and then we camp, like breathing. Then whatever we do, we do it together, for together we are safer!”

He waited for Zoran to digest his words, then opened the flap of his tent and went inside. To an adult he would have answered differently. He would have said that the Tuareg had always been nomadic traders and occasional raiders, following the same routes, as the winds dictated.

If someone had pressed again, and a few did, he would have revealed that being itinerant, the Tuareg healed and re-generated themselves, in the same way the first Moses had kept the Tribes of Israel in the desert for forty years during the Exodus.

“Time to eat” called Zana, ringing a silver bell. Everyone walked across to where the tribe had gathered under a palm tree.

Their food mostly consisted of roots and dried meat, prepared and stored before the journey began, and used sparingly for cooking during it. Zana was a wonderful cook, and had rustled up a

delicious meat stew tajine. She handed them all their pieces of bread and their plates, Uriah first, then in order of tribal seniority.

The sun had almost set, a vibrant small disc still rested above the distant horizon.

Uriah sat and watched the tribe eating. He knew every man intimately; they were like brothers and sisters to him. They all needed to be protected and nurtured. He dipped his bread into the rich sauce, but he'd left his appetite somewhere on day's trail. His stomach ached. He had the cramps.

He looked towards the oasis; the rays of evening light playing on the water. His vision clouded over. He thought he saw clouds of white mist rising out of the water, then faces appearing in the mist – first his dead grand-father, his long-lost brother, then his beloved mother and father. In disbelief, he rubbed his eyes and shook himself. The faces and the mist disappeared.

“What’s the matter?” Zana asked. “You look tired, and pale.”

“Nothing” he grumbled.

Zana went back to eating her tajine, dipping the bread in the stew and eating with her fingers. Uriah picked up a stone and examined it, as if he was trying to feel its pulse. He threw it casually into the campfire. He picked up a battered six string Spanish guitar he'd bartered with a hippie tourist in Essaouira for some of his tribe's exquisite silver and turquoise jewelry. He plucked out a doleful tune that seemed to hang forever in the cooling night air.

It was a tune Uriah's grandfather used to play to him as a young boy. He recalled the angst he'd felt as a child when the tribe had left his grandfather behind in the desert. At the time, he'd pleaded with them not to do so.

“He is going to die!” he'd shouted. No-one listened.

His grandfather had fallen and broken his leg and was too old to continue caravanning. Uriah didn't know then what he knew now – that his grandfather would have been a grave risk to the whole tribe. They had to leave him. Later he learnt that his grandfather had insisted on being left behind.

Moses listened intently to the music, trying to catch its inner story. Something was amiss. There was something worrisome about Uriah's playing. Moses finished eating, wiping the sauce with the bread. He decided to provide extra protection for the tribe that night. It was at quiet moments like this, around the campfire at night, when everyone's guard would drop. He was the sentinel, he was the watchtower: he'd pay attention to every detail.

He walked slowly around the camp, checking inside and out. Then he chose four pebbles from his rucksack, buried one in each of the four compass points around the camp. By each one, he mouthed a prayer of protection. Outside, lay the sucking emptiness and overwhelming power of the desert. Inside lay safety, companionship, and a bulwark to loneliness.

“Zana”, he whispered as he moved closer to Uriah's wife. “A word please?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What’s the matter with Uriah?”

“You’ve noticed too,” she said, arching her eyebrows.

Moses nodded, sanguine.

“I’m afraid for him. He’s not himself, but I don’t know what it is. He won’t tell me.”

“Watch him, carefully,” Moses instructed.

He retreated to his tent and went straight to his herb collection. He picked out several different ones, and mixed them together, inserting each mixture into a small package – one for each member of the tribe. The wick on the candle burned down low as he worked these herbal potions.

During the night, Uriah had a disturbed sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw pictures of events from his life – his childhood, his youth, and his accession to the leadership of the tribe. He’d always believed in his own innate goodness, and in that of his tribal companions, but these sharp impressions of his life’s history bewildered him. He tossed and turned in his makeshift bed, niggled by something he couldn’t identify. When he did drift off into a semi-conscious slumber, he was troubled by djinn in his head, pounding on his temples, speaking to him, screeching, squarking.

“Uriah,” a voice said.

Someone was shaking him.

“You’re talking in your sleep,” the voice said.

“What? Who?” he said.

“Wake up,” Zana said.

He sat bolt upright, sweat pouring from his brow. Zana bathed his forehead with a cloth flannel, trying to soothe him. Outside, there was the soft low hum of the desert night. Outside, the men chatted in low voices when they changed guard on the night watch.

In the morning, Uriah found it difficult to muster. His hands were shaking. His left eye had a nervous tick. He wiped a bead of perspiration from his forehead. Zana helped him get dressed. They broke their night fast with mint tea, bread, honey and raisins, except Uriah spurned the food again. Zana directed the children as they packed the tent and loaded all their belongings onto the camel’s back.

As he did at the start of each day’s journey, Moses went up to each of the adults in turn, and over their foreheads, made a sign of a triangle with his right forefinger to protect them from the desert djinns.

When the camels were tethered one to the other, the caravan was ready to leave. Zechariah was leading this day, Moses in the rear. The camels shuffled and grunted. Moses was thinking to himself about Uriah, analysing the strange nervous symptoms could be attributed to.

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“The kazooma,” he whispered to himself, “the dreadful djinn of the desert.” Many years before, during his apprenticeship, Kuleman, his predecessor, had explained to him its significance.

“The kazooma is like a strange and powerful mirror,” Kuleman had said gravely. “It reflects back a man’s life’s worth. It is unremitting. It is true justice, just-ice; stone cold in the midst of boiling heat.”

Moses could hear his master’s grainy voice even today, detailing the essence of the kazooma. He remembered what he’d told him had to be done once a man had become possessed by the kazooma - how the rest of the tribe could be made secure.

It was near to sunset and the day had so far passed without further incident. As the caravan reached the next oasis to halt for the night, Moses heard a most horrible scream pierce the silence.

Uriah leapt from his camel and ran towards the date palms at the oasis, his hands waving erratically. Everyone froze.

Then as if someone gave them permission, the men moved as one. They jumped down onto the hot sands, and ran after him. The scene was almost comical, but Moses wasn’t laughing. He knew what had happened. So did the rest of the tribe. Eventually, the men caught up with Uriah. Zechariah restrained him on one shoulder, Jeremiah on the other, with two other men held down his legs.

Without a word being spoken, Zana led the children away with the other woman. The goatherd corralled the animals. Other members of the tribe looked on in horror as Uriah screamed obscenities and threats at the very people trying to help him.

Moses arrived from the back of the caravan, to find Uriah in a terrible state. His mouth frothed with saliva like a rabid dog. His eyes almost reached out of their sockets, rolling without focus.

“Bring the gag,” Moses said. If they didn’t, he’d surely bite off his own tongue, and likely choke on it. He’d seen it happen before.

The tribe gathered in a circle of watchers around the struggling man, to witness their leader who’d safely guided the caravan with uncompromising dignity, fall into the abyss. In their eyes, a look of acute disappointment and gnawing certainty.

“Bring the carpet!” Moses called to Jeremiah.

Like an occupying force, the kazooma had taken full possession of Uriah. Moses knew that that grip could only be loosened in one way only.

Moses had a more pressing engagement. He assembled the tribe and carefully handed out to each of them the package of bitter herbs he’d prepared the night before. Each took them with a small sip of water. That was the method of protection Kuleman had taught him.

Jeremiah returned with the silver tasseled carpet and rolled it open. It was royal blue, stark against the golden yellow sands. He’d never needed to use it before. It’d been passed down to the Tuareg from the Golden Horde of Genghis Khan, who had stolen it from their Chinese neighbours, or so the story went.

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Six men restrained Uriah, who was still kicking and writhing. With the utmost reverence, they placed him in the corner of the carpet. They wrapped him in its folds, and then rolled over and over, five ten, times, until the full length was rolled up, Uriah squashed in the centre.

Moses led the tribe in prayer. The men knelt with their hands outstretched, foreheads touching the sand, facing Mecca, trusting god to protect them. He hoped that, along with the bitter herbs, these prayers would protect them from the exorcised kazooma.

The weight of the carpet bore down on Uriah's lungs, slowly squeezing the last breath out of him. Moses wiped away a tear as the sun set, and they buried him in the sand.