

Camel Station

Trevor Griffiths

Trevor Griffiths's plays include modern classics such as 'The Comedians' and 'The Party'. His television work includes a celebrated version of D.H.Lawrence's 'Sons and Lovers', the screenplay of which is published by Spokesman Books.

Northern No-Fly Zone, Iraq. Mountain pastures near Ninevah. Hot. A small battery radio, on its last legs, relays ecstatic commentary on the Iraq-Iran world cup qualifying match from the national stadium. TARIK, 13, perched on a rock beside it, works on something in a notebook, voicing words and phrases as he writes. He wears traditional arab work-dress, though the kuffiah is round his neck, to make room for the NYY baseball cap shading his eyes. Across his back, an ancient Lee Enfield from the second world war.

TARIK

'...The sign read: (thinks) alHourani – Camel Station. Is it a mirage, the tricks of the desert, the Man from Tikrit asked himself. How can this be real?

He looks up at the sky, listens. The radio sputters to nothing. He listens on. A thin wisp of sound from the stratosphere slowly asserts in the silence. He unslings the rifle. Takes aim at the pale blue sky.

TARIK

(Sighting) How. Can this. Be. Real?
(Fakes firing) Boosh. Boosh. Boosh.

A girl's shout from below. Sheep bleat, men call. He looks down the hill, reslings the rifle, returns to his notebook.

SURIYA

(Still toiling up) Hey! HeadinaBook. I brought you food. (She arrives, stops by the rock, lays down a muslin-wrapped parcel and a plastic bottle of water.) Surprised to see me? By, you've grown. You're as tall as me. (She fondles his head, he resists) My little cousin. (She drinks from the bottle, hands it to him) They told me down there you were on wolf watch, your father's so rich he can afford to lose his flock..?

She's already looking up. The dull remote groan of a plane reasserts. Tarik sneaks a shy look at her. Black robe, white scarf. Sixteen.

TARIK

My mam said you were in Baghdad. (She scans on) Studying medicine. (Nothing) Too hard, was it?

SURIYA

(Eyes on sky) My mother's sick. I'm looking after her. (The sky) There's nothing there...

TARIK

Reconnaissance. (She looks at him) No pilot. (Returns to his pad) American.

SURIYA

How do you know that?

TARIK

It's Tuesday. Tuesday's America Day. (Turns pages; rubs out a word, writes in another) It'll be sending back your picture. Couple of minutes they'll be here in person. (Shy peek) Taking a look. (He imitates a fighter plane buzzing the hillside, head and mouth) Zoooooosh. (Points behind him up the mountain) And if you look up there ... you should be able to make out ...

SURIYA

... Eat, child. Go on. (He fiddles with a piece of cheese) Do you want the fig? (He shrugs, she takes it) Should be able to make out ...?

TARIK

Three wolves. Been there all morning. (She looks. Finds them) How do I know they're still there, with my head in a book? (Sniffs) I smell them. My father your uncle tells me to watch for wolves, he does not tell me how. You think he's so rich he can afford a fool for a son? And don't call me child ...

SURIYA

(Chuckles) All right, I'm sorry, all right? ... (Settles beside him on the ledge, puts an arm round his shoulder, helps herself to cheese) My mother your aunt said they were sending you to the Hakawati School in Ninevah, is that right? (Eats on) I'll call you Hakawati. Hakawati of Ninevah, Teller of the People's History ...

TARIK

I haven't passed my entrance yet...

SURIYA

You will. Everybody knows you were born with an old soul.

TARIK

Maybe. I still have to tell them a story...

SURIYA

The scholars? (He nods) Is that it?

TARIK

(Working on) Ahunh.

SURIYA

Can I read it?

TARIK

It's not for reading. It has to be told...

He flicks back through the revised pages. Closes the book. Stands up on the rock. Gazes out across the valley, his lips moving in silence as if delivering the tale.

SURIYA

So tell it. (She moves from the rock, sits facing him in the dirt) I'll be the scholars ... (She reworks her scarf into a puffed-up turban; sits formal, upright; plays with her beard; aged voice) Proceed, Hourani Tarik. It is time to lay your words upon the air between us. Be sure to speak up. And while you're at it, remove that silly hat ...

TARIK

You're making fun...

SURIYA

(Laughing) No I'm not. Honest. I'm not. (He screws up his nose) I really want to hear it. (Coaxing) Remember the poems you wrote me, before I went off to college? I still have them.

TARIK

No you don't. You tore them up in front of me and dropped them on my shoes...

SURIYA

I was only fifteen, for heaven's sake. I have them in my head.

TARIK

I bet.

SURIYA

Tarik. (He looks at her) Send scorpions to my bed if I tell a lie. I want to hear your story. I love your stories ...

Tarik sniffs, hops down from the rock, restores kuffiah to head, improvises a travel staff, walks around, seeking the zone. She claps her hands, pleased.

TARIK

I haven't started yet ...

He moves out of sight behind the rock, climbs slowly into view, stares around as if at a crowd, bangs the stick ceremonially three times.

TARIK

(Fast, fluent; the standard opening) ... Glory to the One who made the heritage of antiquity a guide for our own time, for it is from this heritage are drawn the tales of the hakawati and all that is in them on fable and adventure ... (Another bang of the stick) One night, in time long gone, while the country languished in the grip of foreign invasion, and plague and famine swept the land like fire on the wind, it came to pass that our ruler Caliph Saddam AlTikriti, beloved Father of the Nation, had a troubling Dream.

He takes out his notebook, checks lines, crosses out. She watches him.

SURIYA

Tarik, you'll change his name, won't you. They'll slaughter you ...

TARIK

(On) ... In the dream his formidable relative Great Aunt Tagrid Hourani, known throughout the North as the Midwife of Tikrit, appeared at the foot of his Bed of State and bade him rise. Take off your shirt, Saddam, she croaked, and stand before the glass, that you may see what you have become. The Caliph meekly did as he was bidden. With her hand the Midwife traced the mounded fat and wasted muscle that hung upon his bones. Where is the bright boy I pulled into this world of joy and pain? How long have you strutted these prideful palace passages, how long have you gorged on rich meats and softened in priceless silks? And now the enemy is at your door,

your will and your spirit have crumbled like your flesh, and neither you nor our suffering people will be saved unless you do what I instruct. First, you will leave this place of sin and selfish ease and go back to Tikrit, to the place whence you sprang, to your kin who raised you and to the common folk who taught you all a man needs to know of kindness, of courtesy and of honour. For only thus can you recover your will to do good for the people you rule. As for recovering spirit and body, which lie together like green and blue on a woodpecker's wing, you must then journey alone into the great northern desert, feel the wind on your face, the sun on your back, the sand on your lips, and be as one with yourself and with the nature that gives you life and breath and a pumping heart. And when you have done all this, only then may you return to your palace confident of winning the enduring peace your people ask and your heart will again desire.

He checks the notebook again; makes another edit. Suriya clacks two stones together, unhappy at his drift.

TARIK

What? You're bored?

SURIYA

Not at all. I'm worried...

TARIK

It's too long. I'll cut it...

SURIYA

Don't you see...?

TARIK

Hear me out. (Bangs the stick. On) The next morning, while his counsellors waited for their usual meeting, the Caliph wrote a short note of instruction to his Vizier, slipped from the Palace, saddled a horse and set out for the north. Of the days and nights he spent there in Tikrit, of hard work and simple pleasure, of the truths he learned again from the common folk, of the goodness and courtesy of villagers at one with their lives, the scribes of all ages have had abundant say and need not detain us. Enough to say, when he came to the end of his stay there, his will once again strong and clear, he knew absolutely the dream was real and must be followed to its end.

With a camel bought from a travelling Sudani, a tent and provisions from the tiny suk, maps of the waterholes and the night skies, he set out alone, lit only by the moon, on the journey that would make him a man again at one with his life and with the world of nature he had all but forgotten. But if the dream was real, so was the camel. On the second night it took him an hour to haul it to its feet and get it moving. On the third, he had to walk ahead and drag it. On the fourth it collapsed in an untidy heap in the sand as if dead. The sun rose and still it did not move, beat it all he may. And fear trickled into his heart like boiling fat. And questions flicked at his brain like the tongues of lizards. What am I doing here? How can the dream be real if I am to die alone in the wilderness? How could I buy a camel from a bloody travelling Sudani ...? (Suriya yelps. He grins at her) The Man from Tikrit scans the empty horizon, left, right, before, behind. Nothing. And yet not quite nothing. On top of a large dune some way off something green, something flapping in the breeze, something flapping greenly up ahead. He grabs his water bottle and scrambles up the slope. And slowly as he climbs, it comes into view, a large green tent, a small green flag flapping from its roof, and on the tent a sign which reads alHourani – Camel Station. Is it a mirage, the tricks of the desert, he asked himself? How can this be real? As if in answer, a man dressed in faded boiler suit and wiping his hands on an oily rag appears in the doorway. Welcome, brother, he calls. Come inside, I'll make some tea, you look like a man with a problem.

TARIK (cont)

Are you ... the owner? asks the Man from Tikrit. Abdel Hourani, at your service. How can I help? We do full service, top-up, repairs and parts. You do have a camel, do you? Broke down, bottom of the hill, says the Caliph. Right, you'll need recovery, then. He whistles up his two boys and off they go to bring in the camel. Inside the tent, while Hourani mashes sweet green tea from Jericho, the Caliph finds his eyes drawn upwards to the roof of the tent, where a maze of sacred and profane texts have been painted in gold leaf on the green canvas. And at the very heart of the maze, six lines from the great epic of Gilgamesh, first of earthly kings, builder of the first city, which he had learned from his mother and long since forgotten. *Be what you are. Seek not what you may not find. Let your every day be full of joy. Love the child that holds your hand. Let your wife delight in your embrace. For these alone are the concerns of humanity.* How can this be real? he asks aloud. How can it not? replies Hourani, handing him the tea. Your camel's on its way, drink up, there's work to do. At length the boys return, dragging the beast behind them, and Hourani takes it into the workshop to look it over. Ahunh, he says, I can fix this, no problem. Place him over the inspection pit. When the camel's in position he climbs down into the pit to take a closer look. The Man from Tikrit looks on, amazed. Do you know whose life it is you're saving, he whispers. Uhunh, answers Hourani,

studying the job. Your Caliph's, Saddam alTikriti's, that's whose life you're saving. Is that right, says the man. Well well well. Hand me those two stones, will you. Saddam hands him the stones, Hourani takes one in each palm and lines up the camel's testicles between them ...

SURIYA

(Shrieking) Tarik! You can't ...!

TARIK

... and Bang!!! The camel leaps two feet into the air with a mighty bellow and shoots off to the horizon like a Saudi racehorse ...

Suriya shrieks again, her frame wracked with laughter. Tarik sniffs, turns to look across at the wolf ledge up the hill.

TARIK

They've gone ... (Sudden, loud) DOWN!

He leaps to shield her, seconds before an F15 screams past, two hundred feet above their heads. Displaced air pounds around the space, the noise slowly drains to nothing. Tarik helps her to her feet. Disturbed shouts, bleats, from down the hill.

TARIK

You all right?

SURIYA

God save us.

TARIK

They do worse than that sometimes. Maybe he did.

He brushes hair and dust from her face with a finger. A man's call from below: Suriya! Are you all right? Get down here now. Get down here, girl. She smiles at Tarik.

SURIYA

(Calling) Coming, poppa ... (Tarik returns to sit on rock ledge) I have to go ... (He nods) Is there much more? (He shakes his head) Go on then...

Another huge shout from below.

SURIYA

(Loud) I'm coming, poppa. On my way.

She shrugs her shoulders, makes a rueful face, begins to thread her way down the slope. He follows to watch her go.

TARIK

(After her) ... There you are, Caliph, says Hourani, all fixed and up and running. What do you mean, screams alTikriti, how in God's name am I going to catch him? Not a problem, says Hourani. Get over the pit ...

He listens to her laughter trailing back up the hill. Smiles. Frowns, hearing something.

TARIK

(Loud) Coming BACK!!!

The plane screams back, a hundred feet further down the hill. Rafts of bullets smash into the hillside. Gone. Smoke, dust, groans, men, sheep. Tarik gets to his feet, rage and fear at war in his slender frame.

TARIK

(Calling) Poppa. Suriya. Are you there? I'm all right. (He looks down. The groans fade. He shakes his head, wipes his face with his hand. Stares up at the sky. Takes out his Yankees cap, throws it with venom, up and out) No more Yankees, Yankee. (Scrabbles his book from a pocket. Does the same) No more stories.

He picks up his rifle, holds it above his head. Lights fade.