

Sample Translation

Sold

(Verkocht)

by Hans Hagen

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2007)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

pages 8–11

‘Take good care of my son. He’s only four.’ My mother pushed me forward.

‘No, Mummy, I don’t want to! Stop it!’ I clutched tightly onto her leg.

‘I don’t want to go with Asnar. I don’t even know him. He looks mean. He smells bad!’

‘Don’t make it any harder than it already is,’ said my father. ‘You are our hope for the future. We have no choice.’ He peeled my fingers away from Mum’s leg and forced me to take a small step forward. And another one. ‘Just go now. You have to!’

Those were the last words I heard. ‘You have to!’ He poked me in the back and I stumbled forward. Asnar caught me with one hand and gave the money to my father with the other. He handed the money straight to my mother, as though it was burning his fingers.

The deal was done.

I tried to tear myself free and run away. ‘I want to stay here. Let me go! Now!’

I kicked Asnar’s shins, but my bare feet were too small. He swept me up from the ground and threw me over his shoulder. ‘I’ll treat him like my own son,’ he said, as he carried me to the car like a sack of sand.

‘Mummy!’

My mother was staring at the money in her hand, filthy scraps of crumpled paper. She didn’t look up again until Asnar roughly deposited me on the back seat and slammed the car door shut.

‘Mum-mmy...’

Asnar started the car and it jolted out onto the road. A lorry carrying straw had to swerve to avoid him.

Too-oot...

My mother seemed to wake up with a start, as though it only dawned on her then how much I was going to miss her.

She waved – I screamed.

She reached her hands out towards me – I pressed mine to the hard glass.

With her round tummy, Mum ran behind the car as far as the teahouse. I tugged at the door handle, but the door was locked.

She called out. I couldn't hear anything, but I read the words on her lips: come back...

'Wait! I want to get out!'

'Shut your mouth!' snapped Asnar. He put his foot down on the accelerator; the car shot forward.

Mum fell onto her knees at the side of the road. She stretched her arms towards me, as though she wanted to pull me back. A few banknotes fluttered into the air – Dad quickly flew after them. Once he had caught them all, he went to help my mother to her feet.

I cried out: 'Stop!'

But Asnar just kept going. He flung the car around a pothole; sand flew out from under the tyres.

Be-ee-eep!

Asnar kept his hand pressed on the horn; he wanted to get past the lorry with the load of straw. It took a lot of hooting before the driver pulled over. The engine shrieked and snarled, and then Mum and Dad disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Asnar lit a cigarette. We raced past donkey carts, past the well where the blind camel pumped up the water from below. Day in, day out, the beast pulled a wooden beam around. The cracking and creaking of the wooden water wheel could be heard for miles.

I often used to go to see the camel with my sister Noor. We plucked hairs from the camel's shaggy fur to stuff my ball with, and we fed him hay because he was so skinny. I felt sorry for him – the track he walked in got deeper and deeper as he wore it down.

'Before long he'll just have his head sticking out above the sand,' said Noor.

'Then I'll climb onto his back.'

'You'd better not. If you fall into that ditch, you'll get trampled.'

‘But I’ll hold on tight to his hump or his ear.’

‘He can’t see a thing. If you’re lying down there, he’ll just walk right over you.’

I climbed onto the beam that the camel was pulling. Noor danced around after me. Back then, she was still able to dance...

Peep-pee-eeep.

Asnar hooted for so long that my ears hurt. The first time I went in a car, I thought that hooting was a cheerful sound. That time, I had wanted to stay in the car for as long as possible, but now all I wanted was to get out.

I pressed my face to the window. I caught a glimpse of Lake Manchar. The houseboats with their high fronts. The mud huts on the islands... I had been born in one of those huts. That’s where I lived. That’s where I heard that I was going to go on a journey, but no one said that it was going to happen the very next morning. If I’d known that, I would have run away.

pages 16–19

‘Yaqub is agile and strong,’ whispered Dad on the night before I left home. He thought I was asleep, but hunger had kept me awake, and I wanted to know what the strange man had come for. I heard every word. ‘We’ll give you Yaqub. There’s no other way.’

‘But Yaqub’s only four,’ said Mum.

‘Nearly five. He’s bright and he’s as supple as a reed.’

‘Yaqub is just the right size,’ said Asnar. ‘Not too light, not too heavy. They can make good use of boys like that at the camel races.’

‘But it’s hot in the desert,’ protested my mother.

‘It’s hot here too.’

‘And riding camels is really danger...’

‘Of course it’s not,’ said my father. ‘He’ll learn really quickly! He’s friends with that blind camel down by the well.’

Everything went quiet for a moment, then I heard something rattling. Before I could work out what it was, Asnar said: ‘You’ll only have this chance once. What have you got to offer Yaqub?’

‘A family,’ answered my mother.

‘Ha! That won’t fill his stomach. You’ve already had one son starve to death.’

‘That’s true,’ said my father. ‘And just look at your stomach: before long there’ll be another child. What are we supposed to do then? There are no more fish left in the lake. We’ve had to eat those scrawny chickens of ours. I hardly earn anything at the brickyard.’

‘Over there they have plenty to spare,’ said Asnar. And then he started talking about money, saying that my mum and dad would get three thousand rupees a month for me.

‘That much? Really?’

‘Maybe even ten thousand if your Yaqub wins a race. Just imagine everything you could do with that.

Vegetables and meat.

Pay off your debts.

Patch up this old hovel...’

‘Or finally build our own houseboat,’ said my father. ‘But first we’ll take Noor to a proper doctor, and she won’t have to beg anymore. I’m starting to think that Asnar was sent to us by the great Kalandar. Oh, Kalandar, peace be with you, can it be that you still hear our prayers?’

Kalandar’s been dead for hundreds of years, but he’s still venerated as a holy man. He lies buried in a magnificent mosque. I visited the grave with Mum and Dad to pray for Noor. To Sehwan and back in a car – the only car journeys I ever made before I had to go with Asnar. On the way there, Mum told me that Kalandar could fly like an eagle. ‘Sometimes he rode through the city on a lion, and the stick in his hand was a snake...’

‘Really?’

‘That’s the story that’s been told for the past eight hundred years.’

I had never seen anything as beautiful as Kalandar’s grave. It was like a bed with a canopy. The posts were made of silver and decorated with precious stones. A crown lay upon the dark-red velvet.

‘Is it a king?’ I asked Mum.

‘A holy man,’ she told me. ‘People come here to ask for his blessing.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It means you can make a wish. If you’re lucky, your wish is granted.’

‘So he’s actually a magician?’

‘Let’s hope so,’ said Mum.

We went to pray in the mosque and gave an offering of money. But when we picked up Noor at the teahouse, her legs were still as gnarled and twisted, and there was hardly any money in her hand...

From my bed I heard that rattling noise again, a little louder and more impatient, and suddenly I recognised the sound: a box of matches!

‘So?’ asked Asnar. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ sighed Mum.

I thought about Kalandar. Could he really do magic? Could he make sure that Dad would hear my thoughts?

Don’t give me away, Dad!

Not now.

Not later.

Not ever!

‘If you don’t want to, then there’s nothing more to say,’ said Asnar. ‘There are plenty of other boys. I can just as easily ask someone else.’

It’s worked, I thought. Kalandar really has helped me this time!

But then Dad said: ‘No, no... ten thousand rupees a month. We don’t earn that much in a year!’

After that, Asnar just needed to give one last little push: ‘Believe me, Yaqub will be treated well over there. My own son Javed takes part in the races too and there are lots of other children who work as jockeys. You’d be mad to let a chance like this pass you by. Before long, you’ll be rich and Noor will be dancing around again. Cigarette?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Dad.

‘Just let me know when all of your wishes have been fulfilled,’ said Asnar.

‘Then I’ll bring Yaqub back again. I swear it by the Prophet.’

Someone lit a match.

It was settled.

A done deal.

I had been sold.

Why did that stupid Kalandar not do as I asked? Hadn’t he heard me? Was he away flying somewhere? Had he been bitten by a snake? Had he come crashing down to the ground?

pages 109–122

The sun was lying on the edge of the earth, but I didn't have time to watch it rise.

'Soap, scrub, rinse!' shouted Asnar. 'I want them to look tiptop today.'

It was the first day of yet another festival. Ouskoub, the camel I was going to be racing on, had to gleam like gold, just like Asnar's new teeth.

Sheikh Omar had yelled at him angrily: 'What kind of trainer are you, Asnar? This costs pots of money. Winning? Well, chance would be a fine thing! A falcon dreams of hares in the desert, and I insist that one of my camels should be the first to cross the finish line!'

We had to work harder than ever. I did everything as well as I could, but I felt so weak. My knees were like pieces of string; I was close to collapse.

Asnar was very strict and checked thoroughly to make sure everything was being done properly.

'Yaqub, why are you leaning against that camel, you dozy boy?'

'I've finished.'

'What about the saddlecloth?'

'Oh yes...'

'Beat it and brush it! Come on! Chop chop!'

I cleaned the saddle, the straps, the reins. Sajib tied everything on tight. He kept touching his arm.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' said Sajib. 'Just a little twinge.'

'How come?'

'Oh, you know, a little burn. I walked into Asnar's cigarette.'

I didn't ask any more questions. I wanted to sleep, sleep, but we had to go to the race track.

People were hard at work in the stables around us as well. I could hear the trainers shouting away and when we rode out through the gate, we found ourselves in a procession of camels.

Sponged down.

Tidied up.

Ready for the fray.

The jockeys laughed and chatted.

‘Hey, Sajib, you’re a bit quiet today, aren’t you?’

‘...’

‘Scared you’re going to lose?’

‘...’

‘How about telling us a joke?’

‘Another time.’

‘Oh, go on.’

‘Later.’

We lumbered past the mosque, past the lorries carrying loads of hay, the roundabout...

‘What a lot of cars!’ cried Zareena. The car park was filling up; everything gleamed and glinted. Festive flags fluttered in the breeze, with strips of red, green, white and black.

By the finish line, there were rows of men in white robes, all of them with moustaches and beards, dark sunglasses, and prayer beads in their hands. They looked like brothers, lots and lots of brothers. They were all on an outing together – a big flock of penguins. In front of the stands, people were drumming and blowing whistles. A little boy was looking in my direction through a paper tube. He was sitting on his dad’s lap. That’s what I wanted too! To be with Dad, with Mum, with Noor!

‘Hey, Yaqub, just keep on riding.’

We rode over to the paddock, where we had to wait our turn. The camels knelt in the sand. I stroked my fingers through Ouskoub’s fur.

‘Hey, humpback, are we going to win?’

The camel opened her mouth and made a gurgling noise. You could see her bottom row of teeth.

‘Yees,’ I yelled. ‘The camel’s wonky mouth says yes! Clever, eh? She understands every word I say.’

‘I hope so,’ said Sajib. ‘The first prize for every race today is a car. And Ouskoub’s got her name going for her: it means “speed”.’

‘Those car keys are ours,’ I joked.

‘I’ll believe that when I see it.’

Javed was in the first race. In a way, Sheikh Omar got what he wanted: Javed was the first to reach the finish line, but unfortunately... it was from the wrong side. Just a couple of hundred metres into the race his camel refused to trot along with the rest of the herd. Javed pulled hard on the reins; he kicked and he yelled. But the stubborn beast paid him no attention at all. Instead, it just made a gentle U-turn.

Step step step, slower and slower.

Step step...

Step...

And then it lumbered back to the start line.

The sheikhs in the stands watched the camel with sour faces. There was not a single smile amongst them, particularly not for Sheikh Omar. But out by the track the trainers’ assistants were quietly whooping:

‘Yoyo.’

‘Boomerang!’

‘Bye bye, car.’

The barrier was opened up, and Javed had to leave the race track.

Asnar’s arm flashed up and down furiously with the whip. I’ll treat him like my own son... I don’t think he even knew whether he was hitting the camel or the jockey.

The penguins looked on with a complete lack of concern – a few lashes, well, that was all part of the job. They were listening to the reporter who was riding alongside the race; he was yelling his commentary through the speakers. Even

with your ears covered up, you could still hear for miles that one of the secret weapons had won.

Asnar took the walkie-talkies and attached them to Zareena and me and then he looked around. ‘Hey, where’s Sajib?’

I could see Sajib standing a little further along, half hidden behind a man and a couple of camels. But I didn’t say anything to Asnar. The man Sajib was talking to had his back towards me, but I knew precisely who it was, because of his hat: the photographer. He was taking photographs of Sajib and his arm, and then he stepped to one side...

And Asnar suddenly had a perfectly good view of Sajib. ‘Sajib, come here! The race is starting in a minute.’

Sajib ran over to us and the photographer was suddenly nowhere to be seen.

‘What were you up to?’ snapped Asnar. ‘It’s about to start. I’ve got to get to my car and there are still all kinds of things to do. Straighten that saddlecloth, Sajib. And check all of the ropes.’

‘Bla bla bla...’ whispered Zareena. ‘Do this, do that... Hope he gets a flat tyre. His yelling’s driving me crazy. I don’t want to hear that stupid voice anymore.’

I remembered the story about the smith. ‘We’ll stick Asnar’s head in a fire,’ I whispered. ‘Then his teeth will melt together. If his lips are covered in blisters, he won’t be able to talk. Perfect!’

‘That’d be painful,’ said Zareena.

‘So what?’

‘Ssh. He’s by his car. When the creep turns on his walkie-talkie, he’ll be able to hear what we’re saying.’

‘Helmets on!’ shouted Asnar.

I pulled the straps tight.

Zareena climbed into the saddle and took hold of the reins, but the camel just lay there calmly.

‘Not in the mood,’ said Sajib. ‘That’s a good start. Come on!’ He gave the camel a tap with his stick – reluctantly, the animal stood up.

Click, I heard, click click.

The man in the hat had reappeared. He was taking photographs of just about everyone and everything. I rubbed my hand over the walkie-talkie, so that Asnar would just hear crackling and not be able to make out what we were saying. ‘Sajib?’ I whispered. ‘Why did you show your arm to that photographer? Do you know him?’ But Sajib pretended not to hear me and led Zareena and me to the start line.

Zareena's camel was called Djarada. The name means 'arrow'. But at the beginning of a race all that dopey camel wanted to do was go backwards. So we tied her with a rope to her sister Ouskoub, the camel I was riding.

Two ropes, one just above the other, were stretched over the entire width of the track. The camels pushed their chests against the start line, stepping to the side and backwards. Sajib and the other boys who were holding onto the animals were almost trampled underfoot. I was glad that I was sitting safely on top.

'Nice food,' said Zareena, 'at least for them.'

She nodded in the direction of the stands. In the middle section, the men were sitting on fancy leather seats. The emir was there too, I think. Servants were going around with silver coffee pots and tea, and plates piled high with fruit and pastries. I saw Sheikh Omar's sons grab a few biscuits.

I still felt awfully weak. Couldn't they just give all of the jockeys a biscuit too? Then we'd all weigh a tiny bit more during the race.

'Hey, hey, Ouskoub!' Sajib was nearly flattened. He raised his arm to calm my camel. His sleeve slipped down and I saw a nasty, bright-red wound on his skin, and another one, and more of them. A little burn...

'Did Asnar do that? What with?'

'Calm down, Ouskoub. Stay there!'

'I know what it was. His cigarettes – he stubs them out on your arm!'

The ropes at the start line were lifted. 'Yes!' screamed Sajib.

'Go!' He fled to the side of the track and dived under the railing just in time, right in front of a large pair of feet.

Ouskoub stuck her neck out. Djarada roared when the rope between the two camels straightened out and she had to run along with us. Grawghgh... And off we went, Zareena and I, one behind the other.

'Yalla yalla!'

'Hurry up!'

Left, right, left, right – the whole herd took off and sand sprayed up all around us. Past the stands. Into the long curve. Up the straight and then endlessly onwards, onwards...

I pressed my lips together. My head was thumping; my bum was really sore.

‘Just hang on!’ shouted Asnar. He was driving alongside in his car and could see precisely what we were doing. ‘It’s going well. Don’t do anything!’

I couldn’t have done anything even if I’d wanted to! Ouskoub wouldn’t let me steer her. I was just sitting there on top of her, yelling and hitting and screaming.

‘Ow ow!’ I was bouncing wildly up and down.

Up and down...

Every step sent a shockwave through my body.

My bones were all creaking.

A skeleton! I suddenly thought. A skeleton that rattles and clatters. Stupid sheikhs, why don’t you just tie skeletons onto the animals? They can’t feel anything; they’re already dead.

‘Ohh, ow ow!’

Just in front of us, a camel swerved to the outside of the track. Loud shouts came from the cars, but the animal didn’t take the slightest notice. ‘Hel... help!’ yelled the jockey when the camel came to a sudden stop. He flew into the air like a spear. I heard the fasteners on his trousers rip away from the saddle, but I couldn’t see what happened next. Ouskoub was in the mood for a race today; she just kept on running.

Left, right. Left, right. Dust, sand...

I was in the front of the pack.

It was boiling hot.

My trousers were clinging and rubbing.

‘Ah, ow...’

I held on tight.

I wanted to get off!

‘Now!’ crackled Asnar’s voice.

I loosened the knot in the rope. It was as though Djarada, Zareena's camel, had just been waiting for this. She carried on running beside us for a short way and then flew like an arrow after one of the green-team babies. It looked like the screaming baby's head was on loose. It was bobbling around in every direction – as though it was about to snap off any minute.

'Yes, yes, yessss,' howled Asnar.

When we entered the final kilometre, he started screaming and hooting even more wildly. 'Use the whip! Hit it!'

Zareena's arm was flashing up and down. I suddenly thought of Sajib's arm... Of glowing cigarette stubs. Of burns and pain. The car for the winner. The keys...

Win!

I had to win!

Thwack!

I imagined that I wasn't sitting on Ouskoub, but on Asnar.

Thwack!

'Get moving, you idiot!'

THWACK THWACK!

I'd never hit Ouskoub with my whip like that before. I was howling and screaming. I was kicking my heels in her side, and slowly we began to catch up. Ouskoub's head was level with Djarada's backside.

'Yalla yalla!'

THWACK THWACK THWACK!

I passed Zareena. Another hundred metres. One baby in front of me.

'Yalla yallaaah...'

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

I flew down the final stretch. Ouskoub just kept racing on. Her lips were flapping up and down in time with her step. Left, right. Up, down...

Just before the finish line I caught up with the green-team baby.

'The winnerrrr! Yes, yeeess, yallaaa...'

Exhausted, I looked around. My hand had tensed up. My whole body hurt.

‘Sa-jib...’

Shattered, I slumped on Ouskoub’s hump as she slowed to a halt. Sajib always met us at the finish line, but I couldn’t see him anywhere.

‘Sajib?’

‘Great, Yaqub,’ said Asnar’s voice. ‘Finally you’ve grasped what to do. What a final dash! First prize, very good.’ He lifted me from the camel and put a blanket over Ouskoub. She was allowed to go with Asnar to receive the prize – I wasn’t.

Ouskoub’s neck and head were decorated with orange saffron, the colour of victory.

The car keys glinted in the sunlight before falling into the palm of Sheikh Omar’s hand. I didn’t get anything. During races, a jockey has to sit on the camel, but really we’re no more than decoration.

As the prizes were being awarded, I carefully peeled off the walkie-talkie. I preferred not to wait for Asnar to do it: he was always rough and ripped the big strips of tape from your chest in one go.

I walked back to the paddock on my own. As I went, I picked up a few pieces of paper to draw on, but then I saw something glittering in the sand. I pretended my foot was itching and bent down to give it a scratch. No one saw what I picked up off the ground: a gold chain. So I did get a prize after all.

‘Congratulations,’ said Zareena.

‘What for?’ I kept my fist clenched behind my back.

‘For winning.’

‘Where’s Sajib?’

‘Don’t know.’

We looked all around, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Not that afternoon and not that evening either. We didn’t have a victory meal that time, because Sajib had disappeared without a trace in all the hustle and bustle of the races.

‘That snake!’ yelled Asnar. ‘I will find him, with the help of God.’

He put us all into the container early that night. We heard the chain rattle; the gate was locked. Then he raced off to look for his assistant Sajib.

pages 167–168: Author's notes

Newspaper

Yaqub's story begins in Pakistan. When I was travelling through that country doing research for my book *Het gouden oog*, I saw the following short article in an English-language newspaper:

Baby kidnapped

From Our Correspondent

LARKANA, Jan .1: Some unidentified person on Sunday kidnapped a baby opposite the railway station while she was playing near her home. Already three minors – Naved Sheikh, Naveed and Tahseem Sheikh – are missing from Larkana city.

What happens to these children?, I wondered. Where do they go? I found an answer to these questions years later, when I visited the Dutch school in Dubai in 2001. When school was over for the day, I went to the racetrack outside the city and I saw children as young as three racing camels. Not just a few of them, but hundreds!

Child slavery in such a wealthy land, for everyone to see – I couldn't understand how something like that could happen.

Back at home, I looked for information about camel-racing. It is one of the top sports in Dubai; some rich sheikhs have a few thousand camels. But camels are also popular in other countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Qatar and Oman. The jockeys are bought or kidnapped in poor countries in Asia and Africa. Human traffickers lie to the parents and tell them that their children will be taken to a beautiful home, that they will have good food and be allowed to play with rich children. Not a word of this is true: the children have to work until they drop.

Customs officers in India intercept nine child jockeys

CALCUTTA – Indian customs officials at Madras airport have intercepted a shipment of nine children from Bangladesh, who were on their way to Saudi Arabia. The children, who were between four and eight years old and accompanied by fake mothers, were to be put to work as child jockeys in camel races. In 1997, India intercepted a group of 37 children. (AP) *Volkskrant* 7/1/2002

Emirates bans child camel-riders

ABU DHABI – The United Arab Emirates has acted to stop very young riders participating in camel-racing. An age limit has been introduced in an attempt to put an end to the frequent stories about children being abducted from countries such as India and Pakistan to ride camels: boys under the age of fifteen and weighing less than 45 kilos are no longer allowed to work as jockeys. (Reuters) *Volkskrant* 30/7/2002

UNICEF saves very young camel jockeys

NEW YORK – UNICEF, the United Nations Children’s Fund, has removed a group of underage camel jockeys from the United Arab Emirates. Some of them were as young as four. (ANP) *Volkskrant* 13/8/05