



Source: Sue Pleming, Mussab Al-Khairalla, 'Iraq vows to hunt down Kurdish rebels', *The Australian online*, 04/11/07.

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The wind whipped the red sand into furies around Haneef's loosely-swathed head. He squinted his eyes against it. The three camels had closed their noses and turned their backs to the blasts.

Haneef clicked his tongue and the camels understood, lowering their enormous weight down into the side of a sand-dune. Haneef settled himself in the lee of the dunes to build a fire from a few twigs. He knew the wind would last some hours more but his time was his own. His loads would not spoil—flour, salt, bolts of cloth for the women at the Station. Oodnadatta was a long way behind. There was time to wait out a few hours. Hours mattered little. In the past years he had been held up for days by floods, storms, even ice and snow.

Between here and the Alice, there were people he had to speak with. Kungka from the Kokatha, there was a man of much knowledge. Haneef had promised long ago to see him on his return from the coast. Perhaps, he could pass by the salt lakes and then come to the back of the Kokatha land. At this time of year, Kungka and his family would be in the north, near the flowering mulga. Kungka loved the honey there, and used it to cure many ailments in his people.

Haneef loved his many families, the Arabana, the Dieri, the Irish, all of them but more his friend, Kungka who could read the stars better than any of the mullahs that Haneef had known in his childhood. And the mullahs when he was young, were men of much knowledge. He did not know what had become of them, nor indeed his own family, so far as he was from them, and many years gone. He missed his strong father, Hamzah, the lion. Hamzah sang songs of despair at weddings, and danced for the dead at funerals, he was always the centre of their world. His mother, Zafirah, the victory, had given Hamzah ten children. She baked breads like those of the Prophet's wife. Haneef missed her cooking.

His mouth watered on remembering. The wind had died down, the fire was spent. He clicked his tongue and the camels, chewing the cud in their ample mouths, lifted their bodies up again for another trek. Haneef blessed Allah and the Prophets every day for his luck in his camels. Fine camels—his Johara, the jewel, she loved him like a mother; his Labeeb, the intelligent, he led the way by instinct and never faltered in a storm; and his baby Imad, the pillar, who would give him money in the Alice to buy what he needed for the return journey to the coast.

Time led Haneef into Kungka's roaming lands and Haneef thanked Allah for a pleasant journey thus far and a chance to see Kungka as he had promised. A dry creek bed lay before him curtained by flowering wattle. This was a good

place to camp, the kind that Kungka would choose.

A sudden wind whipped up a panic in Haneef. He lifted his nose to the rushing air and smelt what he had suspected from the first gust—death. The camels had become statue-like.

When Haneef had procrastinated long enough to steady his fear at confronting the scene before him, he unloaded his camels and told them to wait. As it was, fear had paralysed them and they would have moved for none.

Haneef made his way along the creek bed, the wind noise distracting him. Nervously his eyes darted around him, vigilant for any sign of attack or movement. The smell grew and grew. He was nearing the place of death. Nothing would have prepared him for what he saw. Babies, women with child, old ones, all slaughtered, and the fierce Kungka split open and propped up against a great stone like a terrible trophy. Haneef retched and cried out and prayed all at once.

He was still kneeling in prayer when the troopers arrived on their horses which snorted and protested at the hard ride. A burly pig-skinned one dismounted and surveyed the scene, then his eyes fell upon the prostrate Haneef who was jabbering like a madman. He signalled to the others to take the Mussulman and they leapt down to shackle the still weeping Haneef.

It was some hours later as Haneef was being pulled behind the captain's thoroughbred that he realized he was being taken for the murderer. He cried out in the language that he knew was theirs, 'Not me!'

'They all say that, laddie!' scoffed the captain and the others laughed with him. One trooper was disquieted. 'How could such a stripling as he kill so many? And another thing, his clothes bear no traces, just as the sands around bear only the marks of shod horses not camels as I know his kind use. It has me baffled!' thought the trooper yet he said nothing for to question was close to mutiny.

After the third day of waiting, Johara was the first to stir uneasily. The smell was worsening and the winds which had carried it and had muffled the cries of her master had quietened. She summoned Labeeb and Imad and they wandered back to a track they knew would lead to the Station. Johara sniffed the air and turned away from the Station track towards the freedom of the open dunes. The others followed. Their only kindness, Haneef, was gone now. What needed they further of people?

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.*