

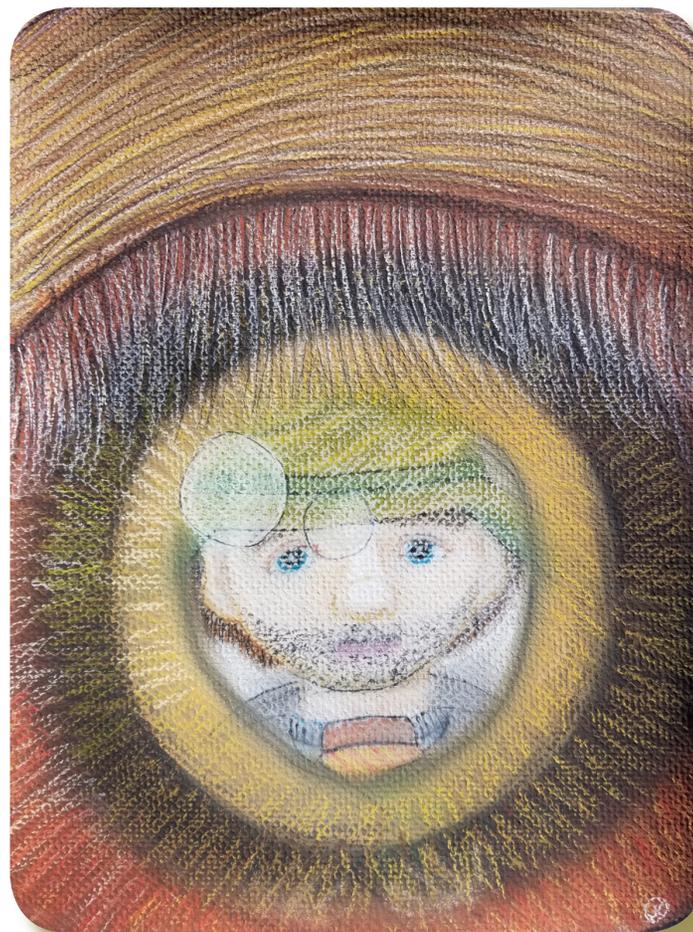
# Blood Brothers

**By Maril Crabtree**

Dave shifted again in his saddle seat. No way to get comfortable. No way to dispel the fear that any minute now he'd slide off the camel's rump or, even if he didn't, that the camel loping behind him would take a healthy bite out of his polyester-covered ass.

*Robin's idea, coming to this godforsaken desert for an "unforgettable vacation."*

He already wanted to forget it, wanted it to be over. His travel pants chafed against his thighs, where his muscles trembled from gripping the camel's sides. His toes ached from gripping the stirrups. His forearms and fingers stiffened with the effort to hold onto this foreign animal who swayed and lurched with every step, kicking up dust that swirled around him. Impossible to get away from the gritty dust that filled every human crevice: teeth, tongue, nostrils, who knew where else.



**Artwork by Natasha Phillips**

*Robin's actually enjoying this. She's smiling, looking at me as if I'm the crazy one.*

“Look at the rainbow, Dave—isn't it beautiful?” She pointed to the distant eastern horizon, where a faint rainbow shimmered. She looked completely at ease, relaxed in her saddle, as fresh as when they'd started out much earlier in the day.

*As if I've never seen a rainbow before. As if I've traveled 3,000 miles just to see an effing rainbow. If I smell one more camel fart, I'll give her a rainbow of her own, all the colors of the lunch we had, right down her effing back.*

Just then, the camel train halted. An eerie silence surrounded them as the animals stood still, alert as if waiting or listening for something.

*What is there to listen to out here in the middle of nowhere?*

Then Dave heard it—a soft moan in the distance. When he turned to look in that direction, all he saw on that vast empty western horizon was a little cloud of dust that grew, within seconds, to a tall whirling plume.

An excited buzz of conversation broke out from

their guides. He heard the word “*kahali*” several times. Slowly it dawned on him that this was the dreaded kahali wind, one of the most deadly of desert winds. This one promised to be a full-fledged windstorm. It was headed right for them.

He had read about these huge sandstorms. They could last for days and would blot out all visibility. The only thing to do in those cases was to find shelter and wait it out.

Frantically, he searched the horizon and the faint tracks of their road. *What* shelter? They had been informed at their lunch stop—a pleasant oasis—there would be no other watering places until they reached their destination in the late afternoon.

What would happen to the road? Would it disappear altogether? It was inconceivable that they might be in real danger. They were *tourists*, for heaven's sake. Urbane, cosmopolitan, and totally unprepared for the unexpected whims of an actual desert.

A guide came up from behind and jerked on his leg. “Down, please! Get down. We make tent *now!*”

“Robin, honey, let’s do what he says.” Dave made an effort not to shout and scream and surprised himself with the calm note in his voice. He had a strange sensation of being an actor in a movie: his role was to be the hero, the one who would lead them all to safety. He kept expecting the director to yell “cut!” any moment, though.

“Why, Dave? What’s going on?” Robin said.

In answer, he pointed to the large gray-brown plume that filled more and more of the horizon.

“Oh, my!” she breathed. The camels knelt patiently as their American passengers scrambled down onto the sand. Around them, the guides ran back and forth, gathering supplies and driving tent stakes that looked, to Dave, as puny as match sticks against the force he imagined was advancing on them.

*My God, they’re expecting us to ride out this storm right here.*

Dave glanced again at the horizon. The storm seemed increasingly menacing and much closer than a few minutes ago. He vaguely recalled the paragraph

he’d read somewhere—was it fiction or nonfiction?—that a desert storm could move as fast as 25 mph and cover an area miles wide. No way to outrun it, even if they had fresh camels and were experienced riders. Although camels could run up to 40 mph for a short burst—as in those damnable camel races they’d read about when putting this trip together—they couldn’t sustain more than about 20 mph.

His next thought surprised him with its ferocity: *I refuse to die in a sandstorm while vacationing in a foreign country.*

He looked at their three guides. Two were struggling with a large piece of canvas while the other was still pounding in stakes. He ran over and gestured: *how can I help?* They immediately handed him a corner of the canvas, and he helped them open it. The idea, he gathered, was that they would all take shelter under it: three guides, two tourists, and six camels, the extra one carrying precious extra supplies of drinking water. No wonder this was such a big tent.

He glanced at Robin trudging back and forth with the large goatskin water jugs that the extra camel had been carrying. Good, she was keeping her head, too. Although his guts were screaming, he stayed calm and busy, using as much force as he could to make sure the tent was tied down in knots that would stay tied. He stopped only to tie a bandanna the guide had handed him around his nose and mouth.

His back had been to the kahali, and now he felt the wind increase. A light breeze became a steady wind. It was happening. He moved to the next tent stake and continued his efforts, making sure everything was tight along this edge. This was the edge that would take the fullest force of the wind. The guides had wisely positioned the tent—shaped more like a lean-to—so that it was diagonal to the wind's direction, although they must have known, as he did from his scant reading, that the direction could turn in an instant. The side poles were no higher than the top of a camel's head when it was kneeling. It was going to be snug quarters, but he figured the guides knew what they were doing. At least, he hoped they did.

They all took turns leading the camels into the tented area. One or two of them protested briefly, but for the most part, they followed their leaders. The guides positioned them on the outer edges of the space, leaving a center space for the humans. Or so he thought until he saw that, with a series of gestures, the guides told them to hunker down *right next to a camel*. They demonstrated, showing that the camel's body would provide additional shelter against the blowing sand that would soon be swirling around them—despite their best efforts at providing a windproof screen with the tent itself.

Dave groaned. Now he regretted all those nasty things he'd said about his camel, and the camel ahead of him and the one behind. Could these awkward smelly animals keep him from dying? With all his heart, he hoped so and breathed a silent prayer to his companion as he eased himself beside it. *Please forgive me*, he prayed, *and keep me safe*. He felt—or imagined—the animal's positive response as he received a slight nudge along his cheekbone.

He felt Robin's body folding into his larger one and realized that—he was *her* camel, providing shelter and assurance with his arm circling her shoulders, her butt tucked into the V-shape between his thighs and chest. He snuggled her close. She was right, of course. If they had to die, better to go as close together as possible.

He wondered if archaeologists had found Pompeii victims who had chosen to die together rather than try to flee the sudden rush of lava. He wondered if he had enough courage to ride through the storm. He wondered if he *had* any inner courage. It had never, in his privileged first-world existence, been tested until now.

Dave nestled into the camel's belly and felt its snuffling breath warm against his neck. He had never been so grateful for anything in his life. The moaning wind shifted and became a low roar, gradually increasing until it filled every space—both outside and inside the tent. The tent walls billowed and strained against their knots. Everything seemed both condensed into this tiny space and enlarged into a universe of energy, vast and unharnessed.

For a split second, he felt terrified. Then everything went soft. He felt wild and free and loose. Sand swirled in a dense fog around him, and he instinctively burrowed even lower into the camel's gut and tightened his hold around Robin. He felt his heart beating faster—or was it the camel's heart? Never mind, he and the camel and Robin were now one living being, working together against the darkness of wind and sand and dust, against the impassioned roar that filled the ears.

And then, again, he found that space that allowed him to embrace all of it, to ride on top of it. In his mind, he saw himself atop his camel, above the storm, flowing into clear air, into silence, into rainbows. He transformed himself into a three-in-one behemoth fighting the storm, melted and dissolved, calm and clear.

The storm moved over and through their little bundle of humanity and animal and canvas. From what seemed like a mountainous distance, he heard Robin's cough, felt the camel's shuddering breath, sensed his own heart slowing.

He opened his eyes to a tent that was still, miraculously, intact. The guides were on their knees, coaxing the camels to drink. One of them gestured to a goatskin and mimed that they should do the same. It was over.

He reached over to the goatskin and offered it first to the camel who had sheltered him. As he did so, the camel gazed at him. He gazed back at the large brown eyes and felt a jolt of kinship that surprised him with its passion. It was as though they had become the equivalent of blood brothers. He felt his typical cynicism creeping into his mind, but he squelched it. He wanted this moment of kinship to last as long as possible. Silently, he acknowledged his camel brother and turned to let Robin drink.

“Ugh—do you have another goatskin? I don’t want to have to drink after a camel.”

He stared at her. Then he crawled, somewhat unsteadily, over to another goatskin and handed it to her. He watched as she struggled with trembling fingers to uncork it. With one hand, he reached out and grabbed

it and pulled the cork off with his teeth. He handed it back.

Then he took the goatskin still in his other hand, the one the camel had drunk from, and lifted it to his mouth, smiling.

The water tasted good, really good, as it filled his throat.