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# Winds of Sand, Women of Rock

By Nathalie Borgers

The camel died of an infection.

- The rope was too tight.

Who's the owner?

- Tenna.

Let's catch the little one.

- Yes, we'd better.

SOUTH SAHARA, NIGER

Let the camel stand up.

OK, unleash her.

This camel is upset.

Look for a calmer one.

Let the baby go to the other side.

Hold her tight, she's afraid.

The milk is flowing.

Stop her.

Amina, let me tie it here first.

Every year after the rains,  
women from different camps  
come together to travel,  
taking one or two camels  
and a few donkeys and goats,  
if they have any.

They set off for the Bilma oasis  
to harvest the dates.

Together, we go from here  
to the Bilma oasis.

God bless you.

- And the dead of this world?

How are you?

- I'm fine.

Anything wrong?

- Everything's fine.

And you? You're OK?

- Yes, I'm fine.

How are you?

- How are you?

Nobody is ill?

- Everyone's fine.

How are your neighbours?

- They're fine.

Have a seat!

I'll leave in five days.

We'll come too, with some goats  
to sell at the market.

The rest of the animals  
will stay with our neighbours.  
We'll start packing.  
We have already stored our wood.  
Now we must pack, roll the mats  
and take down the tents.  
Then we'll be ready.  
I wanted to bring two goats  
but they died during the storm.  
Because of the rain?  
- Yes, those three days were bad.  
Two goats and a horse  
died in the storm.  
My God!  
Really?  
But you still own 2 donkeys?  
- Yes.  
So God protected you  
from something even worse.  
The storm ripped off the tent  
and broke the horse's neck.  
Blood came out of its nose.  
Well...  
May God help us  
through our journey.  
May God help us.  
Mariama, what nice sand  
in your hair!  
Did you put it in yourself?  
- No.  
Who did?  
- Dakko put it in my two big braids.  
The daughter of Kondoi is beautiful  
She belongs to a noble clan  
You know, Amina, when the Kondoi girl  
was kidnapped for her wedding,  
her veil was loose and the men  
were so struck by her beauty  
that they forgot about kidnapping her!  
- Really?  
After the caravan  
when will you go home?  
Not before the end of Ramadan.  
As late as possible.

So, you're "avoiding your husband",  
as they say in the song.  
What good is he to me?  
Your parents gave you to the wrong one?  
- Yes.  
What's wrong with him?  
- I don't want a man from the desert.  
So, Mariama, you're a runaway,  
you're fleeing your husband?  
Mind your hand, mum!  
My God, it's burning hot!  
My bag is really heavy.  
You are taking too many things.  
It's quite full.  
- It's too much.  
It's big enough,  
it can take all my stuff.  
Why are you taking it all, Amina?  
I want everything with me.  
- Why?  
I may need it all.  
What did you say?  
Are they worn out?  
They're OK.  
I think these batteries  
will last the whole trip.  
- Yes.  
Leave at least  
four strong branches here.  
What?  
- Leave four branches. Strong ones.  
What are you doing?  
Bring it here.  
It's heavy.  
- Why carry it, then? Give it to me.  
Take another stick.  
Have you not found your camel?  
- Not yet.  
If I find my camel,  
we will leave together.  
Yes, let's stay together.  
When your camels finish drinking,  
move them so mine can drink.  
Yes, OK.

Women have always done the caravan.  
We are not afraid.  
We can take care of ourselves.  
We know the road well.  
We prefer to travel without men.  
When we leave the men  
take the other camels to the pastures.  
From here to the Bezze Denga well  
it's a 3-day walk.  
From Bezze Dengato the Agadem well,  
it's 2 days.  
From Agadem to the Dibella well,  
From Dibellato the Zoobaba well,  
also 3 days.  
From Zoobabato Bilma,  
That makes 13 days.  
But with the stops,  
it takes up to 3 weeks.  
These are dunes.  
Another dune here.  
And a dune here.  
It won't be easy.  
The journey will be long  
and full of obstacles.  
The road to Bilma is hard,  
drought is everywhere,  
but we are eager to go.  
Issai, don't let it go away!  
DAY 1, MIDDAY BREAK  
The wind is burning my face.  
Tighten the rope.  
Where have our goats gone?  
The water's boiling.  
Where's that girl?  
Gone to get the millet?  
Is it boiling?  
- Yes, I'm waiting for her.  
She won't be long.  
How do you say 'bag' in French?  
- How, Mariama?  
Le sac.  
- Le sac.  
How do you say 'water'?  
- Water? 'De l'eau.'

The containers?

- 'Les tasses.'

How do you say 'sugar'?

- 'Le sucre.'

Les chaussures.

- Les chaussures.

And this?

Un bb.

- Bb.

And this? Le parfum.

- Le parfum.

What's this?

Le bijou.

- Le bijou.

And this here?

Les tresses.

- Les tresses.

OK, that's it.

Put it on top, mum.

Here, take your knife.

Look at my feet!

I already have blisters

and they've burst.

My blisters have burst too.

The skin is cracked.

After I sell my dates, I'll buy  
some perfume products in town,  
and I will try to start a business.

If I find a cheap house,  
I'll buy it.

You'll leave the Sahara?

- Life's too hard here.

I am sick of doing this trip every year  
to collect dates in Bilma.

And then the whole trip back.

In the Sahara we never rest.

When men are not there we even have  
to find the lost camels  
and draw water from the well.

The hardship makes you ugly,  
you get chapped skin  
and your body dries out.

You lose your charm.

- We don't have kids to raise,

we could try to start a business.  
Alone you can get by.  
With the money from the dates  
I want to buy clothes and food  
but above all, go back to school.  
You need savings, to study.  
Yes, I will try to study  
and work at the same time.  
If I finish my studies, I'll work  
and lead my own life.  
I could be a doctor,  
or something like that.  
I'll see.  
That's a nice project.  
Does your husband agree?  
If he doesn't, I can't do it.  
Down!  
What a fuss!  
Tie him tight.  
- He nearly got away.  
DAY 5, 140 KM

**AGADEM WELL:**

Go on, move...  
Ata, what are you doing?  
When we get to Bilma  
with our goats and donkeys,  
do you know what I'll do?  
You'll make money, just like us.  
Do goats sell well?  
- That's what I've heard.  
You know what we'll eat?  
Something really delicious!  
Our purses will be full,  
let's spoil ourselves.  
Once we've sold the goats  
and got some money,  
we can buy whatever we want.  
Let's decide the price  
for our animals.  
Between 35 and 40,000 (60 )  
for a donkey.  
Listen,  
as soon as we get to Bilma...

we'll buy some nice clothes.  
Let's pamper ourselves.  
Let's do that and show off.  
This dress is full of sweat.  
I am almost done.  
- I only have one more piece to wash.  
Last year,  
we went to a wedding in Bilma.  
It was amazing.  
That's how it is in town.  
It was a beautiful choreography,  
led by three girls.  
In Bilma, dances are great,  
everyone gathers there.  
- In the Sahara,  
dances are more simple.  
When they kidnap a bride,  
why do they chain her feet  
for seven days?  
So she can't escape.  
- But they've already got her.  
They'd never leave her free.  
Some women refuse their husband  
and sleep in the bush  
for 2 years. What a life!  
They will never stop this tradition.  
- No, they won't.  
They always beat the bride.  
So when she can, she runs away.  
Come on, why are you so slow?  
- What's the problem?  
Hurry, we have to leave soon!  
This bucket is really heavy.  
The Tubu can't live without camels,  
they are the measure for all things.  
Those hundred camels there...  
That's fifty...  
This is half a man.  
Another fifty.  
One hundred camels,  
that's the blood price for a man.  
The blood price of a woman is 50 camels,  
half the worth of a man.  
For the man, it's 100.



For the woman, it's 50.  
Hanne, take the baby. I'm tired.  
It's slippy!  
Even if you do fall,  
it won't hurt because of the sand.  
DAY 6, 170 KM  
Mariama, why did you quit school?  
- I didn't quit.  
I started when I was six.  
I went every day,  
up to 3rd year primary,  
then my father took me out.  
- Why?  
For no reason. Just like that.  
The others went to school,  
but I had to take care of the household.  
- There was no one to cook?  
When I was 16, I was married off  
and I started fighting with my husband.  
But I was afraid of my family.  
So I did as I was told:  
Getting wood, water, cooking.  
Yet I kept on refusing my husband.  
In secret.  
If my parents had known,  
they would have killed me.  
I fought a long time  
but he didn't divorce me.  
I was also married off,  
but we divorced.  
It was destiny.  
Now, I'm responsible for my own life.  
I do what I want.  
I'll marry the man I really like.  
My ex-husband hurt me so much.  
He beat me every day.  
- That's awful.  
One day I was lucky,  
I found a way to escape.  
Didn't his family look for you?  
- They shouted all around saying:  
"We're looking for a 15-year old  
with a nose jewel."  
I took it out

so they wouldn't spot me.

**They said:**

"She is called Amina,  
wears a nose ring  
and a long dress. She is 15."  
Finally my grandmother came.

**She said:**

"I thought my granddaughter  
had been given to a husband,  
not to a man who hurts her."  
She took me back.  
You can't imagine how much  
that guy made me suffer.  
He gave me hell.  
He handled me very roughly.  
Damn him!  
Now it's all over.  
How do you see things now,  
after all these years?  
Every woman can have ambition.  
- Being like others gets you nowhere.  
You have to have a goal.  
- Yes, that's better.  
DAY 7, MODJIGO WELL  
Greetings! How are you?  
Everything alright?  
Fine and you how are you?  
- Good.  
I can't get through.  
- Really?  
It's not working.  
- Why is that?  
We'll try again.  
It's Amina, how are you?  
No bad news?  
How is your daughter?  
We are on our way.  
How is Fatimi?  
Yes, mum is also here.  
Did I use a lot of credit?  
- It's OK.  
What?

What did you say?  
May God greet him!  
Is grandmother there?  
What did you say?  
When did her son die?  
Who?  
I didn't know  
When?  
When?  
I'm running out of credit.  
Thank you!  
Me too, I'm happy  
to hear your voice!  
Here you are, thank you.  
God bless you.  
Thank you!  
Girls, we're leaving,  
will you be alright?  
Yes, fine. Goodbye.  
Oumi, bring the camels.  
DAY 9, 230 KM  
How far is the Dibella plateau?  
- 8 valleys.  
Eight!  
In the afternoon,  
we should hurry  
and look for grass.  
- To the plateau?  
Yes, we have to find  
grass for the goats.  
This is urgent now  
We need to do this.  
- When will we reach the plateau?  
We'll get some very good grass.  
We rest here and move out at 3 p.m.  
- Can we get there today?  
We need to get there today.  
We have to feed the goats.  
The route will be easy at first,  
and then we'll reach bigger dunes.  
The Atchi and Atchido dunes,  
that run into each other.  
There is a passage  
but it's narrow

Is there anything for the goats to eat?  
The camels are tired.  
I can't tie it up.  
- It's afraid.  
Give her the rope.  
OK, let it up.  
Hold the baby tight,  
otherwise it'll fall.  
DAY 10, 260 KM,

**DIBELLA WELL:**

Now my tooth is hurting.  
The animals are tired.  
- Yes, they are.  
Even my donkey is tired.  
- Tired or sick?  
I guess it's ill.  
Your donkey's ill?  
It's got a swelling, it must be.  
Did it start yesterday or today?  
Yesterday, it had tense ears.  
I think it got sunburned.  
Your goats were tired,  
did you put them on the camels?  
Yes, we put them on its back,  
firmly tied up.  
Once goats travel on camels  
they don't want to walk any more.  
Even when they have recovered,  
they don't want to walk any more.  
I've been traveling with my grandmother  
since I was five.  
I've never had to put so many goats  
on camels before.  
I have never been as tired  
as this year.  
Four goats on camels, imagine!  
Stubborn goats!  
And they pissed all the time!  
We women have our work,  
we pick dates.  
The camels are our husband's,  
the dates belong to us.  
We harvest dates to contribute

to the family's living.  
We don't sell dates  
to keep the money for ourselves.  
If you sell 5 camel loads of dates,  
your family can eat up to one year.  
It's a lot.  
We do this long trip  
to be independent for a year.  
DAY 17, 390 KM  
We all have animals to look after.  
It's hard for all of us.  
It's not far now  
Despite all the difficulties  
and the fatigue  
we've made it this far.  
Traveling requires patience.  
Before the trip we didn't live together.  
We came together to travel.  
That's why patience is needed.  
She's been in a bad mood all day.  
Shut up, you.  
Ignore her.  
She can say what she wants,  
don't answer.  
When we get to Bilma,  
each person goes their own way.  
It's as simple as that.  
Let her talk.  
Who cares?  
Come on, let's go!  
DAY 20, 480 KM

**ZOOBABA WELL:**

The wind makes it hard  
to do your hair.  
We've been on the road 20 days, right?  
- Yes.  
Are you sure?  
- Including last night, that's 20 days.  
We've been traveling 20 days.  
The important thing is to be healthy  
and fulfill our mission.  
My eyes are hurting.  
There's Bilma! At last!

Bilma is there!  
Help!  
The sacks are slipping.  
The sacks are going to fall!  
Get down, get down!  
This way!  
Keep him back.  
My camel won't go down.  
- I'll come and get it.  
Greetings, grandmother.  
How are you?  
- Fine.  
Will we pick after Ramadan?  
- That's what I've heard.  
Won't the dates be dry?  
People have been talking  
about this issue.  
They've been trying  
to find a solution.  
Dates are our main resource.  
If they are cut too late,  
they will be no good.  
They'll be wasted.  
We went to see the village chief  
to explain.  
Some people wanted  
to cut the dates now,  
others wanted to wait.  
We are waiting for his decision.  
In the meantime, we appointed guards  
for the palm trees.  
How much will you pay?  
- 40.000 (60 )  
- No.  
- No.  
It's a good price.  
She'd refuse that?  
Accept my offer!  
My offer is honest.  
It is expensive.  
No, it's not.  
They may look skinny  
because of the trip  
but it's a good breed.

- It's the price of a camel!  
No way. Even a baby camel  
is at least 150.000.  
It's a good offer.  
- Too little.  
for my donkey?  
If you are serious,  
make an honest proposition.  
I already made a proposition.  
I offer 30.000.  
Not enough.  
It's not worth it,  
we've come a long way to get here.  
We suffered to bring the donkeys here.  
- Yes, it has cost us a lot.  
Why should we sell them  
for 30.000?  
They want to lower the prices.  
We have to hold on.  
A donkey has never been sold  
for 25 or 30.000.  
We won't sell a donkey for that price.  
Don't you understand that you  
won't sell it for 40.000?  
Leave them alone,  
they are free to sell or not.  
Anyway, you're not a buyer.  
- What do you know!  
We're used to selling  
but not lower than 40.000.  
Oh, this one is beautiful, I like her.  
- She has beautiful teeth.  
The man is also handsome.  
- Why is he angry at her?  
He is trying  
to reconcile with her.  
Oh, another one came.  
She has a short nose.  
She has a short nose.  
Is she European?  
- Yes.  
Some have a short nose.  
- They all have short noses!  
European girls

are not beautiful.  
Arabian girls  
are more beautiful.  
Look, she's in her office.  
She is beautiful.  
She has a nice body.  
Who is this guy?  
Him? He's the one  
the women are fighting over.  
The one who wants the child?  
- Yes.  
So he came to take the child?  
- No, not this woman's child.  
That's not the woman I meant.  
- Yes, it is.  
He looks like Gaddafi.  
Yes, he looks like Muammar  
but his nose isn't as big.  
These people are English.  
Look at their mouths,  
the way they move is like English.  
But it's dubbed in French.  
From now on,  
I will make my own decisions,  
according to my mood  
and what I want to do, OK?"  
Is she kicking this cute guy out?  
Dream on.  
She won't give him to you.  
Now it's the ads.  
After much debate,  
we have decided  
to start the harvest before Ramadan.  
May God preserve us  
from the thorns!  
Some of us have families  
who own date palms.  
Others pick up the dates  
that drop to the ground.  
That's how it is.  
When the work's over, the owner gives you  
a share of what you collected.  
A mother works with her kids  
to get as much as she can.



I've pricked my hand!  
Mariama is laughing at me.  
I was pricked by a thorn.  
Hold it for me, please,  
or I'll get pricked again.  
Amina, if I hold it,  
I can't work.  
You don't speak Hausa?  
- No, I don't.  
I am Tubu.  
What's your name?  
- Domagali.  
What's your birth date?  
My age?  
I've lived many years!  
How many?  
- How would I know!  
Approximately?  
- Why does he want to know?  
You don't know exactly?  
- I am 40!  
Maybe.  
I stopped counting at 40.  
I'll write 45.  
- Say 45.  
Tell the doctor I don't see well.  
- One eye or both?  
Both. One of my eyes  
got worse because of the trip.  
The other one has been weak  
for a long time and it hurts.  
My eyes are getting much worse.  
This one is the worst.  
Have you had any medical care?  
- No.  
None?  
- No.  
Are you taking medicines?  
- No.  
Have you ever been  
to Agadez for treatment?  
Never for treatment, for other reasons.  
We don't do eye operations here.  
You have to go to Agadez.

Treatment there is very expensive.  
Consultations and medication  
can be very costly.  
That's why you need  
a lot of money.  
From here you can reach Libya.  
In Libya, in one day,  
you can easily make 5000.  
Here, some days  
you don't earn anything.  
There, life's good, the country is rich.  
Houses have heating  
and air conditioning.  
It's warm in winter  
and cool in summer.  
Four units of salt cost 300 CFA.  
- So, I'll take four.  
It's good quality salt.  
How much for what you weighed?  
Tell him I want four.  
It's heavy!  
Buildings are made with bricks.  
They cook with gas,  
we cook with charcoal  
and get smoke in our eyes.  
Does the fire light itself?  
- Yes, it works on its own.  
They leave the pan on,  
after a while, they turn off the gas  
and dinner is ready.  
Nothing more to do.  
- Great.  
As easy as that.  
Switching off gas isn't diff cult.  
You just need to turn the button.  
To light it you use a lighter  
and turn the button.  
It's very modern over there.  
No matter what,  
being a girl is a disadvantage.  
Boys avenge you  
if someone kills you.  
Girls can't even stop a thief  
from stealing a camel.

The men will respect you  
if you have a son,  
even if it's a little child.  
People say  
boys are better than girls.  
So when a baby is born,  
they always ask what it is.  
When they hear it's a boy,  
the reaction is good.  
If it's a girl  
they are not enthusiastic.  
They think  
a girl is just property  
that someone will take away  
one day.  
Someone is always responsible for her,  
either the brother or the father.  
And when she gets married,  
it's the husband.  
Women have no power. Understand?  
But times are changing.  
It's the woman who decides now  
Her decisions are in her hands.  
- That's right.  
Men say women  
have started controlling them.  
Yes, men are saying that.  
Women of the Sahara  
are starting to wear the trousers!  
- It's houmra.  
Did you make it yourself?  
- Yes, I did.  
I see.  
Did you prepare the incense, too?  
- Yes.  
Do you mix  
the ingredients yourself?  
I mix the essential oils together,  
then I add the sandalwood.  
What is this?  
- It's perfume.  
Was it made here?  
- In Libya.  
Libya?

- Yes.

It smells good.

How much is it?

I don't know this.

Is it from Nigeria?

From Dubai.

- From Dubai?

This is for women.

- For women?

Good. How much is it?

- 4000.

It is from Arabia.

- Arabia.

I want to be a nurse.

What must I do?

You want to be a nurse?

- Yes.

To become a nurse

you need a diploma,

at least a secondary school certificate,

then study nursing. OK?

- Yes.

You don't have a certificate

or any kind of

secondary school certificate.

You shouldn't

have stopped school so soon.

You gave up,

so you cannot become a nurse.

Mariama,

what do you do?

Are you married

or do you work at home?

Are you married?

- Yes, I am married.

With children?

- No, I don't have children.

How long have you been married?

- Six years.

Six years.

Well, since you

don't have children,

there is hope for you.

You've done some primary school.

If you finish it and get the certificate,  
you could find work.  
As helper to a midwife.  
Right now, we're looking for helpers.  
Helper, that's pretty good.  
With your level, Mariama,  
you should be happy.  
Yes, madam. Thank you.  
Do you want to help?  
When did we start  
cutting the dates?  
We started 6 days ago.  
The day after our arrival.  
- Yes.  
So, we'll finish this afternoon.  
Yes, this afternoon  
we should be finished.  
Will 4 camel loads of dates  
get us 5 camel loads of millet?  
How many?  
- Four camel loads.  
You'll get 5 loads of millet.  
Dates sell well.  
Get up, your clothes  
will get sticky.  
We are leaving tomorrow  
I'm not going back to the Sahara, mum.  
- What do you mean?  
It's so hard there.  
It's not hard, it's nice.  
- It's tiring.  
You like to stay in town,  
but not me.  
What are you going to do?  
You don't like the town,  
I don't like the Sahara.  
What's so good about town?  
The Sahara is better.  
Your camels and goats are free,  
your donkeys are free.  
They are free  
and eat the grass for free.  
They come back before sunset.  
You drink milk from your animals.

You get meat from them.  
You can sell some to get money.  
What's so good about town?  
- In town...  
What do you hope to gain?  
We've always known  
it's not good to live in town.  
I'll sell my dates  
and get some money.  
You want to do business?  
There are women who do business.  
- Ls that what you want?  
I won't go to the Sahara.  
- I won't stay here.  
Stay and do business.  
We shall see.  
I won't stay.  
When my camels are ready, I'll go.  
Stay if you want,  
but if you do,  
I won't forgive you.  
I will make it.  
I'll check on you.  
I don't think you will make it.  
This one isn't too heavy.  
Help me tie the sacks.  
Where's the kettle?  
The journey to Agadez is difficult,  
but it's a nice town.  
Yes, it is.  
- It's nice.  
Your skin gets very dark.  
- Because of the sun.  
Very dark!  
And when you stop  
there's no shade.  
So people look for shade  
under the truck.  
Greetings.  
What are the red flags for?  
- To mark the oil spots.  
Oil has been found  
here in Bilma and in the desert.  
This is good for Niger.

- Niger will be rich, God willing.

Another sack of dates

from the lady.

Goodbye, Mariama.

Goodbye.

- God bless you!

You will join me, won't you?

Maybe.

See you next year.

- See you next year!

Goodbye, Amina!

- Goodbye, Mariama!

I'd love to join you.

- You'll come?

That's another story.

- You must come!

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