

Caravan

Donna Obeid

Donna Obeid graduated from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and earned both an MFA and MA from American University. A passionate traveler and photographer, her writing often reflects her love of the exotic. Born and raised in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, she now lives in Northern California and works at Stanford University.

for Said

PLEASE, PLEASE," YOU KEPT BEGGING ME. AND FINALLY I took a tiny sip of the orange Fanta from the tea glass you held to my lips.

You'd given me the closest remedy to the nausea that had become unbearable. It was well over 100 degrees in the tent and I was covered with the woolen blanket, but still I was cold. I thought I might die waiting for my lover to return. I grew angry at him for leaving me, while you, you stayed with me though you barely knew me at all. You wore a blue linen djellaba that covered everything but your hands and a red turban that covered everything but your eyes. Each time I awoke, I read more of you by the way you moved. At one point, you placed your cool palm upon my forehead and whispered what I thought must be Arabic healing chants. And then I became glad it was you and not him with me. He wouldn't know what to do. He wouldn't know what to say.

There were twelve in our caravan, and you'd led us across the desert as you had done hundreds of times with other wealthy tourists who had come all this way to see the tallest dunes in the Sahara, the Erg Chebbi. The people in our caravan spoke loudly and laughed; some of them smoked, flicking their ashes onto the desert floor. They missed entirely the exquisite silence of the desert.

At midday, you spread out a blanket and unpacked a lunch for us: a lunch of Moroccan mint tea and skewered meats wrapped in round Arabic bread, a pomegranate salad and dates—none of which you ate. You never even sipped water. *Make me tired*, you said of it, then you rose to pick up a crumpled cigarette box left in the sand. And I thought, We are the people outside your world who come and go so carelessly. We are the intruders.

For the entire day, you barely said a single word. Instead, you hummed or made clicking sounds with your tongue to reassure the camels. Mine was the first camel at the very head of the caravan, and when I asked your name, you smiled and quietly said *Sai-eed* and when I asked if you wanted to switch places with me, you

laughed a little and your eyes looked at me more softly and you drew the camel closer to you like there were only the three of us now. Like no one behind us mattered.

The sun set and the entire sky turned red as the juice of the pomegranates and you sang a Moroccan lullaby that I imagined a man would sing to the woman he loved. Maybe you sang it to me. We stopped and your song did too. I almost didn't want to turn and look at my lover or the other tourists with their fancy, hi-tech desert gear and raucous voices. You had none of these things. You were silent and still; you had nothing and wanted nothing. You were, I thought, entrancing as the desert itself.

We'd arrived at the oasis—a circle of tents and urns of water and a few date trees—and after we had our fun scrambling up and down the hills, there was an evening show for us: a Berber tribe, performing on their drums. Around an open fire, we sat on thick cushions sewn with sequins and fringe; more meat skewers and sweet breads and dipping sauces were passed around. Mint tea was once again poured. In the chilly night everyone slept out in the open beneath woolen blankets, all the stars in the Sahara Desert a thick veil above. My lover took me in his arms and asked, "How awesome is this?" and I nodded guiltily, for all I could think of was you and what it would be like to be looking at the sky inside your arms.

The next morning, I was sick from the food. My vomit was frothy and green. Inside the tent, I wrapped the woolen blanket around myself and shivered; I was too weak to stand and wondered if I might die, but I told my lover I was fine, that I only needed to rest, and that he should go with the others on the dune buggy tour and overnight village excursion that had already been pre-arranged. "Are you sure?" he asked me, rather lamely I thought. His backpack was over his shoulder. Behind him, the others were in the jeeps waiting. I nodded and waved and then they were gone in a cloud of dust and only the kneeling camels and the quiet Berbers were left, ducking in and out of the tents.

You came and stayed beside me the whole time. Secretly, I was glad everyone else was gone and I was alone

with you. Your eyes never left my face. You said almost nothing. Once when I awoke, I thought your expression was changed; you looked more worried and that is when you began to chant. A bottle of Fanta appeared and you opened it and poured it out the Moroccan way, from up high. Then you pressed the tea glass to my lips, your fingers lingering against my chin as you begged me to drink. I sipped and it was warm and tasted all wrong, like metallic syrup, but still I sipped some more.

Only when I asked, you said that you were born in Marrakesh and came to the desert as a boy and never went back to the city again. I asked about your family and you were careful not to mention a wife, but I knew there must be one. A wife waiting for you in a village across the desert. Children too, I was certain of it. I couldn't help wonder if you'd rearrange your life for me.

Once more the sky turned red and you sang again your lullabies and I wanted to stay with you inside the tent forever; I never wanted to return to the rest of the world. I loved your quiet ways, how you were so removed from everything that you seemed above it all. Above our nonsense worries of money. Above the babble of news and talk of destruction. You were in a perfect silence.

In the early morning when I awoke, you were still beside me, watching me. I sat up, and right away I knew that I was better. You smiled and pointed to my heart and said *Queen of the Desert* and then we both laughed together. You took my hand in yours and squeezed it. Then without taking your eyes from mine, you unwrapped the red turban and showed me your face for the first time, like a gift. And I saw it was a face that could see more than I could. Slowly you opened the blanket and I let you undress me; then you lay on top of me and made love to me the way a wind runs over the sand.

The sun rose, and warm, yolk-colored light filtered through the fabric of the tent. And then it was I who sang to you, all the show tunes I could remember. I sang until I could remember no more. I stood up and danced naked in front of you. I did a cabaret and it made you laugh and then you reached up and pulled me down to you and made love to me again. In the final throes, you did something that filled me more than any man ever had. Later, we drank water together from a clay urn and you washed me with all that remained.

When the mob returned that evening, I don't even think anyone noticed how I had become like you. I looked at them like they were the foreigners and I belonged there now. I said barely anything. I ate barely anything. I never took a sip of water. I wonder if anyone could feel it, how my body was so magnetized with yours. How your eyes looked at me not with indifference anymore. How you carried me up and down from the camel like you loved me so very much.

In the morning, you led us all back to the sandcastle hotel with the pool in Merzouga. As soon as I saw it, I didn't want to be back at all. But everyone kept saying

how fantastic it was to return to showers and toilets and civilization. It was like they'd been deprived of everything for so long when really they'd been deprived of nothing for such a short time.

The men in the caravan gave you tips—*American dollars!*—and it was so strange to see you being passed money. You smiled sheepishly like you did not know what to do with it all, then it was gone in the folds of your robe.

That night, there was dancing again from the Berbers, a huge long-table feast to celebrate our return. The next group of tourists was there too, waiting for their turn to go out in the morning. Everyone exchanged travel stories, each one bigger than the next. I was at the end of the table and you were sitting beside me, quiet as you always were. All the stars appeared. I turned to tell you how beautiful it was but you were already gone. I wanted to rise and see where you'd gone. I wanted so badly to follow you. I thought, This feeling must be love. Why else would it hurt like this to see you gone?

And then I heard my lover say my name, and I turned around and right there, in front of everyone, he proposed to me with an enormous diamond ring he'd been hiding the whole time. Beneath all the stars, I said yes because that is what I thought I should say and everyone clapped, but to me it only disturbed the silence of the desert. To me, I'd already betrayed you.

And so, that night he became my fiancé, and the next day we returned to New York where we became man and wife in front of 314 people in May at the Metropolitan Club, but even on that day it was of you I thought. You who still makes me turn away, almost sick, at the sight of an orange Fanta at a deli counter. You, King of the Desert, guest at my cabaret. You whom I never saw again.

I wonder if you ever thought of me.