

ALEXIS NELSON

*Between Sand and Sky*

It was January in North Africa, and I was twenty years old. I'd expected the desert to be hot, but as I stood with my tour group in the pale blue light of early morning, the air was surprisingly cold. It was the kind of cold, I was beginning to understand, that only happens in empty places, where the atmosphere is too thin to keep hold of the sun's heat once darkness has fallen. To one side, a collection of irritable camels kneeled in the sandy parking lot, waiting for us tourists to be hoisted, like sacks of grain, onto their backs. The camels' masters—our guides—were there too, standing in a third cluster, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and speaking to each other in voices that sounded angry but probably weren't. My boyfriend at the time, David, had wandered away from our group and was standing at the edge of the parking lot with his back to me, his arms wrapped tightly around his own body as he stared off at some mysterious point on the horizon. Before him lay the main event: a sea of sand reaching out for the ends of the earth.

My limited knowledge of the Sahara came from two sources: the Peter O'Toole movie *Lawrence of Arabia* and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's memoir of his years as a pilot on the line between Southern France and Dakar. David and I had rented *Lawrence of Arabia* one night back in California. We sat through all four hours, pausing only to order Chinese food, which we ate in bed as we watched, transfixed. For weeks afterward, we referred to each other as "Pasha," and David worked on his posture, trying to stand as tall and erect as Omar Sharif, the ultimate noble savage in his long black robes. I thought he looked more like Peter O'Toole, though, the way both men's lightly colored eyes stood out like fireflies when the sun darkened their skin.

In my favorite passage from Saint-Exupéry's book, sublimely titled *Wind, Sand and Stars*, his plane is forced down atop a towering sand dune, which he describes as a giant cone with its point cut off. Realizing he's probably the first human being to set foot on this place, he writes, "I was thrilled by the virginity of a soil which no step of man or beast had sullied. I lingered there, startled by this

silence that had never been broken. The first star began to shine, and I said to myself that this pure surface had lain here thousands of years in sight only of stars.”

In the same book, Saint-Exupéry refers to local tribes as “my barbarians,” says they were “quite ready to acknowledge French overlordship,” and casually mentions that “There was no question but that they would, by their submission, be materially better off.” But these were not the passages on which I chose to dwell. Instead, I focused on his descriptions of the desert that emphasized its emptiness. Stripped not only of water and plant life but also of people—how could conflict exist in a place like that?

The day our tour group reached the Sahara, we’d already been in Tunisia for about a week. David and I were studying in Budapest for the year but had a long break over Christmas, a chance to travel and escape the coldest, darkest days of winter in Eastern Europe. In a gesture of surrender I wondered how to interpret, David had left the selection of our vacation spot up to me. After about a week of insomnia-inducing deliberation, I’d finally picked Tunisia because a travel agent had found a cheap package deal; because the only oranges you could buy in Budapest at that time of year were marked with little white stickers that bore the name “Tunisie” in red letters; and because I had a mental image of David and me wrapped in gauzy white, fearlessly traversing the desert, pausing at oases to sip coconut milk and make love beneath a canopy of palms.

Instead, we spent our first few days in Tunisia at a “resort/hotel” a couple of miles outside of Sousse, an ancient, crowded city by the Mediterranean. Our hotel was only one in a strip of nearly identical hotels that lined the beach, stretching from just outside the city center to farther than the eye could see, drawing scores of pasty Europeans in search of sun and romance at basement prices. Each of these hotels was big and modern and strikingly out of synch with the medieval mosques and little white homes piled on top of one another in Sousse’s old town. Yet they all made some kind of superficial gesture toward the local aesthetic: a white-and-blue color scheme, arched windows, a tiled lobby. “The Bedouin,” where the Hungarian travel agency had sent David and me, had concrete palm trees in the dining room. We could eat as much as we liked at the buffet dinners served nightly, as our “package” included two meals a day.

Though by no means the most luxurious of the resorts in Sousse, the Bedouin was a much nicer hotel than any David and I had stayed in before. When we traveled together around Eastern Europe, we stayed mostly in youth hostels, where we slept in bunk beds and paid extra for towels and sheets. From the airport, we came straight to our hotel in a chartered van. As soon as we'd checked into our room, we threw off the heavy winter coats that had been weighing us down for the past two months and collapsed onto the queen-sized bed. Bright sunshine entered the room through thin curtains. The air was neither too cold nor too hot; it was simply weightless, a non-issue. I kicked off my sturdy black boots, then sat up so I could unwind the wool scarf from around my neck. Before I could finish, David surprised me by sitting up behind me and placing his hand over mine. "Let me," he said, and I didn't say anything, just held my breath. We'd been struggling lately; I was hopeful that this trip would fix that.

Later, having showered in our *own* bathroom, I slid open the glass doors that led out to a private balcony overlooking the ocean and David switched on the TV, which we discovered carried both CNN and the BBC. For a few moments, in spite of the images being shown on the news, suggesting as usual that the whole world was falling apart, life could not have gotten much better.

The next morning, the automatic front doors of the Bedouin flew open with a heartening swish, and David and I stepped out into the white light of day. As soon as we did, a line of taxis, in various states of disrepair—from slightly rusty to missing essential elements like mirrors and bumpers—shot up to the curb to meet us. Their drivers threw open the doors for us and leaned out of the windows, calling to us in both French and English. I turned to David in some confusion. We hadn't figured taxi rides into town into our daily budget for the trip; yet the drivers seemed so eager for our company. Besides, looking at the road, with its thin, sandy shoulders in place of sidewalks, perhaps the walk wouldn't be as pleasant as I'd imagined. David gave me a little nudge with two fingers against the small of my back, and we climbed into the nearest cab.

Once we reached the town center, we quickly realized that not only the taxi drivers were eager to provide us with their services. David was tall and pale and blonde; I was short and pale and blonde;

with a single glance, you could tell that we were westerners—and that meant we must be looking to buy something. We had hardly taken two steps in the *medina*, or old town, before I was startled by a stranger’s whisper close to my ear.

“Hashish,” the voice said.

A young man, probably in his twenties, dressed in jean from head to toe, stepped out in front of us. “Français?” he asked. “American?”

David and I both nodded.

“Ah, I love Americans,” the man sighed. Then he leaned in close again.

“You like hashish?”

It was like this wherever we went: the same old tired scenes of third world tourism, unfolding before us as if for the first time. It didn’t matter that in truth, we’d barely scraped together the funds to pay for our hotel and airfare, or that I stuffed rolls into my purse at breakfast each morning so we wouldn’t have to buy lunch in town. Nor did the locals we encountered seem to understand that we were *different* from other western visitors. David with his long hair and thrift store jeans, me with my tattered notebook filled with flowery descriptions of the silvery beach beneath a crescent moon: surely we were more like wandering bohemians than pillaging tourists! Yet we were white and we spoke English; and this alone suggested that we had more, much more, than the natives who called to us and followed us and even grabbed at our sleeves as we strolled the narrow, jumbled streets of their city.

Both David and I were terrible at saying no. One afternoon, we paid a street vendor about five dollars for a bottle of warm Pepsi neither of us wanted. Another time, when a shopkeeper called to us from the doorway of his store, we followed his beckoning finger helplessly, as though hooked to it like fish on a line. We spent over an hour politely admiring teapots, birdcages, and colorful lampshades made from stretched animal skins before it became clear that we were never going to buy anything, and we finally made our awkward retreat. As David pushed his way out of the store ahead of me and I followed him back into the glaring, noisy street, I felt a flash of irritation. Why couldn’t he be firmer, why wasn’t he better at protecting me from aggressive shopkeepers and the menacing stares of men who clustered together around small tables at side-

walk cafés, smoking hookahs, watching as I passed? And why was it, finally, that the world simply refused to open itself up to us, in spite of the fact that we were young and cute and in love?

All these feelings and thoughts swirled around in some hazy region of my awareness, and I couldn't see them clearly enough to separate one from another, or tease out the contradictions. I felt guilty about being a rich white foreigner, yet I also felt indignant about having this label applied to me. I was irritated by David's passivity, yet I couldn't keep myself from continually deferring to him. Even my feelings about the blatant stares I received from men and boys of all ages were confused. Their looks made me feel uncomfortable and exposed, yet I can't deny that I also derived some pleasure simply from being noticed, and perhaps desired, by so many strangers. Most of all, though, I could not figure out who or what to blame for the fact that this trip was not turning out to be the great romantic adventure I'd hoped for: was it David's fault, or Tunisia's, or my own?

We'd been in Sousse three or four days when a small boy approached us in the cobblestone square in front of the main mosque, an austere ninth-century structure of light-colored stone, surrounded by high walls. David and I had hoped to visit the mosque that day but had found that non-believers were allowed no further than the interior courtyard. So now we were standing with our hands in our pockets in the middle of the bustling square, trying to decide what to do next but also trying to appear as though we already knew exactly what we were doing. Sweat shone on David's forehead. It was hot that day, and he hated the heat. I thought the best thing to do might be to return to the Bedouin and spend the rest of the afternoon drinking gin and tonics by the pool.

"It's not a pool," David reminded me. "It's a hole in the ground."

This was true: high tourist season began in March, and until then, the hotel had apparently decided to conserve water by keeping the pool empty. It was almost impossible to imagine the rectangular, concrete hole ever holding anything as pure and sweet as a swimming pool.

Before I could come up with an alternative plan, I was distracted by the hurried slap of sandals coming up behind me. As I turned around, a young boy—maybe nine or ten years old—stopped in his tracks and stood about three feet from me. The moment I saw him,

I felt certain he'd been standing somewhere nearby, watching us, the whole time David and I had been bickering. He wore the same squarish cap that I'd seen on many of the men in town, but other than that he was dressed in shabby-looking western clothes: thin brown pants that barely clung to his bony frame, and a red shirt with one sleeve too long and the other too short. He stared at me boldly, almost defiantly, and though he was small and fragile-looking and appeared to be covered in dust—just a poor little boy!—I felt threatened by him, and so I took a couple of steps back, closer to David.

“For you!” the boy said then, and held out his hand to me. In his fist was a wilted pink flower—it looked like a carnation—that was covered, like the boy, in a fine layer of light brown dust.

I shook my head, and the boy spoke in French. “*Gratuit*,” he said. It was a word I'd heard often since we'd arrived in Tunisia; it meant free, but experience had taught me not to trust it. Plenty of things—bottles of water, handmade jewelry, personal tours of the city's hidden back-corners—were “free,” until you accepted them. Then they suddenly had a price.

David seemed to have the same thought. “No thank you,” he told the boy, shaking his head. “We don't want it.” Then he took my arm and began to lead me away. But the boy pursued us, shaking his wilted flower at us and shouting, “*Gratuit, gratuit!*” Finally, he leapt toward us, darting close like a bird stealing crumbs, and shoved the flower into the pocket of David's brown corduroy jacket. Grinning, he stepped back, held his empty palms out in front of us, and shrugged, as if to say, “It wasn't *me* who put that flower in your pocket; but now it's there, so what shall we do?”

For a moment, the three of us stood looking at each other. My arm grew hot and sticky where David still held it, and I could feel his frustration pulsating there, like a heartbeat. Then, in one swift movement, he released my arm, reached into his coat pocket, and removed the flower. Thrusting it back at the boy, he said, “We don't want it,” again. When the boy shook his head, gluing his hands tightly to his sides, David let go, and the flower fell onto a dark gray cobblestone at the boy's feet.

I didn't see whether or not the boy bent down to retrieve his flower as we turned to leave. But as we walked away across the square, I heard him call out after us. “Fuck you!” he said—speaking in

English now—before running off in the opposite direction, his feet making that same slapping sound against the stones as he left.

“David,” I said hesitantly. But how to finish? Later, back at the hotel, if things went well, we might laugh about this. But for the moment, I felt only a deep sense of dread, and for the rest of the afternoon, an aura of guilt hung about us—for I think we both felt certain we’d deserved the boy’s anger. Yet now when I look back on that day, the boy is only a shadow, a flicker. What stands out for me instead is the way his parting slur kept resonating in the space between David and me long after he’d gone, almost as though we’d hurled those two words at each other.

That must have been when I decided we had to get out of Sousse. The town itself had started to feel booby-trapped, and there was something shameful about hiding out inside the Bedouin, where the natives who served us wore cheesy costumes as though they were starring in a production of “Arabian Nights,” while guests gathered nightly to compare the deals they’d gotten on jewelry and oriental rugs.

The same travel agency that we’d used to book our room and flight offered an affordable, three-day excursion into “the heart of the Sahara,” and I convinced David that we should pool our remaining resources and give it a try. This has always been my instinct: when the going gets tough, I try a new location. I can only assume the same impulse propels all hapless people, as we bump and jostle each other on our way through this life.

Before reaching the Sahara, we spent the majority of two full days aboard a tour bus with about twenty other vacationers, most of them Hungarian. As we rode along, I stared out the window. I dozed. Much of what there was to see did not seem worth seeing. Tin huts pushed up against the side of the road, and trash piled in the gutters. Electrical lines; mile after mile of nothing but electrical lines and barren land. How strange, I told myself, that what one found in the third world was not an absence of development, not a return to an earlier and simpler time, but rather development laid bare, exposed in such a way that its unpleasantness became impossible to deny. Leaning my head against the cool glass of the window, at least I could shut my eyes to it.

Meanwhile, our Hungarian tour guide narrated nearly every moment of our seemingly uneventful journey, standing at the head of the bus with a microphone raised to his lips. David and I hadn't studied Hungarian at all back at in the States, and the lessons we'd been taking in Budapest were mostly meant to help us get by in places like restaurants and train stations. We hadn't learned enough to have a conversation with one of our Hungarian neighbors, much less follow along with a lecture on the properties of sand dunes or the customs of the nomadic peoples of the Sahara. So our guide's voice reached my ears as a steady, monotonous stream of sound I could not even begin to understand.

Only once, as I hovered between my dreams and reality, did individual words begin to separate themselves from the stream and drop like clean, round pebbles into my subconscious. I was possessed then by a feeling of transparency, of perfect insight; the gears all sliding into place. Yet in the next moment, I emerged fully from my nap to find myself as lost as I had been before, still barreling along across a foreign landscape. Beside me, David studied his *Lonely Planet*, seemingly engrossed.

The morning we were finally supposed to see the desert began with a fight. It was not the fight to end all fights; but it felt like the kind of fight that could easily become that, like the single loose thread that quickly unravels a sweater.

It was about ten to six in the morning. We were supposed to be out of the motel, where we'd stopped just for the night, and onto the bus with the rest of our group, by six a.m. sharp. I was in the bathroom, trying to find the right adapter plug to get my hairdryer to comply with the foreign electrical socket. David was on the other side of the door, wanting to shave.

"You've been in there forever," he said. "I just need to use the sink."

I don't like to be rushed in the morning. In fact, I don't like to be conscious at all in the morning, especially before dawn.

"Do you really need to shave?" I asked.

"Do you really need to dry your hair?" David replied.

"I'll freeze out there with wet hair," I said, flinging open the hollow wooden door between us. "But fine."

David brushed past me into the bathroom. “This was your idea,” he said, as he held his chin up to the mirror in the weak orange light above the sink.

I threw my hairdryer into my purple nylon duffle bag, which sat open on the bed, then zipped the bag shut. “Fine,” I repeated.

This was not what I wanted to say. I wanted to remind him that we hadn’t come here for me, but for us. I wanted to ask if he cared about that any more—about him and me together, seeing the world as we’d once planned. But how could I make that conversation relate to the one we were having, about whose turn it was in the bathroom? And besides, where could a conversation like that possibly go? Here we were, in the middle of the desert together; what could we do now but hang on and ride things out until the end? Yet I could not imagine when—or where—that end would finally come.

“I’ll see you on the bus,” I said, hoisting my bag onto my shoulder. Without waiting for David’s reply, I swung the door of our motel room open and stepped out into the sharp desert air.

And then there we were, in a sandy parking lot before the mouth of the Sahara.

Underdressed in ripped jeans and a thin cotton blouse, I shivered as a cool breeze came up, sending sand swirling around my ankles, and wished David would come over and put his arms around me, say he was ready to make up, or at least let me wear his coat for a little while. Instead, our Hungarian tour leader came around with matching costumes that we were all expected to put on: pink sheets to wrap around our heads like turbans, and black-and-white striped smocks, like prisoners’ pajamas, to drape loosely over our bodies.

At first, as my camel lumbered across the sand with me on its back, I could only think about how ridiculous we looked—twenty or so Hungarians, David, and me, all clinging awkwardly to the throne-like saddles perched atop our camels’ humps, our bobbing heads wrapped in identical, rose-colored bedsheets. I felt vulnerable and foolish, out there in the inhospitable desert, and wished, suddenly, to be lounging in the sun beside the empty swimming pool at the Bedouin. Or better still: I would’ve liked to be back in California, eating takeout in bed, watching a video.

But then I looked around me and saw that we had left the parking lot far behind and were, in fact, in the heart of the Sahara. The sun was high enough now that the sky had turned a bright, cloudless blue, but the sand still retained the faint pink glow of dawn, as though it were burning from within. While the land had been mostly flat before, now the sand rose up in waves all around us, some of which were several stories high and sharply pointed, with smaller, rounder dunes pressed up against them. Only two colors were visible for as far as I could see: the blue of the sky and the rosy gold of the sand.

Staring out at the Sahara gave me the same feeling of being in the presence of something eternal that standing before the ocean often does, except for one key difference: the ocean never stops moving, taking deep swelling breaths, which makes it feel alive, but the desert felt as silent and still as death. Yet it was the kind of stillness you can't quite trust; I got the feeling that the desert was only playing at being dead, that as soon as I turned my back or drew near enough, it would leap up and grab me.

And in fact, I was somewhere in the middle of these thoughts when the first horseman appeared. Then I saw that there were four or five of them, men dressed in black, with only their eyes uncovered, shooting out across the dunes on dark, beautiful horses, kicking up clouds of sand as they thundered toward us. I clutched my saddle more tightly as the men on horseback drew lines around our group in the sand. Peering around my camel's neck, I noticed that my guide had stopped moving, as had the others. Did they understand what was happening, at least? I couldn't tell. I had lost sight of David—his camel was somewhere behind mine—but I exchanged glances with my nearest group member, a white-haired Hungarian lady who giggled nervously and reached up to adjust her turban. Just when I had decided to panic, one of the riders rose to his feet on his horse's back. He held the reins in one hand and placed his other hand on his hip, posing as he led his horse in a slower trot back and forth in front of us.

It was all for show; like our embarrassing costumes, the men on horseback were part of our desert "package," our authentic Saharan experience. Our guides helped us down off our camels' backs; I found David and we loitered with the rest of our group in the sand, snapping pictures of the horsemen as they performed

some more tricks for us, their animals' sleek, muscular flanks shining in the sun.

One of the horsemen rode up beside me and extended his hand down toward me.

"Photo," he said, then added, "gratuit, gratuit." I looked first at David, who shrugged, then back up at the man on the horse.

"Gratuit," he said again. His voice was firm, almost stern. Though not much of him was visible, I thought he was young, probably not much older than me, because he looked so lean and agile up there on his horse. He wore a black track suit—I noticed a white Nike logo on one shoulder—a black knit cap, and a square black cloth tied over his nose and mouth. I could see only his eyes, which were brown, and the peak of his nose, which was sharp and straight. With a final glance over my shoulder at David, I took the man's hand and let him pull me up onto the horse's back.

I sat in front of him and since I didn't know what else to do, I leaned forward and put my arms around the horse's neck. Its skin was warm and I felt its powerful tendons and veins, tense and alive beneath my hands. The man stood up behind me and someone snapped a picture. Then he sat back down and leaned in close.

"Now we gallop," he whispered into my hair.

Before I could answer, we were flying across the desert. The man had his arms around me and held the reins just in front of me. The horse's hooves pounded against the sand. I'd never been on a galloping horse before, and I didn't know how to keep myself from bouncing around wildly on its back, each jolt causing my turban to slip down my forehead, until it was nearly covering my eyes. Even though I felt afraid, I knew that whatever happened now was beyond my control. All I could do was squeeze the horse's firm sides with my legs and try to match the movements of my body to those of the rider's body. As the horse continued on its flight, I felt, for a moment, wildly free. Then the horse slowed and turned back toward David and the others, and my heart clenched in disappointment.

When we'd rejoined the group, the man gave me a price for the ride, which I paid, and then he helped me down. When I first stood on my own two feet again, the horse's movements hummed in my blood. I could not have explained, then, the sense of loss I felt as the horseman rode away, but I suppose it had to do with the feeling I'd gotten just before we'd turned around—that if we only kept going

a bit further, we would reach a place like the one Saint-Exupéry had landed his plane on, a piece of desert where no man had ever been. And maybe that, more than anything else, was what I'd come looking for, though I didn't know it at the time, a place with no footprints and nothing to regret, or even look back on.