TERESE SVOBODA

Rite Anthropologique

Who wants to ride in front? the father asks. Your mother isn't watching the road anymore.

I'll lose my lunch says the girl. The boy runs a miniature Mini over his knee, a toy too young for him. He doesn't even look out the window, doesn't even answer.

The mother leans against the cracked window that won't shut, her mouth open and snoring. Her people call the sound she makes "the dying hyena" or, rather, that's how the two children translate "air blowing out of a carnivorous dog."

Or they could translate but they won't. Her people are not his, and, as the children have made clear, their people are not theirs. Although the girl knew the language before she knew her own, she would not greet anyone at the last village, and—worse—the boy wiped off spittle the elder plastered on his head for status.

The jeep's gears groan louder than the girl about her stomach. The father searches for third to minimize the lurching but what is left? Only second, which is not too bad for grinding up the thick-rutted, log-strewn inclines but is ridiculous on the desert.

Duneless, the desert is just a line of fine dust from end to end, cut with tracks all the way across from vehicles that passed a decade—or an hour—ago. Even when he gets down on his hands and knees and licks at the dust the way the lorry driver did on his first desert crossing twenty years earlier, he, and as he suspects, the lorry driver, learn nothing except the taste of dirt. The wind comes and the tracks change. Or not. Back then, the lorry driver told of a whole caravan of lorries that ended up on the border of the wrong country. He said they made the mistake of following people who weren't going anywhere, who had wandered the desert for thousands of years.

Even then he didn't believe it. Lorries couldn't last long enough to make it to that border. You couldn't carry that much water. There weren't any oases, what you needed were—

Where are the camels? says the boy, eerily punching into his mind. I saw more camels in the zoo we went to on mom's sabbatical.

That's not a complaint, says the boy after a long silence. It's an observation.

Two month's allowance and counting, says the mother, coming to, acknowledging the note in the boy's voice.

Observation, insists the boy, smacking the little car in his hand.

You never look out the window, says the girl. Twenty camels could have walked by.

No rocks have hit your window yet, says the boy.

So sit in front, says the girl.

The car gives out a few hundred feet further, with steam spurting and the engine heaving. They abandon the car in its paroxysms to sit in its minute shade. They all know nothing can be done until the engine cools. No one even asks what's wrong, the jeep's overheating is so common. The mother brings out her book, as does the daughter.

The boy says they are always reading, no wonder they have no observations. They might as well be home.

The girl sighs, the mother glares, and the father shakes their broken transceiver, then rolls a penny from his pocket into the sand. Heads or tails?

Either way I have to get the penny, says the boy.

A light wind stirs, covering the penny with dust, dusting their sweat without cooling them.

I was younger, says the father. It must've been that.

What? says the mother, keeping her place in her book.

If you're too young or too old, ix-nay on this kind of travel. The father closes his eyes.

Hungry, anyone? asks the girl. She opens the car door for the chips bag lying just inside.

You are disgusting, says the boy. You should be sick.

He's got nerve, doesn't he, Mom? the girl says.

The mother nods over her *The Funerary Practices of the Kuni Cliffdwellers*. You were too young to take when you were smaller, there were too many diseases to die from.

Like boredom, says the boy, bunching up dust in his fist, letting it fall in puffs in front of him.

It is boring, I remember the boredom, says the father. All day waiting for an informant to show.

Is that like, CIA? Only on their side? asks the girl.

Funny, says the dad. You've heard me talk about informants all your life.

I want to be an informant, says the boy. I'd like somebody to ask me where I sleep and what I eat.

What people eat is always a funny question, says the father, opening the hot hood with dancing fingers. People find the question hilarious most of the time. Most of the time they eat the same thing, day in and day out. It's more like feed than food. He extracts a part that he throws to the ground it's that hot.

Ask her about feed, says the boy, pointing at his sister whose mouth is full.

He runs his Mini up her back when she doesn't answer.

Quit it, she shrieks the second time.

Gnats from a twist of dust descend on all of them. They beat at the bugs until they're gone and then they settle in again, everyone but the father, who gazes at the motor intently. He gazes at it and the dropped part so long the mother puts down her book and comes to stand next to him. You've seen this before, I suppose, he says. What's next?

The mother picks up the part from the ground and taps it in her hand. Either melt down a spoon—but I think we only have plastic—and recast it, or wait for somebody to show up.

Triple A, says the boy.

Are we really stuck? asks the girl.

I'm glad night will fall soon, says the father, cupping his hand over his eyes and staring into the glaring desert. We can conserve our water.

The girl crunches on another chip.

I never wanted to come along, says the son. Never. I liked Italy and Tivoli and the trams.

You hated Italy, says the girl. I was there.

Before I came here, I never imagined it was so beautiful, says the father.

You hadn't seen Italy before either, says the girl.

An actual bird flies overhead, horizon to horizon. They all watch it cross as if it were on screen.

We probably drove off the track, says the boy. You just won't tell us.

The father slaps him.

They look into their books, they look out at the white blue sky. The boy doesn't even whimper.

Someone always comes along, says the mother. Would you like your dinner now?

Cat food? says the girl.

We could do a tuna melt with the sun still so hot, says the mother. She searches in the larder, a big army tin with a red cross across it that is bolted to their roof under the bedding.

I want to take a walk, the boy says while she's shifting containers.

Not unless I go with you, says the father.

To pee? asks the girl.

Can't I just take a walk? says the boy. You can see me for miles. I just want to take a walk by myself.

No, says the father. No.

The mother opens a can, slices bread and cheese. Why am I doing this? she asks.

Help your mother, says the father, who is looking at the map.

I mean, why don't you help, says the mother to the father, holding out a piece of bread.

Tribal tabu? He smiles his most careful. For her, he repositions the cheese over the tuna.

The daughter turns down a page in her *Astrology and Your Moods.*

Didn't you go for a walk, asks the son, when you were stuck in the desert? He is standing in the sun with his eyes closed.

I don't remember that story, says the girl. Story number 1793.

I've never been stuck in the desert without one of my people, says the father.

The mother says hush, that will be quite enough, and hands them their sandwiches.

The girl finds bugs in her bread and refuses to eat it. The father eats it and his own. The boy won't eat at all. Can't I take just a short run? he asks very quietly after they all take a sip from the canteen.

All right, says the father. All right.

The boy throws up a little sand with his foot as he leaves so they all turn away, sputtering. He chooses to run away from the sun which is not as high as before, which is not yet setting but will set soon, in the fast way it does in the desert, blazing one minute, out the next, and he turns around only when he's completely out of breath, when the running hurts him.

They're still there, three dark bushes beside the glinting car. Nobody's waving. Maybe they're even facing the other way.

He squats and stretches his neck. It aches from keeping it bent away from the window all the long ride. He stands and stretches again.

He could run a little farther.