

and I kissed him. I've been having a hard time at home, and I don't know what came over me."

The words sounded cold and mechanical, but Nora didn't seem to notice. "I'm disappointed in you, Bree. You could have put Mr. Britton in a bad situation. I think you should leave."

Bree nodded and without another word, she left the school.

. . .

At the first staff meeting of that year, a few weeks before school started, Dave and Mark shot me sidelong looks, while Mr. Hearst spoke. Afterward, the two stopped me in the hallway.

"So..." Dave began. "Did it just stop at that kiss?" He had his hands in his pockets, and his tone was casual, as if he were asking about the Bears' new offensive lineup.

What Nora had seen was all over town. When I went to buy groceries, a gaggle of teenage girls giggled to each other. "I heard she wanted to have sex on his desk," one whispered.

"She just kissed me," I said.

"I figured," Dave said, smirking.

I knew Dave and Mark's opinion of me didn't matter, but Dave's condescending expression wounded my pride.

"But all I would have had to do was snap my fingers," I said, watching Mark's face break into a grin. Dave crossed his arms, appraising me.

When the two walked away, I already felt guilty, but I told myself it didn't matter. I wouldn't be at Bettendorf for too much longer. I would leave for graduate school and a better city, and my real life would begin soon enough.

. . .

I saw her one more time that summer at IHOP. She was sitting at a table by the window reading a book. Although I couldn't make out the whispers snaking through the room over the clattering of cutlery and shouts in the kitchen, I was sure everyone was talking about us being there at the same time.

Seeing her, the sunlight hitting her hair, her lips full and red, made me want to go over to her and say something. Anything. I wanted to take back my words to Nora. My words to Dave and Mark. I wanted to tell Bree she was worth more than any of them, and that I had made a mistake. Before I could move, her head turned toward me as she scanned the room.

When she saw me, she held my gaze for a moment. It wasn't a look of anger or regret. Instead, it was the same expression I had worn so many times when facing a kid with a crush.

# 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 teaches at Stanford University.

*for Saïd*

**P**LEASE, 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.

# Brushed Nickel

Adam Shafer

Adam has written exactly two short stories and published both of them. He won big the only time he went to Vegas, married the first girl he ever dated, remembers lyrics to songs immediately, and is the preferred lap of most house cats. The last he checked, he was living in Chicago. Follow him on Twitter @adamjshafer.

NO MATTER THE NUMBER OF TIMES I'VE STOOD IN this alley waiting for the Pelican to swing open the club's cellar door, I still tremble with anticipation. I can't help but feel seedy. It doesn't help that I am standing in the steamy backstreet with a black duffel bag held at my feet like an ugly dog that scares children. These days, people see someone walking around town with a duffel bag, half of them imagine it filled with napalm, while the other half imagine dildos. Either way, I'm perfectly happy to have it remain unnoticed at my side while I wait.

The Pelican swings the dented steel door over his head and pops, gopher-like, out of the stairwell leading underground. He smiles in a way that suggests he doesn't take our arrangement seriously. I descend the stairs past him as he blathers on about how crazy the place is tonight. As if it's somber and introspective most other Friday nights. I've known this kid for almost two years and I can't remember his name. It starts with J. Normally, to bypass this lapse in memory, I initiate eye contact with him and then just start talking. Internally, I call him the Pelican because his nose skips past his brow line and connects straight to the top of his forehead like a beaked bird with oiled-up hair. Which, I guess, makes him a Gulf Coast pelican.

"Plenty of t.p. in all eight stalls," he says, hurrying his steps to catch up to me. "Soap, towels, all that stuff. I refilled it all at six, so you should be good."

We snake through the lightless basement toward the private stairwell that glows from the club activity upstairs. With a foot on the first step, I turn and hand the Pelican a twenty. He smiles that dumb smile again. I smile back. In all likelihood, this will be the last interaction I have with him tonight.

"Good luck," he says.

Here's how it works: The Pelican is the club's assistant manager, which means he's in charge of men's room maintenance, among other things. Every weekend night, he lets me set up a workstation in the bathroom and collect tips. You might know this job as bathroom attendant, but I prefer "men's valet." Hundreds of dudes

with full bladders and filthy hands come and go without giving me a second's thought. The club employees never know I'm here because they all use a private bathroom on the second floor. And the best part, I only have to hand over twenty dollars to the Pelican each night. If I were a legitimate club employee, I'd have to give back more than four times that. It's not ideal, but given my inflexible hours, it'll do.

Down the hallway from the cellar door are the restrooms. Further still are the rotating lights and unending thump of the club. Even the brightest parts of this place are bathed in secrecy. Lies are as attractive as lust.

The club's throb gives way to the mirrored walls of its men's room. A dozen six-foot mirrors, framed in fake mahogany, line the wall opposite the sinks and toilets. Everything in the room, from the half-dozen ultra-black urinals that look like motocross helmets to the recrystallized carbonate countertops designed to pass for natural marble, is intended to impress people not paying close attention. Knock on the mirror frames and you'll get a hollow sound like a false-bottom trunk. Real mahogany absorbs knocks, accepting them as part of its history. Inspect the fixtures and you'll see not chrome faucets agleam in the light, but brushed nickel employed to deaden it. Matte fixtures hide fingerprints and should suggest to you that they have not been deep cleaned in some time. How do I know? A little pelican told me. Think about that the next time you prepare for a deep six in the bathroom. Look at the fixtures. Look at them and think of me.

"Here you go, sir," I say to a dapper man with cheekbones full of freckles checking for fly-aways in the mirror. I offer a duet of multifold brown paper towels with one hand and begin arranging my workstation with the other.

I've learned to orchestrate colognes, condoms and candies with a florist's aesthetic and a conductor's meticulousness. It's in my nature. A place for everything and everything in its place.

The freckled gent hesitates to accept the towels, but relents in part because my attentions are focused on