

Story for performance #3
webcast from Paris at 09:58PM, 23 Jun 05



Source: Michael Slackman, 'Iran front-runner faces skepticism and mockery', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune online*, 23/06/05
Tags: [desert](#)
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Imagine this, my friends. A petrol tanker, silver-streaked cylinder, its wheels flying sand, making its way across the Sahara. The sun curves its way overhead, and from the sun's eye view, all we can see is a dizzying silver dot in the red blush sand. The head and thorax of a metallic insect crawling ahead. Where is it going to, so straight as a die, ladies and gentlemen? The sun bores down, the red of the sand rushes up to meet it. The land aches with the heat. It is a migraine of dust and light.

Imagine this, my lord. The tanker's cab. Perched up high, hot brown leather seats, windows rolled down, bumping along the track, through the desert, two—no, three—people inside it. One girl, two men. The girl fresh-faced and blue-eyed. Her swinging pony tail is blonde and tawny, hanging down her back. One man each side of her, swaying together across the earth's not so fresh face, furrowing beetle wrinkles into its surface.

There is little talk in the cabin. No common language binds the three travellers. Where have they come from, my friends? Time will tell.

Steven swung his bag into the high cab of the tanker. He was sweating already, and it was only 6 in the morning. Lydia passed her rucksack to him to be lifted in. They exchanged smiles. What a thrill. They were going to be given a lift right across the desert. The dark-faced driver had leaned out of his truck, and waved to them, as they stood at the side of the road. They had only waited half an hour. Rubbing sleep out of their eyes, the leviathan had sighed to an air-braked stop next to them.

The driver couldn't speak any English at all. It was left to Steven's schoolboy French—Lydia spoke none—to make what conversation they could above the roar of the road. They shared the food they had, two or three pieces of baklava left over from the previous night's dinner, and a flat bread sandwich Lydia had thrown together. The driver had passion fruit with him, and a huge silver thermos of sweet mint tea, which he kept on offering to Steven. Lydia sat between them, mute. She contemplated the dead flat dirt road ahead, lined on either side with rickety scrub, spreading out to waste in every direction. The driver did not look at her. She supposed as a white woman she was beneath contempt. But wished she had not worn shorts. Her bare legs, still English white, poked out between the men. Eventually she got a cardigan out of her rucksack and draped it over them.

Now listen. At sundown, the driver turns off the main track, and proceeds north, straight across the sand. The darkness falls like a cloth across their vision. When the driver finally pulls up, he motions to them to get down. He shuts the door before they can get their bags.

'Où sommes-nous?' stammered Steven.

The man busied himself with a fire, and started to make some tea. In the light of the flames, his face danced. Lydia

shivered in her shorts, threw the cardigan over thin shoulders.

But what is this, my lord? The Arab driver is turning to them now. He is holding a knife. Steven imagines that it glints in the fire, but it could not be so. Only in story books would Arabs wield glittering knives. Their driver jabs downwards with the knife to make them sit. The tip of the blade is pointing to Lydia, flicking up and down, appraising its booty. Steven is sweating, as he had been that morning, but now the sweat freezes to his body.

'*Je pense que vous faites erreur*', he begins. Lydia is looking fixedly at him, shuffling closer across the sand. The driver too looks at him. He speaks now in Arabic. Steven understands nothing. The man becomes angrier, pushes the knife into Steven's throat. Does he nick it, my friends? It's hard to see in the darkness.

'Shall we have tea? *Du thé?*', Steven says, his voice tight. He points to the thermos. Cross-legged, the driver reaches over and grasps the silver cylinder. My listeners, it is as though he were drinking from his own petrol tanker in miniature. Lydia cannot keep hold of what is happening to her. The cold is searing.

Steven was gabbling in French now. He had never been so fluent. Over and over again, he plied the mantra that Westerners would be looked for, that it wasn't worth the hassle. They drank tea for tea. The man's knife hand began to tire. He rested it on the sand.

Hours pass. Steven no longer knows what he is saying. He is speaking in English now. He wipes spittle from his chin with the back of his hand. The Arab lurches from bursts of wild anger, that freeze the girl with their heat, to a kind of low whine. At moments he seems to be arguing with himself. They watch each other through the flickering darkness.

Can you believe, my friends, that the night has passed? The trio could be seen still sitting on the cold plain as the sun rose the following morning. They creaked like wooden dolls as the Arab put away his knife, recoiling from the light. Parchment-skinned, they staggered ahead of him to the cab. In complete silence, the driver put the truck into gear, and executed a vast circle to go back the way he had come. The couple shivered in the cab beside him, knees touching.

From the sun's eye view, my lord, they are passing into the next oasis. Look! You can see two bags thrown onto the roadside. Two specks of human matter swing down after them. The cab door shuts. The silver cylinder rumbles away, a cloud of red dust hanging for a moment like an opened parachute, as it puts distance between the past and the future.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ingrid Wassenaar