

The Southern Thruway

Sweltering motorists do not seem to have a history . . . As a reality a traffic jam is impressive, but it doesn't say much.

—Arrigo Benedetti, *L'Espresso*,
Rome, 6.21.64

AT FIRST the girl in the Dauphine had insisted on keeping track of the time, but the engineer in the Peugeot 404 didn't care anymore. Anyone could look at his watch, but it was as if that time strapped to your right wrist or the beep beep on the radio were measuring something else—the time of those who haven't made the blunder of trying to return to Paris on the southern thruway on a Sunday afternoon and, just past Fontainebleau, have had to slow down to a crawl, stop, six rows of cars on either side (everyone knows that on Sundays both sides of the thruway are reserved for those returning to the capital), start the engine, move three yards, stop, talk with the two nuns in the 2CV on the right, look in the rear-view mirror at the pale man driving the Caravelle, ironically envy the birdlike contentment of the couple in the Peugeot 203 (behind the girl's Dauphine) playing

The translator wishes to thank Roberto González Echevarría for his collaboration in the translation of this story.

with their little girl, joking, and eating cheese, or suffer the exasperated outbursts of the two boys in the Simca, in front of the Peugeot 404, and even get out at the stops to explore, not wandering off too far (no one knows when the cars up front will start moving again, and you have to run back so that those behind you won't begin their battle of horn blasts and curses), and thus move up along a Taunus in front of the girl's Dauphine—she is still watching the time—and exchange a few discouraged or mocking words with the two men traveling with the little blond boy, whose great joy at this particular moment is running his toy car over the seats and the rear ledge of the Taunus, or to dare and move up just a bit, since it doesn't seem the cars up ahead will budge very soon, and observe with some pity the elderly couple in the ID Citroën that looks like a big purple bathtub with the little old man and woman swimming around inside, he resting his arms on the wheel with an air of resigned fatigue, she nibbling on an apple, fastidious rather than hungry.

By the fourth time he had seen all that, done all that, the engineer decided not to leave his car again and to just wait for the police to somehow dissolve the bottleneck. The August heat mingled with the tire-level temperature and made immobility increasingly irritating. All was gasoline fumes, screechy screams from the boys in the Simca, the sun's glare bouncing off glass and chrome frames, and to top it off, the contradictory sensation of being trapped in a jungle of cars made to run. The engineer's 404 occupied the second lane on the right, counting from the median, which meant that he had four cars on his right and seven on his left, although, in fact, he could see distinctly only the eight cars surrounding him and their occupants, whom he was already tired of observing. He had chatted with them all, except for the boys in the Simca, whom he disliked. Between stops the situation had been discussed down to the smallest

detail, and the general impression was that, up to Corbeil-Essonnes, they would move more or less slowly, but that between Corbeil and Juvisy things would pick up once the helicopters and motorcycle police managed to break up the worst of the bottleneck. No one doubted that a serious accident had taken place in the area, which could be the only explanation for such an incredible delay. And with that, the government, taxes, road conditions, one topic after another, three yards, another commonplace, five yards, a sententious phrase or a restrained curse.

The two little nuns in the 2CV wanted so much to get to Milly-la-Forêt before eight because they were bringing a basket of greens for the cook. The couple in the Peugeot 203 were particularly interested in not missing the games on television at nine-thirty; the girl in the Dauphine had told the engineer that she didn't care if she got to Paris a little late, she was complaining only as a matter of principle because she thought it was a crime to subject thousands of people to the discomforts of a camel caravan. In the last few hours (it must have been around five, but the heat was unbearable) they had moved about fifty yards according to the engineer's calculations, but one of the men from the Taunus who had come to talk, bringing his little boy with him, pointed ironically to the top of a solitary plane tree, and the girl in the Dauphine remembered that this plane (if it wasn't a chestnut) had been in line with her car for such a long time that she would no longer bother looking at her watch, since all calculations were useless.

Night would never come; the sun's vibrations on the highway and cars pushed vertigo to the edge of nausea. Dark glasses, handkerchiefs moistened with cologne pressed against foreheads, the measures improvised to protect oneself from screaming reflections or from the foul breath expelled by exhaust pipes at every start, were being organized,

perfected, and were the object of reflection and commentary. The engineer got out again to stretch his legs, exchanged a few words with the couple (who looked like farmers) traveling in the Ariane in front of the nun's 2CV. Behind the 2CV was a Volkswagen with a soldier and a girl who looked like newlyweds. The third line toward the edge of the road no longer interested him because he would have had to go dangerously far from the 404; he could distinguish colors, shapes, Mercedes Benz, ID, Lancia, Skoda, Morris Minor, the whole catalog. To the left, on the opposite side of the road, an unreachable jungle of Renaults, Anglias, Peugeots, Porsches, Volvos. It was so monotonous that finally, after chatting with the two men in the Taunus and unsuccessfully trying to exchange views with the solitary driver of the Caravelle, there was nothing better to do than to go back to the 404 and pick up the same conversation about the time, distances, and the movies with the girl in the Dauphine.

Sometimes a stranger would appear, someone coming from the opposite side of the road or from the outside lanes on the right, who would slip between cars to bring some news, probably false, relayed from car to car along the hot miles. The stranger would savor the impact of his news, the slamming of doors as passengers rushed back to comment on the events; but after a while a horn, or an engine starting up, would drive the stranger away, zigzagging through the cars, rushing to get into his and away from the justified anger of the others. And so, all afternoon, they heard about the crash of a Floride and a 2CV near Corbeil—three dead and one child wounded; the double collision of a Fiat 1500 and a Renault station wagon, which in turn smashed into an Austin full of English tourists; the overturning of an Orly airport bus, teeming with passengers from the Copenhagen flight. The engineer was sure that almost everything was

false, although something awful must have happened near Corbeil or even near Paris itself to have paralyzed traffic to such an extent. The farmers in the Ariane, who had a farm near Montereau and knew the region well, told them about another Sunday when traffic had been at a standstill for five hours, but even that much time seemed ludicrous now that the sun, going down on the left side of the road, poured a last avalanche of orange jelly into each car, making metals boil and clouding vision, the treetops behind them never completely disappearing, the shadow barely seen in the distance up ahead never getting near enough so that you could feel the line of cars was moving, even if only a little, even if you had to start and then slam on the breaks and never leave first gear; the dejection of again going from first to neutral, brake, hand brake, stop, and the same thing time and time again.

At one point, tired of inactivity, the engineer decided to take advantage of a particularly endless stop to make a tour of the lanes on the left and, leaving the Dauphine behind he found a DKW, another 2CV, a Fiat 600, and he stopped by a De Soto to chat with an astonished tourist from Washington, D.C. who barely understood French, but had to be at the Place de l'Opéra at eight sharp, you understand, my wife will be awfully anxious, damn it, and they were talking about things in general when a traveling salesman type emerged from the DKW to tell them that someone had come by before saying that a Piper Cub had crashed in the middle of the highway, several dead. The American couldn't give a damn about the Piper Cub, likewise the engineer who, hearing a chorus of horns, rushed back to the 404, passing on the news as he went to the men in the Taunus and the couple in the 203. He saved a more detailed account for the girl in the Dauphine as the cars moved a few slow yards. (Now the Dauphine was slightly behind in relation to the

404, later it would be the opposite; actually, the twelve rows moved as a block, as if an invisible traffic cop at the end of the highway were ordering them to advance in unison, not letting anyone get ahead.) A Piper Cub, Miss, is a small touring plane. Oh. Some nerve crashing right on the thruway on a Sunday afternoon! Really. If only it weren't so hot in these damn cars, if those trees to the right were finally behind us, if the last number in the odometer were finally to fall into its little black hole instead of hanging by its tail, endlessly.

At one point (night was softly falling, the horizon of car tops was turning purple), a big white butterfly landed on the Dauphine's windshield, and the girl and the engineer admired its wings, spread in brief and perfect suspension while it rested; then with acute nostalgia, they watched it fly away over the Taunus and the old couple's ID, head toward the Simca, where a hunter's hand tried vainly to catch it, wing amiably over the Ariane, where the two farmers seemed to be eating something, and finally disappear to the right. At dusk, the line of cars made a first big move of about forty yards; when the engineer looked absently at the odometer, one half of the six had vanished, and the seven was beginning to move down. Almost everybody listened to the radio, and the boys in the Simca had theirs at full blast, singing along with a twist, rocking the car with their gyrations; the nuns were saying their rosaries; the little boy in the Taunus had fallen asleep with his face against the window, the toy car still in his hand. At one point (it was nighttime now), some strangers came with more news, as contradictory as the news already forgotten. It wasn't a Piper, but a glider flown by a general's daughter. It was true that a Renault van had smashed into an Austin, not in Juvisy though, but practically at the gates of Paris. One of the strangers explained to the couple in the 203 that the pavement had caved in around

Ignny, and five cars had overturned when their front wheels got caught in the cracks. The idea of a natural catastrophe spread all the way to the engineer, who shrugged without a comment. Later, thinking of those first few hours of darkness when they had begun to breathe more easily, he remembered that, at one point, he had stuck his arm out of his window to tap on the Dauphine and wake up the girl; she had fallen asleep, oblivious to a new advance. It was perhaps already midnight when one of the nuns timidly offered him a ham sandwich, assuming that he was hungry. The engineer accepted it (although, in fact, he felt nauseous) and asked if he could share it with the girl in the Dauphine, who accepted and voraciously ate the sandwich and a chocolate bar she got from the traveling salesman in the DKW, her neighbor to the left. A lot of people had stepped out of the stuffy cars, because again it had been hours since the last advance; thirst was prevalent, the bottles of lemonade and even the wine on board were already exhausted. The first to complain was the little girl in the 203, and the soldier and the engineer left their cars to go with her father to get water. In front of the Simca, where the radio seemed to provide ample nourishment, the engineer found a Beaulieu occupied by an older woman with nervous eyes. No, she didn't have any water, but she could give him some candy for the little girl. The couple in the ID consulted each other briefly before the old woman pulled a small can of fruit juice out of her bag. The engineer expressed his gratitude and asked if they were hungry, or if he could be of any service; the old man shook his head, but the old lady seemed to accept his offer silently. Later, the girl from the Dauphine and the engineer explored the rows on the left, without going too far; they came back with a few pastries and gave them to the old lady in the ID, just in time to run back to their own cars under a shower of horn blasts.

Aside from those quick jaunts, there was so little to do that the hours began to blend together, becoming one in the memory; at one point, the engineer thought of striking that day from his appointments book and had to keep from laughing out loud, but later, when the nuns, the men in the Taunus, and the girl in the Dauphine began to make contradictory calculations, he realized it would have been better to keep track of time. The local radio stations stopped transmitting for the day, and only the traveling salesman had a short-wave radio, which insisted on reporting exclusively on the stockmarket. Around three, it seemed as if a tacit agreement had been reached, and the line didn't move until dawn. The boys in the Simca pulled out inflatable beds and laid down by their car; the engineer lowered the back of the front seat of the 404 and offered the cushions to the nuns, who refused them; before lying down for a while, the engineer thought of the girl in the Dauphine, who was still at the wheel, and, pretending it didn't make any difference to him, offered to switch cars with her until dawn, but she refused, claiming that she could sleep fine in any position. For a while, you could hear the boy in the Taunus cry; he was lying on the back seat and probably suffering from the heat. The nuns were still praying when the engineer laid down on the seat and began falling asleep, but his sleep was too close to wakefulness, and he finally awoke sweaty and nervous, not realizing at first where he was. Sitting up straight, he began to perceive confused movements outside, a gliding of shadows between the cars, and then he saw a black bulk disappear toward the edge of the highway; he guessed why, and later he, too, left his car to relieve himself at the edge of the road; there were no hedges or trees, only the starless black fields, something that looked like an abstract wall fencing off the white strip of asphalt with its motionless river of cars. He almost bumped into the farmer

from the Ariane, who mumbled something unintelligible; the smell of gasoline over the road now mingled with the more acid presence of man, and the engineer hurried back to his car as soon as he could. The girl in the Dauphine slept leaning on the steering wheel, a lock of hair in her eyes. Before climbing into the 404, the engineer amused himself by watching her shadow, divining the curve of her slightly puckered lips. On the other side, smoking silently, the man in the DKW was also watching the girl sleep.

In the morning they moved a little, enough to give them hope that by afternoon the route to Paris would open up. At nine, a stranger brought good news: The cracks on the road had been filled, and traffic would soon be back to normal. The boys in the Simca turned on the radio, and one of them climbed on top of the car singing and shouting. The engineer told himself that the news was as false as last night's and that the stranger had taken advantage of the group's happiness to ask for and get an orange from the couple in the Ariane. Later another stranger came and tried the same trick, but got nothing. The heat was beginning to rise, and the people preferred to stay in their cars and wait for the good news to come true. At noon, the little girl in the 203 began crying again, and the girl in the Dauphine went to play with her and made friends with her parents. The 203's had no luck: On the right they had the silent man in the Caravelle, oblivious to everything happening around him, and from their left they had to endure the verbose indignation of the driver of the Floride, for whom the bottleneck was a personal affront. When the little girl complained of thirst again, the engineer decided to talk to the couple in the Ariane, convinced that there were many provisions in that car. To his surprise, the farmers were very friendly; they realized that in a situation like this it was necessary to help one another, and they thought that if

someone took charge of the group (the woman made a circular gesture with her hand, encompassing the dozen cars surrounding them), they would have enough to get them to Paris. The idea of appointing himself organizer bothered him, and he chose to call the men from the Taunus for a meeting with the couple in the Ariane. A while later, the rest of the group was consulted one by one. The young soldier in the Volkswagen agreed immediately, and the couple in the 203 offered the few provisions they had left. (The girl in the Dauphine had gotten a glass of pomegranate juice for the little girl, who was now laughing and playing.) One of the Taunus men who went to consult with the boys in the Simca received only mocking consent; the pale man in the Caravelle said it made no difference to him, they could do whatever they wanted. The old couple in the ID and the lady in the Beaulieu reacted with visible joy, as if they felt more protected now. The drivers of the Floride and DKW made no comment, and the American looked at them astonished, saying something about God's will. The engineer found it easy to nominate one of the Taunus men, in whom he had instinctive confidence, as coordinator of all activities. No one would have to go hungry for the time being, but they needed water; the leader, whom the boys in the Simca called Taunus for fun, asked the engineer, the soldier, and one of the boys to explore the zone of highway around them, offering food in exchange for beverages. Taunus, who evidently knew how to command, figured that they should obtain supplies for a maximum of a day and a half, taking the most pessimistic view. In the nun's 2CV and the farmer's Ariane there were enough supplies for such a period of time and, if the explorers returned with water, all problems would be solved. But only the soldier returned with a full flask, and its owner had demanded food for two people in exchange. The engineer failed to find anyone who could give him

water, but his trip allowed him to observe that beyond his group other cells were being organized and were facing similar problems; at a given moment, the driver of an Alfa Romeo refused to speak to him, referring him to the leader of his group five cars behind. Later, the boy from the Simca came back without any water, but Taunus figured they already had enough water for the two children, the old lady in the ID, and the rest of the women. The engineer was telling the girl in the Dauphine about his trip around the periphery (it was one in the afternoon, and the sun kept them in their cars), when she interrupted him with a gesture and pointed to the Simca. In two leaps the engineer reached the car and grabbed the elbow of the boy sprawled in the seat and drinking in great gulps from a flask he had brought back hidden in his jacket. To the boy's angry gesture the engineer responded by increasing the pressure on his arm; the other boy got out of the car and jumped on the engineer, who took two steps back and waited for him, almost with pity. The soldier was already running toward them, and the nuns' shrieks alerted Taunus and his companion. Taunus listened to what had happened, approached the boy with the flask, and slapped him twice. Sobbing, the boy screamed and protested, while the other grumbled without daring to intervene. The engineer took the flask away and gave it to Taunus. Horns began to blare, and everyone returned to his car, but to no avail, since the line moved barely five yards.

At siesta time, under a sun that was even stronger than the day before, one of the nuns took off her coif, and her companion doused her temples with cologne. The women improvised their Samaritan activities little by little, moving from one car to the next, taking care of the children to allow the men more freedom. No one complained, but the jokes were strained, always based on the same word plays, in snobbish skepticism. The greatest humiliation for the girl in

the Dauphine and the engineer was to feel sweaty and dirty; the farmers' absolute indifference to the odor that emanated from their armpits moved them to pity. Toward dusk, the engineer looked casually into the rear-view mirror and found, as always, the pale face and tense features of the driver of the Caravelle who, like the fat driver of the Floride, had remained aloof from all the activities. He thought that his features had become sharper and wondered if he were sick. But later on, when he went to talk with the soldier and his wife, he had a chance to look at him more closely and told himself that the man was not sick, that it was something else, a separation, to give it a name. The soldier in the Volkswagen later told him that his wife was afraid of that silent man who never left the wheel and seemed to sleep awake. Conjectures arose; a folklore was created to fight against inactivity. The children in the Taunus and the 203 had become friends, quarreled, and later made up; their parents visited each other, and once in a while the girl in the Dauphine went to see how the old lady in the ID and the woman in the Beaulieu were doing. At dusk, when some gusts of wind swept through, and the sun went behind the clouds in the west, the people were happy, thinking it would get cooler. A few drops fell, coinciding with an extraordinary advance of almost 100 yards; far away, lightning glowed, and it got even hotter. There was so much electricity in the atmosphere that Taunus, with an instinct the engineer silently admired, left the group alone until night, as if he sensed the possible consequences of the heat and fatigue. At eight, the women took charge of distributing the food; it had been decided that the farmer's Ariane should be the general warehouse and the nun's 2CV a supplementary depot. Taunus had gone in person to confer with the leaders of the four or five neighboring groups; later, with the help of the soldier and the man in the 203, he took an amount of food

to the other groups and returned with more water and some wine. It was decided that the boys in the Simca would yield their inflatable beds to the old lady in the ID and the woman in the Beaulieu; the girl in the Dauphine also brought them two plaid blankets, and the engineer offered his car, which he mockingly called the "sleeping car," to whomever might need it. To his surprise, the girl in the Dauphine accepted the offer and that night shared the 404 cushions with one of the nuns; the other nun went to sleep in the 203 with the little girl and her mother, while the husband spent the night on the pavement wrapped in a blanket. The engineer was not sleepy and played dice with Taunus and his mate; at one point, the farmer in the Ariane joined them, and they talked about politics and drank a few shots of brandy that the farmer had turned over to Taunus that morning. The night wasn't bad; it had cooled down, and a few stars shone between the clouds.

Toward morning, they were overcome by sleep, that need to feel covered which came with the half-light of dawn. While Taunus slept beside the boy in the back seat, his friend and the engineer rested up front. Between two images of a dream, the engineer thought he heard screams in the distance and saw a vague glow; the leader of another group came to tell them that thirty cars ahead there had been the beginnings of a fire in an Estafette—someone had tried to boil vegetables on the sly. Taunus joked about the incident as he went from car to car to find out how they had spent the night, but everyone got his message. That morning, the line began to move very early, and there was an excited rush to pick up mattresses and blankets, but, since the same was probably happening all over, almost no one was impatient or blew his horn. Toward noon, they had moved more than fifty yards, and the shadow of a forest could be seen to the right of the highway. They envied those lucky people who

at that moment could go to the shoulder of the road and enjoy the shade; maybe there was a brook or a faucet with running water. The girl in the Dauphine closed her eyes and thought of a shower falling down her neck and back, running down her legs; the engineer, observing her out of the corner of his eye, saw two tears streaming down her cheeks.

Taunus, who had moved up to the ID, came back to get the younger women to tend the old lady, who wasn't feeling well. The leader of the third group to the rear had a doctor among his men, and the soldier rushed to get him. The engineer, who had followed with ironical benevolence the efforts the boys in the Simca had been making to be forgiven, thought it was time to give them their chance. With the pieces of a tent the boys covered the windows of the 404, and the "sleeping car" became an ambulance where the old lady could sleep in relative darkness. Her husband lay down beside her, and everyone left them alone with the doctor. Later, the nuns attended to the old lady, who felt much better, and the engineer spent the afternoon as best he could, visiting other cars and resting in Taunus' when the sun bore down too hard; he had to run only three times to his car, where the old couple seemed to sleep, to move it up with the line to the next stop. Night came without their having made it to the forest.

Toward two in the morning, the temperature dropped, and those who had blankets were glad to bundle up. Since the line couldn't move until morning (it was something you felt in the air, that came from the horizon of motionless cars in the night), the engineer sat down to smoke with Taunus and to chat with the farmer in the Ariane and the soldier. Taunus' calculations no longer corresponded to reality, and he said so frankly; something would have to be done in the morning to get more provisions and water. The soldier went to get the leaders of the neighboring groups, who were not

sleeping either, and they discussed the problem quietly so as not to wake up the women. The leaders had spoken with the leaders of faraway groups, in a radius of about eighty or 100 cars, and they were sure that the situation was analogous everywhere. The farmer knew the region well and proposed that two or three men from each group go out at dawn to buy provisions from the neighboring farms, while Taunus appointed drivers for the cars left unattended during the expedition. The idea was good, and it was not difficult to collect money from those present; it was decided that the farmer, the soldier, and Taunus' friend would go together, taking all the paper bags, string bags, and flasks available. The other leaders went back to their groups to organize similar expeditions and, at dawn, the situation was explained to the women, and the necessary preparations were made, so that the line could keep moving. The girl in the Dauphine told the engineer that the old lady felt better already and insisted on going back to her ID; at eight, the doctor came and saw no reason why the couple shouldn't return to their car. In any case, Taunus decided that the 404 would be the official ambulance; for fun the boys made a banner with a red cross and put it on the antenna. For a while now, people preferred to leave their cars as little as possible; the temperature continued to drop, and at noon, showers began to fall with lightning in the distance. The farmer's wife rushed to gather water with a funnel and a plastic pitcher, to the special amusement of the boys in the Simca. Watching all this, leaning on his wheel with a book in front of him that he wasn't too interested in, the engineer wondered why the expeditionaries were taking so long; later, Taunus discreetly called him over to his car and, when they got in, told him they had failed. Taunus' friend gave details: The farms were either abandoned or the people refused to sell to them, alleging regulations forbidding the sale to private individuals

and suspecting that they were inspectors taking advantage of the circumstances to test them. In spite of everything, they had been able to bring back a small amount of water and some provisions, perhaps stolen by the soldier, who was grinning and not going into details. Of course, the bottleneck couldn't last much longer, but the food they had wasn't the best for the children or the old lady. The doctor, who came around four-thirty to see the sick woman, made a gesture of weariness and exasperation and told Taunus that the same thing was happening in all the neighboring groups. The radio had spoken about emergency measures being taken to clear up the thruway, but aside from a helicopter that appeared briefly at dusk, there was no action to be seen. At any rate, the heat was gradually tapering off, and people seemed to be waiting for night to cover up in their blankets and erase a few more hours of waiting in their sleep. From his car the engineer listened to the conversation between the girl in the Dauphine and the traveling salesman in the DKW, who was telling her jokes that made her laugh half-heartedly. He was surprised to see the lady from the Beaulieu, who never left her car, and got out to see if she needed something, but she only wanted the latest news and went over to talk with the nuns. A nameless tedium weighed upon them at nightfall; people expected more from sleep than from the always contradictory or unfounded news. Taunus' friend discreetly went to get the engineer, the soldier, and the man in the 203. Taunus informed them that the man in the Floride had just deserted; one of the boys in the Simca had seen the car empty and after a while started looking for the man just to kill time. No one knew the fat man in the Floride well. He had complained a lot the first day, but had turned out to be as silent as the driver of the Caravelle. When at five in the morning there was no longer any doubt that Floride, as the boys in the Simca got a kick out of

calling him, had deserted, taking a handbag with him and leaving behind another filled with shirts and underwear, Taunus decided that one of the boys would take charge of the abandoned car so as not to immobilize the lane. They were all vaguely annoyed by this desertion in the dark and wondered how far Floride could have gotten in his flight through the fields. Aside from this, it seemed to be the night for big decisions; lying on the seat cushion of his 404, the engineer seemed to hear a moan, but he figured it was coming from the soldier and his wife, which, after all, was understandable in the middle of the night and under such circumstances. But then he thought better and lifted the canvas that covered the rear window; by the light of one of the few stars shining, he saw the ever-present windshield of the Caravelle a yard and a half away, and behind it, as if glued to the glass and slightly slanted, the man's convulsed face. Quietly, he got out the left side so as not to wake up the nuns and approached the Caravelle. Then he looked for Taunus, and the soldier went to get the doctor. Obviously, the man had committed suicide by taking some kind of poison; a few lines scrawled in pencil in his appointments book were enough, plus the letter addressed to one Yvette, someone who had left him in Vierzon. Fortunately, the habit of sleeping in the cars was well established (the nights were so cold now that no one would have thought of staying outside), and few were bothered by others slipping between the cars toward the edges of the thruway to relieve themselves. Taunus called a war council, and the doctor agreed with his proposal. To leave the body on the edge of the road would mean to subject those coming behind to an at least painful surprise; to carry him further out into the fields could provoke a violent reaction from the villagers who, the night before, had threatened and beaten up a boy from another group, out looking for food. The farmer in the Ariane and

the traveling salesman had what was needed to hermetically seal the Caravelle's trunk. The girl in the Dauphine joined them just as they were beginning their task, and hung on to the engineer's arm. He quietly explained what had happened and returned her, a little calmer, to her car. Taunus and his men had put the body in the trunk, and the traveling salesman worked with tubes of glue and Scotch tape by the light of the soldier's lantern. Since the woman in the 203 could drive, Taunus decided that her husband would take over the Caravelle, which was on the 203's right; so, in the morning, the little girl in the 203 discovered that her daddy had another car and played for hours at switching cars and putting some of her toys in the Caravelle.

For the first time, it felt cold during the day, and no one thought of taking off his coat. The girl in the Dauphine and the nuns made an inventory of coats available in the group. There were a few sweaters that turned up unexpectedly in the cars, or in some suitcase, a few blankets, a light overcoat or two. A list of priorities was drawn up, and the coats were distributed. Water was again scarce, and Taunus sent three of his men, including the engineer, to try to establish contact with the villagers. While impossible to say why, outside resistance was total. It was enough to step out of the thruway's boundaries for stones to come raining in from somewhere. In the middle of the night, someone threw a sickle that hit the top of the DKW and fell beside the Dauphine. The traveling salesman turned very pale and didn't move from his car, but the American in the De Soto (who was not in Taunus' group, but was appreciated by everyone for his guffaws and good humor) came running, twirled the sickle around and hurled it back with everything he had, shouting curse words. But Taunus did not think it wise to increase the hostility; perhaps it was still possible to make a trip for water.

Nobody kept track anymore of how much they had moved in that day or days; the girl in the Dauphine thought that it was between eighty and two hundred yards; the engineer was not as optimistic, but amused himself by prolonging and confusing his neighbor's calculations, interested in stealing her away from the traveling salesman, who was courting her in his professional manner. That same afternoon, the boy in charge of the Floride came to tell Taunus that a Ford Mercury was offering water at a good price. Taunus refused, but at nightfall one of the nuns asked the engineer for a drink of water for the old lady in the ID, who was suffering in silence, still holding her husband's hand, and being tended alternately by the nuns and the girl in the Dauphine. There was half a bottle of water left, and the women assigned it to the old lady and the woman in the Beaulieu. That same night Taunus paid out of his own pocket for two bottles of water; the Ford Mercury promised to get more the next day, at double the price.

It was difficult to get together and talk, because it was so cold that no one would leave his car except for very pressing reasons. The batteries were beginning to run down, and they couldn't keep the heaters running all the time, so Taunus decided to reserve the two best equipped cars for the sick, should the situation arise. Wrapped in blankets (the boys in the Simca had ripped off the inside covers of their car to make coats and hats for themselves, and others started to imitate them), everyone tried his best to open doors as little as possible to preserve the heat. On one of those freezing nights the engineer heard the girl in the Dauphine sobbing softly. Quietly he opened her door and groped for her in the dark until he felt a wet cheek. Almost without resistance, she let herself be drawn to the 404; the engineer helped her lie down on the back seat, covered her with his only blanket, and then with his overcoat. Darkness was

thicker in the ambulance car, its windows covered with the tent's canvas. At one point, the engineer pulled down the two sun visors and hung his shirt and a sweater from them to shut the car off completely. Toward dawn, she whispered in his ear that before starting to cry she thought she saw in the distance, on the right, the lights of a city.

Maybe it was a city, but in the morning mist you couldn't see more than twenty yards away. Curiously, the line moved a lot more that day, perhaps two or three hundred yards. This coincided with new radio flashes. (Hardly anyone listened anymore, with the exception of Taunus, who felt it was his duty to keep up.) The announcers talked emphatically about exceptional measures that would clear the thruway and referred to the weary toil of highway patrolmen and police forces. Suddenly, one of the nuns became delirious. As her companion looked on terrified, and the girl in the Dauphine dabbed her temples with what was left of the cologne, the nun spoke of Armageddon, the Ninth Day, the chain of cinnabar. The doctor came much later, making his way through the snow that had been falling since noon and that was gradually walling the cars in. He regretted the lack of sedatives and advised them to put the nun in a car with good heating. Taunus put her in his own car, and the little boy moved to the Caravelle with his little girl friend from the 203; they played with their toy cars and had a lot of fun, because they were the only ones who didn't go hungry. That day and the following days, it snowed almost continuously, and when the line moved up a few yards, the snow that had accumulated between cars had to be removed by improvised means.

No one would have conceived of being surprised at the way they were getting provisions and water. The only thing Taunus could do was administer the common fund and get as much as possible out of trades. The Ford Mercury and a

Porsche came every night to traffic with food; Taunus and the engineer were in charge of distributing it according to the physical state of each one. Incredibly, the old lady in the ID was surviving, although sunken in a stupor that the women diligently fought off. The lady in the Beaulieu, who had been fainting and feeling nauseous a few days before, had recovered with the cold weather and was now one of the most active in helping the nun take care of her companion, still weak and a bit lost. The soldier's wife and 203's were in charge of the two children; the traveling salesman in the DKW, perhaps to console himself for losing Dauphine to the engineer, spent hours telling stories to the children. At night, the groups entered another life, secret and private; doors would open or close to let a frozen figure in or out; no one looked at the others; eyes were as blind as darkness itself. Some kind of happiness endured here and there under dirty blankets, in hands with overgrown fingernails, in bodies smelling of unchanged clothes and of days cramped inside. The girl in the Dauphine had not been mistaken—a city sparkled in the distance, and they were approaching it slowly. In the afternoons, one of the boys in the Simca would climb to the top of the car, relentless lookout wrapped in pieces of seat covers and green burlap. Tired of exploring the futile horizon, he'd look for the thousandth time at the cars surrounding him; somewhat enviously he'd discover Dauphine in 404's car, a hand caressing a neck, the end of a kiss. To play a joke on them, now that he had regained 404's friendship, he'd yell that the line was about to move. Dauphine would have to leave 404 and go to her car, but after a while she'd come back looking for warmth, and the boy in the Simca would have liked so much to bring a girl from another group to his car, but it was unthinkable with this cold and hunger, not to mention that the group up front was openly hostile to Taunus' because of some story about

a can of condensed milk, and except for official transactions with Ford Mercury and Porsche, there was no possible contact with other groups. Then the boy in the Simca would sigh unhappily and continue his lookout until the snow and the cold forced him trembling back into his car.

But the cold began to give way and, after a period of rains and winds that enervated a few spirits and increased food supply difficulties, came some cool sunny days when it was again possible to leave your car, pay visits, restore relations with neighboring groups. The leaders had discussed the situation, and peace was finally made with the group ahead. Ford Mercury's sudden disappearance was much talked about, although no one knew what could have happened to him. But Porsche kept coming and controlling the black market. Water and some preserves were never completely lacking, but the group's funds were diminishing, and Taunus and the engineer asked themselves what would happen the day when there was no more money to give Porsche. The possibility of an ambush was brought up, of taking him prisoner and forcing him to reveal the source of his supplies; but the line had advanced a good stretch, and the leaders preferred to wait some more and avoid the risk of ruining it all by a hasty decision. The engineer, who had given into an almost pleasant indifference, was momentarily stunned by the timid news from the girl in the Dauphine, but later he understood that nothing could be done to avoid it, and the idea of having a child by her seemed as natural as the nightly distribution of supplies or the secret trips to the edge of the thruway. Nor could the death of the old lady in the ID surprise anyone. Again it was necessary to work at night, to console her husband, who just couldn't understand, and to keep him company. A fight broke out between the two groups up ahead, and Taunus had to act as mediator and tentatively solve the disagreement. Anything would happen

at any moment, without prearranged schedules; the most important thing began when nobody expected it anymore, and the least responsible was the first to find out. Standing on the roof of the Simca, the elated lookout had the impression that the horizon had changed (it was dusk; the meager, level light of a yellowish sun was slipping away) and that something unbelievable was happening five hundred, three hundred, two hundred and fifty yards away. He shouted it to 404, and 404 said something to Dauphine, and she dashed to her car, when Taunus, the soldier, and the farmer were already running, and from the roof of the Simca the boy was pointing ahead and endlessly repeating the news as if to convince himself that what he was seeing was true. Then they heard the rumble, as if a heavy but uncontrollable migratory wave were awakening from a long slumber and testing its strength. Taunus yelled at them to get back to their cars; the Beaulieu, the ID, the Fiat 600, and the De Soto started moving at once. Now the 2CV, the Taunus, the Simca, and the Ariane were beginning to move, and the boy in the Simca, proud of what was to him something of a personal triumph, turned to the 404 and waved his arm, while the 404, the Dauphine, the 2CV, and the DKW in turn started moving. But it all hinged on how long this was going to last, 404 thought almost routinely, as he kept pace with Dauphine and smiled encouragement to her. Behind them, the Volkswagen, the Caravelle, the 203, and the Floride started moving slowly, a stretch in first gear, then second, forever second, but already without having to clutch, as so many times before, with the foot firmly on the accelerator, waiting to move on to third. 404, reaching out to touch Dauphine's hand, barely grazed her fingertips, saw on her face a smile of incredulous hope, and thought that they would make it to Paris and take a bath, go somewhere together, to her house or his to take a bath, eat, bathe

endlessly and eat and drink, and that later there would be furniture, a bedroom with furniture and a bathroom with shaving cream to really shave, and toilets, food and toilets and sheets, Paris was a toilet and two sheets and hot water running down his chest and legs, and a nail clipper, and white wine, they would drink white wine before kissing and smell each other's lavender water and cologne before really making love with the lights on, between clean sheets, and bathing again just for fun, to make love and bathe and drink and go to the barber shop, go into the bathroom, caress the sheets and caress each other between the sheets and make love among the suds and lavender water and toothbrushes, before beginning to think about what they were going to do, about the child and all the problems and the future, and all that as long as they didn't stop, just as long as the rows kept on moving, even though you couldn't go to third yet, just moving like that, in second, but moving. With his bumper touching the Simca, 404 leaned back, felt the speed picking up, felt that it was possible to accelerate without bumping into the Simca and that the Simca could accelerate without fear of crashing into Beaulieu, and that behind came the Caravelle and that they all accelerated more and more, and that it was O.K. to move on to third without forcing the engine, and the pace became even, and they all accelerated even more, and 404 looked around with surprise and tenderness, searching for Dauphine's eyes. But, naturally, speeding up like that the lanes could no longer stay parallel. Dauphine had moved almost a yard ahead of 404, and he saw her neck and barely her profile just as she was turning to look at him with surprise, noticing that the 404 was falling further behind. 404 calmed her down with a smile and accelerated abruptly, but he had to brake almost immediately, because he was about to bump the Simca; he blew the horn, and the boy looked at him in the rear-view mirror and made a gesture

of helplessness, pointing to the Beaulieu, which was up against him. The Dauphine was three yards ahead, level with the Simca, and the little girl in the 203, now alongside the 404, waved her arms and showed him her doll. A red blot on his right confused 404; instead of the nuns' 2CV or the soldier's Volkswagen, he saw an unknown Chevrolet, and almost immediately the Chevrolet moved ahead followed by a Lancia and a Renault 8. To his left, an ID was gaining on him yard by yard, but before its place was taken by a 403, 404 was still able to make out up ahead the 203 that was already blocking Dauphine. The group was falling apart; it didn't exist anymore. Taunus had to be at least twenty yards away, followed by Dauphine; at the same time, the third row on the left was falling behind since, instead of the traveling salesman's DKW, 404 could see only the rear end of an old black van, perhaps a Citroën or a Peugeot. The cars were in third, gaining or losing ground according to the pace of their lane, and on the side of the thruway trees and some houses in the thick mist and dusk sped by. Later, it was the red lights they all turned on, following the example of those ahead, the night that suddenly closed in on them. From time to time, horns blew, speedometer needles climbed more and more, some lanes were going at forty-five miles an hour, others at forty, some at thirty-five. 404 still hoped that with the gaining and losing of ground he would again catch up with Dauphine, but each minute that slipped by convinced him that it was useless, that the group had dissolved irrevocably, that the everyday meetings would never take place again, the few rituals, the war councils in Taunus' car, Dauphine's caresses in the quiet of night, the children's laughter as they played with their little cars, the nun's face as she said her rosary. When the Simca's brake lights came on, 404 slowed down with an absurd feeling of hope, and as

soon as he put on the handbrake he bolted out and ran ahead. Outside of the Simca and the Beaulieu (the Caravelle would be behind him, but he didn't care), he didn't recognize any cars; through strange windows faces he'd never seen before stared at him in surprise and perhaps even outrage. Horns began to blare, and 404 had to go back to his car; the boy in the Simca made a friendly gesture, pointing with encouragement toward Paris. The line got moving again, slowly for a few minutes, and later as if the thruway were completely free. On 404's left was a Taunus, and for a second 404 had the impression that the group was coming together again, that everything was returning to order, that it would be possible to move ahead without destroying anything. But it was a green Taunus, and there was a woman with dark glasses at the wheel who looked straight ahead. There was nothing to do but give in to the pace, adapt mechanically to the speed of the cars around, and not think. His leather jacket must still be in the soldier's Volkswagen. Taunus had the novel he had been reading the first few days. An almost empty bottle of lavender water was in the nuns' 2CV. And he had, there where he touched it at times with his right hand, the teddy bear Dauphine had given him as a pet. He clung absurdly to the idea that at ninety-three the food would be distributed and the sick would have to be visited, the situation would have to be examined with Taunus and the farmer in the Ariane; then it would be night, Dauphine sneaking into his car, stars or clouds, life. Yes, it had to be like that. All that couldn't have ended forever. Maybe the soldier would get some water, which had been scarce the last few hours; at any rate, you could always count on Porsche, as long as you paid his price. And on the car's antenna the red-cross flag waved madly, and you moved at fifty-five miles an

hour toward the lights that kept growing, not knowing why all this hurry, why this mad race in the night among unknown cars, where no one knew anything about the others, where everyone looked straight ahead, only ahead.