Arc and the Sediment

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Published by Utah State University Press

Allen-Yazzie, Christine.
Arc and the Sediment: a Novel.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/2354.

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“YOU GOING to pay for that?” a woman asks. She’s wearing a park ranger hat and a stiff green T-shirt.

Gretta apologizes profusely. Holding an open bag of corn nuts in one hand and an empty bag of M&Ms in the other, she insists she was about to pay. “I’m just so hungry,” she explains with food in her mouth, nodding toward a long and growing line at the cash register.

Another woman peeks over the display.

“You have white stuff….” Park Ranger waves as a lap swimmer might toward one corner of her mouth.

“Powdered donuts.” Gretta swallows too much too fast, winces, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “I’ll pay for them too. The package is…in my pocket. Until I pay.”

The other woman walks around the aisle. “Do you like my sister’s shirt?” Park Ranger asks.

“Yeah. Curious George is all right…I guess,” Gretta says. “Look, I have money—”

“Come on,” Curious George says to Park Ranger, laughing. “I don’t need your help.”

“Where you heading?” Park Ranger asks, studying Gretta’s sandals. Gretta sees then that Smokey the Bear, embroidered on the brim of the green hat, is smoking weed. She realizes the woman is not, after all, a park ranger.


“Seriously. You live here? You traveling?” Her arms and shoulders are thin but soft and she totters as she talks.
“South. I’m going south.”
“My sister and I were just looking for a place to hike. Know any good places?”
“Let’s go,” Curious George says, annoyed now. The two look alike, mostly. Curious has a smaller chin, compelling eyes, unruly eyebrows.
“Yeah. I just…well, I just saw a place. I was just there. Not far from here.”
“You wouldn’t want to show us, would you?”
“Karen! Let’s go.”
“We packed a lunch—turkey sandwiches. Ham sandwiches if you don’t like turkey. Avocados. Strawberries.”
Curious George giggles in spite of her urgings.
“Raspberries and cream. Corona. Some healthy shit too, if that’s your thing—dried-up exotic peas and sad little apricot ears and god knows what else. Nasty shit. Bincy’s shit.”
“Bincy?”
“As in ‘Itsy Bitsy Spider.’ That was her favorite song. But she always said incy bincy. You know….” She does the spider with her hands.
Gretta knows. A longing for her kids belts her in the back.
“No, it’s okay. I just thought for a second there…I guess I thought she was going to arrest me or something.”
“She’s always trying to hook me up with someone. Last rest area, it was a Dish sales rep. She thinks I’ll fuck, like, whoever.”
“Thanks.”
“I mean, not that you’re whoever. But you know—I don’t know you.”
“Lot of good it does,” Karen says. She excuses herself to the restroom.
“She thought she had you figured, with your necklace and all.” Bincy sizes her up as she talks but seems confused. “Where’d you get it?”
“This? Yeah, my first girlfriend gave me this—like, over a decade ago.” Gretta looks at the pendant, a silver lambda on an onyx triangle, as if for the first time. “So I mean, maybe your sister wasn’t entirely off-radar.” She smiles as best she can, wonders if she still has powder on her face.

“And…she’s not entirely on, is she?”

Gretta shrugs. The need to drive south wanes. Bincy, Gretta sees, has freckles. Tiny near-transparent freckles that oppose the look of worry and impatience she wears. She would like to learn more about the freckles.

“Follow me,” Gretta could say. Or, “I’m likely getting a divorce.” Instead, she thinks of the magic of her bottle of sand, or lack thereof, and finds that she isn’t ready for it to work or fail to work on her marriage. She is on the road still, seeing what she can see. She puts the CornNuts bag and the donuts and the M&Ms bag on a display and fumbles through her pack. “Here—I’ll draw you a map.” She uses a checkbook deposit slip to draw the map.

“This is where you live?” Bincy points to the address and phone number on the deposit slip.

“Yeah.”

“Lance and Gretchen Bitsilly—”

“Gretta—that’s…call me Gretta.”

“Who’s Lance?”

Concentrate: West of the highway. Then what? What were the markers?

“The uh…water spout. I mean, he was.”

“Was?”

Now that Gretta’s drawing a map, she feels unsure of how she got to her spot—or, for that matter, back here, to a Sinclair. “That’s cool, you’re on a trip with your sister,” she says when she finishes, or more accurately gives up. “Wish I had a sister who’d go on road trips with me.” She is unnerved by the way Bincy looks at her, by the tugging sense that she she should offer some disclaimer regarding Lance.

“You’re red,” Bincy says.

“I’m sunburned.”
“Sorry. That came out wrong.” She mock-smiles, as an irritated flight attendant might, and as quickly loses the smile. She takes a business card out of her fanny pack. “I don’t work at the clinic anymore, but my cell number’s on the back.” JANICE TUELLER, LCSW. Gretta sees she also lives in Salt Lake, or worked there, at one time.

“Call me. I mean, if the spout runs dry. Or not. Maybe you can come with me and Karen sometime, hang out. We go hiking a lot. We don’t hike so much. Mostly we just hang out.”

“That’s my kind of hiking.” Gretta fumbles for her keys, wonders just how long it would take for a licensed clinical social worker to realize she is more baggage than she is worth. “And—damn, where’d I put them?—you have my number too. Don’t forget.” She pushes the exit door open with her back; a bell chimes.

“Hey Gretta,” Bincy (Janice!) says.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t forget to pay. For your food, I mean.”