Arc and the Sediment

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Either Gretta will arrive in Arizona and ask for Lance’s return or she will announce her need for a divorce.

Either Lance will be living at his aunt’s trailer house or she will find him living with someone else.

If he is at Aunt Angela’s, he will either agree or disagree with her request, whatever it be.

Either Lance will change his mind or he will not.

Either Gretta will change her mind or she will not.

Either she will arrive stinking of gin or she will refrain. Either she will be out of cigarettes or she will tremble and wonder what to do with her hands. Either her chin will quiver pathetically or she will stand up straight and look Lance in the eye.

Either she will, in fact, arrive, or she will not.

Either Angela will protest the motion or she will not. Either the old woman will be heeded or she will not.

Gretta wishes she had not batted her eyelashes at her math teacher to get through statistics. Had she respected the gravity of probability, she might now be able to calculate the possibilities for a favorable return. The thought of crossing into the reservation now, under existing variables, doesn’t seem promising so much as horrifying.

The first time Gretta went to the reservation, the probabilities, she feared, were not in her favor. Renee and Sylvia—Lance’s mother and sister, respectively—had already expressed disdain and had recommended that she and Lance cancel the trip “until a better time.” Lance was undeterred.
Gretta was to meet Lance’s Aunt Angela, a serious Navajo, by the looks of her bun. James and Lance’s youngest brother, Darrel, had shown her a picture: “The Navajo sense of humor is a little different. If she says anything, don’t take it personally.”

“We’ll go find Erikson,” Angela told Lance when they got there. Gretta thought she meant eventually. “You get that car ready. It’s just down that road a ways and turn left.” Angela looked old then, twelve years ago, like she looks old now, so Gretta was surprised.

“You sure, Mom? It’s almost ten,” Lance said.

“Mom?” Gretta asked. She wondered if he were adopted. Or if by aunt, Lance had meant father’s ex-wife or something. Would there be, then, two mothers whose asses would have to be kissed for the occasional nod of approval? The thought was overwhelming. She nudged Lance’s foot to get a look at him. Lance nudged her back. Firmly. She shut up.

She couldn’t get in the way, she knew that. Lance had to get his whistle fixed. He would be strange until it was fixed, and she’d about had enough of that. After the eagle-bone whistle broke in his back pocket, he looked behind him everywhere he went. The whistle had broken the day he left home to move with Gretta to Salt Lake (Lance’s mother, Renee, likes to remind her), and he’d been haunted by it ever since. At night he accounted for every creak of every door, every groan of the old pine floor of the bungalow that was their apartment building: “Who’s witched me? It’s Lawrence in Arizona—I owe him money. No, Jana in New Mexico—she doesn’t like mixed marriages.” Somehow, Lance’s aunt was a vehicle for clearing it all up.

Angela reheated mutton, green beans, and fry bread for Gretta, Lance, and Angela’s three granddaughters. She called for her husband, Jerry, and her son-in-law Randal. They said they weren’t hungry, but they sat at the table to eat anyway and they watched Gretta. The mutton was cold by the time she knew what to do with it—chew small bites and spit them into a napkin, pretending to wipe her mouth after each bite. When the girls caught on, they tried it too, until Randal began to giggle.

“You don’t like mutton?” Angela asked. Her consonants sounded like eggs falling off a counter, her vowels, the gasp that follows.
Randal and the girls watched and waited. Lance stopped eating and looked at Gretta, who hoped desperately the woman was referring to the half of the mutton steak on her plate and not the half in her napkin.

“I was saving it to go with my fry bread.”

“Good. Because you’re going to butcher me a sheep tomorrow.” Randal stifled another laugh, but Angela’s eyes would not leave Gretta’s. “We’ll go to Grandma Shiprock’s and you’ll get me one.”

Gretta looked at Lance to read his expression: *She doesn't mean it.*

“You know how to butcher a sheep?” Angela demanded.

Gretta shook her head no.

“You got to cut its throat so the blood drains out.”

Gretta dropped the napkin onto the floor. Her sweaty palm swept across her neck. The dog scurried over and ate the half-chewed pieces of meat. She heard laughter overlapping chasitement in Navajo. Eventually, her plate came into focus. The plate was of the same make her mother had years ago. It had a chip in it. Her knife was a good one. She closed her eyes and counted backward from thirty the way her caseworker had instructed.

She was afraid to face Lance, and when she did, she almost started crying. “I can’t do this,” she wanted to say. “I’m afraid, and I can’t. I’m sorry.” By the time she opened her eyes, Lance was looking at Angela too, to see if she was serious.

Gretta’s resentment started then and kept going. She was told in AA that if you quit drinking, the disease will progress nevertheless. Then, when you start again, you drink like you never stopped, and your body falls apart accordingly. That’s how she feels when she sees Aunt Angela.

“Mom,” Lance told her later in the hall, when she demanded an explanation, “that’s like aunt in the Indian way. Don’t worry—you’ll figure it all out.”

“I won’t kill a sheep,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to kill a sheep.”

“I will never kill a sheep.”
“You don’t have to kill anything.”
“You’ll have to kill the sheep. Or she—she will have to kill it herself.”
“No one’s going to kill anything.” He grinned. “Not this weekend.”
“Not so loud! I’m a hypocrite, I know.”
“You’re fine. She was joking!”
“I can never watch—”
“I’ll make sure you never have to watch.” He smiled at her, kissed her, and otherwise comforted her with small kindnesses.

After dinner, Gretta and Lance waited on the couch while Angela watched TV. Jerry left to work the midnight shift and everyone else went to bed. Angela sped through a few dozen channels. She stopped for a moment at Wonder Woman playing a settler in a series with American Indians. Gretta thanked god the actors playing the Indians were, at least, Indian, but the other shows—where was Cosby at least?—white, white, pasty white, white. When finally she turned her head to see the outrage, she saw not anger but boredom. That, and the faces of Lance and Angela seemed to have taken on a darker hue. Angela went through the mix several times, like a punishment. Gretta felt like she should apologize. She couldn’t manage to speak to the old woman—couldn’t change sitting positions, much less apologize for TV programming. Instead, she tried to imagine which of the eleven people who lived in the trailer house went to which of the two rooms to sleep—how many people could, in fact, fit in a little trailer house.

When Angela made motions of leaving, Lance and Gretta packed pillows and blankets in the backseat of their Civic for her arthritic body.

“Which way?” Lance asked as they pulled out of the gravelly trailer court.

“Turn that way, toward Window Rock.”

Lance punched in a tape of Cathedral Lakes and turned the volume high. Gretta waited for Angela to get mad. The lead had an eraser-soft voice, but still, it was a northern song—high-pitched and demanding. Angela said nothing, looked out the window, her lips tucking under
her nose and cheeks now and then. They drove about forty minutes that way.

“How far is it, about?” Lance asked.

“Just turn left when I say.”

And then they drove some more.

Gretta had slept through most of the drive across southern Utah and into Arizona and it was dark when she woke up in Fort Defiance, so she could only imagine what the landscape looked like. Tall red buttes. Canyons curvy as ears. Sagebrush and sand. *Rabbits fucking rabbits*—

“Don’t look out the window!” Angela snapped. “You might see something you don’t want to see.”

“There’s those woofs,” whispered Lance. Angela coughed.

Gretta tried to imagine Erikson, Lance’s family’s medicine man. Long glossy hair. Defined nose. Strong hands. Shoulders like Lance’s, with indents like mouse bowls on top. *No, he’d have to be real old,* she thought—*Windwalker,* like. Lance had driven over nine hours to get to the reservation and had only a weekend to find him. The words *medicine man* ground against her nerves but she understood her disgust had little to do with the medicine in the man. It was the book—*Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Crystals* by Shanli JudithAnne Hali, Medicine Woman. Gretta had mistaken it for a rock-hound’s guide and fast became dispossessed of tangentiality, relegated as she was to a lower rung of an alternate version of ye olde Christian chain of being.

Lance had said there would be a fire. *Or was it coals?* There would be a fire pit, and Erikson would see things. She tried to think of a movie or a book involving an American Indian ceremony and a fire. She saw instead Frenchish black people in colorful billowing clothes. Her chest contracted. She didn’t know anything about Navajos. She didn’t know anything about Frenchish black people. It was true—she lived in a loaf of Wonder Bread under the conspicuous eye of a temple-topping bugle boy.

Gretta wondered what Erikson would do with the broken whistle. Maybe he would mend the two pieces together. *With what? Glue?*
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Wintergreen Extra was what Lance had put on his whistle at a road stop on the way down, long enough to use it. And it was a good thing he’d had it, he said, because a coyote had crossed the highway going left to right. Or was it right to left? He had to make an offering or a request—she couldn’t recall which—with Indian tobacco wrapped hastily in a corn husk. Got to watch out for those woofs!

Angela coughed again as if she were reading Greta’s thoughts.

“That left?” Greta asked as they passed another left-turning dirt road. Angela didn’t say anything. Neither did Lance.

Greta stared at her lap. She stared at Lance’s lap for a while. She thought about his pubic hair, which was straight. She hadn’t known pubic hair came in straight until she met Lance. It is said that Navajo pubic hair stems from Mą’ii—the coyote that necessitated the tobacco. From the time she learned that, curly hair seemed hesitant, bent. Like the hair of sheep.

“Wooly, that’s right,” she says now, to an audience of none. Surely white women’s pubic hair has been described as such. She has been described as such.

Woolly also wooly: Of, relating to, or bearing wool. Lacking in clearness or sharpness of outline. Marked by mental confusion. Marked by boisterous roughness or lack of order or restraint. <Where the West is still woolly—Paul Schubert>.

Uncanny how the words call her to attention, decrypting her every inclination, her every contradiction, with more specificity than she herself could bring into shape. She likes to think of herself as a woman of little superstition, but she can’t deny that the very eyes of the dictionary, or at least her dictionary, seem trained on her. To what end? Why me? Why bother?

“Thank you for calling Moab’s own Golden Granary Pharmacy, where customers always come first. Para Español, marque uno. To order refills by phone, press two now. To leave a message…”
Wherefore? Whyever? West what? Which West? Had she a dictionary to pack around with her the night they first went looking for Erikson, she might have been warned: she would always be the straw that broke the whistle’s back. Still wooly. Even then she knew that on some playing field, she would always represent Christopher Columbus and the oxymoron of “discovering” a previously inhabited land. She would always be John Smith—not Smith of the Disney love-project *Pocahontas* or of Malik’s pretty-pretty work of clitoratography, *The New World*, but Smith the mercenary, the wanderlust braggart who settled kidnappers and murderers on Indian land, bringing with him an as-yet eternity of disease, hopelessness, and death. There, deep in Navajo country, she would forever be Kit Carson, putting bullets in people’s backs, forcing families from their sacred homeland, across three hundred miles of desolation, to something worse than the usual despair of a reservation—to a prison camp, really.

Had she carried a dictionary from the beginning, it might have warned her of a lot of things. *Colonist*, for example: a member or inhabitant of a colony. If the U.S. were a colony, wouldn’t the ancestors of Lance, James, Angela, Erikson—all of Native America—by definition, by force, be colonists, the colonized and the colonizers being subsets of a larger group? For that matter, could she have denied the U.S. was still, in fact, a colony on the larger yardstick of time?

*WordsforLater.doc*

**Colony**: A body of people living in a new territory but retaining ties with the parent state: the territory inhabited by such a body. A circumscribed mass of microorganisms usually growing in or on a solid medium. A group of individuals or things with common characteristics or interests situated in close association <an artist colony>. A group of persons institutionalized away from others <a leper colony>.

Had she a dictionary, she would have understood the truth about language—the truth about her life: that neither historical accounts nor her personal proclivity toward contradiction could ever be reconciled.
Claims of fairness and sensibility may once have sat beside her, cast in bronze by way of taxpayers’ money, but they were neither organic to the scene nor interactive with her personal picnic.

Of course, she wasn’t warned. (Or, she wasn’t sufficiently warned. *The Navajo sense of humor is a little different*....) She didn’t own a dictionary then. Rather, she had school loans and bill collectors and notices from the library. She didn’t have a medication either, much less a diagnosis, beyond Town Crazy Girl.

So there she had been, trying not to look out the windows of the Civic, feeling Angela’s gaze as if it were her own, Carson-unawares. A Long Walk, not by a long shot. A long ride—*fuck yeah*. Eventually, she went to sleep. She was jolted awake by deep ruts in a dirt road. Gretta forgot Angela’s warnings and looked out the window for some sign that they were close. They must have driven a long way because a different tape was playing, and Gretta couldn’t see houselights anywhere.

“How far?” Lance asked.

“Just down this road,” Angela said.

Plywood had been laid out over a rut too big to cross. There were trees, piñon and juniper she could smell through the windows—they were climbing higher.

A hogan and a rusting trailer house became visible around a bend in a flash of headlights. Gretta had seen a picture of a hogan before, but she never thought of it as a place people lived. Not anymore.

A couple of minutes passed. She waited for someone to appear at the wood-framed doorway of the angular dome of the hogan, or perhaps to emerge from the trailer. She whispered to Lance, “How will he know we’re here?”

“If he’s here, he’ll come out,” said Angela.

No lights were on. No cars were in sight. They waited for a long time. Gretta asked Lance if he should go to the door of the trailer and knock on it.

“I’m not going out there,” he said.