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Allen-Yazzie, Christine

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How to Make the World a Better Place

Gretta dreamed of trains, of trying to teach the upper torso of a man to swim. Not the fading dream-abstraction but the memory that must have prompted it washes over her. When she was ten or eleven or so—she can’t remember exactly how old—her dad took her to the train yards. She’d gone to work with him more than a few times, but this time, they stood in front of an empty rail as he passed her a checklist. He pointed to an oncoming train and said, “Now, they’re going to go by really fast. You look at the numbers in the lower corner of the car and just see that they’re all there. You think you can handle that?”

What numbers? Which corner? She wondered what would happen if she missed a number—would a train wreck? Would her father be fired? Surely this must be a game, a way to keep her busy. She didn’t dare ask. The engine approached; she looked for a driver and saw none. She saw that the numbers on the list started with letters. She started to ask whether letters were in this case numbers, but the question didn’t make sense to her as the sound of the train fast grew overwhelming. She saw the first car and understood, felt stupid: a serial ID appeared, just as on the checklist. She was always getting confused like that—over semantics. But she didn’t know the word semantics then, so to her the confusion was not a glitch in communication but intensely self-reflective, a daily horror.

She kept up with the list at first, matching a series of letters and numbers to each car, but the train began to move faster and faster and she missed a couple of cars.

“Right down that-away I once saw a man cut in half,” he yelled
over the deep rumbling and petulant screeching of the train. She tried to focus on the list and the cars but felt the severance in her gut. She missed about every fourth or fifth number. “That’s right—poor homeless bastard. His legs too. Cut in thirds, I should say. Or fourths, if you’re counting legs. Nice black fella. Used to have coffee together every once in a while, him and me. Then he’d just disappear for god knows how long.”

She tried hard to make out the increasingly blurry IDs and popped her jaw open to plug her ears. She saw blood, bowels, a screaming black man.

“Wouldn’t you know, he lived all the way to the hospital. The Dee had closed by then, and the new hospital was a ways away. Bagged up his glower darts myself in a trash bag and chased after the ambulance with them.”

“What?” she shouted over the train.

“Said I bagged up his lower parts myself and took them to the hospital on the off-chance—course, they weren’t able to use them.”

She was missing so many IDs. Would cars be diverted to the wrong place? Would her dad be shamed? Whenever she met older men at the railroad, they held her shoulder or patted her head. “Your grandfather was a good man—the best kind, a real legend,” they’d say. Her own father would wince, or she imagined he did.

“Yeah, lots of homeless down here. Where else they going to go?” He looked around the yard, as if for the first time. “Hey, I’ll be up in the tower. Come on up when you’re done.”

With the last car in sight some dozen cars out, she screamed for him. “Wait!” She checked off the last of the IDs—most of them, anyway—and turned to him, the yard suddenly silent as a dip under water. “How come he didn’t bleed to death right off?”

“Train’s so heavy and so hot on the rails, it sealed him shut.”

“Could he talk?”

“They say he was telling jokes all the way in.” Her dad squinted at her—in anger, in curiosity? “An accountant is having a hard time sleeping and goes to see his doctor. ‘Doc, I’m having a hell of a time
trying to sleep at night.’ Doc says, ‘Have you tried counting sheep?’ Guy answers, ‘That’s the problem. I make a mistake and then spend three hours trying to find it.’” He waited for Gretta’s response, his face hard and creased. “Yeah, I guess it ain’t that funny, but there’s not a one of us who could do better under the circumstances.”

*Sheep. Why does it always come round to sheep?* They’re surprisingly stinky, sheep. And never quite as fully white—or black—as you’d expect.

Gretta boots up the laptop, cranks the heat on high, turns her cell-phone ringer back on, and checks her voice-mail. “Bill here. Let me ask you something, Gretta. What do women want to read? What do *normal* women want to read? You think about that question. Think about it and give me a call back, ASAP. And I don’t want to hear anything about Gaza. I don’t want to hear anything about levees or surveillance or places you can sneak into and shower for free—our readers have showers. Think women. Think your neighbors. Better yet, think *my* neighbors. Jeeze Louise, Gretta—think *Utah*. Think *Citizen*. I want June ready for layout by next week. Let’s get ahead of the game.” She replays the message to listen to the time stamp: 9:43 p.m. He called so late—for his habits, at least. “When I go home, I leave my work at work,” he likes to say. Gretta tucks her worry away and considers his question. What *do* normal women want to read?

She finds a Zoloft in the console but nothing with which to drink it down.

*Ideas.doc*

1. How to look younger.
2. How to eat less.
3. How to tweeze.
4. How to make 101 varieties of holiday cookies.
5. How to raise children.
6. How to buy more for less.
7. How to be loved by a man.
8. How to be good in bed.
It occurs to Greta she is neither the feminist she thought she was nor the revolutionary she had aspired to be. She offends even herself. Maybe a real publication would tell her exactly what women want to read (determined by a panel of, say, six), then she could just write about it, true or not. But working for a Mickey Mouse press like *Utah Citizen*…she doesn’t dare ask.

9. How to make the world a better place. By gardening.

It occurs to her also that she is out of gin and the sun is just now rising. She wonders where and when she got her pajamas—penguin-print bottoms, a striped top. She has no clean clothes, as she accidentally left the suitcase with her clothes in it by the front door when she left home. She considers her surroundings. The sun in the east lights up the tips of the buttes to the west, strata by strata, transforming a gray wall of stone into a luminous sandwich of red-white-and-gold towers. The sky is clear blue and the stillness of the morning is merciless. She takes a photo of the buttes with her phone because she’s out of film for the old Leica she inherited from her grandfather. The digital photo is blurry, so she stills her hand against the dash and takes another. Still, the image doesn’t approximate the beauty of the light on the rock.

In front of the truck is a sign: Moab 5.

Five miles to Moab—why hadn’t she just gone into town? And why couldn’t she remember how she got here? If Lance were here, he’d rub her back as he had nearly every night for years, since an unfortunate laminectomy. He’d even sing her a song with the hand drum, if she asked nicely. *That, or he’d leave me again.* She wishes now she’d rubbed his flat feet after every back rub rather than just when he pouted.

She plugs her cell phone into the lighter and calls home. She has postponed the call as long as possible. She’s been friends with Jackie for years, but her friend doesn’t particularly like children, which explains, in part, why she doesn’t have any. *So why leave them with her?* Jackie answers, groggy and irritated.

“*Hello, I said. Hello?*”
“I’m sorry, I didn’t think you’d pick up this early. I was going to leave a message.”
“Yeah?”
“It’s taking longer than I thought. I’m sorry—”
“I told you it would. If he wanted to leave, he would’ve by now.”
“I should be home late today.”
“How’d it go?”
“Oh…I haven’t seen him yet.”
“You’re kidding.”
“You know, setbacks.” Gretta tries not to cry.
“Do you want to talk about it?”
“No.”
“You’re going to need time to talk with Lance, you know. He’s not just going to hop in the truck as soon as you get there…. You know, just because you want him to come home doesn’t mean he’s coming home…. Gretta, Gretta. Don’t get your hopes up too high, okay? You’re going to be fine with or without him. You’ve got me, right? You’ve got your kids. I mean, you’ve got yourself. You never know what you’re capable of. I just ordered this great set of tapes—”
“I’m sorry.”
Jackie heaves a throaty sigh. “Just as long as you’re home by Friday. I have that date with Josh. Tu-tu and Braden are fine. We’re having fun. We saw a movie last night.”
“What’d you see?”
“Some damned thing. Kids’ show. Talking dog, that kind of thing. Braden ate a whole bucket of popcorn by himself. He’s still shitting kernels.”
“I’ll pay you back. I’m sorry.”
“Quit apologizing. Did you or did you not arrange my mother’s funeral? Just be home by Friday. Promise me.”
“Promise.”
“Keep in touch. Anytime after eight in the morning or before midnight. And Gretta, try not to go off on him. It doesn’t help.” She waits. Gretta has little to say, nothing to say it with. “You can always turn
back. I mean, what do you stand to gain, really? You don’t know where he’s been. He could have herpes or hepatitis or something by now.”

Jackie is right—Gretta would need to insist on tests. She would need to have the conversation she’d been skirting for so long. The conversation would have to begin with an accusation of some sort.

“Gretta?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I’m sorry. That was harsh.”

Could you put the kids on the phone, please? That’s what she wants to say, what she knows any decent mother would say. But she’s having trouble focusing, Herpes, AIDS, genital warts, the clap….

“Hello? I think your phone is cutting out. Gretta?”

An accountant is having a hard time sleeping at night and goes to see his doctor….

“Uh-oh, I’m beeping. Sorry, Jackie, I think I’m running out of battery—” She snaps the phone shut and breathes deep, two, three.

She stuffs her jacket against the window, a reluctant pillow for a throbbing headache—exhale two, three, four. Eventually, she sleeps some more.