Arc and the Sediment

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There is a tapping from the crane; Gretta wills it to go away. There is still the tapping. Or it isn’t the crane, but the ground that taps. Gretta stirs under the bright light of day. She looks around. She is in the pickup; there is no crane. There are no tractors, no dirt roads, no construction sites. There is just the truck. There is just the tapping—the tapping at the window: a woman wearing a hat. Gretta rolls down the window a good eight inches before it sticks.

“Are you all right?”
“Oh, yeah. I guess I got sleepy.”
“Just so you’re all right.”
“I am, thank you.”
“I mean, your truck is running.”
“Yes, thank you.”
“And it looked like you were sleeping.”
“Yes. My starter is broken.”
The woman stares, appearing speechless.
“I said, my starter is broken.”
The woman backs away, raises a hand as if to wave, smiles awkwardly. “Just so you’re all right now.”
Gretta raises her hand too, smiles in return, and rolls her window back up again.

The sun is high. A row of bikers pass on a bike trail to the right. With a fraction of their ambition—

Lance: “Why don’t you take walks at night? Go jogging? If you exercised, you wouldn’t need antidepressants.” Her mother: “Get off the
goddamned couch once in a while. Catch up on your laundry—you’ll feel like a new woman.” Her brother: “When you decide you’re ready to stop sulking and bullshitting about seizures and sore joints, I’ll buy you a mountain bike.” Lance’s sister: “I’m not exercising. I’m athletic. Don’t you see the difference?”

Maybe she does, maybe she doesn’t.

In only hours—six? five?—she will be standing in front of Lance, presenting some argument or another. She has imagined the moment many times. She sees the approach, the entrance, the look on his face, which varies with her mood. She opens her mouth, and…nothing.

“I’ve decided to quit drinking and I need your help,” she could say. Or, “James suggested I come find you.” Yeah right. That might elicit questions. Also, Lance might have heard from James more recently than she has. He might have gone on leave, made a call; they might have had a conversation. About her. Lance might have heard about their night on the town before James left. She’s grateful now she didn’t have sex that night. Not that she hadn’t wanted to…. She stretches her fingers. Just what kind of man falls for his brother’s wife? Just what kind of wife entertains falling for him in return? Her brain throbs larger with every thought, every question; she feels it will balloon out her ears at any moment, but she can’t seem to stop. Why hadn’t she told her husband about his brother’s overtures, her own feelings? Or at the very least, why hadn’t she simply cut off all communication with James, outside of powwows and other family functions? She’d made her choice when she married. And she had kids—they couldn’t have interchangeable dad-uncles.

Until recently, she felt mostly okay with how she had handled the situation. She and James had been writing more or less weekly for years, even when they lived on the same continent and could have phoned. (“And how would that look on a phone bill?” she’d asked.) They’d never written about sex, and she’d never returned his affections—not explicitly, not since she and Lance were married anyway—so why should she feel guilty? Yet she’d got herself a P.O. box and paid for it every month in cash—not a sign of innocence, to her conscience.
Maybe James has finally told Lance about everything. Or more. Lance couldn’t have found the letters, as she shredded all but the most recent. But if James told him about them, it might explain why she hasn’t received a letter postmarked Reagan in over a month. Maybe it’s why Lance stopped calling as well, even to speak to the kids.

At first she told the kids he’d gone to New Orleans to help rebuild power lines, phone lines, homes. Then Tulip started asking about their own leaking pipes, their plugged drains, the dishwasher that wouldn’t work. Gretta had to come up with something else.

*Your father is stranded in a hogan…. What? Yes, he’s fine. Healthy as a horse…. Drive to a phone? I’m sorry, didn’t I mention? Your father is on a spiritual quest in a hogan, way back in the backwoods—no driving allowed. Also, no phones…. What’s that?… Of course he misses you…. How do I know? Through prayer. He spoke to me through prayer…. To you directly? I don’t know, Tu-tu—pray and find out.*

Eventually, she told them something closer to the truth. That he just left. *Why what?… I don’t know. Why anything?* Somehow, Tulip seemed more contented with this.

Gretta puts the pickup in drive to check her gas gauge—she is still a hair above empty. *Time enough*, she thinks. The laptop’s battery has run out. She unplugs the cell phone from the lighter and hooks up the inverter.

*DearJames.doc*

p.s. I didn’t mean all the things I said before you left. If you never see me again, please let’s keep it between you and me. I won’t mention the letters if you don’t. And if you do see me again…well, what’s the use in telling?