Arc and the Sediment

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“WHAT THE HAY is this, Gretta? Riots and bra burnings?”

Gretta pulls into the Golden Granary parking lot. “It’s 134 words. More are coming.” She hits the spacebar on the laptop to keep it from hibernating.

“Riots and bra burnings. Who’s having riots and bra burnings? And the Dilbert financial page? That’s not a source. That’s a mockery, is what it is. Did you get my message?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Have you thought about what I said—really thought about it?”

“Yes, I have. Look, I didn’t want to say anything, but…it’s Lance. They think he’s dead.” She produces a gurgle. She wonders how far she can carry it before Bill catches on or at least feels guilty for pressing on her duress. “I’m the only person who can—I’m sorry—identify the mole…on his left cheek.”

“His what?”

“His other cheek.”

“Ah, geez. I’m sorry. You should have told me.”

“I haven’t been myself. Just give me a little more time, please.” She clears her throat, sighs audibly.

“Freaking-A, Gretta.”

“Yes, Bill. I know.”

“And let’s not forget foods and gardening. I mean, if you think you can. I mean, he’s been gone for a while, right?”

“Right. Foods. And gardening. It was on the tip of my tongue.
You have no idea.” She sniffs again. She performs a strengthening of
spirit: plié, chassé. “I’m your girl.”

Prick, she thinks. Her husband is dead, and he wants foods and gar-
dening. But he isn’t dead. “Entirely beside the point,” she tells herself.

“What?”

“I said, ‘Good-bye, Bill. Thanks for believing in me.’ I mean it. You
don’t know what your patience means to me. To me and my [sob] children.”

Bill probably doesn’t believe anything she says after the excuses she
has given him: a mastectomy gone awry; a baby cougar rescued from
the hands of her friend, a Tibetan poacher; a near-fatal collision with
Bruce Willis in Park City; a burglar breaking into her bedroom to pray
at her bedside. Basically, she likes to fuck with Bill and, at the very
least, witness him exercising a full spectrum of pseudo swear words.
She will, someday, punish him for her unrewarding career, a promo-
tion for a non-Mormon woman being naturally out of the question in
the land of Zion. The other land of Zion.

She hits the spacebar again. Go ahead, go on in now. She sees herself
getting out of the car, walking into the store. But she doesn’t get out
of the car. She doesn’t walk into the store.

Maybe she doesn’t need the Dilantin. Maybe she’s not having sei-
zures—maybe she’s just crazy or self-indulgent, as her brother sus-
ppects. So why pay the money? Why should she feel nervous and shaky
and nauseous all the time? Why should she have sore gums? She could
be suffering side effects for nothing. The episodes weren’t necessarily
eliminated when she took the medicine. Maybe if you’d remember to
take your meds every day.…

Perhaps it is the stress of her job—of hating her job—and not a
neurological disorder that brings on hallucinations of the woman.
Maybe she doesn’t need a pill so much as an employment agency.

Writing reviews and other articles about spa specials, scrapbook-
ing, ski resorts, and other such nonsense, she feels deeply misplaced.
One day she will break out of Utah Citizen, never to hear the words
proactive, impactful, venue, team member, après-this, après-that, or even


*ambiance* again. She’ll tell the finest chefs of Park City, Salt Lake, and, most deliciously, Deer Valley to go fuck themselves, just for the sake of balancing out the kiss-ass foodies looking for mutual admiration and free food. She’s not sure what she’d rather be writing, but she feels certain that over the course of this job, she has given something up—something rare, something animate, something so nearly tangible, she is inclined to hold her breath until she grasps it again in all of its surely breathtaking familiarity.

*Foods and gardening.*

She doesn’t cook. She doesn’t garden (though the concept is novel, an aspiration). She would demand sports, on threat of sexual harassment, just to piss off the men, but she has witnessed, first-hand, college football players peeing on walls and bashing their heads into beer kegs; she refuses to anguish over the Utah Jazz any longer; she was ousted collectively from her fourth-grade soccer team, her sixth-grade softball team, and even from water aerobics for pregnant women; and she doesn’t have the money to ski, not anymore.

Ironically, she is uniquely positioned among the all-white staff at *Utah* to write a column on cultural diversity (if there were such a column; there is not). She is an expert, after all, at standing in the margins of ethnicity and peering in.

She is also an expert at anticipating how much gin a 138-pound girl can drink before she fails to do her work, before daycare workers raise an eyebrow, before she slips down the stairs, before she gets her stomach pumped. But everything else—all that *matters*, as Bill would say—eludes her: fashion, landscaping, interior design, eating more for less, picking out a car, looking for a job, health and hygiene, beauty, family in the symbolic sense, travel.

*Fuck Bill.* She opens her laptop. A cop pulls up beside her. He parks, walks toward the entrance of the store. If she didn’t reek of gin, if she had a valid license, she’d ask him where she could find a KOA—that is, a sink and a shower. *Then he’d know you weren’t one of “our readers”!* She cracks open a pack of Tic-Tacs, boots up. If Lance were here, he’d know where to find a shower. He’s never been one of *our readers* either.
Yes, indeed. She does love her husband in some respects, without hesitation.

_Summer Gardening_.

Spring is over and

She feels guilty leaving the truck running so long, particularly near the car parked in front of her, a Prius plastered with bumper stickers: _You’re Getting Warmer; I’m a Tree Hugger, I Pine for Yew; I ♥ My Mother; and Plant a Tree, Remove a Bush_. Speaking of oil, the price of gas is killing her, too—eating up the best part of the $190 she allotted herself for the trip. But she’s not about to get stranded in a parking lot alone with a faulty starter, not now. Of course, she could just shut down, walk into the store, pay for her prescription, save gas. She isn’t making progress with her article anyway.

In question is not so much what normal women want to read, but what normal women want to write. _So what would you write, if a woodchuck could chuck wood?_ She couldn’t say. Not without help. She withdraws a novel from the glovebox, opens it to the first dogear. The book is slim, precise, and soft from wear—just right. She braces it open against the steering wheel with the back of the screen.

_So, I’m twenty-nine and a half._

It’s on a cross of wheat and wheatgrass that I am tossed out of bounds.

The image lasts all the way across.

I’m twenty-nine and a half. There are four seasons in the southeastern part of Idaho, but I am suspended in one—hot, earthy—I’m on the berth of stupor, with nothing coming, nothing going.

I’m not allowed to photograph the sweat lodge, so I will not. I will tell you, though, it is hot, I am
lost, it is wet, I am forbidden, and it is dark, I am
told.

I can tell you about his body. I slept in it, I came
in it or on it, whichever, it is a part of me. There is
a type of photographic paper I like to use—satin, non-
archival. The skin on his chest feels just like that.
There is a distinct brittleness inside the chest:
his ribcage is a sturdy old bridge, but it makes one
wonder. It is hot, it is wet, it is the color of a
brick house in the light of fiery pallets and glowing
coals.

So, I’m twenty-nine and a half, there are four direc-
tions here—east, south, west, north—I walk through
them all, around the coals, but I cannot say—

They told me to pray to Jesus. Jesus? I said. What
of him. They say he walked on water. I say I sunk
into earth. The coals were hot, forgive me, the steam
scalded my skin, forgive me. Forgive me for trespass-
ing, deliver me, in the name of the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Ghost, and to the Republic, for which it
stands, three Indian nations, under God, indivisible,
I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ—

I said, Who? I said, Pray to who?

So I sank beneath the willows, lifted the carpet
corners, breathed in the half-inch of cool air rising
from the cold dirt beneath the sweat lodge.

They told me to pray to God, then. The Creator. That
higher power, as they call it in AA.

I said, Dear god, what would I say?

I search for something to say in order to say it
right. Everyone else seems to know how to say it
right.

Nightcrawlers emerge.

I’m not ready. I’m sorry. Go down—down beneath the
skin of the sky. Down beneath the skin of the lodge,
beneath the skin of the carpets. That’s where you’ll
find me—hot, earthy. I’m on the berth of stupor—