Arc and the Sediment

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Gretta is lost. She is surrounded not by redrock but by pine trees. She woke in her truck beneath a new-smelling, Christmas-colored quilt as the sun was beginning to set, then drove nearly twenty minutes down a shady canyon before her cell phone caught a signal. It's Tuesday. Not Sunday—Tuesday. Night. Parked on a two-lane road, wearing a godawful pink sweatsuit of unknown origination, she turns the light on in the pickup and flattens out wadded-up receipts against the seat.

Apparently, she made it as far south as a Conoco in Monticello on Sunday night before she turned around. By Monday afternoon, she had backtracked north through Moab (she bought Desert Solitaire from Arches Book Company) and got as far north as a Shell station in Helper. Where had she slept Sunday night?

She counts her Zoloft. It doesn’t help; she obviously hasn’t been taking them. She takes one now, swigging it down with a warm, watered-down Sprite.

She recalls roofs lined with rows of old tires. She recalls a pawn shop, doors locked. She has a receipt for a blanket, a travel case, two shirts, a sweatsuit, jeans, underwear, and socks from Kmart in Price; she can’t read the date and time for the fry sauce smeared on it. She looks in the back of the pickup—two Kmart sacks and a suitcase. A receipt from Monday night for FunYuns, Oreos, cigarettes, and baby wipes from Shady Acres in Green River and another right after that from Arctic Circle. No toothbrush?

That’s it—that’s all the paper proof she has. Between Monticello
and Helper, there is time that cannot be accounted for, so she might have traveled farther. She checks her cell phone—No Messages—and scrolls through caller ID for calls made and missed: Grandma Flint, Home, Unavailable. She checks her photos: Tulip and Braden eating cereal, the lizard, the buttes outside of Moab, a fork, a denim-covered leg. Whose leg, she can’t tell. Late this morning she made it to a liquor store in Price—and this part she remembers clearly, suddenly—before deciding it was imperative that she find out what they mined for on Hiawatha Mine Road in the Manti-LaSal National Forest.

Rumor had it that Gretta’s great-great-grandfather laid track in Hiawatha briefly until he picked up her great-great-grandmother in Helper, who’d been roughed up for hustling a guy from Butch Cassidy’s gang, and escorted her north to Ogden. That was her family’s only claim to fame. She had to have a sense of the place to decide whether the stories were closer to fact or to fiction, didn’t she? Or, that’s what she likely told herself.

She never found out what it was the miners mined—it was dark before she hit the forest. She did, however, emerge from Price with a wealth of Gilbey’s and a key ring reading Sagittarius Makes My Heart Grow Fonder. Neither she, nor Lance, nor anyone else she knows, save Braden, is a Sagittarius. Why would she buy a toddler a key ring he could choke on? But the tiny pewter horse-guy is cool—explanation enough for now.

The clerk at the liquor store in Price asked to see her ID, thinking she was too young to buy alcohol. “Who would’ve thought,” he said, double-checking her birth date. “Well, that’s not that old…. Bitsilly—that’s Navajo, ain’t it?” She nodded. “My aunt’s foster kid was a Tso, but his mom was a Bitsilly. You sure don’t look like a Indian.”

“I was adopted.”

“Huh. I’m from Hiawatha just outside of here, and that’s almost like being Indian, ain’t it?” He laughed, showed her a map laid out beneath the Plexiglas of the cashier stand. “See here? Hiawatha. Born and raised.” She acted impressed. “You wouldn’t want to go for a steak dinner, would you? I get off here in about an hour.”
Now Gretta wishes she had asked him if she could take the map—wishes she had taken him up on the steak, for that matter.

She gets out for a cigarette. The night air smells like turnips. The door wheezes shut. Gretta feels as if she is in a vacuum. The stars enhance this feeling, forming at once the arc and the sediment where the vacuum bag puffs out. Just before the burst.

*I'm not afraid.*

Lance has asked her not to go out without him at night. Especially not alone, not in the desert. “You never know what might be out there,” he has said.

“What?” she yells. She has always wanted to yell like that—just out with it. But her voice sounds absurd. She hears it over and over in her head, as though she is saying it again and again for the first time, and each time it sounds like she has eaten a marshmallow and shouted *what.*

*I said, you're not afraid.*

Back in the car, doors locked and windows shut, she makes herself a gin-and-tonic and breaks open the package of Oreos, which reminds her how badly she could use a toothbrush. “Forgot your toothbrush again?” Lance, an avid toothbrusher, would say. “Figures.”

Gretta wonders how she and Lance endured one another’s differences long enough to get married. She liked sweet, he liked salty. She liked blues and grunge, he liked hip-hop and country. She was a slob, he was a clean-freak. She couldn’t stand southeastern Idaho, where they both lived with their respective parents, he loved it. He had always lived there, she had since graduating college. Some things they had in common: they disliked porn, they slept in every chance they got, their favorite month was May, they loved fresh peaches, and they were chronically late to everything.

He had been late picking her up on their first date—a symbol, at that early stage, and not a tendency, so she left. She passed him on the way out of her subdivision and he chased her down until she agreed to get in his car.

The air was muggy for Idaho; she sweated in her new dress and
thought of ways to tell him off. Still she hoped he would take her someplace nice. Instead he drove several miles into the darkness, into a field in the middle of fields, and stopped the car. He turned off the headlights and rolled down his window.

“Yell something,” he said, clearly not afraid of the night at that time. “Anything.”

“I’m not going to yell.”

“No one’s out here. No one will hear you.”

“You’ll hear me.”

What happens, she thought, in a field at night, where there aren’t any roads? There were no streetlights—just a badly paved road and field mice. She stared out the car window, considering possibilities. There were a lot of weeds.

“I’m not getting out of the car.”

Lance got out of the car. A toenail moon and a thickening of stars made his long hair blue. There was something she wanted out of him in that light, and it bit into her lungs. She got out.

“Yell anything—‘Hey you,’ or bark like a dog.”

“You bark like a dog.”

He sounded nothing like a dog. Not even a hound dog. More like a camel, she thought. She’d never heard a camel, as far as she could remember, but she watched one once at the zoo. For over a half-hour, the thing ate, stood, and pissed—all the usual camel things, she assumed—before it finally looked at her. It looked directly at her and held her stare until it went back to eating, its underside muddy and matted.

“Come on,” he said.

“You can’t make me.”

“Yeah? I have the keys. Now relax. Look around. It’s so big. You’ll never get this kind of big if you move to a city, you know?” She thought he was nodding toward sex, a consolation prize for the seafood linguini she obviously would not be treated to that night, so she squeezed his hand and tried to kiss him. He didn’t react.

“See how you shouldn’t move to Salt Lake?” he said. “You can stay in Idaho. It’s safe here.”
“I hate Idaho. I’ve hated it since my dad dragged us here.” She was a transplant, moved from Salt Lake City to Pocatello, Idaho. But her internship with Idaho State was up, and Idaho seemed to have little use for writers. She couldn’t bear to graduate from college only to go right back to waitressing. She was the worst waitress she had ever known—the spill-coffee-in-your-lap kind of waitress, the I’m-sorry-I-forgot-you-were-here kind of waitress. And she had a job in Salt Lake writing newsletters, got for her by a friend of her parents. She had, it appeared, a destination. She had, as her mother would say, a real jay-oh-bee.

“Can’t you feel it?” Lance asked. “Can’t you just yell something like you want to be alive?”

Gretta can’t remember whether she wanted to be alive then. It’s doubtful, given the odds. She gets out of the truck again. She burns through her fifth consecutive cigarette and feels tired and hungry and weakened by destination. The sky, so porous with glistening stars, so sweetly devoid of human interruption, fills her with the sort of love that makes her chest contract and her nails grow fast—so fast, they tug fiercely at her fingers and threaten to make her cry.

There’s no telling what happens in the sky. If you’re dropped off a spaceship, do you float until you starve or till you freeze? Once, watching a James Bond movie, she saw a man locked in a vault. The air was sucked out instantaneously; the man’s head exploded to watermelon size due to sudden lack of pressure.

“I’m not afraid,” she says, studying the dark for difference. “I’m not afraid.”