Arc and the Sediment

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“Yeah, hi. I’m just…I’m a little lost, and I was wondering—”

“Who is it, hon?” calls a woman from inside.

“A woman. Says she’s lost,” the man at the door shouts. He rubs a trim brown beard and spare moustache. He looks her up and down as a security guard might. She sees herself as she imagines he sees her: pink and puffy, corpse-pale, greasy, frazzled—the Easter bunny on meth.

“Well, invite her in. It’s colder than a witch’s tit out there tonight.”

He hesitates only a second more. Her tennis shoes, she notices, are relatively clean but coming apart at the seams and her laces are different sizes. The man doesn’t seem to notice the shoes.

She isn’t sure what she should do with her hands. She sticks one out. “I’m Gretta. I won’t sell you Tupperware or anything. I’m just lost.”

He shakes her hand with some trepidation. “Come on in. You want to use our phone?”

She could tell him she has a phone, but it’s cold out, and the house smells like Thanksgiving. She nods.

“We just finished with the blessing, but you’re welcome to come in and join us for dinner. You hungry?” A refusal is out of the question; Gretta is painfully hungry.

“You want to wash up?” He says warsh instead of wash, just like her father. He waits outside the bathroom door while she warshes her hands and finger-brushes her teeth. His wife joins him; he chastises her for using obscene language in front of the children.
Gretta is ushered into a dining room where eight children—two boys and six girls—are seated. All are introduced. She half covers her mouth as she thanks them, knowing that if she doesn’t smell like an ashtray, she smells like a bottle of gin. Yet by the time carrots and roast beef make the rounds, she has told them she once worked as a cafeteria cook for the Red Cross (“Not a cook, really—mostly I just washed potatoes, beans, rice…”), that she trained a parrot to sing “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road,” that her grandmother in Arizona is sick and she is going to visit and care for her, an immigrant from the Netherlands, that—

“Bitsilly. That doesn’t sound—”
“I’m married. It’s a Navajo name.”
“Delightful!” Nancy, the mother, says, clapping her hands together. The boys giggle. She introduces everyone at the table. “We were just talking about the Lamanites. Weren’t we, Joseph? We once had one in our own ward. John something or other.”

“Be gay,” says the younger of the boys; they snicker. Their mother delivers a warning look to the oldest. They shut up.

“John Begaye. A proud man. A proud people,” she says to her oldest son. “Go on, honey. Share with us their trials and tribulations with the Nephites.”

The boy, Joseph, looks imploringly at his mother.

“Go on.”

“There…there was this guy, Lehi, this Jewish guy—”

“Merchant. Jewish merchant.”

“And he had these sons Laman and Nephi. And their descendents, the Lamanites and these Neo—”

“Nephites, honey.”

“And then there was these wars, and the Lamanites and the Neophites—Nephites—fought a lot because the Lamanites just wouldn’t listen, and then the Nephites died ’cause they were for Jesus.”

“Why don’t you just quote the scripture, Son,” his father says.

“You’ll need it next week,” adds Nancy. “Samuel, please chew with
your mouth closed. Darla, let’s keep our hands to ourselves. Go on, Joey. Second Nephi, chapter five, verse twenty-one.”

She whispers to Gretta, “Church pageant. He plays three different roles, if you can imagine that. Smart young man, this one.”

“Mom….”

“Go on, Joseph. Listen to your mother.”

“And he had caused the cursing to come upon the Lamanites. Yay, even a sore cursing, because of their indickity—”

“Iniquity,” his father says.

“Wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightful, that they might not be exciting—”

“Enticing.”

“…enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.”

“And?”

“And thus saith the Lord God: I will make them—”

“Cause that they shall.”

“…cause that they shall be loathsome—”

“Loathsome.”

“…unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquity.”

“Iniquity,” Stuart, the father, says. “Very good. Practice makes perfect. Next time you’ll do better, and the next time after that.” He smiles encouragingly at Gretta as if it is she whom he has addressed. “You should see him pitch. They called him the Little League pride of Emery County at one time. When he started, he was on the bench. Go ahead, Joseph. Tell her the rest.”

Joseph looks terrified. He looks as if he might be sick but takes an enormous bite of food.

“Can I play the piano for her?” begs one of the girls, who looks to be Tulip’s age. Gretta tries to remember her name. Her mother mouths, “Later.”

Sarah—the middle-sized girl, by the height of her—wrinkles a tiny bulbous nose and glares at Gretta. “Cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save that they shall repent of their iniquity.
And cursed shall be the seed of him that *mixeth* with their seed…”

“Sarah!” Nancy says.

“…for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was *done.*”

“Sarah!” her mother shouts; she slaps the Formica table. She laughs nervously and smiles at Gretta. Stuart briefly appears exasperated but goes back to cutting his roast beef.

The girl lowers her voice, stares instead at her mother. “And because of their cursing, which was upon them, they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and *did* seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.”

“That is enough! Do you want to go to your room?” Stuart says.

“I’m sorry, I should go. I need to find a hotel as soon as I can—”

“Please…it’s so late. You can stay in Darla’s room—can’t she, sweetie?” Nancy gives her oldest daughter the same warning look she gave Sarah, but the look is unnecessary. The girl nods excitedly and smiles at Gretta. Sarah elbows her, but Darla scowls back at her sister.

Stuart clears his voice, glowers at his wife.

She glances threateningly at him then says, “For inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these, ye do it unto me.”

Stuart takes a deep breath, assesses Gretta as if with pushups. It is possible his belly too is blue, but unlike the lizard, he would not make a good souvenir for Tulip, and Gretta hopes never to bother his tail. He composes himself, looks regretful, even. “Of course you’re welcome to stay.”

After dinner, Stuart goes downstairs to watch TV. The kids fight over who should clean up; a couple of them do their homework in the kitchen. Their mother—“Originally Nancy Albertson, like Albertsons the supermarket”—shows Gretta a shelf of scrapbooks she and her husband and children have put together, as well as her craft wall. “My Aunt Gladys is good at the butterflies, but my mother makes the doll babies. Aren’t they precious? Sarah helped with this one.” Gretta nods. Nancy fingers the objects hung on the wood-paneled wall—pink-blue-and-white crocheted butterflies and doll heads mounted on multicolored crocheted circles, not entirely unlike the elk head hung over the lava-rock fireplace.
at the end of the room or the mountain-lion head over the toilet in the bathroom. “They’re like doilies, but with the doll heads in the middle. I’d like to make them, but…$3.99 a head at the craft store? Outrageous. They gouge us like crazy here.”

“Where do you go to buy stuff?”

“Oh, Price. Helper. Sometimes we just drive over to Provo or Salt Lake during the holidays. I’m from Salt Lake, too. Moved here in ’83 after we got married. My dad teaches economics at Salt Lake Community College and my mom teaches urban planning at the University of Utah. My brothers are all into computers. I myself graduated from Granite High with straight As. Lot of good that’ll do me out here.” Nancy smiles—not sadly, not cynically, not happily either.

Unsure of how to respond, Gretta touches the doll-head doilies, too. “They’re so…wow! The work your mother must have put into them.”

“It doesn’t take much.” Nancy looks at her funny. “You need some more cough medicine?”

“What?”

“That’s NyQuil, by the smell of it.” Gretta senses that Nancy is feeling her out, soliciting a confession, but she plays along. “Oh—” Gretta coughs. “Please, yes. This cold. It just hangs on and on. I hope it doesn’t spread—I think I’m over the worst of it. I don’t have a fever or anything. But…I really appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

After Nancy returns from the kitchen with a tiny plastic cup, apologizing for having only generic cough medicine, she asks Gretta to have a seat. Gretta accepts the cup, pauses before drinking to see if the woman will call her bluff.

“We all had flu shots this year. Useless—we all got sick over the holidays.” She sits across from Gretta on the edge of an afghan-covered recliner. “Are you a church girl?”

“I’m not.” Nancy’s brow furrows in something that looks like empathy. “But I’m looking into it,” Gretta adds. Practice makes perfect. She lifts the cup, cheers, and drinks.

The woman nods, smiles. “I wasn’t always. It helps, though. Out here.” She yells at the kids, who are washing dishes in the kitchen, to
get to bed. “I don’t know what you’d do otherwise.” After an uncomfortable silence, she adds, “I’m sorry about what I said earlier.”

“I don’t mind you asking. I’m used to it—I live in Utah.”

“I mean about the witch’s…breast.”

*Colder than a witch’s tit*—Gretta remembers now. “No, please. I thought it was funny.”

“Maybe tomorrow we can talk more. Ham and flapjacks? We got a late start on supper tonight. What with the calving. It didn’t go quite right. You know what I’m saying. The kids—we’re all upset. Even Stuart, bless him.” She shrugs, but her eyes glisten with tears. “These things happen.”

She shows Gretta to her room. “Darla’s got her own room now. She’s ornerier than a cat in the rain these days. We said, ‘You bring in at least a three-oh and shape up that attitude of yours, and we’ll clear the sewing room out for you.’ And you know, it worked. *And* she helps me around the house.” She brings her voice to a near whisper, “These kids—I never knew it would be so hard.”

Gretta sits awkwardly, wondering how she should respond. “You mind if I bring in my laptop, do a little work?”

“Your what?”

“My laptop. My—you mind if I bring my things in?”

“Oh, laptop! Whew! I thought you said something else. Can you get on the Internet with that from here?”

“Sure. Well, actually, I think I might be out of range on my cell phone.”

“You got dialup, then?” Gretta nods. “Photoshop?” Nod. *Photoshop, Why?* “You can just unplug the phone and hook up in the kitchen. Even Darla’s got a phone jack.”

Gretta thanks her, tries to excuse herself.

“You think I can check my e-mail tomorrow?” Nancy asks.

“You can check it now, if you want. Would Stuart like to check—?”

“He doesn’t care for computers. Anyway, he’ll turn in after *The Apprentice*. He gets up so early.”

Gretta returns with the laptop and shows Nancy how to select the
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eight-hundred number on dialup. Nancy shows Gretta the linen closet and the shower; she apologizes profusely for the bathtub being out of order. “You fill that big iron tub up and it’ll fall right through the floor. Mildew. Wood rot. I keep telling Stuart, you’re letting the house fall apart. I’ll tell you this much, my mother wouldn’t have put up with it.” She puts a hand out but stops short of resting it on Gretta’s shoulder. “I’ll bet you wouldn’t put up with it.”

I’m above ground, aren’t I? Still in the flesh? “You’d be surprised.”