Arc and the Sediment

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Fruit Sauce Should Always Be Served on the Side

The café is dirty. There are cloth napkins on the tables on this side of the room. They have red stains and the ashtrays haven’t been changed. Gretta speculates that it’s because this is a bar-café. Drunks care less about cleanliness.

Not true. You’ve had quite a bit of gin, and I’m disgusted.

“What time do you close?” she asked when she walked in.

“Technically, about one. Maybe one-fifteen, one-thirty. But we’re not going to kick you out or anything,” said an old man swiveling on a barstool.

“Don’t listen to Ben,” the bartender said, glaring at the old guy. “He don’t work here. We close at one o’clock.”

Now, eighteen minutes later, it’s a few minutes past one and her food hasn’t yet been brought to her table. She finishes off a second gin-and-tonic from the bar—an indulgence, given that she’s been working on a pint in her pack and the cough syrup alone had her rummy. She tries to calculate on a napkin whether she could be in Arizona by late morning.

By tomorrow afternoon—at the latest!—Gretta will have stuttered in front of one flea-market Last Supper tapestry, two oil paintings each of Manuelito and Barboncito, twenty-some family photos (she is not in them), two marriage baskets, and a sobering Aunt Angela. She will chew spearmint gum—a lot of it.

“Does anyone have a phone?” asks a man who has just rushed through the door. Gretta looks around. She can see the man’s mistake. Outside the bar there are two signs: BAR on the left and CAFE on the right. Inside, it looks like one room. One room, one phone.
The bartender shakes his head no. Ben and a waitress pushing sixty do the same.

“Shit!” the guy says. He moans. “Come on, you’ve got to have a phone.”

“Not one that works,” says the bartender.

“God. God, god, god. Can I have a shot of tequila, please? With lime. I can’t drink it without the lime.”

The bartender nods, pushes a stepstool in place to reach a bottle of Cuervo.

“Good,” the man says. “Good. I have some money.” His hair is matted and fuzzy, something like a camel’s, but his features are feminine. He looks like a crevice—a big, shady crevice. Gretta can picture him at the top of a building, feeling regretful. Or in a park, getting a rush. She could see him in a city, pretending to not be afraid of the darkening streets. The air was cold as night—

Gretta’s throat is swollen and it’s everything she can do to swallow. The man—the dense, graceful movement of his limbs—is a nice enough distraction, but still, gravity is getting to her. He notices her looking at him. He drinks the tequila.

As sweet as a rose was by sight.

She can’t afford having Darla’s sensibility edging in on her. The poem is stuck in her head nonetheless.

“Six-fifty,” says the bartender.

The man takes money from his wallet, which looks to be full, and lays a bill on the bar. “Another,” he says. He gestures the bartender close. He leans down as if to whisper into the bartender’s ear and, falling short of the ear, mumbles indiscernibly, or is it that Gretta’s brain fails to discern?

Somewhere there is a grassy clearing through which a clear stream courses. The smell of the wet brush and the grass is heady; it makes her dizzy. This man—this fucking idiot—is nowhere near my stream. She wonders who is or who could be. Either she needs another drink or she needed a few fewer: she is at a loss.

The bartender pounds his fist on the bar. “There’s one phone
around here, you little piss-ant, and it’s in my kitchen, in my house, with my wife.”

Piss-ant, the tequila man is not—he’s possibly twice the size of the bartender—but he breaks a mutual stare with him by offering more money. With that, he drinks a second shot, and then a third.

The waitress brings Gretta fries, cheesecake, and gin. “Last call,” she says, stretching one arm to the side and then the other.

“You sure all you’ve got is Beefeater?” It sounds to her almost pornographic, almost unbearable.

“Is that all?” the waitress says. She rolls her eyes then gathers bottles of ketchup and Heinz 57 from the five booths that make up the dining area.

“One more,” says the man. “More lime.” He looks at Gretta, who is staring at him. She turns away. Her mother has always complained about how she stares. She can’t help herself. She has a penchant for staring. Like her penchant for sucking on rock candy. For the longest time, she believed no one could or would see her staring. To this day she forgets.

She wishes she had some rock candy. She wouldn’t mind a map.

She tried to get out of feature writing and start a map-publishing business six years ago, but as she had no capital and couldn’t make maps, she failed. She thought, Hire someone. But hiring someone was more difficult than she expected. For example, how can you tell a mapmaker from a mechanic if you don’t know anything about either? She didn’t hire a mechanic. She hired a graphic artist who specialized in drawing auto parts and land-reclamation equipment on Macintoshes. He didn’t know anything about geography, he told her finally.

So Lance and Gretta went to the university library twice a week. One way or another, Lance said, they would make the business happen for her, even if he had to haul it home in a wheelbarrow. “Never give up on your dreams!” and “Follow your heart!” and “Dreams can come true!” he’d say. He became fascinated with cartography, so when Gretta wasn’t, she had to beg him to give up on her.
She decided to collect rocks. She had bought the crystals book, that ode to the universe with a capital U, but by way of a return to the library, she found herself engaged in a semblance of geology. She had high ambitions, but unfortunately, she got lost on her first rock-hounding expedition. She didn’t have food or matches or toilet paper or tampons. *One day I’ll learn how to light a fire Boy Scout style,* she thinks. *I’ll know how to make a Bunsen burner.*

She confuses herself. She starts off with one idea, ends up in another, forgetting where she came from or where she’s going. She is not sure whether it’s the Zoloft or the gin, or the Zoloft with gin, or the lack of orgasms thereof.

The French fries are soggy. The cheesecake is tolerable, minus the strawberry sauce. She sees the table in front of her has crackers. She snatches them quickly when the bartender turns to stock glasses. After stuffing her pack with crackers, she waves the waitress back to her table. “Fruit sauce should always be served on the side.” When she asks for the check, the waitress walks away without response. Gretta leaves a twenty under the plate. The bartender’s head is off-center with suspicion as he watches her walk out the door, making her feel like she’s swaggering, with one heavy fucking leg.

The tequila man is outside on the step, just beyond the illumination of the lamp over the door. “Hey, where you going?” he says.

_Exactly what I said,* she thinks, suddenly remembering what Lance said to her the last time she saw him. She recalls also the exact features of his expressionless face.

“Hey, where are you going?” she asked.

“The store,” Lance answered, slamming the door shut. That was four and a half months ago, but by that time, Gretta understood the tone of his voice to mean a _very long time_. A few days, a few weeks—who knew. When a few months passed, she got the picture.

“South. Interested?” she says to the tequila man. He follows her, his hands jammed in his pockets. “You want to drive?” she asks. He shakes his head no. “Just a second,” Gretta says once they step into the truck, but he has already begun to settle in against the door for a nap.
“I have to check my messages. You sure you don’t want to drive? I’m not in great shape, I have to tell you.”

“I’m sure,” he says.

Bill: “Why do the burgers have to be Pakistani? Is this you making trouble again? Let’s talk.” Right again. Next time she’ll do All-American Burgers, just to be fair. Musharrafi will understand.

Renee: “Gretta! This is Lance’s mother….” Gretta snaps her phone shut.

“That doesn’t sound good,” the tequila man says.

“Yeah, my boss is an asshole. My mother-in-law—she doesn’t like me very much.”

“Hello. I didn’t hear your messages. I’m talking about your truck—you’d better get this thing in.”

She gives the ignition a few more tries, slaps the steering wheel with both hands, and delivers a string of obscenities. “Maybe you should drive, seriously,” she says, and just as quickly sees herself turning the key, saying, Maybe you should drive, seriously. She is being watched. The woman is either behind her or on the other side of the glass. Gretta begins to sink, begins to burn. Begins to feel sick—really sick.

The tequila man tries in vain to open the passenger window, then stops and leans close to Gretta. She sees that his skin is pale and entirely without wrinkles, but ruddy, and his nose is runny. The woman is frustrated—not so much with the runny-nosed rider, who seems irrelevant to her, but with the driver, with Gretta.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

The woman urges. She insists. “Nothing.”

“Do you have asthma, or…”

Inhale two, three; exhale two, three, four… She closes her eyes.

“Is this, like, a panic attack?”

Shut up, let it pass. Shut up, let it pass. Gretta doesn’t dare look back at the tequila man or at the woman. Exhale two, three… “Go away.”

He starts to get out of the truck. She grabs his wrist and leans into the steering wheel.

“Not you! Talk to me. Talk about anything.”
“Like…do you need an ambulance? A puffer? Do you need to lay down?”

“It’ll go away. Where were you born?”

“Okay, this is…are you okay?”

“Just. Tell me. Make it up, for fuck’s sake.”

“Okay. All right. There was this carnie, a real old guy. He was walking by the bathrooms late at night, and—you sure you’re okay?”

“Talk!” Inhale two, three; exhale two, three, four…

“And…they were closing up the place. And he heard my mom kind of screaming. And he went for help, so there was this…balloon guy and a janitor. Oh, and the candy-corn lady who went after some towels. This is strange.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…,” Gretta hears herself whisper.

“So but first my mom yells, ‘I don’t need towels; I need a fucking ambulance.’ So the lady runs off crying and, I guess, makes the call. Balloon guy is all pissed off—Where is your husband? he wants to know. Where is your father? Like that. Janitor just keeps crossing himself and praying, real nice, like. Is this okay? Is this all right?”

“Yes.”

“So janitor is holding her hand…. You look—feeling better yet?”

“Yeah, it’s going away now. Just keep talking, please. Thanks.”

“Balloon guy goes back to his balloons. Candy-corn lady…I don’t know what happened to her.” He waits. “What the hell was that?”

“Did she make it to the ambulance before you were born?”

“No. I mean, I was going to tell you no so I could drag it out, but yes. I was born at Saint Francis’s General Hospital. Janitor came along. Uncle Sammy, I call him now. Nice guy. You know, I don’t think you should drive.”

“That’s what I tried to tell you.” She tries to smile. Now that he likely suspects she’s crazy, she doesn’t want him driving her pickup—not while she’s sleeping. Who knows where she’d wake up. “I’m all right now. See? She’s gone.”

“Who’s gone?”

“It’s gone, I said.” She tries the ignition again; eventually, the engine turns over.
“Still don’t look so good.”
“Just a little nauseous. It’s seizures. I’m not crazy or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking.”
“Yeah, okay. I mean, you didn’t flop around or nothing.”
“These are not those. They come and go. Thirty seconds. Two minutes, max. Like a long déjà vu. You’ve had déjà vu, haven’t you? I’m all right. See? Nothing now.”
“Here,” he says, getting into his backpack. He pulls out a CD. “You want to listen to this? Puddle of Mudd—their newest one….”
“No CD player,” Gretta says, nodding toward the stereo. “Tape deck.”
“Wow. Okay, you got any tapes?”
“Indian music—recorded at powwows. Sound isn’t too good.”
“Let’s hear it.”
She points to the glovebox; he fishes around till he finds the tape. He reads the label: “Connecticut 1999.”
“That’s the one,” says Gretta.
He puts the tape in. She waits for a reaction, a never mind. “Nice,” he says. “Not quite what I expected, but I like it.”
“Go ahead and sleep. I’ll wake you up when we get to Moab.”