The Curiously Multifaceted Nature of Victimization

“You’re pathetic.”
“I’m not pathetic.”
“You’re a real victim.”
“I never said I was a victim.” *Who is this person? And why did you let him in?*

The tequila man woke up less than a half-hour down the road, itching his feet as if to itch them off his legs. He was ornery but seemed hungry for conversation, asking her all kinds of questions. He seemed to be listening to her answers with some interest or she would have shut up. He nodded amiably, even threw in a few I-know-what-you-means. But now that he’s given up on his feet and put his smelly hiking books back on, he looks at her scathingly.

“He’s fucking around. His folks don’t like you. You don’t like your setup. *Move on.*”
“I didn’t say I wasn’t. I’m moving on. I’m moving—what makes you think you know what direction on is?”
“Next it’ll be, ‘Oh, but I love him!’ Spare me the anguish and the human suffering, will you?”
*Get rid of him.* “You want a ride or not?”
“We’re already on the road, if you haven’t noticed. I’m just saying…pass me the bottle, please…and I’m only saying this because I like you…but stop being a dumbass. That’s all I’m saying.” He finishes the bottle. Fortunately, Gretta has another. “Mind if I have one of these?” He gestures toward Gretta’s carton of cigarettes. She nods, expecting him to take a cigarette, but he takes a pack.
She wonders how unethical it would be to drop him off in a dark wasteland at the side of the road. *Unforgivable? Semiforgivable, given the circumstances?*

“Want some acid?” he says, his voice conciliatory.

“I have kids…seizures….” She looks at him carefully to see if he’s joking. He holds a folded-up piece of foil out to her as if passing her a ring. She shakes her head. “You saw me falling apart. I can’t take that stuff anymore.”

“I have, like, eight hits. Plenty enough to go around.”

“Can you not do that now? Can you put it away, please? If a cop pulls us over—”

“If a cop pulls us over, you’re screwed. You’re a goddamned…pickle or something.”

“Thanks. You know, you keep doing that shit and you’ll be as fucked up as I am. That’s what my neurologist says.”

“That I’ll be as fucked up as you are?”

“No. The acid. It fucked me up. Brain damage or something.”

“Or so he says. How would he know?”

“I mean, he said it was possible.”

“So it’s possible I will be as fucked up as you are.” He laughs, shakes his dark curly mop out of his eyes. “How do you know I’m not now? Fucked up. As you are.”

Gretta feels defensive. *You think I’m fucked up, then?* But she remembers the tequila man was not the one who made the characterization.

“You know,” he says, “some people won’t call a pickle a pickle unless it bounces three inches when thrown on the ground.” He appears serious. “Or is it six inches? Seven? Eight? I don’t know, but it’s got to bounce, I know that. I’m just going to put two hits right here in case you change your mind. Look, see? That’s what a nice guy I am. I’m going to fold yours up in this here gum wrapper…want the gum? No? From mi casa to…you casa. You don’t want them, sell them. How’s that?” He opens the ashtray. “I guess that’s not…you’re really messy, anyone ever tell you that? All right, the glove box, then.”

“Did you just take that? Did you already take a hit?”
He sticks his tongue in and out, displaying a tiny square of paper. He stares at her a while, says, “Why are you so uptight?”

“Why are you so uptight? I mean, you came into the bar—”

“Check it out,” he says. He lifts his shirt up. His side shows the first signs of a serious bruise. A four-inch cut from his left nipple south is clotted with blood. “He just scraped the top of it. Guy I was riding with. He thought I had money. I don’t, you know. So don’t even ask.”

Gretta takes a new bottle of gin from under her seat and passes it to him. “I wonder why he’d think something like that.” She mocks, “‘Look, I have some money, see all my money.'”

He smiles at her for the first time since leaving the bar. It’s a nice smile—effusive, toothy, possibly genuine. “You know how to take it, right? You keep it under your tongue, right here—”

“I know how to take it. I just can’t, that’s all.”

He leans forward and watches her until she fidgets nervously with Sagittarius, who hangs from the ignition. “Want to have sex?” he asks.

She stares at him a moment too long and swerves onto the shoulder. “I thought I was pathetic.”

“What are you? Who isn’t?”

“What are you? I mean, what’s your name?”

“Wellington, five miles,” he reads.

She considers possibilities, probabilities, obligations. Five miles. Moab 5. Wellington 5. High five. Is it regulation to warn of every town exactly five miles beforehand? Does syphilis still exist? Does James think about her at night, and if he does, does he dispel the thoughts into a sock marked Bitsilly? And if syphilis still exists, does it really make your nose fall off?

Lance is likely fucking around. She wonders how long it’s been going on. With how many people. In what exact way. Does it matter? He left you. She has no moral standing to defend. Do I? She pulls over, puts the pickup in Park, and sets the emergency brake. “Okay. Let’s go.”
“What?”
She stretches her spine, which is tight from the drive. “You want to fuck or not? But you’re not happy until I’m happy. Know what I mean?”

“Well, hell.” He gingerly touches the wound over his shirt. “Stop in Wellington? Get a room? I’ll buy.”

Pathetic victims are left for dead in motel rooms. Pathetic victims even fall in love in hotel rooms. “I might change my mind by Wellington,” she says.

He grins, rubs the side of his nose in seeming slow motion.

“Do you have a condom?” she asks.

“Sure.” He waits. “You going to turn the ignition off?”

“No.”

“At least turn off your headlights. We don’t want to attract attention.”

When she takes off her shirt, he stops her. “You’re not going to have one of those things, are you? Like, one of those freaky déjà vus?”

“No. You scared?”

“No.”

He smells of apples and garlic, tobacco and tequila. His hands are rough as plywood. He leans over and tries to kiss her, but she turns her head, so he kisses her neck instead—a little sloppy, but warm and evocative. When Gretta lies back on the seat, she finds herself sucking her stomach in and straightening her spine in what she considers a shameful attempt to impress him. He tries to move on top without squishing her. He unbuttons his pants, scoots them off his legs awkwardly, and kisses her belly and the larger of her two breasts on his way up.

“You happy yet?” he asks. He unbuttons his shirt, tosses it aside.

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant,” she says, pushing down lightly on his shoulders, a suggestion. His grin is contagious.

The movements are awkward and contortionistic and the nudity inspires thoughts of policemen, handcuffs. There’s no room for the tequila man on the seat so he gets down on the pop-sticky floor on
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the passenger side. They form something of an L. His mouth is warm and his tongue is diligent. He clears his pharynx. Gretta laughs. He continues, but Gretta can’t stop laughing. “Shut up,” he tries to say, but, diligent as he is, his voice is muffled. She keeps giggling, but, with a degree of pity for him and concern about her own pharmaceutically stunted libido, concentrates.

Lance comes to mind. Hurt-feelings Lance. Betrayed and shaking-chin Lance. Just-came Lance. Lance professing his love and asking her to do the same. And when she snuck out the window—

Lance saying, “It figures.” Lance peeking in at her, grateful she has found something to obsess about besides him. James, hit suddenly with shrapnel. He’s on a ship, Gretta. James, watching Southeast Asian dancers perform amazing vaginal stunts before a smoky crowd of desperately horny if not openly masturbating and likely married squids. James, lost and sweaty and sucking in invisible swirls of depleted uranium in Iraq.

He held up a flashlight—

James, producing fingerless babies.

Her clitoris is feeling withdrawn, dead to the world. She worries for the tequila man’s jaw. She doesn’t like the guy, necessarily, but she has respect for the oral workout he must be undergoing. She buries images of Lance and his brother under layers of other, more explicitly sexual images. Unbearably soft breasts come to mind. Nipples with the traction of a rubber stamp. Lips, lips, and more voluminous lips. And—Yes…. No, no! Yes—amazing vaginal stunts. The closer she comes to the tequila man, the more he is displaced by an idea—a figment marked by, among other things, curvature and perfect alignment.

She grasps the handle above her, imagines her wrists are bound there. She understands that in so doing, she has entered The Romance—the narrative she hates most, the one where the woman is metaphorically or physically raped and she likes it. The cad, the protagonist thinks. Right before her breasts swell or heave or miraculously become both creamy and firm at the same time. Right before she falls in love and is left.
Concentrate. She thinks fingers, he responds. She thinks faster, he complies. She thinks—

No, no, no, no, no…. When she returns to the phallus, she feels ground, eaten. Divided into many. Unass my AO, li’l soldier. Her eyes tear. She wipes them inconspicuously because it is suddenly everything to her to not be pathetic. “Not yet! Almost.”

She has locked herself in a genre but is determined to get out. Determined, but so very dizzy.


The concentration of her cracks, rends, divides, reveals a collage of body parts, male and female alike—faceless, fragmented, overlapping—

—And Zoloft Almighty is defeated. She thanks god she hasn’t started taking the Dilantin again or she might never have come.

The tequila man appears, ruddy-faced, between her legs. She holds up a trembling hand. Wait a minute, she means to say. He nods in acknowledgement, his face glistening. “Give me a sec,” he says, rummaging through the pockets of his pants. He gets out of the truck, peeling open and smoothing on his protection. Gretta stretches her tight, shaking legs.

“Could you do me a favor first?” she says, humored by the scratch in her voice, something she hasn’t heard in a long—so very long—time. “There’s a towel in the bed of the truck. Get me the towel.” When he does, she reaches for the door handle, slams the door shut, and locks it; she scoots to the driver’s side and locks it as well. She drives forward, slowly at first, so as not to run over his feet or knock him over. He bangs on the side of the truck as she drives away. He yells. She opens her window and throws his clothes out on the road. She floors it—naked, delirious, saturated with a more palatable variety of romance, contemplating the curiously multifaceted nature of victimization.