Arc and the Sediment

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Gretta is smoking a cigarette and browsing the dictionary on the tailgate when an old white Corolla pulls over. It is the second car she has seen since a sprinkling of rain cleared up, leaving its scent. She gets up to see who it is. The passenger door of the car opens. A man gets out. The trunk is popped open and the man gets a duffel bag out of it. The man leans back into the car for a moment then shuts the door. The Corolla drives off. “Fuck you too, motherfucker!” the man shouts after the car. The voice is familiar. The man begins walking toward her.

Gretta is pretty sure she feels nervous, but double-checks—shortness of breath, fuzzy forehead. If she were in the movies, she might back up. She might hop out of the bed of the truck and get in the cab, she might—If you were in the movies, you wouldn’t leave, because that’s where the story would end. Curious/attracted—which? This sort of confusion has been a problem for some years now—afraid/excited, dedicated/addicted, disillusioned/exhausted. In this case, she opts for curious. Her mother would not approve; neither would Lance.

“Hey!” he yells. It is him—the tequila man.

Her lifeforce vanishes and returns as quickly, with a raging fever. Don’t be afraid.

“Figment,” she reads aloud. “Something made up or contrived.”

“Did you plan this?” he says, approaching the truck slowly. “I thought that was you—this pickup is hard to miss.” He pats the yellow door and grins. She weighs the probabilities. A sound beating? A good ass-chewing?

A Little Reluctance Goes a Long Way
“Would you like a gin-and-tonic?” Despite her fear, she feels good she is such a nice hostess, given the circumstances—that he jabbed at her pathos, that she ditched him on the highway, that she saw him naked, that he—

“A little early, isn’t it?” he asks. He doesn’t appear vengeful. Actually, he seems more calm than when she met him. A little more handsome, maybe. Taller.

“It’s got to be going on five o’clock. Have a better idea?”

“Not really, no. I could use a drink.” He looks around, watches ravens fly overhead. “Shouldn’t you be in Arizona by now?”

_Might this constitute The Romance?_ she wonders. _This return to the cad?_

_He returned to you, Gretta._ She checks her breasts—no swelling. No creaming, no firming. She attempts an assessment of her emotions—she’s pretty sure she’s not feeling the love that would toss her back into the dreaded genre, but how would she know? All emotions feel the same to her—intensity, anxiety, a gnarling of the innards. She smiles, despite her concern.

“I’ve been waylaid.”

“Yeah? By what?” he says.

She gestures toward him as if he is a _Price Is Right_ prize.

“That’s not getting laid. I can show you getting laid.”

_Herpes, hepatitis, AIDS._ “Thanks, but no. I’ve been thinking about what you said. That maybe I should move on. Or…I don’t know. I’m thinking. I’m thinking I’m moving on. Like, no more fucking up. Also, car trouble.”

“Truck trouble,” he says. He takes a 360° at the flat, washed-out desert around him. “Where are we?”

“South of Monticello, I think. Between Monticello and Cortez. I ought to know the place like the back of my hand. I seem to be pinballing back and forth between the two.”

She takes the bottles of gin and tonic out of the cab and arranges them with the hotel’s plastic cups on the tailgate. “I don’t have a lime. I know how you like a lime.” She rummages through the glove
compartment. “I have this,” she says, shaking a green plastic lime-shaped bottle of lime juice. “I don’t have a straw or ice.”

“Enough,” he says. “You owe me a big fucking apology. My feet are killing me. Not to mention—”

“I forgot to catch your name,” she says.

“Two pints? Why don’t you just buy a fifth?”

“Easier to hide.”

He fixes both of them a drink, then sits on the ground, leaning back on his hands, his ankles crossed. “You’re lucky someone picked me up not long after you dumped me off. Otherwise I’d have to cut you up into tiny pieces and throw you in the river.”

Gretta is pretty sure he’s joking, but his statement does call into question the wisdom of picking up hitchhikers—and then getting oral sex from them—in the first place. She thinks about asking him where he’s from and how he got here. She decides she doesn’t want to know where’s he’s from or where he’s going. If anything, she wants to know whether he liked their foreplay, or whether he has sores in his mouth. She wants to know if he uses hair gel to get his curly fuzzy mane like that. If she managed to fantasize about loveless consensuality as she had protected sex, would she still be securely in violation of The Romance? So long as the breasts don’t swell, yeah?

“Starter’s dead,” she tells him.

“Good for you,” he says.

“If you can fix it, I’ll give you a ride—anywhere on my bee line.”


“Come on, you’re a guy.”

He gets up, brushes gravel off the seat of his pants, and stretches. He leans over her and kisses her, motivated and focused and tasting of toothpaste. She flies off a cliff and disappears into the trees. “I’m not a guy—I’m a man.” He returns to his drink, shining clear and bright on the pavement. She touches her lip where his tooth nicked it. She feels thick and small and sick to her stomach. And what would that be?
Threatened? Hungover? Shocked. She is shocked by the difference in his kiss. She doesn’t remember what it’s like to be kissed by someone besides Lance.

“There’s no fixing a starter in the middle of nowhere, sweetheart,” he says. “What’d you do to it?”

“I didn’t do anything. It’s been having trouble turning over for a while—a week, maybe two. You heard it. Last time I went to start it, I kept hearing a noise, kind of a click, like. Anyway, I tried again and it was fine. But this time…nothing.”

“Bad karma.”

“Got any more of that toothpaste?” she asks.

“You look like you slept in a morgue,” he says.

“I think I did.” Possibilities enter her feet and crawl up her thighs like runs in nylons. She wonders whether he might fall for the same trick twice. She has heard of a thing called a female condom; whatever it is, it won’t help her now—not unless he has one, and if he carries one, he would have used it before. Wouldn’t he have?

“Show me happy and I’ll give you some toothpaste. You could use it.”

“Excuse me,” she says, ambling to the front of the truck, where she thinks she might vomit. Nothing comes. She squats in front of the grill and drools a little. He walks up behind her and asks if she’s okay. He strokes her hair back away from her face until it’s apparent she’s not going to throw up.

“Here,” he says, giving Gretta the bottle of tonic.

“Thanks. I don’t feel so good.”

“If it weren’t me you dropped off naked, I would say that was pretty funny, what you did.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Of course I’m mad. No wonder your husband left you—you can be a real bitch.”

She tries to get up and smile, but it doesn’t work like she thought it would. He sits next to her and talks about things like the death of vinyl records and how to put a stop to spam and viruses. She pretends
that she doesn’t know much about the Internet just so she can hear him talk.

“…And never, never go to a porn site or an Rx site. You’ll have no end to pop-ups. My wife was ready to kill me.”

“You’re married?”

“Was. Don’t sound so shocked.”

Cars pass. They wave, with the effect of a parade wave. He pulls a miniature tube of Crest out of his pocket and gives it to her. “It’s yours,” he says. “You can use my toothbrush.”

Teeth clean, she explains: “I’m not entirely pathetic, you know. Not really.” She talks about her job as if it were a good job. She mentions a scholarship, honors. More cars pass. No one stops.

“How’s your cut?” she says after a long silence.

“Same.” He shows her. The blood has been cleaned off the wound, which, Gretta sees, is not much more than a deep scratch, but the bruise on his chest looks awful.

“You should put some gin on it. Or maybe tonic water is good for that kind of thing.” He shakes his head no. “You tired?” she says.

“I’m not up for walking yet, if that’s what you mean. Let’s take a nap. We take a nap, then we clean you up. People are more likely to pick up a girl. You’re just the ticket.”

“Girl?”

“Oh, get over yourself, will you?”

“How about guy. Oh, I’m sorry—man.”

“Woman, then.”

“It’ll be dark before long. They won’t pick us up in the dark.”

“Just a little nap?”

She gets the quilt out of the cab. “On it or under it?”

“On it. No, under it.”

“Hey, I need a favor,” she says.

“Get naked? Oh, I know! Get you a towel.”

“I need you to talk to someone for me. Her name is Jackie. Tell her I’m all right. You’re a driver for a towing company—are you listening?—and you helped me get to a mechanic.”
“Who’s this we’re calling? Jackie?”
“You towed my pickup because it was broken down and I left my cell phone in your truck.”
“Why don’t you call her?”
“It’s complicated. Let’s see…I left the phone in your truck…how would you know to call?”
“You called on the toll-free number on my business card and asked me to call.”
“I was stranded all night and all day, and I didn’t call earlier because my cell phone was out of range…and then I didn’t call when you picked me up because…”
“Too much detail,” he says.
“All right. Just…just play it by ear.”
She dials for him. “Yes, this is an axe-murderer. I’m calling about Gretta….” He grins. “Just kidding. No answer—ah, wait, answering machine.” He clears his throat and assumes a southern accent. “Yeah, hi. This is Bobby Billthorpe from Bobby Billthorpe Towing. I just picked up a friend of your’n by the name of Gretta…” He looks at her for help. She mouths Bitsilly. “…Gretta Bit Silly. She wants you to know she’s safe and happy as a clown. She left her cell phone—” He stops, raises his eyebrows. “I ran out of time,” he says to her. “Do you want me to call again and leave another message?”
“No, that was good.”
“What if they try to call?”
“Just turn it off. I’ll call tomorrow.”
They climb in the bed of the pickup. He lays down a fleece jacket and suggests Gretta use it as a cushion. He rests his head on her pack, closes his eyes. No creaming. No firming. She rests her head on his stomach and watches him breathe until sleepiness begins to take over. No tomorrow, no yesterday. He pets strands of hair behind her ear with big clumsy fingers until it’s all tucked neatly away, and then they sleep.