Arc and the Sediment

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“Hey!”

Gretta wakes up with the sun in one ear and a rumbling in the other. Despite the protestations of his stomach, the tequila man is still asleep. “You!”

Gretta sits up. “Hey,” she says to the elderly couple standing beside the truck. She stands up in the bed and scratches her arms. “You kids okay?”

It takes Gretta a minute to think about what the man is asking. She sees parked ahead of her a Wilderness trailer plastered with We’re Spending Our Children’s Inheritance bumper stickers. The tequila man stretches. “Good morning,” he says. “Got troubles?” asks the old man. “Your emergency lights are on.” “I think my starter is broken,” she says. “You sure it ain’t your battery?” he asks. “I don’t think so. I mean, the radio works and all that. And, I guess, the emergency lights.” “Got any cookies on you?” “Carl!” the woman says. “Damned right. I want some cookies.” “We don’t have any cookies,” says the tequila man. Gretta notices his hair is even fuzzier than it was before. She tries not to laugh. “Well, hell. I’ll see you two later.” “Carl!” “I’m just pulling their leg, honey. Come on, young man. Let’s see what we can do.”
The tequila man disappears up the road and inside the trailer and emerges with a Diet Pepsi and a long piece of black licorice. He follows the old man back to the truck. “Now just you watch. Maybe you’ll learn something.”

He lies down beside the truck. “When I tap, you turn the ignition. You listening? All right then.” He climbs under and taps. The ignition resists. “Let’s try her again!” He taps some more. Reluctantly, the ignition turns over. He scoots out and the tequila man steps onto the pavement. “You’re going to have to get that starter replaced pronto,” he says.

His wife adds, “This trick’ll work once, twice, maybe a dozen times, but pretty soon, that’ll be all she wrote. You can also jimmy a screwdriver…well, just get to a mechanic. Life will get a whole lot easier.”

“That’s my Julie. First-rate mechanic,” the man says proudly.

They all shake hands. The old man professes that he, too, is a Chevy man. The tequila man asks for a ride.

“You’re going to split up—just like that?” the woman asks, her hand shading her eyes from the morning sun.

“It’s his decision,” Gretta says. She feels like she should apologize.

“So…you’re not together?” says the old man, wagging his finger back and forth between them. The tequila man shrugs. “Well, hell, I thought you were married. Where you going?” the old man asks.

He shrugs again. “South?”

“All right. Long as you ride in the trailer. Don’t think I won’t put you to work. Ever see Bryce Canyon? A playground for angels and demons.” He winks at Gretta and ushers the tequila man away.

“Wait!” Gretta runs to the cab for the rest of her pack of Oreos. She runs back to the old man.

“Well, aren’t you a sweetheart?” he says. “Hey, I like the broken ones.” He takes the cookies and pats her arm. “Straight to a mechanic, now.”

The tequila man smiles, waves, fades, and disappears. Gretta suddenly remembers that at least one emotion makes itself perfectly clear.