Who’s Your Butterfly?

Published by

Allen-Yazzie, Christine.
Arc and the Sediment: a Novel.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/2354.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/2354
Who’s Your Butterfly?

L. takes her hand and dances with her, an owl dance.

G: Dancing with his bloated sunburned pasty-assed smoke-smelling wife would be better than having an affair with a fucking a likely young, likely attractive Navajo lover, wouldn’t it? (G. stops dancing, shakes her head.) The love affections of a spouse can withstand many things—unfaithfulness, that crevice loss. Even abandonment neediness. But how can it face the one sin that implies all others? The devastating knowledge that, underneath it all, his wife was nothing more, nothing less than...a drunk white girl.

The truck is getting hot and smells of smashed fox foot. Gretta is too sauced to care about that. She feels free in such close vicinity to ruin. She wants desperately to call her kids, hear their voices. “Night-night, Mom,” Braden might say. Or, “Who dis?” And Tulip: “I hate you and I always will.” Oh, come on, has she ever said that?

The only time she feels brave enough to call, she has had enough to drink that Tulip would pick it up in an instant and tell her she’ll tell her dad—or at least Jackie. Instead, Gretta opts for the void. She considers staying in this state of being, then remembers Braden has to be enrolled in the Li’l Tigers by next week. Maybe I’m not so close to ruin, she thinks. Maybe I’m a boring mom with a boring life and a husband who doesn’t love her. I ought to buy slippers.
Lance’s parents for the weekend. Tulip was still a baby. We walked in the door, family room was filled with about a dozen white people and as many Indians (I recognized a couple), a few Hispanics, and a black couple. Southeast Idaho had never seen such diversity. Thought it was somebody’s birthday or a retirement party. Card tables were set up with pretzels and fry bread and Jell-O fruit salad and two-liters of pop.

“Gretta! Let me introduce you to our friends.” Some were neighbors, some outpatients from Second Chance (Clyde was their sponsor), some from Fort Hall. The black couple was originally from Kenya, more recently Idaho Falls. When Lance shook everyone’s hand, I did too, and all I could think about was germs. I felt bad, but I didn’t want to take Tulip back to the hospital again. Seemed like she picked up something every time we went anywhere—school, store, library, friends’ houses. The last person was a white woman—she patted my hand, said, “Renee has told us so much about you.”

Clyde: “We were just about to play cards.” Renee: “You never came to our house on a Thursday, have you?”

I asked Lance what was going on.

“They do this every Thursday,” he said.

“Since when?”

“Since always.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

_Tell me what._ That his parents weren’t necessarily separatists. That obviously something was wrong with Gretta besides her race. If it wasn’t color, what was it? She always thought it was bad news they hated her for being white. Worse news to know she had to keep digging. And what was Renee saying about her to others? If it were something good, something sincere, Gretta would have to rethink everything. If it were something bad…surely it was something bad.
Went to bathroom to breastfeed. Tulip wasn’t hungry, but I couldn’t move. Renee knocked after about a half hour, yelling, “It’s not too late to buy in. Three dollars buys your chips.”

If she’d been wrong about Lance’s parents being separatists, what else had she got wrong? What have I got wrong now?

This is Gretta’s life at home: She gets up at six and feels like it’s the first time she has ever gotten up at six, and she straightens the house. That is, she makes the house arguably less messy. She washes her face, brushes her teeth. She wakes up the kids and dresses them. Lance used to feed the kids in the morning, but now Gretta puts the cereal in reach so Tulip can take care of that. If they don’t want to eat, she doesn’t make them. She ignores the crying and the moaning. She doesn’t have the energy to do otherwise. By seven-thirty, she should be out the door, though she never is. She throws on clothes and shoes and stuffs whatever she is unable to assemble on the kids into a bag, along with snack-pack peaches or pears. She pushes everything and everyone into the truck, drives to daycare, still ignoring the cries and the moans. At some point, the nasty Folgers kicks in and her eyes get buggy. She ignores the day-care workers, who remind her she has to pay up or quit bringing Braden. She doesn’t say a word—not anymore. She kisses Braden good-bye as he clings to her leg and cries. She peels him off her leg, runs to the car like a bank robber, and reminds herself she doesn’t have the luxury of quitting her job. She takes Tulip down the street to Lakeview Elementary. She asks her daughter for her goal for the day—for the tidbit of information she’s always wanted to know that she can look up during library time. Once she has prodded something out of her, she kisses her good-bye.

She goes to work and pretends that she is not a sellout. She pretends that her boss is not an arrogant bastard with such a sense of entitlement, the mountains pull back when he walks out the door. She cranks out text as if she were not the one who wrote it. Time goes by without her. She is on hold. People go to lunch without her; she eats her peaches, her pears. The indoor-outdoor carpet beneath her
feet (speckled blue, as if the fluorescent lights aren’t torturous enough) thins her out in an irrevocable sort of way. She turns on the heat to counteract the air conditioning. Her coworkers come back, complain that it’s hot, and turn the air conditioning back on.

She is ever on hold. Type, type, type.

Eventually, it is four forty-five. She pays an embittered parking-lot attendant and drives to day care. She ignores the workers as they ask her if she’s going to pay next time and give her a talk on the meaning of good faith. She pretends that Braden is not crying because he hates day care. She picks up Tulip from the after-school program. She drives them all home, stops for anything that costs about a dollar per person—on-special hamburgers, tacos, corn dogs, whatever. On good days they eat inside, in the play area. On bad days, she gets it to go and begs the kids to shut up and get in the car, where they eat in silence. Then they go home, go over Tulip’s homework, and wait. What they are waiting for, she doesn’t know. For Lance, she supposes. But night after night, Lance does not show up. The TV and books fail to inspire her, with rare exception. She hasn’t had the money or babysitting to go to the darkroom for months. She sometimes gets the kids started on projects—toothpick forts, milk-jug birdfeeders—but always ends up yelling about something, making the kids feel uncomfortable and worse off than had they just watched cartoons. Friends do not call, because no friend will endure her inability to return calls, to learn her lesson. Well, she has Jackie—or had, depending on how angry she is about the babysitting. But Jackie is busy being single and childless; Gretta can’t accompany her on raft trips or to Reiki workshops, gallery strolls, pub crawls. She wouldn’t have the energy, even if she were granted time, money, and a babysitter by a fairy godmother.

She has the dictionary. Of course, there’s no forcing the dictionary to render tolerable—much less excitable—words on the most dreary of days.

Often she has medicine to concentrate on, because the kids are always sick from something they picked up at school or daycare. She arranges and rearranges bottles of generic Benadryl, Triaminic,
Robitussin. She doles out vitamins like they're candy, because she knows the nutrition her kids get is only slightly better than the nutrition she gets, and her hair is frazzled, her nails thin as paper. Later she finds Tulip's vitamins hidden between couch cushions.

That is my life, she thinks. That is my motherhood. She feels a terrible loss, and she can't say exactly what for. Maybe for the integrity that preceded self-pity. Or did it ever? She blames it all on Lance. For the moment, she can at least do that.

WordsforLater.doc

Lance: A steel-tipped spear carried by mounted knights or light cavalry. Any of various sharp objects suggestive of a lance. To pierce with or as if with a lance. To throw forward: HURL. To move forward quickly.