Arc and the Sediment

Allen-Yazzie, Christine

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In Drills and Bursts

“YOU HAVING another one of them damned things?”
“No. I just called to say hi. Just… I miss you.”
“You never did tell me the end of that story. Don’t hang up on me again, you little shit. I can’t stand it—it makes me worry. Your mother and dad are worried to death as it is, so I didn’t even mention you called.”
“What story?”
“Last time you called me. Let’s see—a woman drives up to an evangelist’s house and demands proof of something or other, and instead they give her a jar of apricots and a brochure, tell her she’d damned well better repent because the last days are coming.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Grandma.”
“Oh, kiddo.”
“I’m sorry.”
“No need to be sorry. They always say that, and the last days are coming—for all of us. We’re all born, we all die…. You still heading to see those colorful people?”
“People of color, Grandma. You can call them American Indian or Native American.”
She once called Lance an Injun and he gave her a gentle talk on political correctness. He has an affection for the woman that has been, at some moments, greater than her own. He lets her tell stories for hours—even when they’re about her mother hiding under her great-aunt’s skirts “when the natives came a-calling.”
“What’s taking you so long, Gretchen? What is it?”
“I don’t know. I got almost there, real close, and I had to drive back to find a mechanic. That’s all I seem to be able to do. Drive back and forth, back and forth. I just can’t seem to get there.”

“Button, Button.”

“Who’s got the mutton.”

“You think you can call my house and tell Jackie I’m all right, I’m just getting the truck fixed? Tell her I’m sorry I haven’t called her myself. I’m having a hard time.”

“I don’t think the kids are staying at your house.”

“What do you mean? Where are they?”

“Calm down. The kids are with your mother. Jackie went home.”

“Why?”

“You’re going to have to take that up with her.”

“All right. Okay. So how have you been?”

Gretta snivels into the cell phone while her grandma talks about the visiting teachers from her ward. “I know they don’t like my smoke, but you know, they never have said a word.”

“Why would they? They’re lesbians.”

“They’re not lesbians.”

“You don’t think?”

“No. And if they was, what would that have to do with smoking?”

“They’d know how to keep to themselves about things that are forbidden, I guess.”

“No one forbids me to do anything. I’m sure they’ll line up to do my temple work after I croak, but until then, I live my life like a big girl. You remember that. Live the life you want to live because you have no idea what comes after.”

Gretta wishes she knew what kind of life she wanted—maybe she would live it. “I have to go now.” Her voice, she is sure, reveals her as the blubbery fuckup that she is. You’re pathetic. She had to backtrack north once more—back to find a mechanic. One of Monticello’s two mechanics was on vacation and the other was closed on weekends. Cortez shops were either booked up or closed for the weekend. One guy was available but wanted two hundred dollars for a remanufactured
starter, plus labor at seventy-five dollars an hour; he took nearly a half-hour to go to the restroom, check his inventory for the starter, and calculate an indefinite estimate. She called mechanics in Shiprock and got no answer. So Moab, it was. Moab again. She is certain this is the longest trip south anyone has ever taken. Eighteenth-century explorers must have made better time.

“The truck should be ready soon.”

“You can always come home. We’ll have a few beers, play Penny-Annie like we used to. You remember that? ‘Just one more game, Grandma.’ It was always just one more game. Don’t worry about your mom—I’ll take care of her. She’s just worried about you, that’s all. We all are. You and the kids can settle down in the basement…. Sell the house—it’s a monkey on your back…. Gretta, honey, you can always come home.”

Gretta stares at her phone for a while after she disconnects—two messages. She hadn’t noticed. And now that she has—Forget it. She sits listening to the drills and bursts of air—to whatever metallic sprites make up the nerve-stripping racket of an auto shop—and tries to compose herself. A woman in a tittie tank and camouflage shorts sits across from her. Gretta imagines running her hand up the woman’s small defined calves to see how closely she shaves. The woman, however, picks out of a stack of last year’s magazines an issue of Time with a favorable-looking image of President Bush on the cover. Gretta scowls. The woman, catching her gaze, scowls back.

Gretta opens the laptop with good intentions, but she has nothing to say. Instead she reads something she has already written.

October1997.doc

We drove up a dirt road through a field. We pulled up to a log cabin the size of my mother’s walk-in closet. “You lived there?” I asked. “For seven years,” Renee said. “Me and my sisters and brothers and my mother and father. Halfway up that hill, my youngest brother died. And right over there, my other brother. And down over there, my dad. My mom would walk around the house at night crying. There’s a way women cry
when they’ve lost something. We tried not to listen. Then me and two of my sisters were sent to the Catholic school. My brothers and other sisters that were left stayed home and died from the sickness.”

We were on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. There were fields and fields of dead grass or maybe it’s something people eat, I couldn’t tell the difference. The blanket that was the door hung to the side from a nail. On one side of the cabin, there was a sky-blue wall. There was a window with no glass. In the middle of the cabin, taking up most of the space, a metal twin-sized bed. A yellowed striped mattress, which had been gutted through a hole near the middle, lay halfway on the wire coils, halfway off the bed. A wood stove with no stovepipe, in the front corner of the cabin, sat dangerously close to the bed. A handmade cupboard stood against the west wall, one cupboard door open. On the shelves were an empty can of oil, pages of a magazine, cobwebs, dead bees and flies, and a paper cup. Renee added a can opener, six cans of corn, six cans of green beans, a case of chili beans, a bottle of aspirin, and a case of bottled water.

On the walls were penned and penciled journals, slanting up, slanting down.

“Who did this?” I asked.

“My brother still stays here sometimes—when he’s around. I left him some blankets last time. I don’t know where they are,” she said.

1968 didn’t drink today, lonely—
1976 went to Idaho
1978 took a drink today. Hungry.

Decbr. Been sober six days. I’m lonely. Pow Wow at hi-school
It was okay.

The notes were everywhere. I couldn’t read them all. I took a few pictures, but I felt strange—was this place sacred like the sweat lodge, off-limits to cameras? A cultural anthropologist would be crazy not to preserve and study it. I pulled my fingertips off the words—was it like the pottery, not to be touched? My husband and sister-in-law walked around the outside of the cabin. My mother-in-law and her sister Kay leaned against the doorframe, made of two-by-fours. No one said anything about my camera, so I shot.

1982 Aug Visited Aunt S. She looked real big.

1994 It got cold today.

Septembr ’66 hungry. Going to harvest with Benny.


Twelve children were raised in this space. Then it came, the sickness. Like an iron fist, or a slow leak.

And there it is again—remorse, futility. Gretta could have replaced the mattress, at least with one from a yard sale or thrift store. She could have brought in another blanket—could have made her home available, for that matter. Instead, she shot pictures, which brings to mind Lance’s problem with scientists: privileging anthropology or archeology over people and place.

She shuts down the laptop and stares at the little screen of her phone, at the two blinking envelopes. It can’t be good—she can’t think of a message she’d want. But maybe it’s Tulip. Could be Lance.

“Call me. Bill.” And the next: click. She checks caller ID. William Malberry and Unavailable.

“Shit,” she says to the woman reading Time. “It’s Bill.” She returns his call. By the fourth ring, she is ready to hang up (“I tried to reach you...”), but hears his voice.

“Hey, Bill.”

“Hey, Gretta. Hey, I don’t know how to say this.”

The woman watches her from above her magazine. She smiles to
dam up any potential tears, because she knows what’s coming. It’s as if she always has.

“…you do.”

“The team and I have been talking, discussing matters, so to speak. You’re not being fired. Your job, however, is being eliminated. Cutbacks. Economy. But…I talked to your mother.”

“You what?”

“We’re not cutting you off. No, we’re—we’re trying this from a freelance point-of-view. For now. That is, if you’re willing to give it your all. This could benefit you, Gretta. It could be the best thing that ever happened to you, what with your quirky schedule and being a single mom and all.”

“Fuck.”

“I know you need the money. And I know Lance isn’t dead. Let it go, Gretta. Just let it go. I’ll pay you double what our regular freelancers get until you get back on your feet. Let’s say, eight or nine weeks? Then we can reassess the rate and come up with a solution that works for all of us.”

“Double your usual rate? Oh, so twelve cents a word? Shit.” She has heard CHIPS enrollment has already closed. Without insurance, she’ll have to take the kids to the reservation doctor in Fort Hall two and a half hours away.

“Who knows, it might inspire you to set your goals a little higher, meet your deadlines…. Gretta? Hello?”

“I have a week of sick leave—”

“Of course. We’ll get you paid for anything you’re owed. Don’t you worry. And Gretta? There’s a good counselor in my ward if you need one. I don’t think I’ve ever told you, but my sister had a little problem with substance abuse.”

“Jesus!”

*Time* sighs, puts her magazine down, and picks Gretta’s phone up from the floor. She hands it to her as delicately as if it were a baby bird. “Maybe it’s best,” she says. “These cancer phones bring out the worst in people.”