Arc and the Sediment

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“Utah is the dirtiest place I’ve ever been,” says Peter, passing Gretta’s bottle of magic sand to Stefan.

“It is,” says Stefan. “Don’t you think?” he asks Gretta. He pours some of the terracotta-colored sand into his palm, watches it drift aside with a breeze, then caps the bottle and gives it back to Gretta. An old man wearing biking gear comes out of the hostel; he nods at the three of them as he walks past. It seems he has no bike. Youth hostel, Gretta notes with relief, does not necessarily mean hostel of youth.

“My babysitter hates me,” Gretta says, raising the bottle of sand to inspect it. She pours some into her own hand and recaps it, puts it in the center of the table. She would prefer a bottle of gin to the sand.

“You guys know where Moab’s liquor store is?” she asks.

“We bought the bourbon in Provo,” says Stefan.

Stefan laughs at something Peter says; Gretta understood only the English of “state liquor store.”

Peter grows more serious, looks at Gretta as if sizing her up. “The air from Salt Lake to Provo is dirty, all smog. I could not breathe there. Off to the side of the road in all of Utah is litter, like you’re sending your garbage beside the highway.”

“Yes,” answers Stefan.

“No one lives like this anymore. Everyone in the Western world knows better. This is”—Peter gestures around them—“it’s the Dark Ages.”

It is getting dark. “That’s right,” Gretta says. “It’s a potpie existence.” Abandonment. She is shocked anew each time she thinks of it. Her
mother said it right in front of the kids. She is not abandoning them. She is retrieving their dad.

“They don’t want to talk to you,” her mom said when she called. “They probably don’t trust you. Who would? You haven’t spoken to them in over a week."

Gretta said she didn’t believe her: she was sure the kids would want to talk to her. She tried to argue that they still seemed to trust their dad, and he really did abandon them. “Don’t I deserve the same lee-way?” she asked.

“Of course not—you’re the mother. They can’t talk regardless. They’re getting ready for a birthday party. They’re supposed to be there already. Alice is throwing a party for the twins at the Pizza Hut.”

Gretta told her mom she was bitter and spiteful. “If I’m so spiteful,” she answered, “why am I here taking care of your kids while you’re out gallivanting around? Why am I always the first one to help you out of a crisis and the last one to be thanked for it?”

Her mother was right. Gretta can admit it now that she’s had time to cool off. The woman bought Tulip and Braden meds if Gretta was broke; she watched the kids when she had to work weekends or simply fall apart in private; she paid for a new transmission for the pickup when Lance could not be reached. Gretta wishes she had bought her mom the clay plates that went with the salad bowl. She could either deliver them with gratitude or hurl them at her.

She could hear Braden crying in the background and Tulip yelling at him. “What’s wrong with Braden?”

“Do you have to ask? This is a clear-cut case of abandonment we’ve got here. You’ve abandoned your own flesh and blood! You’re going to end up right back in the hospital, sure as hell. You mark my words. Don’t think I’m going to save you this time around.”

Hurl. Gretta will pay interminably for her mother’s favor. Her mom picked the kids up from Jackie on Friday afternoon. She must not have heard about the tequila man’s tow-truck message, or she would have drilled Gretta about that. She seemed simply to accept that her daughter had gone missing.
“No!” Gretta yells now, but it comes out as “Uhn.” Stefan and Peter are each holding a piece of the whistle. Gretta realizes she must have pulled the bandana out. She is sinking with the feeling that she’s done something terrible. She told Lance she couldn’t be trusted with sacred objects. He didn’t believe her. “Put it back,” she says. *Her voice cracks, rends, divides, revealing the crevice.*

“What is it?” Peter asks.

“Doesn’t matter, put it back.”

“Not until you tell me what it is.” He sniffs it. He flicks it with his finger. He passes half of it to Stefan.


“Please give it to me….”

“What, you mean this?” Peter says, tapping the whistle on the table.

“It’s important. It’s a whistle.” Peter and Stefan blow on the pieces—she has said too much. “It’s sacred,” she says.

“Sacred?” Stefan pulls an electronic dictionary out of his breast pocket. He and Peter confer in German and then they laugh. They laugh until their eyes water. “Why do you care for sacred? ‘I’m a woman without a god—I lost my passport in Limbo.’ You said it yourself,” says Stefan, grinning.

“You did,” says Peter. “That’s exactly what you said. And also: ‘Now I’ll have to fuck Dante too. Fuck him and all those—was?’”

“Those miserable bees,” says Stefan.

“Yes. Fuck the miserable bees.” Peter laughs. “We did not expect you in Utah.”

“Yeah, well, no atheists in foxholes.”

“And you are in the foxhole?” Stefan asks.

“Or, ‘Do unto others what they desperately need you to do’—she said that also,” says Peter.

“I could make a necklace. Maybe a bracelet?” Peter says to Stefan.

Gretta reaches for his hand but he pulls it away. *Don’t you dare cry.* Her eyes burn and her head spins on a gravel road. *I won’t cry. I won’t.*
“What’s wrong with you? We make jokes,” Peter says. 
I’ve violated something. The thought does not induce a strategy. She doesn’t know what would.

“We didn’t mean to anger you.” Stefan looks regretful and tosses his half on the table. She snatches it up, along with the bandana.

Peter is clearly annoyed. “Hey, where is my bourbon?” he asks.

Gretta feels sick. How about your bourbon? she thinks. It was good, as bourbon goes. She nods toward the bottle at the side of her, lying between the two boards that make up the bench she sits on. Peter leaves the other half of the whistle on the table and motions for Stefan to leave with him. Stefan waves. Peter grumbles in English about Americans. Gretta is left knowing it’s too late, checking her memory for consequences.

“No consequences,” she says to the whistle, and to herself, No consequences.

“Do you have to ask? This is a clear-cut case of abandonment we’ve got here.”

She has also been told, “There is no such thing as cold air; there is only the absence of heat.” The heat of the afternoon sun gave her a headache, but here, alone in the small halo of the porch light in front of the hostel, she sits in an unbearable absence of heat.

Inside, she makes her way upstairs to the bathroom and locks the door. She stares at the mirror until her face stops making sense and reassembles itself into someone else’s face. She reads Don’t waste water, posted above the soap dispenser. Hot water on a chilled girl is hardly a waste. She steps into the shower once the water is hot. The water streams down her back as she leans forward onto the fiberglass wall. Don’t you cry.

She wishes she had a razor. She plans to convince her husband he’s better off at home, yet her legs look like a chimp’s. Part of their premarital agreement was that Lance couldn’t harass her to shave her legs. He’d run his hand upward, against the lay of the hair. He said the thickness was due to the higher testosterone level in white women. That’s how white women got feminism, he said. She argued
that feminism was counter to testosterone. Still, she often wonders whether Tulip will grow knifelike leg hair like her own or peach fuzz like Sylvia's.

Lance has always refused to believe Gretta's claim to feminism. He believes feminists have a plot to divide the Indian people—they want to do away with the men and make the women hate them. “They want to destroy the balance of tradition,” he said.

“So I’m not a feminist, then? Well, you’re not an Indian,” Gretta said. “Apple!” She was on the inside of a locked door, but that didn’t help. The bathroom doorframe burst. It was an old apartment building. Lance has never raised a hand at her, but he always had a thing for drama—for breaking things to make a point. Sometimes it terrified her, but breakage meant she would get a good apology later, usually involving a nice dinner and a backrub, so it wasn’t all bad.

Someone pounds on the bathroom door. She gets out, dries off each limb with great care. If I’m going to be a regrettable American, she thinks, I might as well go all out—get impudent. She wants to yell, but nothing emerges. She dresses slowly, cleans her toenails, starting with the piggy that went to the market. She cleans her fingernails in like order, refusing to even look at the door that’s getting a pounding, as if she is unwilling or unable to break up a ritual, a ceremony.

She doesn’t just need a tool. She needs a ceremony, in addition to the ceremonious cleaning of toenails and fingernails. Fishing? Fishing is a ceremony of sorts. Fly fishing at least. Burning something? Burning anything besides fuel has got to count as ritual if she does it on a regular basis. But what’s the point? And, Well, Gretta, why does anyone need ritual? Comfort.

That settles it. Fuck ritual. To hell with ceremony. I don’t need anything. Self-soothe—a mother must teach her children to self-soothe, said all of the parenting books she read. Why should she be any different? Because some ceremonies might be fun?

Lance has told her that what is essential about a ceremony is that people express themselves. When the medicine man doctored the two of them because of the broken whistle, Lance was disappointed with
Gretta’s lack of self-expression and said so. She couldn’t say she was having fun, but she didn’t cry out as he did.

Maybe she would have felt more expressive had she been told the range of things a medicine man might see in the coals. Could Erikson, for example, see her masturbating? Or how about the night when, at a high-school party, she made out with three different guys, thinking they were all the same guy? Or the time she bit the ear off her friend’s chocolate Easter Bunny then replaced her sixteen Susan B. Anthonys with quarters, only to realize later that the girl had Hodgkin’s lymphoma?

Or what about the nurse on the Greyhound? Or the Thai exchange student? Or the woman from Buffalo? Or how about when she told Lance that she suspected his sister of permanently borrowing her favorite cable-knit sweater, then when she found it in her bottom drawer, she didn’t tell him?

Or the mess with the guy from Qatar, or the frat boy? Try a herd of them—a fucking montage of coked-up strangers. Try—

Some things must never be tried, never recalled. Violence may beget violence, and peace may beget peace, but memory, Gretta has learned, begets presence. Memory begets the vacuum.

She decided that if she thought of these things, these forbidden things, the medicine man would be more likely to pick up on them, so she tried to think of other things. Trilobites, for example. It wasn’t working. She couldn’t help thinking of all those memories that were her knowledge, her own private knowledge. She excused herself to the bathroom, made herself sick, but they didn’t suggest she go to bed.

“That’s what that thing does to you. That bad stuff is there and it will make you feel sick. That’s what I’m here to help,” Erikson said.

So she tried it again. Elk and antelope—do they taste the same? Penguins—just how do they mate?

“Sit up, like this. Your hands, like this.”

Place settings—what is one to do with two spoons, two forks? If your napkin goes on your lap, what do you wipe your mouth with? The napkin on your lap or something separate? If you wipe something off your
mouth, it'll get on your dress. If something has fallen on your lap, it
might be smeared on your mouth—you couldn't inspect it, after all,
under the table. If nothing is expected to fall in your lap or dribble
down your mouth, why have a napkin? To show that one knows the
napkin should go on the lap and not on the table?

But she was too curious about what Erikson was doing with the
little rug, the things on the rug, the things…the things…what things?
These things too are forbidden from speech. These things too—

In the end she thought, Let him see me, if the coals are so good. Let
him fix me. I'm not giving up anything for anybody.

Then there was the bodily contact. Quiet or not, she was in some
pain. Neck up or not, she was afraid. The only time anybody had been
that close to her was during sex or rape. She didn't know whether to
fall in love or scream, so she closed her eyes and waited for the pressure
on her forehead to be over. Which, she reminds herself now, is not
much different from her reaction to sex or rape.

nodded yes. That’s when he moved on to Lance.

First came the search and then the excavation, and that’s when
Lance expressed himself: he screamed.

The bedsprings squeal despite her efforts to be quiet. She consid-
ers whether her quilt would best be used to cushion her from the
bedsprings or to keep her warm. For now, she turns down the hostel’s
blanket, folds her own in half, and lies down on it. She looks at her
life and wonders how it happened. She’s a heterosexually married
woman—or something similar—with children, lying alone on a
thinly blanketed bunk bed.

Someone begins to snore. Softly at first, then louder.

She reaches to the bottom of the bed for her pack and pulls out a
flashlight. She pauses between movements, as every move she makes
seems to echo in the room, but no one stirs. She feels around for her
laptop, which has been juicing up under the bed. The cord won’t quite
reach around the bed frame, so she tugs it out. She tries to shush the
speaker as the computer boots up. She looks around the room, which
is now cast in the faint blue light. She waits for protest. She counts the mounds of sleepers—seven. The snoring gives her a sense of justification. She presses the dictionary open with her foot and holds the little flashlight between her teeth.

*WordsforLater.doc*

**Homosexuality:** Of, relating to, or characterized by a tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex.

Beth, short for Bethany. When she brought her home, her family assumed it was rape that “did it” to her. They blamed it on Qatar, they blamed it on the frat houses, on her university. They speculated that maybe she had been molested by her kindergarten teacher—“damned hippie,” her mother had said. Maybe it was the chemical imbalance that was also the root of her depression. Perhaps it was “that goddamned HBO” her father had insisted they have. They urged her to go to a shrink to find out what was wrong with her so the problem could be repaired.

But what if (she wanted to tell them) it was the elasticity of Bethany’s skin, or her hips—at times full and round, at times concave? No less compelling, though, were Lance’s temples, which pulsed when he was excited, or the density of his forearms, or the soft grit in his voice. The long, smooth planes of his chest.

*TheLover.doc*

It’s nineteen-ninety-something. We are crouched

“No, no, and no.”

Do you want to save changes to "TheLover"?

Gretta shakes her head, clicks No.

*DescartesClassNotes.doc*

It was nineteen-ninety-something. We were crouched,
facing each other, in the back of the cab of his cousin’s white pickup. Leonard was going ninety-five miles an hour. His girlfriend laughed about it. She called him a crazy Indian. I could barely hear them over the music—the White Fish Juniors, loud as can be. I was grateful because all I had been able to think about until the week before, when I met Lance, was Bethany. And now the drum was everywhere, everything, and the pain receded. I looked at Lance, who was holding his knees like I was. He was so beautiful—effusive as a puppy, graceful as a spider. I was hot and buzzing and ready to drag him to bed. But he seemed happy to be where he was. I reached my hand out and he took it. The pain was weightless in his hand. He smiled, and that’s what I wanted. I wanted to become a part of such happiness.

Then:

Do you want to save changes to “DescartesClassNotes”?

“Sure.”

A throat is cleared. “Sorry,” Gretta whispers. But what is the tapping of keys compared to obnoxiously loud snoring?

*WordsforLater.doc*

**Tendency:** Direction or approach toward a place, object, effect, or limit. A proneness to a particular kind of thought or action. The purposeful trend of something written or said: AIM. Deliberate but indirect advocacy.

AIM. *American Indian Movement. Take aim. Aim higher.* She aspires to deliberateness, but she’s not convinced she’s capable of it.

*WordsforLater.doc*

**Homoscedacity:** The property of having equal statistical variances.

“How could you turn that off, please?” the throat-clearer asks, irritated. Gretta shuts down, softly snaps her laptop shut, and slides it under
the bed. *Where is your impudence now?* she thinks, and, *I've had my daily share.*

She tries to find a comfortable spot on the bed, but every time she turns, the bed squeaks. She settles into her kerchief of a blanket and lies still, listening to the sounds of sleepers, giving up on her own sleep. If she were wealthy, she’d donate heavy blankets and nice soft pillows to the hostel; then the place would be perfect. People like her didn’t remember to bring a sleeping bag or pillow with them, but people like her needed the anonymous social intimacy and generosity of hostels, maybe even more than the internationals with their mummy bags needed them.

If the bed will not bring her comfort, even cushioned by the quilt, the quilt might as well keep her warm. She scoots under it.

The young woman in the bunk above her moans softly, and the bed begins ever-so-slightly to shake, or perhaps Gretta is imagining it. She moans again, but the moaning is drowned out by someone else’s snoring. Gretta decides the woman must be dreaming. Surely no one would masturbate in a room full of people. The woman falls silent. Gretta touches the bottom of the top bunk, where the mattress bulges through the slats. She wonders if a part of James enjoys Mr. Cox’s semiprivate interludes—if they are contagious, if they make him miss sex. Who had James had sex with? She can think of no one. She’s never thought of asking, and he’s never offered the information. He’s never told her about a girlfriend, even. *He can’t be a virgin.* If he’s having sex, he’s certainly not a braggart. If he’s not, what could he possibly have against Cox?

If he were a virgin, and things didn’t work out with Lance, they could have good old-fashioned unprotected sex. *Unless—* 

Could she get STDs from oral sex? *You should know these things!* If she contracted something from the tequila man, she’d be morally obligated to tell Lance about it before they had sex. That wouldn’t go over well. "*You what? With a hitchhiker?*”

She’d just have to get tested first. “Maybe we shouldn’t have sex for a couple of weeks,” she could suggest. “Let’s clear our heads, talk
about things first.” How would a counselor say it? “Let’s wait until we’re emotionally ready to begin the healing process.”

She begins to take her laptop out again, to Google oral sex and STD, but decides she doesn’t want to know—not until she’s had a good six hours of sleep, at least. Anyway, he aimed high, didn’t he? And she had planned to make Lance get tested first.

The bed begins to shake again—just a bit, then faster. What would her bunkmate’s sock read? Montagne? Schmidt? Gonzales? Smith? The shaking stops; the woman breathes deeply, as if stepping outside to take a breath of fresh air.

Gretta considers following suit but is struck by an image of another woman’s legs wrapped behind Lance’s back. He grinds against her slowly, purposefully. Nothing unintentional or accidental about thrusting your ass around. Therein lies the drawback to being a man, she decides. You can’t lie waiting for it all to be over. You can’t disown participation afterward, or dull your sense of complicity to unrecognizable proportions. You can’t check yourself in—

She wonders who she’d be, had she not the option of playing the passive observer of events that were, arguably or not, beyond her control.