Arc and the Sediment

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And Also It Goes Back to That Whistle

_She feels_ around under the seat—they didn’t confiscate her gin. Her camera is there. Her suitcase is in the back. She checks the glovebox—her books are there. But the dictionary—she is desperate for grounding—maybe the officer took it. Maybe it fell out. _Maybe you were dragged out of the truck_. The dictionary is gone—it isn’t in the truck. Not anymore.

Her step is unruly. _No twitching_. She tries to carry herself as if nothing is the matter. _Stop biting your lip_. The trailer house is so small and dark, she can’t quite see—that, and she can’t quite breathe. The air is stagnant, hot, thick. She tries to focus on the conversation she has walked into, but the air is so dry she cannot breathe.

“That’s what you think will fix everything? A psychologist?” And to Gretta, “Do you hear that? Lance thinks you need a psychologist,” Angela says.

Gretta drops the keys on the counter, stares at Lance. Perhaps he took the dictionary.

Angela says, “You ever play those puzzle? You got a puzzle and it’s missing one piece. You put it all together and you got one piece missing. It don’t feel right. It don’t feel finish. It could be one piece, it could be four. It still don’t feel right. That’s what that psychology does. It puts this piece and that together. But you won’t find a psychologist who will tell you, ‘I got all the missing piece right here.’ That’s not how it is for us. For people, you and me. Some people die, sometimes you might lose something. You forget. Like that. You can remember this or that or have another kid when your children dies. But you can’t
ever find all the piece. You want to be happy? To raise those children in a good way? You don’t look at it like a puzzle. You don’t go looking for all the piece. You ask for help. You need to pray. You forgot how to pray. That’s why things are not good for you.”

Gretta whispers to Lance, “Where is my dictionary? It wasn’t in the truck. It wasn’t there.”

She tries to put his bewilderment into perspective. Lance couldn’t possibly understand why she needs it—that the dictionary tells her how to do it, how to live, how to know what comes next. It speaks to her, and he does not—few do. Its availability is uncanny. Its sequence, fate. Inevitable. Until now. Now it’s gone. Now someone will look at it, at the notes she has taken, the underlining, the highlighting, the dog-earing, the cross-references. They might make something of it. There might be questions. There might be suggestions, enforcements, reinforcements.

Maybe Angela took it. Angela—a thorn in Gretta’s back. When Jackie was twelve, her father put a thorn in her bra to try to make her stand up straight. It didn’t work; Jackie had scoliosis. So it is with you.

She wonders whether she has always felt this combustible and whether she’ll feel such violence tomorrow.

“And also it goes back to that whistle. You didn’t pray right when you got that thing fix.”

The whistle lies unwrapped in the middle of the dining table. Gretta watches Angela circle around the kitchen about a dozen times, cleaning spots off the refrigerator, the counter, the cupboards. She stops in the middle, turns around, and inspects her work.

What would she want with my dictionary?

The light from the kitchen window is bright—too bright for such a dark little room. She sees sun spots. The air smells like rain, but if it rained last night, there is no visible trace of it now. The air is dry. Thick. Gretta can sense moisture being sucked out of each and every cell in her body, taking her oxygen. Someone will pay for her dictionary, and given the delicate situation she is in, it might as well not be Lance.
“Your friend who got the hantavirus—did you pray for her?” Gretta says. “Yeah? You did? Because she’s dead. Maybe you don’t pray right either.”

Lance leans forward, as if preparing to leap between them.

Angela is undeterred. “You. You think that whistle would have broke otherwise? I’m not talking about my friend. I’m talking about you. You got to pray for your marriage, pray for your children.”

That’s when Gretta sees the fingers working the polka-dotted shoelaces, the tiny knuckles brushing against the maroon carpeting. Her own black boots next to them. Are you logical, too, Mom? Logic. She could use some logic now. Now that her dictionary is gone, the need is greater.

She can’t ask her for it. She can’t demand it back. But she can try to unseat her, even with the old woman’s eyes steadfast and the air thick as it is. She pushes past: “Does God listen to some people’s prayers and not to others? Because I really want to know.” Gretta’s voice cracks, shakes. She is flushed with humiliation.

Lance’s head is in his hands. She sees his head in his mistress’s lap. Her anger usurps her will to bring him home. She wants him to look up, to look at her. To gauge something—she doesn’t know what.

“If you prayed, you would know,” says Angela.

“Or does God listen sometimes, but not all the time? Doesn’t God like it here on the reservation? And what’s up with the mice? Why does he send mice to fuck with you people? For us it was rats. I guess we didn’t pray right either.”

It’s as if her mouth has a conviction of its own. She feels like an idiot for being inarticulate, guilty for spouting off about nothing, desperate for her loss.

“I was sick and I got better,” says Angela. “I prayed. Lance was sick with alcohol and he got better. We all prayed for him and he prayed with us. Look at you—the police bring you to my house drunk and maybe that drug too. You should be with your kids.” Her eyes water and her voice rises and falls in pieces.

Gretta tries to let the fury go, but she can’t. There shall be no smiting here. She wants a change, at least. She wants something to take her out.
But she wants first to get to the bottom of this praying business. She is worried Angela might be right; she wants badly to prove her wrong.

“Did your grandson’s heart fail because his parents prayed Catholic?”

“They believe in that cross,” Lance mumbles. “I don’t like that cross.”

“So that’s why he died. Because they use crosses and God doesn’t like crosses. He likes medicine wheels. He likes symmetry.” Four arms, four legs, all brown. *Does he give her oral sex? Does he tell her about you? You should meet my wife.*

“See, Lance on the other hand, he likes three-ways.”

“I’m not talking about God,” yells Lance. “If you would listen sometimes, you might hear something. All this might not have happened.”


“The Creator,” Angela says, nodding her head. “The Creator wants you to admit that thing.”

“I heard you have a girlfriend.” *Inhale two, three…exhale….*

Lance doesn’t respond. His silence rests in her throat. Angela is still talking, but Gretta doesn’t hear her. Finally, Lance looks up at her. He stares hard as if she might reveal a bluff.

“Yeah? I heard something too.” His voice lowers, and she feels it in her fingertips. “Dear James.”

She begins to shake. *Inhale two, three…exhale two, three, four….*

Angela’s son-in-law Randal walks into the kitchen and puts his hands on the edge of the table. “It ain’t God’s fault. It’s because sometimes the people around them are so strong and so bad, God can’t do anything to help,” he says. He tosses the dictionary on the table. “This yours?”

Lance smirks at her. She doesn’t care. She has it back. With that, she can walk out of the room. She can go home. She can eat lunch. She can have sex with whomever she pleases. She can even throw the book away.
“What’re you talking about?” Angela says to Randal. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You sit home all day and all night. You should be out there working. You need to pray too.” She chastises him in Navajo again.

“And Lance! If you knew your own language you would know what I said. You got to learn. That’s who you are and who you are supposed to be. You just forget about it. That’s why things don’t work out for you.”

She turns to Gretta. “And you. You admit that thing right now!”

Gretta tries to look squarely at Lance and comes close to it. Admit to what? Admit to which? Jeff? Alcoholism? Getting fired? Maybe they all had read her files—gathered round, ate popcorn: I fucked around before the tequila man ever existed. Why doesn’t Angela ask Lance to “admit that thing”? He’s as guilty as she is; she’s sure of it. Probably more. What does he do when he leaves? Who does he see? Who does he touch? How many? She wants to say it, but she doesn’t know how much Angela knows. She doesn’t want her involved any more than she already is—in anything. And who is to touch me?

Who has touched me? How many? How bad was it?

“They had a ceremony at my mom and dad’s last week,” Lance says. “Erikson found something with hair in it behind a brick in the old house.”

“You came through Salt Lake and didn’t stop?”

“You got to pray for yourself. You tell the truth, and you pray, and things might get better,” says Angela.

“Are you saying you came through Salt Lake and didn’t stop to see your kids? Your wife?”

“Someone wrapped hair and a scrap of my shirt in it and put the brick back over it.”

“Yeah? So?”

“They think you did it.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. They do not.”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter? They think I witched you?
What is this, the seventeenth fucking century? Burn me at the stake, then.”

“It’s not the same—” He takes a deep breath and blows out impatience, frustration. Gretta knows this sign—he’s about to lose it. Strangely, he doesn’t. “Look, I know you didn’t do it.”

“As if I would know how—”

“I said it doesn’t matter.”

“Did you see it? Did you see the little bag and the hair and the—the shirt?”

“I said it doesn’t matter.”

“Did you or didn’t you?”

“No…I didn’t go outside.”

“And the whistle,” says Randal. “Don’t forget what he said about that whistle.”

“What about the whistle?”

“Erikson didn’t say that!” Lance says. “She said it.” He nods toward Angela. And to Gretta: “You broke that too, she said. She said it broke because of you. We weren’t right together. That’s what she said.”

“Jesus. She and your mother both….”

“Well, it kind of did. I mean, not because of you. I’m not saying…but in my back pocket, when I got in the car that day we left for Salt Lake.”

“Yeah, yeah, heard it. Many times. For a decade. Thank you, Renee.”

“You pray, and you tell the truth. You got your chance right now,” says Angela.

“Pray for what?” She coats it in sarcasm, but she asks herself whether it really is a rhetorical question.

“Pray for yourself, for your family, to live in a good way. To give up that drink and all those bad things it is you do.”

Gretta holds her head, which has been shaking side to side, side to side. Side to side, side to side.

“Mom! I know you’re just worried about me, but you’re going to have to back off. She’s my wife. You get it? Just leave her alone. Please.”

*Mom.* The hair on Gretta’s arms stands on end. “Aunt!” she wants to
scream. “Aunt!” She reminds herself it’s just a tradition. *Just a tradition?*
And then it occurs to her that he has defended her—really defended her. The bumps on her skin remain, but now as a small elation.

Lance excuses himself to the restroom. Gretta nabs the dictionary. “It was laying outside there on the street,” Randal says. “I figured it had to be yours.”

“Thanks. Thank you.”

Angela sits down at the table and cries silently, alternately sucking her lips in and pushing them out, her fingers fussing with a placemat. She prays quietly in Navajo, every syllable softened by tiny gusts and gasps of air.

Gretta gets herself a glass of water without asking—for practice, maybe. For fun. Just opens Angela’s cupboard door and takes a glass. “What do you pray for, Randy?” Gretta asks, standing on top of the goose, trembling nonetheless.

“I don’t know. I just pray to hell I get some money quick, or my wife’ll kick me out.” Lance returns to the kitchen to sit by his aunt. He and Randal laugh nervously. Angela begins lashing Randal with Navajo again and Gretta laughs too, in spite of herself. She laughs that Angela’s tongue is so dexterous, her voice itself reaching an impenetrable beauty. Laughs that everyone else seems to be ignoring the old woman now. Laughs that her children might never forgive her. That Lance has become involved with someone else. The laugh sounds strange in her ear and she forces herself to stop.

She feels woozy. She wipes her nose, her eyes. “Lance,” *honk*, “could you get me some Benadryl, please? I need some sleep before I drive.” *Honk honk.*

“Call your mom first. Tell her we’ll be home tomorrow,” he says.