They’ll Eat My Irises

“Ruthless: Having no ruth: MERCILESS, CRUEL.” Gretta reads aloud from WordsforLater. Her voice is mostly lost over the wind crossing through the windows, so she strains to read louder.

“Rutilant: To glow reddish: having a reddish glow. That one’s nice, isn’t it? No?” She had the small victory of being defended for a good couple of hours before images of the rumored lovebirds started whit-tling away at her again.

“Ruttish: Inclined to rut: LUSTFUL. Rutty: Full of ruts.”

“Please stop,” says Lance.

She opens Dispatches to a page she had dogeared. “Page forty-nine, wouldn’t you know? ‘Straight history, auto-revised history, history without handles, for all the books and articles and white papers…something wasn’t answered, it wasn’t even asked. We were backgrounded, deep, but when the background started sliding forward—’”

“Gretta, please….”

She tries to read his level of irritation.

“Why did you cut your hair?” she asks. He doesn’t answer. “Someone die?” She waits again, cocks her head dramatically, until it occurs to her that someone may have, in fact, died. James? Grandma Shiprock? But it wasn’t his dad’s side that cut their hair to mourn. It was his mother’s side. James?

“I wondered when you’d notice,” he says, stroking his neck, which has been squared off by razor. “I guess I didn’t need it anymore.” He smiles at her. “Don’t worry, no one died.”
She puts the book away and closes the laptop. She sets the computer on the floor and pretends to study her hands. When the truck slows, Gretta looks up.

“Flea market?” she asks. Lance nods. He climbs out of the pickup. She follows.

Her hands soon become filmy, fingerling shrunken clothes and unobtainable, heavy silver-and-turquoise jewelry. She used to think she’d have a squash necklace one day, or at least a bracelet. She thought eventually they’d have plenty of money and Lance would prettify and legitimize her with turquoise.

“I can’t believe you’re just going to leave the car here with your aunt,” she says.

“She needs it. We can get by with the truck.”

“What will you drive when we get home?”

“I’ll take the bus. For a while.”

“You won’t take the bus.”

“Gretta, please—we’ll figure something out. That thing couldn’t be worth more than eight hundred dollars. Is it such a big deal?”

“Yeah, it’s a big deal. We can’t just buy another one for eight hundred dollars—not one that works. Our credit sucks. I lost my job. Did I tell you that?”

“Don’t say that—please don’t.”

She glares at him, at his response.

“Shit. Gretta—”

“You up and quit your job,” she says. “You didn’t think twice about it.”

“And I got another one.”

“Where?”

“It’s not important.”

“Where?”

“Refinery.”

“In Farmington?”

He nods.

“That’s just great. Hydrochloric acid? Xylene? Benzene?”
“At least I have a job. And you’re so full of liquor…don’t tell me about contamination.”

“What are we doing here, anyway? All I want is a cigarette. Why can’t I find a cigarette in this furnace? Let’s go to a store.”

He pulls a cigarette out of his jacket pocket. “It’s not that hot.”

“You’ve been holding out on me?” says Gretta.

“Do you want it or not?”

She lights up the cigarette in front of an old woman’s stand. The gesture is not appreciated. To hell with her bun. She breathes in deep, deep as she can, and stifles a cough.

“I’ve got to get back to the kids. You have to decide what you want, Lance.”

“What I want? Why is it what I want? We’re leaving right after this—going home.”

“You’re the one who’s been living with someone else.” She tries to stop herself, to dam up the bitchiness that seems to flood her, but she can’t. She can’t stop wishing for a drink. And she certainly can’t say that out loud, not now.

“I haven’t been living with her. I’ve been living with Angela and Jerry.”

“So you agree it’s a her? It’s a specific person—I say her and you know who I’m talking about?”

“Come on—you’ve been hinting around about her all morning. Don’t act like you don’t know. I want to know what you want.”

Yes, she knew. Sort of. She’d suspected. She’d been told. But being almost certain is not the same as hearing it out of his mouth; the affection with which he says her alone is too much to stomach.

“What I want? I want to be normal.” A sound issues from her throat—not a sob, but a gurgle. Don’t cry. “I want to have a normal family with a husband who’s not fucking someone else.”

“I’m not fucking her. She’s having sex. Just not with me. Not now.”

“Right. Right.” Gretta is not sure what to be concerned about now. She’s confused. She knows he’s hiding something, but his lies
are usually simple. She decides it’s a complexity she doesn’t want to unravel. “We’re never going to be normal, you and me.”

“What’s normal?” he says.

“We’re never going to be happy.”

“So let’s get a divorce,” he says—maybe with sarcasm, maybe not.

“Yeah.” It’s what she wants, sometimes. It’s what seems bound to happen—a nontraditional turn toward tradition, maybe.

“Wait here,” he says. “I have to go talk to someone.” He walks off, disappearing between a couple of vans.

Gretta is losing track of what tradition means. It used to mean something like putting the same ornaments on the Christmas tree year after year. Or it meant something bad—like conservatism or misogyny. Then she met Lance and the word gained momentum, became something fat and inaccessible. His family quickly learned she had no concept of tradition. She was careless and uncooperative. She walked around the north side of the sweat lodge when she entered. She coughed on the Indian tobacco. She doused her fry bread in butter, then sprinkled it with sugar and cinnamon. She was, nevertheless, expected to take part in the tradition.

In keeping with tradition, Lance and Gretta were married the Navajo way. Everything was supposed to be exactly right for the wedding—the turquoise, the basket, the corn. Lance’s parents had talked about giving horses to Gretta’s parents since his mother could get them free from Wyoming. “And put them in my backyard?” her mother said. “They’ll eat my irises. I just planted shrubs.” Gretta told her they were kidding and not to worry—it would never happen. And it didn’t.

There was supposed to be a gift or a payment of sorts from the groom’s parents to the bride’s. Maybe the horses were a joke, but the idea she knew to be true. She wasn’t happy about being bought, but she was more unhappy to find out she wasn’t being bought. “Everything must go just the way it is, the tradition,” Lance’s father had said when they first planned the wedding. “Otherwords, it’s not right.” So it’s possible that the tradition meant nothing, in which case they had
spent more than six hundred dollars on a tipi—being possibly hun-
dreds of miles away from the closest hogan—not to mention the feast
that would have fed a staff of zookeepers, the expensive basket it took
them months to find, the velvet and the mock-satin that proved nearly
impossible to sew into wedding outfits, the payment to the medicine
man—all this, all for show.

Gretta supposes that doesn’t make it different from any other wed-
ding, with white gowns and flowers and altars and such. The only
thing that means anything is the contract, the marriage license. And
that only matters in the case of health insurance. Or divorce, when
you pay to have the license revoked. Jesus, she thinks, there must be
something else to getting wedded.

But that isn’t what bothers her most. The more painful possibil-
ity is that his parents intentionally tripped on the wedding tradition
because they didn’t want the marriage to work out. She wonders if
they succeeded.

“Is getting a divorce traditional if you remarry an Indian?” she
asks Lance when he reappears behind her, one hand on her shoulder,
another hand holding twin ShopKo bags full of stuff.

“What kind of a question is that?” He acts so nonchalant it hurts
her. He flicks his cigarette on the pavement and inspects a knife.

She wonders how visitation works these days. One weekend every
couple of weeks? She could live with the kids being gone four days
out of the month. It might be the kids’ only chance at seeing him
regularly. Would he show up? He hasn’t so far.

“Come on, we can’t stay here all day,” says Lance.

“Oh, please. I’m waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me to what?”

“Get the keys. Get the truck. What are we doing here?” This is not
what I want. The thought is thunderous in her head. “Whatever. You
go get the car, please. Please.”

The idea is to get by from one moment to the next. To hope that
something good will happen. There’s not much else she can do except
give up and die, and she can’t do that. She has kids to take care of. She
has an addiction to overcome. She has tickets to the Chinese acrobats that she won on the radio. Anyway, suicide didn’t work out when she was fifteen, nineteen, twenty-three, twenty-six, or locked in the motel room with the fox, so it probably wouldn’t happen now.

_This is not what I want. This is not what I want._ She has exhausted her options. _What you need is a serious accident._

She is ushered to her banged-up chariot. The ease with which she takes the passenger seat scares her. “If you want to be with an Indian man, you’re going to have to learn to walk behind him,” Sylvia told her one day when she showed up at Gretta’s door. Lance had sent her to say something in his defense after an argument, thinking his sister could, perhaps, patch things up between them. “Say you wake up and make him pancakes and he decides he wants eggs and bacon and oatmeal. What do you do? You give the pancakes to the dogs and start all over.” Gretta wishes Lance could have heard his sister then, so he could understand why she could never, ever cook him eggs and bacon and oatmeal. Sylvia is different now that she’s out of college—more independent, less likely to cook eggs and bacon and oatmeal all at the same time. But maybe she isn’t so different. Maybe then she was just saying the very thing she knew Gretta wouldn’t want to hear so “the little white girl” would leave her brother alone—red tape, just like the wedding gift to her parents that never arrived. She wonders why Sylvia’s disdain wasn’t as obvious to Lance—who would trust his sister to mediate.

To Lance’s credit, he never asked his wife to be his cook. If she made him pancakes, he said thanks and, more often than not, did the dishes afterward.

When he starts the pickup, Gretta opens his sacks. Pink pajamas, six to nine months. More pink pajamas. More pink pajamas. A daisy-print shirt, denim overalls, yellow booties. Three pacifiers. Four bottles. A large can of Similac. A tiny silver bracelet with a turquoise center, just like the one he gave Tulip when she was a baby. A note—

He turns the ignition off. “Please don’t,” he says. He underscores his words with an uncharacteristically steady stare. She folds the note
up slowly and puts it back in the sack, which she tucks beside her feet. “I’m trying, Gretta. I’m trying very hard. I love you, and I love our kids, and I’m going to keep trying. Are you trying?”

_Am I?_ Devoid of an answer, she says she is sorry. He starts the truck up again, gives her a cigarette. She smiles, to the extent that she can.