

University Press of Colorado
Utah State University Press

Chapter Title: The Plan, Amended

Book Title: Arc and the Sediment

Book Subtitle: a Novel

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Published by: University Press of Colorado; Utah State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgqfz.4>

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The Plan, Amended

THERE IS something beautiful about a golden naked woman lying in the sand, which is why Gretta is stretched out here in the not-terribly-hot late-afternoon sun. But she is not a golden naked woman looking beautiful in the sand. Her face is swollen from drinking gin and is blazing vermilion like the redrock around her. Her sunglasses pressure her temples and the pajamas wadded up beside her smell like the janitorial closet of an old, canasta-addicted smoker. Her hair is tangled and salty, her doughy belly an aurora borealis of two long, nearly unendurable pregnancies. Peering through the window between lens and cheekbone, she sees that she is shaped like a crevice, like a V, and at the bottom of the V is hatred lying fallow, which is not, by definition, beautiful.

In the front pocket of her army-surplus pack is the whistle, wrapped in an orange-and-white bandana. She takes it out, uncovers it to see that it's still real, and looks at it without touching. She removes her sunglasses. Not a glimmer. The whistle, broken in two pieces, is dry and inanimate. What once braced the weightless wing of an enormous bird of prey now clacks top end against bottom, protected only by a bandana from her trembling hand.

She doesn't know why Lance trusted her with the thing. It was given to him in an event that involved days of praying, fasting, and sweating for reasons presumably too great, too indescribable, too *Indian* to share with her. Maybe this oddly placed trust is why she hopes to make amends with her husband. Maybe it's why she doesn't trust him.

Pneumatic. Is it a word?

She'll be glad to be rid of the thing, of the responsibility of it, but as yet, she still hasn't thought of something appropriate to say to Lance, and the detour she hoped would inspire the words is, rather, making her sleepy. She wraps the whistle back up and tucks it into the front pocket of her pack. She fumbles around the main cavity—four books, a few tampons, a stack of credit cards (both good and bust), a driver's license (technically invalid, given that her neurologist refuses to declare her seizure-free at this time), receipts, more receipts, a bra, cigarette butts (stinking up everything—she smells her fingers—*Jesus*), a dictionary, a beat-up flip phone.

No reception. She climbs an outcropping of rock. She slips, scrapes a knee and an elbow, bleeds, but finds herself oddly in range.

A lizard skitters close, assesses her with pushups. She takes a photo of it with the phone. Her daughter might forgive her if she brought home such a thing, worthy of any second-grade show-and-tell—such delicate hands, a blush of blue spreading from underbelly to soft pulsing throat, curious half-closed eyelids. She could keep it in something for now—*the console? the glove box?*—then buy a cage in Moab.

Gretta lunges. She is rewarded with a discarded tail.

Ice cream it is, she thinks. It's just as well—the Navajo in her daughter isn't supposed to handle reptiles. Of course, now that Lance has left her, Gretta may have to reconsider the zodiac of cultural prohibitions they sutured together between the two of them and settle on which ones remain pertinent. If he doesn't return, he will be responsible for seeing through his own.

“Thank you for calling Moab's own Golden Granary Pharmacy, where customers always come first. Para Español, marqué uno. To order refills by phone, press two now...”

It's not like her meds will work with as much as she's been drinking anyway. A voracious bender presented itself some five days ago and will end, in all likelihood, this afternoon—hopefully at a Laundromat. Once Lance is in-hand, or clearly not, she'll get her Dilantin. At least she has Zolof. *Just breathe. Just breathe now.*

Pneumatic. This is how it is: A word drifts from the ether into her nostrils, her ears, permeates the membranes of her eyes, and she must look it up, given the limited pool of language a Utah railroader upbringing and four and a half years of state college have afforded her.

Pneumatic—pneumonia? “Moved or worked by...”

She sets her dictionary down and weaves across and around patches of cryptobiotic soil to the truck, heckling herself—she drove a couple of miles off the off-road, after all, probably over yards and yards of the fragile stuff, and now she tiptoes. One day, she will be an environmentalist in more than just theory. Maybe she’ll even be a vegetarian, except that she will eat fish, because fish, she is willing to believe, are too stupid to contemplate their own demise.

She will be a woman whose socks match. When they get holes in the heels, she will throw them away and buy new socks—thick, soft knee-highs, not the junk socks she buys at Wal-Mart. *Hell*, she thinks, *you won’t step foot in a Wal-Mart*. Instead, she’ll pontificate on the moral depravity of superstores.

One day she will teach her kids Tulip and Braden to eat bran cereal rather than Cap’n Crunch. She will eat bran cereal, or at least she will make bran muffins. She will lock her doors at night. She will expect her children to brush their teeth not once, but twice a day. She will brush her teeth twice a day. She will wash her hands rigorously after every pee.

And if she is divorced, she will make serious efforts to use the term *Native American* instead of *Indian*. Unless, of course, her children bristle at her use of the words as her in-laws always seem to have, in which case she will be all appeasement.

One day she will be sober—for good. For now, she yanks her laptop’s power cord out of the inverter and returns with laptop and pack to the outcropping. She makes an office of a pocket of sand. The laptop burns her thighs as she types, heated by sun and inverter both.

WordsforLater.doc

Pneumatic: Moved or worked by air pressure. Adopted for holding or inflated with compressed air. Having air-filled cavities. Of or relating to the pnuma:

spiritual. Having a well-proportioned feminine figure; esp., having a full bust.

The whistle is Lance's pneumatic Leatherman, his tool of potentiality. It opens, it sharpens, it seals, it heals. But it's selective. It allows only good intentions to pass through it. Lance rarely uses it, but the possibility awaits him like an obedient dog.

Gretta wants a tool. She has a laptop and a dictionary, and they serve her well, but are not of the spiritual variety—any positive renderings are arguably incidental. The idea behind the whistle is that it can make everything right, or at the very least say thanks, because that's what it was meant to do. She considers whether she is capable of saying thanks—wholeheartedly, with feeling.

WordsforLater.doc

Occident: To fall, to set.

Occidental: Of, relating to, or situated in the Occident: western. A member of the Occidental peoples: a person of European ancestry.

Occlude: Obstruct; to come together with opposing surfaces in contact; used of teeth.

Of teeth? As in the sand grit grinding around between my molars?
Here's proof that the laptop and the dictionary don't make everything right. Instead, the cursor and the word reveal the world to be frightening and inconclusive, and they give form to just anything—murder, desire, self-defeat, love. Infidelity.

She imagines James, Lance's brother, standing on the deck of the *USS Reagan*, shielding his eyes from an unrelenting sun to watch inky black clouds billow into the sky from the oil fields of a foreign shore.

She sets the laptop aside, lies on her back, covers her eyes with an arm. With or without words—or, for that matter, blue-bellied lizards—the world is a gaseous place.

“...To leave a message with a pharmaceutical representative, press three now. To contact the grocery or the Super Saver Photo Lab, press

four now. To learn more about our Golden Granary Customer Rewards program, press five now. To hear pharmacy hours...”

WordsforLater.doc

Gaseous: Having the form of or being gas; also: of or relating to gases. Lacking substance or solidity; GASSY <trick phrases and gaseous circumlocutions
—Edwin Newman>

Sand wafts into her nose and mouth, tasting of chalk. She rolls over for a bug’s-eye view. She sees just what’s in front of her but understands there are miles and miles of the stuff: in the beds of canyons, at the bases of buttes, in the crevice of her ass and the holes of her ears. In a photo the banks of sand might look like you could spray them with whipped cream and take a slice, but up close, there’s nothing pure about them. Ants and spiders and snakes make trails, traversing sticks and stickers without notice, tracing Ss in the sand. When she breathes in, her cheek pressed against the warmth, the granules rub at an already sore throat. When she breathes out, dust drifts into her eyes. Her hipbones sink into the sand and her back arches till it aches.

She checks her voice-mail. Lance’s mother Renee has left four messages on her answering machine, telling her to stay away, Lance has a new life she need not interfere with. “You leave that boy alone. He’s getting a new life. He’s got his way, and you got yours.” Gretta wonders whether Renee sees their children as part of Lance’s old life or his new one. She would like to know when he crossed the line between then and now. To Gretta, it is one life—her life—and the lines are made up of prejudice and accident, not time.

She replays two saved messages from her own mother. “Did you register the Hoover yet? You have to register the damned thing if you expect them to honor the warrant. I didn’t buy you a vacuum just so you could break it and not have it fixed. God knows you’ll break it eventually.” She can’t deny it—she’s a breaker of small appliances. Or at least, an abandoner. Her last vacuum was used, her grandmother’s.

She couldn't figure out how to remove the bag, much less find one the right size to replace it. The sales rep at Sears laughed at her. "Wow... this old thing? I don't know..." The bag ultimately became so full of sediment, it exploded and she itched for two days. Rather than admit she didn't have the will to e-bay for antique vacuum bags, she told her mother the thing's motor died a sad death in an incident involving yarn and tacks.

"To delete, press seven..."

Her mother's second message: "Gretta? Is that you? Look, honey, there's something wrong with your voice-mail. I'm just hearing noises and a beep. Are you there? Is this a trick? I'm concerned."

Gretta finishes off a pint of Gilbey's gin and fills it with red sand—a bottle of magic sand, she tells herself—a tool with which she can appropriate herself to an ideal life: motherhood, gainful employment, bay windows, unexpected pleasant circumstances.

Her husband is unclear to her now. She wonders whether she has ever seen him in a moment of clarity. The memory of his face seems overexposed in the harsh afternoon light, a fleshy russet potato of a map. She sees not his parting words, but the words she has used to describe his face: wide, elegant, thick-lipped, summoning, dividing. At times, an undershot jaw. She has been told the dark lips trace the health of liver, of heart. She sees also the words with which he has been described to her: an angry brow, accusatory eyes, a willful stride, a knowing grin.

"What, he wants his land back?" her uncle said once, studying a framed photo Gretta had hung in the hallway—an image of a Red Cloud quote scrawled on the wall of a BIA office during an AIM siege: "They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one, they promised to take our land, and they took it." He shook his head with the force of certain cartoon characters, said, "It ain't never going to happen. They might as well get used to it. Why they always have to walk around so pissed off all the time is beyond me. It's not like we call them savages or shoot them off a horse anymore." He pointed to a black-and-white Gretta had taken

of Lance at L.A.'s Venice Beach, at sunset. "See there? Pissed off. Got an attitude. If I didn't know him personally, I'd say he was a cup-half-empty kind of guy."

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Savage: A person belonging to a primitive society; a brutal person; a rude or unmannerly person, at least in some cultures.

Saveloy: Pig's brains; a ready-cooked, highly seasoned dry sausage.

At one time, Gretta too might have seen him as saveloy do, but now he is just Lance, willing himself to smile for the camera despite the sun setting in his eyes. His is the face she has woken to thousands of mornings—sometimes pleasant, sometimes irritated, usually just reluctant to turn off the alarm and get out of bed. *No*, she reminds herself—now he is not even that familiar face, but an ambiguity pressing against her lower regions, a force that will not have her.

A fire ant chases aimlessly across her thigh; she flicks it off. She's certain she'd be hungry if she didn't have the spins and a massive headache. She sits up, brushes the sand off her arms, checks herself over for ants and other trespassers. When she reaches for her clothes, the alcohol in her blood whirls into motion, flooding her extremities all at once, making her blood flow a fine, decorative pink. She lies back down to catch her breath, steady her vision, but her eyes report a world lacking in vertical indices. The sand consumes her warmly.