

Members of the Story

by Ann Bogle

1

The doctor doesn't fly. She flies without him, alone. She is alone but not alone when the plane lands at LaGuardia. The driver from London Town Car is at baggage, holding a sign for "Memerlou" on a stick. The driver lets her slow to light her cigarette, while he walks hastily, pulling her suitcase.

2

The driver is silent. He is Polish. She is silent. Then she extracts the cell phone from its pocket and dials the doctor by pressing the green button under his photo.

"Have you landed?" he asks her.

"Yes, I'm in the car."

"How is the driver?"

"Fine," she says, not offering to describe him.

3

Ms. Memerlou must deliver the message from the back seat that the doctor will report the driver in case of misconduct. She likes the doctor's solicitous protection but dislikes the procedure. What if the driver were nice? She'd rather sit quietly and assume he will be courteous and take her directly to the hotel.

4

She has worn tall wedge sandals. They are not difficult to walk in, but socially, she feels conscious of her height. The shoes are made of beige "linen" leather with "eggshell" accents *aigus*. The doctor rarely notices shoes unless it is to note their cost in dollars, as if all dollars issue from him.

5

The driver pulls up to the hotel and releases the trunk. She lets herself out of the car and doesn't offer to tip. She once read the Amex bill. The company bills \$155 for the one-way trip. She is only one of the doctor's scarecrow passengers. The doctor transports two other women from Connecticut.

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6

They will drive in the morning to see the leaves change color in Vermont. Ms. Cerumbyk has already checked in to the hotel. That is what the doctor tells Memerlou on the telephone next. Memerlou considers visiting her, calling the front desk, or staying alone without calling her. She decides to wait until morning.

7

Sometimes people forget that the doctor is not a medical doctor. He is a doctor of philosophy in pharmacology. He holds the patent for a bone densifying drug. He has something against cosmetic surgery. He cannot forgive his ex-wife for changing her nose and breasts or allowing their sons to digitize photos of women.

8

In the morning Ms. Logoteal sends a message to Memerlou that they are to meet the doctor in the lobby at eight, to bring sweaters. Memerlou has not seen the doctor since 2005. It's been five years. Before that, it had been twenty years, but she has taken the trip in the town car.

9

The doctor tells Logoteal and Cerumbyk that he had noticed Memerlou before he noticed his wife. That was in the days at Valhalla when all the men played at being young. Logoteal and Cerumbyk act more interested in stories about the men than about his meeting Memerlou. The doctor is alone in admiring Memerlou.

10

Memerlou has learned in reading the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous that the purpose of women meeting in their auxiliary is to express their love for one another. While the trip to see the foliage in Vermont is not related to her Alanon attendance, she is to apply these principles in all her affairs.

11

On the way to Vermont, they stop in Northampton and circle Smith, so the women can see where they did *not* go to college. "Pine nuts"—as Logoteal calls the doctor when he isn't

there—went to Princeton, Logoteal to Pittsburgh, Cerumbyk to Paterson, and Memerlou to Eau Claire before she fled to Texas.

12

Pine nuts (his name is Pinesatz) swerves to park outside a Subway sandwich shop. He tells the women, girls, as they prefer to be called, to go in and order. He ducks next door, to a shop called Calendar Liquor, and buys three pints of Smirnoff. He puts the brown sack in the trunk.

13

Pinesatz says he needs a break. “Wendy, will you drive? You have the prettiest arms.” Logoteal giggles because he's complimented her. Cerumbyk says, “I have pretty hips, so I'll sit in the back with you, Doctor.” Memerlou keeps her seat on the passenger side. She tucks her feet around her own and Logoteal's purses.

14

Memerlou eats her sandwich daintily while Cerumbyk picks at hers. Pinesatz keeps his back straight. He's sitting behind Logoteal where he can watch Memerlou's ear. The sun slants Logoteal's eyes. As a matter of safety, Memerlou offers to look for sunglasses in Logoteal's purse. Logoteal says she left hers at home. Memerlou's are prescription.

15

Wendy L., Marie C., Louane M., Raymond P., Ph.D. Wendy drives. Marie flirts, shimmies her little rack. Raymond watches Louane's ear. Louane feels him watching her and glances at him slyly. Wendy asks for a bite of beef sandwich. Louane puts a piece of it on a yellow napkin she sets on Wendy's thigh.

16

Leave nothing out. Put nothing in. Leave the leaves drying on newspapers in the Vermont sink, drying out of the sun. Her faith is in sun where sun is slipping. She puts faith in animals that die not for her but for a grocer. She gives up meat then lunges at it when hungry.

17

Wendy Logoteal, Marie Cerumbyk, Louane Memerlou, Raymond Pinesatz, Ph.D. go walking. Each woman has brought her flip flops in the car. Each has brought running shoes. Pinesatz is wearing brown wingtips and plaid walking shorts. He's wearing a green pullover. His black socks don't match. One is ribbed; the other is nubby without ribs.

18

"We have too many names," Pinesatz announces. "Our names are ridiculous." The hill is steep. Pinesatz's stride has rigor. The women are laboring, Marie least so because she's a marathon runner. Wendy is conditioned, but she says she wouldn't make it on her bicycle. Louane falls back in her step and in her breathing.

19

Of course he will not pick me, Louane thinks. He tells them he has picked me; then he picks them, first his wife, then Marie. Or true, he has not picked Marie. Perhaps Marie has picked him. Asking Wendy to drive because she has the prettiest arms is a foil. He needs a chauffeur.

20

"What we have is a set-up," Pinesatz says when they reach the top of the hill. Louane feels remorse that they have left the car at the base. *Let Marie fetch it*, Louane thinks. Instead, he asks Wendy to go. "Uphill is easier for the best of us," Pinesatz says. "Downhill is a dream."

21

The scene from the hill is golden. If it were hair, it would be auburn, a double malt. It's orange. It's red. It's pink. It's green. It's brown. Louane lies down near a tree and waits. She waits for Pinesatz to analyze her. She waits for him to satisfy her, acquire her, marry her.

22

The sun leans on her face like a walrus. Her immunity to it is sunscreen. When her eyes open again, she sees the doctor patting Marie's foot. He has bowed to do it. The next car that

comes over the hill is not their rental car. It is a camper driven by a teenager.

23

Pinesatz is standing again. He and Marie seem unaware of time, unaware that Louane is watching them, unaware of waiting for Wendy with the car. Every glance is a hook. Every gleam is a glance. Every stanza is a room. She vies for it. Pinesatz is picking, reordering his principles. "Demand love," Louane murmurs.

24

Then the car comes. If she were Wendy, she would feel like a caddy, but Wendy looks joyful and given to drive. Pinesatz takes the front seat. Louane has little choice but to sit beside Marie in back, devoutly expressing love for women in all her affairs, even as it says in the book.

25

Wendy starts talking. Pinesatz sits awkwardly, a man on the passenger side, as if teaching Wendy to drive, as if he has lost his own license. He is so tall his hair skims the velour paneled ceiling. His knees butt the dash. He pulls the lever under the seat and slides back toward Marie.

26

The purpose of a story is to entertain. The purpose of a story is to set in motion between characters—I would call them "members of the story"—a theme expressed by way of language (one might say "style" or "style" might seem inadequate to describe the part of language) through events as plot.

27

Louane appraises Marie's knees. Marie's knees—her legs entire—are swept together, slightly to one side, toward the center hump in the floor. They are tiny compared to Louane's knees. Louane has an athlete's legs. Marie, the runner, is silk, no sinew anywhere. Louane imagines the tiny shells of insects, their running little arms.

28

Louane ends up staring at the little legs through slitted eyes. Lesbians never stare, she decides. Green-with-envy women stare, women without proper trainings in etiquette, whose fathers didn't swat them. She thinks her face is mobile because of not being hit. If she were a real woman, she would angle her nose toward Pinesatz.

29

When she imagines having sex with a woman, for life, she sneers. It is a sneer, not a smirk. She begins to imagine "doing it" with Raymond if she had knees like Marie's. (She cannot stop gazing.) The difference between Louane and Marie is the difference between "Barbie" and "Dawn" in the doll world.

30

Openly gay women do not stare, but perhaps repressed lesbians do. Perhaps she is a failed writer and a repressed lesbian, just as her classmate wrote of someone like her in *The New Yorker*. She remembers having said with hubris after reading his story that he should have written, "repressed writer and failed lesbian."

31

Louane pretends to speak: *I stare because your knees are small. There is a space between them and the seat ahead of yours. My knees, by contrast, touch the seat ahead of mine. The doctor and I need room for our knees. It might be better if he and I were together.*

32

I acknowledge with veneration the fire that must play between you— you because you're small and he because he's famous for inventing Aulair®. You because you're diminutive and he because he's wealthy. You because you're devotional and he because he's a figure. I imagine him ravishing you with his hand or backing you to a wall.

33

Instead, she says to Cerumbyk, "You stay so small. I eagerly await bone loss." Pinesatz snickers. Wendy taps the steering wheel. Marie gives Louane a gentle smile, as humble as it

is gentle, and Louane imagines that Marie has been through Steps Six and Seven and that God has answered by removing her defects.

34

This barking at God, Louane surrenders. She realizes her mood has turned foul, though her face may remain plain, drawn back in a refusal of discord. It is not that Louane loves God. It is not that Louane loves Raymond. It is that she loves dollars and dolls and fugues. Didn't she name it?

35

"Thirty is old enough," Pinesatz proffers, "to get married, begin a family, publish a book, write a dissertation." Pinesatz was thirty when he hit pay dirt. "In the case of you ladies, thirty was the year to find a man. Have a child. Not that I'd object if one of you wrote a book."

36

"Doctor, that's so prescriptive," Wendy says. "We're all on our own unique timetables. You don't know what might happen. You act like you think you were supposed to have married Louane back then, but you didn't know about Louane. Hell, we don't even know what might happen before we get back to New York."

37

Louane flutters momentarily in the breeze of feminine kindness. "Everything you say seems reasonable," Pinesatz says. "It's just not very useful because not very original. Let's change our topic to something original. What—shall we say? I'll begin by telling you 'this is original'." He chugs on the bottle he brought in the car.

38

"It's rude not to pass that around, Raymond," Louane says, taking on momentarily the life of a shrew. "Pass it to me, at least, since Wendy is driving and Marie doesn't care for it." Louane rolls down her window and lights a cigarette. "Wendy said she can hardly believe it when educated people smoke."

39

"And you disagree with her?" Pinesatz says, turning fully around in his seat to face her. "No wonder you've had bone loss."

"Don't chide her," Marie places her hand on Raymond's shoulder.

"Who should inherit?" Raymond asks Wendy.

"Your children," Wendy tells him, as if she will never have an indirect or devious thought.

40

That evening they cozy into the cabin Raymond rented for the weekend. In fact, it's a house with four bedrooms and a sweeping yard that overlooks a valley turning orange with end-of-summer chill. There hasn't been a thought of rain when Louane feels a wet dot on her forehead. She reaches for her cheek.

41

Raymond goes to a shed at the side of the house where firewood is stacked and loads his arms with logs. Marie tags along, a butterfly on a wire—the wire might be a long hair that extends from his brilliant head, the head that invented Aulair®. The road to the cabin is unpaved.

42

Louane finds her bedroom and totes her suitcase from the trunk up the stairs. She props it open and sorts through her things, as if things could bring her a life shared with a group of people. She tears out a piece of paper and writes a Step 10. She was too jealous today.

43

Wendy is right. We don't know what is supposed to happen. At the end she writes, "dzwill," an expression she learned in Alanon that means God's will. She puts on a loungewear set: gray fleece with a white V-neck and goes in her flip flops downstairs to where Raymond is kneeling, poking a fire.

44

"You say but you don't ask," Louane says. "I saw you later. I noticed you after you noticed your wife. I noticed you after you married your wife. I guess it went quickly. You ought to be grateful that she gave you four sons. Isn't 'gave you' the expression people use—people with children?"

45

"We're in the woods, Louane," Raymond answers. "We're not here to talk about thirty years ago."

"It isn't thirty," Louane says.

"You two like to fight," Wendy remarks. Wendy has reappeared with her hair in a reddish bun. She, too, has unpacked clothes, put on clogs and a zippered sweatshirt.

Marie has gone running.

46

The fire cackles like a woman in its cave. It sends smoke like a signal to rescuers. Wendy uncorks a bottle of white wine and pours it over ice into tall glasses. She fills each glass halfway. She pours aloe-pear juice into the wine. "This is a night for warm seafood salad," she says.

47

Raymond pokes the fire, directing smoke up the chimney, shaking the logs with tongs. Louane lies curled. She says she wishes they had brought hashish. She envisions a boy bringing it to her through the woods on a motorcycle. She envisions a rescue team of three older men and herself in a cocktail dress.

48

"You're going to die, Raymond," Louane says, smiling behind her wine. "You're going to die not knowing of our deaths. It is as if we are not going to die since yours is the central consciousness and with it goes consciousness itself. I'm abbreviating. The idea occurs to me as I lie here waiting."

49

"You're free," Raymond tells her. He looks distractedly at Wendy who brings him his wine.

"What good is freedom?" Louane says. It's true she wants to avoid deception.

Raymond moves to the couch. Football is on TV. He changes the channel. He seems annoyed by the remote and only plays with it for challenge.

50

When Marie comes in, she's barely sweating. Her brown eyes look startled. Raymond watches as she walks across the room and upstairs to shower. They listen to the play of channels. A long brown hair trails off Raymond's collar. Louane holds it up for inspection. No one there even has brown hair.

