

Spring 1999

Arm and the Needle

Arthur Franz IV

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Franz, Arthur IV (1999) "Arm and the Needle," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 51 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss51/11>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

ARM AND THE NEEDLE

DINNER OUT WAS my last, best idea. "Because you're thin," I told her.

"Of course I am," she said.

"Order anything you want," I said. The waiter was doing his job, waiting patiently, smiling at us. Sharon lit up a cigarette.

"What's the point?" she said.

I ordered dinner for both of us. Sharon caught me staring at her crooked yellow bangs. She adjusted her wig.

"There is always a point," I said. "Look." I showed her my little silver pocket watch. With a grand flourish, I pulled up the small winding knob, exposing its throat. The watch hands froze.

"See," I told her, "how easily it stops?"

"Cute," she told me, carefully sipping her water. I held up my wine glass, the chardonnay a deep gold in the poorly lit room.

"Sure you don't want something real to drink?"

She shook her head. "Chemo," she said. "All tastes the same."

I held the glass out to her. "Try," I said.

"No, thank you."

I threw back half the wine and held out the glass by the candle, so she could reach.

"Try," I said.

"No," she said, and pushed the glass away. The glass was sweaty, and she pushed the base first, and I lost my grip and I guess it slipped. The empty wine glass lay between us.

I tried smiling at her. She tried smiling back. The wine I had spilled was creeping to the edge of the table, and I don't know how long we sat there, quiet, watching the stain spread.

The waiter brought us garden salads, loaded baked potatoes, big steaks that flopped over the sides of the plates.

Instead of walking home, Sharon asked to take the bus.

"It's only seven blocks," I told her.

"It's cold out here," she whispered.

To get out of the wind, Sharon sat on the covered bench

next to an old toothless man. I draped my black coat around her shoulders and she shrugged it into place, pulling it across her chest. She started rummaging through my coat pockets. She found my Wayfarers and grunted. I removed my silver flask of whiskey from my back pocket and took a long, thoughtful, throat-burning swallow. When I stopped, the flask felt lighter.

"Is this what you're looking for?" I asked her. She nodded. Sharon took it from me, barely sipped from it like a baby bird, and put it in her purse.

"No more tonight, OK?" she told me.

"Sure, no more for you," I said, smiling. "You've reached your limit. We're cutting you off."

She wasn't smiling. She wasn't going to give the flask back.

"Hey, come on. The night is young." I held open my hands to the old man. "Can you believe this?" I asked him. He didn't move.

"Come on, baby," I said, "why you do me like this?"

"You're stumbling, sweetheart," Sharon said.

"I am not." Sharon looked away. The old man watched for the bus down the street. I said it kind of loud.

Sharon put on my sunglasses. She swiveled towards the old man, tapping him on the knee until he looked at her.

"Look," she said, the black of the glasses accenting her red lips, yellow wig. "I'm a queen of the soap operas."

Under the bright humming lights, Sharon looked fluorescent, and the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth shone like the white scratches keyed into the plexiglass behind her. Sharon was very animated, smiling at that old man the way starlets do when signing head shots for adoring fans. Sharon couldn't deal with silence, and strove always to fill any dead part of a conversation with something "familiar and gay," as she would say. That poor old guy. He handled it well, I guess. He didn't say a word, just let her pat his leg and make up stories about how gloriously the cast was treating her, how the maid was letting her wall of acting trophies collect dust. No, that old guy just looked at her. Maybe he saw how transparent her teeth looked, how thin her fingers seemed against the fat, lead-colored veins on the back of her hand, how her eyebrows were no more than tracings in a light pencil.

"Darling," I said, my hands stretched out dramatically towards

her. Sharon loved it when I played along. "Darling you look heavenly tonight."

I sat down between Sharon and the old guy. She seemed genuinely surprised. She took the sunglasses off, and her eyes were wet. Those eyes were what I had loved about her, once. They used to be a rich blue, but now were much paler, like a poster that's been in the sun too long.

I rubbed my nose under Sharon's ear. That always made her crazy, the whole four years we were together. She murmured a little protest, wiggled, but it was nothing a little persistence couldn't cure. I felt her head fold over mine, our cheeks touching. Sharon was rubbing the cold Wayfarer lenses under my chin. And as I kissed her awhile in the windy night, under the humming fluorescent lights of a bus stop, I dropped my free hand between her legs and slipped it into her purse. I stood up fast, the silver flask in my left hand, bright and triumphant against the dark violet clouds.

Sharon's face was twisted and her neck was slick where I was kissing it. My nose was wet and cold. I closed my eyes and took a drink. When I peeked, her face was the same. I took another drink, longer this time, tilting my head way back, looking straight up into the night, and the whiskey warmed me. The flask was very light, the faint tapping when I shook it said a thimbleful was left. When I looked again, Sharon was frisking my coat for something. I held out the flask to her.

"Wanna kill it?"

Sharon did not look up. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She slipped the sunglasses back on, and fumbled in her purse for a cigarette.

Somewhere between the dinner salad and the check I was supposed to have ended it. I had it planned so well, too. She's very calm, rational. *I understand*, she says, *I wouldn't want to watch it happen to you, either*. I pay the check, tip very well, call her a cab, and, with a peck on the cheek, it's done.

I in no way intended, at any time, to be standing on the stairs to her loft.

Sharon was hunched by her door with a bundle of keys, the

echo of the opened lock bounding down the stairs, when I said, "I should probably get going."

"You can't stay tonight?" she asked.

"I shouldn't."

Sharon was not a stupid woman, just one who didn't want to face facts.

"It's the holidays," she said, as if that explained everything.

"True," I said, and stepped backwards two steps, holding onto the rail.

She looked really surprised. "Well at least come have a drink." The door downstairs opened, the breeze from outside fanned hair into her eyes. She pushed it aside, grinning.

"Come on," she said, "just a drink?"

I checked my watch. "A short one," I said.

Sharon fumbled around in the fridge. She kept popping her head over the refrigerator door and seemed shocked when I was still there. I had, after all, agreed on one drink. She pulled out a festive red and green carton of eggnog. She was using her interview smile, all teeth.

I sat on the couch while Sharon cut the eggnog with rum.

"Nutmeg?" she asked.

"Uh. . . yeah. Sure."

"Sit back," she said. "Relax. You look all tense."

I was sitting on the edge of a sofa cushion. I smiled meekly at her but did not move. She stood very still, the short bottle of nutmeg poised over the cold yellow drinks, and I knew she would stay just like that, eyeing me, until I did what she said. So I slid back and settled into a corner of the sofa, gingerly, like I was on a small boat too easily overturned.

She put the glass down on the coffee table out of reach. The top of my drink was well dusted with nutmeg. Hers was clean and thick, missing rum.

"You're not having any spice?" I asked her.

Sharon looked at me coldly, a quick moment, then snatched up the bottle. She dumped spice into her glass. It came out in old clumps, dirty islands floating on her drink. She looked like she was going to cry.

I slid over towards her but she held up her hand. I stopped. Sharon slowly, methodically spooned out the brown clumps into

the ashtray. She lit up a cigarette, then took a sip of her drink. She slurped when she drank. I killed mine quickly, watch in hand. She studied me. Outside the loft windows, the city was smothered in dark clouds. We sat there a long while on the verge of speaking.

Big chunks of ice in her drink had frozen together, the whole mass sliding up and down in her glass. I watched her. She was working her tongue below the ice, licking at the reservoir of egg-nog beneath when the whole chunk popped her in the nose. It caught her off guard, and suddenly, beautifully, she was grinning. I was too. A bead of yellow shivered on the tip of her nose.

"You know what'll melt this ice?" she said. Sharon reached across the table and poured rum in her glass. The ice popped.

"Guess I'm off then," I said.

"You're going to make me drink alone?" Sharon took a big swallow of white rum, and choked it down. She was making faces.

"Damn," she said, "that's smooth!"

"It's just. . . I'm not sure I have the time."

She looked at me seriously, honestly. Sharon said, "We have all the time you want." She was squeezing the neck of the rum bottle.

I am, at my core, hopelessly weak.

"OK," I told her, "I've got about five minutes."

Sharon got up and went straight for her albums. The couch was lumpy and I spent a minute trying to smooth a spot out, but it was no use. Her hands worked quickly in the colorful stack of albums. They were on the floor, arranged like books, and Sharon was flicking their spines from right to left with her pinkie. Like a card trick, one appeared in her hand.

"This one," she said. "My great-grandmother's favorite. I was 11 when she first played it for me, to drown out my family's New Year's drinking."

"I remember the story, OK?" I told her. She was quiet. I started fiddling with my pocket watch, unlinking the chain, winding the knob, tapping my initials on the silvered back. Sharon had bought me that watch, a long time ago. I held it up and showed her the looping script of my initials. I smiled. Sharon

stopped looking at me, tipped the bottle back and swallowed, wincing hard.

“Careful,” I told her. Something in me wanted to go to her, to rub her shoulders, but I stayed on the couch. She was busy putting the record on.

Sharon said, “Can we hear the whole thing?” I checked the time, but the hands of my watch had stopped moving. I pushed the knob back in. Then, thinking better of it, I pulled the knob back out.

“Put it on,” I said, “and we’ll see.”

The needle skipped, clip-clop clip-clop, and dusty burlesque horns mingled in harmony with the hollow tin plinking of piano. I had heard it before. When we first started sleeping together, Sharon liked the radio on this AM oldies station, a ‘40s format. The whole first year some DJ must have been in love with that tune because we heard it damn near every night. So it seemed every night I heard this story from Sharon, curled up in white sheets, about how her friends from high school couldn’t ring in the New Year without this song. Like it was some tradition.

Sharon was standing by the loveseat, eyes on the spinning turntable, looking sad. The phonograph spun. The record stopped, the arm lifted the needle automatically to bed, and even long after the spinning had stopped she did not move. It was awkward. I got an idea.

I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to me with those pale blue eyes, so big, so sad. The damn song had done that to her. I reached out my hand and she closed her eyes, breathed in deeply. And I took the bottle from her. By the coffee table, I poured us both a finger of rum. I placed her glass in her hand.

“Let’s say we start a new tradition,” I said. “Mind if I play a tune?”

Sharon exhaled, a wheezy sigh. “Sure,” she said. She sipped her drink, wincing.

I played Chopin. It was a record I’d bought for her long ago, when her hair smelled light as new snow. Sharon did not collect compact disks, ever, swearing up and down that music sounded better on vinyl. When I gave her this album, she smiled big and hugged it to her chest. I told her it took me back to carriages in the rain, to cobblestone streets with wet people under soaked

awnings, and how silly they were to worry about staying dry. I told her lots of things.

"Yeah," she would say, no matter what I told her, "I can almost hear that."

Sharon tilted her head closer to the music and kept drinking. She killed that finger of rum quickly and retreated to the bottle. She was very pretty, once. But then she looked so dejected, slumping her shoulders as she stood by the record player, that it seemed only the tightness of her white sweater or the firmness of her blue jeans kept her in place, kept her from melting to the floor. She was swaying chaotically with the music, back and forth, like a bridge in the wind.

"The room is spinning," she said. I helped her to the sofa, propped her head up on the armrest. My fingers were in her wig. It crackled from so much hair spray. A few strands were loose and I tucked them behind her ear with my thumb. Sharon's cheek was warm from all the rum. She tried to cradle my hand softly against her shoulder, like a pillow, but I wiggled my fingers free.

"It's getting late," I told her.

She shook her head no. Sharon was drunk, sweating, she looked waxy, her lips were pale. I couldn't stand to see her like that. A red stain had collected on the lips of the bottle. I took it from her and poured myself a shorty.

"Get me a cigarette," she said. She was out of it. "Get me another drink."

"I'm going," I said again, "it's late."

"It's early," she started, but there was no more actress in her. Sharon looked half dead.

There were nights, years ago, when I was the one on the couch. But it was temporary, and my own fault. She used to chastise me, softly, the sweetness of her perfume making me ill. But she would kiss me on the forehead, and I would sink into the cushions, sink deeply to sleep.

I bent down and kissed her. I kissed her on the lips because I refused to put my lips close to that wig. I tasted rum, eggnog, a hint of steak. She did not return my kiss—all she could do was lie there.

And I knew she'd be the same six months from now, her white bones pocked with cancer, her veins sucking on tubes

governed by a grey box with a grey, digital readout, tubes that give the magic water that stings like ice crystals in her arm, and over the click and whirr of the morphine drip she'd open her sweaty eyes and thank me, can you believe it, *thank me*, for the extra time. Even if her room, with its antiseptic walls and plastic sheets, were empty.

I tugged the comforter onto the floor, peeled back her sheets. They were a shiny material, smooth, sheets that when rubbed between two fingers sound like elk walking in snow. I got her ready for bed; all she had on was a big T-shirt that fell to her thighs. When I touched her, though, I felt it, the cancer, hard at work.

I made love to her that night, softly, like she was a paper lantern.