

THE COAST

one

Lexa McCaskill ran both hands through her coppery hair, adding up appetites.

Non-wedding for 50, the job slip on the refrigerator door read. But fifty, when it came to party food, in her experience meant either forty grazers or sixty, depending on whether last-minute lightning strikes of invitations offset the no-shows. She still marveled at how people treated guest lists like poker hands, panicking when their hole cards sent regrets and then bluffing wildly to try to fill out the room. The last occasion she did the catering for, she had overheard the host introducing his tai chi instructor around!

[So if this is one that turns into a full house and jokers showing, what do I fill them up with--bunny food or money food?]

Handwritten notes:
I was, I'd consider dropping this. I made me think that Lexa has Carter. From the 10. And p 2 top see me too?

Now she remembered that tonight's was a lakefront techie bunch, whose style was to balance their plates with a dab of this and an atom of that while comparing the latest paraphernalia of their health clubs. Go strong on dip dishes and let them eat their treadmill hearts out if the smoked salmon and the Swede balls run short, she decided.

While she religiously jotted down today's chores ~~thing by thing~~ onto stickits, a habit picked up by osmosis from Mitch, she was restless to head outside. Out the kitchen window the beaming morning weather was almost enough to make a person forget Seattle's rainblotter reputation. In celebration the jazz jockey on KPLU was playing the Eckstine-Vaughan cut of "Ain't It Clear." The window-high bush of sunlit white rhododendron blossoms was nodding along in the Puget Sound breeze. She hoped the sun would hold for Mitch while he flew back up the coast. He seemed to need all the warming up he could get, these days.

[Whoa, though. That sounds dangerously like married, doesn't it.]

Lexa, at forty, long since had adjusted to a lot of life's doubletalk, but modern living-together still took some tiptoeing through the terms. When they started at this-- when she and Mitch Rozier swallowed away what they had done to Travis--she and for that matter Mitch had to get used to being called a Significant Other. Then along came the census-takers who slapped on them the information that they had become POSSLQs,

It doesn't, particularly, cut?

ok?

played?

nodded?

Persons of Opposite Sex in Same Living Quarters. Now all of a sudden the expression for what they were to each other seemed to be Spousal Equivalent, which possibly was one reason Mitch looked so furrowed up lately.

[...*voovoo doowawdy dawdy doo,*] earthly mischief in every Sarah Vaughan note,

“and ain't...it...clearrrrrr.”

Lexa killed the radio, and went into the backyard to the herb bed and started gathering burnet to flavor the vegetable dip. From his garden patch next door where he was bent over from the waist to stab slugs with a trowel, their landlord Ingvaldson watched her suspiciously. He was possessive of Mitch, and as yet Lexa's presence--now six years--was something he preferred not to acknowledge.

“Morning, Henry,” she called over to him. “Your slug supply holding out okay or should I send over some of mine?”

“Yah, I got plenty,” Ingvaldson said moodily and eviscerated a six-inch-long banana slug.

A bit of grin twitched on Lexa as she snipped stems of burnet and Ingvaldson went back to pretending she was nowhere in sight. There was an ocean between the crabby old fisherman and her, literally. He liked to fill Mitch full of tales of the North Pacific because Mitch did not know a bowline from a bulkhead, but Lexa most definitely

is this necessary?

ok?

did, having cooked on fishboats out of Sitka and Yakutat and Kodiak. A woman who had trawled farther north than Henry Ingvaldson was always going to be grounds for consternation.

Back in the kitchen, whistling to herself for the company of it, she pulled out her next to largest mixing bowl. This was on the early side to be making the vegetable dip, but she had learned that no one at a catered shindig could tell ~~anyway~~ that the dip had been sitting in the refrigerator most of the day. Whereas if the carrot sticks tasted more than a minute old, there would be Handel Choruses of whining. So, stir now, chop later, always a sound policy. She spooned globs of yogurt and mayonnaise into the big bowl, followed those with judicious sloshes of buttermilk, and began to whisk the mixture, her square rugged hands liking to be doing something.

Every so often she caught one of her customers staring at these hands, attention snagged on the glaring white swaths of scar across the base of both palms. In the territory of suicide try, yet not quite on target across the wrists, which caused the uncertainty in those stares. Barbwire was responsible, she never bothered to tell the customers. She had put all her weight on the wire stretcher, one last notch, her father rummaging in the Dodge Power Wagon they used for fixing fence when he thought to call out "Hey, petunia, I think that's about enou--" but the barbwire already snapping with a murderous

van, I
could see his
he could
he'll see how
he couldn't
do

under

twang and sharp metal whipping across the bottoms of her clenched hands, the next thing she knew was the white face of her father as he tore apart a grease gun and globbed grease onto her slashes to stop the flowing blood. She was thirteen then, and, scarred for life, was mad only that she would have to forfeit the entry money for her and her roan Jasper in the barrel race at the Gros Ventre rodeo the next week.

Up from those hard-used hands, Alexandra Marie McCaskill--married name, Lexa Mudd; she knew that last name was not Travis's fault, but it hadn't helped--was what her parents' generation liked to term "presentable" and she herself had always calculated out as no more than a C+. To start with the plus side, there was the family flag of the McCaskills, that hair, an enviable royal rich red mane on her sister and a shading toward burnished copper in Lexa's page-boy cut. Another McCaskill attribute, though, Lexa could have done with less of, the expansive upper lip which must have come from generation after generation of ancestors' pursed expressions at their circumstances back in stony Scotland. The handsome gray eyes of that musing clan had *not* come down to her, only a faded sea color. Face a bit too square and unplanned. Nose a bit saucy. It all added up to what she ruefully knew was a permanent kid-sister look, which had not been made any easier by growing up alongside ^{her} the sister, ~~she had~~, who possessed the power to cloud men's minds. The pair weren't even in the same contest on figure, Mariah lanky and

OK?

shouldery as the McCaskill men had been while she was more sturdily consigned to their mother's side of the family, chesty and puckish. So far, Lexa had managed to stay a few judicious pounds away from stocky even though, to Mitch's constant wonderment, she ate whatever presented itself.

Including now a contemplative tablespoonful of vegetable dip at eight in the morning, as she tried to figure out why it tasted so blah.

Right, whizbang chef, remember the trip into the backyard?

She cut the frilly shamrock leaves of the burnet off the stems, minced the tiny pile with a butcher knife, then stirred their green flecks mightily into the bowl of dip, the better to have the catered-to ask, "Ooh, what gives it that cucumber-y taste?"

With the dip stowed on the bottom shelf of the crammed refrigerator, she consulted its door again, the thicket of cartoons, snapshots, and other clutter there that served as the almanac, calendar, account book, album, and footnotes of life in this household. Here was a young, young Mitch pictured as a college sophomore, grinning rather queasily amid the fallen cornices at the University of Washington after the '65 quake. And there his favorite shot of her, on a rocky shore: copper hair against the salal, rubber boots and a yellow rainsuit, her arms full of beach find; peeking around her hip was the square of duct tape that reinforced the seat of the rainpants. Next, tucked

alongside a forest of grocery coupons, the latest postcard from Mariah on her Fuji Fellowship to wander the world for a year and do her photography. The Bay of Naples this time, ~~the turkey~~. *Shooting the ash outlines of the long-gone in Pompeii today,* Mariah's handwriting on the back a slanting rain of ink. *Makes a pair with the shadow burned into the wall at Hiroshima. Scotland next for, you guessed it, lighthouses. Then home, Brit Airways #99 on the 12th. See you at SeaTac, honeykins. Sibling love, M McC.*

Okay, Lexa told herself with a mix of pride and rue when those postcards came winging in from the storied corners of the world week after week, one McCaskill sister has it made.

One to go.

[Nibbling her lip], she arranged today's stuck-on chores down the door in the order she ought to get to them: pick up smoked salmon and salad makings, prepare the meatballs, prepare the veggies...

Prepare Mitch, for that matter. Her regular pourer, Brad, who like three-fourths of the males in Seattle dreamed of making his living by playing music, rarely got gigs but he had one tonight. So Mitch did not know it yet but he was going to have to tend bar.

From Lexa's point of view he was perfectly fitted to ^{the job} be a bartender, since he didn't indulge in alcohol. But he never liked taking orders, even if it was only "White wine, please." And tonight's catering job was way over east of Lake Washington, in the land of

OK? Again! was a bit missed by Lexa's cuteness in the get up party.

OK?

software that he called Cyberia, so that was not going to be popular with him either.

Could be quite a night in the food field, she warned herself.

It about blew her mind sometimes, the long arithmetic of chance that had delivered her here, to this, to life with him. Her father would have said she took the uphill way around. But a hilly day at a time, sometimes bumpy minute to minute, she and Mitch had been sorting out living together, right from the morning when it occurred to both of them that her stay under this roof seemed to be more than temporary.

They hadn't made it out of bed yet, skin still peeping at other skin, before Mitch broached, "This takes some getting used to, you know."

Did she ever. Here she was under the sheets, more or less, with a guy big enough to eat hay but who hung around with holy ghosts like Thoreau for a living. One minute Mitch was Mr. Love Handles of Steel and the next he was a sponge for language. Lexa's heart was, so to speak, still trying to catch its breath.

"What," she'd retorted, kidding but not, "getting laid without dating?"

"That I can probably adjust to," he allowed, small wry smile on his big face. "I meant, more like playing house. How do we split--divide up? Who's going to do the laundry?"

Wow,
I find
that
attempts to
convince me was
we talk
a bit awkward
too much
attention!
And I think
it works
without
But up to
you.

“Mmm, I see what you mean.” They eyed each other across the love-mussed bedcovers. After a moment, Lexa said, “How about you do it for the first year, then it’ll be my turn the next.”

“A year?”

“You’ve been doing it practically forever, haven’t you? A year is shorter than forever, last I knew.”

[“Big gain there, I guess. Checkbook?”

“I’ll--all yours,” she switched to, seeing his expression start to change.] *Jeez, she’d thought, a person has to be really quick at this stuff, it looks like.* “Weekend breakfasts?” she tackled him with.

[“I’ll take..] Saturday. No, wait, *Sunday*,” he amended and got from her the grin that said *right guess*.

So was it always going to be guesswork? she had to ask herself these days.

Frowning, she did one last inventory of the notes thick as shingles on the refrigerator door and peeled off the one that read **Mitch Wed.-Fri. Berkeley confce/Hotel Durant--then Frisco/Jocelyn**, wondering how that went last night, his get-together with his daughter the prickly pear.

*Idlaed
if you could
eliminate
the last of
the
Mr. Servino
about the
Frigo*

two

“People who get their news from *Doonesbury*,” this Halloween refugee who was his grown daughter made fun of him--Mitch had to hope it was fun--as the pair of them put on blades. “What happens when you and Lexa run out of refrigerator magnets?”

“Boopsie will have a Web site by then,” he said, trying to catch up as Jocelyn began to coast on her rollerblades.

Around them the horde on wheels kept thickening as more skaters pumped across the Embarcadero and glissaded onto the sidewalk in front of the Ferry Building. Several hundred, Friday-nighted to their pierced eyebrows and gaudy fingernails, already had congregated beneath the building’s clock tower and were milling around in various states of balance like ^{students at} a ballet school having a costume party. “How rav!” and “Dressed for

or cut?

excess!" sang this tribe of recreational outlaws. In khaki slacks and rental black knee pads and a messageless yellow T-shirt, Mitch felt next thing to naked. One or another of Jocelyn's hues--orange tank top, chartreuse leotards, knee pads painted a disturbing fleshy pink--flared in the corner of his vision as he and she rode their skates around clumps of waiting bladers. Not that he couldn't have kept track of her just by the way she jangled. Wherever Jocelyn got her fashion news from, it dictated a wristwatch with an industrial-strength expansion band, deliberately too big so that it slid up and down her arm. ^{and} ~~At her wrist she wore~~ a bracelet made of what seemed to be links of an old tire chain, to blockade the watch from flying off. Time slithering back and forth, clinking and clanking ominously, Mitch did not need to be reminded of.

"Whatever. Advertising was so, you know, not me. I'm jacked on marketing now," Jocelyn drawled her way back to where they had been in the conversation before he brought down on himself that accusation of hopeless Doonesburial. (On himself and Lexa, which doubly smarted. So much for nonchalantly reporting on your current household partner to the child of your ex-wife's spiteful loins.) All he'd done was confess he had never heard of Jocelyn's latest employer, something called Juice Up, then stepped in it deeper by asking if she had written any juicy ads lately.)

“Juice Ups are free-standing health drink kiosks,” she severely recited for his benefit, although he still couldn’t tell whether this mantra was advertising or marketing. “They’re kind of Starbucks out on the sidewalk, only citrus. Hey, really, you never’ve tried one?”

“Jocelyn, I don’t want to seem anti-citrus or anything, but...” This marked her fourth fresh occupation that he knew of. (Eyes cool in their applied shadows,) hers the not yet moulded face of a growing girl there behind the swaying hank of reddened hair that fell past her left ear to her collarbone, she nonetheless had turned twenty-five, the same age her parents had been when they tripped into marriage and produced her, and she already was a couple of careers ahead of Mitch (even if he counted college football) and four ahead of her mother. Mitch wondered whether Jocelyn’s generation kept some kind of family album of their jobs.

“*We rolling!*” someone bellowed in echo of the tower clock’s first deep note, and by its eighth chime, were they ever. In one single accelerating commotion the massed rollerbladers let themselves loose, each of them a polymer marble in the spill that rolled toward Fisherman’s Wharf. Tourists in rental cars wildly pulled over at the sight of this meteor shower of get-ups, the closets of San Francisco airborne on low-flying naiads and masquers, leftover Wavy Gravys and incipient Courtney Loves, [retro flappers, bare-

Syntax?
I'd cut
the eye
bit.

someone
more

could
cut
abit?

midriffed bodybuilders in stark Spandex,] seasoned exhibitionists and heart-in-throat first-timers [alike borne on boots speedy as runaway midget locomotives.] Skating the rim of the city, the rolling multitude hung a left at Bay Street and aimed its thundering wheels toward Fort Mason.

Carefully matching Jocelyn stride for stride [somewhere near the middle of the throng,] finding the side-to-side push and glide rhythm of the exercise laps he'd lately been taking on skates, Mitch one more time told himself to quit worrying. Hadn't he biked across Iowa, kayaked Glacier Bay? As much of Mitch as there was, he needed to keep fit or watch himself inflate enough to leave the earth.

So, when he called Jocelyn about getting together before he flew home and she pleaded this weekly habit of skimming through the city (grooved San Franciscan that she was, after a half-year here), he had been able to say he did some rollerblading, too. [Any was some, right?]

"That'll work," she replied, which it had taken him a moment to decipher as an invitation to skate along with her. Or a challenge.

[And now they were] on the long straight glide past the Marina, where necklaces of lights out in the bay showed off the Golden Gate Bridge, [when from nowhere] a bareshouldered young man in salmon-colored overalls scooted up between Jocelyn and

Man,
I think you
could cut a
bit of the
rollerblading
scene
It's over 5 pages
A lot

Mitch. Asian lithe and American friction-free, he seemed paused even as the three of them rocketed along side by side by side. "Primo outfit, Joss," he yelled above the *chung chung chung* sound of urethane wheels. Appraising Mitch and their family resemblance, he gave Jocelyn a knowing look, ~~left the advice~~ ^{he said,} "Be your blades!" and sped ahead like a breakaway hockey player.

Of the next many minutes of pushing and gliding, pumping and striding, Mitch later could summon up [the amplified wail of a sidewalk singer at the corner of Marina and Divisadero unsuccessfully bombarding the whizzing procession with "JeSUS is the waayyy, the truth and the *light!*" and then] only a blur as the skating swarm honed in on the Palace of Fine Arts, a hundred bladers at a time peeling into its rotunda and joining hands to form a whirling roller snake there beneath the odd old umber orange-squeezer-of-Caesar dome. [Mitch in some surprise at finding himself holding hands with a character who had a kazoo in his mouth letting out bleats like a dwarf foghorn as the merry-go-round of skaters spun.] Then, centrifuged out to the columns around the rim of the rotunda, Mitch propped gratefully beside other bladers catching their breath (in his case, there was a lot of breath to catch) as bottled water popped into every set of hands, Jocelyn chugging down copious glugs of hers (eat your heart out, Juice Up, registered on

Mitch) before the final six miles through this lovely mischievous city which from Lombard Street onward was, God help the beginning rollerblader, a labyrinth of hills.

Ahead of Mitch and Jocelyn as they made the turn off Lombard, the little red reflectors on the back of skaters' helmets straggled up, up, up in the night like Christmas lights strung too thin. A vast apprehension sucked into Mitch. The conference he had been covering in Berkeley was called "Thinking Like a Mountain: The Place of Nature in a New Millennium." If he thought like the ski-slope street rearing in front of him at this instant, the mental result would be a hideous subterranean giggle at how much trouble humankind still had with uphill.

While he clambered at the slope in imitation of Jocelyn's short digging strides, what he tried not to think about was how many times his pounding heart had already beat, in fifty years.

Huffing and puffing, he floundered to a halt at the first plateau of intersection when Jocelyn called over to him, "Ready to skitch?" When a bread truck came laboring up the street, she grabbed onto the rear bumper, Mitch following suit, each sitting back on their skates for the hitchhike up the hill. [They passed rowhouses of all pastel flavors, the corner of every block given over to coin laundries or tiny restaurants with prices more savage than dining with panthers.] Oh, San Francisco, dear and doomed, stacked so

if you don't cut,
must fix
signature

we!

prettily on tectonic fracture. Mitch knew he ought to be writing in his head, tucking away fragments for ^{his} use ~~when he did the~~ piece about the conference. But clinging to a truck bumper took a surprising amount of concentration.

[At the top where they and the truck gratefully let go of each other lay Broadway, at least its Baghdad-by-the-Pacific version, and a sane few level blocks before the route crouched and dived underground.] The Broadway tunnel, a third of a mile of amplified skatewheel sounds and infinitely repeated tiny yellow tiles, not to mention unamused car traffic, disoriented Mitch a bit. It was like being subjected to hearing and eyesight tests while trying to waltz.

"EEEEhooo!"

Halfway through this treacherous echo chamber, the shriek Jocelyn let out scared him half to death.

Lurching to look around at her, Mitch was met with a moon of grin that informed him her whoop had been for the absolute ki-yi kick of it. Right. Drive another stake into old dad. He managed a pale smile ~~back at her~~ and floundered into stride again as she tore along ahead of him. [Pleased as a Comanche who had just counted coup, she nonetheless did look like a hurtling pumpkin in that orange tank top.] Once more Mitch felt an obscure genealogical guilt that instead of Marnie's fine-boned features, Jocelyn had been

handed his bulk. Other than that, the only gene this father and daughter seemed to share was the shape of a rollerblade wheel.

They swooped out of the tunnel into a garlic precinct of North Beach.

“Hey, wait.”

Breathing heavily, very heavily, Mitch managed to halt Jocelyn at the first street corner. “Let’s watch, a minute.”

“You like to watch?” Jocelyn said in insinuating imitation, but stayed next to him, turning in restless circles.

Skaters shot out of the tunnel in platoons, Mitch saw, a sorting of some kind occurring for this passage. Here came pairs of women in shimmy dresses holding hands, and now men in sequins line-dancing.

And next the half-Asian young Nureyev in overalls again, impossibly coasting sideways, even more impossibly each foot pointing an opposite direction in line with his spreadeagled arms, a human parallelogram from shoulder blades down to rollerblades as he drifted by like a beautiful winged statue passing. “Go ninja, Joss!” [the flat knee-bent form of him] ^{he} called out as he cruised around their corner in an effortless lean and set sail through Chinatown for Union Square and the stretch turn toward the Ferry Building.

*haha
without
the pro or
"stay business"*

[As further skating contingents erupted from the tunnel like circus acts,] Jocelyn gradually stopped twirling on her blades and settled into watching beside Mitch. Knowing better, he still couldn't help but seize the moment as a hope, maybe, that she was putting away the arsenal of resentment. This made twice that he and she had got together this year, Seattle and here. He would need to think all the way back to be sure, but twice seemed to him a new record in the twenty years since Marnie catapulted herself and the kids to Key West. ("Why'd you stop there?" Mitch had howled down thousands of miles of phone line at her. "Wouldn't they let you behind the barbed wire at Guantanamo?") Before that there had been a determined try at split custody but it turned out to be cruelty to small creatures, the bewildered kids never with either him or Marnie long enough to know where their next beddie-bye would take place. ~~And so~~ Mitch, knowing he would be condemned but quite used to it from life with Marnie, gave over daughter and son ~~to her~~ and away she went with them as far as she could and still have the U.S. Mail deliver child support checks.

[Parked on her blades next to Mitch,] Jocelyn eyed ^{Mitch} him, wondering why he felt he had to do this, make like he wanted to connect at last, after everything.

You're some late, Dadspace. You and Moms hit this time where you couldn't stand each other, way back there. So now I'm supposed to what? Just say "No prob, I never did want a father around anyway, Momso's hairball sailboarders did just fine?"

But chill as she tried to be, she kept noticing his sopping wet T-shirt, the sheen of sweat rolling ~~down~~ out of his wavy ~~black~~ hair crested with a little gray, the seismic rise and fall of his chest. He looked buff enough, for his age. But taking some more time here on the corner probably wouldn't hurt. She didn't want him going dead in the midst of this. She thought she did not want that.

He heard Jocelyn rattle a bit beside him. Joss, the kid in overalls called her. Chinese for *idol*. [But weren't Chinese idols as plump as butterballs?] What, Mitch wondered now, had he and Marnie been thinking of when they picked a name as breakable as 'Jocelyn'? ^{Or, for that matter,} ~~Evidently the same thing~~ as when they christened her brother 'Laurits' and almost before he was done teething ~~he was stuck~~ ^{him} with the nickname 'Ritz'.

But it wasn't nicknames that nicked a family to death, was it. He closed his eyes a moment, against the record of domestic misadventure brought ~~west~~ ^{closer} to him again with Jocelyn's move to his coast. Bad tempers and worse sighs, Marnie's toy store of a brain versus his infatuation with whatever story he was working on that week, the mattress the

only surface in the house they put any effort into, the two kids too soon--he could read it off like an old traffic ticket: 'Speeding into marriage while under the influence.'

[Now this other traffic. He was about to declare himself ready for tonight's last lap of rollerblading when the stench hit his nose, quick as the flash of match next to him.

Over the cigarette she just had lit, Jocelyn blew out the wooden kitchen match from the bullet-like container she carried on her belt, Mitch involuntarily yanking his head back from the sulphur aftermath.

"Sor-ry," she offered in a peeved tone, shooing her smoke away from him.

"Didn't meant to second-hand you." It has come to this, he noted. People who will not give you the ice off their heart apologizing for letting their cigarette smoke touch you.

Jocelyn's surprise showed when he grinned grimly and said:

"What, never been around anybody who's allergic to matches before?"

Mitch was pleased to see she couldn't tell whether or not he was kidding. [Given their family history or lack of, it couldn't hurt for him to be a different specimen than the one she had always been able to label simply Missing Dad. For both of them to know less about each other than met the eye, and start again from there.]

After all, the cartoon collection on his and Lexa's refrigerator wasn't *Doonesbury*, it was *The Far Side*.]

Handwritten notes in a large bracket on the left side of the page:
"I can, my chance
you want to
close chapter
with
" Speaking two
marriage
while
under the
influence."
It does more
from any thing
in chap. 1 to
announce
the comment
shut down on
subject in
Mitch Lexa
handbook.

cut?

three

Whether these particular mountains were thinking or not, they were showing unclouded brows as they ~~came~~^{ed} parading past the right-hand wingtip when Mitch flew back to Seattle in the morning.

Lassen and Shasta, Jefferson and Hood, Adams and Rainier, the fire alps of the Cascade Range shone in the sun one after another, dormant pyramids of glacier and snow higher than hell and once upon a time as potent. He knew that on a day this drastically clear even the lonesome cone to the north, blue-white Mount Baker, would be out and waiting to make its appearance when the plane hooked ~~around~~ above Lake Washington into the SeaTac landing pattern.

More than willing to be seduced by every blessed one of them rather than tackle the Berkeley conference lurking in the laptop on his tray table, Mitch discovered over Shasta and Lassen he could catch a rare good look at each volcano's birthmark, its frozen scar of crater, by craning over the woman in the window seat. Elderly and teak-colored, Indonesian to judge by her head-to-toe batik garb, she watched him with the flat attention of a sentry, which he was used to. Particularly on airplanes, people seated next to Mitch reacted as though they were being forced to share their picnic blanket with a St. Bernard.

It was on the tip of his tongue ~~to attempt~~ to tell her he had a son teaching English in Jakarta, but even if she understood, there were dead ends immediately ahead in that kind of conversation. Where in that city did Ritz live? No idea. Was he married? Not by last secondhand report. If Jocelyn was icy about Mitch taking himself off the battlefield of their childhood, Ritz was the silent Antarctic. No, the Rozier version of fatherhood would not do anything much for international relations. Mitch gave the woman a smile that turned out not to be worth the effort either, and went back to peering down at the restless earth below.

Edgy and rapt, shifting in the constraint of the plane seat, he could not escape the feeling that he was in suspension in more ways than one. He had been writing "Coastwatch" every week for more years than he dared to count. Had tried his

damnedest to grope his way among all of it sprawled down there--the sea-bent coastal capes, the snake routes of rivers, the strangely serene cliff-faces of dams, the faltering forests, the valleys going to suburbs, ~~suburbs, suburbs~~, the slumbering but restless earthquake faults, the cloud-high mountains made of internal fire. So how about, for a change, this chance to actually watch the coast, peep from here ~~at~~ thirty-five thousand feet down onto the wreath-green lovely untrustworthy Pacific littoral, the jagged edge of America. The Left Coast. Home for him ever since he had, well, left home. (In one of his fights with his father, the old combatant had jabbed: "They call it the Coast because that's what people do there, don't they?") So what if Bingford was going to give him freckled hell for not finishing up the Berkeley column by the end of today. He knew *Cascopia's* deadlines at least as well as Bing. Mitch shifted savagely in his seat again. A *Cascopia* deadline was the one instance he could think of, any more, where time was not truly lethal.

[Impassive, the woman from Indonesia watched him. His big trunk of body, big face like the ugly Frenchman. A man so big should not squirm.]

Mitch was scrooched around trying to find Mount Jefferson under the wing, first tall sentinel of the Oregon peaks, when his shoulder came under assault from the aisle. The beverage cart squeezed past, making him tuck even more of himself into the

(N?)

cut?

1/20/88 I'm
tempted to cut
last line to
P. 24

ridiculously little seat space. Yow. Regions of his body he had not been in touch with for years were letting him know they resented last night's rollerblading escapade. Any pangs on distant daughter Jocelyn, muscular or vascular, this morning? Didn't he wish he knew.

Now a food cart bumped past him, in surprise convoy with the beverages. He had lost track of whether there was some shred of government regulation left or the airline this early in the morning was simply shamed into dispensing something resembling breakfast. Whichever, up at the front of the cabin a stick-thin young woman with the dark composed face of Hindu statuary began handing out food trays while an ash-blond male offered coffee. Flight attendants; among his other passages through history Mitch went back to the days of dating stewardesses. Back when he was running his life from his groin, that groping year or so right after Marnie, there had been the valkyrie from United in a midnight booth at The Three Coins who moved herself over against him from stem to stern and unforgettably suggested that he think of her as more than a stew, she was anything on the menu.

Yah, well, those son-of-a-gun Sixties, as Ingvaldson would say. Mitch made himself push away the old days, leaned over for more sightseeing but the plane was between volcanoes, and so, with a grimace, he faced his laptop.

[Scrupulously he logged in the \$3.95 that a cup of terminal coffee had cost him in the San Francisco airport. Even before the laptop computer, Bingford accused him of being the only person on the paper whose expense account was carried out to the third decimal place.]

As he started scrolling his Berkeley notes up onto the miniature screen, something like glazed panic set in. What he had from the various speakers sounded like quotes from parrots who had been eating dictionaries, *biome* this and *paradigm* that. Maybe he was growing jaded, but the Berkeley sessions seemed to him one more case in the raging epidemic of conferencitis. *The place of nature in a new millennium*, you bet. What would conference throwers do without the year 2000 on our cosmic odometer?

He tried tapping out a glom graf:

Four hundred and fifty-two of this land's leading theorizers theorized tooth and claw over the meaning of nature when they gathered last week in... [oh, shit, never mind.]

A bit frantically he started searching the storage of his laptop for something, anything, melodic enough to lead with.

TLM, he punched up, and there it materialized on the little screen, "*thinking like a mountain*," Aldo Leopold his very self after wiping out wolves in New Mexico, turning

himself around to preach holy caution in messing with things of the wild. *"Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf."*

[Mitch mulled trying something comparing the drone of conferences with wolf howls, and reluctantly discarded it.] He scrolled on through his laptop Leopoldiana:

"...Reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes....I was young then, and full of trigger-itch..."

Been there, too, thought Mitch, at least the young and itchy part.

He hunched, uneasily transfixed, ~~in the plane seat,~~ thinking about the sainted Leopold trying to murder the last wolf. ^{once} ~~One time~~ Mitch had interviewed a plant geneticist, a bitter-mouthed elfin woman tucked away in a federal agency for thirty-some years, who told him the human brain had been the equivalent of a nuclear catastrophe for all other life on earth. "Ours is the journey of the worms through the wormwood but on a planetary scale," she had said in a teaching tone that he greatly resented at the time.

"We, the unfeathered bipeds, amount to a worldwide epidemic that causes extinctions.

Smallpox was nothing compared to our effect on other species." Mitch had tottered out of that bilious government-green office realizing he would never be able to translate that into print. [Quote that baleful federal lifer, yes, put what she had said into newsprint in handy boxes on every street in the greenest corner of the nation, thrust her message into

poss. cut to
last line
of it?

readers' hands, rub it into their eyes; and the next week, the next day, the next hour, *poof*, human behavior would send something else extinct. Yet you can't go around deploring brains.

(Mitch dry-scrubbed his eyes with both hands, drawing anotherⁿ stare from his Indonesian neighbor. He bit his lip, wishing his mind would quit playing tick-tack-toe with his work this way. What *is* this? he wondered. Columnlock, the environmental writer's equivalent of traffic gridlock? Whatever was slouching back and forth in his head, it was about time it packed up and cleared out of there. Lexa would be sure to point out to him that a trip to the San Francisco Bay area isn't most people's idea of hard duty.

He and Lexa; the ten years between them were starting to show, maybe. But there was no backing up his own odometer, was there.

"Breakfast?" the thin flight attendant asked him in a Julie Andrews accent.

He shook his head against the choice of omelette or Cheerios and tried to go back to tapping out this week's "Coastwatch." But his seatmate kept saying something in a low singsong which the flight attendant couldn't seem to catch. They both waited for Mitch, bulking between, to mediate. He leaned over the Indonesian woman enough to hear "zhick-ken" in a lovely soft chant.

How so?
Six living
genes?

I know
this
seems
brutal,
but
cut
to next
page?
If not all
same?

“No chicken,” Mitch told her as distinctly as he could. The woman looked at him with timeless South Pacific reproach.

Figuring “omelette” was beyond all their acting repertoires, he glanced around at the flight attendant, then turned back to his seatmate and tried “Eggs?” He made an approximate shape and size with his thumbs and forefingers. The woman by the window seemed to indicate reluctant agreement.

He went back to nature, so to speak, in his laptop. In a matter of moments, though, a strange angry crunching broke out beside him. He peeked sideways at the neighboring tray table. Thanks to Mitchell Rozier, Mister Sign Language, the flight attendant had given the woman Cheerios.

He drew a resolute breath and concentrated into the handmirror-sized computer screen.

The mountains kept winking through the window at him, the old devils.]

He sneaked a look at the sky-cutting outline off the wingtip now. Mount Hood, the mainsail of Oregon’s mountains, standing there spanking-white. Beneath the plane would be Portland, green salad of a city, and the pewter beauty of the Columbia River.

Mitch felt himself tensing, dreading what was coming again. Where were clouds when you needed them?

He forced himself to wait a minute, ~~then another~~. Another. One more. (OUT)

Then abruptly lifted himself ^{wiseyes} to see ~~past the teak-skinned woman, downward.~~

Mount St. Helens, the blown cone, the reminder that volcanoes, no matter how dormant are still loaded and cocked, had come under the wing now.

Mitch stared in sick fascination at the broken crown of St. Helens, the gaping bowl of crater and the ragged blown-out north half of the mountain. The lateral blast of the eruption had leveled forests for seventeen miles, sandblasted the soil off Coldwater Ridge six miles away, put up an ash cloud that blotted the sun all the way to Idaho, and churned out rock, mud, and lava in a gray delta of debris that now fanned out from the ladle of the mountain like molten lead gone cold and ended in those distant ridgefuls of flattened silvered trees like metal splinters.

Juanita Trippe was still under there.

The two of them had been taking turns at the camp on Coldwater Ridge; the simmering volcano was naturally Mitch's beat but Trippe was goofy for the mountain. She liked to brag that she had been in the first Girl Scout troop to climb St. Helens, even though that would have been an excursion really, a Sunday outing even for twelve-year-old girls to trudge up this most perfect and gentle of the Cascade cones, America's (OK?)

Mitch is so strong.
he just wants to
get here faster.

convenient Kilimanjaro. The spell held, though. The mountaineering that Juanita Trippe later did with like-minded female climbers who called themselves WOT expeditions-- Women On Top--she always trained for on St. Helens.

When the mountain started acting up in the spring of '80, Trippe took it personally. She shed herself of the oxymoronic title of *Cascopia's* business manager and demanded in on the volcano story. Mitch didn't know a base camp from a bassoon, so it made sense for Trippe to set things up for them on Coldwater Ridge where they could monitor the monitors, the put-upon feds and excited university scientists ~~who had set up shop there~~, just outside the "red zone" that had been evacuated when the mountain's harmonic tremors and burps of ash started getting interesting. Trippe more than pulled her weight in the watch on the volcano and she was a proven outdoors photographer, had a climber's alert eye for shifts of light on the face of a mountain. The Vesuvius Bureau, they called themselves, and Mitch would remember those weeks as a sweet streak of writing, no environmental on-the-other-hands about a rumbling ten-thousand-foot peak.

He also was frankly relieved that his and Trippe's two or three after-party forays into bed together, years before, had not led anywhere. Juanita was muscular, spoiled, bawdy, rich, coldblooded, and indefatigable, and she reminded him of a big-hat halfback he was glad enough to play beside but could stand to be without after the season.

Sweet
Image!

She cheerfully bossed him off the ridge that last night. The volunteer Lighthawk pilot who was going to help Mitch tally up clearcut logging on the timberland around St. Helens could only fly early the next morning, Sunday. "Go, you big dink," Trippe instructed. "We can swap back at noon. Weather's good, I want to climb out early for some dawn shots anyway." That brilliant May morning Mitch and the Lighthawk pilot scoped out clearcuts--Mitch knew with satisfaction that it would make a good gruesome "Coastwatch" piece after the shaking mountain resolved itself; portions of the forest were so chopped up it looked like the earth had the mange--and when they were through with that they buzzed St. Helens, mosquitoing for twenty minutes or so around ~~and around~~ the cone, before flying back to Seattle.

He and the pilot were barely out of the Cessna on the landing strip at Boeing Field when they heard the boom. It signaled Pompeii-in-the-forest.

At observation posts and in campgrounds and on logging roads and at picture-taking perches like Coldwater Ridge, vigil-keepers caught in the same moment with Sunday larkers, they died and they died. Died they all, who were encamped along the north rim of the red zone as the power of Mount St. Helens welled over it, to a sum of fifty-seven.

The place of nature in *what* new millennium?

Ask Juanita Trippe, Mitch could not help but think, down there buried a millionfold with her camera in her mummified hand. Times like this, as he stared out at the blast from the past that was Mount St. Helens and then the giant fire kettles named Adams and Rainier and next the inchworm traffic of Seattle on freeways and bridges underlain with earthquake faults, site after site where the old brute physics of the planet someday were going to have their say again, he had the terrifying suspicion that he was beginning to understand extinction, from the inside out.

four

At least an hour a day Lexa walked, prowling the city, a compact Stetsoned woman in blue jeans and a teal rainjacket, gathering miles under her feet as a kind of ransom against the routines of living with other people's walls all around her.

This was her most regular route, down past the Ballard taverns favored by Henry Ingvaldson and the other old vikings of drink and then across the ship canal locks and up through a shoreline neighborhood to a grove of alders along the railroad tracks where great blue herons nested. This she had figured out for herself, that the gorgeous featherduster birds populating the waterways of Seattle must have a heronry not too far, and she had watched their flight patterns to find the spot.

(nice!)

Now she had her binoculars on the treetop ^{sticks} nests of sticks and the floppy young birds--*Come on, Junior, poke your head up a tad more*--when the seaplanes started going over. Nine a.m. sharp, Lexa knew without having to check her watch, the Lake Union floatplane fleet launching. A minute apart, they ~~kept on~~ laboriously ^{skied} ~~sking~~ the sky, following the ship canal out to Puget Sound and then purring off northward to weekend places in the San Juan Islands. Seattle wasn't as overrun with seaplanes as Alaska, but close.

You did love those floating goonies, didn't you, Travis. You were trained in birds but you were quite a plane man.

She was competing at Cheyenne when she met Travis Mudd. That season on the circuit, in her third and winningest year at barrel racing for the college rodeo team, she was cruising through Colorado State U. majoring in beer and high times, already wistful that her elementary ed degree was waiting on the far side of the Fort Collins haze of fun. As usual at big-deal Cheyenne the brass band for the grand entry played on and on, but this year each batch of riders into the arena was greeted with a skin-prickling bullfight solo from the trumpet, the giddy ascent of notes putting the crowd in a whooping mood. With the kind of buzz on that she always got just from competing, everything slightly slow-

motion and sharp-edged, she naturally took notice of this trumpet player, the type of all-legs western kid called a long drink of water, [and how cutely serious he was about his wacko horn music.]

Then when she rode, her horse Margarita shied off slightly at the first barrel, costing them the shade of a second and any prize money right here. To teach malingering damned Margarita a lesson, Lexa leathered the mare without letup around the next two barrels and across the line in a steaming finish.

She reined up hard and heard, lofty but with that Jimmy Buffett trace of flirty wooziness to it, a trumpet riff of "Margaritaville."

Of course she looked up the trumpet player. As shy as he was tall, but shoulders broad enough to eat off of, and a face that invited nuzzling like a puppy's,

"Pretty funny," she commended his razzing tribute to Margarita.

"Pretty good ride," he had ready, "except having to drag that horse along under you."

"She knows how to be a real shy whore," Lexa said conversationally.

Travis grinned, a little off balance. Then and as their courtship heated up, he looked at Lexa as if he couldn't get enough of her and listened to her in continual mild alarm.

Travis finished his wildlife management degree at Northern Colorado the next year, and Lexa, who would have come at you with a hammer if you had hinted she was in college to land her M.R.S. degree, found herself married to him the week after graduation. And the education of Lexa McCaskill began then.

As the last of the seaplane flock droned into the distance, Lexa headed back along her route, trying to calculate how long she could stretch the outdoors part of today and yet not have to end up handing around Snickers bars ^{for} at tonight's ^{desert} catered shindig. She resolved to drive ^{rather than walk to} when she did her docent hours at the zoo, rather than walking there, and use the car ^{phone} time to call her crew and remind ^{her crew} them when and where to show up. And leave Mister Mitch the news that he's been elected bartender.

Wash no stage business!

I think you used this phrase

Now that she'd given herself the guilty pleasure of a little extra time, she stopped to play tourist at the ship canal, where the big lock was lowering several work-stained fishing boats to meet the tide of Puget Sound. As usual Lexa drew a lot of looking from the fishboat crews--fair of figure ^{and} [but only fair of face, too; but that fetching hat] and the unfeigned ranchborn way she parked her hands in the top of her front pockets, only the thumbs out ^{as} [she stood planted there watching the water draw down in the canal lock.] Cowgirls need love too, wasn't there even a song to that effect? [These gawking]

[examinations from deck always put Lexa a little wry, because] she knew that if she was aboard with any of the leering crews there would be no such [behavior. No] reckless eyeballing, no suggestive kidding, and above all no touching: those were the sea rules that protected her when she had cooked on the *Bellah Hammond* and the *Arctic Dancer* and other trawlers of the Sitka fishing fleet, her and half a dozen men in close quarters for weeks at a time in the lonely Gulf of Alaska. And husband Travis had never said anything, Travis and his blind trust in rules.

[Speaking of not saying...] #

at? Ankle? Travis? Mitch hadn't called from the Berkeley trip. He never called. Telephones disagreed with him, he claimed, they were absolutely full of stuff that his ear found hard to take. So he never called from out-of-town, or much of anywhere else. You could draw up quite a list of Mitch's nevers, Lexa knew by now.

The sonofabitch, I love him.

That thought spun her on her heels, and her hiking boots resounding on the steel walkway of the lock gate, she crossed back over to the fish ladder.

Lexa fully knew--Mitch had told her *this* enough times--that the fish ladder was a public relations plaything, 99% of the migrating salmon into the rivers feeding Lake

Washington rode up through the canal locks as the boats made their passage. Still, she liked to visit the 1%, the fish that had fought their way up the stairstep rapids.

[The glass-walled viewing area was dim, grottolike, which meant she could walk right up to the salmon in their transparent channel. Today it was the spring run of chinooks, silver dirigible fish hanging there in the greenish water, seeming to pant, to muster themselves.]

So why am I losing him, the sonofabitch.

Only a bit at a time, and there was more than a handful of Mitch left, for sure.

But as a spousal equivalent, lately, he seemed to be evaporating, little by little in the way ^{coming} he came home edgy instead of eager; in a cat-kicking mood, so much so that Lexa had ~~briefly contemplated getting a nimble tom for him to take it out on.~~ She herself did not know why, in this loose jangly era of dosie-doe-and-everybody-change-partners-again-and-again, she thought a ceremony would bring [thou, Lexa, and thee, Mitch,] a more sturdy commitment to each other. [Hell, Mariah had considered it cause for congratulations when given the news merely about her moving in with Mitch: "Finally going to try shacking up, huh?") Or was commitment overload his malady already. The weight of the world on him alone, he seemed to think. She had learned that was a formula for discouragement, and Mitch and discouragement were not a nice sight together. He was

cat?

(667)

not sure I follow

the kind who waded into his work up to his neck, then was always surprised when some
 rogue wave tossed unpleasantness up his nose. She could imagine other ^{lives} cutouts of life

Mitch once could have fit, running a bookstore in Missoula or teaching high school

English in Moab, working the job to death in sorrowless surroundings. But times were

always going to be tricky, any more, for a gospel such as "Coastwatch."

She stayed longer than she intended watching the exhausted salmon, survivors
 paused behind the glass wall.

how so?

Not
 sure!
 get this,
 either

five

“Seen Mitch?”

“I thought he’s in Birkenstockley, doing the green thing.”

“He’s supposed to be back for this morning, ~~the mutt.~~” Bingford retracted his head into his office impatiently.

The *Cascopia* building was in Seattle’s Fremont district, where the Sixties still roamed. The hempen necessities of life were available ^{there} in Fremont, ^{as well} plus cafes with good rowdy names such as The Longshoreman’s Daughter, plus deluxe junk shops, plus bars that were museum pieces from the days when hair was *Hair*. Indeed, the neighborhood merrily ran the gamut from Lennon to Lenin, a twenty-foot-high bronze Eastern European

clearance sale item depicting Vladimir Ilyich forging into the future with rifles stacked slyly beside him, but now peacefully surveying traffic at a particularly funky Fremont intersection.

In such environs, employment at the weekly newspaper *Cascopia* was a lot like manning the drawbridge against the slick downtown Seattle skyline to the south, for the building squatted at the north edge of the old steel bridge over the ship canal; only the bridge tender, making the twin halves yawn open by means of counterbalances, sat closer to the moat. Both Bingford and Mitch liked the racket of the Fremont Bridge's traffic gates clanging down and its girdered halves groaning and humming as they labored upward, on the best days many, many times. Others on the staff either quit in a hurry or made a major aural adjustment; the "Cityscape" columnist, Moira Mason, had been wearing earplugs for ten years now.

At the moment the bridge was up on its haunches ~~more or less as usual~~, letting a single sailboat putter through while cars stacked up, and Mitch was killing time and dietary intentions at the Espresso A Go Go stand ^{waiting} until he could stroll across to the office. He was in the fetching mute company of Trixie, the mannequin ~~lounging against the street sign~~ in her powder-blue miniskirt and white go-go boots, with the stand's *espresso!* sign bandoliered across her shapely form ^{and} a permanent twinkle of provocativeness in her ^{cut same?}

traffic-stopping face.) Mitch would have gratefully spent the rest of this day hanging out with Trixie.

Thinking and frowning, he sipped coffee and tore into a bagel; he was going to have to work through lunch. Distill something out of the Berkeley conference vapors. His mind sometimes sneaked up on an idea for his column while he did other things, so now he familiarly studied the ^{familiar} suspended bridge and the views east and west of it, the white froth of mountains ^{towering} ~~showing their tippy tops~~ over the swelling streeted hills of the city. As Mitch had written so many times even he was tired of hearing it ^{from himself}, Seattle in its rapid career had spread itself as an offhand Brasilia, a capital of enterprise turned loose in the middle of a timber jungle. The two-hundred-foot cedars and Doug firs originally prickled so thick along Puget Sound that the first sawmillers made their fortunes right there on the shore. By now enough of the great forest had been thinned away to let in a metropolis of two million people, and still coming. Seattle, the consummate doodler on the margin of America. The place had given the world some dervishes of the electric guitar, connoisseur lessons in coffee, *The Far Side*, airplanes by the stratosphereful, and now the alchemies of software. Twenty-five years ago it had given him "Coastwatch" to write, then ever since yawned, "So what?"

*I'm not sure
 this is clear
 becomes so
 end of it,
 but mixed
 allusion?*

So he was working in a field where there was a saint every foot of the way and even so the world was turning into pavement. Not exactly the most inspiring thought for this week's column. Mitch fired a bank-shot of his crumpled coffee container into the recycle bin, the ghost chorus of his trade keening at him. Ed Abbey smoldering in his grave in the slickrock desert, Stegner magisterially whopping the nail on the head in every sentence of his hallowed "wilderness letter." Feverish Bob Marshall, the Thomas Wolfe of the Forest Service, writing and hiking himself to death in the mountains he so adored, his epitaph theirs: "How much wilderness do we need? How many Brahms symphonies do we need?" And back beyond them the sweet ponds of Thoreauvia. The whispering pines of Muirland. St. feathered Francis, if you really want to go back. Whatever all else Spaceship Earth was running out of, it didn't lack for old soaring planetary anthems. Although, in Berkeley, in this time on the cusp of the next millennium, academic bigfoots had just spent three days in airless rooms arguing about the nature of the word "nature."

Clanging announced that the drawbridge was going down. Mitch headed across, envying Trixie her job.

~~#~~

Wishing himself ~~spraddled~~ ^{loosed} against a mountain wall of granite somewhere, Bingford watched down at Mitch through his office window. Huge color photos of mountain

climbers spidered onto crags covered the office's other three walls. Look closely, and in every case the wiry dangling man with a flaming sunburned face was Bingford.

Successions of *Cascopia* staffers, where a generation amounted to around three years, had been stunned to see their editor/publisher arrive back from Denali or Aconcagua or Everest with a face like a campstove victim. Gradually the effects of sunglare, cold, and wind at extreme elevations would peel away, and the freckles would crop out again. Watching this over the years, Mitch had wondered if Bing added a freckle for each conquered mountain, the way fighter-plane aces painted downed opponents on their cowlings.

At this moment Bingford was ^{hesitated, not} hesitating, ^{used to} something he was ~~not often~~ afflicted with. ~~He found himself not wanting to go through with his intention to call Mitch in.~~ ^{to call Mitch in?} What good would it do? By now the two of them knew each other's lines of argument like sailors knew rope knots. ^{his eyes} [Bingford decided he didn't need the extra hassle of Mitch this morning.]

Still, something kept him at the window, unable to tear ~~away~~ ^{his eyes} from watching ^{coming} Mitch ~~come~~ across the bridge in that peculiar tender-toed floating way he moved. Heft trained into grace, like the Lippizaner stallions Bingford had seen perform in Vienna during his trip to climb the Eiger. ~~The mutt,~~ ^ε he's always had some moves, the editor in

Bingford speaking now. At his best, Mitch could write a column with a skateboarder's skill, with an eye for odd angles and fast surfaces. But he was a considerable way from his best, ^{these days} lately.

"Old times, guy," Bingford said quietly. "Golden moldies, you and me."



Spired and wooded and not a little stoned, the campus sprawled amid the 1960's like a disassembled cathedral. The University of Washington, thirty-five thousand students strong and restive as a mutinous barracks, was the upper left corner of the battle banner that was writhing through Berkeley and Madison and Morningside Heights and a hundred other bastions of learning, wafted by the highs of drugs and dorm sex and soon to be blown jetstream-high by the storm of opposition to the Vietnam war.

Mitch Rozier had come for football.

He was raw then, but he knew it and figured there might be a cure for ^{it} ~~that~~ in a place like Seattle. His athletic scholarship had come like a bingo jackpot--the big kid from a small town playing his one card in life and having it pay off at the Shrine Game, the high school all-stars on the other side of the line strewn like train wreck victims in the wake of Mitch's three touchdown runs. In the stands was Washington's most junior assistant coach, assigned to recruit the longshots, and even though this fired-up running back was

from some dinkyville, he liked the kid's unexpectedness on the field, ^{the} his quicksilver quality, you didn't often see ~~that~~ in a fullback. And so Mitch arrived to the green and gray city, the Elysian campus, and the bootcamp-like football practices of the Washington Huskies. The industrial brand of football played in the Pacific Coast Conference was savage compared to what he was used to, but he did not back off from it. Mitch was very sizable, and as determined as he was large. [He knew to be ready to fight the first teammate who jeered out the nickname foisted on him back there on gridirons next to farm implement dealerships--it never came up, alas--and he had done enough chores in his life to blow off the robotic scrimmages and drills. Most of all, he knew a free ride to a college degree when he saw one.

After where he had come from, college was Coney Island. [There had never been a sensation quite like it in his life before, but] as best Mitch could determine, he was undergoing something like amok evolution. [Hurrying from class to class, he would have sworn he could feel one part of his brain grow, then another, exactly like that] ^{He was} ^{chickadee they talked about in} Biology 101 ^{or} ~~example of the chickadee's ability~~ ^{able} to expand one lobe when winter came and a greater number of feeding spots had to be remembered. For a while it surprised him every time, and then the surprise became reliable, that he all at once could stretch his mind around some bigger thing. Just then the UW campus had some hot departments, ~~where things~~

cut?

?)

OK?

Great description of a guy ready to learn

were about as sizable as they could get. History--God, man, lover in History one of the
 profs had kicked William F. Buckley's fancy butt in a debate over Vietnam. And in
 English, to his and the department's mutual astonishment, Mitch found home. The white
 but Afroed instructor for his Writing Skills section openly winced when he bulked into
 her classroom, but as soon as she discovered this was one football jock who seemed
 incurably curious about the insides of sentences and would rework a piece of writing to
 death, she fed him books. A nature freak herself, she turned him on to Thoreau,
 inspector-general of the seasons: "*I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a
 moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by
 that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.*" To the
 tidal force of Rachel Carson: "*I tell here the story of how the young planet Earth acquired
 an ocean...*" To the University of Washington's own just-dead nova, Theodore Roethke,
 who had held forth in ^{his} the exact classroom they met in; greenhouse ghost that he always
 was--it did not hurt that he had been a father fighter, too--Roethke ranted great whispers
 of poems through the windowpanes to Mitch's tuned-up ear. "*At the field's end, in the
 corner missed by the mower/Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert*"--Christ,
 Mitch knew that field. And to the human hawk of Big Sur, Robinson Jeffers--Mitch
 practically groaned sexually when he encountered the lines *the old voice of the ocean, the*

Gorsens

bird-chatter of little rivers....Love this, not man apart from this. It was a time when zinger sentences walked the earth.

Football, though. What the University of Washington coaching staff wanted at fullback was a kamikaze short-gainer and what they rather quickly realized they had in Mitch Rozier was an excess of IQ for that role. Kranski, the starting fullback, was barely organized enough to put his socks on, yet turn him loose on third down and short yardage and he would ram into the line like a runaway ox. The second-string fullback, Buford, ran those plunges in his own can't-hurt-me-if-I-don't-think-about-it fashion. But Mitch, to his own revelation and certainly the coaches', always tried to fine-tune that situation of fighting for inches of gridiron; his timing was *too* fine, hitting the hole over left guard with precision but if the defensive line delayed the guard any--if an atom of dirt delayed him--the guard would find Mitch running up his backbone in the pigskin equivalent of a rear-end collision. It became apparent to all concerned: the only chance for the name *Rozier* to be inserted in the University of Washington starting lineup was if Kranski and Buford collided in the shower room and both fractured their tibias. For precisely such a possibility, of course, a major football program needed a battalion of bodies, and nobody much minded Mitch being kept on the team as backup to the backup fullback, especially Mitch.

Busy lighting up in every way he could think of, came the day when he went to football practice after his first experience with marijuana half scared to death that it would somehow show on him, he'd be singled out of the warmup drill by one of the assistant coaches screeching, "Hey you, dope fiend, outta here!" When no such thing occurred, it quite rapidly dawned on Mitch: these old white-socks guys were *afraid to know!* Within days he confirmed this by showing up in the locker room wearing a Levi jacket with a peace symbol painted on the back (he'd had to look all over Seattle to find a 'nik jacket big enough to fit him) and the coaches stared very hard but not one of them said a word to him.

There he sat, then, on into his junior year, All-Conference scholastically and benchwarmer into eternity, until the pivotal Saturday afternoon when the Huskies were playing at home against Southern California. Much to the disappointment of the mud-oriented Washington coaching staff, no drop of rain was falling on Seattle, the world capital of H₂O. On the dry field Southern Cal tailbacks were taking turns romping around the end of the elephantine Washington line. Bored, the Husky third-stringers were sneaking peeks at the cheerleading squad, envying the yell leader, a gymnastic imp named Mancini whose duty was to put his hands under the purple pleated skirts of the female cheerleaders and boost their pretty butts onto his shoulder.

Mitch in particular was engrossed in watching this activity when Bingford, the freckled and notorious editor of the *UW Daily*, detached himself from the sidelines press and said something at length into Mancini's ear.

Lit up like a jack-o-lantern with inspiration, Mancini grabbed his bullhorn and yelped:

"All right! Listen up, everybody. Just had a request to do a Go cheer for an institution that's dear to us all--North Dakota Agricultural and Scientific! Got it? Go, N-A-D-S!"

Even before the student section woke up brightly to the opportunity to roar "GONADS!" Mitch was laughing fit to rupture and lurched up off the bench. He dashed over, picked up Mancini under the arms and held him in mid-air like a squirming cat, and shouted:

"Now let's try S-P-E-L-I-G! SPELLING!"

He had barely set Mancini free when the backfield coach Jacobson boiled up beside him. "Rozier, are you in this game?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"Are you high?"

"Six foot five, same as always."

"You know what I mean, boy--Are you on something?"

"Twenty questions does beat the crap out of this," Mitch jerked his head toward the scoreboard showing **UW 0 USC 27** in bright buttons of light. "But Jake, Coach is going to think both of us lack T-E-E-M S-P-I-R-U-T."

Mitch unsnapped his helmet, tenderly took it off with both hands, then reached back and slung it, sailing end over end, high into the ecstatic student section. It was the longest University of Washington pass of the day, and it concluded the football career of Mitch Rozier.

 Not long after, he ^{stood} ~~was standing~~ in a field carpeted with several thousand other zonked-out souls. When yet another of those funny-looking cigarettes made its way around to him, the hand that offered it was supremely freckled.

"You're the hippie fullback," said the possessor of the hand and the joint. "Or were."

Mitch took a drag, the better to contemplate Bingford.

"And you're the rich mountain climber's kid. No cure for that so far, though^w

huh?"

"Famous in our own time, ~~guy~~," Bingford said with a world-weary sigh. He scanned the air. "Where's that mothering piano?"

Chords of the Mothers of Invention's "Freak Out" jangled out of the earnest but challenged band that had set up on the flatbed of a sod-hauling truck. The platform of piled-together logs where the piano was to hit loomed like a sacrificial altar. ~~Everywhere~~ ~~around~~, the crowd splashdanced in the creek or cavorted in the farm fields, green pastures of pharmacopia.

Still staring into the sky, Bingford asked: "They take away your jock scholarship yet?"

"Does a bear go in the woods?"

Bingford cocked his head. "What're you doing for spare change?"

"Washing dishes at the House of Pancakes. And I hump big stuff for a moving company, Saturdays."

Speculatively Bingford made a bicep, a la Charles Atlas. Mitch wanted to swat him one and at the same time had the urge to giggle at the hopeless little muscleman pose.

Now the helicopter was ~~approaching~~^{ed}, whacking the air frantically. Beneath it the piano swung like a pendulum. The crowd scattered like chickens under a hawk, except for an unshirted young woman on an acid trip who loped along under the swaying Steinway,

arms uplifted as if to hug it. She let out a sound between a moan and a wail when she was held back.

Mitch was finding he couldn't decide whether the idea of a piano drop was the greatest thing yet or plain silly. [That was the stimulating part: *he wasn't sure!*] Either way, here he stood, at this particular spot of existence taken over by this spontaneous tribe, a breed all their own, shaggy, loose-limbed, barefoot, and more than a few rousingly naked. Present and accounted for, at the dawn of a time when a piano would plunge from the sky. [Margaret Mead--she was still alive, wasn't she? Then where the hell was she, if not here watching this? If she wanted to see a cargo cult, bigfella-in-sky-him-come-let-piano-drop, if she wanted to see Coming of Age in America Right Now, if she wanted real *anthro*, here it was.] Okay, maybe some little bit of what he was feeling was the merrywanna starting to cook in him, but the greater cause for exhilaration, Mitch was convinced, was himself, ~~and~~ here, and this and now. Hadn't he been able to hold a conversation with Bingford that sounded perfectly sane, [while inside him there was all this loosy-goosy stuff going on?] If this wasn't something new in life, that you could stand out here with grass tickling your toes and holy smoke up your nose and feel giddy and perfectly sane at the same time, he didn't know what was.

Hummer

Mitch inhaled deeply, air this time, and felt his brain settle back into his head a little.

Side by side he and Bingford contemplated the laboring helicopter, close now. For no particular reason, Mitch heard himself pop out with:

“My old man always calls the thing a helicopeter.”

[Realizing how hicky that sounded, he added:

“On purpose.”]

“My old man owns a couple,” Bingford confessed in return.

[The old men.] Fathers, the ghosts of dead wars. ^{Heather →} Mitch and Bing, ^{nor} nor all the sons and daughters in the skin-plaid fields of the young that day and in the hairy ranks they would form against the war in Vietnam, ^{ed} did not even need to name their names, those spent shells. Antecedents always think they still own the combat zone. Lyle Rozier, who to hear him tell it had the time of his life in the jungle of World War Two. Jerry Bingford, fighter ace in Korea and cocky toward earthbound mortality ever since. Young in their time, but too many turns of the world ago. While the news that counted now hovered here.

The chopper noise flooded over the pasture, tingling in Mitch the way the thunder of a football crowd always did. Used to. He glanced sideways at Bingford, who seemed similarly swallowed in the blissful storm of noise.

The roar of the helicopter drowned out something Bingford said. Mitch cupped an ear at him.

“Come by the *Daily* office,” Bingford repeated. He was looking off at the clattering chopper as it circled, the piano swinging like a watchcharm to amuse a baby.

“The idiots let me have a budget. You can be our aviation reporter.”

Having lifted its burden into bomb-run position a couple of hundred feet up, the helicopter now honed in on the log bull’s-eye where the piano drop was to occur.

Businesslike, the helicopter seemed to brake in the air. But the piano kept going. As, now, did the helicopter. Panicking at being towed by his cargo, the pilot let the piano loose.

Far overshooting the log platform, it plummeted to the earth with a dead thud. Not a chord, not a note, not so much as a plink.

“Encore,” Bingford said softly.

Mitch could not have told why, but that decided him to show up at the *Daily* office.

After Mitch's sidelined but bylined final years of college and a few more on a well-intentioned but criminally underpaying community newspaper, he latched on as a rim dog on the rewrite desk at Seattle's morning daily, the *Post-Intelligencer*. Not the most sensational of jobs, and he still wasn't sure he even liked newspapering. But he liked being around people who liked newspapering. Accordingly, there he sat each day, fashioning the three sentences for the front-page weather box and boiling down wire copy into bite-sized stories called "Quicklies"; Marnie had taken to giggling and calling him Mister Quickie.

He was hunched over his keyboard trying to think of some fresh way to say "*rain later today*" when the call came that someone wanted to see him down in the lobby. He never liked eerie stuff, but somehow he had the prickling feeling it was going to be Bingford.

The last that Mitch knew, Bing was in a Rocky Mountain high period, off to climb the fourteeners of Colorado and then goof around the Grand Tetons for a summer. That had been, what, considerably more than a year ago, Mitch realized--an evening spent parked below the runway approach to SeaTac airport while the two of them smoked some reminiscent dope and let the roars of jets take them over as plane after plane

waddled down a scant hundred feet overhead. Between the soul-emptying flushes of noise and the good weed, they gradually slid off philosophical deep ends. After what must have been an exceptionally potent puff, Bing revealed to Mitch his nearly paralyzed moments of fascination on rock cliffs sometimes at being suspended there by the nonslip piton his old man had invented and patented: he was hanging there by a combination of genetics and contrivance that just seemed awesome in those moments. Mitch in turn confessed his own latest source of awe, *A Sand County Almanac*--it singlehandedly had almost sent him back to do a master's degree in English, hell, you could opus-pocus your whole thesis on Aldo Leopold's rhythms, the old boy *wrote* like the coming up of the sun and the going down of the sun and the stopless turning of the seasons...but then along had come Marnie and marriage, and Mitch had chickened out on going back to school, but who knew, maybe eventually he would. It had been one of those funny warped nights, much too much said in sloppy circumstances, and Mitch and Bing had both ended up a bit embarrassed by the time the last jetliner swept its cone of thunder over them. You couldn't really base a gutspilling friendship on aeronautical decibels, could you? Now Mitch headed down to the lobby decidedly on guard.

"How's life in the Quickly lane?" Bingford said as hello.

Would he
use the
beam, too?

"Salaried," Mitch answered, steering him out of the building. One never quite knew with Bing, whether he was simply stopping by to visit between conquests of tall peaks or whether he was here to unload on establishment journalism.

"Happy under the big crapping bird?" Bingford resumed when they were outside, ^{pointing up} indicating upward to the *P-I*'s massive revolving globe with the Hearst eagle the size of a pterodactyl squatting atop it.

"Close enough. Why? You curious about getting on a paper again? They probably won't let you start right in as editor here, you know."

"I do know. So I figured I'd start my own."

"Your own paper? Hell, why don't you save time and just wad that money up and throw it out a window."

"This is one window people are going to throw money in. Tell you why, guy. Remember '*Hip spade wants to dig you*'?"

Mitch had to laugh. All of them on the *UW Daily* staff had gone bug-eyed when somebody brought in one of the underground weeklies with that first barrier-exploding personal ad. After that crack, the deluge. "The wanna ads, Bing? Hey, even we at the *Pee Eye* are running those these days. Kind of late to the orgy, aren't you?"

“Not if I gather ads from enough places out here and put them in enough corner boxes in all the good towns. People move around. The I-5 corridor--think about it, Mitch ^u babe.” It actually didn't take that much thinking. Bingford's scheme was based on the long skinny freeway archipelago from the Canadian border to the ~~bottom~~ ^{tip} end of the Willamette Valley, a day's drive to the south. That Interstate ^{stretch} ~~sluice~~ of people alongside the Cascade range ~~of mountains~~ took in the campus towns of Bellingham, Corvallis, and Eugene; it took in both state capitols, Olympia and Salem, with their burgeoning staffs of young guerrilla bureaucrats; it took in the groovy metropolises of Seattle and Portland: in short, the Pacific Northwest confederacy of beardedness and bralessness, ready to set out to explore the new backpage alphabet of desire.

The cute little bastard, Mitch thought with a shake of his head, he's going to be able to buy his own mountain. But said only: “Could pay off.”

“Trippe is coming in with me on the idea,” Bingford mentioned as if it was the wildest of coincidences. Mitch could not have been less surprised. She had been on the *UW Daily* with them and in and out of mountain-climbing with Bing, Juanita had. Trust-fund daredevils, two on a rope. Hers was a branch of the Pan Am fortune. This was another of ~~the~~ ^F things about Seattle that Mitch could never get used to; there were

not sure this reads
 these...seeps ^{pockets} of polite wealth; neither Bingford nor Trippe would say *family money* if they had a mouthful of it.

Cut
 "Rowdy-dow-dow for you and Tripper," Mitch softly patted the palm of one hand with the other.

"And--"

"And you ~~only~~ came by to give me the first subscription."

--we have an opening," Bingford went on unperturbed. "You'd fit."

"Hey, here I get to write the weather every day. Wouldn't quite be the same in newspaper camp." Their old *Daily* phrase for various counterculture once-a-week-maybe excursions into print made Bingford wince. "*This past week, we had weather again,*"

on?
 teased:
 Mitch tested out. "Nope. Thanks anyway."

"Come on, guy. This isn't you." Bingford flapped a hand again at the *Post-Intelligencer's* taloned figurehead as if to shoo it off its roost. "We'll even scrape up the same salary for you."

"Bing, [that doesn't cut it.] I'm married and got a kid on the way, all right? Marnie already thinks my working for a newspaper is next thing to picking up tin cans along the road. What's she going to say if I throw in with you just because we smoked some weed together at the U Dub?"

"Most of the time, you'll be out where you can't hear her," Bingford said helpfully.

In spite of what he knew ought to be a firewall of guilt and shame, those words of Bingford's sizzled up the back of Mitch's mind. He had already started half-admitting to himself that Marnie was more of a flake than he'd bargained for, [back in their dating days when she simply seemed turned-on in entertaining ways.] Her latest phase, 100% wok cooking, had him sneaking cheeseburgers from the drive-in catercorner to the *P-I*.

Trying not to sound tempted, he asked: "Out where, would I be?"

"Wherever." Bingford impatiently threw ^{up} his hands ~~in the air~~ to illustrate *out*.

"We want you to be our nature freak."

~~##~~ —————

[So much for history, that caravan route of distant spices. Now was now, and ^{out} _E out of the haze of cannabis smoke and freckles had emerged Jerome "Bing" Bingford III, editor/publisher of an urban weekly newspaper for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon. From the shipwreck of a marriage and the raft he had sent his children away on and the shoals of a number of other major regrets had waded, big and drenched inside and out and environmentally the last of his kind, Mitchell Rozier, "Coastwatch" columnist and now quite late to work.

Stronger
this way?

"I see we can call off the search party," ^{was his greeting from} he was met with by Cynthia, the

less awkward?

duplicitous receptionist and chief spy for Bingford. "At least you're back in time for the staff meeting."

"Right," Mitch growled. "Wouldn't want to miss that just for the sake of getting my work done."

[In her notifying tone, Cynthia called up the stairs after him: "Bing wants everybody there."

"Bing shouldn't lust for us that way, Cyn," Mitch tch-tched and tromped off to his cubicle.]

A pair of eyes ~~that were~~ permanently parked in neutral and an indiscernible murmur met him as he stepped ^{into his cubicle.} in. His cubemate ^{roommate} was the new video reviewer, Shyanne Winters--monosyllabic, thin almost to the point of transparency, and black-lipsticked. In his time, Mitch had shared cubicle space with drunks and brooders and at least one proven felon, but Shyanne spooked him. [He was pretty sure ^{she} Shyanne would have spooked even Jocelyn.] ^{her} At the first staff meeting ^{after she was hired}, Shyanne had gone on and on in an avid near-whisper about corporately responsible non-lactic vegan dietary rules until it dawned on the assembled *Cascopians* that no milk in the office meant no lattes in the office, and she was rudely hooted down. [Shyanne seemed to expect that the

ok!

A bit of a nun.
Equator.
I think
hell
Think of
Jocelyn
anon
own
hee.

world was going to put nasty stuff on her. As a reviewer, she had the habit of tapping an instantaneous lead sentence into her computer, then dissolving into a sea of sighs.

Mitch's attempts at sympathetic conversation during these longeurs of hers only dragged him into her swamp of despond as well. Mystified but also royally fed up, he finally had gone to Bingford about her.

"How about getting me out of range of Lips of Death there?"

"Oh, come on, Mitch." Instantly Bingford's management style, counterattack, kicked in. "Everybody shares here, you know that. Buckle down, bucko."

"I didn't say I don't want to share," Mitch protested, although now that he thought about it a cubicle all to himself sounded paradisaical. "All I ask is a cubemate who isn't a living X-ray."

could cut straps?

"Can't you goddamnit be a little fatherly?" Bingford caught himself. "Be some help to her, she's young, okay?"

By a loter?

Now Mitch matched Shyanne's more-or-less greeting with something slightly less equivocal and went directly to his computer. But ~~no more than had logged in~~ ^{he had barely managed to log}

"Coastwatch/Berkeley gasbaggery" when heads prairiedogging out of sundry other cubicles announced the staff meeting. [The extent of Mitch's muttered cussing caused

or did you have something else in mind? or cut?

^{give him a fleeting} Shyanne to look over her shoulder ~~fleetingly at him~~ as they left the cubicle.]

Oh? less awkward?

In the conference room the *Cascopia* staff was strewn on the edges of tables and windowsills. It struck Mitch that compared to Jocelyn and her rollerblading cohorts-- always with the Transylvanian exception of Shyanne, of course--these looked like an Amish choir.

They had unholy mouths on them, though. While Bingford and Cynthia conferred in the doorway to be sure everyone was on hand, the usual rabid factions went at it over whether staff meetings ought to be held oftener, or never. By reflex Mitch pointed out that in the distant past when Bing panicked on every publication day and called a lunchhour meeting to try to straighten matters out, they always ^{managed to do} get something ^{useful} worthwhile done: eat.

"Woo-oo, it's IM time," somebody droned. Institutional Memory was not a prized attribute among the younger *Cascopians*.

"Hey, now, not me," Mitch protested with a chesty laugh. "Not as long as Flatley waddles the earth." He cocked his head around to find the restaurant reviewer who could recite what kind of sandwiches and pickles Bingford ordered in for lunch in 1971. Then realized everyone in the room was staring at him, a gallery of faces masked in mockery, embarrassment, and here and there shocking malice.

As is,
you need
a noun
after the
colon
OK to
change?

see into
next page

"While you were away," Bingford let him know. "Flats is no longer with us.

He's doing a CD-ROM for Microsoft on Pacific Rim cuisine."]

Then Bingford ^{walked in} ~~came on in~~ and sat at the table, ^{holding} ~~carrying~~ a single sheet of paper.

"One announcement. A biggie." He rubbed his cheek as if a freckle was bothering him.

"The paper's going free."

Nobody said anything until Walmeier, who covered baseball, ballet, and brew pubs, asked: "*Scusi*, but how's that work?"

Our sinking captain didn't say it would work, Mitch mentally edited Walmeier, he merely said it would occur.

"Readership is dead in the water," Bingford was going on glumly. "Mailbox roulette"--the personal ads--"isn't what it used to be. People can feel each other up on the Internet now." Next he resorted to his lethal sheet of paper, trotting out the data. Free weekly newspapers--Mitch in his mind edited that, too: *giveaway* newspapers--were the national trend, it would build circulation and thereby hoist the advertising rates. "I've talked to them Downtown," Bingford was saying, which always meant the rival *Seattle Week!*, also known as *Seattle Eek!* "They're going to have to go this same route. So are the Oregon guys, *Portlandia* and *The Eugene Scene*. And Bellingham, the *Bellyburg News*. They're all taking the price off the paper."

Sage business
where was
he when
he told Mitch
about flats?
Again, you
could not?

Bingford paused and went after that bothersome freckle again.

The room stirred, or rather, Mitch stirred it. He had sworn to himself, over and over during Bing's predestined announcement, that he was going to keep his mouth shut. What evil ventriloquist, then, was producing a voice exactly like his to suggest to Bing the next logical step: pay people to take the newspaper, why not? Rig up the vending boxes like slot machines: if a person grabs ~~out~~ one copy of *Cascopia*, the box pays him a quarter; if the customer takes, say, three papers, make the payoff a dollar. "Circulation will go through the roof, Bing, I can practically guarantee."

"Mouth, Mitch." Bingford primly patted his lips as if reminding Mitch to employ a napkin there. "When I want my ass kicked in front of an audience I'll go on *Letterman*, all right, ~~old buddy~~?" Bingford crumpled his sheet of paper, signaling that the meeting was over. "This is where we are, people. Not easy times."

~~When he went~~ back to his cubicle, Mitch settled himself into his erg chair but did not turn his computer on.

He was half a century old, and working for a giveaway newspaper. Put that in your Institutional Memory and smoke it, Rozier.

"Are you, like, blocked?"

Mitch jumped as if goosed. Then spun his chair around to face the wraith in the doorway.

[Just what this day needed: his cubemate the witch doctor. Shyanne's health mania was, it could only be said, incurable. Assorted natural purgatives and other herbs lay ~~stuck away~~ in every desk drawer at *Cascopia*, courtesy of her fevered diagnoses and apothecary arts.

Wary of what vegetable matter she might foist on him, Mitch now checked:

"Are we on the topic of bowels here?"

"Writer's block," she specified eagerly.] "I have it every time. I mean, I just walk into this building and I'm, 'Oh. There it is again. The block.'"

["Hey, huh uh,"] Mitch tried a smile, with the awful feeling that it was going to look sickly. "No, this is just a really hard piece to--"

"*Strictly Ballroom* was the worst," she broke in. "How can you write a review about something that's totally perfect?"

"Listen, ahm, Shyanne. I've got to start turning out this piece or--"

"If you won't spam it around? How I take myself past being blocked?" Shyanne came to roost on the edge of her chair, her sharp knees inches from Mitch's. She looked intense enough to cut diamonds with. "I always go ^{with a sentence:} 'Reader, I married him.'"

Mitch's brow furrowed massively.

[“No, truly.”] She spun around to her computer and in the ritual keyboard flurry that Mitch recognized, he indeed heard her fingers make the keys go ^{conjure} ~~splocksplock, ock~~ ~~splocksplock ock~~ and Charlotte Bronte's once deliciously inked words were ~~conjured~~ ^{conjured} there on her screen in up-to-the-instant pixels.

Shyanne sat back, wan but wired. “See, there's my lead, every time. I, like, borrow it a while. [That way I don't have to be too thinky about it and--”]

[“Your l--?”] Isn't that more of an ending?”

“Sure, but ^{it} hooks up on the interpersonal level, ~~and that.~~ There I am, talking to ~~the reader.~~ It's all, ‘Oh, hey, Reader? Here I am again!’ And that just really frees me up inside, ~~for~~”

^{Charlotte Bronte's} “But ~~that~~ reader exists in England in ^{the 19th century} ~~18~~-um-something,” Mitch pointed out with a force that startled himself. “~~Charlotte Bronte's~~ reader ^{is} out there ankle-deep in the moors: Who has never laid eyes on a video, let alone the forgettable Joan Fontaine as Jane Eyre.”

Eyes vast, Shyanne suddenly was emulating the old Procol Harum song, *A Whiter Shade of Pale*.

“Be joking,” she said very low.

I can, I love this
solution to
Winter's block.
But I think
Shyanne is
better.

al?

“I kid you not, those people were video-deficient. So, don’t you think going interpersonal with *that* reader is kind of”--Mitch knew that if there were a referee on the premises he would be whistled for piling on, but he could not stop himself--“unnatural?”

“You jealous puke!” Shyanne was vigorous enough in springing out of her chair.

“Be blocked, see if I give a zit! We are over being cubular together. I will not work in the same space with a destructive aura. BING! I NEED A NEW CUBE!”

six

“Way cool! You can hear it *eating* it!”

The third-graders shepherded by Lexa were in ecstasy at the unscheduled feeding time they were witnessing. Squirrels are cats with the brains left out, she reflected, judiciously watching the long-tailed gray tidbit being feasted upon by the zoo’s eagle invalid, Spike. A minute ago the squirrel was bounding along, bippity bippity, at the grassy verge of the injured raptors’ perch area, and the golden eagle, dragging wing and tether and all, nailed it with a huge noiseless pounce.

“Yuck, gross!”

“SHHH. *Listen.*”

70-72
76-79
I say,
I'd mini
about cutting
these passages.
I'm of mixed mind.
On the one hand, Lexa's
another indication of
her own
sympathy that might
be bippity.
On the other
hand, I'm
clear to get to
the heart of
Lexa's story.
The Travis
story.

Indeed, the sounds of Spike ripping apart the squirrel with his beak, tearing ligament from bone, could be clearly heard. Parents were in for twenty-seven graphic reports at dinner tables tonight.

Palmer wasn't even trying to hide his pride in Spike. Slipping the gauntlet onto his wrist, the raptor keeper said: "Little snack between meals there. But I don't want to see any of you attacking our squirrels with your bare teeth, hear?" The schoolkids moaned in adoration while their grim-mouthed team of teachers and field-trip volunteers who were getting more than they volunteered for on this field trip tried to quell the rampant bloodthirstiness.

"While Spike chows down," Palmer continued, winking at Lexa where she stood in front of the herd of kids, "let me introduce you to our other birds of prey."

The raptor casualty ward currently included a snowy owl, a kestrel, and a red-tailed hawk, besides the feasting eagle, and Lexa had heard Palmer's spirited spiel about each bird enough times that her attention drifted off to the zoo's Northern Trail again. She had taken this pack of schoolkids there--she took all the groups in her weekly docent stints there--and naturally the bear enclosure wowed them. The two grizzlies, big and bigger, frolicked in the pond dammed by the transparent viewing wall. The grizzly male, six hundred pounds of bad attitude, in particular seemed aware of the audience. The kids

delighted in scaring themselves by racing right up to the glassed-in bear, but Lexa, knowing she was being sappy about it, nonetheless always stood all the way at the back to watch the creature from as much distance as possible.

—————
 The summer she had cooked for the bear tagging team, the team leader Zweborg was forever saying *Gee gosh, I hate to see that* when the massive pawprints would show up on the trail between them and the camp.

The six of them and a hundred or two grizzlies were prowling the Kenai Peninsula. It was a great break for Travis, because on the research rungs of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game this was way up there, setting foot snares along streams choked with spawning salmon to catch huge and hungry grizzlies. Then, when you caught a bear, firing a tranquilizing dart into his shaggy hide and hastening (but not hurrying; Zweborg, the priss, always piped out *We must not hurry, people, for we have no time to waste*) through the procedures of fastening a radio collar on the medically controlled griz, taking its measurements, tagging its ear, and ~~(even Travis did not much like this part)~~ smearing blue tattoo ink under its upper lip and plier-pressuring a permanent identification number into there. The team looked like crazed surgeons air-dropped into the middle of the wilderness, their implements spread on the back of the bear. Souped up on adrenaline,

ok,
 save it
 for next
 page

but not *hurrying*, each of them performed some chore on the animal--the two that always made Lexa catch her breath, ~~times when she was along with the taggers on some bear trail~~^R ~~near camp~~, were Ruthie's handling the needles of the bear-dope called atrophine, deadly to humans, and Travis's count-your-fingers-first task of tattooing the inside of the griz's lip.

Blued, tattooed, and construed, the grizzly then had to be given the shot of antidote and watched a while to make sure it woke up and went back to its bear ways okay. Quite a lot of sentry duty in tagging bears. Lexa noticed, though, that the pawprints across the trail at the end of the day--the bear that *wasn't* there--spooked the F&G team more than their tagging work did, and they would all erupt into yodeling or nervous yelps to announce their presence. Everyone was armed to the teeth and beyond, the men packing shotguns loaded with slugs and Ruthie the bear-drug dealer with a .375 Magnum revolver strategically on her hip, and the times Lexa was out with them she was about as concerned over all the large-caliber weaponry in the hands of fresh-from-the-lab wildlife biologists as she was with the potential grizzly in the bush. Even Travis, who looked like Hunter Hank the minute you put him in the outdoors, was actually the genetically suburban son of a Phoenix airline pilot.

Ruthie

But the summer passed with nobody either eaten or shot, and Lexa looked back on it as a highly instructive season. Alaska was fresh to her then, but the trick of living beside the wild was known to her. Other than Zweborg, whose mind seemed to consist of a compartment labeled *Everything about bears* and another labeled *Christian thoughts for the day*, she was the one among them who had any history with grizzlies. When they were barely big enough to see over the dashboard of the Power Wagon, she and Mariah had watched as their father shot a sheep-eating bear, the grizzly trying its mightiest to tear off its own trapped toe and reach the man. There had been other family bear encounters as she grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern Montana. So, in a sense, she had already been where Alaskans were stampeding toward. The human population of the Kenai was multiplying as fast as the U-Haul trailers could be unloaded, and the idea behind the tagging team was to study how the bears were faring as their home range was encroached on. Lexa would not have said she was against science, exactly, but she was going to be mighty surprised if the data indicated anything but grizzly life eroding away.

Hers not to reason why, though. Travis seemed to thrive there in bear camp. He had charge of the floatplane, out at the trailhead, and the flying lessons he had cajoled out of his father back when he was a teenager looked pretty smart now. There was one other

OK?

amended sentence fix?

side of Travis she hadn't had a chance to see before, the elastic way he could fit himself around whoever was in charge. In no time at all, Zweborg was writing evaluations on Travis that were the bureaucratic equivalent of frankincense and myrrh.

Not overly surprising, then, when at the end of each week Zweborg would clear his throat and send Travis and ^{Lexa} her out ~~together~~ on the supply run. Everybody knew it made no sense to send the *cook* out of camp for the day, but the rest of the tagging team gamely said nothing and ^{ting} put up with sandwiches and dried apricots in Lexa's absence. So, armed and pack-carrying, the two of them would head out on the trail, Travis's cute flat cowboy rear end close in ^{ahead} ~~front~~ of her as they hiked fast and loudly announced themselves to possible bears. Travis's style was to caterwaul the Eagles' great song, *You cain't hiiide yore lyn' eyes*. In her turns, Lexa adapted top-of-her-voice commands that had worked well on the McCaskill family sheepdogs. *Jump in the truck, bear! Bear, go lay down!*

Both of them would be thoroughly keyed up by the time they reached the lake and the floatplane moored there. Now at last came the conjugal part, the reason Zwe-- bless his pointy old Jesus freak head--sent them out together. Nights in bear camp posed a marital problem, with four other people in sleeping bags a few feet away and half-awake anyway listening for grizzlies outside. But the sleeping bag she and Travis were