

The gigantic smokestack of the Black Eagle smelter would start to show above the curve of the central Montana horizon as you drove within fifty miles of Great Falls and its Black Eagle hill, a smoking beacon against the sky. Lexa well remembered the silly but disorienting sensation of missing that manmade landmark, pole magnet to the eye for an hour at a time on any car trip, the first time she went back to the Two Medicine country after the divorce from Travis.

Mariah was thinking out loud:

“I was going to use it as--I don't know, the runaway version of something like Bell Rock. Signatures on the horizons. The lighthouse sending its signals out to sea, all nice-nice...the Black Eagle stack taking over a piece of country about the size of Scotland and saying hey, we're the biggest furnace in the world here, we're smelting the copper guts right out of Montana. Anyway, so much for that pairing.”

Highly camera-ed up, their father had been known to say of Mariah's approach to life. *Taking on the whole world with it now*, Lexa mused. *That's Mariah for you*. With this flamehaired sister, when life wasn't heart heart heart, it was job job job.

Mariah's eyelids closed, then opened reluctantly as Lexa watched. “*Now* I'm crashing,” Mariah admitted. “Where's that blessed bed you're forcing on me, one-of-a-kind sister?”

three

When the middle name of your hometown is Sulphur, there is not much you can do about the smell of your childhood.

Two generously pungent ponds burbling away at the temperature of warm soup convinced Mitch Rozier's forebears that the place would spawn an American version of Baden-Baden, but Twin Sulphur Springs turned out to be another teetery western town, stunted by distance, regularly put upon by tough weather barreling down out of the Rockies, and, to the sorrow of the first three generations of Roziers, devoid of earthly wealth except that pair of thermal swimming holes. By the time Mitch was blinking his way into his teens, his father Lyle was reduced to bossing a crew of rock pickers on the

glacial benchlands north of town where hard sod had been cut up into grainfields. Out there on the rockpile it did not seem much of a debate, whether Twin Sulphur Springs ought to be regarded as an unspawned spa with a healthy mineral aroma to it or one more West Nowhere with the added detriment of smelling like eggs gone bad.

So, Mitch took away with him a kind of bitter awe that his father never once wavered from that life, those stoneboats that you could heap high springtime after springtime and still have a world of rocks amid the alien grain, then the haying contract every summer at so much per ton but never as many tons as anticipated, then the mad dashes of trucking in the harvest each fall if the white combine--hail--hadn't claimed the grain first. Winter, though, when his father was cooped up in town, was the season hardest to get through. Mitch dreaded suppertime, coming home from scrub basketball practice and right away being dispatched by his mother to play fetch. Across town he would go, between the springs steaming side by side in Artesia Park, their aroma barely clearing from his nose by the time he reached the V.F.W. Club. Fluorescent dusk in there, the men along the bar drinking with their hats on as Mitch edged in. Lyle Rozier holding forth, you could count on it.

"Wouldn't you know. Here's my heir apparent, with orders from headquarters. Hey, Fritz"--or Mike or Monte or whoever else had once had the fate of being shipped overseas; New Guinea was Lyle's own chapter of foreign war--"how do you think this kid

of mine is gonna stack up? Needs another year or two and some pounds on him to really handle rock, but maybe he'll amount to a hay hand, what do you think?"

Supper ready at home, now to grow cold while his mother's temper heated up.

cut or explain. Not sure what "gaps" means

Faced with gaps he couldn't yet name, Mitch tried. "Mom said--"

"I can pretty much guess what she said." Just the right tinge in his father's words to draw a general laugh along the bar.

He would not forget standing there, raw as a stripped willow, watching as his father ^{did not} didn't budge, did not move on the bar stool except to dig in the shirt pocket where his smokes were kept. Then the bright crack of a match against his father's horn-colored thumbnail, new sulphur whiff filling the boy's nostrils as Lyle lit up another Lucky and ordered another beer. "We'll go before you know it, son," Lyle Rozier was saying, while Mitch was already more than halfway to his own verdict of stay or go.

#

Not sure about Proust here you wouldn't wonder how, would you?

And the minute you come back, the Mitch of now was thinking to himself by way of his nose, you wonder how Proust could encounter the wafts of the past and get a butter cookie out of it.

As if by family mandate he had been driving the twisty old highway from Choteau somewhat too fast and, his mind speeding even more than the Honda, he suddenly had to come to and brake hard for the bridge at the Soda Creek curve, just short of the miserably

see note next page

unbanked turn where the half dozen white highway fatality crosses had accumulated across the decades. This time of year the road was dry, and with the advent of anti-lock brakes the bad curve was not necessarily lethal any more. At the start of the winter of 1962, however, right here his mother's big tail-finned Chrysler apparently had skidded like crazy before wrapping itself and her around the concrete bridge abutment. Here, barely two miles out of town, Adele Rozier had already built up speed on another of her impromptu getaways to the Sweetgrass Hills, three hours away on the northern horizon, to simmer down for a few days or a week with the accommodating aunt and uncle who had raised her. By the county coroner's estimation she was dead in the time it took for the noise of the crash to carry to the nearest farmhouse. Cause of death: black ice. Mitch had been sixteen when his mother's car wreck came on top of everything else, there in that strange set of years that still were the longest in his life.

Past the Soda Creek curve the highway drew a dead aim on Twin Sulphur Springs, the yellow striped line a straight shot to the bumptious gazebo in Artesia Park at the far end of town. Beyond, as if keeping their wary distance, sat the Rocky Mountains. Now Mitch drove with excessive care--this section of road was unevenly patched from frost heaves-- and used the time into town to ^{let} graze his eyes around. The country here was ledger-line flat on both sides of the highway and yet not in sum; the bumpy edges of benchlands protruded everywhere like knees of reclining Gullivers. Grainfields whose more natural crop was

Would he
really be capable
of forgetting that
the uncle was
coming?

ow?

cantaloupe-sized rocks had been farmed into all the benchtops but one, the hopelessly pebbly elongated rise showing above the park at the west edge of town, and that was the Rozier Bench.

Mitch glanced at it for the trillionth time in his life and pondered, *Dad, why? And don't tell me, "Because."* The one thing the family property supported was the high school's big white rock letters TSS, repainted springtime after springtime by senior classes of varying artistic temperaments. Mitch's father had always got a kick out of acting civic, particularly if it didn't cost anything or better yet paid off somehow. Among Lyle Rozier's endeavors had been the contentious term he served as county commissioner, long enough to get a number of roads paved at the Twin Sulphur Springs end of the county and coincidentally one of them right out to the Rozier Bench. Currently his chosen connived post was as county brand inspector. Mitch shook his head. One Rozier trotting around to ever diminishing cattle ranches, another dedicated to the vanishing species called newspapers—*Naw, he told himself. Huh uh. Stuff like that can't run in a family. Can it?*

As he pulled into town, it seemed to him even more shabby than the last time he had been here, no more than half a year ago. A fast-food delivery truck was backed up to its first port of call, the Town Pump, *Gas-Groceries-Videos-Electronic Poker* on the pump-island sign and room for more.] The aquamarine post office, Uncle Sam's cinder-block

contribution, squatted next to the old community hall that was now the senior center, with a wheelchair ramp put on like a hasty patch. In the squeeze tube line of enterprises that squibbed out toward visitors approaching any American municipality anymore, the only new business Mitch could spot was a small medical equipment supply store, there to supply oxygen for emphysema sufferers. Any other change in a town like this was probably something vanishing. Until the statute of limitations on athletic fame ran out how ever many years ago, there had been a weathered sign at the town line proclaiming **State Class B Football Champions 1963**. Mitch's last game here, the Class B playoff. It came down to The Springs wind, and Mitch. The Forsyth Dogies looked stunned when a typical gust stalled their point after touchdown, the kick in mid-air, the football fading like a shot duck. In the ungodly weather, next thing to winter, all game long Mitch made yardage against them in that deceptive drifting style of his, running faster than he looked to be, then pouring on a bit more speed yet. [He would score, then on leftover momentum would slant around end for the point after touchdown.] The Forsyth Dogies got back on their schoolbus with the wind fanning their whipped butts.

At least they beat me out of here. All too aware that the downtown face of The Springs on a bright afternoon of this sort was like being in a stucco desert, he took the back street to his father's place. Even so he had to skirt Artesia Park on the way. The fume of the twin springs and the gazebo needing paint and the bald patches of what had been

intended to be lawn were everything he remembered. Well, what could you expect,

[Roziers past and present] he addressed the convention of ghosts in his mind. Come out here and create an unnecessary town from scratch and that's what it was going to look like, scratch.

He pulled up in front of the house. His father's pickup was not there, but rolling stock of several other kinds abounded around the place--vestigial tractors, and several generations of self-stacking hay bale haulers (none of which, Mitch recalled, ever worked worth a damn), and the power buckrake his father had driven before bale-stacking gizmos came into vogue, and the truck of all purposes called the Blue Goose, now mostly rust.

Lyle Rozier's knickknack drawer was his yard, still.

The skeletal traffic jam aside, the Rozier place looked barely populated. The four wavery aspens out front that his father forever fed agricultural fertilizer were the thinnest of sentries. The house itself seemed gaunt, life only in its lower half; the upstairs, you could tell from the hazy unwashed windows, was a deck of unoccupied bedrooms. Downstairs, the ancient lacy curtains hung like doilies on a packing crate. Mitch climbed out of the car and walked down the gravel driveway, (each footstep a small crunch,) toward the kitchen door. There still was the large gray canker in the soil not many feet from the kitchen steps, where in the time before sewers and garbage collection reached this end of town his family tossed the wash water and stove ashes, and for that matter emptied the slop pail. [The

Great
Image

chickens pecked away the slops, but the lye of the soap and ashes had killed the ground for good.

As if suspecting that kind of behavior, the Aronson house next door had a newly built bay window bulging like a vigilant eye, [he couldn't help but notice.] Whatever had got into the Aronsons, the paint on their place also looked suspiciously fresh. With particular wariness Mitch sized up the new fence of shellacked jackstays between the [Rozier place and the neighboring] house. [Was his father back into some kind of fencepost scheme again, too?]

"Are you the son?"

The accentless voice across the fence belonged to a carefully maintained man of about forty, wearing a brushed-denim shirt which cost about the same.

He ~~came non-stop~~ out of his yard, ducking^{ed} adroitly through the poles of the pristine fence, and [over to where Mitch stood by the steps, whipping^{ed} out an earnest handshake] when he reached there. "I'm Donald Brainerd. We're next-door now."

"Mitch Rozier," Mitch reluctantly owned up to. He ^{nodded toward} ~~indicated to~~ Brainerd's spruced-up house with his head. "What happened to--when did the [Aronsons (move)]?"

"Last December. We came up from Boise in time for winter. I thought we should test that out." Brainerd seemed to be trying to do a fair assessment of Twin Sulphur

not sure
this works
grammarally
though I
certainly get it,
we'll see what
the c/c says, ok?

Springs' brand of winter. "It wasn't as bad as all the predictions," indicating with his head the house of Lyle.

"One will be," Mitch forecast with no effort, "if you stick around."

"Oh, we're here to stay. I can run my consulting business mostly by E-mail and cell phone--FedEx when I have to. Nice to be able to do that and have all this, too."

Brainerd indicated proprietorially toward the Rockies ^{behind} ~~in back of~~ Mitch.

Mitch turned around to them, the distant but sharp-edged skyline up over the Rozier Bench. Mountain by mountain they took hold of his gaze. He knew them from boyhood ~~sight~~ and could still name each one, from southmost Cathedral Reef with its gray-blue upthrust calling on the sky, to the mammoth pachyderm lobe of Ear Mountain, to the distinctive stone ramparts north in the Two Medicine country, Roman Reef and Jericho Reef, with the profile of Phantom Woman Mountain presiding between. Mountains of an older order than the Coast's volcanic apprentices; folded, palisaded, granitic. And up there atop the divide of the continent, he was reminded anew, sat the Bob Marshall Wilderness, [emphasized as it had to be nowadays with a capital W. Marshall,] ^{named for} that bat-eared Mozart of the national forests, roaming and rhapsodizing, and right now Mitch wished that more people had seen along with Bob Marshall that this neck of the earth was always going to be a country of great mountains and mediocre human chances.

too much
I think

So many
descriptions

Reluctantly leaving the sight of the mountains, Mitch turned around to deal with next-door.

[Brainerd crossed his arms on his chest, making Mitch know he was arriving at the point of his visit.]

“Your father is something of a character.”

Mitch glanced toward the hard-used Rozier house, then toward Brainerd’s modernized little-house-on-the-prairie. “Everybody is, in a certain light.”

[Donald Brainerd smiled very slightly. “Wouldn’t you say he’s more so?”

Mitch’s forehead furrowed in lines that read Now What?]

“I have to tell you, we’re concerned,” Brainerd let his voice drop as if sympathetic to Mitch’s plight. “I’m glad you’re here, we thought we might have to call you.”

“[Call me,] what about?--isn’t he all right? [I talked with him on the phone just-]”

“I didn’t mean healthwise. He tore out of here in that pickup as usual this morning.” Brainerd frowned past Mitch. “It’s the appearance of the place. Wouldn’t a reasonable person say it’s...overcrowded?”

Mitch turned and joined in Brainerd’s appraisal.

“No,” his rewrite instinct kicked in. “‘Junk-laden’ is more like it.”

Brainerd cleared his throat. “[Whatever the choice of words.] My concern is this: everything sits right there, out our window.”

Mitch's eyebrows went up ^{quizzically}. "You're not telling me my father moved all his junk into view the instant you bought your place, are you? That'd have been the biggest sonofabitching deployment since Desert Storm."

Brainerd was not even close to amused. "We were led to believe his...collection comes and goes." He folded his arms on his chest again. "It seems mostly to come."

Mitch put on an expression of sympathy, ^(maybe overly so). Ah, the troublesome life of the window westerner. Those gorgeous purple mountains and the Lyle Roziars of the world in the way.

Already tired of changing sides--he had been in his father's damned teetertotter of a town now for, what, fifteen minutes?--Mitch gave the neighbor a look with some shoulder to it. "Donald?" he said as if it was a guess. "I'm here to see about straightening some things up. Give me a little time with my father, ^{okay?}"

Brainerd ducked back through the jackstay fence looking unsatisfied but ^{not} surprised either, and Mitch went on into the house.

He knew that his father was no housekeeper, but the sludge of items had grown to geological proportions. Newspapers were stacked like hay bales. Amid the multiple months' worth of the *Great Falls Tribune* and the *Choteau Acantha*, Mitch was startled to spot past issues of *Cascopia*; then remembered that he long ago had sneaked his father's

I think I can see what you mean, but it's a bit of a mix

name onto the subscription list. ^{Why} What on earth had he ^{thought it was a good idea to give Lyle} been thinking of to give him a

OUT

weekly reminder of the gulf between their two lives?

Old machinery parts congregated comfortably on end tables and sideboards as if visiting from the back yard. Seasons of clothing were tossed onto hooks on the wall,

[Lyle's red-and-black plaid winter cap with earflaps mashed over his fishing hat.]

Amid it all, a once-green easy chair showed a seat which sagged to the exact fit of Lyle Rozier's venerable rump. An almost as venerable bunny-ear television set, probably with Ed Sullivan and Dagmar painted on the cave walls inside it, ^{sits under} but with a startling new VCR box-atop, ~~sat on a straightback chair~~ no more than arm's length from the easy chair.

Good God, was his father's eyesight going, too?

Mitch unabashedly prowled. Christmas cards were still ^{lined up} standing in the bay of the window. The UNESCO one he and Lexa--all right, Lexa--had sent. A few with names Mitch recognized from around town. Then one with the shaky inscription, *Wishing you another year on top of the ground, old sarge. Your pal, Fritz.* Mitch made a mouth; Fritz Mannion, another single-handed winner of World War Two, wherever he was now. [Fritz, or at least his combat boots, starred often in one of those everlasting VFW Club stories.]

"One time out on patrol old Fritz tripped, saved our lives," Lyle's voice echoed from the past. "I of course went to help him up, and as I was, here's this movement in the jungle just ahead. Got my rifle around on it in a real hurry, but Ferragamo behind me beat me to

wouldn't be such a surprise

want to go for a simple frown here?

it by about a trigger squeeze. He had that BAR going, the Jap never knew what hit him. I didn't even have to fire, Joe'd almost cut the guy in half already. Hadn't been for Fritz's big feet, though, that Jap would have ventilated us for sure."

[Fritz's scratchy remembrance and the other handful of cards and a stamped greeting from the electrical co-op appeared to be the total of Lyle's holiday season last.] Mitch wondered if ^{Lyle} the man cared that it was a sad collection, or even noticed. [He turned around to where life in this household, such as it had been, was always centered.]

His father's desk in the far corner of the living room--"the neutral corner,"

[that remembered figure would joke as he plopped himself down there to juggle wages and bills] was as laden but organized as ever. And unlike any other appurtenances in this household, the daybooks ranked on the long shelf above the back of the desk were kept free of dust. The ledgers of Lyle's crews, year by year.

[Immediately Mitch went over to them.] 1962 was inked on the spine of one in a hand different from the rest. For that matter, the teenage boy's hand that had so carefully written those numbers was different from the grown Mitch's now, was it not?

He felt the urge to pull out the daybook and flip through its pages, but why start that again. Names of crews, marching down the ledger lines, and their days of work tallied across the wide double pages of each month, that was all the thing held. Fritz and

A bit awkward
not sure this
is better
I might just cut

great

implicit

Ferragamo were in there, too. Hayfield warriors, that indelible summer, still serving under old sarge Lyle Rozier.

In spite of himself, Mitch drew down the daybook and opened it to the first crew of that year. *While every page else,* **April: rockpicking** recorded in his father's neat hand. **Donald Brainerd**

OK? I think Mitch is so full in the past now that Brainerd wouldn't come to mind
would have tipped over in astonishment, but the bookkeeping in the Rozier household had always been meticulous. Except *(Almost?)* when *The word here would be more painful, I think*

He heard *[*crunching in the driveway*]* a vehicle pulling in. The pickup that ground to a halt outside the bay window was the latest in his father's succession of faded Smokey-the-Bear green rigs, bought every few years when the U.S. Forest Service auctioned off used surplus. Lyle Rozier *entirely* despised the Forest Service and all other government agencies that kept people like him away from the big pinata of natural resources in this country, but the pickups were a bargain he couldn't pass up.

Mitch *watched* saw his father step from the pickup cab as if measuring the distance down to earth from his preferred automotive eminence, then hold the door open for his passenger, his deaf border collie Ring *[*to appraise the exit and dubiously leap out.*]* Next, a groove of behavior Mitch would have recognized from a dozen blocks away--Lyle turned, lifted his head a notch, and took a deep, deep sniff. So far as Mitch had ever known there was no physical reason for that habit, nothing wrong with his father's magisterial nose; he simply seemed to feel entitled to an extra share of the air every so often.

over time!

Looking around as if he had all the time in the world on his hands, ~~now~~ Lyle eased backward and propped himself against the fender, lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

Mitch realized his father was going to wait for him to come out.

As he stepped out the kitchen door, Lyle peered up from under his battered brown Stetson. "You made it."

"Looks that way, doesn't it. How you doing, Dad?"

"Not bad for the shape I'm in," the identical answer he had been giving ^{the} for half a century ~~that~~ Mitch personally knew of. Trying to study his father without flying flags about it, Mitch came down off the kitchen steps and advanced to the lounging area of the pickup fender.

cut?

They shook hands, still awkward at it as if they had mittens on. Then Mitch gave Rin a passing pat as the dog left the pair of men to their foreign world of sound and somberly went to examine the trunks of the aspens out front of the house. Then, for the humans, there was family tree.

cut?

Of Lyle Rozier, many would have said big-headed, but to put it as neutrally as possible, his hat had a great plenty to rest on. The Rozier box of face, as his son all too ruefully knew, could not be called distinguished, but certainly qualified as distinctive, full of surprising promontories. There was such a thing as a Rozier jaw, blunt and stubborn as

its background of French peasants and their plows; and definitely a Rozier nose; and

the french peasants who passed it on,

Mitch is a great line. I'd bet it stands all alone. Couldn't be more vivid

1/2 way to the end

cheekbones broad enough to substantiate the rest of the foursquare proportions. This one-man Mount Rushmore face had been Lyle's collateral in life, if not yet his fortune. The worn lines on it even improved it, the way an Anasazi cliff dwelling seems more natural because it's ancient. (Not that his father was ancient, Mitch reminded himself. There could be an exhausting number of years of Lyle left to deal with.) The problem of the eyes, though. The bluesteel eyes which Mitch met again now as always, with a stir of resentment at the weight of presumption under those Roman senatorial lids. His father's drill-bit way of looking at you as if he had seen you before you put your clothes on this morning and knew just what you were covering up.

Crutches and a snowy new walking cast had been unexpectedly useful to Mitch as camouflage, that distant evening of the picnic supper in the park. After the monumental broken leg had kept him in bed all that summer he at last was up and around and giddily aware of the new reaches of his body. Mitch did not yet know enough to put it this way, but he was finding it intriguing to be around himself: the growth spurt that would change [him radically across the next year--change] him so hard he sometimes would ache out loud, startled, with it; change him ruthlessly from a sixteen-year-old inadvertent cripple into a seventeen-year-old who threatened the dimensions of doorways--was starting to hit. And still thrumming in him too was the somewhat scary sense of apprehension (it all had

his smile
set his.

great

happened too quick to be called fright; mortal instillment of awe, more like) at the fashion in which fate had idly snapped his leg in two places. But that was almost overridden now by this steady amazing tide of growing up: every day a strength of some kind that he hadn't known he had. The crutches of course were bastards to handle at first, but he had overpowered even them in a hurry, his shoulders and arms mastering the swing that carried the plaster weight of the leg along with ease, his hands calloused enough from the relentless squeezing exercises he'd done on the bedpost knobs to not be bothered by the harsh wood of the crutch grips.

His father and even his mother were determinedly socializing with the crew there at the picnic supper [in Artesia Park the ^{that} Saturday before haying was over; a Rozier family tradition, and there weren't many. The customary crowd of a dozen [the adults and him trying savagely to grow into that stage, they] had the park to themselves there in the late-summer dusk and were visiting with each other almost as if they had not had every day of the haying season together to do so. But wives of the crew always came too, welcome additions, jolly Mabel Tournierre down from Gros Ventre, and up from Great Falls, Janine Ferragamo, a peaches-and-cream redhead beside her dark quiet husband Joe. The unmarried men were on their best behavior, handling everything like eggshells; as far as Mitch could remember, even Fritz Mannion stayed heroically sober for the duration of the picnic.

His walking cast, still fresh, ~~of course~~ invited everybody's autograph. "Private Mannion!" his father teased Fritz. "Still remember how to make your X, do you?" Fritz whinnied a laugh, protested to his old sergeant that he was entirely capable of providing name, rank, and serial number, and with laborious penmanship did so.

When it came her turn, Mrs. Ferragamo thoughtfully leaned over and scanned for an untaken place to write her name on the plaster. Mitch without even trying could see way down her summer dress to--surprise, surprise--twin treats of forbidden skin playing peekaboo with him from where they were barely hidden in a turquoise-blue brassiere.

The time it took Janine Ferragamo to sign her name was all too soon over, and everybody began sitting up to the fried chicken and three-bean salad and all the rest. Each table had space for half a dozen [persons comfortably], so his father joined in with the unmarried guys and his mother presided at the ^{table} one where Mitch sat.

[Whatever that said,] ^{PP} his mother was at her best in a crowd like this. She always took care to ask each of the crew wives to bring a potluck dish of some kind, so they would feel in on the occasion, and she laughed readily [at things that were said], instead of seeming to examine every conversation for booby traps the way she did at home. Now she simultaneously kidded about how starved Mitch was all the time and made sure he did justice to his food. In the natural way of things, then, he could sit there propping his leg along the bench and his crutches resting beside them, and look like he was following back

and forth the yakking of Tom Tournierre and Joe Ferragamo beside him, and his mother's chitchat with Mrs. Tournierre next to her, all the while able to drift his ^{gaze} eyes catercorner across table toward Mrs. Ferragamo.

Until this day he had not known there was such a thing as a brassiere the color of turquoise.

Here was another ~~new~~ talent he hadn't known he had, these innocent tumbleweed glances, the timing on them, move his head just enough not to be obvious, look attentive but not too, just backing and forthing between the conversations, not his fault if Mrs. Ferragamo happened to be there for the watching. While he worked on the matter of how goodlooking Mrs. Ferragamo--the *rest* of Mrs. Ferragamo--really was. Beyond pretty, he knew that much. Although he didn't think beautiful; Julie Christie in whatever the name of that foreign movie was, that constituted beautiful. No, Mrs. Ferragamo was, how could he classify it, cuter than was to be expected, sort of the way a cheerleader's looks improved when you realized she was a cheerleader, even though in Mrs. Ferragamo's case she had to be almost his mother's age and, with Joe of course on the scene, very much a married wo^{man}.

All at once Mitch felt something riding him piggyback.

He turned half-around to the load of his father's eyes on him. No frown behind them, no wink ~~from them~~, not a thing anyone else was noticing. Simply letting his son

I ran
a bit
awkward this
A lot of heads
turning back
& forth. I think
we get it from
hot off the

know ~~with a look~~ that he had been caught at it. Mitch was pretty sure that ~~look~~ of his father's had brought him those sergeant stripes in the war.

He felt himself redden, and redden some more, burn from the knowledge of that gaze.

Unblushing toward his father all the years since, Mitch said now:

"So here I am, heir to the fortune in gravel. What's this about a buyer for"--he cast a glance around the ramshackle place--"the Rozier chateau and grounds?"

Lyle cleared his throat. "Kind of keep your voice down, okay? Not just everybody knows about this gravel deal."

"Like, say, Donald Brainerd?"

"Already met the improvement to the neighborhood, did you." Lyle tossed down his cigarette and ground it into the driveway gravel with his foot. It always surprised Mitch to ~~look down and~~ see workshoes on his father. His type of strut you would think could only spring from cowboy boots.

[To be saying something, Mitch provided:] "Lexa said to tell you she's sorry she couldn't come and watch the gravel fly."

"I bet."

At last Lyle unmoored from the pickup fender. "Oh, say. Before we go in, let me show you a little something interesting." Off he marched to the nearby shed. He was moving more slowly and stiffly with the years, [Mitch took notice,] but he still went as arrowstraight as if on a parade-ground.

Lyle threw open the double doors to the machine shed, which held a maze of metal but not a bit of it machinery. Skinny rods each about three feet long with exotic bends at their ends were in tangled iron pyres on the floor, in rust-streaked downpours on one wall, and in dangling black stalactites from the rafters. The place looked like a case history of ferrous extrusion gone mad.

[Mitch stood unmoving, but his gaze shot around this metallic rummage heap as if ricocheting.] By the opposite wall stood a cheerful red barbecue grill, half a sack of charcoal beside ^{it;} ~~one leg,~~ into that wall were burned hundreds of sets of the hieroglyphics that once had been seared onto herds of cattle and horses, Tumbling T's and Walking 7's, Barbed Y's and Rocking 0's, Dice 8's and Rafter S's and all the rest of what was evidently an entire capering glossary of this menagerie.

"Branding irons," Lyle pronounced in a remnant of his sergeant voice.

"I see they are."

Mitch ~~went over and~~ picked up a couple of the brands waiting to be heated in the grill, clattering a Quarter-Circle R against a Lazy A.

"You've been hard up for a hobby, I guess."

"Hobby!" Lyle's voice cracked from indignation. "Hobby, my patoot." These're business. I sell them. Every guy new to this country is gonna want one, you just watch and see."

"And they're going to do what with them, swat snakes?"

"Mitch, [It's not just the iron,]" Lyle said with terrible patience. "Think about it. I sell the whole brand, registration and all. Gives guys the right to call their ranchettes the Bar BQ or whatever the heck if they buy the brand, now doesn't it. They can legally put it on the kid's pony, paint it on their Jeep, all that."

A familiar ~~dimension of~~ dread filled Mitch. "But you've been the county brand inspector, right?"

"Sure have. And I know just what you're going to yip about next. But this isn't whatchacallit, conflict of interest."

"Maybe not, but you can pretty easily see it from here."

~~"Aw, you worry too much."~~

Mitch gaped around again at the metal mess, with an equal legal tangle doubtless somewhere behind it. ~~Helplessly he thought out loud,~~ "There can't be much of a living in selling branding irons."

Lyle's expression turned hedgy. "Sort of one."

["Like horseshit, there is. Dad, you've got to get over--"]

"Guys are doing that now, too," Lyle put in.

"Doing what?"

"Selling horseturd keepsakes. Shellac them up and put them on a little base, get them into the gift shops. I prefer dealing in iron, myself."

"All right already, so you're dealing in iron instead of road apples!" Mitch gestured violently at the collection. "Where'd you come up with all these? What'd you use for money?"

"Oh, I see what you're driving at," Lyle said, lowering his voice toward—
~~confidential~~ "The *financing*. Took out a mortgage on the place. And the property, of course," with a pleased nod in the direction of the benchland. "See, though, that's the beauty of selling the Bench. Pay off the mortgage and hang on to the branding iron collateral and still come out ahead." He studied the expression on his son, then admitted: "It's a little complicated."

Mitch could almost feel tentacle after tentacle of litigation and forfeiture wrapping around his knees. *Lawyer, banker, gravel man, grief.*

"Dad, the paperwork you want me in on." He was trying to fight off the perverse hope that his father *was* certifiably losing his mind; dementia might be the best defense, the

Mr sure you
need quite so
much of this.

way the case of Lyle Rozier versus the contractual world seemed to be going. "Don't you think I ought to start looking that over?"

"Sure, sure. Head on into the house, make yourself at home if you remember how. I have to detour by the pickup a minute."

Again in that first-floor attic that was the living room, Mitch gazed around for some spot clear enough to ~~sit and~~ work. After the helter-skelter cargo of branding irons and the general strew outside, his father's desk looked more than ever like the unnaturally tidy bridge on a tramp freighter.

"I can still keep book, anyway," Lyle's voice came. He unhurriedly followed it in from the doorway, hanging up his hat on one of the already-full coathooks without looking as he passed. ["Wondered if I maybe could go into the income tax preparing business, there for a while. But it occurred to me Uncle Sam's pencils are probably even sharper than mine."]

Mitch gave [something which could have been either] a grudging grin, or a grimace.

"There've been times when I would have had to bet on you in a contest like that."

["Okay, papers."] Lyle fussed around at the desk, moving this ream and that, [peering down, then checkerboarding the stacks back where they had been. "Wonder which of this stuff you ought to see first, here."]

Next page
spirit and
dine

Mitch watched this uncharacteristic bout of squint and dither, then glanced once more at the television set so suspiciously close to his father's easy chair. He had the sudden inspiration that maybe ~~it would be provable~~ ^{a lawyer could prove} that his father had worn out his eyes on [that electronic additive atop the TV] hundreds of video viewings of *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, ~~it could be~~ Eyesight, Your Honor. He couldn't see well enough to read the fine print, our defense is this eyechart ~~by~~

"Getting a lot of use out of your VCR, ~~are you?~~" Mitch casually asked.

Lyle seemed delighted to contradict him. "[VCR, poeey. Miles beyond that] Ever heard of the Web?"

Gingerly he crossed the room and picked up the remote control, poised over it as if trying to remember the fingering on an accordion, then hit enough buttons to bring up WebTV and a row of icons on the television screen.

Mitch was still staring at the pixellated portholes of the Internet when his father let drop:

"I talk with Ritz on there quite a lot."

My[...our] Ritz? Laurits? The vagabond of Jakarta? A pang shot through Mitch and quivered there, but he tried not to give his father the satisfaction of seeing it. "Is that a fact. What about?"

“Aw, [↓]been keeping him up to date whenever I sell a branding iron, ~~and so on~~. He seems to get a kick out of it. Way we got started, I just was curious what he thought of that part of the world--you know I was out in some of those islands during the war. I thought it was sort of interesting he’s over there, too.” Noticing the look on Mitch, he further reported: “Can’t seem to get logged on to Jocelyn, though, at that advertising outfit ^o or whatever it is.”

“That was twenty minutes ago. She’s, shall we say, rolled along. Then tell me”--
you’re the expert on the farflung Rozier family all of a cybernetic sudden--” how Ritz is doing.”

“He sounds real good on the E-mail. Busy, teaching and all. Turned vegetarian, but I guess that happens [↓]any more?”

Now Lyle hesitated, evidently trying to shape his next news. “Mitch? These days you can do a search on there, you know. Find just about anybody anywhere, way I understand ^{find} it. Matthew helped me with it on Ritz. Lives next door. Brainerd’s kid, although you can hardly tell it. [Sort of a funny kid--never said boo about me calling him ‘Matt’ ever since they moved in, then the other day he all of a sudden looks up and lets me know, ‘My name is Matthew.’”]

[Mitch blearily passed a hand over his face. “Fine, wonderful. He knows his own name. Now may I see the goddamn paperwork that I drove seven hundred miles for?”]

cut?

could cut this, too

Of the making of terrifying contracts there was almost no end, Mitch found as he immersed ^{himself in} ~~into~~ his father's accumulated sheafs. The stacks ~~upon stacks~~ of gilt-edged conveyances of cattle brands to *aforsaid Lyle Rozier* appeared dismally irrevocable, Mitch finally deciding he would have to lug the whole smear off to the county seat, Choteau, and throw it all to the mercy of a lawyer. (Lyle meanwhile had done some reflecting on his claim of nonconflict of interest: "Most of those brands, Mitch, I bought outside this county. ~~Most of them.~~ Some, anyway.") The proposed deal on the proportion of his father's worldly possessions that weren't branding irons took him a good while longer to parse through, but the half-inch-thick set of papers indeed seemed to add up to an offer from Aggregate Construction Materials, Inc., to buy the benchland and what was called concomitant residential property. The money wasn't great, but it was better than might be expected for a rockpile and this badger den of a house.

Mitch sat back. As much as he hated to go near the legal jungle with anything as blunt-edged as logic, there was this to be asked.

"And what are they going to do with your glorious gravel?"

[Lyle could not stop himself from puckering up in bemusement before letting out:]

"Roads."

The Alzheimer's-has-got-your-daddy alarm went off in Mitch again. He took a long hard look at Lyle, then leaned around him to peer out at the trafficless street.

"Naw, not around town here." Lyle waved away his son's quizzical frown. "Up there." He inclined his head in the direction of the mountains ~~and held it in that attitude,~~ watching Mitch. "Aggregate's betting there's going to be gas and oil wells. Those leases along the reefs, you know. Could happen."

^{felt like he'd}
Mitch ~~had the sensation of having~~ hit an air pocket. OK?

"Can't pave into that country," Lyle was going on. "But they can lay down some gravel. Keep them from cutting ruts four feet deep, look at it that way."

"In the *Bob*? They're going to drill in a wilderness area? How the hell can they get away with ^{that?} ~~it~~?"

"Of course not *in*," Lyle stipulated. "Next to ^{neighboring} ~~Up~~ against, I guess you could say." Mitch goggled at his father, this walking dictionary of helpful locutions when it came to draining the life out of wilderness.

"Listen, Dad. Those so-called energy leases, don't get your hopes up ~~on that old~~ ~~crap~~. There's ^{what} ~~what~~ Forest Service hearings and environmental impact statements and fifty kinds of bureaucratic decisions to be made before anything like that can even begin to--"

"Those're being made. Else why is Aggregate so hot for our gravel?"

Point taken. Somebody besides Lyle Rozier was counting on gas and oil rigs trundling in to the Rocky Mountain Front, ^{or} ~~else~~ there wouldn't be this half an inch of

legalistic blandishment sitting here on the table, ~~would there~~. Every reporting hair on Mitch was standing at attention. He knew, ~~just knew~~, this was a "Coastwatch" natural, although geography would need a little amending--the Rocky Mountains as the sister shores of Malibu. But you think about it and that's absolutely what they once were, in glacial times; inland seas the size of the Great Lakes pooled up on both sides of the Rockies in that era of massive freeze and melt. And where there had been vastnesses of water like that, of course there had also been reefs, the rock enfoldments up there along the Bob that had trapped the oil and gas deposits which Aggregate and the energy speculators now were doing their sonofabitching best to ^{tap} go in and-

It abruptly came back to Mitch that "Coastwatch" and *Cascopia* were about as gone as the Ice Age. He drew what he hoped was a steadying breath. The other gnawing question presented by the Aggregate paperwork still gnawed, however. One more time he took a deep breath and turned to his father, Houdini of deals:

"The wonderful world of gravel aside, okay? Why is Aggregate in the housing market for--" he spread his arms with an indicative shrug "--this place?"

"Because I told them no deal no way on the bench property unless they took this, too. [It's all got to go.] We can make a clean sweep of it, Mitch, don't you see?"

"What I ^{can} don't see is where you think you're going to *live* if you toss away ^{can} this place, Dad!"

"Aw, something will come along," Lyle said as casual as a touring baron.

The fear he had not wanted to think about surfaced in Mitch. Did his father intend to come live with him? (And of course Lexa, who definitely had never signed on for shared occupancy with Lyle Rozier. And add in Ingvaldson, who was sourly suspicious of any fellow codger who didn't qualify as Norwegian.) Mitch could not help but remember the occasion, pre-Lexa, when Lyle had deigned to come to Seattle for a visit and, instantly bored, spent his time either using a metal detector to hunt for lost pocket change in the sand at Golden Gardens beach or sitting in on juicy cases in divorce court. Most of all Mitch recalled the kind of thing that had occurred when the young woman clerking at the Safeway made the mistake of complimenting his father on the gold-rimmed extra-green sunglasses he had on:

"Why, thanks, Missy. Know where I got them?"

"They're really rad! Where?"

"Off a dead Jap in the South Pacific."

"H-h-have a nice day, sir."

In the here and now, Mitch resorted to a suggestion which many another hale geezer or geezelle out here had managed to hit upon for themselves:

"Were you maybe thinking of getting yourself a double-wide?"

An unexpected glint came into Lyle. "Now there's a real interesting choice," he commended as if the idea of a retirement mobile home was major original thinking by his son. "Let's sort of deal with that as we go along, how about. First, why don't we get a pen going, Aggregate's already been itching to--"

"Let's ^{let} let them itch, some."

"Oh, I don't think so," Lyle said slowly, drawing his head back against the veteran leather of his easy chair as he studied Mitch. "Thing is, see, a deal can always get away if you're not pretty speedy about clinching ^{it} ~~it~~."

"Takes two to clinch," Mitch tapdanced a pair of fingers on the Aggregate stack of paper to make his point. "The Bench and home sweet home here, it's all in my name, too, as well as yours. Mom's doing, in her will, remember?"

"~~Tell me something I don't know.~~ Mitch, this dickering with Aggregate is ~~more~~ ^{more} for ~~as~~ as much for you as it is for me. You never wanted to take any of this on," Lyle indicated ~~around with a sweep of his eyes~~ ^{at} the household empire of odds and ends and the provinces of tractor carcasses and branding irons beyond, ~~before fastening back to his son.~~ "Not blaming you, but you just never did want to pitch in here and try to make something of this--"

--this *family*, Mitch in amazement waited for him to finally own up to. His father's so-called life under this roof, walled into himself and his own schemes, had been mainly of

a lot of studying

the man's own choosing. Didn't use the GI Bill to go to college after the war. Didn't take the veterans' preference jobs that came up elsewhere. Didn't even try for the big wages on the boomer projects he rabidly approved of, such as the Interstate highway or the missile silos. In something like patient fury Mitch awaited the confession from the old man [in front of him] that his closed-in approach to life had added up to a half-dozen Christmas cards curling in the May sun.

"--this town. Son, here's your shot at walking away from The Springs for good and all. With no, what do they call them, encumbrances. Just takes signing your name one time. Well, okay, a bunch of times, but--"

"I came, I saw the paperwork, and I don't concur. What's the hurry here? Aggregate doesn't have to lay its roads in the next five minutes, does it?"

"Mitch, for crying out loud, are you going to drag your feet about this?"

"I'm not going to be dragged into it without a chance to think it over, if that's what you mean, Dad." He mightily wished Lexa was here to hoot effectively at his father's grandiose gravel. *Her* father happily bargained his ranch into a buffalo preserve. Good God, the hopeless algebra of lineage.

Lyle swallowed with what seemed to be a lot of effort. "This takes more energy than it used to. I could sure stand a cup of joe." He made as if to get up, but first frowned toward Mitch. "You want some, or do you only drink herbal substances?"

"I'd better make it," Mitch said mildly and headed for the kitchen. "Coffee always knows when somebody is from Seattle."

The kitchen was somewhat more navigable than the living room, but only because of a central two-foot-high pack of paper plates. Plainly Lyle had dispensed with doing dishes and ate picnic-style.

Locating the pot that looked as if the next perk might be its last, Mitch put in what he knew was half as many measures of coffee as his father would and got it started. He hung on in the kitchen, trying to tend the stings of being the son of this father. [All the old everything.] That longstanding charge that he was AWOL from the life his father had set up for him. All right, then, what if he had [stayed--no] come back to The Springs after college, Then "married local," as they said in this town. [Say, oh, the high school principal's daughter.] Then had Springs versions of Jocelyn and Laurits. He still was as sure as anything that they'd be sailing through the streets of San Francisco and the lingual bypaths of Jakarta just the same. He was even surer he would have started off dead-ended in any career here. In that wonderful might-have-been-life sponsored by Lyle Rozier, worked at what? Become his father's partner in seasonal muscle? [You bet] divvy a job that barely supported one person. [All the rocks, hay, and graintruck dust you could eat. *Right, Dad, can't understand why I ever gave up on The Spr--*]

Behind him the back door shot open. [Mitch spun, poised on the balls of his feet, arms out for a grabbing lunge.]

why so fierce & reactive?

A pale, pale teenage boy, wearing a Twin Sulphur Springs Salamanders basketball jersey and jeans that bagged out like harem pants, stood with hands in pockets and eyed him from under eyelids at half-mast.

[“Hi,” the boy at last muttered.]

“You’d ~~better~~ be Matthew,” Mitch said, holding his ^a ready-to-tackle pose.

[“He is, he is,” Lyle called from the living room. “You can tell by his door manners.”] The pair in the kitchen watched each other with leery eyes, time lengthening between them while they listened to ^{Lyle} him pulling himself up out of the groaning old chair and making his way to the kitchen door. “Mitch, Matthew. And I suppose vice versa.”

The boy flicked a gaze as opaque as mica toward the living room and Lyle’s E-mail screen and said, “I’ll come back some other time and we’ll log on to that General MacArthur home page.”

Mitch watched the tall twig of boy hunch out the door, the back of his head pasty white beneath his buzzcut. Guilty visions of Shyanne suddenly swam to mind.

Lyle was saying, “~~Matt, sorry~~ ^{Rom} Matthew sort of likes it over here. Nobody’s on him to pick stuff up, I guess ~~maybe~~.”

cut?

Mitch just about laughed. Of course! His father's shambles of a house was a teenager's hog heaven, accumulation without particular purpose but dangerous proportions.

Mistaking Mitch's expression, Lyle said: "I don't let him hang around too much of the time. He's got parents, they're there for a purpose. Although that father of his is a dud if there ever was one."

Mitch pursed up, but said only: "Coffee's ready."

This father of his accepted the cup, took a drink, made a face, ~~then sent a glance~~
~~Mitch's way.~~

"Where were we?"

"Fighting."

"~~Yeah, right,~~" wouldn't want to lose our place at that," Lyle fairly spat out. He gave his son a tired look, then went to the table. Chair legs scraped in predictable protest. He sat down and pulled out his pack of cigarettes in the same motion. He took his time about lighting up, Mitch watching the old performance. But of all things, the next note out of his father sounded as nonbelligerent as the offered words:

"Mitch, I hate having to put it this way, but could we postpone this arguing for a little while?" Exhaling smoke slowly as if to settle his nerves, he let out along with it: "It's ~~getting~~ ^{harder and} harder to get along with Luke."

Another war with some neighbor. Or the brother of his cyber-gospelist Matthew?

Mitch waited, but nothing resembling an explanation seemed to be nearing his father's blue-hazed horizon.

"Make me ask, why don't you. Who's this Luke character?"

Lyle sniffed. Then cocked his head as if he himself was interested to learn what he was going to speak out next. And only then uttered:

"Leukemia."

—————

Mitch felt as if the skin on his face was suddenly too tight.

["Dad, run that by again."]

He stared at the older man as if trying to see into the box canyons of his mind.

["Because it sounded like you're sitting there pleasant as anything and telling me you've got--"]

"The doc says it's about got me. Why I called you."

["But...leukemia?"] Stunned as he was, now Mitch caught on: all that pinballing

around the place by his father, little tiny distances, pickup fender to the shed, back to the pickup, only then to the house and only across bits of a room at a time, to the desk, to the chair, to the doorway, of Resting places. That was what Lyle Rozier's life consisted of

The less, the better here, I think. It's much more powerful.

cut?

cut?

cut?

now. Whatever was left of it. ~~Mitch swallowed.~~ "How long've you [↙]—when did you find this out?"

"Aw, year or so. The kind I've got can go slow, you know."

"*Can't* be that long. I was out here to see you just last fall and you were perfectly ^{fine}—" Mitch stopped at the look on the other's face.

"No," his father provided as if he had it written down somewhere, "that's about what it's been, a year now."

Mitch wanted to pick the old reprobate up by his ears and then start doing him serious damage; shake him, rattle that infuriatingly reflective expression off his face, register the helpless fury of trying to be a son to this man.

~~He confined himself to gritting out.~~

"Then why the goddamn hell didn't you tell me?"

"You got your own life to lead, seems like," came Lyle's bland response. Put that way, it did not sound a particularly commendable fact.

"Well, ye gods, Dad, we have to get you going on the best medical help we can. I'll --"

"Mitch, I am bright enough to spell 'doctor'!"

All of a sudden this was the hot-faced Lyle, the foreman who could fire a lazy hayhand so fast he would be a mile down the road before he knew what hit him. The

I just want to cut down on these if possible

implicit

cut?

implicit?

father who blazed for years when a son defied him. The VFW Club veteran, revisiting his war with nightly ardor.

With old and awful familiarity Mitch watched this flare of temper, numb to its heat but trying to measure its light. *Choosing the ground to fight on one last time, old sarge?* he wondered.

Lyle cracked a match into flame and lit up another cigarette before drilling a look across the table at Mitch.

"They've looked me over every which way, down at the Falls," he was saying ~~ruggedly now, with a jerk of his head in the direction of Great Falls and its hospital hill.~~
 "And called in their visiting guy from the Mayo Clinic, just to make sure. Chemo or any of that, the odds they gave me didn't even add up to long-shot." He gave a little flipping wave with his cigarette hand and tried on a tough grin. "Everybody eventually catches something they don't get over, I guess."

On automatic, Mitch heard himself recite: "Nothing at all they can do for you?"

"Not the docs, no." Lyle was staying oddly reflective. "~~What they tell me is...~~"

Mitch listened to his father pronounce *myelogenous* and *terminal* and other medical adjectives, but his true awareness was back there on the lightning-spike epitaph *leukemia*. One diagnostic word, all it took. The space of a breath had brought Mitch his turn in the gunsights of obligation. Bingford had buried his famous father in Aspen earlier

this year. Ingvaldson's daughter the Unitarian minister had popped back from Duluth to frown compassion over his kidney stone episode last winter. Like the flyways of rattled birds, America's concourses were constantly crisscrossed with Baby Boomers trying to nerve up for the waiting bedside consultation, the nursing home decision, the choosing of a casket. Mitch could generally pick out the stunned journeyers home in airport waiting lounges, the trim businesswoman who lived by focus sitting there now with a doll-eyed stare, the man celebrating middle age with a pony-tail looking down baffled now at his compassion-fare ticket. Targeted from here on, in featureless waiting rooms the color of antiseptic gloves, for the involuntary clerkwork of closing down a parent's life. The time came, it always came. The when of it was the ambush.

Sayens

four

“It’s me,” reported Mitch’s voice, as if not happy with that fact. Amid pie dough, Lexa was listening in to the phone machine. “Deep in the heart of Artesia Park. Sharing a phone booth with squashed beer cans, and the wind is blowing in like a true sonofabitch. I’ve spent all day dealing with, trying to deal with, my father. It’s about five o’clock, Mountain time--four o’clock *your* time, right?--and I need to talk to you, Lexa, do I ever. Give me a call when you’re back from walking or zooing or whatever, would you, please? The number at the house is four oh six, ahm, nine six six--”

Really a shame to interrupt such a nice report. He must have rehearsed. Lexa picked up the phone and with a floury thumb mashed the answering machine button to OFF. “Mitch, hi, you okay? (You sound kind of crapped on.)”

“What, you’re there? Then] how come the machine is on?”

She could not stifle a chuckle while pointing out: “It’s statistically possible.”

Wiping her hands, she rescued her favorite *Far Side* (the two bears sitting in the hulk of a car in the woods: “*Think about it, Murray...If we could get this baby runnin’, we could run over hikers, pick up females, chase down mule deer--man, we’d be the grizzlies from hell.*”) out from under the latest paper blizzard on the refrigerator door while giving Mitch time to rib her in return, but he didn’t. “I just put the machine on because we voted to pig out on lemon meringue pie tonight and I’m^u—”

““We?””

“~~Mariah’s here. She~~ flew in last night. Walked her all over Seattle today sightseeing, so she’s resting her bod.” Piquant alto zzz’s trailed down from the upstairs bedroom.

“Mariah, right. Tickle her in the ribs for me.”

“Depend on that.] How’s it going there?”

“Uphill, Lex, every daddy-loving inch of the way. He’s determined to sell everything off starting with, I don’t know, the kitchen matches. Except that it’s going to take a deck of lawyers to figure out these damn deals he’s been busy making, all but the one I *don’t* want him to m^{ake}—”

I don't know,
I've. This
is a lot of
bunk.
How we're
going to
get by
informed

“Why’re you calling from a phone booth?”

The rim of the Rockies faced Mitch as he stared across the scabby little park.

“Lexa, he’s about gonna die.”

“As in the next little while?” Lyle who sounded like the healthiest bull in the world on the phone? Concern rushed into her tone. “Mitch, how come, what of?”

“ I wish to hell I had answers to any of that except what of.” He filled her in on his father’s year-old onsets of leukemia and reticence. “The doctors laid it on him that it could be any time now, he finally came out and admitted to me, but God, it’s hard to tell. One minute he’s marching around as ornery as ever and the next he turns into a wingwalker, never lets go of one thing until he has hold of something else. It’s like”-- the memory jumped up and surprised him--“watching Jocelyn and Ritz when they were learning to toddle. Only he’s toddling in the other direction, ~~isn’t he,~~” Lexa could hear the wind whistling in on Mitch and the phone while he struggled for voice again. “But hey,” he managed to resume hoarsely, “stop me before I babble more. I just called because I had to let you know I’m high-centered here until I figure out what to do with him. When I tried him out on coming to Seattle, he just snorted and said he’d rather have cashed in his chips in New Guinea than go bye-bye on the Coast.”

She twiddled at the curls in the phone cord as if trying to decide whether to pinch off the words. But she knew they were already on their way from her.

Great
inside

"Want me there for immoral support?"

His relief was almost painful to hear. "How can you? You've got jobs lined up, haven't you?"

"Gretchen's outfit can fill in," Lexa by this time was ruffling among the refrigerator slips, rearranging the food circles of life, ^{we}'ve covered for each other before. I'll need to tell her to kick butt on my crew every so often just to keep them in practice, but other than that, everybody will probably survive." She lifted her eyes toward the ceiling, grinning a little at the ^{news} tickle in the ribs, Mariah was about to get along with the ~~news~~ that the McCaskill sisters would be driving back to the Rockies together.

—————

The street was longer than the town, back to the fanciful days when Twin Sulphur Springs was going to warm the toes of the world, and Mitch walked west from the park to where the thin old asphalt gave way to a stub end of gravel in a block of vacant lots. A solid snarl of tumbleweeds lay jammed against the barbwire fence of the nearest hayfield. One geodesic weed evidently had skittered over the top of the others like an acrobat vaulting the backs of his cohorts, and it sat now against the gravel, rocking as it waited for the next ride from the wind. Mitch went over and thoroughly tromped it into milk-colored straw.

There. Had my exercise, at least. All else that was yet to be done, back down the street at his father's place, held him in a kind of disbelieving trance as he walked the return direction.

Call his father's doctor in Great Falls, try to find out what to expect.

Call Bingford and ask for further time off from one dying enterprise to tend to another.

Figure out how to tackle the swamp of household, did the place need a housekeeper or a nurse or what, and where could you get any of them around here.

UM?

The list went on like some terrible ^{infinite} ~~bottomless~~ timetable. He felt like a tourist to his own circumstances, not quite understanding how he signed up for this. The tired reviewing line of houses along the way, lived in by people he no longer knew or who had become poor fits to the faces in his memory, didn't help. Seattle and everything he had ever chosen for himself lay little more than a day's drive away, but as distant to this situation as the good ship *Lollipop*. He wanted not to walk back through that Rozier door, ~~be~~ trapped again between those walls echoing with old family fights. Not ~~have~~ to become the rules-playing son when the contest was his father's medical gauntlet. And knew there was no escaping this street. You can't not go home again when someone is sitting there dying.

He crossed the lengthening shadow-copies of the aspens as he turned in at his father's driveway. Soon be suppertime. He cast a yearning glance toward Donald Brainerd's place and its ganglia of messagery and FedEx but told himself *Forget it, Lexa will skin you alive if you have meals from Gretchen's outfit overnigheted in here.*

On in to face reality or whatever currently passed for it, he was surprised to find his father standing stationed at the bay window, [the back of his hand holding the wispy lace curtain aside.]

"Mitch?" Lyle called over his shoulder as if taking roll. "Here we go. Come watch this."

Mitch joined the spectating. A gaggle of magpies, black and white and saucy as a masquerade party, had taken over the yard to try to boss Rin away from his dog dish. Their clamor was wasted on a deaf dog, ^{and} but Rin, half-dozing ~~by his dish~~ with his nose behind his paws, seemed to amount to only a furry lawn bump. What must have been the drum major of the magpie flock had alighted out in front of the dish and was striding around cocking a look at the out-of-it dog. Confident in its reconnaissance, the bird now took a brazen hop to the dish. It commenced to gobble the food, Rin watching like a sleepy pensioner. All at once he put a paw out, pinning down the magpie's long train of tail. There was just time for a victimized squawk before Rin leaned his head forward and ended the magpie's dish-robbing career with one snap of his teeth.

[The other magpies were outraged. They stalked around and around the dog, scolding him while he sampled his prize oblivious to their chatter. Every so often a bird would get behind him and peck him, Rin lifting his ears in surprise and glancing around at this, before going back to work on the bird in hand.]

“He gets himself a lot of magpie cutlets that way,” Lyle said proudly, [letting the curtain fall back.]

“^{He}Uh-huh, but Rin probably isn't real keen to share with us.” Mitch sent a wary glance toward the kitchen. “Any wishes for supper?”

“Dairy Queen. I get by on milkshakes pretty good. Butterscotch, if you want to be fancy about it.”

Mitch could put up with most things if there was food attached. By the time he was back from his trip to the drive-in, his father had made his way to the back yard and settled onto the running board of the defunct old blue truck, a can of Oly in one hand and a smoke in the other. *Sure gonna miss these, dead,* [Lyle was disgustedly regarding his repasts of beer and nicotine as Mitch came around the corner of the house.] “*cut?*” “Might as well eat out here,” he made room on the running board for Mitch to sit down, “pretty evening and all.”

Mitch's cheeseburgers and Lyle's milkshake barely outlasted the sun as it encountered the crags and reefs of the mountains. The purpling time, the Roziars had

could cut

Ivan,
a bit
abrupt,
this
setting into
Lyle's head
for the first
time.

always called this point of dusk when the mountains turned plum. Watching the sunset procession of shades, the older man sat and smoked, the younger man simply sat.

Probably won't be any better time than this, Lyle figured. [He cleared his throat and broached:]

"Mitch? We haven't talked over the disposing of."

Heirlooms by the dumptruckload, you bet. Mitch did not even bother looking around to tally it all, the equipment collection that overpopulated the yard, the branding iron warehouse, the no-account house chockful of borderline cases of rummage-or-garbage.

"When the time comes, if I'm going to be your executor--sure, Dad, I'll naturally take care of getting rid of stuff."

Lyle took an audibly deep drag on his cigarette. Along with the cascade of smoke he let out:

"I meant me. What's left after the undertaker's stove gets cleaned out, anyway."

"~~Your ashes?~~ ^{As in} your cremated ashes?"

"Only kind I know of," Lyle said unperturbed, "unless you count these." He tapped the gray residue off the end of his cigarette.

Ten seconds ago Mitch would have sworn his father's final resting place did not matter to him. So why was he speechless?

When he did manage to make his mouth work, what came out came out stiffly:

“Dad, sorry, but I just always figured you’d want to be buried--you know. Next to Mother.”

“Don’t take this wrong, Mitch. Nothing against your mother, you know that.” He shifted around on the running board and glanced at the ground. “But I decided I don’t want to be down there.”

Where, then? In a Mason jar on my mantelpiece in Seattle? Couldn’t say that to a dying person, though, could you. Not even one this full of dickering about his dying. [He took another extended look at his father, ^{was} the last person in the world he would have expected to let a bought-and-paid-for grave go to waste. Okay, damn it, ashes or whatever, I guess you’re entitled. [“If you really figure we’ve got to start thinking about, uh, arrangements, I’d better start keeping track.” Mitch started to get up and go in the house for his laptop, feeling monumentally silly. What do I even call it, the Lighting Up Lyle File?

His father impatiently put a hand on his arm and stopped him from going. [“There’s a fire tower on Phantom Woman Mountain,” the older man said and flipped the still-glowing stub of cigarette toward that peak with the stone suggestion of a woman’s face on the darkening mountain skyline. “I did the majority of the work building it, back in CCC

*lots of looking,
lots of stage business,
cut some?*

cut?

times, Mitch, what I want is for you to toss my ashes from that tower." Lyle looked directly up at his son, the sergeant look. "Right in the old girl's eye."

~~###~~

They were eighteen and unkillable, that Divide summer of 1939. Inseparable, practically joined at their tanned ribcages, he and Ferragamo. Life at the Civilian Conservation Corps camp was aiming them a bit, teaching them this and that and keeping them from either going hungry or going criminal, but the pair of young men had plenty of velocity left over after each day's labor. Lyle was local and knew just how to take advantage of that in hitchhiking rides for them into Twin Sulphur Springs, anybody driving to town recognizing^{ed} him half a mile off as the Rozier kid. Joe Ferragamo, plucked from Paterson, New Jersey, was grateful for such a guide, a friend who didn't call him Joisey. And what Lyle liked right off the bat about Ferragamo was how swift he was at catching onto things. In his very first fistfight, there out back of the CCC barracks on Soda Creek, Joe didn't go in for the roundhouse knockdown style but instead concentrated on staying on his feet, the way the western boys fought. Lyle could tell he'd been watching, soaking up. In no time the burly local kid and the weedy but improving East Coast youngster were a regular pair at "pal night" at the Saturday movie in Twin Sulphur Springs, getting in two-for-the-price-of-one.

Joe Ferragamo thought Montana was the luckiest thing that had ever happened to him, which it was. From his first footstep off the train, the mountains took him over. There on the depot platform at Browning ^{surrounded by} clogged with similar young guys from the East staring west at the halfway-up-the-sky wall of the Rockies with apprehension or in some cases outright fear, what Joe felt was excitement. The highest thing in Paterson had been the waterfalls that powered the silk mills, when there used to be silk mills.

AC?
avoid two
with 5 ?

Then when his company of boys and men--they were some of both--was being trucked south to the CCC camp and the highway climbed back up past the layers of cliffs at the valley of the Two Medicine River, he could see that there were more and more mountains ahead, blue-gray and constant, all the way to the farthest distance where they'd been told this place called Soda Creek and their camp lay. Out here was the real it, Joe decided.

He and Lyle fell into the Phantom Woman job. Joe happened to be pickaxing a stubborn stony cutbank right at the new trailhead when the forest ranger came riding up the main trail with what looked to Joe like all the horses in the world strung out behind him, and asked if he knew where the crew boss might be.

"Yeh. ~~Yeh~~, mister, you bet, I'll go find him for you!"

Charging off up the slope and then tagging at the crew boss's heels on the way back down, Joe was there all ears when the ranger asked whether he could borrow a couple

of the CCC lads for a week or ten days, there had been a foulup at headquarters and he was short a couple of good workers to finish up the firetower on the summit of Phantom Woman.

“Tell you what, I’m about to call lunch,” came the reply. “Sit and have some with us and I’ll go over my roster, see if I can find you a pair of working fools.”

The instant of lunch call, Joe raced up the trail again, this time to Lyle. “Horseback and everything, we’d getta be!”

He was surprised that Lyle showed hesitation about volunteering. It meant no town, no pal nights at the movies, for a week or maybe two, but wasn’t it worth it to be on top of a mountain--of the Continental Divide--and leaving something built with your own hands?

“What the hey, why not,” Lyle said finally, and away they went to offer themselves. Initiative counted with the crew boss, and for that matter, the young ranger, Paul Eliason.

By the time the rest of the jealous catcalling CCCers were putting away their lunch utensils, Joe and Lyle were riding up Phantom Woman Mountain like tickled cowboys.

When they eventually came up over the brow of the peak, there in front of them on the summit loomed the fire tower like a daddy-long-legs standing at attention. Joe took one look at its cabin in the sky and started yearning to be a forest fire spotter.

Ranger Eliason proved to be a fussbudget of the first order. From the minute they arrived on top of the mountain, he made it clear to them there was the right way, the wrong way, and the Forest Service way. They barely were off their horses before the ranger was making the pair of them go up the fire tower and install the lightning rod. When the ranger's back was turned, Lyle gazed elaborately around at the utterly clear blue sky and winked at Joe.

The real work started as soon as they clattered down the stairsteps from the tower to the mountaintop again. The ranger led them over to the nearest of the rock formations surrounding the legs of the tower. Eyebolts, he explained, had to be anchored into the stone formations and tension cables strung to the tower to prevent sway in the high winds up here. "Now then, laddy bucks," the young ranger piped. "Have you ever drilled rock before? No? Here's the procedure."

They slugged away with a sledgehammer, taking turns holding the drill-bit and turning it a quarter of a revolution for each hammer stroke. The spang of the sledge striking resounded off the neighboring mountains, a godhammer of creation ringing in Joe's ears, an uninvited din of hard labor in Lyle's.

The boys survived the eyebolting and cabling and most of a week's worth of other unheard-of tasks before Eliason started fretting over the stairs.

"Good golly, these will rot out in no time," he complained about the stairwork done by the framing crew that had put up the basics of the tower. The hefty floorboards on all three landings had been set flush against one another, instead of being spaced half an inch apart--the young ranger had checked the manual, twice--so that moisture would drain through, nor had the edges of the steps been beveled to encourage runoff.

"This just won't do," Eliason decreed and put Joe to trimming down the stair edges with a drawknife and plane, and Lyle, with his heft, at ripping out the stair landings with a pinchbar and a hell of a lot of grunted pulling of ten-penny nails with a hammer.

There was quite a kick to this work, a kind of steeplejack thrill as they progressed up and up the zigzag stairwell, ever farther into the air above the top deck of the continent. They seemed to be the only lucky ones permitted into the crows-nest while the ship of earth sailed tremorlessly through the blue weather. They had reached the third and highest landing, Lyle having just finished tearing out the floorboards and ready to nail in the new set and Joe tenderly shaving just enough off a stair-edge a few steps below him, when the Forest Service bigwig swept through.

The bigger
~~All the more~~ surprise came from him showing up on foot, backpacking, rather than regally on horseback. Eliason, just then coming up the stairwell to mother-hen over Lyle as he spaced those floorboards, gawked ~~in surprise~~, knit his brow, and clambered down in record time. The boys could overhear the visitor claiming that he wasn't really inspecting

smears

A bit awkward. Ok who?

was that he showed

anything but scenery, but from the hesitant way Eliason shook hands with him he was obviously somebody important. They truly knew Eliason was rattled when, though it wasn't even close to high noon, he called Joe and Lyle down for lunch. Hammer dropped and drawknife set aside, they descended to where Eliason was nervously rubbing his hands on his ranger pants and the first person from Washington, D.C., they had ever met was waiting with handshakes for them, too.

Eliason dug out the Forest Service's version of a treat, a can of tomatoes apiece to go along with baloney sandwiches, and the four of them sat on a couple of the tower's anchor rocks munching and slurping. The headquarters guy made conversation like a house afire, asking Joe and Lyle this, that, and the other about themselves and the CCC while he practically inhaled lunch. Obviously he was in a hurry and didn't seem to be giving the firetower any particular going-over, but all through lunch, Eliason looked as if his diaper was being checked.

His sandwiches and tomatoes ingested, the visitor finally glanced up at the tower as if just now noticing it. "Really ought to see all the view there is," the man said genially.

"May I?"

Eliason jumped to his feet and escorted Mr. Important over to the tower. Watching them go, Lyle wondered in a sarcastic whisper to Joe how a guy landed a job like that, drawing pay for loping around on the mountains. Joe had been turning that over and over

in his head too, not able to take his eyes off the Forest Service official as he daydreamed of maybe being in charge of mountains himself, someday. [With little secret smiles back and forth the boys kept track of the rigamarole at the bottom of the stairs, where Eliason half bowed and half stepped out of the way to let the headquarters guest go first.]

cut?

While Lyle's attention shifted to the important matter of popping a blister on his hammering hand with the point of his jackknife blade, Joe couldn't get enough of the ceremonial visit and sat watching the two men ascend the tower. They had climbed the majority of the stairs, the bigwig talking over his shoulder to Eliason, when it hit Joe.

"Hey, mister, don't! Those boards aren't nailed!"

The headquarters man froze, a step short of the top landing and the teetery floorboards Lyle had left flush with the stairtread beam but not actually on it so he could mark in the spacing, before he and Joe scampered down for lunch. Eliason was so close behind he nearly bumped into the other man's rump, but in a flash he reached around and gave a testing push to the board where the visitor's foot would have put weight. It tipped forward off the center beam of the landing like the trapdoor of a scaffold, then sailed off into air, plummeting to the ground thirty feet below with a clattering hit.

Wordlessly Eliason reached again and yanked the remaining boards firmly into resting on the stairtread beam, then grabbed Lyle's nail can and hammer and spiked each one down. Joe sneaked a look at the belated expression on Lyle, stunned and guilty. To

the amazement of both boys, the headquarters man only gave them a chiding grin and made the schoolyard sign for *shame, shame*, one index finger whittling the other.

The instant the visitor vanished down the Divide trail, Eliason laid into the two of them. Joe figured he had good reason to; Lyle's little lapse had come close to dropping the ranger's boss three stories on his head onto the rocky brow of Phantom Woman Mountain. "Don't ever walk away from your work without securing it," the ranger told them, then found ways to repeat it. It helped none that all three of them knew the lecture was aimed at Lyle.

Eliason sent the boys back to the stairwork, then grimly disappeared into his tent to write up the visit from headquarters. Through the first hour of the afternoon Lyle steamed, then boiled over.

"I can't go this guy. Next thing, he'll be telling us how to blow our noses."

Joe checked him in alarm. He had been half-expecting this, while hoping against it.

"Say, Lyle, he *is* the top dog." Ferragamo, who had been bossed every which way by life ~~itself~~ in the slums of Paterson, found it a relief to be overseen by mere Paul Eliason. Besides, there was this chance-of-a-lifetime mountain.

"I don't care if he's the pasteurized Jesus," Lyle declared, "I've had enough of him."

Down went his hammer with a thud of finality. "Come on, let's tell him we want our walking papers."

"I'm sticking."

"What, and keep taking it from Paulie the Parrot?"

"Lyle, I--it's different for me. You're acquainted down in town, know your way around and everything. Where, me, if I mess up out here...it's a long way back to Paterson, and there's plain nothing waiting when I get there." Ferragamo looked at his friend in appeal. "I'm gonta try tough it out at this."

"Up to you. I'm heading down that trail."

Ferragamo's heart sank with each sound of Lyle's shoe-leather going down and down the tower steps. He called out:

"Say, Lyle?"

At the bottom of the stairs, Lyle turned and looked up at him.

"Catch up with you, first Saturday night when I'm down from this?" Joe tried out.

"Go to the show together?"

Lyle gazed at him a long moment, then gave him a smile. "Sure. Sounds good. See you on pal night."

That held. The two young men gravitated back together on those Saturday nights, even after Lyle parted company with the CCC and latched on at a haying job on the ranch

next door to the Soda Creek camp, and after Ferragamo came out of his mountain summer honorably blooded, struck by a falling snag during the big Flume Gulch forest fire. Across the next couple of years of jobs as young muscle in the Twin Sulphur Springs country they stayed in touch, and when the war came in '41 went in together and, still together, were destined to a place which would do its best to kill them, the other side of the world from the mountain called Phantom Woman.

—

"In the old girl's eye? Now what's that about?" Mitch stared at this fathomless stranger his father.

"Kidding, Mitch." Lyle sniffed hard. "What do you call it in your line of work, a figure of speech? I mean it, though, about you carting my ashes up there and throwing them off. That's what I want done with myself. Hope you don't mind too much, do—
you?"

Dying man in front of him or not, Mitch couldn't help sounding confounded:

"I didn't know Phantom Woman meant such a lot to you."

"Oh, you bet it does."

"Let's hear it, then."

"What?" Suddenly cross, Lyle grumbled: "It was way back there, doesn't matter any to you. Something wrong with me wanting that kind of thing?"

Lyle Rozier at one with the earth, mingled ash to dust? No, Mitch supposed, such miracles were capable of happening. Deathbed conversions, they were called. Still puzzled, he openly studied his father. *Why the mountains, why that mountain?*

[“Of course if it’s something you don’t want to do,” Lyle was saying with just the right amount of infuriating solicitude, “they have these young guys in Glacier Park now who hire out as what’s the word, sherpas. We could maybe set it up with one of them to--”

“Never mind!”]

Mitch whirled and went over to the vaguely green remnant of a John Deere tractor. One mitt-size hand against the rugged old corrugations of the tractor tire, he leaned there, eyes off toward the wilderness crest to the west, all the while Lyle watching him as if gauging a touchy fieldhand.

Lord, what a size Mitch was. It had surprised him for thirty-five years now, his boy outgrowing the family line so. This was no time for the lump in the throat, though. He called over in his best negotiating voice:

“I know you’re gonna think this is just another scatbrain idea of mine, but Mitch, I do need you to promise. That you’ll do right by me, on this.”

“Okay, okay, *okay*.” Mitch turned around to him. “But I still don’t get it. How you can want to gravel up to the eyeteeth of the Bob, and at the same time want yourself sprinkled over the top of one of its mountains.”


Could cut

It took effort, but Lyle let that argument go by. He muttered instead:

“In memory of Ferragamo, let’s just say. Joe was on that fire tower work with me.”

Mitch mulled this. The last he could remember of Ferragamo and for that matter his notable wife was that final crew picnic. All right, the man did figure in that New Guinea blood-and-guts tale his father always used to tell. But that was long ago and far away. Particularly far from a Continental Divide fire tower. Nor was it like his father to turn sentimental. Stubborn, sly, exasperating, and the rest, you bet, but--

Sounding satisfied on top of it all, Lyle now announced: “That’s probably about enough of a day.” He put his hands on his knees, pushed himself up off the running board and started his slow march toward the house. Mitch noticed he did not once look back at the mountains.



The burgundy VW van scrunched to an abrupt halt in the driveway the next day at what would have been supertime if there was any supper in the house.

Mitch all but vaulted over his father to get out of the living room and welcome Lexa. He was surprised to hear Rin, who never barked, give a series of rusty yips.

“He won’t bite, but he might pull your tailfeathers out,” Mitch called to the figure bent over into the back of the van.

The figure reversed out of the bay of the van and, looking bemused, stood holding a half-lifted handful of cameras ~~swaying at the end of their straps~~, like a collection of shrunken heads. [The dark red mane of hair barely interrupted by her *Hard Rock Cafe--Beijing* ballcap would have bought and paid for Lexa's copper approximation several times over.] From her lanky point of vantage she was now pensively regarding the off-key Rin at her ankles, and out of her came: "Ever hear the one about the dyslexic atheist who didn't believe in dog?"

"Mariah hitchhiked along," Lexa called out as if it wasn't more than evident, popping around the other end of the van carrying the Kelty backpack she still used as a suitcase. "You know how it is with these world travelers, they can't get enough of exotic locales."

"This one comes with hot and cold running arguments," Mitch said, a bit on guard although he didn't yet know why. He jounced down off the porch steps and swept Lexa to him with a bearlike arm, extending his other hand. "Hi, Mariah. Been some time, right? You along on work or pleasure?"

Mariah gave him a grin. "Both if I can get them. How's the hometown treating you, Mitch?"

"Sis thinks she has to get her newspaper shooting eye back," Lexa reported dubiously. "But I still think she's out of her mind to come here and target practice on--"

“This town ought to be good for something besides going stir-crazy in,” the first smile in days cropped out on Mitch along with his journalistic instinct. “No shortage of rundown stuff for photo features around here. ^y I guarantee you The Springs is the world capital of rundown.” Going to the van, he grabbed ^{yet more} ~~out some of the still astonishing amount~~ of ^{the} photographic gear ~~in there~~. “Need a place for a night or two while you’re on your shoot? The bunkhouse isn’t taken yet.” He steered them past Rin, ~~managing to point him~~ off to ~~his dish and magpie-hunting territory~~, and said, “Come on in, before my father deals the ground out from under us.”

In the living room, Lyle stiffly got out of his warren of a chair.

“Population’s up around here all of a sudden,” he observed. “Here’s one I know, anyhow. How’s the Lexa?” He said it with no inflection she could detect, leaving her to decide whether or not it was a greeting.

With no small effort she made nice and said back, “I thought the question is, how’s the Lyle?”

He just laughed.

Mariah was gamely introduced by Mitch and her habit of wearing cameras explained; indeed, it seemed probable that much of her photographic output for the *Montanian* across the years lay in the stacks of newspapers in this room.

layout of *Bad Housekeeping* before; that logjam of clutter in the far corner, the tipsy angle at which it reposed; the globe of metal rods about ready to teeter off the crowded sideboard...

“The Kobe quake!” she blurted.

Realizing three curious stares were fastened on her, she alibied with a little laugh:

“Nothing, nothing. Last little tag-end of jet lag, is all.” Now it was going to have her photographic attention every damned time she walked in here, though, how much this hermit cave of a living room resembled the Japanese museum’s tumbled exhibits that she had shot in the trembling hours after the great earthquake there.

“Some of us around here were starting to think about supper,” Mitch issued to fill the conversation gap. Enlightened sharer of household chores or not, he had been deeply hoping Lexa would take charge of the forbidding kitchen. Instead she cast one glance into the disaster area and said, “Let’s eat out.”

He knew she did not mean the Dairy Queen, so that meant the Springhouse downtown. “Dad, can we bring you something?”

Lyle the unbudgeable was reaching to where his hat was hung. “Thought I might step out with you,” he said in a tone of grandiloquent hurt. “If you don’t mind my company.”

See how
that shot's already
ready to
photograph

The Springhouse Supper Club was somewhere between unfinished and rundown.

It was also extensive and yawning and empty, but no sooner had the four of them taken what appeared to be the cleanest table than they were in a line of traffic as black-clad Hutterite men five or six at a time began to find their way to the banquet area dividered off at the rear.

"Beats the dickens out of me, what they're doing in here," Lyle had to admit when Mitch, Lexa, and Mariah looked the question to him. A population all their own across Montana and the Dakotas and up into Canada, the Hutterites dwelled in their farm colonies of a hundred or so people, talking their German among themselves and following their Anabaptist communal religion. They had kept their way of life by avoiding things of the world that might infect it--television, radio, the camera's eye, public schools--and it might have been supposed that supper clubs would be prominent on that list. But the one thing the Hutterites were thoroughly modern about was their agriculture, and when the table of four saw a pair of civilians in knit shirts and high-belted trousers pushing video equipment into the banquet area where the Hutterite bearded legion was congregating, they caught the drift. Fertilizer salesmen or some such, come to preach the virtues of their product to an audience lured by a free supper.

“We may have to go in there and take religious vows,” Mitch resorted to yet another dry breadstick, “to get any food in this place.”

“Those guys really are out in force,” Lyle observed, recognizing white-bearded Pastor Jacob Stapfer from the Freezout colony east of town in the next covey of Hutterites trooping in. “How’s t’ings, Lyle?” the brethren elder sang out.

“How you doing, Pastor Jake?” Lyle called back. The Jehovah-like figure was plainly doing topnotch, cruising into the banquet area just as if a Hutterite in a supper club wasn’t as unlikely as soup du jour in the Old Testament.

“I can feel your trigger finger twitching from here, Mariah,” Lexa teased.

“Tell me about it.” Mariah gave a mock grimace of remorse as the next contingent of visages, three Lincolns and a Surgeon General Koop, processioned past into the banquet area.]

At long last, as it seemed to Mitch, the waitress emerged from the kitchen and with a harried look gave them menus and the bulletin, “The special is pork chops and applesauce.”

“Ribeye,” Lexa said without touching the menu.

“Just the salad bar for me,” Mariah decided just as fast.

“Milkshake,” Lyle said, “but I’ll live it up and have chocolate.”

Mitch had started through the menu, but realizing it was his turn told the waitress before she could get away: "I'd like the special and I'd like it now, please."

"Ribeye," Lexa warned.

"Lexa, will you quit? I'm about starved. I want fast food, I mean, quick food."

Mitch turned to the waitress to check. "The special is ready, right, sitting there cozy on the steam table?"

"Always is."

"Then bring it on."

Away the waitress went, and Mitch settled himself to determinedly not taking the last breadstick while Lexa ragged Mariah about the brown lettuce and petrified carrot sticks she was doomed to at the salad bar and Mariah gave back as good as she got by observing that Lexa's catering career made her the certified expert on whining and dining and Lyle looked around as if he was on an outing in Tokyo. Through the divider between them and the Hutterite-filled banquet area an amplified voice took over:

"Those of us at Biotic Betterment are just real happy that you farm animal people could join us here tonight and listen to our message and get a free supper out of the deal, too."

Bacterial additives for health and heft in livestock, the sales pitch proved to be, or as it was said more than once, good bacteria used against bad bacteria.

Lyle sounded reflective as he swizzled the final breadstick ~~in his water glass, took a~~ look at it, then put it down without tasting it. "It's getting so you need to be a scientist just to grow ham and eggs."

"In just a minute here we're going to be showing you a video on what our bug can do for your four-legged creatures," the knitwear voice was confiding. "But first we'll draw for the door prize we promised you gentlemen. Here it is, right here. This lovely mantel clock. Battery-run, no need for a cord. Terry, draw a name out of the hat, would you. There you go, thank you kindly, Terry. And the winning name is...Peter Zorn!"

There was a moment of collective contemplation among the Hutterites. Then a voice: "So, vich Peter Zorn is t'at?"

The four eavesdroppers had to grin.

The microphone maestro, though, sounded unamused. "How do you mean, which?"

"Vell, I'm Peter Zorn from t'e Seven Block colony," the Hutterite voice answered.

"And I'm Peter Zorn from t'e New Alberta colony," another voice attested.

"And I'm Peter Zorn from t'e Kipp Creek colony," chimed in a third.

It plainly had escaped the bug prophets that the Hutterites get by with only a handful of family names--of the sixty black-garbed men in the banquet room, probably twenty were Stapfers, twenty were Liebknechts, and twenty were Zorns.

“Umm.” The microphone handler could be heard working his brain about the problem of the repeat Petes. “What I guess we better do is, umm, put the names of you three gentlemen and your colonies onto slips of paper and draw again.”

“But t’at vill mean two Peter Zorns von’t vin a prize. And you said t’e winning *name* is Peter Zorn.”

“Oh, for--Terry, go out to the van and bring in two more clocks.”

Amid the tableful of chuckles, Lyle was practically bursting with neighborly pride at the Hutterites’ ability to drive a bargain. “If we could cash in on our place like they do on farming, we’d be sitting pretty. Don’t you think, Mitch?”

A clamped expression came over Mitch.

Lexa chipped in, “I’d sure never make it as a Hutterite--” She stopped hard, then finished the thought: “--wife.”

Another uncomfortable faceload overcame Mitch, but Lexa hurried right on:

“Those old bearded coots run everything. ^{except} ~~All the women are in charge of~~ are potato peelings and dirty diapers.”

“They’re tough sonsofguns, men or women either one,” Lyle maintained. “Look how they stick to that way of life of theirs. They raise a kid, that kid listens to them. They pass along what they can to that kid, that kid knows what to do with it. Mitch and I have been having a conversation along those lines the last couple of days, and I’d be interested

to hear your take on it, Lexa and Mariah. You ladies have had parents. Don't you think then when they make you their heir, that ^{you} heir ought to--"

"Dad, can't you drop this long enough to--"

"Hey, I think this isn't our war," Lexa spoke up, with a meaningful glance at Mariah.

"I'm just along for the ride," Mariah claimed. Then ^{did an about face.} ~~made a guilty erasing motion in~~ the air like a prize student flubbing 3+1 at the blackboard. "No, I'm not. Am I ever not."

I think he had this before; once is enough

Two sets of male curiosity and one of sisterly foreboding suddenly ^{settled on} ~~were around the~~ table ~~from~~ Mariah. ^{then turned} Now she looked Lyle in the face, ^{then} now sideways toward Mitch, ~~now~~ full-on at Lyle again. "I've got a humongous favor to ask you."

He's answered as is

Lexa, Mitch noticed, was industriously chewing a corner of her mouth.

His father, on the other hand, sat back with crossed arms and waited for Mariah to ~~go on~~ as if he had all the time in the world.

"What it is," Mariah resumed, gesturing too casually with her water glass and sipping a little, "I'd like to--could I kind of hang around, do you suppose, and take pictures while you, mmm, go through..." she took a hard swallow of water and let the words out in a tumble, "whatever you're going to go through?"

Lyle squinted one eye as if peering through a rifle sight, then translated:

“While I gradually kick the bucket, you mean?”

“That’s the idea,” Mariah said fast. “I know it sounds a little grue--”

“A *deathwatch* photo essay?” Mitch bit out. “You want to use him as a poster child for *that*?” By now he was casting a dumfounded look in Lexa’s direction.

What can I tell you? She pulled into Seattle, her mood up and down like a yo-yo, we were just sistering away like we’ve always done, and then you called, and Mariah had to get back to Montana somehow anyway, so we hop in the van and along about Coeur d’Alene she comes up with this idea of wouldn’t it be something to shoot Mitch’s dad’s last days. I had four hundred miles of telling her huh-uh. Your turn.

The majority of this, he could divine just from the expression on Lexa. Mariah meanwhile was heard from again. “My editor gave the idea a shit-hot Go, Mitch.”

“Well, I give it--”

“These’d be in that paper of yours?” Lyle asked, frowning along with his squint.

“You bet, but *after*,” Mariah specified delicately.

“Listen, shooter, points for effort, okay?” Mitch started in on Mariah. “But we’re going to have more than enough to handle around here while--”

“Ribeye,” the waitress sang out as she slid a sizzling platter past him to Lexa.

Conscientiously waiting for the rest of the food to land before further batting down

Mariah’s ~~possibly well-meant but cockeyed~~ idea, it took Mitch a minute to realize the meal

deliveries had ended with Lexa's. He shot a look ^{for the waitress} ~~around in vain for the gone waitress,~~
 then at Lexa. She ~~lifted a knowing eyebrow and~~ dug into her steak.

Lyle's granitic head thrust an interested couple of inches closer to Mariah.

"What do they pay, on something like that?"

"Probably not as much as you have in mind. Nothing, actually."

Lyle was taken aback. "Hell of a note," he muttered, "when you can't even make a living out of dying."

"Lyle, you'd be--it's news, see. The story of--" Mariah took a breath "--how you face death is worth telling readers. There's this aging population, and a bazillion of us lint-free Baby Boomers who've never had to deal with anything more serious than burying the class hamster, back in first grade--I hate to say it, but people need to see your kind of situation." She stopped for a moment. "Lexa and I have been through this with our mother. Haven't we, kiddo." She laid a quick hand on Lexa's arm. "Lung cancer, that was. We didn't have a clue, before we had to watch her go. I guarandamntee you, my photo piece on you won't leave anybody clueless about life's last dance, Lyle."

"Wouldn't exactly be my best side, though, would it," came his dry objection.

"And the newspaper can pay Mitch," Mariah skipped right on. Mitch's head snapped around to her. *What, for my father? Like a bounty on coyotes?* "Not much, but some," she was explaining, as close to apologetic as she evidently could get. "It'd be on a

freelance basis for caption stuff, of what I shoot. Oh, and the paper can put you on as Teton County stringer as well. The regular one in Choteau needs time off for a hip replacement.”

“Just what I’ve tried to work my way up to in twenty-five years of journalism,” Mitch spoke with ominous calm. “Second-string stringer. Such a deal, Mariah.” He turned to his father. The silence from that quarter was saying all too much.

“Dad. You’re not going do this.”

Lyle went back to his folded-arms pose. Then gazed off as if calculating and said:

“Ohhh, I think maybe so. Yeah.”

The thought of his father being allowed to grandstand his way out of life, winking tragically at the camera eye in front of a statewide readership, appalled Mitch.

“Forty-eight hours ago I had to pry the fact of your sickness out of you! Now you’re ready to parade it in front of a camera?”

“Hey, *parade* isn’t a very nice way to put it,” Mariah chided.

“Guess maybe I’m forty-eight hours older and wiser, huh?” Lyle said speculatively.

“You heard Mariah,” Mitch could hear his own voice rising, “there’s nothing halfway financial in this for you. You’ll be giving yourself away.” Although he wouldn’t, would he, in the way that really counted. [No, Mitch was sure as anything that his oldest

antagonist could flimflam photographic film if it came to that, and it evidently was. *So we can't divorce our parents. But why can't we at least trade them?* He allowed himself an instant of fantasy of getting up from the table, marching over to the phone and calling Ingvaldson's minister daughter and offer to swap ornery fathers, straight across. But the matter at hand still waited across the table from him, two of them in fact.]

He stared across at his father, then over to Mariah. "Nothing against you and your camera, okay? But it's just a fact of...I was about to say life, but now it has to be *death* too, that the camera will be in the way--"

"Will not," said Mariah hotly.

"Since when?" Lexa said, chewing the last bite of her steak.

"--every time we try to sort ourselves out on anything, medical, family, the sonofabitching gravel, *anything*."

"Tell you what, Mitch," Lyle broached suddenly. "I'll back off and let you think over the gravel deal [without any more of my, what do they call it these days, input,] if you'll go along with the picture-taking."

"And I promise I'll get out of everybody's hair any time there's heavy family stuff you have to deal with, how about, " said Mariah, all reasonableness.

Mitch rubbed his forehead as if trying to erase all this. "Lexa, what do you think?"