

In the crow's-nest of the continent, Phantom Woman the topmost mast of mountain between Halifax and Astoria, the three rolled through the night.

By midnight or so, Mitch finally was in half-sleep, the notebook of his mind open but woozy material creeping in, *right in the old girl's eye* slurring around in there with *not without your telling me why...* He heard the dry rustle of a sleeping bag, then a pause.

Lexa or Mariah, needing to go down the stairs to do the necessary and obviously reluctant about the three-flight trip in the dark. A miniscule flashlight clicked on resignedly. He started to settle back into doze, not for the first time in his life taking satisfaction in the male anatomical arrangement. Then heard the scrabbling at the packs. Mice were to be expected, but why didn't Lexa or Mariah as the case may be step over there and scare off ^{them} the pesky little--

With an explosive grunt, Mitch reared up, the sleeping bag cocooned on him. He fought at the zipper, floundering at the same time toward his backpack and the pencilbeam of light there.

"Quit!" he shouted. "No you don't! Put that back--"

Finally managing to shed the sleeping bag, Mitch closed in on the figure at the stack of packs. He couldn't make out her face in the dark, but how many photographers were there on this mountain incensed because the devious last wish of Lyle Rozier had not been

honored. She was holding the box of ashes with both hands and the tiny flashlight clamped against the box. Faced off against him in the darkened tower, she feinted the box to one side and then the other, Mitch recalling with dismay that Mariah had been a standout ballhandler in high school basketball.

“Just put it down, okay?”

The answer was a palmed move, the box moving down behind her in the dimness while the flashlight hand flicked back and forth in the other direction.

Trying to read her in the dark, Mitch shuffled his feet in a stutter-step feint, but stayed poised just where he was.

The box came back together with the flashlight in a protective clutch and the hands hesitated. He leaped in and grabbed.

“Keep the damned stuff, then.” Lexa’s voice was resigned.

“I intend to,” Mitch said, taking a righteous step backward from her while cradling the box tightly.

“What *is* going on?” the groggy sounds of Mariah coming from the direction of her sleeping bag mingled into his surprised plaint as he confronted the downcast pencil light of Lexa: [“You were going to spread these off of here, weren’t you.”]

Her silence was all too much answer. to p. 378

I'd use this line on next page, instead of here

“Let me wake up in the morning and that father of mine would be blowing around out there. Is that it, Lex?”

[Again she was devoid of words.] *replace with?* *Her silence was all too much answer.*

“Well, no way,” his tone still high and hurt. “These,” he spelled out into the dark to her, “are going back down with us,” taking another step for emphasis. Backward into the stairwell.

He fell like a full keg, one thump after another after another, noises alone loud enough to bring out bruises, tumbling and tumbling down the steep chute of stairs and railing until he hit the top landing, sprawling there on his back like a flattened prizefighter. His breath knocked out of him, he lay in an aching heap waiting for the stun to go away and air to return. The box of ashes was still in his gripping arms like a recovered fumble, mashed but not leaking. Every whomp against a stairstep had left a place on him that hurt. He managed to come to a bit more. Toward the base of his body, he realized, was something that did not feel good.

“Mitch!?”

Lexa’s voice sounded almost in awe, in the dark at the top of the stairs. “You okay? Say something.”

“My leg. Broken.”

Lexa swore impressively and came clattering down the stairs to him.

“I know what I was going to do, and didn’t,” Mariah’s voice and footsteps following her down. “Take that first-aid course.”

“M-Mitch, I’m sorry. Am I ever sorry.” With care Lexa lifted his head and shoved her sweatshirt under as a pillow. “Don’t move, don’t move,” she keened, although he showed no signs of doing so. Her mind raced to what it it was going to take to get him off this mountain. “Neither of you could have brought a cell phone instead of computers, could you.” She shined the pencil-light in his eyes, checking his pupils for shock.

“Do you mind,” he gritted at her, “if I don’t be blind,” clamping both eyes shut, “as well as half-dead?”

She turned her head toward Mariah tensely kneeling beside her on the landing.

“It’s too chilly here. We’ve got to get him moved.”

Mariah thought so too, but glanced dubiously at the long sharp flight of stairs to the tower cabin. “Up or down, do we?”

That brought Mitch’s eyes open again. “If it’s between griz country,” he panted out, “and up with you two, I’ll take you two. Although it’s not a real clear choice.”

The women were stymied for anything to splint his leg with until Mariah thought of the shingles she had encountered on her photographic excursion to the roof. Together they

depends
on
either
cut it,
Mariah's
computer
p 356

raced up and out onto the platform. In the open dark, the stars up there with them, it seemed miles down to the ground.

“Careful.”

“I *am* being--oof!”

“I’ve got you. Take your time. Just don’t--”

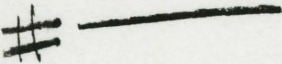
“I’m not going to--”

“--fall.”

Mariah crept ~~her way~~ up the ladder until she could stretch from the waist and feel around on the roof, Lexa two rungs below her holding her legs in tightest clasp against the ladder boards. Pawing around up there for loosened shingles, Mariah broke several to the accompaniment of an equal number of swearwords, until she at last managed to wrest enough off.

Mitch’s leg wrapped in the shingle splints from thigh to heel, they now had to maneuver him up the stairs. It was like slaughterhouse work, his agonized grunts hurting their ears as they tried to help him lift himself. Finally onto his good leg, he teetered against the railing of the landing, gasping that he was as ready for the next as he was going to get.

Lexa staggering under one of his shoulders and Mariah wobbling under the other, they supported him up each stair in a perilous series of lurches. Mitch, close to passing out on every tread of the way, remembered hoping that whoever installed the steps did a solid job of it, with the weight of all three of them on each one.



Like tangled contestants in a three-legged race they made it to the side of the cabin nearest the barrel stove; Mariah fretfully propped up Mitch, whose every breath now was a ragged shudder, until Lexa could drag his sleeping bag and foam pad over and they could work him down, splinted leg causing him harsh toothsucks of pain no matter how careful they tried to be, into resting position on the floor.

Lexa was still tucking and zipping him into the bag when he blurted: "The ashes. I don't want you to--"

"All right, all *right*, we won't touch them, right, Mariah?"

"Speaking for myself," Mariah ground out, "I never have, never wanted to, don't intend to, and won't."

She flung into starting a fire in the stove but Lexa didn't wait, lighting the butane campstove and hurrying water on to heat. Seeing what she was at, Mariah went to her pack, felt around in all the gear she had in there and handed what she found to Lexa, who

turned it over in the light of the candle lantern to read its label. "Can't hurt." In a minute she was pouring hot water and stirring and then kneeling to Mitch, Mariah holding his head up enough that he could drink from the cup she held steady for him in both hands.

"What--what's this?"

"Black cherry Jell-O, hot. With airline brandy in it, courtesy of Mariah."

He took a dubious swallow. The mixture was luscious. He needed no coaxing for the repeated swigs Lexa urged on him while the drink was still hot.

Gradually his breathing settled down. He felt himself going into a kind of daze, haze, combination of shock and the dark glow of the drink spreading through him. As he slipped under, the women backed off quietly.

Now that she had time, Lexa was crying. She grabbed ~~up~~ her backpack, brought it to the table and dumped everything out.

Mariah saw she was sorting to travel light. ["Hey, huh uh,"] she caught Lexa's wrist. "Why not you stay with him and I go."

"Because I'm faster on the trail," Lexa raged in a rushing whisper. "Because the last thing Mitch needs right now is looking at my face for the next two days. Because I was the bucket head who thought I was doing everybody a favor with the ashes. ~~Because--~~"

"Those'll do," Mariah muttered, swallowing. She didn't let go of Lexa's wrist yet.

"Two days. Coming in it took us--"

"Alone is always faster." Lexa wiped her eyes with her free hand. "It better be two days, a leg like that."

They both checked over to where Mitch ^{lay} with an arm over his eyes. They hoped he was conked out and not hearing their diagnosis. aw 3

"It won't be any cinch here with him, either," Lexa pointed out softly.

Mariah let her go back to readying her pack. Lexa chucked back in one change of heavy socks, her windshell and rain pants, a share of trail mix, her water bottle, container of matches and fire starter, the smallest cooking pot and a Sierra cup, package of noodles, and after hesitation, the last of the sausage. "Hate to, but I'll need it." Without a word Mariah dealt her a swatch of moleskin for blistered feet, drawing a rueful look from Lexa as she stood there ticking off items in her head. "Let me have your sweatshirt, okay? Mine is Mitch's pillow."

Mariah crossed over to her sleeping bag and tossed the sweatshirt to her. She strenuously kept from saying anything until she saw Lexa stand the pack ready by the stairwell with neither sleeping bag nor tent strapped on.

"Lexa, ~~no~~ think about this," Mariah whispered furiously. "Hypothermia when you have to sleep out won't help this situation one damn bit!"

Lexa turned around expressionless. "That fishing camp," she reminded in a murmur. "I don't dare aim for any farther than that anyway tonight--do myself in too much." Now tried for a reassuring look to give Mariah. "Maybe I'll be lucky, meet somebody on the trail even before then."

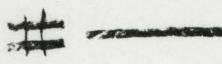
They both knew this was the start of their fifth day with no other people than themselves.

~~_____~~

The first hard thing was to wait for light beyond question. Stumbling on the rocks getting off the summit of Phantom Woman, Lexa over and over told herself, was very much to be avoided.

At dawn plus a little, Mariah went down the lookout tower stairs with her. Mitch was asleep or passed out, they hoped one was as good as the other. Mariah's eyes glistened as she kissed Lexa. "Don't make me sisterless," she instructed with a jumpy attempt at a grin. Lexa tucked in the bottom of the *Glaciers are a kick in the ice* sweatshirt under the belt strap of her pack and wordlessly went.

Watching until the top of Lexa's pack disappeared beneath the brow of the mountain, Mariah checked west for what she felt in the air. Changing weather. She hoped Lexa hadn't seen the telltale thin streaks over the farthest mountains, mare's tails before more serious clouds.



Mitch, damn, why--

He jumbled in with every thought she tried to put to the day she had ahead of her, the mountain's severe shoulder, the gorge, the corrugated valley before the Ledge Creek crossing. The weather. If the clouds closed in up here, it could take a week to get him out. That invited complications on a broken limb, she knew that much medicine. Gangrene, her boots pounded out the syllables. Blood clot--break loose--hit the heart. Complications and worse beat upward at her from each jarring footstep.

Watch your own bones, she furiously counseled herself as the trail steepened down from Phantom Woman's brow. The downhill trick of hiking. She stopped and tightened her laces so her boots were firm on her ankles and kept the toes from jamming. Then set a steeled careful pace, not to pound herself too much on the trail yet make steady time.

Her mind jittered back into the night, to the ashes, to the hours of furious thrashing. Lot of mental coin flips you have to do in life, and hers to throw Lyle to the winds for

Mitch was one she would grab back out of the air of time if she could. Not that Mitch, damn him, hadn't flipped out, too. She knew it wasn't right to be as mad at him as she was at herself. But why couldn't he have just thrown those ashes to the wind, let Lyle blow away if that's what the old poot wanted [done with himself]? Lyle Rozier wasn't the first dubious choice to mingle into the earth. And likely not the last. Who appointed Mitch to be the decider?

She knew in the heart of her despair that he'd have said, they all did. The old holies of earthwatching, his laptop tribe of wordslingers. Muir. She breathed in as her right foot lifted. Leopold. Rhythmed the exhale to the stride of her left. Stegner. Her boot dodged a fist-sized rock in the trail. Abbey. The other boot set a firm mark into the dust-filmed ground. Bob--

———
--Marshall jounced down the identical shoulder of Phantom Woman, his bootprints an everlasting instant coinciding where hers were alighting in the dust of the trail, the bulging canvas pack on his back gray-shadowing her Kelty, she and he together breathing the thin air of not enough time.

Now that he was down out of sight of the fire tower and could write without setting off the nervous young ranger, he made himself stop. He batted a persistent horsefly from

the vicinity of an ear, then creased open his notebook to this day's page, *June 21 '39*.

Poor old notebook, nothing but interruptions today; lunch to smooth the ranger's feathers, and then that doozy of a close call on the stair landing. Shortcut to the parlor, of the funeral sort. But didn't happen. It will when it will, and until then, he would get away every chance he could, up here away from the swarm.

(He marched his mind back over the earlier part of the day.) Did his sum of the miles hiked to the fire tower from where he had started that morning. (Thought back, and) to his little entry *Marker cairns observed on the Divide*, added a final three. Flipped through to the lingo-counting page, for a moment impishly pursing his lips at how the tower crew cussed no stronger than seminary girls: half a dozen *gollies* out of the ranger, Eliason; three uses of *sonofagun* by the blocky boy.

He tucked the notebook back in his shirt pocket and resumed his mile-eating pace. Three days ^{earlier} before he had set out from Marias Pass, straight from his sleeper on the Empire Builder to the trail up from the depot. He had wanted to follow as much of the Continental Divide as he could in the short week left to him before he had to go back to office life, to call it that. Reports to be written on this western swing and seeded among his allies in the alphabet agencies in Washington. Life was this, the high lonesome; the other was obligatory existence. The chores of paper and committee. ^{And then} No sooner would he be

Do you
need?

I missed this
or his reading -
He keeps a record
of cuss words!

Five
back
on one
page
if we're
counting

back there than he had that trip to New York to make, its canyons the dead opposite of these wild passages.

ou?

At the gorge, Lexa made herself stop and drink from her water bottle. Hat off, to let the sweat dry. Handful of trail mix to munch while she willed herself to rest briefly. The wind gusting with wicked swirls through the gorge for some reason brought back the time on the Anaktuvuk River. How, for the eight days of toughing out hunger in the sleeping bags, it had blown in the Brooks Range, coursing over her and the others in its running start north across Alaska to--

hand mix
the mix

--the Gates of the Arctic, ^{was the first entry in} he had begun this summer's well-creased notebook with, and since then the California mountains and the Cascades up through Oregon and Washington and now the old loved Rockies, all of it to take the miles and words back with him to what passed for civilization.

ou?

He shifted the balance of his pack a little to the inward side of the trail, away from the drop of the gorge. He could already taste missing this, the continent's center of gravity, the high wild equilibrium in these mountains. An earth all lowland, entirely gentle and cliffless, invited engineering and the tame patterns of residence.

Hard to get the wilderness idea across, though. It was only fifty-fifty among even the CCC lads up there on Phantom Woman, where you could see mountains all the way to kingdom come. In the look on the Italian one he had caught a schoolboy reflection of himself, back in Adirondack summer vacations when he and his brothers were scampering up every peak. The other boy, nothing doing. The top of his world was not the Divide.

He hiked on, the flavor of the day a little off, weary already of the next scrap ahead when he returned East. The old bulls in the regional offices resented him and the Primitive Area designations his division was nudging onto them, he knew that. Bob Marshall needs more seasoning, they kept writing in their reports at every point of his hopscotch career through the Forest Service. But country like this was worth pushing for. The swarm didn't need it, couldn't even make much use of it, yet would manage to riddle it with needless roads, peckerpole logging, the maws of mines, dry-hole wells, if it wasn't set aside.

[Seasoning was for salads, he said over his shoulder and hiked on.]

—————

"Hey! Yo! Anybody?"

With some daylight to spare but not much, Lexa came within sight of the fishing camp. At the top of her voice she tried again:

better word?

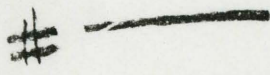
"Hello? Anybody here?"

Of course not. Where were damn fly fishermen when they could be some actual use to someone. She tromped toward the creek. Alone. No help for it.

Her mind was operating desperately as she reached the ledge, jetty to the creek crossing, the cairn there. At her last glimpse of the Divide before coming down into the valley, Phantom Woman wore a foxfur of cloud. *Why don't I keep going. Grab a sleeping bag here and make some more miles. Screw the weather, it'd just be one night.* Half-panting, she stood by the stack of stones, the constant tumbling sound of the waterfall and the murmur of the creek at her tired feet holding her for a minute, long enough to realize those thoughts were breakneck. Catching her breath and herself with it, in forced calm she checked downstream to the tepee. She'd almost have sworn she could feel someone else around, but the camp stood there empty. Funny how she didn't want to let go of company which all too plainly wasn't there. That was what she had given Mitch hell about, over Lyle, wasn't it. Nobody said life is all one straight line. Resolutely she put her mind into list form. She was going to have to ~~make herself~~ rest, get a strong meal into ^{eat} her, crawl into one of those mauled sleeping bags and spend the night under shelter. As soon as there was any light at all in the morning, get going on the long last lap down out of here.

There. Back to sanity. Revive herself before pitching camp and she had it made.

She knelt to throw water on her face.



The grizzly rose in the upstream brush not a hundred feet away, out of her line of sight but less than a minute from her if it decided to charge.

Mingled human smells came to it and the dark rounded ears were alert, instantly triggered to territorial threat. Behind the great jaws a low steady *urrrr* sang in the throat. Standing to its full height to peer in her direction, the bear moved its head, size of a man trap, from side to side. Eyesight was the bear's only sense that was not powerful. Almost lost in the wide furry head, the eyes tried to bring in the puzzle of shapes at the edge of the water.

Constrained by her pack, Lexa shrugged out of it, put it beside her against the monument. Remembered she would need water to cook with over there in camp, and still on her knees, dug into the pack to retrieve the cooking pot. Then put herself around to the rushing water again.


The other creature watched, ~~watched~~, only the fur on its humped back moving in a ripple of breeze. There at the water it saw more than one form, then one, now more than one again. The shifting shapes confused the grizzly.

*Lexa,
This is
absolutely
pigens writing.
about the bear.
But a part of
me thought,
Oh, look, I've
filmed for
with Bob
Mannars
lead, I've
filmed for from
me POV to
another
the bear.
But now I
have to
go with
The bear?*

Lexa stripped off the sweatshirt, chucked it up onto the cairn. Stuck her hat up there with it. Now rolled her shirtsleeves partway up and dabbled her hands and wrists in the water. Bracing herself, she dipped water onto her face, the cold against her skin making her gasp.

To the bear, the standing figure had grown, the other mysteriously moved close to the ground. Strange behaviors. Now the smaller shape was up, merging against the other, they became a single large form.

In ancient instinct of ceding ground to the unknown, the grizzly dropped to all fours and vanished upstream. Lexa kept at her water chores, shielded by the standing stones.



Mariah woke in the night to a sound like a sandstorm sifting hard against the outside wall.

She lay there in confusion. Couldn't be, she tried telling herself. Not again. The grit of Mount St. Helens' ash cloud hitting the siding of the house she and Riley had at the time in Frenchtown, west of Missoula, a full 36 hours after the eruption.

Spooked and blinking, she wildly sat up and sorted dream from darkness. Not St. Helens. Not Riley. The sting of rain, this was, and Mitch prone as a chopped log over there the other side of the cabin.

She listened to the rain, which sounded as if it was here to stay awhile. No drippy-drip pattern onto floor or table yet, but she didn't dare have much more faith in the elderly roof of this place. She got up and stoked the fire, ~~then~~ undid the tents from Mitch's backpack and her own, spread one over him to make sure he stayed dry, did the same for herself. Then lay there to wait for dawn, knowing any more chance of sleep was shot.

"What time did she go?" Mitch right away had wanted to know when he came out of his stupor. By then he had slept so far into the morning that she had about chewed the inside of her mouth out, waiting for him to come to so she could see how he was.

"Five, a little after." And right away she had told him Lexa intended two days out, to try to take at least some of the long chore of time ahead of them off his mind. He said nothing to that.

She'd had to spend much of the day down out of the tower scrounging firewood. ("Holler right away when you need me, hear?" "You'll know it's me.") Her fourth trip up the stairs with an armload, she saw that he had caught on that she was stoking in much more than two days' worth.

no?
"Saw"
next p.

Played out from packing wood but satisfied that whatever else happened they wouldn't freeze to death up here, she managed to cook a noodle meal with much frowning at the instructions on the package. Mitch ate out of duty rather than enthusiasm, she saw.

She was braced for it when he said the next.

"What got into your sister?" Tone as haggard as the rest of him.

"Lexa I think was only trying to...close the book on your dad for you." Mariah picked her words carefully. "You have to admit, Mitch, there's a lot more than one side to that argument. I mean, you and I had it out with each other worse yesterday than"

"Job stuff, that was. You just wanted your picture. That I can live with --if our situations had been reversed, you know damn well I'd have jumped all over you for the story I thought was coming to me, too." His face was set in a wince. "But she wanted to let him go ahead and be the Archangel Lyle. Write his own ticket into ever after. Fly off over all this, toodly oo, like his ashes were Gandhi or somebody."

"Take it a little easy, okay?" she said nervously. Elevated blood pressure entering into this already not great medical picture, she did not want.

"Where did she ever get the idea it was up to her to?" He didn't bother to finish.

"Sort this out with her later, can't you? After this is --we're down out of here."

"I don't see how."

Now she could hear the first ~~plop-plop-plop~~^{drops} of a leak, direct hits on one of the packs from the sound of it. *Right*, she thought wearily, *all we need next is for those ashes to get wet and dribble out on the floor.* She ~~got up and~~ moved the packs to the other side of the cabin, then poked the fire to life again. While she was at that, a fresh drip started on the tent spread over her sleeping bag ~~and~~^{so/} she dragged everything there under the far end of the table. "Leak like a fucking sieve," she told the tower under her breath, "see if I care."

Enough gray daylight had come that she could look out at the swirling curtains of rain and tell that Phantom Woman was weathered in for the day. Sometimes these squalls merely played along the Divide, didn't gravitate into the valleys, out toward the plains. Sometimes but not most times. Mariah's mouth was dry with worry. It was going to be a scummy enough day ~~here~~ in the shelter of the cabin. It would be liquid misery for Lexa out there in miles of mud and wet scree, already bone chilled when she'd have to wade that creek behind Jericho Reef. And wade it again. And again.

Mariah ~~sat there trying~~^{tried} to think of something she could be doing. Yesterday her dance card had all too much on it; the firewood supply, figuring out food, alternately tamping Mitch down and trying to cheer him up. Today looked like it was going to be Zombie Junction around here. Mitch was still heavily asleep, that was fine, that was good,

just so long as his chest kept rising and falling. She put her head down on the table to try to nap.

She would have sworn it was no time at all later, a few swift thoughts tangling in and out of places on the trail and the rain falling onto the cabin and into it and streaming off Lexa's hat if she was okay and up and going, when she lifted her head to check on Mitch. And jumped a little when she saw he was awake and had been watching her

"I'm falling down on the job here." She stretched to unkink herself and tackled breakfast. "How do you like your oatmeal, one lump or two?"

"I'm not very hungry anyway." Nothing he could have said would have worried her more.

But after she coaxed, he ate some and came to life enough to uncomfortably shift what he could of his body, which seemed determined to kill him of back ache if the rest of this didn't get him. "Prop me up some more, could you?"

She rolled up her sleeping bag and mat together and lodged it for him to rest his back against. That done, they sat and looked out at the dishwater day.

["Umm. Laptop?"]

He shook his head. "Help yourself, though. If you've got work, do it. Take the batteries from mine if yours go."

Again, it's that technical stuff makes me ask him extra batteries. But let's do only one laptop?

But you don't need this here at all. Could easily cut to top 397

My knowledge laptop systems is that they would have run on by now.

"No, no. Got everything caught up."

He looked back outside.] "Not doing us any favors today, is it," *Mitch offered.*

"None that I can see."

"Know what?"

"Hnn nnh. What?"

"Whiskers are a terrible invention." He fiercely scratched his facial stubble.

A little grin wouldn't stay off her lips. "You'll never make Hutterite."

"Yeah, well, another career advancement shot to hell." Making talk, Mitch did not look quite as much of a wreck. Mariah had the impression that, whatever kind of medicine words were, keeping up the conversation was having a bracing effect on her, too. And then it came. One thing led to another and something else and back around again a little closer to the heart of matters each time until they found themselves spilling to each other in earnest. Colin ~~was told of~~ ^{made it into the conversation} (*But all his smarts were from the neck down...*) and Jocelyn (*Have I got a daughter for him...*) and Ritz across his chosen oceans (*Jakarta! Hey, I dropped a bundle of Fuji expense money on interpreters there, I wonder if...*) War stories of work, past ("*Bingford, the ship that left us sinking rats...*") and imminent (*...so now with the museum residency and the book and the Montanian I've got three sets of deadlines people want to kill me over...*). He stared at the ceiling as he put together his rendition of

no?
was some!
get this

ok?

his father (*There just was never any halfway, with him. You either sided with him in chasing his next rainbow or you hit the road...*) . She leaned forward with a sad smile to deliver herself of her ex-husband (*If I lived to be a thousand I could never be as sure about anything as Riley was about everything...*) Crusoe and Friday. Lara and Zhivago. They talked away the rain, talked away the tremendous hours. The only inflection that fell flat between them all that day was Lexa's name.

And that night, Mitch asleep at last, before crawling into her own sleeping bag, Mariah stood by the stove, her crossed arms hugging her chest as if clinging to herself. The sum of this day was complicated enough to make her cringe. Perturbed as she was about the new feel of this between Mitch and her, she was also dizzied with it in a way she wouldn't really have traded, intrigued as a person can't help but be by an unexpected avenue of the heart. (The whole while repeating to herself that it was stupid. Nursie in the tower and her patient swooning for her because that was all in the world he had to occupy himself with. *Stupid squared--there are two of us.*) She absolutely would have rather eaten dirt than cut in on Lexa. But everything about this was doing its utmost to cut in on Lexa, was it not.

She looked over at Mitch's pack where the box of ashes rested. *You monumental old SOB.* Whatever Lyle had had in mind, his grasp at Phantom Woman was jerking everybody's strings ⁽in unintended directions.) ⁾

Morning three was clouds, lapping at the summit of Phantom Woman like an inconsistent tide.

Cork on a white sea, the lookout tower was riding atop a lid of weather. At moments Mariah could see the filled-in expanse, cottony and thick, with only the topmost shards of other peaks sticking through like offshore seastacks in fog. The rest of the time a milky haze teased around the tower and she couldn't even see down to the ground.

Give us a break, damn it, she thought, not confining the command to the cloud lid.

She checked on Mitch again. Rise and fall of his chest, the helpless grandeur of his big face in sleep against Lexa's pillowed sweatshirt.

Mariah puffed out her cheeks in exasperation at the prospect of another set of hours like the past forty-eight, then told herself to get with it, feed the fire, feed Mitch whenever he woke up. ^oshe was about to turn from the window and its panorama of murk when she heard the noise.

Josephine

Lexa's cruddy bluejeans, soaked onto her three times in fordings of the last creek, felt to her like she'd been born in them, (had she been born in a barn) Her feet, plastered with moleskin, were like toothaches at the wrong end of her. She had never been so tired in her life and at the same time never so wired.

The noise inside the helicopter was a constant chopped-up thunder. She was belted in behind the co-pilot where the fourth member of the Malmstrom Air Force Base rescue team usually rode; she was the one who knew Phantom Woman.

———

Out on the observation platform Mariah craned her neck up, trying to glimpse the source of the blade noise which sounded close enough at times to cut the roof off the tower. Now came the loudspeaker voice:

"We don't have enough visibility to land. Medic Gorman is coming down to you on a line. When he has the patient ready, we're going to lower a basket sling and bring the patient up in that. Stand by."

A hideous groan erupted out of Mitch. Mariah whirled to him.

His eyes were wide and staring. He asked:

"How much does a piano weigh?"

———

The medic when he got up into the tower sedated Mitch and jockeyed the stretcher-like basket down from the helicopter with a stream of talk into his helmet mike. "I've got to go up next and see to him," he shouted to Mariah over the helicopter roar. "Then we send down the sling harness for you. You buckle every buckle on it, tight, understand? Then give us the high sign and we reel you up."

Mariah looked abstracted, hunched, staring off into the field of fog. The medic frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Tiptop," she said wearily. "I have to get my camera gear together and something from his pack. I'll be ready by the time you get Mitch lifted."

~~##~~

Lexa was kneeling by Mitch in his medical cocoon, the medic fussing over him on the other side. She did not want to babble, so she let her hand do the talking in its steady grip on his. With the sedative in him he was dead to the world, a phrase she could face now.

Beside the copter's open bay of door the co-pilot was controlling the sling bringing Mariah up. "What's she doing? Hey, lady! Pay attention up here, can't you?"

Mariah did not look up. She clasped the camera to her eye, shooting and shooting as the sling reeled her up, below her the lookout tower on its base of rock standing forth, reeflike and beaconlike, out of the layer of cloud that looked like ocean.

{ Lexa peered down out the door. "No, leave her alone. Just bring her up as slow as you can." }

*proper
without
Lexa here?
we have her
in our
heads because
of new editor
Caulis
photographing
the tower*

three

The bed of the past. Waking up there each morning and reaching back to the knob on the bedpost that exactly fit his hand, always careful of his lower half as he pulled himself up to half-sitting, he had the weird impression of being a parade balloon of himself when he was sixteen. Moored to his boyhood bed by the same leg.

The sun was already pouring in the window and he closed his eyes again for a minute knowing it wouldn't help much. He believed, along with Hemingway (his one resemblance there), that some people's eyelids were thinner than other people's, light was harder on guys like them. When he told that to Lexa, she looked at him and asked *How do you guys know that?*

Reluctantly he opened his eyes now, and nothing had changed overnight nor maybe since 1962. Out the window, the rust museum of dead equipment in the backyard was indistinguishable from earlier machine generations that his father had used up and left parked there for eternity. This too silent house, then as now the domain of disappointed schemes. Mitch edged himself out from under the covers, the leg with the cast on it first. At least medical fashion was different, the lightweight black fiberglass bootie rather than the plaster anchor of the first time around. He balanced, putting his clothes on the way he'd had to do everything, factored around his leg, in the three weeks since the helicopter took him from Phantom Woman like a cracked Easter egg in a basket.

For two of those weeks now, Mariah had been roaring out of here daily to her gig at the museum in Great Falls and Lexa had been licking her wounds in Seattle.



I still can't believe how three-way stupid we were. Better get used to believing it, though. They're there, I'm here.

The front half of her mind could bargain, no problem, for the pick of little tender spears of asparagus with one of the growers who had more than likely bargained his way out of Vietnam on a refugee boat. She always shopped the low stalls at Pike Place Market which have the home-grown veggies and faces like this guy's, while the high stalls farther

inside have California crops and the shiny arrangements that magazine photographers love so much. Today the bargaining was a hard go, the Vietnamese man insisting she had to take some of the big woody stalks that would sit like beaver food on the table at the party she was catering that night. As she haggled ~~back at him~~, her hands went through considerable gestures. It took her a little to realize the Vietnamese was following her wrists with his eyes, judging the scars there. "Barbwire," the word came right out of her as though the two of them had been comparing the fencelines in their lives, and he looked at her from his mask of crinkles. He nodded, one sharp up-and-down, to say she had a deal.

Lexa carried her string bags of vegetables down the hill of steps behind the Market, to catch the waterfront trolley to where she always parked at the north end of the piers. At least trying to hang on to a sense of humor, on her Walkman earphones she was listening to "I Cover the Waterfront," the rare Shelly Manne and Andre Previn pussyfoot rendition. She was resorting to the Walkman a lot.

"Mitch. I'm thinking I should clear out," she had said.

"Can't blame you there," he had said.

The back room of her mind was still a mess. Even before he left the hospital she knew something was up between him and Mariah.

Mariah. Why, with all the DNA in the world, couldn't she have been somebody else's sister.

At first she had tried to write it off as that kind of endless-reunion air that survivors of a major accident have toward each other. No way could she share in that, she had been too busy racing down the trail trying to save his damn life. (All right, to be fair, she with her little midnight raid on the ashes had been the one who put him in the position where his life needed saving. Sort of.) But after he was home in The Springs and starting to get around, and the strain between him and her showed no sign of letting up and Mariah had that look on her like her heart was in quicksand, she packed for Seattle.

"I know when I've been cut out of the picture, so to speak."

"Lexa, none of the tower trip was my idea, was it."

"You're still going to have to get over the guy on the shelf there, you know," she had tried one last shot on him. *"Dispose of the disposing of."*

"How about giving me time to get used to being a cripple again first, okay?" he had fired back.

Then there had been the farewell scene with Mariah, another story that she had not had any luck drowning out with the Walkman.

There in the back of her mind she continually saw the two of them together. A truck would pass her on the freeway with those obnoxious mudflaps showing a pinup's half-reclining body in silvered outline and she would think, sure, Mariah could very well be sitting naked on Mitch's chest that very minute. Every billboard for bottled water reminded her of the non-bottled variety and taking the plunge together as they no doubt nightly were in the steaming dark of Artesia Park. Such scenes added up and added up like chalk all over a blackboard.



Mariah was trudging back to the museum after speaking to the Great Falls Rotary Club and showing some of her slides. She was in a powder-blue pants suit that she'd had to buy for such occasions during this museum gig, and she felt like a rodeo princess who had stepped in the droppings of the parade horses. The guy running the projector had put every slide into the carousel upside down. Nor had it been such a sharp idea to douse the lights and have the slide show right after everybody was stuffed with lunch; more than one Rotarian had caught a little sleep.

Taking the longest way back to work, she veered off into the neighborhood of big trees and old houses north of downtown. The day was hot and sticky, and she tried to glide from one pool of shade to the next, wondering if she was timing this right to be ahead

of the thunderstorm. Great Falls seemed to receive a lot of pent-up weather. Its site out here on the plains gave storms a chance to build and build before they struck the city, the clouds that had started off with white innocence in the mountains boiling themselves black by the time they got here; about this time of day, she knew, rain would come down as if from faucets for fifteen minutes, then quit.

Weather was the least of grievances. The hike into the Bob, the quake-like rearrangement of Mitch and her and of Mitch and Lexa and of Lexa and her: *We all three walked into this one, did we ever.*

She came to the river, the museum at once in sight on a bluff of the Missouri. Between her and there, though, commotion in the air. The thunderheads were pushing agitation along the river ahead of them, and at the 10th Street Bridge fork-tailed swallows by the hundreds were swooping and drifting back and forth over the bridge and then under its archways to start looping their loops all over again. Mariah downed her camera bag and in the next motion came up with her Pentax. It allowed her one click and then was out of film. Swearing succinctly, she reloaded and cupped the camera to her eye again like a sentry habitually hoisting binoculars and found her picture of the storm of birds, within the wild weather. Sunday taken care of, at least.

The droopy-eyed houses with their shades half-down in the summer swelter watched her make her way on along the river. Long ago, it seemed now, Great Falls had been literally the place in the distance that she aimed at in life. The smelter stack when it still stood across the river on the rise called Black Eagle she could recall like the mast of a ship pulling in for her, drawing nearer and nearer when, at sixteen, she had won her first photo competition, and she and her folks, proud and a little mystified at having produced a photographer, were driving down here for the ceremony at the *Tribune*.

The long ago. She quickened her pace as if prodded. Growing up on the ranch, in all the weathers there were. By each January the gleam on the snow began to tarnish, and there were a hundred days yet until spring. Then came summer, and was gone as if the first nice breeze along Noon Creek shook those months off the calendar. Was that what turned her toward seasonless work, she wondered, the camera lens its own fresh day every time? But Lexa with the same starting point had taken to horseback, to running the hills; somehow she was cut out for kid life on the ranch and the rhythm of chores taken in stride from then on.

There seems to be a lot I'm not cut out for. Mariah still was cringing at what had been said between them before Lexa bailed out for Seattle.

"All right, Mariah, what is it with you--a sweet tooth for newspaper guys?"

"Damn it, damn it, damn it, Lexa. I didn't intend any of this. ^u(I hope you don't think--")

"I am so slow on this. Now that it's over, I can see it happening."

"Nothing is over, and not that much has happened."

"Hasn't it? If you have anything to do with it, Mariah, it will."

There had been occasions before when *sibling*, as practiced by the sisters McCaskill, became an active verb. Mariah had given Lexa a hard time about splitting up with Travis, and worse, been wrong about it. Lexa had given Mariah unshirted hell about getting back together with Riley, that time, and worse, been right about it. But this made those look like warm-up bouts, and Mariah winced again at how *sistering* had turned tooth-and-nail.

Outside a neighborhood drugstore just ahead Lyle's face looked at her, same as from every corner in the city today. The *Montanian* photo editor had chosen one of the shots from Artesia Park for the lead-in, Lyle in command of a weathered bench at a picnic table, his hat the only thing that still fit him in his gauntness. The first big raindrop blotch hit the plastic window of the newspaper box, trickling down his untouchable visage, as Mariah hastened by.

Rounds of the park were their next chore, him and his leg. This was another thing medical opinion had done a 180-degree turn on, how long Mitch Rozier was assigned to lie around when he went through life breaking that leg. That summerlong bedtime after the truck went over him wasn't prescribed any more. As per doctor's orders this time around, he had been up and hobbling on crutches the first week and since then just grimly hobbling.

So now he stumped around ~~and around~~ Artesia Park the given number of laps, watching other people's weather--in this case, a thunderstorm over there dumping on Great Falls--and speculating on today's temperature of the smelly springs, then drove back to the house. There was that about the soft cast, he could manage it into a car and then use his good leg for driving. Not that there was anywhere much to go.

He went in to resume what he had come to think of as non-housecleaning. Ever since the interruption by their hike into the Bob, the Rozier place had actually accrued a fresh top layer of clutter--Mariah's photographic gear, all over the house and bunkhouse both. He supposed this was like dwelling with Picasso, if Picasso had happened to use film.

Mariah. Plenty to be sorted out there yet, too.

At the moment, the only thing in the world he felt he could do justice to was a cup of coffee. He hobbled into the kitchen and put the pot on, then propped himself in the doorway to the living room to wait out the perking and figure out a next step in the minefield of his father's belongings. At least there was one less stack of paper on the desk across there. As though the distance across the room lent the perspective he had been looking for, he contemplated the bare little bay of desktop where the Aggregate deal had rested. The non-deal, now. ^{Making the call to say that} [Calling up the gravelmeisters' signer of papers, vice president in charge of aggregation or whatever he was, this forenoon and telling him] the Rozier Bench was not for sale at any price had not come easily, but it had come. Passing a hand over his face, Mitch once more wondered who *does* change the forest fire danger pointers and was there any chance for a crippled-up debt-saddled ex-newspaperman to crack the profession. Yet there was a corner of peace in him, now that he had torn up the Aggregate paperwork, and he just wished it didn't have to be such a lonely one. Mariah naturally was out of here, working her job or three, from can see to can't see. Lexa, he knew, would have applauded him to the skies for not letting loose of those megatons of gravel if Lexa had not gone out of his life because he would not let loose of a few pounds of ashes. [Was this fair? (World doesn't care, bub. He knew that, too.)]

ok?

[The coffee pot gave a final *blub.*] He poured a cupful ^{of coffee} and then plucked up the newspaper for the dozenth time. When Mariah came in late last night from handling the photography class at her museum gig, she had left the early edition of the *Montanian* [with her photo story of Lyle] on the kitchen table. Those eyes drilling up through the newsprint were the first thing that met Mitch when he gimped downstairs this morning.

Now he took the newspaper to the big chair in the living room and sat there staring at it. From a working lifetime as a word jockey fighting for space in the narrow confines of a newspaper, he could take photojournalism or leave it, preferably leave. But this was like a book known by heart. In one of Lyle's moments caught by Mariah there was cigarette smoke around him like the haze of his life. Another, he was talking, and you could tell that this man had a tongue in him like a clapper of a bell. Mitch could all but hear him sounding off to his rockfield platoons. Sharpless and Loper and the skim-milk kid. His annual army of haymakers, Fritz and Ferragamo and the three Swensons down through the years and one-armed Eddie and the mute Hutterite and Truax and Larsen with an *e*, it was as if the ghost legion of them was mustered out of the daybooks and crowded from wall to wall in this room where Lyle Rozier had handed out their paychecks.

All that was a long way back, yet it was in no way gone. It sat there on the daybooks' shelf in a somewhat beat-up beige box.

we know!

I think
I'd avoid
gimp

Mitch gazed over there a considerable while, mulling the ledgers of his father.

Then ^{hauled} ~~pushed~~ himself ^{up} out of the chair and ^{over} ~~clomped his way~~ to the desk and the phone.

He looked up the number in the not very many pages of the Teton County phonebook,

[dialed, and stood staring out the window, keeping his eyes away from the box of ashes.]

Across the driveway he could see Donald Brainerd in his bay-window office whip a small cellular device to his ear.

“Donald? It’s Mitch Rozier. Could I borrow Matthew over here for a while this evening?”

four

Versions of earth changed and changed along his route the next day, as though the car windows were thin-sawn prisms. Soon freed of the benchlands around Twin Sulphur Springs and the Soda Creek valley, the highway streaked straight across an elevated plain of tanned grass and then rollercoasted down to the fanned-open bottomlands of the Sun River. Onward south from there the land puckered into steep castellated buttes, crisp-edged inland islands of the sort he had liked ever since being around the Sweetgrass Hills.

Except for the excessive company of his cast Mitch was solo in the Honda. It felt strange, after everything, not to have the vocal jury of Lexa and Mariah along. But witnessing himself at this was going to be hard enough.

Beyond the buttes the Missouri River took charge. Concentrated and curving, it cut its way through the bent hard-candy colors of Wolf Creek Canyon. On past the course of the river lay the long valley at Helena, knotted by the freeway interchange.

And here he made the turn onto the MacDonald Pass highway, the paved and banked route up to, ~~yes,~~ the Continental Divide.

The road crossed the Divide in a yawn of summit meadow and wound its way down into pockets of hayfields and small ranches, before becoming a tributary into the rush of Interstate 90. In minutes came the Deer Lodge exit sign on the freeway and the unforgiving walls out at the edge of the town limits. "Our graduate of Penn State," his father always would say, just out of hearing of whatever occasional member of his haying crews happened to have served time here in the state pen. He pulled in at Deer Lodge to the Hasty Tasty, which didn't look either one. It was churning out food to a standing-room crowd, though, apparently keyed to weekly visitors' hours. Lots of ways in life to end up penned up, he thought, looking around at the bleak faces here to do their visiting-room duty. This town and the even smaller old ones south down this valley had been at the front of the line, back in the state's earliest history, when institutions were being handed out. Besides the penitentiary here, the insane asylum had been awarded to Warm Springs at the far end of the valley, and halfway between here and there, Hydropolis had the

Suppose

Montana National Guard pensioners' facility known as the Vets' Home. He fortified himself with a cheeseburger and two refills of watery coffee to try for the voltage of one decent cup. Then drove the last dozen miles south down the valley of the institutionalized.

#

The Vets' Home resembled a grade school of the 1950's, low and flattish, built of the elongated squashed-looking material known as ick brick. It sat a block back from the tiny main street of Hydropolis, an aging patch of storefronts and a bar aglow with a green sign redundantly declaring itself the Oasis. At the Vets' Home itself nothing much was going on, so far as the reportorial eye of Mitch could see, except the kaleidoscopic turns of colors on television screens through the windows of several of the rooms.

But the source for what he was after was not likely to be in there at this time of day glued to *Jeopardy*, was he. How to deal with the source. Always the trick ^{on} ~~about~~ any story. [(Say one thing for being jobless in Seattle and the rest of the contiguous continent, he no longer had to pass inspection with Bingford.)] Mulling, contriving, he drove around the block twice. Then headed for the lone motel in Hydropolis, to wait for morning.

#

The sun was already delivering a little too much warmth when, a few minutes before eight, here came two of them down the street from the Vets' Home, not together but

not very far apart (in their race to the Oasis either.) The man in the lead, World War Two vintage, was toothless, his caved-in mouth making him look constantly concerned. The next one, shaggier and slouching, flapped along in an unbuttoned Nam fieldjacket. Each of them, Mitch could see as they passed where he was sitting in the parked car, was wearing loafers. Too shaky to tie shoelaces.

He kept watch in the rearview mirror. It took only another minute. Number three of the morning brigade, purposefully gaiting down the sidewalk now, had the remembered bulldog build.

Serial number 20929162, Private, Montana National Guard activated to 41st Infantry Division. Service in forward area New Guinea. Occupation Duty in Japan....

DWI conviction, Yellowstone County, 1947...

Disturbance of the peace, three months suspended sentence, Gallatin County, 1948...

Re-enlistment during Korean Conflict, 1951, Disability Discharge...

DWI second conviction, 6-month license suspension, 1956...

Those and other buffets of life that had brought this man here where the pensioned lived alone with their wars ancient and current, Mitch's laptop now held, thanks to Matthew's ransacking on the Web.

As rapidly as he could maneuver his cast, he climbed out of the car.

"Fritz, hi there. Mitch Rozier, remember?"

"Mitch! [How's it hanging]"

Fritz Mannion instantly sounded like the closest pal imaginable, honorary uncle in the bunkhouse. Midway through the handshake he already was peeking down in wrinkled concern at Mitch's walking cast. "You look kind of bunged up."

"Missed a step," Mitch said minimally, waiting for the conversation to go the way he knew it would.

Fritz didn't disappoint, shuffling [back a bit on the sidewalk] into a stance as if appraising a historical tapestry. "Don't I recall one other time you were hobbling around with something like that on?" He all too solemnly wagged his head. "You don't want to let that get to be a habit."

The inevitable about the weather and how different this country around here was from Mitch's neck of the woods, ~~Fritz rattled off~~ ^{Fritz} Then as if on cue he gave a lopsided chummy smile. "How's that dad of yours, how's Lyle?"

Dead but still making trouble, Mitch did not say. "Passed away, about a month ago."

"Aw, no! Hate to hear that. What of?"

Mitch told him, watching the face that had aged so radically yet had the rubbery lineaments of those past summers. The old man listened as if he knew how to assess death; New Guinea had given him at least that.

“That’s hell, when that happens,” Fritz shook his head at leukemia. Then nodded over his shoulder toward the Vets’ Home and said confidentially: “See people go to the marble farm every kind of way in that place.”

Mitch said nothing, waiting him out.

Starting to fidget, Fritz nonetheless hesitated before asking.

“What do I owe this pleasure to?”

“Brought something to show you.” Mitch reached in the back seat of the car and drew out the daybook from 1962, spreading it open on the hood of the Honda.

Fritz glanced toward the Oasis, where the door had opened and the earlier two thirst cases had charged in, then peered uncertainly down at the daybook pages. “Been goin’ through your dad’s stuff, is this? Get my cheaters on.” He fumbled reading glasses out of his shirt pocket.

The penmanship instantly caught his eye. He glanced up at Mitch as if they were allies against forgery. “Too nice a writing for your dad. What, Mitch, did your mother keep the days some? Funny, I never knew her to handle any of the book side of things.”

This was like pulling hen's teeth, but Mitch recited with patience: "That was my bookkeeper summer, because I was in bed with a cast on, wasn't I."

"Oh, yeah. Dimly remember." His forefinger as a slightly shaking guide, Fritz examined the names of the crew and the crosshatched record of their hayfield days as if it gave him every pleasure to do so. "Huh. Hadn't thought about some of these guys in years." After a little, his finger found its way across the page to what the mens' labor ultimately added up to, the tonnage of the bale stacks.

"We were fiends on that haying when things'd go right," he vouched. "Godamighty, look at this run of days--two hundred tons put up, that week. That's going some."

"The week of the Fourth of July," Mitch prompted. "Take a look at that."

With due deliberation Fritz turned the page and studied the three-day gap. "I see I got docked some days, in there. Must've been laid up some way."

"Actually you hung onto those days," Mitch came back with, "but it wasn't because I didn't try."

Every wrinkle on that face wrote out innocent amazement. "What, did we have some kind of little disagreement? Old stuff like this, it's hard to bring back."

Not for one of them, it wasn't. As distinct as a recording Mitch could hear his younger self saying *You know you're lying* and this man saying back *Just ask your dad*.

Mitch went through it all like a prompter feeding lines to a soured actor, how Fritz's spree began on the Fourth and lapped over the next two days when the rest of the crew was back in the hayfield. "I marked you for showing up for work again on the seventh, and when everybody got paid off at the end of the summer you bitched like crazy on those two docked days, ~~for some reason~~. And my father backed you on it instead of his own kid. Sat there and lied right along with you. How come?"

Fritz moved his bowed shoulders an inch apiece. "If Lyle'd wanted you to know, he'd have damn told you."

"Fritz, I want to know. He had thirty-five years and never got around to it. I didn't come here to jump on you about whatever you were up to, okay?" Mitch watched the face in front of him, but not even the eyelids moved. What did it take to make a mark on these old men? "But it played hell—let's say accidentally—between my father and me when he let you screw over the daybook the way you did and then told me your word on it was better than mine. Everything went wrong between us after that. Help me out on this, Fritz. Just tell me what that was about, back there. (I won't hold it against you, honest.)"

"Wish I could help you out."

From somewhere in memory another saying of his father's came to Mitch: *That Fritz, he'll fill you so full of it it your eyes'll be brown.*

Mitch kept watch on the old man (for most of a minute more), then closed the buckram cover on the daybook. "Tell you what. Climb in the car with me, let's take the load off our feet. We can drive around a little while we catch up on those days."

"Another time, maybe. Been nice, Mitch, but hey, I got something needs doing downtown."

"Really? Not much open this time of day except the cafe and the Oasis. And I imagine they give you breakfast there in the Vets' Home, don't they?" He gazed down at Fritz's feet. They were in sandals.

Watching the flushed old man, desire for the first drink of the day hanging out all over him, Mitch hardened himself to say:

"Come on, let's get in the car, (Pretty please,) Fritz."

(Okay, but I can't give you very long, Mitch, you understand.)

Stronger?

~~_____~~

Fritz was chattering out the not many sights of greater Hydropolis when he noticed that Mitch had turned onto the access road that led back out to the freeway. He clammed up, but the looks he gave Mitch out of the corner of his eye said worlds.

Controlling his voice (against himself), Mitch said like the least time-conscious of tour guides: "I thought we'd just see some country. Mosey over to Billings and back, maybe." He punched the cruise control, the speed set at fifty. It didn't take a minute before a bread truck passed them as if they were parked. Billings and back would be an all-day trip at this anemic speed.

"You're meaner than Lyle ever thought of being."

Mitch clenched his teeth, on the hope that if it was true it was temporary.

"This car has got reverse in it," he said. Then forced the next sentence out: "Help me straighten out that daybook (in my mind), and we'll turn around."

Fritz's eyes were watering.

Mitch did not know how far he could bear to push the man or his own revulsion for this. But he was determined to see. He had played by the rules of their generation, back then, and been run over by his headlong father and blindsided by this remorseless liar as his rewards. *Do things back somewhere count, or don't they?* Time stalled on Interstate 90. Each in his own way, the old hayhand and the boy now middle-aged sat there in the slowly gliding car sweating it out. They rode five miles in silence, fence posts creeping past, before Fritz Mannion used his hands to lift one leg over the other, the way a cripple would. Hands, legs, knees still twisted together, he said with a wince:

“Ferragamo’s wife.”

Immediately Mitch punched the cruise control off and whipped the Honda around on a highway patrol crossover, aiming back toward Hydropolis. But he put the car on fifty again to remind his passenger not to get too relieved.

“Say more.”

Fritz rubbed the veiny back of a hand across his mouth. (Then delivered:)

“Those trips Lyle kept making into Great Falls--remember how much we was broke down all that summer? Radiator hose kept blowing out on his buckrake. This’d happen, that’d happen, time or two a week away he’d have to go to the Falls to get parts, wouldn’t he. What he was mainly getting was sacktime with Janine.”

Fritz glanced nervously across the car. “Mitch, I don’t know that your mother ever found out. If she did, not from me. I made sure, she wasn’t even around when we got into it over my days.”

Mitch fixedly kept his eyes to the road ahead, as though down its unrolling lane of time he could see them form again, the people at that picnic--the creamy Mrs. Ferragamo, and his father with that sergeant stare, and his mother whose life was all potluck, and the good Joe: picnickers and more. “I caught on,” now Fritz swallowed audibly, “I don’t even remember how. It started out as kidding, was all. Just me saying something to Lyle

about it sure being a hard summer on a certain kind of hose. He reddened right up, you know that way he would? And next thing gave me one of his goddamn winks." Fritz paused. Wiped an eye, then his nose. "I just wanted him to know that I knew he was getting his dong polished regularly by Janine, those little trips down to the Falls for 'parts.'"

Then coming upstairs to his son who was keeping the days, to hand him the expenses of cheating.

"Ferragamo," Mitch put a voice together, "he was always the one in that story--"

--spotted the Jap in the bushes, saved Lyle's life, yeah, yeah. He did that. More than likely saved mine, too." Fritz stopped again to gather his next words. "Your dad came out of that with the notion he wasn't up there with Joe as a man, is what I think. And when he couldn't be, he...what would you say. Brought Ferragamo down. Those summer jobs. Sneaking off and laying Janine."

And last of all, getting it into his head to smudge away the man's time on a mountain, sift himself into that place. *In memory of Ferragamo, let's just say:* back there in the running-board conclave, Lyle Rozier saying it as though it were just the epitaph of a Divide summer. Mitch gripped the Honda's steering wheel as unrelentingly as if he had the box of ashes in hand again.

what?

“I always figured Lyle was getting set to fight it out with Joe over her, that next summer. Your mother gone, Janine’d have to choose, wouldn’t she.” Fritz’s voice had loosened, soft with gratitude at the sight of the Oasis now. “But right before haying, Ferragamo took her and moved to Oregon. Never said a word in ^{to} Lyle’s ~~direction~~, just up and did it. That’s what really got to your dad. Joe dropped him like he was just nothing.”

five

They were eating it up, the wedding-goers, whuffling right through the hors d'oeuvres and munching, munching, munching onward into the big food.

Nervously she circled off from the groom a little, wanting the reception to be perfect, the most mouthwatering page in nuptial history.

[“We’re out of the pasta salad, Lexa,” Jaci of her crew came up and whispered.

Lexa pulled out the couple of emergency fifties she always kept in the pocket under her apron. “Run over to the Safeway and buy anything at their salad bar that’s not outright spaghetti. Quicko, hon.”]

*Please cut -
It breaks my
heart that
Lexa would
want to
Safeway
pasta!*

Lexa
She monitored the room trying to recognize the next incipient emergency. Now groom and bride were whooping it up with another champagne-brandishing phalanx of friends. He owned a chain of sunglasses shops and she was concertmaster of a chamber orchestra; they had met in one of the *hiking/biking/caring/sharing* chat rooms on the Internet. Lexa nibbled her lip. Those champagne glasses were emptying fast, and she swung around to check on the level of traffic over by the bar and Mitch.

Mitch?

She was over there in a flash. Absence and the heart and all that notwithstanding, she was purely panicked by his materialization here.

“Where’d--What’re you--”

Giving the roomful a broken-field runner’s alert scan, he appraised the wedding reception: “Not bad as these things go, hmm?”

She couldn’t say the same for him. Unshaven for a couple of days, clothes that all too obviously had been slept in for at least that long, the giant black glob of his cast sticking out alongside the bar table, he looked like something a very large cat had dragged in off the road. To her outrage, he was perusing her companionably. There he loomed, a winning grin hung on him, damn him. As much as she wanted to whale into him with her fists for this derisive bye-bye or whatever he thought it was, she had to keep frantic watch

over her shoulder for the mother of the bride, big mama of the universe at these events. All it would take was enough commotion to bring the Matriarch of the Day over with the pronouncement *You'll never fix food in this town again.* In a fierce whisper Lexa demanded to know: "What did you do with Brad?"

"He slipped out to his car to listen to his Kenny G instructional CD."

"How'd you find--" She shut up and stood in front of as much of Mitch as she could while he dispensed champagne into the next covey of thrust glasses. When those guests moved off, he turned to her as if surprised she had to ask:

"Went to the house for some things and read the refrigerator door, how else?"

That was it, then. He had come for his stuff. Packing it all up, to add to the permanent houseload in The Springs. Roziers. A penchant for mess ran in the family. For almost three weeks she had been fuming about having to live with his belongings and now she found herself equally ticked off that the house was going to look half empty. She tried to keep her mind on the point that he had no business playing around with her business:

"The house is one thing, but where I'm trying to do my work is another--why'd you bother to slip in here?"

“Thought it was time I did a little shopping.” He studied the reception room again.

“Might need one of these someday.”

“*[You really want to rub my nose in it, don’t you.]* Jesus, Mitch, I don’t care how terminally peed off you are at me over the ashes and what happened at the tower and whatever else you’ve managed to come up with to add to the list. I don’t deserve this. You and Mariah can go off into the goddamn wedding sunset if you want, but--”

“Lexa--”

“--I don’t have to have that picture painted for me.” She stood there seething at the future. Family reunions were going to be a real case of the jollies, weren’t they, with him on hand as Mariah’s hubby and Lexa’s ex-you-name-it.

“Lexa, listen--”

“And I don’t have to listen to any of your--”

“Lexa, Mariah and I are not in the marrying picture. We’ve never even tried the sample of that.”

[Never even--?] She shot a suspicious gaze at him all the way up. True, his hair was not standing up in sulphur spikes.

He caught her look and smiled. “Think about it. How could I go in the water with this cast?”

By then it didn't take thinking. It only took erasing the blackboard of her mind, and then their bodies were colliding in a desperate hug and more.

~~##~~ Coming into the empty house, Mariah ^{depressed} ~~plotted down~~ the sack with a Dairy Queen hamburger in one direction and her camera bag in another. How damnably quiet. *Price of peace*, she told herself, and went to the kitchen for one of Lyle's beers to help prop up supper.

When Mitch had come back from Hydropolis yesterday with the goods on Lyle and told her he was going right on to Seattle, he'd asked if she didn't think she should come along and start making her own mend with Lexa. "How convincing is that?" she had pointed out. "We come trotting into Seattle, joined at the hip, to tell her we're not an item together? You go alone. Give her me to be mad at."

Mitch had touched her on the shoulder. "We are an item together. Just not the household kind."

"Second thoughts. Story of my datebook."

Standing there, they drew new assessments of each other, a daily occupation since their time in the fire tower. He saw a woman who cut trails through life as brisk as a comet, and as unfollowable. Steady eyes on his, she was looking back at a route not

taken, not takable, running as it did between the sisters McCaskill. She and he traded those appraisals with self-conscious little grins, and Mitch went out the door.

Someone at that door now. She ~~went and~~ opened it to a pair of men all in black, including hats and beards, who peered at her as if a beautiful redheaded woman in a *Hard Rock Cafe--Beijing* ballcap and a bottle of beer in her hand had not been their expectation.

“Is t’e mister here?” inquired the older Hutterite.

“We’re fresh out of misters. Can I do anything for you?”

“T’ose brands of Lyle’s, ve vant to buy ‘vun.” The older Hutterite locked eyes with her to keep himself from straying into the rest of her scenery, then decided to confide, the other man nodding grave accompaniment: “Ve are hiving.”

Mariah stepped back a little. “Is that a fact.” It took her a few seconds to recall the Hutterite custom of hiving off into new colonies, entire families resettling on the next communal farm, whenever an old one reached a certain population. A new dairy herd would need a new brand, maybe Lyle had a little something in his iron menagerie after all. “Congratulations, I think. Come on out to the shed with me.”

The branding irons appeared to have been busy learning from their clothes hanger cousins how to multiply in the equivalent of a closet. There were angular heaps of them,

wall-climbing squads of them, corner congregations of them. Mariah gestured at everything with what she figured was businesslike aplomb:

“Help yourself, gentlemen.”

The Hutterite pair looked at her. The elder one said:

“Ve vant a T Cross.”

Mariah blinked. Half of the iron in the known world, wrought into fancy combinations of who knew how many kinds in this shed, and they wanted a specific one? “~~Mmm~~, well, we can look a little, I guess. See if you can find it burned into the wall there while I scout around in the irons themselves.”

The Hutterites read along the wall while she tried to figure out any system Lyle might have had to this. It wasn't numerical, it wasn't alphabetical, it wasn't even brandabetical. Under no approach did it seem to want to divulge an iron stem with a T and a cross on the end of it. After much murmuring from the men and much clattering from her, Mariah announced:

“Whoa, here you go.” The Hutterites looked at the swoop-necked branding iron she was brandishing. “The, uh, U Cross, next best thing,” she maintained.

“Ve vant a T Cross,” the two Hutterites said in chorus.

[“If you don't mind my asking, why the f--heck does it have to be a--”]

"Ve go the alphabet."

"Could you sort of spell that out for me?"

"Ven ve hive a colony, t'e new colony gets t'e next letter for its brand," the elder Hutterite explained. "T'e New Alberta colony, t'at vas our first, its brand is t'e A Cross." His beard lifted a little like a preacher coming to his favorite part of Deuteronomy. "T'e next vun, Kipp Creek Colony, t'e B Cross. [T'e vun after t'at..." he marched through the recital despite her attempts to signal that she got the concept. He concluded: }Right up the alphabet, ve go. Now ve vant a T Cross."

She gave up and rummaged some more; (finally declaring): "Look, this is as close as it gets--an ET Cross. Must've been Spielberg's his very self."

The Hutterite men looked at her. "Nein, t'at is Ernie Toomey's old brand."

{Joke joke joke} never mind. See, all you have to do is cut off the E." She cast a wild glance at the tools here and there along the wall. "I'll throw in that hacksaw and a blade, even."


The Hutterites conferred with each other in German, and with a great show of reluctance snapped up the deal.

#

Wedding-goers gone, bride and groom on a floatplane whirring to the San Juan Islands, the Do-Re-Mi catering crew was cleaning up. The crew, which looked a little hurt at having to get by with less than usual bossing, left a space around the bar, where a great amount of public kissing and earnest vowing was still going on.

“So he had love trouble in spite of himself,” Lexa digested his account about Lyle.

“It used to run in the family,” said Mitch, and reached for her again.



Back in the living room of the Rozier house, Mariah stood over the pages of the *Montanian* spread out on the desk, eating her thoroughly cold hamburger with one hand and running the other critically over the sheets of newsprint, trying a tighter cropping on one image, tracing and retracing the angle of perspective through another. Finally, more or less satisfied, she balled up her napkin from one hand to the other. *All this time on a newspaper and I still don't know why the ink has to come off on a person's fingers.*

The still unvanquished face of Lyle gazed up at her from the dozen incarnations on the pages. All at once she remembered his habit of e-mailing Ritz about each triumph in selling off a branding iron. *Last favor, you old handful* and in the general cyber-direction of Jakarta, *One from beyond the grave, kid*. Turning on the WebTV, she plopped into the big chair, keyboard cradled in her lap, and typed out the message. When she came to the

brand she tapped a capital T onto the screen and then the plus sign, pleased by its resemblance to a cross, then had the idea to boldface them both to give Ritz a nice strong **T+** for his e-mail equivalent of a scrapbook. She clicked on SEND, but that didn't seem to want to be the end of it for her. Something more tickled at her, back up there beside the plus-sign key. Curious, she tried its nearest neighbor, the minus sign, onto the screen and then typed another capital T and gave it the boldface treatment. **-T**. Another recognizable brand, the Bar T.

Shopping further, she did away with the minus sign and skipped along the row of keys to the caret sign. **^T**. Sure enough, the Rafter T.

She deleted the caret and moved over a couple of keys to the asterisk. **T***. Uh huh, a pretty presentable T Spur.

Faster now, she deleted the asterisk, held down the shift key and tapped the colon key, twice. **::T** The Dice T. Dumped that and put a pinky down in the lowest right of the keyboard. **/T**. The Slash T.

Mariah stared down at the keyboard. She wasn't even into its dingbat options, circles and boxes and triangles and hearts and spades and diamonds and a whole zoo of other graphics, yet. Nor had she started to go the alphabet, pairing twenty-five more letters and combinations thereof with each of these keyable mutations.

She lunged for the phone book, pawed out the number, waited impatiently for response at the other end.

“Umm, Donald, is it? Could you send Matthew over here to the Roziers’? I’ve got something on the computer I need to have him check out.” Then she called Seattle.

BlazingBrands.com, as quick as they got it on-line, billed a junior fortune in orders its first week. Brands went from being the return addresses of cows to the latest must-have as PICs--personal identification codes--in the cyber frontier beyond PINs, and the Webspeak equivalent of monograms transposable to everything from tech team T-shirts to personalized steaks sizzling on barbecue grills at company get-togethers. From ZYX headquarters arrived a fine fat offer to buy all three of those letters, in all permutations.

Wouldn't you know, Mariah set her sights on the world again. This time, with her cut of our cyber gold rush, she figured she could poke the planet in the ribs with her camera for as long as she wanted. Before she could take off, Mitch and I asked her to perform the photo honors the day Lyle's ashes were dealt with.

She was circling around the site, restless as a jay, her camera bag bumping on her hip, when Mitch and Lexa pulled up.

“Brrr. Dad’s little helper, the wind.” With the box clutched to him, Mitch ducked into the lee of the *BlazingBrands.com* corporate Chevy Blazer, Lexa and Mariah already huddling there.

“This place is going to miss him,” Mariah mused.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t need any more like him, either,” Mitch said with equal meditation.

“Watch your footing out there,” Lexa warned.

“Where was that advice the last time I needed it?” He sent her a flit of a grin, then looked soberly at Mariah. “Got your camera angle scoped out?”

“Always got that.”

“Then here goes.”

The sisters stood ^{watched} ~~watching~~ him transport the ashes the last little way, carefully edging himself into position.

“Lexa?” ventured Mariah.

“Hnn?”


“No hard feelings?”

“Oh, yeah. But other kinds too, sis.” She gave Mariah a reflecting smile. Then gently gave her a push, fond but a push, out into the wind.

Mitch stood at the edge of the Donstedder benchland where the coulee cut in. The pile of rocks below still seemed oddly concentrated here in this one place, like a sac of glacier stones. Lexa ~~came and~~ stood off to one side a little, upwind. Mariah went around to the brow of the coulee on the other side of them and cocked her camera.

"Maybe in error, but never in doubt--that was my father." Mitch's voice steadied against the wind. "He read himself wrong there at the end. He thought he could make himself add up to all that he wasn't, with these--" Mitch raised the ashes a little "--and Phantom Woman. If he figured he had to have a monument, there is nothing shameful about this one. This one he earned over and over."

He opened the lid of the box, undid the plastic liner inside it. Hands high, he leaned out over the coulee and carefully turned the box upside down, shaking the ashes. They were the consistency of sand, and of the same color as the rocks they fell among.



In a mountain valley as old as the visit of glaciers, the hiker stopped to drink out of the swift stream.

He gazed around with care as he walked out onto the low smooth outcropping that led right to the creek. Upstream, a waterfall slid with a pleasant little roar, and then water that looked as if it had fish in it pooled against the parentheses of bank before riffing off

down the valley. *Pretty sonofagun of a place*, occurred to him with a small smile. And it had the lookout tower beat for calm instead of commotion. All in all, he supposed he could tell himself he had come up in the world by coming down from Phantom Woman. But tired, Lord, he was tired and thirsty after the hot pace on the trail; it had been a long time since that fortifying can of tomatoes at lunch.

Taking off his hat and wiping away sweat, he looked for somewhere to set the hat and his things while he watered up, but there was nothing of the kind ~~there~~ on the bare ledge of the creek crossing. He backtracked off the dock of rock and put it all, his Stetson on top, against the nearest aspen. Then came back to the stream's stone edge. He drank from his hands, wiped his sleeve across his mouth, and stayed squatting on his haunches there for a minute, simply looking around. No matter how old he lived to be he would never cease to be captivated by the green tingling leaves of aspens. Everywhere under them, flat rocks from a sedimentary ledge vastly larger than the creek's namesake where he hunkered. The spill of rocks out of the mountainside was like a flow of stone joining the creek. A lot like flagstones. Tempting. It wouldn't take much to pile them.

Running his eyes over the palette of rocks he mulled whether to put up a cairn, mark this place for the kick of it. Didn't really have time. Another hour, maybe two, he could pound on down the trail before calling it a day. But the trail would be there in the

morning, too. The monument this spot of solace seemed to want would not, unless he lent a hand to those rocks.

Leave it up to gravity, he decided. He stood up and dug into his britches pocket for the good-luck piece he carried, a Liberty head silver dollar. If the toss came up heads, camp here and work with the rocks until they mounted up in monument form. Tails, then-- he chortled at the play of words, starting to feel like himself for the first time this day-- hightail on down the trail.

Bob Marshall poised the dollar on his broad thumbnail. Then flipped the coin high, the silver disc of heads over tails and tails over heads spinning and spinning in the mountain air, whirling like the world.