

Fuming and famished and having told the waitress to tell the cook where to dispose of that pork chop, Mitch launched off to the salad bar for emergency rations. ("The garbanzo beans are your best bet," Lexa's advisory followed him) and caught up with Mariah as she was trying to pick up slices of pickled beets the size of poker chips with recalcitrant salad tongs. Scanning the unpromising offerings of the salad bar, he ground out:

"You are some piece of work, you know that?"

"I don't think I hear the Hallelujah Chorus coming."

"What's up with this brainstorm assignment of yours anyway? Jesus H., Mariah, you waltz in here from the world at large, you vamp my father into--"

"Nobody's vamped anybody around here yet that I know of," she told him pleasantly.

"--turning himself into a, a photo album of saying sayonara. What in the name of hell is it you want with any of this? You're a roving photographer, aren't you? Why can't you rove into somebody else's family mess?"

She looked over her shoulder to where Lyle was holding forth to Lexa, then met Mitch's eyes with her own, gray and sharp as flint arrowheads. She kept her voice down.

"Never pretty, is it, doing a piece somebody isn't happy to have happen. I want to do your father's story because it's going to be a first-class shoot, okay? I can just feel a terrific set

break
into
stronger
sentences ✓

He

chance-of-a-lifetime

absolutely that ✓

of pictures waiting to happen out of his...situation. But Mitch, you really want to know what else I can get out of this? Some mountain time, even if this half-assed excuse for a town did manage to miss the entire Rockies by about thirty miles. At least I can sneak out to them from here, early mornings and in between doing your dad. It's a job thing, you of all people ought to be able to savvy that. No, listen a minute, just let me lay it all out to you, Mitch. I've been shooting newspaper pictures for twenty years and I win the Fuji free ride. Then I come back and it's going to be the same old crap at the paper, only under new management as usual. The newsroom is the same playpen it always was, there's the same kind of dim bulb as publisher, only dimmer. They'll send me to snap the same damned Rotary lunch speakers in every weinie place like this in the entire state, if I don't think up better shoots. While what I really want to work on is my world album book, and I need these mountains for that." She checked on him with another straight-on meeting of the eyes. "Any of this give me a passing grade?"

"I was way off. You're *twice* as tricky a piece of work as I thought."

"Get a grip of yourself, can't you?" *Rrr* s rolled in Mariah's admonition like the wheels of Scottish war wagons. "What I'll be doing on this assignment, full livelong working days and then some, will be a perfectly legit picture story. Right now you can't see it because of all the family stuff. Take it from me, though, your father--the camera is

going to love him, a face like that, and the way he handles himself like he's his own prize invention. It doesn't matter to the camera, what you think of him."

"Listen, Mariah. That may be. Say he's the most photogenic doomed person you've ever laid a camera eye on. All else being equal, sure, bang away at him, say I. But all else *isn't* equal on something that hits this close to home, it never goddamn is." He locked eyes with her. "Don't you think you're crossing a line, just gaily handing yourself a story where, well, Lexa and I are mixed into it too?"

"You've never crossed a line into a story, hmm? Alaska or any of that?"

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"Those two are sure circling that garbanzo trough over there," Lexa observed.

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Even after the supper club, the house was not a welcome sight to any of them but Lyle. Mariah brightly said she had better get herself and her camera gear established in the bunkhouse, hadn't she, while Lexa felt the need to walk somewhere and Mitch, still looking more fed up than fed, said maybe that's what he needed, too.

As if it was an effort but worth making, Lyle underhanded the keys to his pickup in a high lob from the kitchen steps across the driveway to him. "Head on out to the Bench, why don't you. Show Missy the sunset from there." Turning to go in, he left them with: "Just remember, you're walking all on money."

Mitch drove west out of town, Lexa watching partly the tops of the mountains coming closer and partly him.

"I never should have let her climb off that plane, huh?"

"Lexa, I am not holding you responsible, can't you tell?"

"But."

"But why the hell couldn't you have let me know about her wild-hair scheme of taking snapshots of my dear doomed father until the moment he goes defunct, first?"

"When? How? For that matter, Old 5W's and an H, why? You can't think it's your decision instead of your father's, whether he lets Mariah poke a camera in his face for what little is left of his life?"

There was a side of Mitch the size of Half Dome that did think precisely that, of course. But the more rational portion of him knew Lexa's argument was unassailable. If Lyle Rozier wanted to go out in his own form of sunset, kindled into blaze by the focus of Mariah's manifold damnable camera lenses, who could deny him that wish?

"She won't pretty him up any, you know," Lexa was saying. "If he goes out of life throwing up on his shoes, she'll shoot that, too."

"Gee, that's reassuring."

Reminding herself that maybe it was time to concede a point, Lexa granted: "For somebody dying, he is pretty lively."

change

Mitch stared ahead bleakly, to where Phantom Woman's brow-like summit stood above the other peaks of the Continental Divide. "You don't know the half of it yet."

They parked atop the long ramp of ridge, ^{a hundred miles of awaiting them} the Rockies ahead in the first dye color of evening. The sunset didn't stop with the rose-washed mountains; Mitch at once turned Lexa around by her shoulders to view the exquisite three rises on the northeast horizon, of the plains, the Sweetgrass Hills, outlined in last minutes of golden light.

While they walked along the top of the benchland, which was oddly like a pebbly beach elevated quite a way into the sky, Mitch thought out loud about the medical siege ahead and a father who until now had never spent so much as a minute in a hospital bed. It fell to Lexa to do the private thinking about being back on a patch of earth like this, toe to toe with the old hungers.

There when she and Lyle were alone at the table, during Mitch and Mariah's circumnavigations of the salad bar, Lyle had inclined his head toward the front window of the supper club and the distant skyline framed there and said as if the thought had just strolled up to him: "You know what, though, Lexa? Mitch doesn't like to hear me say so, but those mountains do just sit there. So much of this country has always been locked up--the Bob and all that, up there. Finally along comes a way that land can be put to real use, some gas and oil drilling--not all that much, it's only a kind of dental work on a bigger scale, if Mitch would just think of it that way--and if gravel roads up into there," he nodded

toward the mountains again, "are going to be part of that deal they might just as well be Rozier Bench-gravel roads, it just seems to me. I figure you ought to know how things stand, since you're sort of in the family and all."

The *sort of* had put her wary. "Leading to what, Lyle?"

He smiled the smile of a kindly trick noper.

"Just that I believe I'll go ahead and dab my name on those papers that Mitch is still a little skittish about, is all. That way, if he happens to change his mind any, that arrangement will be ready to go no matter what condition I'm in. You and Mitch haven't got so much money in life that you can pass this up, have you?"

~~She had been careful to give him a nice smile as she responded:~~

"If Mitch asks me what to do with the papers on your gravel deal, I'll tell him to tear the fuckers up and throw them to the forty-eight winds."

Yet was it worth it, she asked herself again now; even trying to keep country like this at arm's length from the dreams and schemes of the endless Lyles. ("You don't have to be in the family so much you sound like Mitch," he had ended up huffing to her there in the supper club.) North of here some thirty miles, the McCaskills had come and put in their century--homesteading, rangers, ranching, trying not to disgrace the land that held them. Maybe that was all that could be hoped for, one family canceling out the other in the world's ledgerbook. She had wanted to keep it going in Alaska, her tribal line of people

change & expand

who lived by seasons instead of core samples. But it turned out there would be no kids; Travis was shooting blanks. It turned out short for her in a lot of ways, the sum of Alaska.

She realized she and Mitch had done the length of the ridge and back, and he was still restless. He reached over and cupped her shoulder as if to buck her up and kidded, "Never knew Easy Street is all gravel, did you." It at least made her blink. *I thought I was the designated kidder.*

"Come on," Mitch said suddenly, "I'll show you the real family landmark."

Now he drove north and a bit east to the Donstedder Bench. The late spring's green blush was still on the slopes of that more arable benchland, although the grass would soon enough turn tawny. The road climbed the side of the bluff in a long swooping curve, and right at the crest Mitch stopped the pickup. He climbed out, Lexa following, and stepped through the plowed dirt to the last furrow of the field, at the very verge of the bluff. Under them now, the coulee leading down to the Soda Creek valley was a massive spill of stone, from junior boulders to the size that could be pitched with one hand.

"Lot of big mama rocks had their nest here, looks like," Lexa said.

"We picked rocks on all these benches that got farmed." ^{Mitch} He dipped his head to each of the several long landforms around like a moored fleet. "Most truckloads ended up here-- some guys didn't want rockpiles taking up the corners of their fields, but Donstedder said ^{we could} he didn't care about this coulee, fill it to the brim as far as he was concerned."

Mitch paused, seeming to think back. "Dad had crews of us out every spring as soon as the fields dried enough to drive a truck on." He let out a bitter half-laugh.

"Sometimes barely dry enough."

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"Dad? It's awful soft out here."

"A little mud won't hurt you guys," his father scoffing. The man with a war behind him.

In his mind's eye, they were fanned out in this field again, mud of thirty-five years ago. Two boys on each side of the blue truck, ranging out to pick up rocks from the size of softballs on up. They began brighthanded, wearing cheap white cotton workgloves which by the end of the first day would be irredeemably soiled and by noon of the second day would be worn out. Every farmer whose field they worked pointed out that leather gloves might cost more but would last longer, and every boy resented laying out his own money and went on buying the cheap ones.

Those farmers were not happy to have to deal with Lyle Rozier on rockpicking. ~~Too damn well~~ they knew they could hire these same boys for the same dollar an hour he paid them, but overseeing a bunch of high school kids took too much time from everything else that needed doing on a place in springtime. So they scowled and paid Lyle two dollars

an hour for every pair of hands (including himself, sitting like a duke in that truck cab) and gassed up the truck for him as well.

On that first day Mitch had been paired with Sharpless on the far side of the truck, and over on the driver's side were his other buddy from the football team, Loper, and some skim-milk kid whose name was lost now. In compound gear, the truck grumbled along at slowest speed. The truck tires cut alarming furrows, but Lyle had been right, rockpicking was possible. Chilly and messy and clumsy, with mud built up on their shoes, but they could do it. The boys worked hard to keep warm, which doubtless was in Lyle's calculation too. When they met up with the most sizable rocks, erratic glacier leavings the size of anvils or more, he might stop the truck and jump down to help the grunting pair of boys. Or he might not. He was breaking Sharpless and Loper and the no-name kid in on who was boss, Mitch knew.

So it had come as a surprise, about an hour into the day, when they saw Donstedder and his hired man moving some mother cows and their fresh calves in the fence lane on the far side of the field and Lyle stopped the truck and called over the top of the cab to his four rockpickers, "Need to go ask Donstedder if the gate's unlocked to his coulee. Mitch, come drive the Goose, a couple minutes." He gave them a satisfied nod for the heap of rocks already in the truckbed. "There, didn't I tell you? Any prissy pants can work in a dry field."

Mitch ascended to the truck cab and his father marched off across the mud of the field. As he got the truck inching along, Sharpless promptly drifted around to the side where the other two boys were.

Sharpless called out, "Here comes a lateral, Lope." With both hands he lobbed a rock the size of a workshoe toward Loper.

Loper caught the rock, tucked it to his middle like a football and, laughing, dropped back a few steps and passed it overhand into the truckbed. Sharpless and the skim-milker cheered and clomped around searching for rocks the right size to shovel-pass to one another.

Mitch watched several fancy flings of rocks, all three boys into the game now, before pulling out the throttle a fraction to keep the truck going, then stepped out onto the running board.

"Hey, Sharps, and you guys, bad idea," he shouted while keeping his hand on the steering wheel. "My old man's not going to go for that." He tried a forced laugh, already knowing this could be major trouble. "You're leaving rocks like crazy, he'll can your asses."

The trio giggled, took a peek across the field to make sure Lyle's distant back was still turned, and kept on pitching and passing to one another, each rock that found its way to the truck leaving many others undisturbed in the mud.

Mitch rode there on the running board, in charge of disaster. The field that first day was full of fresh frost heave, rocks galore, rocks--

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He stood looking at them again now, the filled vee of coulee like the comet tail of a glacier. One oblong rock, somewhere there, that his life had pivoted on.

“You never told me you had a rock collection,” Lexa tried on him, slipping an arm into his.

He made the effort to laugh, a little. He gave her a bit of a gaze, then away. “I don’t know, Lex. If you have to wrestle the country from the rocks every damn year, maybe that ought to tell you something about the country. But it never did Lyle Rozier, or these dry-land farmers.”

“You’re not going to change him at this late date, you know.”

“I do know better, but I want him to have been something else than what he was. Or for that matter still is.” Mitch nodded violently across the corner of the valley toward the gravel-gray Rozier Bench. “Goddamned guy who is always out to make a killing instead of a living.”

✓ “That’s always been his story,” he abruptly went on. “Always been a promoter.

He got all excited when Yuppies started swilling down mineral water. He and the town honchoes sent off samples of the springs to the mineral bottling guys--half of them wrote

back that the stuff tasted too terrible, and the other half said it tasted too good. Another time, we were going to get rich on antique tractor radiator caps. Now it's branding irons."

"It's huh?"

"Don't ask. I'll show you the Rozier treasure vault of 2 Lazy 2 P's tomorrow."

"Mitch, he's up in years now, not to mention on his last legs. You're going to have to--"

"That's the latest thing he's trying to get away with. Time for sympathy for Lyle."

"And the worst part is, you're feeling some."

"YES! Damn right I am, and I don't want to be." He was silent a moment. "I know it sounds cruel."

It sounded near-criminal, her expression seemed to say.

Desperately Mitch delved for a basis to answer that look on her.
He knew he had to try to reach her. Find his way out of his divided state of mind.

Okay, which was the trance? The Coast life, the fumble of marriage and the kids, the long devotion to a newspaper that was Bingford's plaything between mountain romps, the try with Lexa, six years now and still somewhere in the experimental stage? Or here this born-into obligation, this step back into--what do you even call it? Certainly it was no longer childhood, but it was offspringhood of some inescapable kind.

“He pretty much *was* dead, as far as I was concerned,” he explained, if it was an explanation. “Had been since I left here, as little as we had to do with each other all those years. Now it’s like he’s popped back to life. Temporarily.”

“And now you have to deal with him, and you don’t like that.”

“Both of the above, sorry to say.”

Lexa shook her head, whether wondering about his mental fitness or her own he couldn’t tell. She told him, “I came to try to help along the edges. But you’re going to have to let me know when you and your father are in the here and now, and not back there wishing each other would turn out differently.”

Rooted there at the outermost furrow of the field, Mitch did not say anything for several seconds. Then it all came.

“Lexa, I am a fifty-year-old unfeathered biped carrying too much weight. With a marriage behind me that I wouldn’t wish on an alimony lawyer. And grown children who maybe are what they are because I didn’t wage a fifteen-year war over them with their mother, and they don’t care spit about me. The only occupation I’ve ever had is about to turn into street litter. Now I’m back here where I don’t want to be, in Lyle Land. He and I have let each other down in ways we can’t even spell out. Then there’s you.”

Me? She blinked a quick semaphore of alarm at arriving on this list.

Mitch was surging on. "I know I torpedoed Travis and you--"

"Hey, that only took a cap pistol."

"--and I've only ever managed to be so-so at playing house with you, I know that, too. Why don't you just walk out on the Roziers?"

"You are in a mood. "

"You can, you know. Give this relationship the big haircut." He swiped his leveled hand across his throat.

Lexa stood perfectly still. Around her she could sense dusk dropping degree by degree, the feel of the chilling field. All she knew was that she wasn't going to surrender here.

"Come on, let's get you back to town," she said to him. "We could both use some beauty sleep."

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Sleep was not anywhere near either of their minds, though, the darkness still fresh by the time they drove back in. She gave him a try again as they came to the outskirts of town.

"So, fullback. Going to drive me by the old high school, see if they've put up a statue yet of you throwing your helmet into the stands?"

“Don’t get your hopes up.” She thought she could see the area around his mouth twitch a little.

“Tsk. Here you are, legendary, and I don’t even get to see the blade of grass you first fullbacked all over, you, the Iron T--”

“Don’t start with that!” he commanded, but now he definitely was suppressing a bit of provoked smile.

She watched him watch her from the corner of his eye until he finally broke out with: “Okay, Smart Mouth, you want local attractions, I’ll show you the one and only.”

He swung the pickup down a sidestreet and pulled over at Artesia Park. They got out and stepped over to the vacant park, Lexa turning her nose in the direction of the springs as if investigating an aroma that had no business in her kitchen.

“You still want walking,” Mitch was saying, “four times around this mother is a mile.” When she looked questioningly at him, he said only, “I circled it enough times to know, when I was a kid.”

“Let’s just move our feet a little. Show me the sights, Slick.” She balled up her hand and put it in his side jacket pocket, causing him to put his arm around her as they began the tour.

Even by night it was a scabby park. In the harsh bluish glow from backyard lights behind most of the nearby houses, the crusts around the side-by-side sulphur springs

looked deathly alkaline, and the timeworn gazebo appeared to have fallen off the forklift from a high school production of *The Music Man*. Trees had a hard life here.

Yet frolicsome tries had been made. Sporadic picnic tables still were around, scattered like old survivors of a shipwreck, and over by the weatherbeaten *Artesia Park* sign was a plywood cutout where tourists could poke their heads through holes and have jokey photos taken.

“Kind of stinky, but not too bad,” Lexa granted when they reached the double set of artesian swimming holes.

Mitch shifted from one foot to another then back again, studying the pair of pools with surpassing interest. “Umm, Lexa? Want to go for a euphemism?”

Lexa gazed at him, then at the springs steaming gently in the night. “Is this the point where the shy maiden says, ‘But I didn’t bring my swimsuit’?”

“I was sort of hoping she’d say, ‘Let’s shoot out the blue sodium lights and go naked.’”

“Welcome to Yard Light City, all right. What do these people have that they think is so worth swiping?” Eyes creased against the acetylene hover of nightlights behind most of the nearby houses, she peered around the none-too-dark park. “Serioso, Mr. Hots, it’s pretty public around here, isn’t it?”

“There’s a corner of the big spring in behind the gazebo.”

“How do you know this?”

“Hearsay.”

Lexa laughed down in her throat. “Her say, don’t you mean? Memories of some midnight swim partner, back in high-de-ho school days, have we got here? So who was she, Rozier? The cheerleader who was easy to score on? The 4-H Club sweetiepo--head, heart, hands, and not bad in some other parts too?”

Mitch enwrapped her, jolting her off her footing, seeming to stagger a little himself as he gave her a kiss that could have been felt in France. After the maximum visitation back and forth by their tongues, he pulled his head back and said thickly: “She wasn’t anybody. You’re it.”

“In that case,” Lexa heard herself say in a rush, so starved for him her throat wasn’t working quite right, “you probably don’t want any more years to go by before testing out that water.”

There were a few scrawny tree shadows at the far end of the park for them to scurry in to the back of the gazebo. On the spring bank there, hidden or close enough, they clutched and kissed some more. Clothing cascaded off. His large pale form loomed, her compact one emerged from a sudden circlet of blue jeans and panties. *The non-bride wore*

moonlight. If it doesn't suit the occasion, Mitch, I don't know what better I can do. She steadied herself against him with an inquiring spread palm.

They went into the water, Mitch first, lifting her down. The water was coarse but warm as a zinc-tub bath. The sulphur odor might as well have been harem musk.

He kissed downward on her, her head arching back as she put the rest of herself toward him. Hair wet, they were sleek as seals in a pocket of sea. When he lifted her a bit she rode on his thigh, rocking there, pleasure-clenched on the might of him; making love with Mitch was like trying out a jungle gym, there were all these...*dimensions* to take into consideration, to play on. Her hand found him ready. She shifted, and his breath drew in. Open-mouthed with need, they joined, surged together, the water of the spring lapping against the gray silver rim of bank.

"This stuff," Mitch panted and laughed urgently at the same time, "makes your hair stand up," he panted again, "in spikes."

"Break my heart some more," she growled and buried her lips into his.

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"Mitch? Lexa? That you?"

"Everybody but." Finished bumping her way through the kitchen maze to the refrigerator, Mariah blanched at what she found when she opened its door, but shoved

enough of it aside to stash her extra film. "Just keeping my camera food cool," she called to Lyle in the other room.

"Oh. You situated okay in the bunkhouse? Been a while since it had anybody in it."

"It's fine, no livestock or anything. Ta-ta."

Woop, Mariah. You're back dealing in American. Better go in and tell him night-night. She went to the doorway into the living room. He was planted there in his chair, up close to the television.

In the ghostblue light from the screen he again studied her all he wanted to, his manners so rusty he didn't think to invite her to take the load off her feet. No immediate "good night" forthcoming from that quarter, either. She wondered what she was getting into, inserting herself and her camera into the last days of this ironbound old man.

As she was about to murmur "See you in the morning" and turn and go, Lyle nodded toward the WebTV.

"This's quite something. Found myself, on there."

"No crap?" She was unwillingly drawn into the room. Her body clock was still ticking in Eskimo or some such, but she could always put off being tired long enough to be curious. "Let's have a peek at you." She came and hunkered by his easy chair.

“First thing is, get rid of Dugout Doug here.” Lyle peered down into the keyboard on the TV tray table, struck something, and General MacArthur and his corncob pipe vanished back into history. “So you just been everywhere. What was that like?” Frowningly concentrated on the web to the past as he was, she was surprised he could make conversation as he hunted and pecked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. What fits with what, in the book I’m doing.”

Peering up at the screen and down at the keyboard with every stroke, Lyle mashed away at keys with two fingers stiff as drill presses. “Does that pay good, a book?”

“There’s no telling.”

“You’re gonna be putting the whole world in a book, hadn’t you ought to be able to charge plenty?”

“My stuff, you can’t sell by the ton.”

We Who Were the Jungleers arrived on the screen, with the cartoon of a Sad Sack soldier wearing the patch of the 41st Infantry Division where Superman wore his S.

“Progress,” Lyle announced, and stopped to take stock of the menu. He brought up onto the screen *Australia--the Queensland training*, frowned harder and zapped it. “That kid Matthew can squirrel around in this stuff like nobody’s business. Takes me some hit and miss.” He managed to find *New Guinea--the jungle war*. Mariah watching, he began a fresh search through *zones of combat*.

“The world,” the word came from him as if he considered it an interesting affliction. “I’ve never much budged, myself. Not that you’ll be overly surprised to hear so.” He indicated the cramped room shadowed around them. She felt a bit guilty for equating this house with the quake-shaken museum, but the resemblance was still there.

“Had to go when they sent me to fight Tojo,” Lyle said as if thinking it over. “But that was different. See the world from under a helmet.”

Very much as if he had timed it, combat photography arrived onto the screen, landing craft and bomb geysers in the water. Dead bodies on a grainy beach.

Mariah was the third generation of McCaskill women tired of hearing about it from men who had gone to war, as if women’s lives weren’t some level of combat.

“That was my father’s story, too,” she let him know. “Came back from the Aleutians with his leg shot up. Then there was my uncle who didn’t come back at all.”

Lyle paused a moment over what she had said. “Don’t know how, but the ones I went with all stayed in one piece. Although it was close enough, a time or two.”

His next click brought them. The trio of young soldiers, himself in the middle. Helmets with camouflage netting, rifles slung on their shoulders, a bazooka in their possession, too; happy-go-lucky smiles at odds with all that. Central as he and his sergeant stripes were in the grouping, Lyle in particular looked convinced he was

bulletproof. Mariah could tell it was confidence put on for the camera, but even so. A face like that came from the climate inside the person.

He must have been a heartbreaker when they came home in uniform, she thought to herself. War hero, or what passed for one, here. Mariah was veteran enough to know halo sheen when she saw it.

“This business of pictures for nothing, again,” he was saying. “They can just take and put me on there?”

“Seems like,” she said wryly, staying intent on the set of faces on the screen.

“Goodlooking bunch of devils you were.”

“Yeah, well, two out of three isn’t bad.” They chortled together at the pug-faced bazooka man, his smile a bit lopsided and loose around the edges, posing shoulder to shoulder with Lyle.

“Buddies of mine,” Lyle identified, although Mariah hadn’t thought it necessary to ask. “After the war they both worked for me, some.” He judged them again there on the screen. Fritz Mannion, primo facie dumb. Joe Ferragamo, noble as some statue in the middle of Rome.

“And then the next thing I knew,” he said as if still caught off balance by it, “I was back here in the Springs, family man and all. You ever tie the knot?”

“You bet.” Mariah grinned with fond scorn for the marriage to Riley. “Turned out to be a slip knot, lucky for me.”

The old man sharpened his tone on that answer of hers.

“Divorce has gotten kind of contagious, yeah.”

One thing Mariah never liked, among many, was sermonettes on marriage from people who were not current in the field. By whatever hole card of fate this man was a loner, she could tell, and she decided to call him on it.

“Your wife--what’s that wimpy way they put it now--predeceased you some time ago, did she?”

Lyle jerked a fit-to-kill look at her. But of course she had no way of knowing about Adele, flying along on black ice until here came the bridge abutment. He sat there forcibly swallowing ire and memory, while Mariah watched him from only a few feet away. These women these days didn’t give you much ground to maneuver on.

“A lot of time ago,” he said and left it at that.

Mariah stood. “I’d better call it a night. Always have to get up early for good light for the camera. Thanks for the loan of the bunkhouse.” She glanced again at his WebTV picture of the three young GIs. Leaving, she wished him “Happy World War Two,” seeming to mean it.

Alone again except for the tired feeling which was pretty much with him all the time now, Lyle had to debate whether to bed down here in the chair and have to justify that to Mitch and Lexa when they came in, or drag himself off in a more civilized fashion. Dying wore on you after a while.

Yet it had taken all these years for the one with his name on it to catch up with him, hadn't it. This was what he kept finding surprising, that he was being handed time enough to know he was a goner, to think through the disposition of things. Settle accounts.

Not that he had decent experience in how to handle death, not even the one brought up by that "predeceased" crack of Mariah's. (She and that Lexa both had the sort of mouths that needed holsters, didn't they.) He had been secretly relieved when Mitch's mother went out of his life--went out of life, period, you'd have to say--in that car wreck. Secret didn't begin to say enough, about something like that. A person could never admit that kind of awfulness, even to himself. But deep down Lyle knew that was what it amounted to. He figured he might be particularly conscious of this because he was a man with only a few such things buried out of sight that way, and there had been his scare when one of those had half got out, that summer of Mitch's leg accident and all the commotion after.

Adele had been touchy. (Mitch got that quality from her. Mama's boy without a mama; maybe that accounted for Mitch breaking away from him, back there.) Any number of times she utterly did not want to go along with the program, his ventures to try to make something of the Springs country and this family along with it. it still burned him, Adele's lack of trust. Watch your chance and take a gamble every so often on a deal like the Rozier Bench and that was your reward at home, arguments. He had been amazed the first time Adele pulled out of here and spun gravel halfway to the Sweetgrass Hills. Then when she came back, that time and every time, and the household would settle down for a while, the word turned to more like amused.

It was Mitch they stayed together for, of course.

He hadn't known jack-squat about having a kid. Or even wanting one. Cravings a person never suspected before had built up throughout the war, though, had they ever. Kids poured forth, from the ex-Sergeant Lyle Roziers and the ripe and waiting Adele Conlons. Like probably any number of people then they had got themselves caught, barely started going together when Adele missed her time of the month. But she went up to her people in the Sweetgrass Hills to have the baby, and when Mitch was born a bit overdue, even the bookkeeping on that looked pretty close to balanced.

Lyle shifted in the chair in the semi-dark. It wasn't the life he'd thought he would lead. Whose is?

He hesitated, listening to make sure Mitch and Lexa weren't on their way in, then keyboarded back to the war-scarred beachhead on the Web.

—

New Guinea was a sonofagun of a place to go to war unless you had a taste for vines, mosquitoes, snakes, sopping horse-blanket heat, tropical diseases severe enough to make your bones rattle, and the likelihood of Japanese snipers up every mangrove. Not even to mention being ushered in to the Guinea shore the way they were, aboard a disabled landing craft laying there on ^{Tambu} the bay like an engraved invitation to the Japanese air force for target practice. Some idiot on his last cigarette had crumpled the empty pack and tossed it over the side instead of onto the floor of the landing craft and the wad of foil went into the sump pump like silk drawers up a vacuum cleaner. Sergeant Lyle Rozier's natural tendency was to suspect Fritz Mannion, but he lacked total evidence and besides there was the more pressing matter of the water leaking in fast around the landing-ramp without the sump pump to draw it back out. Half a mile short of the beach, the coxswain had to dead-stop the already half-swamped vessel or risk driving it under the waves. And so there Lyle and Company C ^g of the 41st Infantry were, invasion-force soldiers bailing like madmen with their helmets.

decks?

September

Lyle still was proud of getting the men at the bailing without anybody panicking. In those little details that stick up in memory, he even now could see Ferragamo carefully

rack his Browning automatic rifle in the side struts of the landing craft to keep it high and dry, and Mannion taking the same care with his bazooka, before starting to shovel saltwater. Most of the other guys were from the Montana National Guard and like Joe and Fritz they knew how to work. Meanwhile Lieutenant Candless seemed to think he could repair the situation by belaboring the Seabees who were trying to get the sump pump up and running again. The lieutenant was militarily doomed anyway on account of his name's

resemblance to candy-ass, but Company C's wariness toward ninety-day wonders such as him ran deeper than nomenclature. The ~~last good officer that the enlisted men knew of was~~

incontroversially believed
~~the rank of lieutenant was reserved for those who could not~~
~~Hannibal, who called in the elephants to give the goddamned enemy something to think~~
~~find their ass with both hands.~~
 about. Right there in that gap of trust, Lyle figured, was where he had to operate. Even all

these years after, he could bring back *bluff cozy* the sensation of acting as sergeant, like watching

himself in a mirror shop. Part of him would show up, giving the blessed order to drop

packs and take a smoke or jokingly commanding *listen up, you modified civilians*; then a

little farther off as his mind reflected *man by man* to the next step regarding the unit of *men assigned to*

him; then close up to himself as he savored what he had attained with this set of stripes. He

had sensed something of this sort back when he was in the CCC camp, that he could put up

with things better if he had a hand in running them. It didn't need to be everything, he

didn't have to be total MacArthur. But in on the plan, some orders to give, a piece of

changed again

✓

✓

massive complicated soldiery

authority: this he liked very much. And was managing to live up to, here in their welcome party to New Guinea, at least enough to keep them all from drowning yet.

Finally the lieutenant quit profanely wasting breath when one of the Seabees yelled back up to him that they were ready to give the pump a try.

“Sergeant, have the men put their packs and helmets on again.”

Dealing with this shavetail lieutenant was a matter of buying time. “Right away, sir, but just to be on the safe side, how about we give it another couple minutes of--”

They all heard the plane at the same time.

It was the lead Zero of three, and while the other fighter planes were farther back and a mile or more into the sky, this one was coming in at about a hundred feet. Coming with an odd laziness, as if the Jap pilot had all the time in the world to look them over before starting to strafe the landing craft.

There was a mad scramble for their weapons, Fritz ridiculously trying to get his bazooka set up, Joe quickest with his BAR but the plane roaring in on top of them even by the time his finger was ready on the trigger.

“Ferragamo!” the lieutenant screamed as the Zero buzzed over them without strafing. “Get that BAR working!”

"Sorry, sir," Joe said, keeping watch on the two as-yet uninterested planes. "I'm loaded with tracers. The other Zekes will see me firing, think I'm real ack-ack worth knocking out."

The Zero departed low over the water, wigwagging his wings as if to say *You look like you have enough trouble, Yanks.*

If it had ended there, that would have been the story brought home to the VFW Club--Lyle, drylander boatman, keeping them afloat while Joe, coolest head in the cauldron of the bay, kept them from being blown out of the water. But then came the patrol.

By ^{now} ~~then~~ they were turning into jungleers, baptized combatants in the steamy and treacherous fighting as the 41st ^{infantry} laboriously thrashed inland from the beachhead. Some more baptized than others. The night before the patrol, dog-tired from their first week in the forward area but on another level pleased enough with himself, Lyle filed along ahead of Joe in the first real chow line they had seen since hitting the beach. Mess kits in their right hand for the more or less hot food and helmets held out in the other for the next

week's worth of C-rations to be dropped into, Lyle joked something to Joe about the two Ferragamo looked at him from under dark eyebrows, eyes shadowed with fatigue. of them standing in a line that paid off twice as good as the CCC one for beans. ~~It didn't~~

^{is life} ~~take.~~ Ferragamo had filled out handsomely in his years in the West, ~~dark and keen and~~

~~primed~~ to be a credit to society, but the military with its ruthless pecking order reminded

him of being back into the slum again. He hunched up and soldiered and never said a word of complaint about lugging the twenty-two pound automatic rifle and another twenty pounds in ammunition clips, but that didn't mean he liked any of Army rigamarole, as Lyle a little too obviously did.

"You can have this 'jungler' good stuff," Ferragamo replied. Then added, giving it full Jersey accent: "Sawjint Rozier." He smiled at Lyle but only barely. "All's I want is to get my butt out of this war in one piece."

"Get with the program, Joe, your precious butt's already got a crack in it."

At the time Lyle just thought being shot at most days of the week was on Ferragamo's nerves. He felt he couldn't do much about that, couldn't play favorites now that he was sergeant. It would all pan out okay if he could keep dealing with Lieutenant Schwartz. (Candless was already a distant memory, picked off by a sniper the second day of the assault.) Lyle was fond of the men in the unit, he somehow believed he would be able to keep on keeping them from harm^{'s way}

New Guinea was not the most cooperative country for that. The island's terrain was the damnedest tangle any of them had ever seen, mangrove swamps one instant and hellish shelves of tropical forest the next, and ultimately beyond, some of the worst mountains in the world, the Owen Stanley Range. When their patrol set out that next morning to probe a spine of ridge along the Division's left flank, they first had to clamber

on top of mangrove roots, one slippery muscle of wood to the next, to keep from going into mud up to their nuts. It took a couple hours of that to creep through a few hundred yards of swamp, but they came out of it not too badly situated, Lyle thought, hidden at the bottom of the slope. Somewhere not far above them on the ridge a Japanese heavy machine gun was firing bursts the other direction toward the Americans' main advance.

Afterward, Lyle had to grant that Fritz Mannion did make a war contribution that day besides falling down. The patrol crept up on the machine gun situation, the Japanese dumb and happy there with their protection of a cliff behind them and the swamp below.

With hand signals, Lyle sent Fritz and his bazooka to the brow of the ridge and a little behind the unsuspecting enemy, Ferragamo and couple of others to lay covering fire if needed. About any of the fine points of military life, Fritz could be stupider than snot. But let him get his mind set on something and a coyote cleverness took over. He had grasped that the bazooka was a chore that spared a person from, say, being point man of the patrol, and he had clamped hard to the bazooka job and today was about to earn it. As if deer-hunting with a blunderbuss, Fritz sighted in on the machine gun position and killed the gun crew with that first big shell.

That seemed a sufficient morning's work, particularly since the cliff closed off any reason to scout farther inland. With the men gathered around him at the former machine gun nest, Lyle looked at the jungle trail the enemy had been firing down.

"Careful on the road home," he said. "Let's fall back."

The sergeant part of Lyle was feeling good ^{as the men lined out}. They'd blown up some Japs, the patrol was all in one piece, and they had this trail back to their lines instead of kangarooing among the mangroves. All the time after, running it through his mind again and again, shaping it for telling in the VFW Club, even now when memory was fed fresh by the pictures from the Web, he could not identify when and how he let his guard down.

As these things do, it happened too fast. Fritz tripped on a root and sprawled, the bazooka under him. Lyle remembered hoping the bazooka wasn't bent. He took a couple of quick steps to reach Fritz and help him up with as little commotion as possible.

Fritz was still down on all fours swearing under his breath when something rustled in the foliage. Without thinking, Lyle popped his head over a bush for a look. For a confused moment he thought the figure squatting there in the shadows, automatic rifle across its lap, was Ferragamo taking a crap. Until he recognized the curved cartridge clip up top, Japanese-make, instead of a BAR's clip under the gun. His own rifle not at the ready, he knew in that paralyzed instant he was dead, the whole patrol was dead, led blindly by him into the fusillade about to come as the enemy gunner began the scythe swing of that gun barrel.

Simultaneously a deafening stutter of shots dislodged that from Lyle's mind, it was Ferragamo firing, six BAR bullets a second cutting a strip across the Japanese soldier's shoulders and the base of his throat.

Lyle felt blood on his face and hands, couldn't believe this either. The Jap hadn't had a chance to fire. Then he realized Ferragamo's spray of bullets had blown the Jap's blood all over him.

—————

Out in the night now, he heard the pickup pull into the driveway. Mitch and Lexa, coastal night owls, finally on their way in. Lyle sat up straighter and started zapping the traces of the war from the silent glowing screen. And laughed, not because he had any particular reason to be happy with himself but at the way things turned out. He had far outlived Ferragamo, Hero Joe himself. And was at least tied with that old bastard Fritz, yet.

five

Don't know that I dearly wanted to oversee anybody's last supper, but it's in the record books now, Lexa would work back at the puzzle of those weeks of the three of them and Mariah's nibbling camera keeping Lyle company as he gradually left life, frame by frame. None of us knew what we were in for. Mariah and I and even Mitch started at this as takeout funeral-goers, when you come right down to it. Lyle was going to be our highly temporary job, was all, for whatever little while that took. We lit in here full of our own lives, or what we thought they were, and the next thing we knew we were finding sides of us all that nobody had seen before. Even with each of us doing our best, something like this can get as weird as bear-tagging camp. You try to watch your step and

changed

everybody else's as well, the whole crew of you tend to the chores and nobody gets any fingers nipped off, but in the end that's not quite all the danger there is. It goes beyond the actual griz. It's that clawprint on the trail. It's something just out of sight.



The unknown weeks were still ahead of them when Mitch stepped out of the house yawning, rubbing his head and wondering why his hair was stiff. Then a remembering smile came, and he kissed at the air in the direction of the upstairs bedroom where Lexa was still under the covers. No sooner had he done so than he heard the instep of a boot come to rest on a nearby bottom pole of the jackstay fence.

“Mitch. I hope I can call you that?”

“Why not, it's my name. What's foremost on your mind this morning, Donald?”

“I wondered if you could give me any timeline yet on, well, cleaning up your father's place. I have some clients I want to bring in to stay with me for some fly fishing.”

Mitch shook his head. “The flies in this country are pretty hard to catch, even with those little hooks. They don't fry up very good anyway.”

Brainerd evidently was not to be dissuaded. “Your father has been telling me that the disposal”—Mitch shot him a look—“of his items in his yard is going to have to be up to you.”

“He and I have been holding discussions about the place,” Mitch confided. “We think we might turn it into a hog farm.”

“What is it they say--’Never kid a kidder.’” Brainerd tried that tight little smile of his. “I hate to have to bring this up again. But I’ve been here next door for some time now, and I can’t really say I’ve seen any improvem--”

The bunkhouse door banged open, and Mariah came out at full velocity, mane of hair richly red in the morning sun, well-filled lavender shirt with pearl snap buttons, blue jeans built for her. She threw a wave toward the two men and with her other hand slung her camera bag into the VW van, slid in like a Monte Carlo race driver, and launched away in a crackle of gravel.

Mitch peered at Brainerd.

“Donald? Were your eyes green, before?”

Mariah’s eyes were thinking all the time, which maybe shouldn’t have been news to a sister but still took some getting used to. Even Mitch, whose nerves she was primarily on, backed off some after she did the old Scotch preacher bit to say to him, “Forgive us our press passes, laddie.” Me, I jumped out of my skin probably the first forty times when I’d be at something with Lyle, trying to get him to eat or at least slurp a milkshake between

expand

cigarettes now and then, and out of nowhere would come the click. She was an utter damn genius at turning herself into atmosphere.

The Great Falls doctor did nothing to conceal his annoyance at Mariah and her camera showing up with the rest of them for Lyle's medical appointment until Lyle sniffed majestically and said, "Can't hurt me much at this point, can it?"

Sitting there waiting for the mortal arithmetic of the latest medical tests, Mitch himself felt so rotten that he couldn't begin to imagine how down his father must feel. As much as he wished it wasn't, Mitch's body was the oversize barometer of his mood, and the strain of trying to do right by unwanted bloodline obligations kept registering heavily. He could feel himself waning inside, turning to sludge. His every exercise-deprived muscle was yelping its conscience out at him. *Yo, Dairy Queenster, you want us to turn into rubber bands and suet?* He sat tense and tired and defensive against he didn't know quite what, as if his father's affliction was shadowing into him.

Lexa had been through this before, not that a person ever got used to visiting death's anteroom. Seven years ago, her mother sitting where Lyle now sat even if it was not this precise office. *"I wanted to do this on Mother,"* Mariah had spilled in the sister session last night. *"Record the last of her. And I couldn't. Jick was having a tough enough time as it was. I'd probably have had to fight you on it--"*

"You damned bet."

"--and so it ended up I didn't even try. I just didn't have the guts."

"Maybe some heart was involved there somewhere, Mariah, give yourself a break."

"Vicinity of the insides anyway, okay. Makes a person wonder about herself, though, a gut check telling me 'Huh uh' then and 'You've got to' on Lyle Rozier now."

From the look on this doctor, intestinal fortitude was going to be in demand for all of them before this was over, Lexa figured.

In the bull's-eye of the camera lens and all available medical apparatus, *the latest verdict being related by the doctor,* Lyle still was trying to resist showing how he was, deep down inside. Scared. Scared as he had been only about three times before in his life, and two of those in New Guinea. The several months past when he had been the only one outside this office who knew he was dying, that phase of this had been oddly like just going away somewhere, traveling in solitary, being a tourist where nobody really knew him. Like on that visit of his to Seattle, watching people who didn't know he existed, and taking for himself a new awareness from that: if he was a secret, he had that over them, didn't he, and they couldn't even guess it. There'd been the duty to eventually tell Mitch about the leukemia, sure, and somehow out of that had come Lexa's bossing of the household, and Mariah's camera record of his, what was that six-bit word, demise. He had been able to make her camera second nature to himself, not really outright posing for her or even ever wanting to see any of the proof sheets of

what she had taken. He just was interested in this odd kind of a deal--the camera to keep him company as he went through this, Mariah getting her picture piece for the newspaper out of it. But come right down to it, dying was a person's own business, and feeling scared was at least a sort of last privacy.

Mariah drifted around the room, not soundlessly but softly enough, consulting with her light meter until she gravitated to the shaft of prairie light coming in through the glass door to the office's genteel balcony. Eyeing the tableau of Lyle and Mitch and Lexa huddled next to the doctor's blondwood desk, she backed up against the glass door, tensed there, waiting, waiting, snapping a picture, waiting, snapping. When at last she was done and stepped away, a moisture outline of her upper body was left on the glass, fogged there from her body heat and sweat like a negative.

—————

There wasn't any rehearsal available on any of this, most of all for Lyle. He reminded me of one of those big old hall clocks running down. Tired as he would get, though, he could still play sergeant. When that doctor finally coughed up the prognosis that he had better figure he at most had only a few months left, Lyle said right back to him, "I get to choose which ones, I hope?"

✓
 for panel -
 details
 of
 Lyle's
 illness

With Mitch, he didn't even have to work at being problematic.

—————

All of them but Mariah were at Lyle's desk, the latest gauntlet of paperwork spread there. Mitch by now looked as though he were undergoing the torture of a thousand paper cuts, having spent days on end with the Choteau lawyer clearing up the snarl of branding-iron niceties and along the way finding innumerable other loose ends, inevitably fiscally treacherous, from Lyle's lifetime of dealings. Lyle, on the other hand, notably perked up whenever he could corner any of them into a business discussion.

Lexa ✓
as
Lyle's

"You see, though, the water rights on the banana farm"--Lyle had taken to calling the Rozier Bench that in order to piously hew to his promise not to mention the gravel deal--"ought to be a whole separate kit and caboodle from the mineral. Who the heck knows how much of this country is, how would you say, artesian?"

"Dad, it's a bone-dry glacial rock heap, okay? You'd have to drill halfway to--"

"Drilling is a bad habit anyway," Lexa put in.

"Excuse me." Ever scrounging for the photographable, Mariah was over by the sideboard examining the globe of metal rods buoying out of the clutter there. "This has been bugging the daylight out of me. What *is* this?" The thing had been nagging her since the minute she first walked into this room; welded together of pencil-thick rods, the metal tarnished with time, its skeletal sphere shape reminded her of, of, of she wasn't sure what.

Mitch glanced over, then flinched. Then unconvincingly shrugged as if the item amounted to no more than, oh, say, a giant dustball. "Just somebody's idea of a joke.

Long time ago. Should've thrown it--"

"'Joke' nothing!" Lyle trumpeted in. "It's his trophy. That's what they ^{always} called him in the newspaper, you know. When he was rolling down the field on all those touchdown runs."

Feeling dumb for having looked at it day after day without seeing it for what it was, Lexa blurted:

"The Iron Tumbleweed!"

"Well, well, well," said Mariah, a glitter in her eye.

"Hey, the whole bunch of you--do you mind?" Mitch gritted out.

"But I don't get it," Mariah kept on. "If it's iron, it wouldn't roll like a you-know-what, would it?" She leaned down lithely and fastidiously, puckered her lips a little and blew at the cross-strutted ball of metal. "I mean, you could huff and puff on this sucker until..."

Mitch gave her a glower. "Think about it, Mariah: sportswriters are the poets of the inane."

Mitch more
more
uncomfortable

#

Mitch nor I neither one wanted to admit it after all the fuss we'd each kicked up with ^{my sister the self-invited no-bling photographer} Mariah, but her picture-taking seemed to do Lyle some good. Except when he wasn't the one directly in her sights.

#

"Let's try this, over here."

Mariah was set on getting a fresh picture of Mitch and Lexa together, and already having shot virtually every backdrop at the Rozier house and a considerable distance around, she shooed them across town to Artesia Park.

Lexa unaccountably giggled at the venue.

To their surprise, Lyle had been determined to come along. It was one of his cranky days, but they figured he had every right, and Mitch with tight-lipped attentiveness bolstered him into the pickup and then over to a picnic table bench where he could sit and smoke and scowl while Mariah shot away.

Her Pentax on its strap bouncing against her breastbone, she had already circled the set of springs and the gazebo a couple of times, wrinkling her nose and muttering about what a thin excuse for a park this was, and had come back for another frowning look at the plywood cutout. It was in the approximate shape of the zigzag mountain skyline, with the two whitish springs daubed in and the full-size figures of a male bather in a Victorian

fix sentence rhythms on this p.

bathing suit and a female bather in a bikini about the size of a spotted bandanna and two leftover polka dots. Each figure was topped with a face-sized hole.

“When you can’t be creative, be crazy,” she declared and coaxed her subjects into poking their heads through, Lexa reluctantly and Mitch twice that. He still couldn’t make up his mind if Mariah was a genius with that damned camera or more like an idiot savant; instead of the fluke of rattling off what day of the week the Fourth of July fell on in the year 2099, maybe her mystifying capacity for calculation was all in her eye. Likely she was some of both, freakily inspired. He could remember the fascination of watching Peggy Fleming in Olympic figure-skating and taking to heart the commentator’s remark that no one would ever skate more beautiful routines than hers, merely prettier ones. Mariah on a shoot had that same cool sense of highest possibility. Glancing over to keep tab on his father while she worked out the shot she wanted of Lexa and himself, Mitch saw that familiar figure at the picnic table wearing an expression that was unmistakably jealous. One more side effect, Mitch thought resignedly, of Lexa’s sister the ice maiden.

Meanwhile Mariah backed and forthed in front of the weatherbeaten painted wood, trying out lenses for the cracked-old-masterpiece effect she wanted. Mitch and Lexa, reduced to heads only, looked like carnival targets.

Lexa ogled downward. “The last time I had a figure like this, I was seven years old.”

details
of
Mariah
shooting

"You want to talk numbers, mine was twenty pounds ago," Mitch muttered.

"Don't smile, be yourselves," Mariah commanded, firing away.

When she at last was through with that, Mitch ducked down so that only a void showed where the man's head was supposed to be. "Where's the rest of me?" he delivered in the squawky fashion of Ronald Reagan waking up in the hospital bed in *Kings Row*.

"Quit," Mariah ordered, snickering. "Although you did give me about half an idea. Switch, how about. Lexa, you stand in the guy's place. Mitch, be the bikini beauty."

"Not sure I'm required to sit here and watch that kind of stuff," Lyle huffed from behind his blue haze.

"No advice from the cheap seats, please," retorted Mariah, who by now could get away with kidding him. The camera glided to her eye and in the next instant she was crouching as if starting a run. Mitch as well as Lexa watched the balanced footwork and the delicate fingering, the athletic devotional moments, being clicked off now in hundredths of a second, that he recognized from football and she from barrel racing. And Mariah caught them as eternally as figureheads of vessels moored side by side, the faces taking on history, his emphatic map of delving and her particular ration of dubious luck.

"That'll do," she quit shooting, sounding rarely pleased. Lexa proclaimed that what she was about to do was walk. But before setting out on her daily route up to the

details ✓

in pregnant dock ✓

Bench, she hung on until Mitch had gone over to see how his father was holding up, then sidled to where Mariah was putting away camera gear.

“Umm, Mariah? Been meaning to ask you. If I show up in the newspaper, um, you know, from being with Mitch and all--what am I going to be called?”

“‘Fiancee’ is the journalistic style, sweetie,” Mariah super-innocently provided.

She watched the determined figure of her sister, the walking woman in territory where people drove a block to the post office, recede past the slightly steaming springs; gave a little *tock* of her tongue against the roof of her mouth in salute to Lexa, and had to go back to her camera stowing. Then, though, it was Mitch’s turn at her.

“Mariah? Do me a favor?” He looked highly uncomfortable. “Pretty please?”

“If it doesn’t involve dropping off the edge of the earth.”

“Shoot this for me. Him there at that picnic table.”

Mariah only had to glance over there before shaking her head and telling him, “Mitch, it’d just be wallpaper, a shot like that. Not to, mm, poop on your photographic advice or anything, but I’ve got a whole bunch of better ones of him today and--”

“It’s one I want. For myself.”

He had an expression on his face she couldn’t read as she slowly pulled her Pentax out of the bag and uncapped the lens.

change
of
expand ✓

“None of us had a camera here,” he said as much to himself as to her, “the first time around.”

—————

Those weeks dragged and flew, both. I felt like I was running a visitor center, with a short-order kitchen on the side. The teenage ghost next door, Matthew, all of a sudden would crop up there by Lyle's chair and the two of them would go chousing around on the Web. Or old cronies of Lyle's from the town and around would drop in to say sorry for how sick he was, and about as many enemies would come by to make sure of it. He hadn't yet reached the point of being bed-ridden, but pretty much chair-ridden, when Mitch and I couldn't any longer put off taking turns at Seattle.

Imagine my surprise that the old burg had managed to feed itself in my absence. I took back my crew from Gretchen long enough to do a wedding and a non, remind everybody of my existence. Then just wandered for a day. After Lyle's place and The Springs, Seattle looked like kingdom come. The zoo was cause for thought. I sat way back, on the bench with the raven sculptures, where Palmer couldn't see me during the raptor show. Lot of mental coin flips you have to do in life.

—————

The highway out of Twin Sulphur Springs was still warm from Lexa's zooming return when Mitch began making his miles to the Coast. It was a long drive, and he still

felt as if he was in a troubled dream. Geography ruled time; driving limitless across western Montana and riskily above the posted miles per hour through the Idaho panhandle and eastern Washington, even so he had to call it quits for the day at a motel in the farming town of Ritzville, which was on the same planet as Jakarta but barely.

The next morning soon enough brought the basalt gorge of the Columbia River and the freeway's roundabout approach to that surprise girth of water. At the rest area on top of the big ridge to the west of the river, still a hundred miles out from Seattle, he pulled in to look at the peak of Mount Rainier cresting over the horizon of the Cascade range like an iceberg adrift in the sky.

An hour from there, as he drove down out of the Cascades, the honeycomb of suburbs began, then the glass stalagmite skylines of Bellevue and downtown Seattle appeared. The land of ~~Xandria~~ and other quakes not yet awake. The Springs back there on perfectly sound ground if you could live on a diet of rocks and sulphur water. ✓

All the way on in to the *Cascopia* building he had the sense of returning to the known, yet with the edges of things not quite meeting.

Bingford didn't waste any time.

"You don't really want to hear me say 'the bottom line.'"

“My bottom and your line, you mean, Bing?” Mitch gazed out at the ship canal and the Fremont Bridge. The bridge tender waved at him. Mitch wondered if the guy could use an assistant. “What’s the next step? I’ve never been downsized before.”

“Severance pay.” Bing had the good grace to sound strained as he said it. “Two weeks, the accountants recommend, but I’ll sneak you a month’s. Can’t help you any on the health bennies, they get cut off. Your 401K plan you take with you, these days.”

“Right, that’ll buy a couple issues of the paper.”

“This rips my guts, you know, Mitch.”

“That’s two of us.” He plinked a finger against the pane of the window and looked around at Bingford. “Last request before the blindfold goes on. Let me use a cube a couple days, do some phoning, E-mailing, data raiding, speaking in tongues, whatever the hell it takes. I need to load up on some stuff.” Mitch smiled, with a bite behind it. “I may have to go up a mountain ^{sometime} ~~yet this summer~~.”

Bingford didn’t even want to go near that. “Help yourself,” he gestured toward the now underpopulated cubicles.

Mitch started out of the office, then turned. “Bing? What’s going to happen to, ahm, Shyanne?”

“Already out of here. She’s a content provider at Herburbia.com.”

change ✓

✓

#

So we never were a household you would want to patent. Mitch and Mariah kept nipping at each other, although it was what each of them was trying to do that kept getting in one another's way as much as anything. That sister of mine could give the impression she had the attention span of a swizzle stick, but she was chronically working on pictures in her head. Busy as we all were, the comings and goings like those strings from finger to finger when you play cat's cradle, there were times we tended to forget how many agendas Lyle had.

#

One of Lexa's self-appointed chores was to keep half an eye on Lyle cigarette by cigarette to make sure he didn't snooze off and set everything on fire. When she looked in on him now, he was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, but no smoke in the vicinity. An angled rectangle of sunlight from the bay window cast itself across his reclining figure from armrest to armrest, the cords and veins on the back of his hands standing out like junctures of old wiring.

"I hear your folks were Forest Service people," he said, eyes suddenly half-open and shifted toward her. "Explains a lot."

Lexa's eyebrows lifted. You always had to remember with Lyle the element of surprise. A lot of bravado ago, this man wore the uniform of a jungle fighter.

"I can guess who spilled the beans to you on that." Mariah, absent this afternoon to shoot a ribbon-cutting in Great Falls, sometimes gave away the damnedest conversational tidbits to see what expressions they would bring onto the face in her viewfinder at the moment. "But you bet, the Two"--the Two Medicine National Forest along the face of the mountains, she meant by that--"had its share of McCaskill footprints."

"How far back?"

"Our grandfather was the English Creek ranger practically forever."

"Huh. Must have been one of his shavetail assistant rangers I built that firetower for. Small world."

Lexa studied him. "And?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just thinking about--"

One of the chronic knocks at the door put that on hold. *If this is another sympathy casserole...* Lexa went and opened the door to a man who stood there looking uncertain.

"I'm trying to find Blazing Brands Enterprises. I saw its sign on a fencepost along Highway 89 but--"

"Sorry, this isn't--"

"Hey, no, Missy," Lyle's voice, a little frantic, rose from the living room interior.

"It is too."

✓
expand

Oh, right, the SOBing branding irons. Not that she knew what a typical customer for them was supposed to look like, but this man appeared likely to be in one of Montana's new lines of business, llamas or lattes. "Excuse me," she told him with a bright forced smile, "I have to check on our merchandising procedure. Meet you over there at the shed in a jif."

Lyle was straight up in his chair, bouncing his fist on the arm in triumph. "Wish I could get out there. You're gonna have to do the deal. Now, first thing is, don't be too eager to sell."

Lexa nodded.

"But don't let the customer start to lose interest, got that so far?"

Lexa shook her head.

"Let's do this." She plopped the telephone from his desk to where he could reach it beside his chair. Then went out to the van and grabbed her cell phone. She headed toward the machine shed and the puzzled man waiting.

"Who's in the house there, your father?"

"He's my...the guy I'm with's...we're sort of in-laws, is all." Lexa flung open the shed door, then began punching numbers on the phone in her palm. "Uh *huh*," she heard the man say at the sight of the Fort Knox of branding irons. "Well!"

They could hear the phone ring in the house. "We're going to have to share this," she apologized to the man and tilted the cellular so that he could put his ear alongside it across from hers.

"Lyle? Ready to deal iron?"

"You bet."

Lexa glanced encouragement at the customer and tipped the cell phone for him to speak into.

"I'll take a dozen," the guy decided. "They'll make fantastic Christmas presents."

"Huh uh," Lyle said at once.

The customer gave a businesslike smile, recognizing the time to dicker. "Then what kind of lots do you sell them in? I suppose I could use twenty--"

"Nothing intermediate-size, sorry," Lyle's tone was firm. "We're dealing in only little lots or the whole collection."

Lexa took the phone for herself.

"Um, Lyle? We *are*? Since the hell when?"

"Don't want to do Mitch out of what he has coming," the phone voice explained patiently. "See, the collection is the real jackpot here, and while it doesn't hurt to sell a few brands now and then, keep the ante in the game, so to say, you don't want to be selling off sizable chunks of your kitty, if you see what I'm--"

"Lyle, believe me, there are branding irons to spare out here! You can sell this gentleman as many as he can load in his car and still have--"

"Huh uh. Not the way it works. Lexa? Give the guy back to me."

Wordlessly she turned back to the frowning customer and beckoned him to bring his ear to the phone again.

"Mister? Naturally you can buy one for yourself," Lyle seemed to be counting off numbers on his fingers, "and I can let you have one for the wife--how many kids you got?"

"Eh, two, but I want some for other--"

"Four family members total, then," Lyle added up for him. "So there's four irons, if you want, and Lexa will see to it you get nice ones. But you can't just buy them like stuff for a charm bracelet."

—————
That night Lexa was in Lyle's chair, fiddling with the Rodeo Hall of Fame Website and swearing at the conspicuous absence of the 1976 barrel-racing finals in Elko that she had won in a record 14.8 seconds, when the phone rang.

"Can you talk?"

"Wow, if it isn't Mister Hello."

"Greetings from the Coast, my Rocky Mountain love princess, I kiss your every inch. Is that better?"

change -
mist
Chicago
jazz
scene

"You're getting there, babe," she allowed, her grin in her voice.

"Lexa, *now* can you talk?"

"As they say in this town, yup indeed. Your dad turned in early tonight. Mariah went to the bunkhouse to mark up her proof sheets--said there wasn't a flat surface anywhere in this house, wherever she got that idea. I'm holding out against a solo swim in the springs--when you coming back?"

"Tomorrow late. I'm about to head out now, drive as far as the Columbia at least. How's he doing?"

"Same." She saved the news that Lyle was parceling out branding irons one per capita.

"Lex, listen, I found some things out. Don't blab this to my father, okay?"

"Bl--?"

"I've been picking up pieces of string. Called every old source I could think of in the 'crat bureaus. And here's what: it's no way a sure thing that the Forest Service is going to allow those reef leases."

Alaska had taught Lexa to believe in no miracle beyond a fifty-fifty chance. "That'd be nice, Mitch, but so would a cure for the common cold."

change
of
train

"I hear you, I had trouble believing any energy leases aren't wired all the way, too. But it seems the big feds don't want to take any more heat on giveaways, so they've bucked the decision down to the supervisor of the Two."

"Then I hope he has a head on his shoulders," declared Lexa.

"It's a she."

Into the unaccustomed silence at her end, Mitch resumed:

"But here's the other thing. Aggregate isn't brain-dead either. I did some phoning on that, too, and now der gravelmeisters want to hold off on the deal until they see which way the Forest Service jumps. Unless we sweeten the terms for them considerably. It'd still be more money than a rockpile is usually worth, but damn it, I just don't know whether to or not."

It was his turn for expressive silence. *Don't vague out on this, Mitch. The bastards don't need to pipeline-and-road this country next.* Lexa felt as if she was back in the tight confines of a fishboat, standing there at the snug but crammed desk with the phone. "You know, you don't sound like somebody happy to have a surplus of gravel."

"I'm not happy to give the world another gravel pit either, Lex," his voice came reluctantly, "but without one the Rozier family finances are a black hole."

Bushed and of course hungry, Mitch pulled into the driveway at the end of the next afternoon. The van was gone, Lexa more than likely downtown buying groceries, he figured, but Mariah was on the lawn trying to draw Rin's attention to give him his dog dish.

"Hi," Mitch ^{made his manners} ~~called over~~, "at least to the one of you who can hear me." ✓

"Yeah, hi," Mariah swung around, ^{very quickly} looking out of her element without a camera swaying somewhere on her. ✓

"Where's Lex?"

"In Choteau."

"Big-time shopping, hmm?" He started for the house and whatever razzing greeting his father would have for his return from the Coast. "Can we look forward to carrots less than a week old, you think?"

"Mitch, she's at the funeral home."

He froze at her words. *Not even the hospital?*

Arms crossed on her chest, Mariah took some steps toward him, long legs scissoring slowly. She visibly worked at how to give him what he was waiting for.

"Damn it. There's no good way to say this. Your dad didn't wake up this morning."

He stood looking at her, still trying to register what was over now and what wasn't. Absurdly he wondered what expression was on his father's face in the last picture she had taken of him.

"I hung on here," she was saying, ^{tone as wan as her face,} "we didn't want you walking in cold on this, find everybody gone when you came. Mitch? I'm sorry as hell."

"Mmhmm"--the family load couldn't get more impossible than this--"I, ah"--after everything, he hadn't even managed to be on hand when his father died--"I'd better..."

Dazed, he headed on into the house to call to the funeral home.

—————
The evening was all but night by the time the three of them returned from Choteau and Mitch's making of arrangements for his father to be cremated. [#] Lexa and Mariah quietly offered to fetch some fast food, and Mitch said that would be appreciated. Giving him time to himself, they drove off in the van and he went to the machine shed.

He flipped on the lights. The branding irons had not quite taken over every inch of the place. Here and there along the walls were tools and implements like sidelined players. He rummaged out a sledgehammer about the weight of a small barbell. Next, found a steel fence-post driver, about twice that heavy. Then there was the anvil, big weight. He lined them up, stripped off his shirt.

In the rust silence of the machine shop, he began lifting.

#

“Mitch, help me get the Blue Goose ready.”

His father’s daystarting voice, that distant morning when they were to begin rockpicking on the Donstedder Bench.

Out the two of them trek to the faded Dodge truck and take off the high boxboards used to haul grain. In place of those went a set of 2 x 10 boards along both sides of the truck bed, enough wall to hold rocks on the truck but low enough to toss over.

By the time the truck was ready, Sharpless and Loper and the third kid were sleepily on hand, managing gawky grins when Lyle kidded them about how much work he was going to wring out of their sissy hides. The man wasn’t kidding very much. Lyle considered that teenage boys barely had the brains of sheep, but you could stretch their day’s work--twelve hours instead of ten if a field could be finished by keeping at it until dark--in ways that would make an older man keel over.

Up until this point in life it had not particularly bothered Mitch to be the rock boss’s son. His father made no exception for him in prodding all the work he could out of drifty teenagers, and whatever god is assigned to rocks knew that Mitch wanted no soft treatment--maybe there was something worse than your football buddies teasing you about being babied, but so far he couldn’t imagine it. Consequently he could barely believe the

fix he found himself in by the middle of this morning, deputized to drive the truck and having to hold forth helplessly there on the running board while Sharpless and Loper and the other one insisted on sluffing off and his father due back any minute and sure to fire those three so fast their heads would swim.

Gulping, Mitch shut off the truck and jumped into the field. Not wanting this but seeing no way around it. He aimed himself toward Sharpless, who was ahead of him in growth, filled out like a bulging grain sack.

“Sharps, damn it, come on. I’m telling you, my old man will kick your asses down the road if you guys don’t--”

Sharpless only laughed. And caught in the infection of goofiness, now Loper giggled, stutter-stepped over to Sharpless and faked a handoff to him, spun about and lobbed an oval rock toward the truck in a pass that fell ten feet short.

“You’re right out here with us now, Mitchmo,” Sharpless crooned. “How’s your daddy gonna fire us and not you?” Loper giggled again.

Mitch gauged the two of them. Then he jumped Sharpless, half-wrestling half-mauling him, managing to land a couple of solid wallops before Sharpless could gather himself. When Sharpless did get his feet set in the loose soil of the field, he hit Mitch a painful whack on the side of the neck. Then as he drew back for another one, Mitch drove into him in a tackle stunningly perfect, his right shoulder into Sharpless’s midriff and his

lowered arms lifting and dumping him. Mitch and his momentum must have carried Sharpless a full ten feet backward before Sharpless pancaked to the ground on his back.

Mitch had known he had to make this good, he likely had to fight Loper next.

Sharpless lay stunned, no breath nor battle left in him. Puffing, Mitch scrambled off him and whirled around to Loper. But Lope looked at the heap that was Sharpless, swallowed, and put up his hands only to fend off Mitch if he came; he offered no fight. Off to the side, the kid none of them knew that well looked as if he wished he had a hole to crawl into.

Mitch stepped back over to where Sharpless was struggling to sit up.

“Come on, Sharps,” Mitch gasped and put a hand down to help him up. “Let’s call it quits on this.”

“Mitch?” His father came boiling around the truck to them. “What the devil’s going on?”

“Little argument,” Mitch panted. “School stuff, right, Sharps?”

“Wuhuh,” Sharpless managed to cough out. “It’s okay, Mr. Rozier. I asked for it.”

In no uncertain terms Lyle showed them what it was like to have an aggravated boss. “The whole grab-butt bunch of you are asking for it here if you don’t watch out,” he started in on them, giving it to Mitch especially. When he wound down, he made Mitch

and Sharpless shake hands and go back to work together, a piece of Lyle sergeantry that his son took in silence.

The four boys rockpicked like good fellows, the truck soon filled and then the clatter and chain-thunder crack of the rocks being dumped in the Donstedder coulee. By then Sharpless and Mitch were exchanging sheepish smiles. What wasn't over yet, however, were Lyle's arrangements with Donstedder. Soon into the second load he had to tromp off again and ask the farmer whether he wanted the patch of alkali just ahead in the field picked or ignored.

"See if you can not draw blood on each other while I'm gone," he instructed. This time he left the truck idling but pointedly did not tell Mitch to get in there and drive.

While he was at that, the boys scooped up the rocks in the usual span on either side of the truck, then stood around waiting, four cases of conspicuously good behavior there under the sun's eye.

Sharpless was confining himself to a baseball dream, tossing up little stones and taking imaginary swings, the *tlock* of his tongue the sound of the bat. Leaving well enough alone, Mitch moved around to keep warm, restlessly glancing over at the truck to see when his father would get things underway again.

He saw the rock caught between the dual tires. "Under the truck, Sharps," he called out the code.

"Sure thing," came back from Sharpless, along with another home-run *tlock*.

Mitch crouched under the truck bed to work the piece of stone loose before mud built up behind it and clogged against the frame; this would all be an even nastier mess to dig out then. Oblong, about the size and taper of a bowling pin, the rock was wedged hard, and he dug in his heels, bracing to give it enough of a pull. No sooner had he done so than he heard the truck going into gear, at the same instant with his father's yell, "Okay, make those rocks fly."

Mitch slipped in the muck of the field as he flung himself sideways. The outside tire of the duals ran over his right leg just above the ankle with a disheartening sound of bone cracking. What flew through his mind was that this could cost him football next fall. He could see Sharpless semaphoring his arms, screaming to Lyle to stop the truck, and in the gouge of pain he hoped the truck was not going to back up.



So there they were in bed for the rest of the summer, Mitch and his cast-encased broken leg. Doubly broken; the bone had been snapped at the ankle and the shin, both. And but for the softness of the mud beneath, the wheel would have mashed his foot and ankle as well.

The first week or more, his mother was dangerously silent toward his father, and constrained in how to try to handle a household with the chores of a nurse dumped on it.

She could not go off to the Sweetgrass Hills with this situation. "Let me know," she kept saying to Mitch, wanting to do more for him than she had been able to think of so far. Her square-cut face, more striking than any kind of lovely, would knit in concentration as she tightened the sheets for him or brought him a warm basin of water and a washcloth for his daily bath. (Planted there in bed for those months, Mitch for the first time had the leisure to wonder about such things as whether his parents had got married because they looked like each other.) Then she would have to go back to life downstairs, and there would be the occasional sound of her at some kitchen chore or the gray murmur of her soap operas on the television in the living room.

Those first bed-ridden days, Mitch read the *Great Falls Tribune* for the baseball scores and roundups. Then, since you can read a sports page only so many times, he began reading everything else in the paper. Then everything in the house, and a good amount of the library at school when his mother arranged to fetch books for him.

Sharpless came around a couple of times, tongue-tied with apology--apologize for what, though; being Sharpless[?]--so morose that Mitch immediately felt better when he left.

Of anybody, it was his father who registered on that million-hour summer. ✓

From his service in the military ^{he} his father had some feel for the duration of time-spending that Mitch was going to have to go through. The first morning of haying season he came into the bedroom, his work-stained straw hat from past summers already on, to

ask:

"How you holding up?"

"Okay, I guess." Along with it Mitch smiled as best he could. He hadn't yet found what he could cheerfully say to the father who had run over him.

They talked back and forth a minute about haying, Lyle wryly complaining about the aptitudes of his crew as he did every year, Mitch saying how much he was going to miss being out in the field. Then Lyle suddenly said:

"I want you to--"

With visible effort, he started over.

"How about you keep the days, this summer? Give you something to do." With both hands he gave Mitch the clothbound daybook.

Surprised didn't say it, for his son. The daybook was the Bible of this household, holy writ and sacred accounts combined as Lyle ritually sat down at the end of each working day to keep record of wages and expenses in the waiting pages.

Momentarily Mitch blanked on words. Then mustered the ones he had to, even wanted to:

"Sure. I'd like to."

With enough pillows propped under him he could see out to the machine shed where the haying crew assembled each morning, his father laying out their day for them. Dark goodlooking Ferragamo, on vacation and downtime from the Black Eagle smelter.

Fritz Mannion, the joker of the crew, bowlegged as a bulldog and as staunch if he wasn't drinking. Some new men every summer, this time Truax and Larsen with an *e*, and a young Hutterite man from one of the colonies that would cautiously hire somebody out if Lyle Rozier went to them and dickered just right. And others, all carefully recorded by Mitch in the big daybook pages. Creamy paper, with a light green crosshatch of little squares. When each crew member worked a day, a *1* went into that day's square on the line with his name; half a day, interrupted by a toothache or some such, a slash across the little box. No work, such as Sundays or the Fourth of July or Labor Day or what his father called AWOA (away without alibi) that day's square was left empty--Lyle's system, although Mitch was mightily tempted to write a goose egg in there, as more apt.

Sitting up there in bed ^{missing and} ~~doing~~ his bookkeeping, a clerk of ideas for the first time in his life, Mitch noticed that this seemed to be a jinxed summer. ^{The machinery was often as crippled up as his legs} Equipment was always breaking in the hayfield, but this year the power buckrake was chronic that way. With Mitch to be tended to, his mother couldn't make the runs for parts, so it would be his father who would have to dash down to the auto supply place in Great Falls, time and again coming in at night shaking his head as he brought the sales slips up to Mitch to enter expenses in the daybook: a carburetor filter, an epidemic of burst radiator hoses, new rotor for the distributor cap--the items became a mechanical roster down a page of their own. ✓

But the haying progressed, and so did the boy with the shattered leg. Came the monumental day, that week before the crew picnic in the park, when Mitch was at last up on crutches. He swung himself on them, learning and learning how to get around on arm-stilts, until his armpits started to go raw. "Mitch, don't overdo," his mother said more than once, and even his father instructed him to take things a little easy. But he wanted to be set for school. Truth be told, he did not at all mind that the crutches might make him a bit heroic there.

The last Saturday night, when his father was writing out the checks for the hayhands, Mitch made sure to be on hand outside as the crew said their goodbyes. He took their kidding about his summer off from the labors of haying and grinned back. Then one by one they were gone. Ferragamo's wife had come for him, Mitch's mother was delivering Truax and Larsen to the bus station in Choteau. Mitch went back in the house feeling a little lonely for the names he'd had in his care all summer. He was heading for the stairs and the still not easy climb to his room when he heard his father say:

"I can tear it up."

Then, his tone odd: "If you're dead-set that I have to."

"Hell, Lyle, you know how I hate to bitch against the kid's bookkeeping and all, but..."

Mitch swung into the living room on his crutches. "What's going on? Did I hear my name being taken in vain?"

Their workhats on the back of their heads, indoors style, the two men looked up at him. After a moment his father said:

"Little problem on Fritz's days, is all."

"What problem? When?"

Lyle hesitated. Fritz did not, laying it out pronto:

"Back there around the Fourth. I had it happen to me before, Mitch, on other jobs.

A holiday comes around and maybe whoever's keeping the days doesn't get back to it right away after and something gets overlooked. It's understandable."

Mitch swung his way to where he could see onto the daybook page, ^{where his father's capped fountain pen was tapping} The little white

gap, amid the crew's steady cross-hatch of days labored, where the squares stood blank.

July 4, 5, 6: Fritz's three-day drunk. "Fritz, that's when you were--downtown. You remember, Dad. You were all steamed up about having to clean Donstedder's field of bales with only the buckrake and nobody to run the Farmall."

"Can't say as I do," Lyle said shortly.

"Funny summer that way," Fritz put in, keeping his gaze away from Mitch but pretty much toward Lyle. "Broke down as much as we were. Hard to keep track, what's

what. Don't think I'm laying blame on you, Mitch, hell no. Just that a man hates not to get paid for what's coming to him."

"But--there *wasn't* any mistake. I *remember* what happened then, Fritz, don't you? You didn't make it back to work until the morning of the seventh. Dad, Mom would remember. She said something to you about Fritz showing up days later than the wrath of God and still so hungover he--"

"Leave your mother out of this, you hear?" Lyle said harshly. "This is a crew matter."

▼ *hung there in his crutches as if legless*
 Bewildered, Mitch next ventured: "Then Joe--he'd be able to say, you can call ^{he} down to the Falls and ask--" ✓

"Ferragamo either," his father snapped. "Any trouble keeping the days, we don't want to kiyi about to anybody out of this room."

The ugly silence that followed, Fritz finally broke. "I tied one on, the day of the Fourth, sure. Practically unpatriotic not to, right, Lyle? But I hauled myself back into the hayfield the next morning, I'm sure of it."

A little ripping sound came as Lyle tore the check in half. "These things happen, Mitch. I'm gonna give Fritz that couple of days, that'll settle it. We'll call it three months even."

Once the fresh check was written and handed over with a little snap of Lyle's wrist, Fritz bobbed his head as happy as if he had good sense, Mitch thought, and told them he appreciated fair dealing like this.

Mitch couldn't find anything to say after Fritz went out. His father came up with: "Hurts old Fritz's pride, I guess maybe. Besides, there's a fifty-fifty chance he's right, huh, son?" He rose rapidly from his desk chair. "Going to the Freezout Colony with the check for our Hutterite. Tell your mother I'll be back by supper."

As he left, Mitch stared in dismay at the daybook. When he heard his father's pickup leave the driveway, he swung himself around and headed back outside.

He crossed the back yard in a kind of wooden gallop. Then maneuvered onto the low porch of the bunkhouse, and grabbed onto the doorway. Re-establishing his crutches, he swung on in to the long bareboard room. Summers past, he had been in this bunkhouse hundreds of occasions, roughhousing there at the corner bunk that was Fritz's by seniority, listening to Fritz and Ferragamo and his father refight the war, speculating on the longevity of each year's new crewmen in his father's scheme of things. This was the first time he was biggest figure in the room.

Fritz peered up from rolling his bedroll. "Heard you coming. Sound like pegleg Siamese twins doing a jig."

Mitch said nothing.

“No hard feelings,” Fritz said, eyeing him from across the stripped cot, “but I had those days coming to me.”

“You know you’re lying.”

“Just ask your dad.” Usually you could read the expression on Fritz in block letters: now he kept overlapping himself, righteous and guilty. “There’s different verses, Mitch, of just damn near anything. Sorry you had to be in the middle, is all. But this’ll wear off.”

“Why’d you pull this?”

“Goddamn it,” Fritz said, his voice losing its rein, “any man’ll tell you an even three months of wages beats two months and the rest days. It’s like fishing. Filling out your limit.”

“You didn’t deserve those two days. You were downtown drunk.”

“We’re gonna have to not quite agree on that.” Fritz hoisted his bedroll under one arm and picked up a battered metal suitcase. He stuck his right hand toward Mitch.

“See you next summer.”

Mitch did not take the hand. He left Fritz Mannion the angry echoes of his crutches tapping away on the bunkhouse porch.

He knew it didn't amount to a beanhill, in the range of contentions hurled up by life. But Fritz's swiped days stayed with Mitch, smarting on and on, perpetually there at the edge of how he got along with his father the rest of that autumn. When he was able to cast off the crutches and begin taking laps around the park, walking and then gingerly jogging, testing the leg, he would be thinking about something that had happened at school or what he was going to do on the weekend, and out of nowhere those disputed days would return. The proof had been right down there in black and white; Mitch had thought the daybook was sacred, but evidently something else counted more with Lyle Rozier. Then came his mother's car wreck, and that unending winter, the man and the man-size boy without the woman who had been the lightning rod between them.

That next spring Mitch picked rock on his father's crew without question until school let out. Then he went to him with the word back from the Sweetgrass Hills, his great-uncle's letter saying yes, there was a summer job for Mitch if his father didn't care.

Lyle couldn't help but grin at the clumsy penciling of the letter.

"Rockpicking all summer long? Doesn't that thick mick know you're supposed to stop and put something in the ground sometime?"

"It's on sod he just plowed up," Mitch defended. "What he wants is to get the worst rocks off before he plants winter wheat."

“Conlon can be kind of a hardbutt to get along with,” Lyle said slowly. Mitch watched him, lips pressed against saying *Takes one to know one*. “Sure you want to let yourself in for a summer of him?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

His father stood there, waiting him out.

“Uncle Alf’ll pay me good,” Mitch resorted to; wages were always a trump card in this household. “I can buy my own school clothes, that way. And my letterman’s jacket.”

“You’re putting me on the spot, shavetail. I was counting on you to drive the buckrake now that you’re back in one piece.”

This was news. The buckrake was the race car of the hayfield, a stripped-down chassis swooping and roaring out after the next load of hay; gunning it across the cropped fields was always the prize job on the crew.

“You always drive that yourself.”

“Nothing good lasts forever, I hear.” In all its capacity, his father’s face looked rueful and oddly mischievous at the same time.

“Can’t you put”--Mitch was not going to do Fritz Mannion any favors, ever--“Joe on the buckrake?”

“Ferragamo’s not haying any more, the prick.”

Mitch blinked, shocked. His father hardly ever swore. Again he was puzzled at the way this was going, the mixed looks on his father--at the moment, he seemed both indignant and amused at the matchless Ferragamo's desertion from his haying crew.

Lyle's expression took on further complication as he gave Mitch a long looking-over. Something shaded in, wanting to be said but somehow unsayable.

Then Lyle Rozier gave a frustrated shrug of his shoulders that no longer quite came up to his son's.

"And next thing, Conlon and his blasted rockpicking job," he all but spat. "Costing me my own kid for the summer."

It took a moment to dawn on Mitch that he had won on this, as surely as he had lost over the daybook.

He left in the morning for that solo summer. There next to Canada the trio of Sweetgrass Hills, actually small mountains aged down to the size of high-standing buttes, hovered on the plain like three competing tellings of *Treasure Island*. The west butte, whale-backed, Mitch watched make the weather for the area, clouds rising over its broad hump and letting down veils of silver-gray rain. Those showers would come and lightly test the thrust of the middle butte, shaped like a young woman's taut breast, in a way he would see again years later when he walked in on Marnie, zonked on post-prandial weed and readying for sex, flat on her back atop the bedspread and bare from the waist up,

brushing her own slow hand over her risen nipple. (Never after would Mitch scoff at yearning mountain men who dubbed winsome rises of peak "tetons".) Biggest and last, the eastern butte, where his mother's people, the Conlons, farmed on the skirt of soil, was the most complicated geographically and the most piratical. Up on its circus-tentlike set of summits, squinty goldstruck miners periodically pecked away at the one named Devil's Chimney, and the entire steep-sloped promontory of East Butte sat like a frontier walled city elbowing the Canadian boundary; Mitch's imagination quickly was fueled with the fact that on the far side of the butte lay Dead Horse Coulee, boneyard of the done-in mounts of the first Mounties trying to make their way from Toronto to frontier Alberta. Raffish history. For that matter, he knew from hints dropped by his father that there were likely old reasons, back in bootlegging days, why Alf Conlon lived with his back to the border.

Here Mitch's mother had grown up, townless, ward of relatives. As soon as he arrived to this prairie archipelago he somehow was aware of her life here without much thinking about it, the same wind blowing on him, the triple islands of earth standing up into the sky around him just as they had for her, his shadow as original on this lonesome ground as hers. And Alf and Edna Conlon, dried to their roles in life like pressed prairie flowers, doubtless were much the same as they had been then, too. Mitch really did not know much about them except that their awkward hearts had rescued his mother time and again, and now they came through for him. Edna Conlon fed

break
into
more
sentences

✓

and pampered him in the auntish way of a woman guessing what a youngster might like.

Alf Conlon turned him loose onto the Sweetgrass summer.

Eighty acres broken from sod, Mitch was to work on. The field newly undressed by the plow was geological chaos, rocks ranging from the size of grapefruit to as big as suitcases, a stew as if an avalanche had hurried through. His uncle lined him out with an elderly John Deere tractor to pull the stoneboat. After the first half hour Mitch shut the tractor down, there was such an abundance of rocks to toss or wrestle to the stoneboat that he could have long periods of silence before he had to pull the equipment ahead another fifteen feet. His uncle appeared, to make sure the tractor hadn't quit of its own accord, then said nothing more all summer about Mitch's chosen rockpicking system, the brief stammer of the poppin' John and then the next radius of rocks.

He picked rock as if determined to rid the earth of it. The first day he believed he would die on his feet, the stoneboat a hopeless raft in the mocking wake of glaciers. Places in the field, it was a standoff as to whether there was more soil showing than rocks. The stone bit at his hands differently from that of the Twin Sulphur Springs country--these were igneous, fire-formed countless eons ago when the Sweetgrass Hills were dunes of lava. Gasping loads of air into himself and shedding an equivalent in sweat, Mitch time and again took a look around at the scattered tons of stone, and went back at it. He underhanded the football-sized rocks, hefted the larger ones with his hands under either

end as if moving an anvil. His aunt's provisions saved him, the waterjug wrapped in a wet gunnysack for coolness of drink and at noon the lunchbox glory of food, two thick sandwiches and a couple of pieces of fried chicken and a cinnamon roll and an apple. He ate then and every noon in the shade cast by the high rear tires of the tractor, around him the first fresh country of his life. As if in rebuke of the plowed ground, the prairie next to the field bloomed with Indian paintbrush, lupine, and Queen Ann's lace. And there was the sweetgrass, thin golden whipbunches of it, lending its vanilla smell as the sun warmed it. With the flywheel monotony of the tractor shut down, the sweetgrass made a whisking rattle as the wind blew through it.

Some weeks of that June and July and August the field threw itself in his face, fine dirt blowing off the rocks as he lobbed them aboard the stoneboat, six days out of seven. (The Conlons determinedly rested on Sunday, watching preachers on television from Canada with the abstract gaze of obligation, and by the second sabbath Mitch was running the buffalo trails that zigzagged up the butte. Building up his wind for football, he labored into view after view, now the Rockies a distant low wall in the west, now grain elevators pegged into the prairie amid the strip farming. At the top of East Butte awaited the reward of color, everywhere around him from up there the farmed gold of canola, the green of spring wheat, the blue of flax.) And there were days he worked even though the field was muddy, the rocks coming up with a sucking sound, his footing slippery, and his memory

on the accident beneath the truck a year ago. But in any weather this was something to get hold of, to wrestle to a finish even if the result was merely a mound of rocks at the edge of

plowed land
a field.

As that summer deepened, the country around turned tawny, and Mitch along with it. He had his father's attribute of automatically tanning, and before long he could work with his shirt off, young cinnamon giant there amid the surprising pinks and blue-grays of the rockspill against the greater brown of the soil. He muscled up, thickened at the chest and thighs, his leg now stronger than new, his arms seriously powerful pulleys. The machine of his body became faster at the rockpicking. There was an immense coarse beauty to this season of work, the huge days and the infinite shapes of the rocks, the peninsular solitude so quietly clocking through him, the earned voyages of the stoneboat to the end of the field and back again, that he knew he was honing himself against. What he was on his way to becoming he didn't know, although he daydreamed version after version--pilot, Mountie, fullback for the Cleveland Browns. None of it his father's route, he was determined on that. But whatever his life turned out to be, the footprints of it started in these independent hills where the sweetgrass sang its song.

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Lexa found him in the machine shop, sweating and ^{weep} crying.

"Sonofabitching death, Lex. You have to ^{cry your guts out} weep at it. Anybody's."

