

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 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.

Why would
he be amused?
(from what we
can tell)

“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. East Butte 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 sat like a frontier walled city elbowing the Canadian boundary. Mitch's imagination quickly was fueled with the

Pretty soon!

not sure if
get this!

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 virginal 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 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 strew 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

*Mitch is
struggling
of landscape*

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.

As that summer deepened, the country around turned tawny, and Mitch along with it. He had his father's attribute of effortlessly 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 of the Hills 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.

Lexa found him in the machine shop, sweating and weeping.

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

THE DIVIDE

one

Magpies in raucous caucus were trying to draw Rin's attention from his latest tidbit, a now defeathered member of their tribe that had poked its beak inquisitively into the doghouse and been met with teeth. At work there in his little arch of doorway the dog took a pensive mouthful of fowl, to the survivor flock's shrill horror.

Lexa clapped her hands like a gunshot, and the huffy birds swam off into the air and away. Her reproachful gaze at the dog did not faze his dining at all.

She had stepped out of the house to stretch her legs and for that matter her capacity for any more odd jobs. *Whew. I'd forgotten. But when our mom went, we didn't have to dive right in to keep mountains of stuff from gaining on us.* How the past half-week

Do you really want two episodes of waggie-eating on Rin's part? abstract

had evaporated, none of them could have recounted, but Lyle's death left in its wake something like a whirlpool of chores that blindly sucked away time. The deciding on what Mitch might want to keep--*no iron tumbleweed on the mantel in Seattle, drat*--and what ought to go to the Teton County Historical Society in Choteau and what ought to be forthwith lugged to the trash; the wrestle with bales of newsprint; the disheartening daily discoveries of stashes they hadn't noticed before; the unending housecleaning--*that kitchen, unbelievable, that kitchen*---every time they turned around, some major duty was staring them in the face. She and Mitch had slaved steadily and Mariah pitched in whenever she wasn't inspired to photographically record this or that in the accumulation bought, bartered, or long-term borrowed by Lyle. But this morning Mariah had bailed out of here early to scour around the countryside for something fresh to shoot, stuck as usual at this time of week for the Sunday feature photo she owed the newspaper.

Time we all came up for breath. So, just to be out, hands in the tops of her jeans pocket and her hat brim leading her on, Lexa strolled around to the open sunshine at the back of the house. The town was quiet, unattuned to anything except the welcome weather. Glad as she was ^{to} ~~going to~~ be to get back to Seattle and food for hire, whenever they could clear their way out of here, she had to admit Precip City could use a little of this toasty torpor.

The clutter that greeted her in the back yard gave her pause, the truck body and the remains of tractors and three generations of haying equipment that she could recognize all fanned out across the rear of the property. "What people leave after them tells a lot," Mariah had insisted as she clicked away out here. If that was the case, Lyle must be an unabridged edition. Lexa ~~shook her head~~, ^{ed} picking her way past a much weathered stoneboat and ^{ed} stepping over an automotive axle lying in ambush. He had stayed contrary to the end, had Lyle. Mitch and she and the recording angel Mariah more than once talked over the dreaded hospital vigil awaiting them in Great Falls whenever Lyle's condition went into final fade. He'd made them promise there would be *no tubes, no jumper cables on me, hear?* but they fully knew that someone like him, stubborn to the last bone of his existence, could lie there for weeks as his rugged old body borrowed against itself. Instead, he checked out of life like an early-rising guest, ^{while} ~~when~~ Mitch on his way back from the Coast yet and Mariah, ^{ed} out prowling the photographable precincts of dawn, so that she, Lexa, was the one to find him there on his back in bed, the light of morning hitting him full in the face. To have him so suddenly gone--which she at first thought would be a somewhat guilty relief, the last tricky chapter of Mitch's father over and done with--was not that simple, ~~though~~. Good, bad, indifferent, better, worse, the confusing truth was she missed the old antagonist. Of course, about the damnable gravel or any of that, to the very

end she still wanted to bat him across the ears. But the way he bit down and didn't complain about the leukemia ~~and its gnawing in him~~: she had to give him full credit there.

And littler things kept cropping up to her, in the scatter that was memory. Lyle's incredulous bark of laugh, plainly the kind he hadn't let out in many years, when she once wised off to him with *Aren't you just more fun than a wet kiss*. Then that characteristic line of his, *I feel I can tell you anything, pretty much*, which she all along knew was horseshit but gallantly varnished horseshit. No, there was no quick disposing of Lyle Rozier.

She wandered on into the rust jungle. A time or two a day Mitch would come out here to stare at this derelict fleet, hands on his hips, then shake ^{Rm}his head and go back inside. Lexa had to believe they were beginning to see progress, on the long sorting of the antique from the antic, but in this situation loose ends seemed to proliferate. She could hear Mitch's voice start up again in the house. He had been tooth and nail at desk dilemmas all morning long.

Right now he was on his third round of tag with Jocelyn's voicemail, pining hopelessly for the dear gone days of facemail. (To wish to actually be standing there and

see the living skin of someone you were trying to talk to, what a dinosaurian concept, Rozier.)

“Jocelyn, hi, it’s your father again. Just letting you know we’re still at it here. Done with the funeral home, so at least that’s over. I’m getting to the picture-sorting-- there’s some of your mother and you kids, the time or two you were ever here. Though maybe you were too little to remember? Anyway, I’ll send them. If you’d divide them with Ritz, that would help. I hope you’re doing okay. (How are you liking--”

For the life of him, he could not bring to mind her current phase of employment.

”--the job? Take care.”)

He put down the phone feeling excessively tired between the ears. Picking up after the last generation was task enough; getting hold of the next seemed to him like trying to tweeze out slivers in the dark. The E-mail back from Ritz, cyber-regrets instantaneous and crimped, had begun without a salutation, merely *LRozier @Teton.net* as if his grandfather still existed. Jocelyn’s drawled phone-machine messages sounded just as distant and denatured. The old story of being so young, momentarily immune to parents, ailments, death. It occurred to Mitch he had never even heard Ritz’s voice since it passed through puberty. If his twentysomething version had any of Jocelyn’s conch-shell accent,

been there, done that? he can't remember

somewhere this minute were Indonesians talking like a Tennessee Williams play. Was this a confusing world or what.

He sat back from the desk and took stock. Colorful little tongues of paper stuck out at him from the many heaps that still needed shuffling and winnowing. Some part of him ought to feel sheepish about slapping stickits all over another person's lifetime, he vaguely granted, but how else keep track of any of this scatter? He rubbed his eyes, dry-scrubbed his temples, tried to put the main thing in proportion. His father, author of this household strew that went all the way out to the property line in the back yard, that intrinsic cargo load that was Lyle Rozier now consisted of an approximate cubic foot of ashes. The beige box sat unmissably in front of its weary heir, on the shelf with the daybooks.

Shaking his head at it, quite as if the receptacle had asked to be taken out for a walk, Mitch pondered family ties and why the Roziers were full of attitudes like knots. For Lyle Rozier, of all people, to have wanted his final act to be a snowy sift across a sylvan resting place in a Forest Service wilderness, his son still found as galling as it was mystifying. One more time Mitch was highly glad that in saying he would perform the ash task up on top of Phantom Woman, he hadn't said when. (Maybe ballasting a deal with tricky footnotes was more of an inheritable trait than he had ever supposed.) And he felt uneasily relieved, if that was possible, that his father hadn't wanted anyone else to know

about that carry-me-back-to-the-old-fire-tower conversation. Not that Mitch himself felt it deserved to be a secret, exactly. It just didn't need to be told to anyone (Lexa who had already had to put up with forty kinds of Lyle whims, for instance) until the right time.

(However long it took) the smarting scab of his father's last-minute dickering for a wilderness place of repose would eventually become only one more scar, he supposed, and he could deal with the ashes then.

But in the old girl's eye?

Mitch drew in a deep distasteful sniff which would have done credit to Lyle's nasal capabilities, then coughed from it. The smell of cigarette smoke that stained the whole house while his father was alive was now the stale smell of cigarette smoke. Fresh air, maybe that's what the overtaxed filial brain needed, in all this. He got onto his feet and went outside to hunt up Lexa.

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Stalking rocks, Mariah traipsed up yet another hillside. This was one of those days in a photographer's life when a desk job didn't sound nearly so ridiculous. The slopes of these lesser benchlands south of town were hummocky, covered with diminutive mounds where tough wiry grass sprouted and not much footing in between. She had been on her feet for hours out here, trying for some semi-respectable shot to send in for Sunday but at

the same time her mind going back over Lyle. After every assignment, every photo subject, she had to shift gears and go on to the next, but the browy old man was turning out to be surprisingly hard to pull away from. Her set of photos of him kept ramming into her thinking even when ~~(like now)~~ she had plenty else to think about. Tricky matter, choosing how to show a person leaving life frame by frame. At least Mitch had worked up caption notes for her. Despite his less than charitable attitude toward her assignment, she was all admiration for how he had hunkered down last night and tapped out every needed word. Craft forgave much. It had been that way when she was married to Riley, who could get on her nerves just by walking into the room, but whose style when it came to turning out words, she lapped up. *Typical. The guy and I, the only language we both speak is job.*

She stopped and blew for breath. With one thing and another, by now the best light of the morning was gone, her camera bag weighed on her like a mail pouch on catalogue day, the wind was starting to blow, and she discovered she had left her close-up lens in the van. Nor were the damn rocks cooperating.

She was in search of the right rockface. Out in this lower end of the bench country the glacier leavings were big lone stones called erratic boulders, the size of Volkswagen Beetles, deposited by the ice sheet when it pushed out of the mountain canyons. Such

rough old displaced chunks often were rouged with orange lichens, so that they resembled decorated Gibaltars on the prairie. Shoot the right one from up close against the wavery horizon of grass, and it would make an effect like crossing Weegee with Van Gogh. She felt mildly guilty resorting to this. But you could slap anything inanimate on a Sunday page and readers would think it had more than everyday meaning. ~~So~~ she knew, ^{just} ~~just~~ knew, a passable picture existed somewhere out here. She ~~hadn't~~ ^{just} found it yet.

Two rocks later, a distant upright shape caught her eye, off on one of the foothills to the west. More curious than convinced, she half-trotted back down to the van and drove as close as she could get on a fenceline road. Then she trudged up the hogback hill, skirting little stands of jackpine and switchbacking against the steep incline. She was going to be as pissed off as she was leg-weary if the thing up top wasn't what she hoped.

It was, though. Not one rock but many, a cairn; square-cornered, tapering as it rose, fitted together like a stack of exceedingly thick jigsaw puzzles from the slate-like stones of a broken outcropping nearby. Amateur dry-rock masonry, as all these were, but done with divine patience. Already ~~her~~ camera was to her eye, ^{she was} focusing in on the headhigh sentinel mound.

It was a sheepherder's monument. These stood on the ridgelines and the shoulders of mountain pastures throughout the Two Medicine country where she and Lexa grew up,

each stone stack the product of boredom or mania or whimsy or the need for a landmark or a grazing allotment boundary or simply the urge to build something well. Back in the times when the McCaskill bands of sheep were part of the wool tide in these slopes along the Rockies, their shepherd might build one of these in a fevered afternoon to take his mind off a sudden terrible thirst for the attractions in the skid row bars in Great Falls. Another might fiddle around all summer erecting one or two, perhaps a puzzle-piece layer a day, the monument corners exquisitely joined (as on this one) with proper fit as the only mortar. On one of the camptending trips of their girlhood, their father was inside the sheepwagon in touchy diplomacy with the herder while she and Lexa proudly tussled up a sizable rock and crammed it onto the cairn the man had underway nearby. The herder came out and saw their achievement, and threw a fit. "What's that doing on there? That's a bad leave!" After he quit raving and expelled their rock in favor of a smaller one that chinked into place more readily, the girls grasped that whenever stones were forced to fit together the way theirs was jammed in, it left trouble when the next stone had to be inserted. The 'leave' was what you left yourself to start again.

I'm going to cry. I never cry.

There had been a cairn like this at Taiaroa, on the South Island of New Zealand.

Colin had taken her home to meet his parents, it reached that stage. He and she drove down from Mount Cook farther and farther south into red fertile hills, every so often Mariah dandling a hand over to his in ratification of the scenery but also as if to make sure of his wordless presence. Sheep raisers evolving into bed-and-breakfast providers, Colin's folks scrupulously put the two of them in separate bedrooms but adjoining.

Mariah entered into the occasion still having hopes for something lasting, still shoving the difference in their ages as far to the back of her mind as she could. Throughout her Fuji year of traveling, there had been the embassy types hitting on her with invitations to tennis and evening functions. The guides and taxi drivers in twenty countries ~~eventually~~ asking, "Your husband is where?" (To which she would look them in the eye and say, "He is in a business meeting with your secret police.") Colin with his mountaineer grooves and his god bod was a more straightforward proposition than any of those.

A home weekend with him, though, except for his visit in the night, proved to be quite a length of time. After it dawned on him that Mariah had seen sheep before, and the fields of giant turnips they fed on were ~~maybe~~ interesting for only so long, he took her to the coast, to a nesting refuge of royal albatrosses. To Taiaroa.

And there the stupendous birds, yachts of their kind, came swooping in from Antarctica, constant thousands of miles of glide on the circular air currents to bring food to their young. Those jumbo youngsters perched on the cliff brinks, like dodoes resolved to pass the evolution test this time around, lifting their wings over and over again in the testing wind along the New Zealand coast. And in would come another parent albatross with its five-foot wing examples, sailing with the South Pole at its back. Mariah was excited, enchanted, lit up through and through with this spectacle of wingspans beyond angels'. (If she was remembering her Brit Lit course right, Coleridge had to resort to serious drugs to reach this point.) To be out of the wind while she got her camera into action, she tugged Colin down onto a grassy spot behind the marker cairn of purplish stones on the crest of the headland. (Built by some fallen-to-the-bottom-of-the-world Scottish sheepherder?) Then she crawled out a little way into the blowing grass and settled down there in the tussocks, scoping the bearcub-sized chicks through her long lens and turning her head upward to catch each whispered flight of the elder royals. She watched by the hour, Colin stoically bored behind her, the wind ruffling no feathers of aspiration on him.

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Mitch found Lexa around back, where she had hopped up onto the somewhat still extant stuffed seat of the buckrake, lying back with her legs crossed on a random flange of the bare ruined chassis, hat down over her eyes as she soaked up sun. "Any luck?" she asked about his phone try on Jocelyn.

"The usual. Bad."

(A sympathetic little cluck of her tongue seemed comment enough there.) Mitch came on over toward the buckrake, passing the dog with its nose down among feathers, dozing and digesting. He reminded himself to go next door yet today; Matthew over there might like to have Rin.

"Take five, why don't you," Lexa murmured. "Can't hurt. Could help."

Wordlessly he agreed and sat on the low lazyboard of the buckrake, his head back against the seat cushion where she was ensconced. Without disturbing herself under her hat Lexa reached down and cupped a hand around his shoulder as if he might fall off. He contemplated the Rozier back yard's maze of machinery carcasses, but drew no new conclusion.

"Mitch?" Lexa asked from under the hat. "I keep wondering, that whole thing yesterday where the funeral home gave you that package." Plainly they didn't often hand out modest contents for urns around here; Twin Sulphur Springs self-evidently had a

bigger population of burial stones than citizens up walking around. And for that matter, McCaskills themselves were tombstone types, generations of them interred when their time came, their epitaphs incised a century deep in the cemetery on the hill outside Gros Ventre. So it had tantalized her that Lyle, of all people, would spurn a monument for himself and go the ash route. "How did your dad come around to that?"

"Hell if I know." Mitch made a wry face. "Cremation always sounded to me like a perfectly good idea, until he thought of it too."

"Quite something, though, for him." She tipped the hat back up away from her eyes. "Wanting his ashes spread over the Divide that way."

It startled a look out of Mitch as though she had caught him hiding a lewd item.

[She peered down on him from her driver's seat perch, his eyes turned up toward her as if trying to read something written under her hat brim.] After some moments he managed to say:

"He spilled--told you about that, did he."

"Naturally. We were alone here, that last afternoon after ^{the} that guy got to buy four whole branding irons, and I guess your dad was all excited from that. Anyway, next thing I knew he sat me down and was going strong on --"

--the disposing of ^{ashes} Mitch finished tiredly.

“You know it.. Made me swear not to let on about it to anybody else, keep his little last wish between him and you and me. It surprised the strudel out of me, that he’d want the ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ treatment. But I figured it’d be pushy to ask why.”

Mitch got up off the lazyboard and walked a little circle in the yard, [his hand on the back of his neck.] “Wherever it came from, Lex, I couldn’t get it out of him. He and a buddy drove some nails into the fire tower up there when they were CCC kids, but he never had a good word to say for the Forest Service from then on. Asking me to pack his ashes up there sounded to me like one of his VFW Club jokes, until I saw he really meant it. [Why couldn’t he have wanted his ashes cast somewhere that meant something to him from the war?” Mitch allowed himself the brief reverie of shipping the bieve box to Ritz to lug onward to New Guinea. “But no, you would have thought he was right in there with Percy B. Shelley, wanting some bonfire to scatter him up to the stars.” Only he wanted to be scattered precisely in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, in nice near proximity to paths of gravel and drill rigs, didn’t he.]

“It’d be a week on the trail, I guess you know.”

The way Lexa said it, he looked around at her.

not sure
this adds
volume here

“Three days hiking in. Another three out.” She took her hat off, glanced at it, then back to Mitch. “And we’d want to spend one up there at the fire tower, take life a little easy for a day.”

We. As relieved as he was to hear that particular word, the others added up to more than he wanted them to.

“What are we talking in miles?”

“Oh, about ten a day. That’s plenty in up and down country like that.”

He was idly wondering how many hundred football fields that amounted to when Lexa pressed on with:

“So, then. When?”

The turn of the century, maybe? Deliver my father into the millenium he was forever trying to get to with his deals? “I hadn’t decided on the exact, ahm, getting at it.”

He knew she was itchy to head back to Seattle, and that would take care of putting off the ash chore for this summer. “Sometime when life lets up a little bit we can figure that out, don’t you think?”

“Actually, what I was thinking is tomorrow.”

Mitch made a little arcing motion with his forefinger as if pressing a dreaded button. “You mean like tomorrow tomorrow?”

impossible
to imagine?
can you
simplify?

"~~Mmmhmm~~. We're here handy to the mountains. We could use a break from this house, that's for sure." The way she was reeling off reasons, it seemed to him, she could have printed up the Lyle Rozier Memorial Hike as a brochure. "The streams are down some this time of year, when it comes to wading. It could snow up in there, any time beginning in August. So I figure right away--like tomorrow--makes sense." She stopped and cocked a look at him. "Only a thought."

It inescapably was mental material, all right. Mitch tried to digest the notion of starting out up the pyramid slopes of the continent not all that many hours from now. Sixty miles of fresh air, some of it pretty thin.

"Just like that?" he objected to her hit-the-trail mode. Looming over him at least as significantly as those mountains was the fact that the more and more un-ignorable gravel deal needed, well, dealing with. He kept away from that with Lexa now by indicating vaguely around the Rozier place. "I mean, there's still the upstairs to sort, and something to be done with the ever-popular branding irons, and--"

"Mitch, this stuff isn't going to trot off out of here."

"Mariah theoretically is. Weren't you going to get her and her wide world of belongings moved?"

Lexa didn't even have to lift her hat to swat that away.

"No biggie. She has that museum gig in the Falls she's been putting off. I'll tell her I have to run in there anyway this afternoon, she can get packed up and come along. That way I can pick up trail gear for us." She checked Mitch with something like dubious hope. "Do you have any at all, in everything else there is around here?"

{I'll have you know I have--" he had to think before defensively coming up with "--boots. And maybe socks."

Could cut
 "Right, Rambo of the Rockies." She patted her pockets and then his for something to start making a list on. }

He provided her with a half-used pad of stickits. Then reached out and cupped her chin, bringing her face up to let this register. "You're revved to get into those mountains, aren't you."

To his surprise, she reddened in a shy way. She pushed both hands back through her hair, the sunlight warming its copper hue. "Really am." She glanced in the direction of Phantom Woman and the rest of the spinnaker pinnacles and blocky thrown-dice summits of the Rockies and spent a moment savoring the skyline congregation. Then laughed a little. "Been a while." Alaska, and the Exxon Valdez spill, and the crackup with Travis, and the long mend with Mitch, all had happened since she had been into the mountains of the Two Medicine country.

Now she was gazing back at him with open curiosity. Half a dozen years with him and she still was trying to learn to read between his lines.

“Mitch? You okay with this?” [She indicated to the mountains with the tilt of her head.]

“Not particularly,” he let it gust out of him. Beyond that he felt it was too complicated for words: his father’s absence seemed so prominent it was a stand-in for his presence. As though no inch of territory around Lyle, past or present, could ever be neutral: either Lyle was going to be hugely there or hugely not there, take your choice of readings on the screen. Mitch felt Lexa’s gaze still on him. The best he could give her was quirked bemusement with himself and his burden of ashes. “But flinch and bear it, right?”

Lexa’s van entered the driveway with an eager washing-machine roar, Mariah returning from her photographic scavenger hunt.

“Sis?” Lexa called when the van door slammed decisively. “We’re around back, in the used-equipment dealership.”

Mariah picked her way to them. “Hi, gang. Another exercise in focus-pocus accomplished.” She looked worn down to her socks but persevering. After the long siege of Lyle’s illness and the emotional drain of being around death, all three of them must look

something like that, Mitch reflected. He watched her put down her camera bag like a traveler at the end of an extended journey. [Stirred by the thought, he asked:]

“When are your pictures of my dad going to run, do you think?”

Mariah gave him an odd look and said, “Some slow week. You know editors.”

“Cover your ears, Lexa, I’m going to say something nice about your sister.”

“Don’t, you’ll spoil the kid,” Lexa warned with a grin.

Her arms crossed, Mariah stood and watched Mitch, looking medium wary.

“I never thought I’d be saying so,” he brought out, “but your pictures *are* my father. For better or worse.” Seeing the whole portfolio for the first time last night, he and Lexa both had exclaimed time and again at Lyle to-the-life: sniffing, sneaking that extra air in; or pooching out his lower lip, dubious of everything over the horizon; even when he was at his most parade-ground grand, watching himself go by, her shutter click caught him against the hard soil of age. Unsparing but heartcatching, Mariah’s camerawork. Mitch smiled congratulations at her. [“You nailed him.”]

“Just about.” She gave her head a shake that rattled her cut-glass earrings.

[Mitch] Mitch and Lexa glanced at each other. Her gallery of Lyles, they both figured, likely outnumbered Matthew Brady’s of the whole Civil War.

“Kind of late to be second-guessing, isn’t it?” Lexa pointed out, not unkindly.

“Yeah, really,” Mitch began, “you bagged him in every conceivable--”

“I still need the right shot of you,” Mariah was saying impatiently, “spreading his ashes on Phantom Woman. That’s what he told me he wanted, you know.”

two

In an almost cryogenic state of cool at getting to palm the wheel of the rattly retired Forest Service pickup, Matthew Brainard had driven them to the trailhead next to Agency Lake earliest that morning, hung around restlessly while they checked over their packs, then took off back down the one-lane gravel in a road warrior's plume of dust.

"I hope he knows the meaning of a week," Mitch said, watching him go.

"Did you when you were sixteen?" was Mariah's contribution.

"He'll be back for us okay," Lexa said absently, tying on a Sierra cup with a little length of parachute cord so it would bang on her packframe as a noise against bears. "I threatened to hack his home page [and key in 'Hey, Dudes, Call Me Matt!'] if he screws up on the time."

Their packs were leaned against old stumps on the lakeshore like bulging creatures after a meal. They had gear and more gear [among the three of them.] Nice new nylon tents,

depends
on the
earlier
cut

a change of clothing apiece, extra socks, sweatshirts for warmth, rainjackets that would double as windshells. Caps, dark glasses, sun block, moleskin. Candle lantern and pencil-sized flashlight. Binoculars, smallest pair possible. Toothbrushes with the handles sawn on off. Waterproof container with pitch firestarter and matches. Lexa's sleek little Bleuet camp stove and sufficient butane cartridges. Food, much food.

When they helped each other heft into their pack straps, Mitch in particular appeared laden, from the look of it his long-frame pack threatening to tip him over onto his back like a beetle. Lexa had had to buy him an extra-large sleeping bag called the Big and Tall model, and since it was too bulky to ride at the bottom of his packframe it had to be strapped atop his pack. Now she took an inspecting look at him, top-heavy as a moonwalker, and for the first time in years had a pang for Travis and his nature-boy fit into the outdoors.

Mariah was going with what she insisted was an absolute basic irreducible minimum of photographic apparatus, which included a tripod and two spare cameras and enough film to send Fuji stock up.

Could be worse, he at least left Lyle's desk home and she didn't bring her
 darkroom, Lexa wryly reviewed her trail troops. Herself, despite her own hefty enough pack she could have charged off into the mountains at a high trot. This was always a moment she loved: the pumped readiness as she jockeyed in the saddle before the start of a

barrel race; the palette of food made by her own hands gloriously ready to meet the partycomers; the minute before setting boot onto trail. Right this instant she felt something like a hum of her body, a neural scat melody that seemed to break out into the air when a redwing blackbird flew from the top of a willow near them, its chevrons bright against the limestone palisade of Jericho Reef.

She reminded herself to throttle down, there were three days of footsteps ahead to the Divide and one trail companion who was not exactly a lean whippet of the highlands and another with about the same attention span as her shutter speed and both standing here humped with packs. Trying not to make it sound dubious, she asked:

“Ready?”

“Red-aye,” Mitch proclaimed, giving her a game little salute.

“Anytime,” said Mariah, buckling the belt strap of her pack like a gunfighter.

~~##~~

There was a scatter of trails near the lake, delta of footsteps before geography narrowed the choice. Jericho Reef steadily stood on its head in the lake’s mirror of water, a perfect unwavering stalactite of itself, as they threaded along the shore, Lexa in the lead by unspoken vote. Shortly she was pointing left, where the trail turned up Agency Creek, and that quick they were into the first of the funneling valleys, the flumes of the continental

drainage. The top flap pocket of Lexa's pack held three transparent waterproof packets, each with a U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle map folded with a day's traced-in-red route showing out. Today's crawl-line of trail angled behind the length of Jericho and led on into the mountains beyond the north rampart of neighboring Roman Reef, less arduous than tackling the canyon between the huge shields of stone straight on.

Even this junior valley, however, was so deeply cut that its walls dictated when the trail would be allowed on one side of the creek or the other. Not more than an hour after leaving the lake, they had to cross Agency Creek in water uncomfortably far up their thighs, water swift enough that to stay on their feet they had to lean into the current like slow, slow prowlers.

Seeing both Lexa and Mariah sit down on the bank, remove their boots and take out the insoles, take off their socks, then put their boots back on to cross the rockbottomed creek, Mitch had followed their example.

When they booted up for real again on the opposite bank he felt almost pathetically grateful for the solace of dry socks and insoles.

Before resuming on the trail the three of them stood and just looked up at the formationed mountainsides virtually overhead, reefs and deeps like an ocean tipped empty

and left on its side. Agency Creek, all the creek any of them wanted to have to tackle in one wading lifetime, skittered between these skyscraping valley walls.

Then the *clong* of Lexa's cup in rhythm against her packframe was leading them onto the narrow table of trail ahead.

They forded the obstinate creek twice more that morning, wet blue jeans and clammy loins convincing them lunch was deserved at the last ford.

Packs were shed gratefully, even by Lexa. Mariah and Mitch chorused that the cheese and crackers, cherries, and banana chips she passed around were easily the best food she had ever fixed. There was scenery to munch on, too. ~~Sitting there~~ drying out on the creek bank, they could see ahead through the turn of the valley to the mountains that carry the continent, dividing its waters and halving its scenery into the West and the rest.

Lexa zeroed in on the one that was central on the skyline.

"Phantom Woman," she said dreamily. "The great goat photo studio; Mariah McCaskill, girl proprietor."

(With a sly expression Mariah lobbed back: "Career built on a golden stream, thanks to you.")

("You're getting awful," Lexa declared, laughing and flipping a banana chip at her.)

“Did I miss a hairpin turn in the conversation?” Mitch asked.

“Sister talk,” Lexa told him as if it were higher physics, a flicker of commiserating grin coming his way from Mariah. This country was just west of childhood, for them.

Lexa then the tomboy ranch kid and rambunctious big sis Mariah already halfway to another planet--Mariah maybe *was* another planet--he indeed figured that there were sibling times no only child could fathom.

“You brought *sheep* up in here, with your dad?” He had been trying to fathom low-slung wool-laden animals and this creek that was close to hip-deep on him. “How, by Scotch-taping rubber duckies all over them?”

“We weren’t in through here,” Lexa took on the explaining, “this was Primitive Area even before Phantom Woman and the rest ever got set aside and they started calling the whole thing the Bob Wilderness. No mutton conductors allowed, orders of the Forest Service. So we trailed in south of here, along Roman Reef, didn’t we, my ridin’-double sister.”

“Wait a minute. There’s an easier trail?”

“Longer. Not as interesting.”

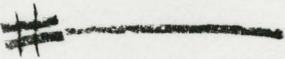
“For sissies,” Mariah put in with a straight face.

if you
don't
cut,
change
fathom
in
one
place,
OK?

["Gee, maybe I qualify," Mitch began, "how many tender feet does a guy have to have to--"]

"Company," murmured Lexa, sharpest outdoor eyes among them. Mitch was sitting across from Mariah, and when she went rigidly still at the words he did too.

Fifty yards upstream the four-point buck deer, horns in velvet, stared at them in poised surprise. Then was gone in dolphin-like leaps into the brush.



By early afternoon the creek was a wistful dabble behind and below them. The hike now was steadily up, across the shoulder of a high stony ridge. The Overthrust Belt, this sea of Rockies was called, a vast tectonic slosh that left behind rank after rank of tilted mountains, like frozen tidal waves aimed east toward the continental beach of plains. Cross one of these slabs of strata, and your reward was another of the alpine valleys raked into the geography by glaciers. But first you had to cross it. The three hikers now were spaced with great unevenness on the hard gray clay trail over the first of these mile-high upturns.

Mariah had taken the lead, launching off into a headstart so that she would have time near the top to scope around with her camera. A couple of hundred yards above Lexa now and letting out anti-bear yodels every so often, she was pushing herself in long

Suzanne

climbing steps that she would pay for in stiffness by tonight, but Lexa knew that was simply par for Mariah.

So, Lyle. Lexa allowed herself a little roving of her own. I never would have bet you had it in you. To pass up a townwide funeral for a procession like the three of us strung along this mountain. How ever Phantom Woman did it, she got hold of you for good.

Going up this sharply, Lexa loosened her boot laces a little so her ankles could flex. That done, she concentrated on matching her breathing with her stride, inhaling when she lifted her right leg, letting the breath out on the left leg of the next step. How that little lungful of air within you could give the illusion of lift, she didn't know, only that it worked. This high and starkly open section of the trail gave her some of the elevated feeling of being on horseback. The torso has memory, too. For one sweet selfish and quite guilty moment she let herself wish she was doing a high lonesome, on this hike. Solo up here, she could maintain her own pace.

Mitch, though. A hundred yards behind her, and not noticeably keeping up. Apparently Mitch had not been put on earth to traverse mountains. Even from here she could see the dark wash of sweat on his shirt. Even as she watched, too, he sought a convenient boulder to sag onto and rest.

Useful tips!

She went back down to where he had plopped.

“Getting your second wind?”

“I’m already on about my ninth,” he panted.

“You’ll toughen in. First day is the hardest.”

He devoutly hoped so. Too tired to look around to see where Mariah had yo-yoed off to this time, he asked: “The roving photographer roving, is she?”

“Yup.”

“You’re starting to talk like a backcountry guide, you know that?”

“Indubitably.”

“Tell me something. You’ve got some excuse for being good at this, from tromping around Alaska those years. Where does Mariah get it from?”

“She got the family share of legs.”

Sitting and blowing, he gandered around at the rock faces, the quilled forest below, while Lexa watched him.

“Lex? Everybody thinks I’m as strong as a Bibleful of oxes. I’m reasonably sure myself I don’t have a leg in the grave yet. This country could not be prettier. Then why is this so hard?”

She patiently pulled out the quad map to show him. "We're climbing about, oh, a thousand feet an hour in through here. See these contour lines, each of those is a forty-foot rise in eleva^{tion}~~x~~. That's not what you mean, though, is it."

"The guy on my back is what I mean."



At the bottom of Mitch's backpack, of course, sat the box of ashes.

Pulling into the Rozier driveway the night before with her Great Falls-bought trove of trail gear for them, Lexa had managed to not quite run down Mitch as he headed for the machine shed, the beige box in his hands.

"Caught me at it," he said. "Give me a hand with this, okay?"

Together they went into the shop and Mitch handed her the box, stepped on the antiquated platform scale and weighed himself, grimacing. Then he took the box and had Lexa do the weighing while he held it. She pushed the balance along with her index finger, a little a time. At six pounds more than Mitch's weight, it balanced.

He backed off the scale. "Then it's so. A person's ashes weigh about the same as a newborn baby. Trite and true."

Lexa held her tongue about any such neat arithmetic of life.

In the crisscross of gearing up for the hiking trip, Mariah met up with them as Lexa closed the machine shed door. Right away her eyes fastened onto the box Mitch held.

“Weighing in our distinguished hitchhiker,” he joked lamely.

Mariah stared on at the box. In India she had witnessed a public cremation. Fire on the Ganges, the funeral pyre floating. One of maybe fifty funeral pyres: she’d had to choose among that flotilla of conflagrations, fire-rafts of souls she had never known. Several summers before when the big fires swept Yellowstone Park, she had spent weeks shooting on the firefighters’ lines, had seen every part of nature burn, lone trees suddenly aflame, the persisting lick of fire on a charred buffalo, entire mountains red in firestorm. Yet it had not prepared her for what came into her viewfinder at the eternal and filthy river: that the flames of a person were like any other. Maybe that was what had made her hands shake when she took that picture of human fuel flaring into the universe and again now as she looked at Mitch and all that remained of his corporeal father. For once she didn’t say anything.

#

Now Lexa flexed the straps of her pack off the front of her shoulders by thrusting her thumbs under the strap pads, as if to unloosen Mitch from his rock perch, too.

c/f, here we had this exact phrase?

"You're still on that? Your dad going woo-woo in his last wish? What happened to 'flinch and bear it'?"

"Goddamnit, you know, I'm having trouble doing it. (This with the ashes, I mean.)

It feels...operatic or something."

She did not want this trailside repose to go on too long. Periodic brief stops, a few quick deep breaths, were better than single long leadbutt sitdowns. "Mitch, not to get on your case or anything, but we ought to keep moving."

"That's one opinion."

"As we say in the barrel-racing profession, 'Giddyup.'"

"Minute more."

"Come on, town kid. What'd they tell you back there in UW football practice--
'Roll on, Iron Tumbleweed'?"

His head snapped up. "They did not!"

"Or, oh ho ho, I bet I know. Those coaches of yours knitted samplers of this one from pairs of their old white socks, didn't they. The one that starts off, 'When--'"

"Lex, don't. Not that old crap, okay? Honest, I'll--"

"--the going gets--"

"Lexa, I'm warning you!"

“--tough, the tough get--”

“~~Stop, stop!~~ Look, I’m on my feet. Holy Kajesus, you’d have made a hard-ass coach.”

They dry-camped that first night, high but shelved out of the wind, they hoped.

Their only company on

~~Their~~ timberline campsite ^{was} ~~had only~~ the crests of the gigantic reef formations and the

portals between for company. Jericho, its bowed palisade the nearest to them, appeared to

arch its back in everlasting surprise as the plains butted into its bedrock. Across a deep

thickly forested gulch from Jericho, Roman Reef stood higher and a mile longer, its

rimrock crest as regular as the frieze of a vestal temple but incalculably more ancient.

Grizzly Reef, true to its name, seemed to threaten on into eternity with its half-turned slab

face targeting north toward the flanks of the other two.

Moving stiffly as marionettes, Mitch and Mariah had gone to their packs to dig out

sweatshirts, hours of dusk yet ahead here under the timbered shoulder. Lexa already was

setting up things for supper. Loaf of heavy dark bread, tough nourishing stuff.

Uwajimaya noodles, a good carbo load. Thuringer sausage, protein supreme. A menu that

would have set off prepare-to-waddle alarms in them all down on the flatlands but would

be welcomed by digestive systems up here.

OK?

“What can I do to help, cookie?” Mariah inquired as she came back over tugging down a sweatshirt which read across its front *Mount Cook Guide Service--Glaciers are a kick in the ice.*

“Firewood for later,” Lexa recited. “Tents. Roll out the sleeping bags. Dig a potty place over there in the trees.”

“Whoa,” Mariah honestly was set back on her heels. “That’ll teach me to ask.”
 She cast a look in a pertinent direction. “Umm...?”

“I heard, I heard,” Mitch was saying, heading off to the timber. “I’ll do the woodsy stuff.”

Mariah started to squat to untie Lexa’s tent packet and winced. “You know what? My legs ache in every damned pore.”

“No shit, ridgerunner.” But Lexa managed sympathy in her smile.

“Aren’t you tired at all?”

“Sure. But it’s a good tired.” Mariah watched as her sister stood and stretched, arms out and fists balled, at ease after earning this mountain.

~~_____~~

The freshest of fresh air woke Mitch in the morning. Only inches of him were outside the sleeping bag, from his nose on up, but those were thermometer enough. He

saw there was frost on the outside of the tent. He lay looking at it a minute, then reluctantly risked an arm outside the down bag and put a finger up to the tent fabric. The frost was on the *inside* of the tent, too.

There was scrabbling at his tent flap.

Lexa came scooting in. Shucking her unlaced boots, she slid inside the sleeping bag with him. "Came to check out the rumor on you--cold feet, warm heart?"

"Good morning, Nanook. You didn't tell me this was going to be a polar experience."

"Brisk, is all." She puffed an experimental cloud of breath toward the frost motif on the tent ceiling. "Think of it as not snow." She snuggled in on him some more.

"Having any fun?"

"Through all these layers of clothes?"

"~~Lech~~. I meant the hike." Nonetheless she kissed the place under his ear in incendiary fashion. Tempting as it was to continue on each other from there, murmurs between asleep and awake were emanating ~~every so often~~ from the neighborhood of Mariah. Lexa gave him a promissory *later, sailor* wink and they stayed almost nose to nose to transmit warmth. From such close range she noticed Mitch's face was starting to

look seamed. As if Lyle's generational markings were already shifting onto him. The twinge that this gave her reminded her to ask: "How's every little muscle this morning?"

"Letting me know they spent the night on the ground," Mitch admitted. "Stiff, is all--nothing really shrieking."

"Hey, then," she sounded pleased, "you're in not bad shape, considering. When's the last night you slept in a tent? Boy Scouts?"

He went still. Coldwater Ridge. One other fine bright conscienceless morning, amid mountains with lodes of time up their canyon sleeves. Juanita Trippe another relentlessly cheerful morning type, surely out there on the ridge smiling in Mt. St. Helens' direction when volcanic hell cut loose.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Nothing anything could be done about. "The tent and I? It's been a big while ago," he murmured.

The current mountain, which had been so early to go into dusk, now made up for it by being the first to catch sunshine. The orange tent fabric began to give vivid light.

"Looks like a sweetie of a day," Lexa reported to Mitch, propping onto one elbow to check on the dawn's progress. Moisture pearled on the ceiling of the tent, and she swiped away the worst of it with a bandanna. By now the frost on the outside was melting into plump

globules, and she and he lay there watching the beads of water blip around on the grid of the tent pattern, like some outer space video game screen. Taking turns poking under a poised glob to make it run, they giggled and estimated that each one of these raindrop races knocked a point off their IQs.

“I better get to work on breakfast,” Lexa finally called this off. “What can the chef put you into ecstasy with this morning, the soup du jour or the bread of life?”

“I like either, so I’ll have both,” Mitch declaimed with a stretch and a grunt, coaxing his body into the day.

Mariah was fumbling a fire into being, and before long they were breakfasting on steaming pea soup and pumpernickel and hot chocolate.



This day’s hiking had a reward only an hour into it, the talus shoulder of the mountain and downhill ahead. Now they were in the Bob. Up here in the interior peaks and the supple valleys under them lay its million acres of designated wilderness. And up ahead, on the skyline, the Continental Divide the guarding rim of it all.

At the marker amid the rockfield on top, Mariah insisted on posing Lexa and Mitch like summit conquerors, their packs leaning nonchalantly against the tin yellow **National Wilderness Area** sign wired onto its west side. While she fussed with her camera

setting, Lexa telling her she would eventually get the hang of it, Mitch sneaked looks back down at the Two Medicine National Forest land they had come through, ever since Agency Lake. Oil and gas, pocketed in those geological folds; *Just remember*, Lyle Rozier's memorial gravel handy for roads to them, *you're walking all on money*. He faced around to Mariah's camera with not his best expression.

—————
When they set out again, the trail zigzagged down and then flattened across a broad scoop of valley, meadowed where it wasn't forested, a stretch of miles they accepted with silent gratitude after yesterday's more vertical ones.

It was only mid-afternoon when they came to the clear rush of water. Aspens pintoed the opposite bank, their leaves exquisitely trembling in the least whiff of breeze. From not far upstream poured the more industrious sound of a waterfall, twenty or thirty feet high, a toboggan of white water. The rocky sidehill around the waterfall broke up through the valley floor, like the mammoth root of a mountain surfacing, strewing the streambed and the slope down to it with stones the size of small flagstones. In the broken mosaic of it all, the water pooled and then tumbled down rapids like glass over marbles.

"Ledge Creek," Lexa announced off her map. More than evidently she was on the ledge, a low smooth sedimentary span that led like a little dock to where the shallow stream

could be crossed on other flat stones. She had close company there: a rough-mounded cairn, no taller than she was, had been built on the ledge near the water's edge. Standing there spectating at the pleasant scenery, she clapped her hat on top of the monument and ran her hands through her hair.

The other two trailed up onto the vantage point next to her and the compact tower of rocks.

"Why one here, I wonder?" Mariah kicked at the cairn's base a little, as if wanting it out of the way.

[Absorbed elsewhere, Lexa simply gestured around. "Duh. Where the rocks are."]

"Thank you for sharing that, Ms. Einstein," Mariah said none too mildly. "But you know what I mean.)^h Up along the Divide or back at the Two boundary, sure, you expect these anywhere there. But not directing traffic at a creek crossing." She squeezed past the cairn, still seeming to take its presence personally.

"What, are you allergic to monuments all of a sudden?" Lexa said absently, still gazing around at the waterfall, the chorusing creek, the nimble grove of aspens. "Probably it was one of our bored shepherders."

["Duh yourself. The old Primitive Area here, remember."]

"Jesus, Mariah, I don't know how it got--")

“I believe, as an expert on the behavior of rocks,” Mitch stepped in to head off sisterdom’s sudden propensity toward civil disturbance over anything mineral, vegetable, or animal, “that these, how do you say it in America, *dogpiled* onto each other.” He ran a hand over the uneven but effective dry-stone construction. “It’s standing up okay, but it doesn’t look like anybody put in all their time on it.”

“Well, it has some scenery,” Lexa said as if this spot on earth needed her defending. “Good-looking campsite.”

Mitch was watching her hopefully, and (for that matter) so was Mariah.

Lexa chewed her lip, calculating.

“It’ll make a humongous day tomorrow, but we seem to be ready for this.” She plucked her hat off the monument. “Okay, gang? Let’s (go) unload.”

As soon as they were on the other side of the creek, they saw they were not the first ones to think of it as a camping spot. A canvas tepee gray with age poked up not far downstream, on a nice high dry place handy to the water. No one around, though, when they approached it, and the campfire ashes were not recent. Inspecting, they whistled appreciatively at the amenities: dragged-up logs to sit on, a fire circle of blackened creek rocks, even a rusted but serviceable cooking grill that gladdened Lexa’s heart. Mitch zeroed in on the tepee, walking around it in admiration.

“A tent tall enough to stand up in? Wouldn’t that be too bad. *Woop!*” He nearly fell over a bundle in the grass at the rear of the tepee.

The others joined him and stared down at a rolled-up sleeping bag that had a foam mat wrapped around it for protection. The protection had not much worked; the foam had been vigorously gnawed through, shreds of bag fabric and tufts of down oozing out through the mauled mat.

Lexa shot a look toward the tepee, Mitch and Mariah an instant after her. Muddy pawprints at shoulder height showed where the animal, evidently up on its hind feet like somebody nearsighted feeling along a wall, had patted along the canvas of the tepee until deciding to rip its way in.

The trio stared at the claw-cut slash, big enough for a grizzly to walk through.

“We can assume the griz isn’t in there any more,” Lexa deduced (for them)

Their combined six eyes frisked the low brush along the creek.

“So then where is he. It.” Trying not to sound nervous, Mitch wanted to know with some urgency: “Don’t we want to clear out of here?”

“Minutes ago?” chimed Mariah, her head swiveling back and forth steadily as a radar dish.

“Probably not,” Lexa figured out loud. “The bear has been and gone. If we’re careful to make noise and build a fire--generally announce ourselves--it isn’t likely to bother back here again any time soon. Zweborg used to say each grizzly bear has a hunting territory bigger than Rhode Island.”

“Lexa, Rhode Island is the most microscopic state.”

“Mitch, if a bear wants to come visiting, it *could* come visiting if we were camped out on the trail somewhere.”

“I’m not for that either,” he conceded.

“Okay, then,” Mariah voted, shucking off her backpack. “If we’re going to be eaten, let’s be eaten in comfort.”

They banged cooking pots together and whooped and hollered for a few minutes, a racket that they felt would clear any self-respecting grizzly out of the valley. Then turned to the night’s hostelry, unsnugging the tepee flap and stooping in like cave explorers. Strewn in there were other sets of mat-encased bedrolls, tossed around by the bear after some sample bites.

“Fishing camp.” Mariah pointed to the rod tips sticking out of the ends of a few of the foam rolls.

“Hunter-gatherer time!” Lexa exulted.

“His clan’s tools of the trade, right here,” Mariah happily seconded.

They could form alliances quicker than he could turn around, Mitch too late realized. “Sexism,” he protested. “Fishermanism. How about if I spread doilies around in here while you two go kill fish?”

The McCaskill sisters only snickered. “What’s the use of having an alpha male along,” Mariah was asking Lexa rhetorically, “if he won’t get out there and alpha?”

Lexa knew another formula. “Fried trout for supper,” she cooed in Mitch’s direction. “Golden brown. Just crisp enough you can eat them with your fingers, like corn on the cob. If only some big strong mansie would go catch them.”

“You are the Bobbsey Twins from Hell,” Mitch observed. [“How many fish?”]

Some soothing came from Mariah, who said she might as well come help slay fish after the tepee was kicked into shape, while Lexa said she wanted the leisure of setting up a camp kitchen in style for a change.

Armed with rod and pocket-size box of lures that had been tucked into the middle of a mat bundle and a few angleworms he’d scouted from under rocks, Mitch headed up the creek. Past the crossing and the cairn was water which he thought either should have fish in it or be impounded for false pretenses. It was a classic pool, dappled with shadow and blue, while an apprentice waterfall about two feet high spilled in over a terracelike ledge.

Snags abounded in the brush roots and fallen trees along the faster water that riffled out of the lower end of the pool, but he thought he could do something with the shade-quiet eddy along the edge of all that. Knowing there was going to be a lot of rust in his casting, he decided to stick with tin fishing--lures--instead of trying to deposit worms or grasshoppers delicately across thirty feet of pool into skeptical fish.

Just when he had been at this long enough to get into the fishing mood, halfway between boredom and fascination, he heard willow branches in commotion.

The crashing in the brush had familiar red hair. "How's fishin' (Hem?)" Mariah called across the pool in more than passable Bacall huskiness.

"The fishing's great. The catching isn't worth a crap."

("Mmm.") Rod already at the ready, she glanced up and down the stream at the lay of the water. "Mind if I sneak in here and try the riffle?"

"Just don't catch any of the ones I'm slowly hypnotizing."

Mariah made a respectable but not great cast. "It's been about forever," she self-critiqued her technique. "Since my ex-. Last person you'd expect to find up to his brisket in the Clark Fork, whipping the water with this stuff. But there he'd be, so I did some with him. Never got as good at it as he was," she mused into another toss of her line, "so at least our marriage wasn't done in by that."

“Anything worth doing is worth doing so-so,” Mitch attested. He aimed, flicked the first cast yet that felt right, bounced the lure off a half-submerged tree trunk, and it plopped squarely into the eddy he wanted.

“No fair,” she protested. “You didn’t warn me you’ve got coordination.”

“It’s all in the--*Yow!*” The hit of the fish dipped the end of his fishing pole.

“Don’t horse him!” she shouted as he instinctively yanked the pole back. “You’ll lose him, play him in slow!”

“Right right right. Okay, I’m playing him, come fishie, there’s a good fishie, *nooo, not under the log, you bastard,* there, right this way, we can seat you for dinner in just-one-minute, Mr. Fish, excuse me, *Ms.* Fish--”

Mariah was laughing so hard she let her line drift into a snag. “Oh, horseshit.”

“What’s this I hear, nasty talk in the vicinity of my meal?” He had the trout, about a twelve-inch rainbow, on the bank.

Mariah eyed toward her branch-snarled line, which was on Mitch’s side of the creek, and then at Mitch.

He smiled vengefully. “Don’t even think it, lady.”

She puckered and blew a raspberry at him, then surged into the water. To reach the riffle she had to wade along the side of the pool, in almost up to her waist, and then

}
cute
fishie?

clamber among the submerged rocks until she could bend down and get hold of the snag to snap it off. Mitch watched every moment of it, not least because of how interestingly her wet Levis were plastered on her. Finally holding up the soggy black branch with her hook and line still tangled in it, she turned and gave Mitch a baleful little grin. Then outfished him three to two in the next half-hour.



They came rolling back into camp like old whaling chums, showing off their catch on a willow stringer apiece, the trout lovely as jewel-dusted jade.

Lexa got busy on supper. The campfire smoke behaved beautifully, twining straight up like a mystic rope trick. In daylight's last act at this spot, aspen shadows danced on the creek water. The waterfall drew silver from the air. She kept marveling around over her shoulder as she potted the meal together.

She was frying the trout when she heard *tappa tappa tappa*.

Mitch was hunched on a jackpine log, laptop across his knees.

"Hey, digerati. What's that about?"

"Just looking stuff up. On Bob Marshall. The guy was a hiking machine, I thought I'd pick up some tips." Silence met that. He sent over an informing look. "Habit, Lex, okay? Even if I don't have anyplace to write for any more."

I can hear your first indication of web. No matter what Mitch has, he's got it. Can't be to talk as me.

And it must be clear that we're not in the interest. How about really specific? How about if we know Mitch talked to drums beforehand?

To this point in the scene?

“You had to pack that, though? No damn wonder I got stuck with carrying all the cooking gear and most of the food, too. Mitch, really, I don’t see why--”

Tappa tappa tappa. Emitting from the tepee.

“Oh, good,” Lexa’s voice rose, “all God’s children got laptops, do they.”

“Mmmhmm,” came Mariah’s slightly muffled answer. “This sucker is wonderful, and I wish to Christ it didn’t exist. But my photo inventory is on it. I’m just checking to see what I’ve got on pics from other parts of the Bob.”

“Here I am in the greatest scenery in the world,” Lexa stormed, “and I’m surrounded by gear freaks. *Techiegear* freaks.” Skreek of the frying pan’s bottom as she yanked it across the campfire grill to inspect the golden-brown fish. “Can you drag yourselves away from your keyboards long enough to *eat*?”



Supper in them and the fire pleasant, they sat watching a placid sunset, the last light raying like golden spokes through the treetops on the rim of the valley. The minute the sun went down, Mitch dug out his laptop again with a wary glance at Lexa.

“Play ‘April in Paris,’” Mariah requested dreamily.

He vamped a run along a piano keyboard, and even Lexa broke up.

“Okay,” she said in resignation. “I give in. What’s with our man Bob?”

*Man, let
Canada being
Mariah's
laptop blind
Doesn't really
need it?
Might with 2
Cameras + a
tripod?*

*Oh, what,
a half
hour of
use
who?*

“He was a strange one,” Mitch shook his head. “Maybe saints in any trade are. Marshall was a kind of, of bean-counting poet. (I mean,) he hit a few keys and peered close to read off the small screen: “*First snow on the Lolo Trail, September 6, 1928. The path was too muddy to show white so soon, but the grass along the sides and the surrounding trees were already blanketed. Under this cover flowers, berries, mosses, highly pigmented rocks, everything that made the forest warm and colorful, had vanished. In a few hours the season had jumped from late summer completely over autumn, and had landed frigidly in January.*”

Mitch bopped the side of his head with the flat of his hand in admiration. “You get that from him one minute, next he’s geeking around counting every sonofabitching thing. [Literally.” *Tappa tappa. “Conversation between lumberjacks today: God 38, Damn 33, Jesus 16, Christ 13...*’ on down through *Bastard, Hell, Ass, Fart...*you get the picture,” he joined the others’ laughing at the hallelujah chorus of cussing.

don't
need
to be on
computer

“How was he on ‘*Sightings of bears*’?” Mariah went facetiously wide-eyed. “Like, how many guh-guh-guh--”

“Don’t start with that.” Mitch glanced into the coming dark, not that it helped any.

“Nobody in the history of Rhode Island,” Lexa mischievously lectured, “has ever ended up as a hide on the floor of a grizzly’s den.”]

"Miles on the trail--" Mitch adamantly steered his topic past hers "--Marshall was more of a maniac even than you on that. He kept track of every one of those babies. [I'm up to 1938 in his notebook and here's the kind of thing," *tappa tap tap*] "over in the Flathead: '8 day totals: miles, 288...feet climbed, 54,000...number of peaks ascended, 20.'"

As she heard this, the back of Lexa's neck prickled a little. ^{She, too, had} The impulse to count, calculate the outdoors into ^{herself} yourself, she had, too. The same mainspring that drove her to measure herself against the clock in barrel-racing, perhaps. Whatever installed it, ever since the first time she set foot into these mountains and took off up a grassy mountainside with Mariah while their father dealt with a sheepherder, she would run through her mind a sweet-sad estimate of the amount of time ahead, how many more years of hiking she had left if she lived to be such-and-such. Who knew, Lyle maybe had some such soul calculus, when he was up here at eighteen.

"Jesus, [and if you're counting, Christ too,]" Mariah was saying in a floored tone.

"What'd Bob Marshall do, *run*?"

"He pushed himself like crazy," Mitch confirmed, "it probably was what killed him. Remember, all he was doing in the Forest Service in the meanwhile was installing the whole wilderness system, against every old bull of the woods who figured trees are there

to be chopped down. So there he was, dead at thirty-eight. Makes those of us who are too old for drugs and too young for Alzheimer's wonder what the hell we ever spent any time at." Broodily he chucked a piece of wood onto the campfire, sparks taking to the air.

"Spooky last chapter for you: the obits say Marshall went back to Washington from one of his high lonesomes out here and right away died on the train to New York. Conductor found him in his sleeper when the train pulled in to Penn Station."

"Lead us not into Penn Station," Mariah said reflectively in preacher tone.

They talked on for a while, held by the fire and a demon hiker who believed mountains made the difference in the world.



The wind came up in the night, the canvas walls of the tepee flapping as if wanting to sail away. When the canvas commotion woke Mitch he rolled over, listened to Lexa breathing in her sleep as regular as a swimmer and Mariah's in the minor key of z, then went out and built up the campfire. For once he was up first, the next morning, starting the oatmeal and coffee by the time the women ducked out under the tepee flap.

Lexa kept them on the move all this day. One step, another, rhythm across the hours. Up Ledge Creek the country roughened into abrupt little gulleys with muddy bottoms. Then at the head of the creek was a boggy area, with clouds of mosquitoes.

Amid three sets of voluble swatting, they doused repellent on their necks and backs of their hands and cuffs and collars and slogged through. When they came out into Big Elk Meadow, over them stood the crag with an outcropping that resembled a nose of delicacy, its placement of eyes a lucky accident of symmetry by winsome sockets of rockslide.

Phantom Woman lived up to its name in its bearing, comely at first glance but then oddly withdrawing; at the mountain's hem, so to speak, the timber began green-black and luxurious, then gradually silvered away upward on its slopes where forest fires of old had left a coarse shawl of snags. Wordlessly Lexa pointed out a certain pocket of rock, and Mariah whipped out mini-binoculars but could discern no goats.

By noon the tightly bunched trio of hikers was edging toward the mountain through Flathead Gorge, with Yosemite-like rock thrusts browng in above them on either side. The clear creek was sometimes two hundred feet below them. Here a stagger or a stumble was a serious matter, the trail a ribbon across a talus face. Lexa sternly reminded Mitch and Mariah that if they were going to fall, fall into the mountainside. At a wide spot (comparatively) in the trail she decided now was the time for the reward of lunch, and had it backfire when they heard the sound of rocks avalanching somewhere not far behind them. They ate on the go until they were out of the gorge and at the base of the trail up Phantom Woman.

They climbed the mountainslope in perfect sunshine and a ripping wind. It caught at their packs comically hard, the three of them leaning into the cloudless gale swearing and laughing. Around them the wildflowers, lupine and Indian paintbrush and daisies, tugged against the tethers of their stems. Dandy day for a picnic up here, if you didn't mind a hurricane as a guest. Over the force of the wind Lexa yelled that she was going to have to shed her hat. Mariah complained that her eyes kept watering up so that she couldn't see to sight in her camera. Mitch said little, just trying to cope against this air-avalanche down from the mountain. He was taking the rest-steps Lexa had tutored him in, step-pause a moment-another step.

They plodded, swayed. (One step, another.) Dusk came to their side of the mountain. Lexa knew they were cutting this pretty fine. She had them gobble granola bars and raisins and keep trudging.

They made it to the top as the setting sun was washing the fire tower in light, peaks and valleys stroked into heavier outline. Straddling the summit of the mountain and windowed all around, the tower faced four directions at once. Its stilty legs were a bit spraddled, built to angle all possible support to the sky-riding cabin at their precarious top. The sunset ran through its gradations, yellow to gold to pewter, as Lexa, Mitch, Mariah made for the tower with the last exertion they had left in them. Drifting over them from the

so beautiful,
this day
of landscape

west were small puffy clouds all the same size, as if being turned out by an ice machine.

Ridiculously on cue, as the trio reached the base of the tower the last of the light set the clouds glowing red, like coals of the sun. The done-in hikers trooped up the steep three flights of stairs, their footsteps tattoos of sound in the mountain silence. Did hurried housekeeping to the lookout cabin, sweeping mouse droppings into the stairwell with a broom worn down to its nub. Feasted on the hot meal Lexa conjured in record time. Then slept, slept, slept as night came to the Bob.



Mariah's sleeping bag was empty when Lexa sat up in the first of light the next morning. Rolling her shoulders a little to unstiffen from the night on the floor and vaguely combing her hair with her hands, she blinked around at the aged cabin, elemental in its furnishings and decidedly not built for three. Their packs and cooking gear and Mariah's movable photographic emporium were strewn around as if everything had been dumped out in the dark. Which, she reflected, had pretty much been the case. She peeked past the rickety old table in the middle of it all to see how Mitch was faring in his share of the cluttered space. His sleeping bag, too, was vacant.

Her every motion stopped. Silence, heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat... Now she heard a cough from out on the railed platform that cupped around the cabin on all sides.

“Mitch?”

“Taking a whizz,” he warned her against coming out. “Care-ful-ly. Got your choice up here, claustrophobia or acrophobia.” After a minute she heard him zip up.

“Okay, the scenery is undiluted again. Come see.”

She stuck her feet in her boots but didn't lace them, pulled on a sweatshirt and clopped to the open door to the deck.

She came out yawning, and then simply stood catching her breath at the view. The lookout tower was aptly placed, you could ^{see} look out over a dozen watersheds and headwaters, out to the dark pelt of pine on a hundred mountains, out into supple valleys, out all the way to the half-mile-high walls of stone that fronted the mountain range. Up here the continent was tipsy with mountains. There were now three ranks between them and the trailhead at Agency Lake, and throngs of peaks to the west. And of all these, the beadline of gravity rested here on this stony brow. Down Phantom Woman's back, this meant, the snows and rains of the seasons ran off into the westgoing rivers that culminated in the Columbia and the great gate to the Pacific at Astoria. Those trickling off its front streamed away to the Missouri River and thence the Mississippi River and at last into the

vast delta catchment at the Gulf of Mexico. Inclines of the continent under her in both directions, Lexa moved to the railing beside Mitch and went up on tiptoes, seeing all the way back to when she was twelve.

After a while she said, "No wonder this place stuck in your dad's mind."

"It should have." Mitch bounced a fist on the railing as if testing the tower.

She glanced sideways at him. "Day off, ^{n he said} [Going to spend it in your laptop?]"

"I am not. I thought I'd catch a little more sleep. Then maybe have a nap. And

after that, relax with my eyes closed."

He seemed to be serious. *Can anybody be that tired and still be breathing?*

But then he gave her a difficult little smile and admitted: "Need to collect my thoughts. Today isn't anywhere on what I thought was the graph paper of my life." He arched his head partway around toward the cabin and his pack with the box of ashes in it. "Or what I thought was the guest of honor's."

"You want mental health time, you've got it," Lexa bestowed. "Let's get some breakfast in us, and I'll go see what Mariah is burning film on."

—————

Mariah did not know--who ever does?--how she had arrived at past-forty and still had to figure out her job every cottonpicking new day. Wouldn't you think the act of

taking a picture was essentially the same each time: camera, lens, film speed ought to add up to abracadabra, no? This picture, this morning, no. She rambled around the mountain top, trying from here and there in the early morning light she loved (not for nothing were television commercials for cars shot at dawn in front of the Tetons or the Rockies, after all) and each time she sensed with the click of the shutter that the shot was a throwaway. *Too bad you don't believe in the Zen Zone*, she tweaked herself, *and just leave the lens cap on all the time*. In Grenoble she'd had a battle royal with one of the old lionesses of photography, a portly presence who had been in the Magnum agency with Capa and Cartier-Bresson. "I no longer any more *need* to take the photograph," the grande dame insisted. "I see it, and it stays forever in my mind." Mariah went at her from every which way, arguing that whatever was in her mind it was not a photo. (She had got into a similarly intense debate, but full of bowing and ducking, with her host in Kyoto over haiku. Why always a seventeen-syllable poem, what if an eighteenth syllable would make it better? What if sixteen sounded just right? Her host's reminder that sonnets too had a set form did nothing to change her mind. Mariah was not your sonnet type.) She hoped she never reached the point of scorning the photo for the shadow in the brain.

“Whoa, Sis, hold your fire.” Lexa’s call startled her. She looked up from her viewfinder as Lexa cut across the mountain’s little topknot of meadow to her. “How’s it going?”

Mariah made a face. “As we high-toned photographers say, I seem to be trying to polish a turd here. Hoped I’d get a book shot out of this--” she nodded toward the fire tower “--to pair with the Bell Rock.”

“Nothing wrong with the idea.” Lexa deeply meant it. Their grandfather’s mountain-topping tower for his lookouts, one of the string he caused to be built across his English Creek Ranger District after being handed the wounded district; the inferno of 1929 had burned on for nearly a month up here, a generation of trees charring away, Phantom Woman determined to wear black. *His* great-grandfather’s lighthouse on an impossible smidgin of rock off the coast of Scotland; stonemasons, Alexander McCaskill among them for three years, plying their tools on granite at low tide and fleeing in boats at high. Marks against the sky, Lexa and Mariah knew, in their family history.

“But it doesn’t hold up in the viewfinder,” Mariah ^{lamented} ~~was lamenting~~. “Poor old lookout tower here just won’t compare to a granite lighthouse. I’ve shot it from every fancy angle I can think of, and it sits there like a stack of toothpicks and says--” Mariah gave a chorus director’s downbeat:

"*Duh!*" the sisters chimed together.

"Anyway, it'll do to slap on a Sunday page," Mariah concluded. "So that's my day so far. What've you been up to, a little ten-mile hike?"

"Mariah? You know your trouble?" Lexa told her with narrowed eyes, startling the daylights out of her. "You don't put your munchies where your mouth is." Lexa whipped a bag of trail mix out from behind her back.

"Breakfast? I've heard of that. My sister the foodie, what will I do without you?"

Mariah wolfed into the trail mix, Lexa taking an occasional handful herself as they watched the morning's tones of light on the mountains around. Through most of a mouthful Mariah asked: "You and Mitch heading back to the Coast as soon as we get down out of here?"

"*I'm* going to have to, or turn the business into Ex-Do-Re-Mi Catering."

"Mmm, know what you mean. I'm going to have to haul butt into the Falls and that museum residency, or change my name to Absentia." With a ghost of a grin Mariah turned to face Lexa and said: "Three more days of each other's unforgettable company then, kitten. If our guide knows how to get us back."

"Nothing to it." Lexa grinned back. "All you have to do is roll downhill for thirty miles."



They gathered on the observation deck a little before dusk. Mariah positioned Mitch at the railing in the best light, scenery galore behind him for the ashes to cascade out into. "It's going to be so good," she crooned of the picture-to-be. Then frowned around the deck. "Wish I could get higher."

"You came into the world wishing that," Lexa told her. She gestured at the mountains everywhere below Phantom Woman. "There *isn't* higher."

"Actually," Mariah mused, "there is. Up by the lightning rod." The other two could see along with her that the shingles weren't much any more, but the roofboards looked sound. She strode over and tested the board rungs up the side of the cabin to the roof. "They'll hold me. I think." And began to climb.

Lexa watched her progress, grimacing a little. "Mariah, you fall off there and we'll have to scoop you up with spoons."

"Yes, little mother." She did, though, lodge herself firmly above the stanchion base of the lightning rod.

It was time, Mitch knew. Lexa waiting with her patented get-on-with-it expression, Mariah up there like a sniper in heaven. Nerved up as he was, he approached the railing of the platform as if it lipped out over the Grand Canyon.

“Mitch?” Lexa’s tone was light, but meaningful. “Figure out where downwind is, then don’t be there, okay?”

“Oh. Right.” Feeling silly, he licked a finger, ^{and} then held it up for a minute, the drying telling him the direction of the barely perceptible breeze. Then moved so his body was between the whisper of air and the box. He held ~~the~~ ^{balanced} ash receptacle ~~there~~ ^{balanced} on the graywood of the railing, looking down at the rock brow of Phantom Woman below.

We take you now to the tomb of the known soldier. My father, the sergeant of the Continental Divide. For a crazy moment all he could think of was his father’s habit of sniffing deeply, as if trying to snare air in from this most distant horizon of the nowhereville where he led his life. *If he had such a taste of this country the summer he was up here, then why...*

One more time Mitch reminded himself this was a How occasion, not a Why. He checked again that he had the ashes in a firm enough grip to be shaken, sprinkled out in prescribed fashion except, he was determined, not in the direction that would carry them toward the eye of the mountain. Gathering breath, he tried to find the words to commend his father to this wilderness, the peace of pine valleys and windsinging mountains.

What came out was:

“This is too weird.”

He took the box off the railing, holding it cradled as if not to let it squirm away.

“My father never cared a whoop about any of this,” he spoke as if to the surroundings, “one way or the other. No, I take that back--he wanted it carved up into money. Just never quite managed to figure out how.”

Lexa gave him a careful looking-at. This was not the sendoff Lyle had in mind, pretty surely.

Mitch met her eyes. “I’m not going through with it. His ashes don’t belong up here.”

“Mitch, very very funny,” Mariah called down from where she was sprawled on the roof. “You gave my chain a real yank there for a moment. The rest of the kidding later, though, okay? My light is starting to go.”

“For real, Mariah. No performance.” Mitch stepped away from the railing, then thought to say in the direction of the cabin roof: “Ahm, sorry about your picture.”

“Oh, come on, you’ve got to.” Peering at him over her camera, Mariah appeared perfectly diplomatic except for those two perturbed indents between her eyes. “You can’t haul--carry someone’s ashes all the way up here and then not go ^{think with it} sprinkle, sprinkle.”

“You’re seeing it.”

“*God damn,*” Mariah emitted. She came down the ladder in nothing flat and over to Mitch at least that swiftly.

“We hiked three days to do this! The light is right, the setup couldn’t be better, you’ve got the ashes right there in your hands the way your father *asked* you to, all you have to do is open the box and--” Mariah gestured as if madly salting soup “--*SHAKE!*”

Mitch shook only his head, at her.

She stood planted there looking at him with whatever is beyond disbelief. “Lexa, you could pitch in,” she said through her teeth.

(Lexa made a despairing noise in her throat, then managed:

“Mitch, you did promise him--”)

“If it saved a fight while he was dying and somehow made him feel better about himself, ~~all right, then~~ ^{Mitch said,} I promised him, ^{ye/} But I can’t believe he lived up to his end, either. Here’s a man who told forty thousand stories in his life, everything that ever happened to him, and he never once mentioned this,” Mitch nodded emphatically downward. “So where did it come from all of a sudden, his big notion that this fire tower owes its existence to him? That he ever did anything for country like this instead of against it?” The expression on Lexa went even more pinched. Mariah still looked just purely furious. He felt bad that Mariah was taking it this way; here went being bosom fishing buddies and all

that. But this was his to contend with, his and the mischief merchant boxed up in his hands. "The whole thing doesn't sit right," Mitch stubbornly maintained to the two women. He swept a hand out toward the earthly kingdom of Marshall, the wilderness, then whapped it against the side of the box. "My father didn't earn his way up here in the least, he worked against the Bob every chance he could."

The instant he stopped, Mariah launched again:

"Your father didn't know me from a can of paint when I showed up and asked him to do one of the hardest things you can ask of a person--let me stick my camera in his dying face. Whatever else you think about him, that took guts for him to say 'Sure, shoot away.' Why is it so tough for you to go through with what he wanted as his last shot?"

"His last *wish*," Lexa put in, her tone equally exasperated.

"His last fast one," Mitch insisted, "that he was trying to pull with this. I don't know why, I don't know straight-up any more about half the cockeyed deals he cooked up. But this is another Lyle Special--I can feel it. Something for nothing, if he can just punch our buttons right."

Mariah bit her lip, her eyes snapping around at the dissipating light and her foot tapping the platform floor with the sound of an impatient woodpecker. "I'll tell you what let's do: how about we take a vote?"

"We are not going to goddamn *vote!*" Mitch moved farther away from the railing.

"He put this on me. And I'm not going to let him get away with it--going out of the world in some phony fancy way."

"Never mind his sake, then," Lexa's turn came. "I think," she said in a voice struggling to stay even, "you ought to throw the damn ashes and get him out of your craw."

"No can do. I--"

"Which? *Which?*" Lexa blazed. "Toss those into the wind, or get over your father? Mitch, which can't you do?"

"Lexa, will you just let me handle my own family matter?"

She gestured angrily to what he had in his hands. "You don't seem to want to handle it."

"*Want* to, goddamn no. But I'm trying." He gave her a beseeching look, to no apparent avail. "He's the one who dumped all this on us." Mitch shook the box as if to demonstrate his father's shifty nature. "Turn what little we've got into a gravel pit, sell every yuppie a brand for his llama, and oh by the way, 'Sprinkle my ashes on the Continental Divide, the country of my heart although I never gave any least indication of

that in my previous 75 years.' Lexa, it's one whole hell of a lot to get over. It's too much."

He looked from her to Mariah and back again. "He's going back down with us."



Supper was snappy in more ways than one.

Lexa, giving off about as much heat as the camp stove she fired up, whipped together a pot of Uwajimaya noodles with carrots sliced in and flung in flecks of basil for flavor. (Mitch tentatively: "Can I help?" Lexa: "No. Yes--stay out of the way.") Mariah had stormed down the tower stairs at breakneck pace and stood out on the rock brow fuming at the graying light until the food was ready, when she charged back up the stairs. The three of them ate in silence except for the angry clatter of utensils. Then found themselves in another furious go-around.

"You can't get back at him--"

"I am not getting *back* at him."

"--after he's dead. What good does that do?" Lexa showed no intention of waiting for an answer to her hotly-put question. "Why can't you blow off the past stuff?"

“For the same goddamn reason you still won’t gas up at an Exxon station! Do things back somewhere—” Mitch gestured widely “—count, or don’t they? It turns out this does, with me.”

“But you’re making it count, as you call it,” Mariah trying on a voice of reason none too successfully, “on somebody who can’t even know ^{about it} ~~you are~~. Your dad isn’t around to have the errors of his ways corrected, is he.”

“Fine, then he won’t be bothered about not being up here, will he!”

Through it all, Lyle reposed again in the bottom compartment of Mitch’s backpack.

As soon as dark arrived they turned in, Mitch and Mariah all but wordlessly acquiescing to Lexa’s more-than-suggestion that they get an early start in the morning, down out of here. Marching orders on the trail were hers, she reflected as she angrily snuggled into her sleeping bag. It was only everything else about life that she couldn’t herd in any given direction. *How do I keep getting hooked up with the wars of the Roziers?*

The cabin was a contest area of tossing and turning. She could hear Mitch lay on one side and a restless minute later revolve to his other. She could practically feel the shockwaves when periodically Mariah reared up to punch her rolled-up sweatshirt into shape as a pillow then slam her head back down on it.