

Ferragamo<sup>both</sup> were in there<sup>9</sup> too. Hayfield warriors, that indelible summer, still serving under old sarge Lyle Rozier.

In spite of himself, Mitch drew down the daybook and opened it to the first crew of that year. *April: rock<sup>#</sup>picking* recorded in his father's neat hand. Unlike everything else, the bookkeeping in the Rozier household had always been meticulous. Except.

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

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

Looking around as if he had all the time in the world, Lyle eased back, propped himself against the fender, lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Mitch realized his father was going to wait there for him.

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

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

"Not bad for the shape I'm in," the identical answer he had been giving for the half a century Mitch personally knew of.

They shook hands, still awkward at it as if they had mittens on.

Of Lyle Rozier, many would have said big-headed, but to put it as neutrally as possible, his hat had a great plenty to rest on. The Rozier box of face, as his son all too ruefully knew, could not be called distinguished, but certainly qualified as distinctive, full of surprising promontories. There was such a thing as a Rozier jaw, blunt and stubborn as the plows of the French peasants who passed it on; and definitely a Rozier nose; and cheekbones broad enough to substantiate the rest of the foursquare proportions. This one-man Mount Rushmore face had been Lyle's asset, if not yet his fortune. The worn lines even improved it, the way an Anasazi cliff dwelling seems more natural because it's ancient. (Not that his father was ancient, Mitch reminded himself. There could be an exhausting number of years of Lyle left to deal with.) The problem of the eyes, though.

The bluesteel eyes which Mitch met again, now as always, with a stir of resentment at the weight of presumption under those Roman senatorial lids. His father's drill-bit way of looking at you as if he had seen you before you put your clothes on this morning and knew just what you were covering up.

# —————

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

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

the relentless squeezing exercises he'd done on the bedpost knobs to not be bothered by the harsh wood of the crutch grips.

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

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

When it came her turn, Mrs. Ferragamo thoughtfully leaned over and scanned for an untaken place to write her name on the plaster. Mitch without even trying could see way

down her summer dress to--surprise, surprise--twin treats of forbidden skin playing peekaboo with him from where they were barely hidden in a turquoise-blue brassiere.

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

His mother was at her best in a crowd like this. She always took care to ask each of the crew wives to bring a potluck dish of some kind, so they would feel in on the occasion, and she laughed readily, instead of seeming to examine every conversation for booby traps the way she did at home. Now she simultaneously kidded about how starved Mitch was all the time and made sure he did justice to his food. In the natural way of things, then, he could sit there propping his leg along the bench and look like he was following the yakking of Tom Tournier and Joe Ferragamo beside him, and his mother's chitchat with Mrs. Tournier next to her, all the while able to drift his gaze catercorner across table toward Mrs. Ferragamo.

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

Here was another talent he hadn't known he had, these innocent tumbleweed glances, while he worked on the matter of how goodlooking Mrs. Ferragamo--the *rest* of

Mrs. Ferragamo--really was. Beyond pretty, he knew that much. Although he didn't think beautiful; Julie Christie in whatever the name of that foreign movie was, that constituted beautiful. No, Mrs. Ferragamo was, how could he classify it, cuter than was to be expected, sort of the way a cheerleader's looks improved when you realized she was a cheerleader, even though in Mrs. Ferragamo's case she had to be almost his mother's age and, with Joe of course on the scene, very much a married woman.

All at once Mitch felt something riding him piggyback.

He turned half-around to the load of his father's eyes on him. No frown behind them, no wink. Simply letting his son know that he had been caught at it. Mitch was pretty sure that look of his father's had brought him those sergeant stripes in the war.

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

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

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

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

“Like, say, Donald Brainerd?”

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

“Lexa said to tell you she’s sorry she couldn’t come and watch the gravel fly.”

“I bet.”

At last Lyle unmoored from the pickup fender. “Let me show you a little something interesting.” Off he marched to the nearby shed. He was moving more slowly and stiffly than the last time Mitch had seen him, but he still went as arrowstraight as if on a parade-ground.

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

By the opposite wall stood a cheerful red barbecue grill, half a sack of charcoal beside it; into that wall were burned hundreds of sets of the hieroglyphics that once had been seared onto herds of cattle and horses, Tumbling T’s and Walking 7’s, Barbed Y’s

and Rocking O's, Dice 8's and Rafter S's and all the rest of what was evidently an entire capering glossary of this menagerie.

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

"I see they are." Mitch picked up a couple of the brands waiting to be heated in the grill, clattering a Quarter-Circle R against a Lazy A. "You've been hard up for a hobby, I guess."

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe not, but you can pretty easily see it from here." Mitch gaped around again at the metal mess, with an equal legal tangle doubtless somewhere behind it. "There can't be much of a living in selling branding irons."

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

Mitch gestured violently at the collection. "Where'd you come up with all these?

What'd you use for money?"

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

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

"Dad, the paperwork you want me in on." He was trying to fight off the perverse hope that his father *was* certifiably losing his mind; dementia might be the best defense, the way the case of Lyle Rozier versus the contractual world seemed to be going. "Don't you think I ought to start looking that over?"

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

Again in that first-floor attic that was the living room, Mitch gazed around for some spot clear enough to work. After the helter-skelter cargo of branding irons and the general

strew outside, his father's desk looked more than ever like the unnaturally tidy bridge on a tramp freighter.

"I can still keep book, anyway," Lyle's voice came. He unhurriedly followed that commentary in from the doorway, hanging up his hat on one of the already full coat hooks without looking as he passed.

Mitch gave a grudging grin, or a grimace.

Lyle fussed around at the desk, moving this ream and that. Mitch watched this uncharacteristic bout of squint and dither, then glanced once more at the television set so suspiciously close to his father's easy chair. He had the sudden inspiration that maybe a lawyer could prove that his father had worn out his eyes on that electronic additive atop the TV, hundreds of video viewings of *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, most likely. Eyesight, Your Honor. He couldn't see well enough to read the fine print; our defense is this eye chart.

"Getting a lot of use out of your VCR?" Mitch casually asked.

Lyle seemed delighted to contradict him. "VCR, nothing. Ever heard of the Web?"

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

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

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

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

"Been keeping him up to date whenever I sell a branding iron. He seems to get a kick out of it. Way we got started, I just was curious what he thought of that part of the world--you know I was out in some of those islands during the war. I thought it was sort of interesting he's over there, too." Noticing the look on Mitch, he further reported: "Can't seem to get logged on to Jocelyn, though, at that advertising outfit."

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

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

Now Lyle hesitated, evidently trying to shape his next news. "Mitch? These days you can do a search on there, you know. Find just about anybody anywhere. Matthew helped me with it on Ritz. Brainerd's kid, although you can hardly tell it."

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

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

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

"Roads."

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

“Naw, not around town here.” Lyle waved away his son’s quizzical frown. “Up there.” He inclined his head in the direction of the mountains, watching Mitch.

“Aggregate’s betting there’s going to be gas and oil wells. Those leases along the reefs, you know. Could happen.”

Mitch felt like he’d hit an air pocket.

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

“In the *Bob*? They’re going to drill in a wilderness area? How the hell can they get away with that?”

“Of course not *in*,” Lyle stipulated. “Next to, up against, I guess you could say <sup>alongside</sup>.”

Mitch goggled at his father, this walking dictionary of helpful locutions when it came to draining the life out of wilderness.

“Listen, Dad. Those so-called energy leases, don’t get your hopes up. There’s Forest Service hearings and environmental impact statements and fifty kinds of bureaucratic decisions to be made before anything like that can even begin to--”

“Those’re being made. Else why is Aggregate so hot for our gravel?”

Point taken. Somebody besides Lyle Rozier was counting on gas and oil rigs trundling in to the Rocky Mountain Front, or there wouldn’t be this half an inch of legalistic blandishment sitting here on the table, would there. Every reporting hair on Mitch

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

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

"The wonderful world of gravel aside, okay? Why is Aggregate in the housing market for this place?"

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

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

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

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

*“Why, thanks, Missy. Know where I got them?”*

*“They're really rad! Where?”*

*“Off a dead Jap in the South Pacific.”*

*“H-h-have a nice day, sir.”*

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

*“Were you maybe thinking of getting yourself a double-wide?”*

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

"Let them itch."

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

"Takes two to clinch," Mitch <sup>3</sup>tapdanced a pair of fingers on the Aggregate stack of paper to make his point. "The Bench and home sweet home here, it's all in my name, too, as well as yours. Mom's doing, in her will, remember?"

"Tell me something I don't know. Mitch, this dickering with Aggregate is as much for you as it is for me. You never wanted to take any of this on," Lyle indicated the household empire of odds and ends and the provinces of tractor carcasses and branding irons beyond. "Not blaming you, but you just never did want to pitch in here and try to make something of this--"

--this *family*, Mitch in amazement waited for him to finally own up to. His father's so-called life under this roof, walled into himself and his own schemes, had been mainly of the man's own choosing. Didn't use the GI Bill to go to college after the war. Didn't take

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Locating the pot that looked as if the next perk might be its last, Mitch put in what he knew was ~~half~~ <sup>twice</sup> as many measures of coffee as his father would and got it started. He hung on in the kitchen, trying to tend the stings of being the son of this father. All the old everything. That long-standing charge that he was AWOL from the life his father had set up for him. All right, then, what if he had come back to The Springs after college, then "married local," as they said in this town? Then had Springs versions of Jocelyn and Laurits. He still was as sure as anything that they'd be sailing through the streets of San Francisco and the lingual bypaths of Jakarta just the same. He was even surer he would have started off dead-ended in any career here. In that wonderful might-have-been-life sponsored by Lyle Rozier, worked at what? Become his father's partner in seasonal muscle? Divvy a job that barely supported one person. All the rocks, hay, and graintruck dust you could eat.

Behind him the back door shot open. A pale, pale teenage boy, wearing a Twin Sulphur Springs Salamanders basketball jersey and jeans that bagged out like harem pants, stood with hands in pockets and eyed him from under eyelids at half <sup>g</sup>mast.

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

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

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

Mitch watched the tall twig of boy hunch out the door, the back of his head pasty white beneath his buzz <sup>/</sup>cut. Guilty visions of Shyanne suddenly swam to mind.

Lyle was saying, “Matthew sort of likes it over here. Nobody’s on him to pick stuff up, I guess.”

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

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

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

This father of his accepted the cup, took a drink, made a face.

"Where were we?"

"Fighting."

"Wouldn't want to lose our place at that," Lyle fairly spat out. He gave his son a

*terribly*

tired look, then went to the table. Chair legs scraped in predictable protest. He sat down and pulled out his pack of cigarettes in the same motion. He took his time about lighting up, Mitch watching the old performance. But of all things, the next note out of his father sounded as nonbelligerent as the offered words:

"Mitch, you suppose we could postpone any more arguing for a while?" Exhaling smoke slowly as if to settle his nerves, he let out along with it: "It's harder and harder to get along with Luke."

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

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

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

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

"Leukemia."

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

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

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

"*Leukemia?*" Stunned as he was, now Mitch caught on: all that pinballing around the place by his father, little tiny distances, pickup fender to the shed, back to the pickup, only then to the house and only across bits of a room at a time, to the desk, to the chair, to the doorway. Resting places. That was what Lyle Rozier's life consisted of now.

Whatever was left of it. "When did you find this out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All of a sudden this was the hot-faced Lyle, the foreman who could fire a lazy hayhand so fast he would be a mile down the road before he knew what hit him. The father who blazed for years when a son defied him. The ~~VFW~~ <sup>VFW</sup> Club veteran, revisiting his war with nightly ardor.

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

"They've looked me over every which way, down at the Falls," Lyle was saying.

"And called in their visiting guy from the Mayo Clinic, just to make sure. Chemo or <sup>marrow transplant or</sup> any of Told them I wouldn't go through that sort of a beating for nothing that, the odds they gave me didn't even add up to long-shot." He tried on a tough grin.

"Everybody eventually catches something they don't get over, I guess."

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

"Not the docs, no." Lyle was staying oddly reflective.

Mitch listened to his father pronounce *myelogenous* and *terminal* and other medical adjectives, but his true awareness was back there on the lightning-spike epitaph

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

four

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

*Really a shame to interrupt such a nice report. He must have rehearsed.* Lexa picked up the phone and with a floury thumb mashed the answering machine button to OFF. “Mitch, hi. Sorry about the machine being on, but we voted to pig out on lemon meringue pie tonight.”

““We?””

“Mariah,” she reminded him in three emphatic syllables. “I walked her all over Seattle today sightseeing, so she’s resting her bod.” Piquant alto zzz’s trailed down from the upstairs bedroom. “How’s it going there?”

“Uphill, Lex, every daddy-loving inch of the way. He’s determined to get rid of everything starting with, I don’t know, the kitchen dishes. Him and his damn deals--it’s going to take a deck of lawyers to figure out it all out.”

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

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

“Lexa, he’s about gonna die.”

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

“I wish to hell I had answers to any of it except what of.” He filled her in on his father’s year-old onsets of leukemia and reticence. “The doctors laid it on him that it could be any time now, he finally came out and admitted to me, but God, it’s hard to tell. One minute he’s marching around as ornery as ever and the next he turns into a wingwalker, never lets go of one thing until he has hold of something else. It’s like”-- the memory jumped up and surprised him--“watching Jocelyn and Ritz when they were learning to toddle. Only he’s toddling in the other direction.” Lexa could hear the wind whistling in

on Mitch and the phone while he struggled for voice again. "But hey," he managed to resume hoarsely, "stop me before I babble more. I just called because I had to let you know I'm high-centered here until I figure out what to do with him. When I tried him out on coming to Seattle, he just snorted and said he'd rather have cashed in his chips in New Guinea than go bye-bye on the Coast."

She twiddled at the curls in the phone cord as if trying to decide whether to pinch off her next words. But they had to be offered.

"Want me there for immoral support?"

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

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

# \_\_\_\_\_

The street was longer than the town, back to the fanciful days when Twin Sulphur Springs was going to warm the toes of the world, and Mitch walked west from the park to

where the thin old asphalt gave way to a stub end of gravel in a block of vacant lots. A solid snarl of tumbleweeds lay jammed against the barbwire fence of the nearest hayfield. One geodesic weed evidently had skittered over the top of the others like an acrobat vaulting the backs of his cohorts, and it sat now against the gravel, rocking as it waited for the next ride from the wind. Mitch went over and thoroughly tromped it into milk-colored straw.

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

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

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

Figure out how to tackle the swamp of household, did the place need a housekeeper or a nurse or what, and where could you get any of them in this skin-and-bones town?

The list went on like some terrible infinite timetable. He felt like a tourist to his own circumstances, not quite understanding how he signed up for this. The tired reviewing line of houses along the way, lived in by people he no longer knew or who had become poor fits to the faces in his memory, didn't help. Seattle and everything he had ever chosen for himself lay little more than a day's drive away, but as distant to this

situation as the good ship *Lollipop*. He wanted not to walk back through that Rozier door, not be trapped again between those walls echoing with old family fights. Not have to become the rules-playing son when the contest was his father's medical gauntlet. And knew there was no escaping this street. You can't not go home again when someone is sitting there dying.

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

On in to face reality or whatever currently passed for it, he was surprised to find his father standing stationed at the bay window.

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

Mitch joined the spectating. A gaggle of magpies, black and white and saucy as a masquerade party, had taken over the yard to try to boss Rin away from his dog dish. Their clamor was wasted on a deaf dog, half-doing with his nose behind his paws. What must have been the drum major of the magpie flock had alighted out in front of the dish and was striding around cocking a look at the out-of-it dog. Confident in its reconnaissance, the bird now took a brazen hop to the dish. It commenced to gobble the food, Rin

watching like a sleepy pensioner. All at once he put a paw out, pinning down the magpie's long train of tail. There was just time for a victimized squawk before Rin leaned his head forward and ended the magpie's dish-robbing career with one snap of his teeth.

"He gets himself a lot of magpie cutlets that way," Lyle said proudly.

"He probably isn't real keen to share with us, though." Mitch sent a wary glance toward the kitchen. "Any wishes for supper?"

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

Mitch could put up with most things if there was food attached. By the time he was back from his trip to the drive-in, his father had made his way to the back yard and settled onto the running board of the defunct old blue truck, a can of <sup>Cool</sup>~~Old~~ in one hand and a smoke in the other. "Sure gonna miss these, dead," Mitch heard him mutter over his repasts of beer and nicotine. When Lyle became aware of him, he made room on the running board.

"Might as well eat out here," he told Mitch, "pretty evening and all."

Mitch's cheeseburgers and Lyle's milkshake barely outlasted the sun as it encountered the crags and reefs of the mountains. The purpling time, the Roziers had always called this point of dusk when the mountains turned plum. Watching the sunset procession of shades, the older man sat and smoked, the younger man simply sat.

"Mitch," Lyle said after a while. "We haven't talked over the disposing of."

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

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

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

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

"As in *ashes*? Your *cremated* ashes?"

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

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

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

"Dad, sorry, but I just always figured you'd want to be buried--you know. Next to Mother." His father was the last person in the world he would have expected to let a bought-and-paid-for grave go to waste.

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

*Where, then? In a Mason jar on my mantelpiece in Seattle?* Couldn’t say that to a dying person, though, could you. Not even one full of dickering about his dying.

“If you really figure we’ve got to start thinking about, uh, arrangements, I’d better start keeping track.” Mitch started to get up and go in the house for his laptop, feeling monumentally silly.

Impatiently his father put a hand on his arm and stopped him. “There’s a fire tower on Phantom Woman Mountain,” the older man said and flipped the still-glowing stub of cigarette toward that peak with the stone suggestion of a woman’s face on the darkening mountain skyline. “I did the majority of the work building it, back in CCC times, Mitch. What I want is for you to toss my ashes from that tower.” Lyle looked directly at his son. “Right in the old girl’s eye.”

# \_\_\_\_\_

They were eighteen and unkillable, that Divide summer of 1939. Inseparable, practically joined at their tanned ribcages, he and Ferragamo. The regimented life at the Civilian Conservation Corps camp was keeping them from either going hungry or going criminal, but the pair of young men had plenty of velocity left over after each day’s labor.

Lyle was local and knew just how to take advantage of that in hitchhiking rides for them into Twin Sulphur Springs. Anybody driving to town recognized him half a mile off as the Rozier kid. Joe Ferragamo, plucked from Paterson, New Jersey, was grateful for such a guide, a friend who didn't call him Joisey. And what Lyle liked right off the bat about Ferragamo was how swift he was at catching onto things. In his very first fistfight, there out back of the CCC barracks on Soda Creek, Joe didn't go in for the roundhouse knockdown style but instead concentrated on staying on his feet, the way the western boys fought. Lyle could tell he'd been watching, soaking up. In no time the burly local kid and the weedy but improving East Coast youngster were a regular pair at "pal night" at the Saturday movie in Twin Sulphur Springs, getting in two-for-the-price-of-one.

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

Then when his company of boys and men--they were some of both--was being trucked south to the CCC camp and the highway climbed back up past the layers of cliffs at the valley of the Two Medicine River, he could see that there were more and more

mountains ahead, blue-gray and constant, all the way to the farthest distance where they'd been told this place called Soda Creek and their camp lay. Out here was the real it, Joe decided.

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

Charging off up the slope and then tagging at the crew boss's heels on the way back down, Joe was there all ears when the ranger asked whether he could borrow a couple of the CCC lads for a week or ten days; there had been a foulup at headquarters and he was short a couple of good workers to finish up the firetower on the summit of Phantom Woman.

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

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

He was surprised that Lyle showed hesitation about volunteering. It meant no town, no pal nights at the movies, for a week or maybe two, but wasn't it worth it to be on

top of a mountain--of the Continental Divide--and leave something built with your own hands?

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

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

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

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

The real work started as soon as they clattered down the stairsteps from the tower to the mountaintop again. The ranger led them over to the nearest of the rock formations surrounding the legs of the tower. Eyebolts, he explained, had to be anchored into the

stone formations and tension cables strung to the tower to prevent sway in the high winds up here. "Now then, laddy <sup>ie</sup> bucks," the young ranger piped, "Have you ever drilled rock before? No? Here's the procedure."

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

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

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

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

There was quite a kick to this work, a kind of steeplejack thrill as they progressed up and up the zigzag stairwell, ever farther into the air above the top deck of the continent.

They seemed to be the only lucky ones permitted into the crow's-nest while the ship of earth sailed without tremor through the blue weather. They had reached the third and highest landing, Lyle having just finished tearing out the floorboards and ready to nail in the new set and Joe tenderly shaving just enough off a stair-edge a few steps below him, when the Forest Service bigwig <sup>unexpectedly</sup> swept through.

Even more surprising, the man was on foot, backpacking, rather than regally on horseback. Eliason, just then coming up the stairwell to mother-hen over Lyle as he spaced those floorboards, gawked, knit his brow, and clambered down in record time. The boys could overhear the visitor claiming that he wasn't really inspecting anything but scenery, but from the hesitant way Eliason shook hands with him he was obviously somebody important. They truly knew Eliason was rattled when, though it wasn't even close to high noon, he called Joe and Lyle down for lunch. Hammer dropped and drawknife set aside, they descended to where Eliason was nervously rubbing his hands on his ranger pants and the first person from Washington, D.C., they had ever met was waiting with handshakes for them, too.

Eliason dug out the Forest Service's version of a treat, a can of tomatoes apiece to go along with baloney sandwiches, and the four of them sat on a couple of the tower's anchor rocks munching and slurping. The headquarters <sup>man</sup> ~~guy~~ made conversation like a house afire, asking Joe and Lyle this, that, and the other about themselves and the CCC

while he practically inhaled lunch. Obviously he was in a hurry and didn't seem to be giving the firetower any particular going-over, but all through lunch, Eliason looked as if his diaper was being checked.

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

"May I?"

Eliason jumped to his feet and escorted Mr. Important over to the tower. Watching them go, Lyle wondered in a sarcastic whisper to Joe how a guy landed a job like that, drawing pay for loping around on the mountains. Joe had been turning that over and over in his head too, not able to take his eyes off the Forest Service official as he daydreamed of maybe being in charge of mountains himself, someday.

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

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

The man froze, a step short of the top landing and the teetery floorboards Lyle had left flush with the stair<sup>=</sup>tread beam but not actually on it so he could mark in the spacing, before he and Joe scampered down for lunch. Eliason was so close behind he nearly

bumped into the other man's rump. In a flash he reached around and gave a testing push <sup>down onto</sup> ~~to~~ the board where the visitor's foot would have put weight. It tipped forward off the center beam of the landing like the trapdoor of a scaffold, then sailed off into air, plummeting to the ground thirty feet below with a clattering hit.

Wordlessly Eliason reached again and yanked the remaining boards firmly into resting on the <sup>stair</sup>stair<sup>beam</sup> beam, then grabbed Lyle's nail can and hammer and spiked each one down. Joe sneaked a look at the belated expression on Lyle, stunned and guilty. To the amazement of both boys, the headquarters man only gave them a chiding grin and made the schoolyard sign for *shame, shame*, one index finger whittling the other.

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

Eliason sent the boys back to the stair<sup>#</sup>work, then grimly disappeared into his tent to write up the visit from headquarters. Through the first hour of the afternoon Lyle steamed, then boiled over.

"*This just won't do,*" he mimicked. "Next thing, he'll be telling us how to blow our noses."

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

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

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

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

"I'm sticking."

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

"Lyle, I--it's different for me. You're acquainted down in town, know your way around and everything. Where, me, if I mess up out here...it's a long way back to Paterson, and there's plain nothing waiting when I get there."

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

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

"Say, Lyle?"

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

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

"Go to the show together?"

Lyle gazed toward him through the zigzag of stairs and railings for an extended moment, then sent up a smile. "Sure. Sounds good. See you on pal night."

That held. The two young men gravitated back together on those Saturday nights, even after Lyle parted company with the CCC and latched on at a haying job on the ranch next door to the Soda Creek camp, and after Ferragamo came out of his mountain summer honorably blooded, struck by a falling snag during the big Flume Gulch forest fire. Across the next couple of years of jobs as young muscle in the Twin Sulphur Springs country they stayed in touch, and when the war came in '41 went in together and, still together, were destined to a place which would do its best to kill them, the other side of the world from the mountain called Phantom Woman.

# —————  
"In the old girl's eye?" Mitch stared at this fathomless stranger his father.

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

Dying man in front of him or not, Mitch couldn't help sounding confounded: "I didn't know Phantom Woman meant such a lot to you."

"Oh, you bet it does."

"Let's hear it, then."

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

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

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

"Never mind!"

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

Lord, what a size Mitch was. It had surprised Lyle for thirty-five years now, his boy outgrowing the family line so. This was no time for the lump in the throat, though.

He called over in his best negotiating voice:

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

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

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

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

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

Sounding satisfied on top of it all, Lyle now announced: “That’s probably about enough of a day.” He put his hands on his knees, pushed himself up off the running board ↗

and started his slow march toward the house. Mitch noticed he did not once look back at the mountains.

~~\_\_\_\_\_~~

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Fuji jet-setter claims she has to get her newspaper shooting eye back,” Lexa reported dubiously. “But I still think she’s out of her mind to come here and target practice on--”

“This town ought to be good for something besides going stir-crazy in” the first smile in days cropped out on Mitch along with his journalistic instinct. “No shortage of rundown stuff for photo features around here.” Going to the van, he grabbed yet more of the photographic gear. “Need ~~a place~~ <sup>some room to spread out</sup> for a night or two while you’re on your shoot? The bunkhouse isn’t taken yet.” He steered them past Rin and said, “Come on in, before my father deals the ground out from under us.”

In the living room, Lyle stiffly ~~got~~ <sup>arose</sup> out of his warren of a chair.

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

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

He just laughed.

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

Lyle appraised Mariah at length, then turned back to Lexa. "Come to help out?" He had all the approach of a kindly card cheat. "How are you at forging Mitch's signature?"

"Let's just put our crayons away a while, Dad."

"Mitch can't seem to stand the thought of prosperity," Lyle confided to the two women. "Makes it hard to leave him what he has coming to him."

Lips compressed, Mitch started clearing decades' worth of *National Geographics* off a couple of chairs. As he did so, Lexa analyzed the pair of jousting men. Together, the family likeness of Lyle and Mitch was inescapable: they were same song, second verse. The wavy hair, still a full head of it in pewter shade on Lyle, Mitch's black with wisps of gray around the ears. The faces like larger-than-life masks done by the same emphatic hand. How, she wondered, had they turned out so opposite inside those similar heads?

*And how am I supposed to pitch in anything useful when they can't even get past Hello without starting to fight?*

Mariah had been scanning the room, familiarity tickling at her from somewhere.

The story of her lens life, *déjà* voodoo. Twin crinkles of concentration appeared between her eyes as her mind tried to frame when she had seen this particular layout of *Bad Housekeeping* before; that logjam of clutter in the far corner, the tipsy angle at which it reposed; the globe of metal rods about ready to teeter off the crowded sideboard...

"The Kobe quake!" she blurted.

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

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

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

He knew she did not have the Dairy Queen in mind, so that meant the Springhouse downtown. "Dad, can we bring you something?"

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

# \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Springhouse Supper Club was somewhere between unfinished and ~~run~~<sup>deteriorating</sup> down.

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

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

drift. Fertilizer salesmen or some such, come to preach the virtues of their product to an audience lured by a free supper.

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

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

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

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

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

“Ribeye,” Lexa said without touching the menu.

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

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

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

“Ribeye,” Lexa warned.

“Lexa, will you quit? I’m about starved. I want fast food, I mean, quick food.”

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

“Always is.”

“Then bring it on.”

Away the waitress went, and Mitch settled himself to determinedly not taking the last breadstick while Lexa ragged Mariah about the brown lettuce and petrified carrot sticks *and Mariah maintained she had eaten for horse specimens during her wander year* she was doomed to at the salad bar. Through the divider between them and the Hutterite-

filled banquet area an amplified voice took over:

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

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

Lyle sounded reflective as he swizzled the final breadstick, then put it down without tasting it. “It’s getting so you need to be a scientist just to grow ham and eggs.”

“In just a minute here we’re going to be showing you a video on what our bug can do for your four-legged creatures,” the knitwear voice was confiding. “But first we’ll

draw for the door prize we promised you gentlemen. Here it is, right here. This lovely mantel clock. Battery-run, no need for a cord. Terry, draw a name out of the hat, would you? There you go, thank you kindly, Terry. And the winning name is...Peter Zorn!"

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

The four eavesdroppers had to grin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But t'at vill mean two Peter Zorns von't vin a prize. And you said t'e winning name is Peter Zorn."

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

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

A clamped expression came over Mitch.

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

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

“Those old bearded coots run everything except potato peelings and dirty diapers.”

“They're tough sonsofguns, men or women either one,” Lyle maintained. “Look how they stick to that way of life of theirs. They raise a kid, that kid listens to them. They pass along what they can to that kid, that kid knows what to do with it. Mitch and I have been having a conversation along those lines the last couple of days, and I'd be interested to hear your take on it, Lexa and Mariah. You ladies have had parents. Don't you think then when they make you their heir, you ought to--”

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

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

"I'm just along for the ride," Mariah claimed. Then made a guilty U-turn out loud.

"No, I'm not. Am I ever not."

Two sets of male curiosity and one of sisterly foreboding settled on Mariah. She looked Lyle in the face, then turned toward Mitch, then full-on at Lyle again. "I've got a humongous favor to ask you."

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

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

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

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

"While I gradually kick the bucket, you mean?"

"That's the idea," Mariah said fast. "I know it sounds a little gruesome."

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

*What can I tell you? She pulled into Seattle, her mood up and down like a yoyo,*  
*we were just sistering away like we've always done, and then you called, and Mariah had*

*to get back to Montana somehow anyway, so we hop in the van and along about Coeur d'Alene she comes up with this idea of wouldn't it be something to shoot Mitch's dad's last days. I had four hundred miles of telling her huh-uh. Your turn.*

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

"Well, I give it--"

"These'd be in that newspaper of yours?" Lyle asked, frowning along with his squint.

"You bet, but *after*," Mariah specified delicately.

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

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

Conscientiously waiting for the rest of the food to land before further batting down Mariah's scenario, it took Mitch a minute to realize the meal deliveries had ended with Lexa's. He shot a look for the waitress in vain, then at Lexa. She dug into her steak.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And the newspaper can pay Mitch," Mariah skipped right on. Mitch's head snapped around to her. *What, for my father? Like a bounty on coyotes?* "Not much, but some," she was explaining, as close to apologetic as she evidently could get. "It'd be on a freelance basis for caption stuff, of what I shoot. Oh, and the paper can put you on as Teton County stringer as well. The regular one in Choteau needs time off for a hip replacement."

“Just what I’ve tried to work my way up to in twenty-five years of journalism,”

Mitch spoke with ominous calm. “Second-string stringer. Such a deal, Mariah.” He

turned to his father. The silence from that quarter was saying all too much.

“Dad. You’re not going do this.”

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

“Ohhh, I think maybe so. Yeah.”

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

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

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

“Guess maybe I’m forty-eight hours older and wiser,” Lyle speculated.

“You heard Mariah,” Mitch could hear his own voice rising, “there’s nothing halfway financial in this for you. You’ll be giving yourself away.” Although he wouldn’t, would he, in the way that really counted.

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

“Will not,” said Mariah hotly.

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

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

“Tell you what, Mitch,” Lyle broached abruptly. “I’ll back off and let you think over the gravel deal if you’ll go along with the picture taking.”

“And I promise I’ll get out of everybody’s hair anytime there’s heavy family stuff you have to deal with, how about?” said Mariah, all reasonableness.

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

She felt Mariah’s eyes on her, and from across the table the pierce of Lyle’s.

“What can I say,” she slowly furnished to Mitch, “except maybe get it written in blood from both of them.”

Lyle chortled from way down deep. “Didn’t expect to be made famous for this, but you take what you can get.” He held a hand toward Mariah. “Shake?”

“Shake.” She gave him a squeeze of the palm firm enough it obviously surprised him. She aimed the same slim vise of hand out over the table. “Mitch?”

“Shake,” he gritted out and shook hands with her and then, feeling doubly foolish, with his father. Lexa rolled her eyes and downed a final forkful of her baked potato.

Looking beyond pleased, Mariah bounced to her feet and went off to raid the salad bar.

“Shake,” announced the waitress, depositing a milkshake in front of Lyle. “here you go, hon.” Before whirling away again, she advised Mitch, “Yours will be a while.”

“Wait a minute,” he sounded between desperate and miserable. “We all ordered at the same time, I asked for the special because it was sitting there ready, right? Where is mine?”

The waitress bit her lip and peered nervously toward the kitchen. “Cookie is on a kind of a slowdown.”

Mitch swiveled to join the waitress’s perusal of the kitchen ready-window and was met with a glare.

“She’s ticked off at the boss,” the waitress confided. “For taking on this big feed tonight.”

“The Biotic Betterment banquet?”

“Right, how’d you know? So anyway she’s only doing one order at a time.” Just then theme music swelled in the banquet area, announcing video time. “*Swine diseases are ever lurking,*” the blare through the divider got right down to cases. “*Parasites, bacteria, and viruses are always on the attack, and each and every pig in your swineyard is their battlefield. Erysipelas...leptospirosis...transmissible gastroenteritis...*”

An angry flick of the order slip ensued at the ready-window. “There, she’s starting on your pork chop special now,” the waitress said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She met Mitch's eyes with her own, gray and sharp as flint arrowheads. She kept her voice down. "Never pretty, is it, doing a piece somebody isn't happy to have happen. I want to do your father's story because it's going to be a chance-of-a-lifetime shoot, okay? I can absolutely feel that set of pictures waiting to happen out of his...<sup>circumstances</sup>~~situation~~. But Mitch,

you really want to know what else I can get out of this?" She did a quick little toss of her head, storm of hair clearing away from the vicinity of her eyes, as if that would help her to sight in on him. "Some mountain time, even if this half-assed excuse for a town did manage to miss the entire Rockies by about thirty miles. At least I can sneak out to them from here, early mornings and in between doing your dad. It's a job thing, you of all people ought to be able to savvy that. The paper will keep sending me to snap the same old Rotary lunch speakers in every weinie place like this in the entire state, if I don't think up better shoots. While what I really want to work on is my photo book, and I need these mountains for that." She checked on him with another straight-on meeting of the eyes. "Any of this give me a passing grade?"

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

"Get a grip of yourself, can't you?" *Rrrs* rolled in Mariah's admonition like the wheels of Scottish war wagons. "What I'll be doing on this assignment, full livelong working days and then some, will be a perfectly legit picture story. Right now you can't see it because of all the family stuff. Take it from me, though, your father--there's no way I won't get great shots of him, a face like that, and the way he handles himself like he's his own prize invention. The camera doesn't care what you think of him."

“Listen, Mariah. That may be. Say he’s the most photogenic doomed person this side of Garbo in *Camille*.” He locked eyes with her. “Don’t you think you’re crossing a line, just gaily handing yourself a story where Lexa and I are mixed into it too?”

“You’ve never crossed a line into a story? Alaska?”

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

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

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

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

“Lexa, I am not holding you responsible, can’t you tell?”

“But.”

“But why the hell couldn’t you have warned me some way that she was going to want to take snapshots of my dear doomed father while he goes defunct?”

“When? How?” Lexa shifted defensively in her seat. Lyle’s pickup was like a junk room calved off the house, the dashboard full of flotsam and the floor of jetsam. She pinned down a stray screwdriver that was threatening to bounce up and impale her. “Even if I’d managed to send you smoke signals or something, what were you going to do with them? You can’t think it’s your decision instead of your father’s, whether he lets Mariah poke a camera in his face for what little is left of his life?”

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

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

“Gee, that’s reassuring.”

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

Mitch stared ahead bleakly, to where Phantom Woman’s browlike summit stood above the other peaks of the Continental Divide. “You don’t know the half of it yet.”

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

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

There when she and Lyle were alone at the table, during Mitch and Mariah's circumnavigations of the salad bar, Lyle had favored her with a cagey grin and confided: "Glad you're on hand in this, what'll we call it, <sup>continuing discussion</sup> ~~situation~~. I feel I can tell you anything, pretty much." Then inclined his head toward the front window of the supper club and the distant skyline framed there and said as if the thought had just strolled up to him: "You know what, though, Lexa? Mitch doesn't like to hear me say so, but those mountains do just sit there. So much of this country has always been locked up--the Bob and all that, up there. Finally along comes a way that land can be put to real use, some gas and oil drilling--not all that much, it's only a kind of dental work on a bigger scale, if Mitch would

just think of it that way--and if gravel roads up into there," he nodded toward the mountains again, "are going to be part of that deal they might as well be Rozier Bench-gravel roads, hadn't they? I figure you ought to know how things stand, since you're sort of in the family and all."

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

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

*It is something, how he can be so bossy and full of dickering at the same time,* she had noted with what she was sure was poker-faced calm and simultaneously heard her best intentions go out the window.

"Lyle, I came to be any help I can on the household stuff, okay? The rest of it, you and I are pretty much going to be oil and water, shall we say. If Mitch asks me what to do with the papers on your gravel deal, I'll tell him to tear the fuckers up and throw them to the forty-eight winds."

Yet was it worth it, Lexa asked herself again now, even trying to keep country like this at arm's length from the dreams and schemes of the endless Lyles? ("You don't have to

be in the family so much you sound like Mitch," he had ended up huffing to her there in the supper club.) North of here some fifty miles, the McCaskills had come and put in their century--homesteading, rangering, ranching, trying not to disgrace the land that held them. Maybe that was all that could be hoped for, one family canceling out the other in the world's ledgerbook. She had wanted to keep it going in Alaska, her tribal line of people who lived by seasons instead of core samples. But it turned out there would be no kids; Travis was shooting blanks. It turned out short for her in a lot of ways, the sum of Alaska.

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

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

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

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

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

Mitch paused, seeming to think back as Lexa measured the rockpile with her eyes.

"Dad had crews of us out every spring as soon as the fields dried enough to drive a truck on." He let out a bitter half-laugh. "Sometimes barely dry enough."

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

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

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

Those farmers were not happy to have to deal with Lyle Rozier on rockpicking.

They knew they could hire these same boys for the same dollar an hour he paid them, but overseeing a bunch of high school kids took too much time from everything else that needed doing on a place in springtime. So they scowled and paid Lyle two dollars an hour for every pair of hands (including himself, sitting like a duke in that truck cab) and gassed up the truck for him as well.

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

So it had come as a surprise, about an hour into the day, when they saw Donstedder and his hired man moving some mother cows and their fresh calves in the fence lane on the far side of the field and Lyle stopped the truck and called over the top of the cab

to his four rockpickers, "Need to go ask Donstedder if the gate's unlocked to his coulee. Mitch, come drive the Goose a couple minutes." He gave them a satisfied nod for the heap of rocks already in the truckbed. "There, didn't I tell you? Any prissy pants can work in a dry field."

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

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

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

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

"Hey, Sharps, and you guys, bad idea," he shouted while keeping his hand on the steering wheel. "My old man's not going to go for that." He tried a forced laugh, already

knowing this could be major trouble. "You're leaving rocks like crazy, he'll can your asses."

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

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

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

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

He made the effort to laugh, but his eyes stayed soberly on the coulee of stone. "If you have to wrestle the country from the rocks every damn year, maybe that ought to tell you something about the country. But it never did Lyle Rozier, or these dry-land farmers."

"You're not going to change him at this late date, you know."

"I do know, Lex, but I can't help wanting him to have been something else than what he was. Or for that matter still is." Mitch nodded violently across the corner of the

valley toward the gravel-gray Rozier Bench. "Sonofabitching guy who is always out to make a killing instead of a living."

He gave <sup>Lexa</sup> her a bit of a gaze, then away. "That's always been his story," he

<sup>raggedly</sup> abruptly went on. "Always been a promoter. He got all excited when Yuppies started swilling down mineral water. He and the town honchoes sent off samples of the springs to the bottling companies--half of them wrote back that the stuff tasted too terrible, and the other half said it tasted too good. Another time, we were going to get rich on antique tractor radiator caps. Now it's branding irons."

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

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

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

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

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

Desperately Mitch delved for a way out of his divided state of mind. He knew he had to answer that look on her. But which was the real side of things? The Coast life, the fumble of marriage and the kids, the long devotion to a newspaper that was Bingford's plaything between mountain romps, the try with Lexa, years now and still somewhere in

the experimental stage? Or this born-into obligation, this confusing but unavoidable step back to--what do you even call it? Certainly it was no longer childhood, but it was offspringhood of some inescapable kind.

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

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

“Both of the above, sorry to say.”

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

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

“Lexa, I am a fifty-year-old unfeathered biped carrying too much weight. With a marriage behind me that I wouldn’t wish on an alimony lawyer. And grown children who maybe are what they are because I didn’t wage a fifteen-year war over them with their mother, and they don’t care spit about me. The only occupation I’ve ever had is about to

turn into street litter. Now I'm back here where I don't want to be, in Lyle Land. He and I have let each other down in ways we can't even spell out. Then there's you."

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

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

"Hey, that only took a cap pistol."

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

"You are in a mood. "

"You can, you know. Give this relationship the big haircut."

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You still want walking,” Mitch was saying, “four times around this mother is a mile.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Welcome to Yard Light City, all right. What do these people have that they think is so worth swiping?” Eyes creased against the acetylene hover of nightlights behind most of the nearby houses, she peered around the none-too-dark park.

“There’s a corner of the big spring in behind the gazebo,” Mitch issued like a bulletin.

"How do you know this?"

"Hearsay."

Lexa laughed down in her throat. "Her say, don't you mean? So who was she, Rozier? The cheerleader who was easy to score on? The 4-H Club sweetiepoo?"

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

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

There were a few scrawny tree shadows at the far end of the park for them to scurry to the back of the gazebo. On the spring bank there, hidden or close enough, they clutched and kissed some more. Clothing cascaded off. His large pale form loomed, her compact one emerged from a sudden circlet of blue jeans and panties. *The non-bride wore moonlight. If it doesn't suit the occasion, Mitch, I don't know what better I can do.* She steadied herself against him with an inquiring spread palm.

They ~~went~~ <sup>plunged</sup> in, Mitch first, lifting her down. The water was coarse but warm as a zinc-tub bath. The sulphur odor might as well have been harem musk.

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

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

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



“Mitch? Lexa? That you?”

“Everybody but.” Bumping her way through the kitchen maze to the refrigerator, Mariah blanched at what she found when she opened its door, but shoved enough of it aside to stash her extra film. “Just keeping my camera food cool,” she called to Lyle in the other room.

“Doing okay in the bunkhouse? Been a while since it had anybody in it.”

“It’s fine, no livestock or anything. Ta-ta.”