Woop, Mariah. You’re back dealing in American. Better go in and tell him nighty-night. She went to the living room door and saw him planted there in his chair, up close to the television.

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

As she was about to murmur “See you in the morning,” Lyle nodded toward the WebTV.

“This is quite something. Found myself, on there.”

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

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

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

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

"There's no telling."

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

"My stuff, you can't sell by the cubic yard."

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

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

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

"Had to go when they sent me to fight Tojo," Lyle said as if thinking it over. "But that was different. See the world from under a helmet."
Very much as if he had timed it, combat photography arrived onto the screen. Smudges of landing craft, and bomb geysers in the water. Dead bodies on a grainy beach.

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

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

Lyle paused a moment over what she had said. "Don't know how, but the ones I went with all stayed in one piece."

His next click brought them. The trio of young soldiers, himself in the middle. Helmets with camouflage netting, rifles slung on their shoulders, a bazooka in their possession, too; happy-go-lucky smiles at odds with all that. Central as he and his sergeant stripes were in the grouping, Lyle in particular looked convinced he was bulletproof. Mariah could tell it was confidence put on for the camera, but even so. A face like that came from the climate inside the person.

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

"This business of pictures for nothing," he was saying. "They can just put me on there?"
“Seems like,” she said, intent on the set of faces on the screen. “Good-looking bunch of devils you were.”

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

“Buddies of mine,” Lyle identified even though their countenances were speaking for themselves on the screen. Fritz Mannion, primo facie dumb. Joe Ferragamo, noble as some statue in the middle of Rome.

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

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

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

“Divorce has gotten kind of contagious, yeah.”

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

“Your wife—what’s that wimpy way they put it now—predeceased you some time ago, did she?”
Lyle jerked a fit-to-kill look at her. But of course she had no way of knowing about Adele, flying along on black ice until here came the bridge abutment. He sat there forcibly swallowing ire and memory, while Mariah watched him from only a few feet away. Women these days didn’t give you much ground to maneuver on.

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

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

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

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

Not that he was deluding himself about knowing how to handle death; he was still trying on the one brought back again by that “predeceased” crack of Mariah’s. (She and
that Lexa had the sort of mouths that needed holsters, didn’t they.) He had been secretly relieved when Mitch’s mother went out of his life—went out of life, period—in that car wreck. Secret didn’t begin to say enough, about a reaction like that. A person could never admit to that kind of thing even to himself. But deep down Lyle knew that was what his feeling toward Adele’s death amounted to, a lifting of what he had blindly brought on himself. He figured he might be particularly conscious of this because he was a man with only a few such things buried out of sight that way, and there had been his scare when one of those had half got out, that summer of Mitch’s leg accident and all the commotion after.

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

It was Mitch they stayed together for, of course.
He hadn’t known jack-squat about having a kid. Or even wanting one. Cravings a person never suspected before had built up throughout the war, though, had they ever.

Kids poured forth, from the ex-Sergeant Lyle Roziers and the ripe and waiting Adele Conlons. Like probably any number of people then they had got themselves caught, barely started going together when Adele missed her time of the month. But she went up to her people in the Sweetgrass Hills to have the baby, and when Mitch was born a bit overdue, even the bookkeeping on that looked pretty close to balanced.

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

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

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

Lyle still was proud of getting the men at the bailing without anybody panicking. In those little details that stick up in memory, he even now could see Ferragamo carefully rack his Browning automatic rifle in the side struts of the landing craft to keep it high and dry, and Mannion taking the same care with his bazooka, before starting to shovel saltwater. Most of the other guys were from the Montana National Guard and like Joe and Fritz they knew how to work. Meanwhile Lieutenant Candless seemed to think he could repair the situation by belaboring the Seabees who were trying to get the sump pump up and running again. The lieutenant was militarily doomed anyway on account of his name's resemblance to candy-ass, but Company C's wariness toward ninety-day wonders such as him ran deeper than nomenclature. In young looeys whose only hand-to-hand combat had been with pencils at Officers Training School, they trusted not. Right there in that gap of trust between the enlisted men and the candy-asses, Lyle figured, was where he had to operate. Even all these years after, he could bring back the bluff cozy sensation of acting
as sergeant, like watching himself in a mirror shop. See himself young and on top of the job, giving the blessed order to drop packs and take a smoke or jokingly commanding, 

*listen up, you modified civilians.* Then back off a little as his mind reflected, man by man, the precious complicated unit of soldiery assigned to him. Then savor to himself again the piece of authority that had come to him with that set of stripes on his sleeve. Back in the CCC camp, he had learned that he could put up with things better if he had a hand in running them. It didn’t need to be everything, he didn’t have to be total MacArthur. But in on the plan, some orders to give, dealing instead of being dealt to: this he liked very much. And was managing to live up to, here in their welcome party to New Guinea, at least enough to keep them all from drowning yet.

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

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

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

They all heard the plane at the same time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

By now they were turning into jungleers, baptized combatants in the steamy and treacherous fighting as the 41st Infantry laboriously thrashed inland from the beachhead. Some more baptized than others. The night before they were to go on patrol, dog-tired
from the first week in the forward area but on another level pleased enough with himself,

Lyle filed along ahead of Joe in the first real chow line they had seen since hitting the

beach. Mess kits in their right hand for the more or less hot food and helmets held out in

the other for the next week's worth of C-rations to be dropped into, Lyle joked something
to Joe about the two of them standing in a line that paid off twice as good as the CCC one
for beans.

Ferragamo looked at him from under dark eyebrows, eyes shadowed with fatigue.

Ferragamo's life had filled out handsomely in his years in the West, but the military with its
ruthless pecking order reminded him of being back into the slum again. He hunched up
and soldiered and never said a word of complaint about lugging the twenty-two pound
automatic rifle and another twenty pounds in ammunition clips, but that didn't mean he
liked any of Army rigamarole, as Lyle a little too obviously did.

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

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

At the time Lyle just thought being shot at most days of the week was on

Ferragamo's nerves. He couldn't do much about that, couldn't play favorites now that he

was sergeant. It would all pan out okay if he could keep dealing with Lieutenant Schwartz.
(Candless was already a distant memory, picked off by a sniper the second day of the
assault.) Keep an even rein on the men in the unit. Keep on keeping them from harm’s
way.

New Guinea was not the most cooperative country for that. The island’s terrain
was the goddamnedest tangle any of them had ever seen, mangrove swamps one instant
and hellish shelves of tropical forest the next, and beyond those, some of the worst
mountains in the world, the Owen Stanley Range. When their patrol set out the next
morning to probe a spine of ridge along the Division’s left flank, they first had to clamber
on top of mangrove roots, one slippery muscle of wood to the next, to keep from going
into mud up to their nuts. It took a couple hours of that to creep through a few hundred
yards of swamp, but they came out of it not too badly situated, Lyle thought, hidden at the
bottom of the slope. Somewhere on the ridge not far above them a Japanese heavy
machine gun was firing bursts in the other direction toward the Americans’ main advance.

The patrol crept up on the machine gun situation, the Japanese dumb and happy
there with their protection of a cliff behind them and the swamp below. With hand signals,
Lyle sent Fritz and his bazooka to the brow of the ridge and a little behind the unsuspecting
enemy. About any of the fine points of military life, Fritz could be stupider than snot. But
let him get his mind set on something and a coyote cleverness took over. He had grasped
that the bazooka was a job that spared a person from, say, being point man of the patrol.
As if deer-hunting with a blunderbuss, Fritz excruciatingly sighted in on the machine gun position and killed the gun crew with that first big shell.

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

“Careful on the road home,” he said. “Let’s fall back.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the time after, Lexa would work back at the puzzle of those weeks of the three of them and Mariah’s nibbling camera keeping Lyle company as he gradually left life, frame by frame.

It’s not pretty to have to admit, but I started at it all thinking that Lyle was a hopeless case in more ways than one. For Mitch’s sake, I took on caring for his father as if I was pitching in on, oh, a sputtering tractor out there in the backyard mess. After all, that congregation of old odds and ends, at rest and yet somehow restless, was a lot like what comes with letting yourself love somebody. The debris field of the other person’s
family stuff. You can tell yourself until you are blue in the face that none of their history
with each other concerns you, you don’t care who put whose nose out of joint, way back
when. But those are the things that make people the ones they are. That made Mitch, for
better or worse. And Lord only knows, the makings of somebody like Lyle. So you do
have to let yourself in for some of their weird family junk. Otherwise, you might as well
go off by yourself in life and take up street mime.

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

“Mitch. I hope I can call you that?”

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

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

Mitch shook his head. “The flies in this country are pretty hard to catch, even with
those little hooks. They don’t fry up very good anyway.”
Brainerd evidently was not to be dissuaded. "Your father has been telling me that the disposing"—Mitch shot him a look—"of his items in his yard is going to have to be up to you."

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

Brainerd tried that tight little smile of his. "I hate to have to bring this up again, really. But I've been here next door for some time now, and I haven't seen any improvement on your side of--"

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

Mitch peered at Brainerd.

"Donald? Were your eyes green before?"

Mariah's eyes were thinking all the time, which maybe shouldn't have been news to me—sisters are expected to know each other microscopically, aren't they—but still took some getting used to. Yet even Mitch, whose nerves she was primarily on, backed off
some after she did the old Scotch preacher bit to say to him, "Forgive us our press passes, laddie." Me, I jumped out of my skin probably the first forty times when I'd be at something with Lyle, trying to get him to eat or at least slurp a milkshake between cigarettes, and out of nowhere would come the click. I have to hand it to her, she was an utter damn genius at turning herself into atmosphere.

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

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

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

"No 'probably' about it."

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

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

"Vicinity of the insides anyway, okay. Makes me wonder about myself, though. A gut check telling me 'Huh uh' then and 'You've got to' on Mitch's dad now."

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

In the bull's-eye of the camera lens and the latest verdict being recited by the doctor, Lyle still was trying to resist showing how he was, deep down inside, scared. Scared as he had been only about three times before in his life, and two of those in New Guinea. The phase before this, when he had been the only one outside this office who knew he was dying, had been surprisingly like going away somewhere; traveling in solitary, being a tourist where nobody really knew him. Like on that visit of his to Seattle, watching people who had no idea he existed: in an odd kind of way, he couldn't help feeling he had that over them. Now Mitch and Lexa and Mariah and her camera had to be in on it all, but feeling scared was at least a sort of last privacy.
Mariah drifted around the room, not soundlessly but softly enough, consulting with her light meter until she gravitated to the shaft of prairie light coming in through the glass door to the office’s genteel balcony. Eyeing the tableau of Lyle and Mitch and Lexa huddled next to the doctor’s blondwood desk, she backed up against the glass door, tensed there, waiting, waiting, snapping a picture, waiting, snapping. When at last she was done and stepped away, a moisture outline of her upper body was left on the glass, fogged there from her body heat like a negative.

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

We all grew acquainted with leukemia in a hurry, through the symptoms that seemed to visit Lyle from day to day. Not that he would ever say so, but all of sudden one of us would notice that he was short of breath. Or sweating in a cool room. Or if he happened to bump into anything, it would leave a bruise on him dark as a plum. The healthy cells in him were gradually being overtaken by the others, we could tell. Looking back on it, living with Lyle and his affliction and for that matter each other was as
complicated as bear-tagging camp. You try to watch your step and everybody else's as well, the whole crew of you tend to the chores and nobody gets any fingers nipped off, but in the end that's not quite all the danger there is. It goes beyond the actual griz. It's that clawprint on the trail. It's something just out of sight.

All of them but Mariah were at Lyle's desk, the latest gauntlet of paperwork spread there. Lexa was trying to be a buffer between the two men, not that buffing seemed to have much effect on either of them. Mitch by now looked as though he were undergoing the torture of a thousand paper cuts, having spent days on end with the Choteau lawyer clearing up the snarl of branding-iron niceties and along the way finding innumerable other loose ends, inevitably fiscally treacherous, from Lyle's lifetime of dealings. Lyle, on the other hand, notably perked up whenever he could corner Mitch into a business discussion.

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

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

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

Mitch glanced over, then flinched. Then unconvincingly shrugged as if the item amounted to no more than, oh, say, a giant dustball. “Just somebody’s idea of a joke. Long time ago. Should’ve thrown it--”

“‘Joke’ nothing!” Lyle trumpeted in, then coughed hideously. “It’s his trophy. That’s what they always called him in the newspaper, you know. When he was rolling down the field on all those touchdown runs.”

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

“The Iron Tumbleweed!”

“Well, well, well,” said Mariah, a glitter in her eye.

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

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

Mitch gave her a glower. "Think about it, Mariah: newspapers are responsible for a lot of inane things."

Neither Mitch nor I wanted to admit it after all the fuss we'd each kicked up with my sister the self-invited roving photographer, but her picture-taking seemed to do Lyle some good. Except when he wasn't the one directly in her sights.

"Let's try this, over here."

Set on getting a fresh picture of Lexa and Mitch together, and by now having used up virtually every backdrop at the Rozier house and a considerable distance around, Mariah had shooed them across town to Artesia Park.

Lexa unaccountably giggled at the venue.

To their surprise, Lyle had been determined to come along. It was one of his cranky days, but they figured he had every right, so Mitch with tight-lipped attentiveness bolstered him into the pickup and then over to a picnic table bench where he could sit and light cigarettes and scowl.
Mariah had already circled the set of springs and the gazebo a couple of times, wrinkling her nose and muttering about what a thin excuse for a park this was. Now she came back for another frowning look at the plywood cutout. It was in the approximate shape of the zigzag mountain skyline, with the two whitish springs daubed in and the full-size figures of a male bather in a Victorian bathing suit and a female bather in a bikini about the size of a spotted bandanna and two leftover polka dots. Each figure was topped with a face-sized hole.

"Time to try crazy," she announced, twirling a different lens onto her camera as she coaxed her subjects into poking their heads through the cutouts, Lexa reluctantly and Mitch twice that. He still couldn't decide if Mariah was a genius with that damned camera or more like an idiot savant; instead of the fluke of rattling off what day of the week the Fourth of July fell on in the year 2099, maybe her mystifying capacity for calculation was all in her eye. Likely she was some of both, freakily inspired. Mitch could remember the fascination of watching Peggy Fleming in Olympic figure skating and taking to heart the commentator’s remark that no one would ever skate more beautiful routines than hers, merely prettier ones. Mariah on a shoot had that same cool sense of highest possibility.

Glancing over at his father while she worked out the shot she wanted of Lexa and himself, Mitch saw that familiar figure at the picnic table now wearing an expression that
was unmistakably jealous. One more side effect, Mitch thought resignedly, of Lexa’s sister the ice maiden.

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

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

“You want to talk numbers, mine was twenty pounds ago,” Mitch lamented.

“Don’t smile, be yourselves,” Mariah commanded, alternating long patient stares through the camera with flurries of firing away.

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

“Quit,” Mariah ordered, snickering. “Although you did give me about half an idea. Switch now: Lexa, you stand in the guy’s place. Mitch, be the bikini beauty.”

“Not sure I’m required to sit here and watch that kind of stuff,” Lyle huffed from behind his blue haze.
“No advice from the cheap seats, please,” retorted Mariah, who by now could get away with kidding him. The camera glided to her eye and in the next instant she was crouching as if starting a run. Mitch as well as Lexa watched the balanced footwork and the delicate fingering, the athletic devotional moments, being clicked off now in hundredths of a second, that he recognized from football and she from barrel racing. And Mariah caught them as eternally as figureheads of vessels moored side by side in foreignmost docks.

“That’ll do,” she quit shooting, sounding pleased for once. Lexa proclaimed that what she was about to do was walk. But before setting out on her daily route up to the Bench, she hung on until Mitch had gone over to see how his father was holding up, then sidled to where Mariah was putting away camera gear.

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

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

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

“If it can be done pretty fast. I have to scoot into Great Falls yet and talk to the curator about how many walls I get for my museum show.”

Mitch gandered down at this prestidigitator of newspaper, book, and museum wall.

“You have three jobs? Am I counting right?”

“Well, sure, more or less,” she shrugged those huntress shoulders at him.

He could feel the place in each week where “Coastwatch” had been. “It must be nice,” he muttered. Then motioned with his head, ever-so slightly, toward the bench where Lyle was perched, pensively fieldstripping his cigarette butt down to tobacco crumbs and a pea of paper. “Shoot this for me, would you? Him there at that picnic table.”

Mariah only had to glance over there before telling him, “Mitch, it’d only be wallpaper, a shot like that. I’ve got a whole bunch of better ones of him today and--”

“It’s one I want. For myself.”

He had an expression on his face she couldn’t read as she pulled her Pentax out of the bag again and advanced the film with a flick of her thumb.

“None of us had a camera here,” he said as much to himself as to her, “the first time around.”
Those weeks dragged and flew, both. I felt like I was running a visitor center, with a short-order kitchen on the side. The teenage ghost next door, Matthew, all of a sudden would crop up there by Lyle’s chair and the two of them would go chasing around on the Web. Or old cronies of Lyle’s from the town and around would drop in to say sorry for how sick he was, and about as many enemies would come by to make sure of it. He hadn’t yet reached the point of being bedridden, but pretty much chair-ridden, when Mitch and I couldn’t any longer put off taking turns at Seattle.

Imagine my surprise that the old burg had managed to feed itself in my absence. I took back my crew from Gretchen long enough to do a wedding and a non, remind everybody of my existence. Then just wandered for a day, sopping up the city. After Lyle’s place and The Springs, Seattle looked like kingdom come. And there was one bonus of showing up back there alone: Ingvaldson missed Mitch so much he was semi-glad to see me as a proxy.

The highway out of Twin Sulphur Springs was still warm from Lexa’s zooming return when Mitch began making his miles to the Coast. It was a long drive, and he still felt as if he was in a troubled dream. Geography ruled time; driving limitless across western Montana and riskily above the posted miles per hour through the Idaho panhandle
and eastern Washington, even so he had to call it quits for the day at a motel in the farming town of Ritzville.

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

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

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

Bingford didn’t waste any time.

“You don’t really want to hear me say ‘the bottom line.’”

“My bottom and your line, you mean, Bing?” Mitch gazed out at the ship canal and the Fremont Bridge. The bridge tender waved at him. Mitch wondered if the guy could use an assistant.
He plinked a finger against the pane of the window and looked around at Bingford.

"Last request before the blindfold goes on. Let me use a cube a couple days, do some phoning, E-mailing, downloading, upchucking, whatever. And I need to copy my morgue disks of Leopold and Marshall." Mitch smiled, with a bite behind it. "I may have to go up a mountain someday."

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

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

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

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So we never were a household you would want to patent. Mitch and Mariah kept nipping at each other, although it was what each of them was trying to do that kept getting in each other’s way as much as anything. That sister of mine could give the impression she had the attention span of a swizzle stick, but she was chronically working on pictures in her head. Busy as we all were, the coming and goings like those strings from finger to finger when you play cat’s cradle, there were times we tended to forget how many agendas Lyle had.
One of Lexa's self-appointed chores was to keep half an eye on Lyle cigarette by cigarette to make sure he didn't snooze off and set the whole place on fire. When she looked in on him now, he was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, but no smoke in the vicinity. An angled rectangle of sunlight from the bay window cast itself across his reclining figure from armrest to armrest, the cords and veins on the back of his hands standing out like junctures of old wiring.

"I hear your folks were Forest Service people," he said, eyes suddenly half open.

"Explains a lot."

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

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

"How far back?"

"Our grandfather was the English Creek ranger practically forever."
“Must have been one of his shavetail assistant rangers I built that firetower for.

Small world.”

Lexa studied him. “And?”

“Nothing, nothing. Just thinking back over some stuff.”

She came on in to his chair lair and put the back of her hand against his forehead, testing again for fever. By now he accepted such fussing over him, even seemed to expect it. For a relationship that had started off below room temperature, she reflected, the two of them spent a lot of time gauging how much heat was being given off.

“You’re not scorching,” she judged. “Better than this morning?”

“Was I supposed to be keeping track?” He followed that with a little laugh. He watched her, only his eyes moving, as she cleared away the latest filled ashtray from the arm of his chair. “You’ve got hands a lot like Adele’s were, only hers weren’t scarred up.”

Lexa stopped short, meeting his gaze. She wondered what roamed in the gloom behind those eyes. The wife topic, Mitch’s mother, he never once had brought up until now. More than sufficiently curious, Lexa asked:

“How come you never tried again, after Adele?”

He didn’t even blink. “I didn’t want to be one of those people who’s always got love trouble.”
The loneliness in that about took her heart out. "When did the world ever work like that?" she started.

One of the chronic knocks at the door put that on hold. *If this is another sympathy casserole...*

Lexa opened the door to a man who stood there looking uncertain.

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

"Sorry, this isn't--"

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

"It is too."

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

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

"But don’t let the customer start to lose interest, or--"

Lexa shook her head. "Let’s do this." She moved his desk telephone to where he could reach it beside his chair, then went out to the van and grabbed her cell phone. She headed toward the machine shed and the puzzled man waiting.

Lexa flung open the shed door, then began punching numbers on the phone in her palm. "Uh huh," she heard the man say at the sight of the Fort Knox of branding irons.

"Well!"

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

"Lyle? Ready to deal iron?"

"You bet."

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

"I’ll take a dozen," the man decided. "They’ll make fantastic Christmas presents."

"No, sir," Lyle said at once.

The customer gave a businesslike smile, recognizing the time to dicker. "Then what kind of lots do you sell them in? I suppose I could use twenty."
“Nothing intermediate-size, sorry,” Lyle’s tone was firm. “We’re dealing in little
lots or the whole collection.”

Lexa took the phone for herself.

“Since the hell when?”

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

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

“Not the way it works, Lexa. Give the guy back to me.”

She beckoned the frowning customer to the phone again.

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

“Eh, two, but I want some for other--”

“Four family members, then. So there’s four irons, if you want, and Lexa will see
to it you get nice ones. But you can’t just buy them like stuff for a charm bracelet.”
That night Lexa was in Lyle’s chair, fiddling with the RealAudio simulcast of the
On Rush Web site she had managed to find and nodding time to Marian McPartland’s slow
balletic fingering at the start of “Twilight World.” Jazz like a river of time flowing from the
past. Back there in Chicago the first other of any significance: Foster, one of Mariah’s
classmates at the Illinois Institute of the Arts. Lexa had the week in the big city while the
Stockyards Rodeo was on; Mariah was part-timing almost every night shooting accident
pictures for the City News Bureau, but still found ways to give her sophomore sister the
world—terrific photos of Lexa winning the barrel-racing finals at the Stockyards in record
time, and fixing her up with Foster. A Loop date, deep-dish pizza at the Uno and then
music at the Do-Re-Mi Club on lower Dearborn. Whatever the jazz equivalent of a maitre’d
is, he took one look at the pair of them—Lexa with her prom-date chest and cowgirl
freckles, Foster the finest young manhood Des Moines had to offer—and seated them up
next to the piano, inches from the end of the keyboard. They each ordered a beer of a kind
they had never heard of, and peeked around at the huge blowup photographs covering the
walls. Krupa on his drums sounding the wake-up call at Carnegie Hall in the Goodman
concert. Billie Holiday with eyes so deeply closed. And most of all the one of Louis
Armstrong with his cheeks and eyes as big as his horn, and above him the dance of
lettering of his creed, We all go do-re-mi, but you got to find the other notes
for yourself. When Marian McPartland came on, slight woman in a velvet pantsuit,
three-inch earrings dangling like dollhouse chandeliers, she sat down to the piano, glanced, a little startled, at Lexa and Foster and said, “Wow, music in the round.” Then shifted slightly sideways toward the audience and began to play. Lexa took it all in, vowed earrings into her life, vowed a life of high wire grace. She watched the astonishing hands, already knobby on a couple of the knuckles, terrifically long spatulate fingers, and the music came and came, Ellington’s velvet “Long Valley” and a Coltrane piece called “Red Planet” that indeed sounded from beyond the bounds of this earth and then one of McPartland’s own, “Twilight World,” of course. Came request time--Lexa definitely remembered this--and someone called out, “Love Supreme.” McPartland scoffed, “‘Love Supreme,’ that will be the day,” but caressed into it, her fingers at the black keys and sliding down to the seams of the white. When it was over, Lexa and Foster sailed out of the Do-Re-Mi in a certain state of ecstasy that they both knew was going to lead to the next. Desire under the El. They kissed further and further in the swaying seat of the elevated train on their way back to campus and Foster’s room--he had the collection of Rush Street lp’s--and then made love that was pretty good for amateurs if not yet supreme. She still believed you could do worse than lose your virginity to Chicago jazz. 

The phone made her jump. She clicked the WebTV and picked up the ringing instrument.
“It’s me, done with the dance of death Bing’s putting the paper through.” Mitch sounded a whole lot older. “Can you talk?”

“As they say in this town, yup indeed,” Lexa tried to cheer him up with her own tone. “Your dad turned in early tonight. Mariah went to the bunkhouse to mark up her proof sheets because there isn’t a flat surface anywhere in this house. I’m holding out against a solo swim in the springs—when you coming back?”

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

“Same.” She saved the news that Lyle was parceling out branding irons one per capita. “Mitch, I’m sorry as hell about no more ‘Coastwatch.’”

“Lex, listen, I found something out. Called every old source I could think of in the ‘crat bureaus, the Forest Service, Interior, the bunch. And here’s what: those reef leases are being put on a fast track. The big feds don’t want to take any more heat on energy giveaways, so they’ve bucked the decision down to the supervisor of the Two.”

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

“It’s a she.”

Into the unaccustomed silence at her end, Mitch resumed:

“But here’s the thing. I had our tax guy run all the numbers for me on Dad’s so-called finances. No wonder he’s got gravel and the Aggregate deal on his brain.”
It was his turn for expressive silence. *Don’t vague out on this, Mitch. The bastards don’t need to pipeline-and-road this country next.* Standing there in the gloom behind Lyle’s crammed desk, Lexa felt as if she was back in the tight confines of a fishboat. “You know, you don’t sound like somebody happy to have a surplus of gravel.”

“I’m not happy to give the world another gravel pit either, Lex,” his voice came reluctantly, “but without one the Rozier family finances look like a black hole.”

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

“Hi,” Mitch made his manners, “at least to the one of you who can hear me.”

“Yeah, hi.” Without a camera swaying somewhere on her, Mariah looked oddly lost out there on the lawn.

“Where’s Lex?”

“In Choteau.”

“Big-time shopping?” He started for the house and whatever razzing greeting his father would have for his return from the Coast.

“Mitch, she’s...she’s at the funeral home.”
He froze at her words. *Not even the hospital?*

Mariah took some steps toward him, long legs scissoring slowly. “Your dad didn’t wake up this morning. Lexa went upstairs and found him—” She didn’t need to finish. Almost to him, she halted and crossed her arms on her chest as if squeezing out the next words. “Damn it, there just isn’t a good way to say any of this. But I’m sorry, Mitch.”

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

“I hung on here,” Mariah was saying, tone as wan as her face, “we didn’t want you walking in cold on this, finding everybody gone when you came.”

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

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

The evening was all but night by the time the three of them returned from Choteau and Mitch’s making arrangements for his father to be cremated.

Lexa and Mariah quietly offered to fetch some fast food, giving Mitch a little time to himself, and he said that would be appreciated.
He flipped on the lights in the machine shed. The branding irons had not quite taken over every inch of the place. Here and there along the walls were tools and implements like sidelines players. He hauled out a sledgehammer about the weight of a small barbell. Next, found a steel fence-post driver, about twice that heavy. Then there was the anvil, big weight. He lined them up, stripped off his shirt.

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

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

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

Out the two of them trek to the faded Dodge truck and take off the high boxboards used to haul grain. In place of those went a set of $\frac{2}{3} \times 10$ boards along both sides of the truck bed, enough wall to hold rocks on the truck but low enough to toss over.

By the time the truck was ready, Sharpless and Loper and the third kid were on hand, managing sleepy grins when Lyle razzed them about how much work he was going to wring out of their sissy hides. The man wasn’t kidding. Lyle considered that teenage boys barely had the brains of sheep, but you could stretch their day’s work—twelve hours instead of ten if a field could be finished by keeping at it until dark—in ways that would make an older man keel over.
Up until this point in life it had not particularly bothered Mitch to be the rock boss’s son. His father made no exception for him in prodding all the work he could out of drifty teenagers, and whatever god is assigned to rocks knew that Mitch wanted no soft treatment—maybe there was something worse than your football buddies teasing you about being babied, but so far he couldn’t imagine it. Consequently he could not believe the fix he found himself in by the middle of this first morning, deputized to drive the truck and having to hold forth on the running board while Sharpless and Loper and the other one insisted on sluffing off, his father due back any minute and sure to fire those three so fast their heads would swim.

Gulping, Mitch shut off the truck and jumped into the field. He aimed himself toward Sharpless, who was ahead of him in growth, filled out like a bulging grain sack.

"Sharps, come on. I’m telling you, my old man will kick your asses down the road if you guys don’t get back to work."

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

“You’re right out here with us now, Mitchmo,” Sharpless crooned. “How’s your daddy gonna fire us and not you?” Loper giggled again.
Mitch gauged the two of them. Then he jumped Sharpless, half-wrestling half-mauling him, managing to land a couple of solid wallops before Sharpless could gather himself. When Sharpless did get his feet set in the loose soil of the field, he hit Mitch a painful whack on the side of the neck. Then as he drew back for another one, Mitch drove into him in a tackle stunningly perfect, his right shoulder into Sharpless’s midriff and his lowered arms lifting and dumping him. Mitch and his momentum must have carried Sharpless a full ten feet backward before Sharpless pancaked to the ground on his back.

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

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

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

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

“Little argument,” Mitch panted. “School stuff, right, Sharps?”
“It’s okay, Mr. Rozier,” Sharpless managed to cough out. “I asked for it.”

“The whole grab-butt bunch of you are asking for it here if you don’t watch out,”

Lyle started in on them, laying it to Mitch especially. When he wound down, he made
Mitch and Sharpless shake hands and go back to work together, a piece of Lyle sergeantry
that his son took in silence.

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure thing," came back from Sharpless, unleashing another home-run swing.

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

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

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

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

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

Sharpless came around a couple of times, tongue-tied with apology, and so morose that Mitch immediately felt better when he left.
It was his father who registered on the million hours of that summer. From his service in the military he had some feel for the monotony Mitch was going to have to endure. The first morning of haying season he came into the bedroom, his work-stained straw hat already on, to ask:

“How you holding up?”

“Okay, I guess.” Mitch smiled as best he could. He hadn’t yet found what he could cheerfully say to the father who had run over him.

For a minute or two they talked haying, Lyle bluffly complaining about the shortcomings of his crew as he did every year, Mitch maintaining how much he was going to miss being out in the field. Then Lyle suddenly said:

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

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

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

“Sure. I’d like to.”
With enough pillows propped under him he could see out to the machine shed where the haying crew assembled each morning, his father laying out their day for them. Dark good-looking Ferragamo, on vacation and downtime from the Black Eagle smelter. Fritz Mannion, the joker of the crew, bowlegged as a bulldog and as staunch if he wasn't drinking. Some new men every summer, this time Truax and Larsen with an e, and a young Hutterite man from one of the colonies that would cautiously hire somebody out if Lyle Rozier went to them and dickered just right. And others, all carefully recorded by Mitch in the big timekeeping pages. Creamy paper, with a light green crosshatch of little squares. When each crew member worked a day, a I went into that day's square on the line with his name; half a day, interrupted by a toothache or some such, a slash across the little box. No work, such as Sundays or the Fourth of July or Labor Day or what his father called AWOA (away without alibi) that day's square was left empty--Lyle's system, although Mitch was mightily tempted to write a goose egg in there, as more apt.

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

But gradually the haying progressed, and so did the boy with the shattered leg.

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

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

Then, his tone odd: “If you’re dead-set that I have to.”

“Hell, Lyle, you know how I hate to bitch against the kid’s bookkeeping and all, but...”

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

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

“Little problem on Fritz’s days, is all.”

“What problem? When?”

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

“Back there around the Fourth. I had it happen to me before, Mitch, on other jobs. A holiday comes around and maybe whoever’s keeping the days doesn’t get back to it right away after and something gets overlooked. It’s understandable.”

Mitch swung around to see where his father’s capped fountain pen was tapping onto the daybook page. The white gap, amid the crew’s steady cross-hatch of days labored, where the squares stood blank. July 4, 5, 6: Fritz’s three-day drunk. “Fritz, that’s when you were--downtown. You remember, Dad. You were all steamed up about
having to clean Donstedder's field of bales with only the buckrake and nobody to run the Farmall."

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

"Funny summer that way," Fritz put in, keeping his gaze on Lyle. "Broke down as much as we were. Hard to keep track, what's what. Don't think I'm laying blame on you, Mitch, hell no. Just that a man hates not to get paid for what's coming to him."

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

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

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

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

The ugly silence that followed, Fritz finally broke. "I tied one on, the day of the Fourth, sure. Practically unpatriotic not to, right, Lyle? But I hauled myself back into the hayfield the morning after, I'm sure of it."
A little ripping sound came as Lyle tore the check in half. "These things happen, Mitch. I'm gonna give Fritz that couple of days, that'll settle it. We'll call it three months even."

Fritz bobbed his head as happy as if he had good sense, Mitch thought, and told them he appreciated fair dealing like this.

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

As soon as he heard his father's pickup leave the driveway, Mitch swung himself around and headed back outside.

He crossed the back yard in a kind of wooden gallop, then maneuvered onto the low porch of the bunkhouse, and grabbed onto the doorway. Re-establishing his crutches, he swung on in to the long bareboard room. Summers past, he had been in this bunkhouse hundreds of occasions, roughhousing there at the corner bunk that was Fritz's by seniority, listening to Fritz and Ferragamo and his father fight the war over again, speculating on the longevity of each year's new crewmen in his father's scheme of things. This was the first time he was the biggest figure in the room.
Fritz peered up from rolling his bedroll. "Heard you coming. Sound like pegleg Siamese twins doing a jig."

Mitch said nothing.

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

"You know you're lying."

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

"Why'd you pull this?"

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

"You didn't deserve those two days. You were downtown drunk."

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

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

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

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

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

“Rockpicking all summer long? Doesn’t that thick mick know you’re supposed to stop and put something in the ground sometime?”
“It’s on sod he just plowed up,” Mitch defended. “What he wants is to get the worst rocks off before he plants winter wheat.”

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

“Sure I’m sure.”

His father stood there, waiting him out.

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

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

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

“You always drive that yourself.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He left in the morning for that solo summer. There, next to Canada, the trio of Sweetgrass Hills, actually small mountains aged down to the size of high-standing buttes, hovered on the plain like three competing tellings of the spy-glass hill in *Treasure Island.*

The west butte, whale-backed, Mitch watched make the weather for the area, clouds rising over its broad hump and letting down veils of silver-gray rain. Those showers would come and lightly test the thrust of the middle butte, shaped like a young woman’s taut breast, in a way he would see again years later when he walked in on Marnie, zonked on postprandial
weed and readying for sex, flat on her back atop the bedspread and bare from the waist up, brushing her own slow hand over her risen nipple. (Never after would Mitch scoff at yearning mountain men who dubbed winsome rises of peak "tetons\(^\text{62}\)."

Biggest and last, the eastern butte, where his mother's people, the Conlons, farmed on the skirt of soil. East Butte was the most complicated geographically and the most piratical: up on its circus-like set of summits, squinty goldstruck miners periodically pecked away at the one named Devil's Chimney, and the entire steep-sloped promontory sat like a frontier walled city elbowing the Canadian boundary. Mitch's imagination quickly was fueled with the fact that on the far side of the butte lay Dead Horse Coulee, boneyard of the done-in steeds of the first Royal Mounted Police trying to make their way from Toronto to frontier Alberta. Raffish history. For that matter, he knew from hints dropped by his father that there were likely old reasons, originating in bootlegging times, why Alf Conlon lived with his back to the border.

Here Mitch's mother had grown up, townless, ward of relatives. As soon as he arrived to this prairie archipelago he was aware of her life here, the same wind blowing on him, the triple islands of earth standing up into the sky around him as they had for her, his shadow as virginal on this lonesome ground as hers. And Alf and Edna Conlon, dried to their roles in life like pressed prairie flowers, doubtless were much the same as they had been then, too. Mitch really did not know much about them except that their awkward
hearts had rescued his mother time and again, and now they came through for him. Edna Conlon fed and pampered him in the auntish way of a woman guessing what a youngster might like. Alf Conlon turned him loose onto the Sweetgrass summer.

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

He picked rock as if determined to rid the earth of it. The first day he believed he would die on his feet, the stoneboat a hopeless raft in the mocking wake of glaciers. Places in the field, it was a standoff as to whether there was more soil showing than rocks. The stone bit at his hands differently from that of the Twin Sulphur Springs country—these were igneous, fire-formed countless eons ago when the Sweetgrass Hills were dunes of lava. Gasping loads of air into himself and shedding an equivalent in sweat, Mitch time and again took a look around at the scattered tons of stone, and went back at it. He
underhanded the football-sized rocks, hefted the larger ones with his hands under either
end as if moving an anvil. His aunt’s provisions saved him, the waterrug wrapped in a wet
gunnysack for coolness of drink and at noon the lunchbox glory of food, two thick
sandwiches and a couple of pieces of fried chicken and a cinnamon roll and an apple. He
ate then and every noon in the shade cast by the high rear tires of the tractor, around him
the first fresh country of his life. As if in rebuke of the plowed ground, the prairie next to
the field bloomed with Indian paintbrush, lupine, and Queen Ann’s lace. And there was
the sweetgrass, thin golden whipbunches of it, lending its vanilla smell as the sun warmed
it. With the flywheel monotony of the tractor shut down, the sweetgrass made a whisking
rattle as the wind blew through it.

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

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

"Sonofabitching death, Lex. You have to cry your guts out at it. Anybody’s."
The Divide
Lexa stepped out of the house to stretch her legs and for that matter her capacity for any more odd jobs.

*Whew. I'd forgotten. But when our mom went, we didn't have to dive right in to keep mountains of stuff from gaining on us.*

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

_Time we all came up for breath._ So, just to be out, hands in the top of her jeans pockets and her hat brim leading her on, Lexa strolled around to the open sunshine at the back of the house. The town was quiet, not attuned to anything except the welcome weather. Glad as she would be whenever they could clear their way out of here, she had to admit Seattle could use a little of this toasty torpor.

The clutter that greeted her in the back yard gave her pause, the truck body and the remains of tractors and three generations of haying equipment that she could recognize all fanned out across the rear of the property. "What people leave after them tells a lot," Mariah had insisted as she clicked away out here. If that was the case, Lyle must be an unabridged edition. Lexa picked her way past a much weathered stoneboat and stepped over an automotive axle lying in ambush. He had stayed contrary to the end, had Lyle. Mitch and she and the recording angel Mariah more than once talked over the dreaded hospital vigil awaiting them in Great Falls whenever Lyle’s condition went into final fade.
He’d made them promise there would be *no tubes, no jumper cables on me, hear?* but they fully knew that someone like him, stubborn to the last bone of his existence, could lie there for weeks as his rugged old body borrowed against itself. Instead, he checked out of life like an early-rising guest, while Mitch was on his way back from the Coast yet and Mariah out prowling the photographable precincts of dawn, so that she, Lexa, was the one to find him there on his back in bed, the light of morning hitting him full in the face.

To have him so suddenly gone—which she at first thought would be a somewhat guilty relief, the last tricky chapter of Mitch’s father over and done with--was proving to be not that simple. Good, bad, indifferent, better, worse, the confusing truth was she missed the old antagonist. Of course, about the damnable gravel or any of that, to the very end she still wanted to bat him across the ears. But the way he bit down and didn’t complain about the leukemia: she had to give him full credit there. And littler things kept cropping up in the scatter that was memory. Lyle’s incredulous bark of laugh, plainly the kind he hadn’t let out in many years, when she once wised off to him with *Aren’t you just more fun than a wet kiss.* Then that characteristic line of his, *I feel I can tell you anything, pretty much,* which she all along knew was horseshit but gallantly varnished horseshit. No, there was no quick disposing of Lyle Rozier.
She wandered on into the rust jungle. A time or two a day Mitch would come out here to stare at this derelict fleet, hands on his hips, then shake his head and go back inside. Lexa had to believe they were beginning to see progress on the long sorting of the antique from the antic. But in this situation loose ends seemed to proliferate. She could hear Mitch’s voice start up again in the house. He had been tooth and nail at desk dilemmas all morning long.

Right now he was on his third round of tag with Jocelyn’s voicemail, pining hopelessly for the dear gone days of facemail. (To wish to actually be standing there and see the living skin of someone you were trying to talk to, what a dinosaurian concept, Rozier.)

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

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

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

Shaking his head at it, quite as if the receptacle had asked to be taken out for a walk, Mitch pondered family ties and why the Roziers were full of attitudes like knots. For
Lyle Rozier, of all people, to have wanted his final act to be a snowy sift across a sylvan resting place in a Forest Service wilderness, his son still found as galling as it was mystifying. One more time Mitch was highly glad that in saying he would perform the ash task up on top of Phantom Woman, he hadn’t said when. (Maybe ballasting a deal with tricky footnotes was more of an inheritable trait than he had ever supposed.) And he felt uneasily relieved, if that was possible, that his father hadn’t wanted anyone else to know about that carry-me-back-to-the-old-fire-tower conversation. Not that Mitch himself felt it deserved to be a secret, exactly. It just didn’t need to be mentioned to anybody (Lexa who had already had to put up with forty kinds of Lyle whims, for instance) until the right time. Eventually the smarting scab of his father’s last-minute dickering for a wilderness place of repose would become only one more scar, the way he had it figured, and he could deal with the ashes then.

But in the old girl’s eye?

Mitch drew in a deep distasteful sniff which would have done credit to Lyle’s nasal capabilities, then coughed from it. The smell of cigarette smoke that stained the whole house while his father was alive was now the stale smell of cigarette smoke. Fresh air, maybe that’s what the overtaxed filial brain needed, in all this. He got onto his feet and went outside to hunt up Lexa.
Stalking rocks, Mariah traipsed up yet another hillside. This was one of those days in a photographer’s life when a desk job didn’t sound nearly so ridiculous. The slopes of these lesser benchlands south of town were hummocky, covered with diminutive mounds where tough wiry grass sprouted and not much footing in between. She had been on her feet for hours out here, trying for some semi-respectable shot to send in for Sunday but at the same time going back over Lyle. After every assignment, every photo subject, she had to shift gears and go on to the next. But the browy old man was turning out to be surprisingly hard to pull away from. Her set of photos of him kept ramming into her thinking even when she had plenty else to think about. Tricky matter, choosing how to show a person leaving life frame by frame. At least Mitch had worked up caption notes for her. Despite his less than charitable attitude toward her assignment, she was all admiration for how he had hunkered down last night and tapped out every needed word. Craft forgave much. It had been that way when she was married to Riley, who could get on her nerves just by walking into the room, but whose style when it came to turning out words, she lapped up. Typical. The guy and I, the only language we both speak is job.

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

She was in search of the right rockface. Out in this lower end of the bench country the glacier leavings were big lone stones called erratic boulders, the size of Volkswagen Beetles, deposited by the ice sheet when it pushed out of the mountain canyons. Such rough old displaced chunks often were rouged with orange lichens, so that they resembled decorated Gibraltars on the prairie. Shoot the right one from up close against the wavering horizon of grass, and it would make an effect like crossing Weegee with Van Gogh. She felt mildly guilty resorting to this. But you could slap anything inanimate on a Sunday page and readers would think it had more than everyday meaning. She knew a passable picture existed somewhere out here. She just hadn’t found it yet.

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

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

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

*I'm going to cry. I never cry.*

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

Colin had taken her home to meet his parents; it reached that stage. He and she
drove down from Mount Cook farther and farther south into red fertile hills, every so often

Mariah dandling a hand over to his in ratification of the scenery but also as if to make sure
of his wordless presence. Sheep raisers evolving into bed-and-breakfast providers,

Colin’s folks scrupulously put the two of them in separate bedrooms but adjoining.

Mariah entered into the occasion still having hopes for something lasting, still
shoving the difference in their ages as far to the back of her mind as she could.

Throughout her Fuji year of traveling, there had been the embassy types hitting on her with
invitations to tennis and evening functions. The guides and taxi drivers in twenty countries
asking, "Your husband is where?" (To which she would look them in the eye and say,
"He is in a business meeting with your secret police.") Colin with his mountaineer grooves
and his god bod was a more straightforward proposition than any of those.

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

And there the stupendous birds, yachts of their kind, came swooping in from Antarctica, constant thousands of miles of glide on the circular air currents to bring food to their young. Those jumbo youngsters perched on the cliff brinks, like dodoses resolved to pass the evolution exam this time around, lifting their wings over and over again in the testing wind along the New Zealand coast. And in would come another parent albatross with its ten-foot wingspread, sailing with the South Pole at its back. Mariah was enchanted, lit up through and through with this spectacle of wingspans beyond angels'. (If she was remembering her Brit Lit course right, Coleridge had to resort to serious drugs to reach this point.) To be out of the wind while she got her camera into action, she tugged Colin down onto a grassy spot behind the marker cairn of purplish stones on the crest of the headland. (Built by some fallen-to-the-bottom-of-the-world Scottish shepherder?)

Then she crawled out a little way into the blowing grass and settled down there in the tussocks, scoping the bear-cub-sized chicks through her long lens and turning her head upward to catch each whispered flight of the elder royals. She watched by the hour, Colin stoically bored behind her, the wind ruffling no feathers of aspiration on him.
Mitch found Lexa around back, where she had hopped up onto the somewhat still extant stuffed seat of the buckrake, lying back with her legs crossed on a random flange of the bare ruined chassis, hat down over her eyes as she soaked up sun. “Any luck?” she asked about his phone try on Jocelyn.

“The usual. Bad.”

Mitch came on over toward the buckrake, passing the dog with its nose down among black-and-white feathers, dozing and digesting. He reminded himself to go next door yet today; Matthew over there might like to have Rin.


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

“Mitch?” Lexa asked from under the hat. “I keep wondering, that whole thing yesterday where the funeral home gave you that package.” Plainly they didn’t often hand out modest contents for urns around here; Twin Sulphur Springs self-evidently had a bigger population of burial stones than citizens up walking around. And for that matter,
McCaskills themselves were tombstone types, generations of them interred when their time came, their epitaphs incised a century deep in the cemetery on the hill outside Gros Ventre. So it had tantalized her that Lyle, of all people, would spurn a monument for himself and go the ash route. “How did your dad come around to that?”

“Hell if I know.” Mitch treated himself to a sigh. “Cremation always sounded to me like a perfectly good idea, until he thought of it too.”

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

It startled a look out of Mitch as though she had caught him hiding a lewd item. After some moments he managed to say:

“He told you about that, did he.”

“Naturally. We were alone here, after that guy got to buy four whole branding irons, and I guess your dad was all excited. Anyway, next thing I knew he sat me down and was going strong on --”

“--the disposing of ashes,” Mitch finished tiredly.

“You know it. Made me swear not to let on about it to anybody else, keep his little last wish between him and you and me. It surprised the strudel out of me, that he’d want the ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ treatment. But I figured it’d be pushy to ask why.”
“Wherever it came from, Lex, I couldn’t get it out of him.” Mitch got up off the lazyboard and walked a little circle in the yard. “He and a buddy drove some nails into the fire tower up there when they were CCC kids, but he never had a good word to say for the Forest Service from then on. Asking me to pack his ashes up there sounded to me like one of his VFW Club jokes, until I saw he really meant it.”

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

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

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

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

“What are we talking in miles?”

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

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

“So, then. When?”