THE COAST

---

one

Lexa McCaskill ran both hands through her coppery hair, adding up appetites.

Non-wedding for 50, the job slip on the refrigerator door read. But fifty, when it came to party food, in her experience meant either forty grazers or sixty, depending on whether last-minute lightning strikes of invitations offset the no-shows. She still marveled at how people treated guest lists like poker hands, panicking when their hole cards sent regrets and then bluffing wildly to try to fill out the room. The last occasion she did the catering for, she had overheard the host

introducing his tai chi instructor around.

So if this is one that turns into a cattle-call, what do I fill them up with--bunny food or the gold-plated grub?

Now she remembered that tonight's was a lakefront young bunch, whose style was to balance their plates with a dab of this and an atom of that while comparing the latest paraphernalia of their health clubs. Go strong on dip dishes and let them eat their treadmill hearts out if the smoked salmon and the Swede balls run short, she decided.

Jotting down thing by thing the stickit list of her day, a habit picked up by osmosis from Mitch, she was restless to head outside. Out the kitchen window the beaming morning weather was almost enough to make a person forget Seattle's rainblotter reputation, and she hoped the sun would hold for Mitch while he flew back up the coast. He seemed to need all the warming up he could get, these days. Whoa, though. That sounds dangerously like a wifey, doesn't it. Lexa, at forty, long since had adjusted to a lot of life's doubletalk, but modern living-together still took some tiptoeing through the terms. When they started at this--when she and Mitch Rozier swallowed away what they had done to Travis--

name, Lexa Midgett; she knew that last name was not Travis's fault, but it hadn't helped--was what her parents' generation liked to term "presentable" and she herself had always calculated out as no more than a C+. To start with the plus side, there was the family flag of the McCaskills, their hair, an enviable royal rich red mane on her sister and a shading toward burnished copper in Lexa's page-boy cut. Another McCaskill attribute, though, Lexa could have done with less of, the expansive upper lip which must have come from generation after generation of ancestors' pursed expressions at their circumstances back in stony Scotland. The handsome gray eyes of that musing clan had not come down to her, only a faded sea color. Face a bit too square, and unplaned. Nose a bit saucy. It all added up to what she ruefully knew was a permanent kid-sister look, which had not been made any easier by growing up alongside Mariah, who had the power to cloud men's minds. The pair of sisters weren't even in the same contest on figure, Mariah lanky and shouldery as the McCaskill men had been while she was more sturdily consigned to their mother's side of the family, chesty and puckish. So far, Lexa had managed to stay a few judicious pounds away from stocky even though, to Mitch's constant

wonderment, she ate ~~all she wanted of~~ whatever presented itself.

Including now a contemplative tablespoonful of vegetable dip at eight in the morning, as she tried to figure out why it tasted so blah.

Right, whizbang ~~cook~~ chef, remember the trip into the backyard?

She cut the frilly shamrock leaves of the burnet off the stems, minced the tiny pile ~~of leaves~~ with a butcher knife, then stirred their green flecks mightily into the bowl of dip, the better to have the catered-to ask, "Ooh, what gives it that cucumber-y taste?"

After stowing the dip on the bottom shelf of the crammed refrigerator, she consulted its door again, the thicket of cartoons, stickits, snapshots, and other clutter there that served as the almanac, calendar, account book, album, and footnotes of life in this household. Here was a young, young Mitch pictured as a college sophomore, grinning rather queasily amid the fallen cornices at the University of Washington after the '65 quake. And there his favorite shot of her, on a rocky shore: copper hair against the salal, rubber boots and a yellow rainsuit, her arms full of beach find; peeking around her hip was the square of duct tape that reinforced the seat of the rainpants. Next, tucked alongside a forest

of grocery coupons, the latest postcard from Mariah on her Fuji Fellowship to wander the world for a year and do her photography. The Bay of Naples this time, the turkey. Shooting the ash outlines of the long-gone in Pompeii today, Mariah's handwriting on the back a slanting rain of ink. Makes a pair with the shadow burned into the wall at Hiroshima. Don't take any wooden bagels. Sibling love, M McC. Okay, Lexa told herself with a mix of pride and rue when those postcards came week after week, one McCaskill sister has it made. One to go.

Nibbling her lip, she arranged today's stuck-on chores down the door in the order she ought to get to them: pick up smoked salmon and salad makings, prepare the meatballs, prepare the veggies...

Prepare Mitch, for that matter, ~~occurred to her.~~ Her regular pourer, Brad, who like three-fourths of the males in Seattle dreamed of making his living by playing music, rarely got gigs but he had one tonight. So Mitch did not know it yet but he was going to have to bartend. From Lexa's point of view he was perfectly fitted to be a bartender, since he didn't ~~care for~~ indulge in alcohol. But he never liked taking orders, even if it was only "White wine, please." And tonight's catering job was way over

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east of Lake Washington, in the land of software that he called Cyberia, so that was not going to be popular with him either. Could be quite a night in catering history, she warned herself.

It about blew her mind sometimes, the long arithmetic of chance that had delivered her here, to this, to life with him. Her father would have said she took the uphill way around. But a day at a time, sometimes lately minute to minute, she and Mitch had been sorting it out, right from the morning when it occurred to both of them that her stay under this roof seemed to be more than temporary.

They weren't out of bed yet before Mitch broached, "This takes some getting used to, you know."

"What," she'd retorted, kidding but not, "getting laid without dating?"

"That I can probably adjust to," he chuckled. "I meant, more like playing house. How do we spli--divide up? Who's going to do the laundry?"

"Mmm, I see what you mean." They squinted at each other across the rumpled bedcovers. After a moment, Lexa said: "You do it for a year, then it'll be my turn."

"A year?"

p. 8B follows

"You've been doing it forever, haven't you? A year is shorter than forever."

"Big gain there, I guess. Checkbook?"

"I'll--all yours," she switched to, seeing his expression start to change. Jeez, she'd thought, a person has to be really quick at this stuff, it looks like. "Weekend breakfasts?" she tackled him with.

"I'll take...Saturday. No, wait, Sunday," he amended and got from her the grin that said right guess.

So was it always going to be guesswork? she had to ask herself these days. Frowning, she did one last inventory of the notes thick as shingles on the refrigerator door and peeled off the one that read Mitch Wed.-Fri. Berkeley confce/Hotel Durant--then Frisco/Jocelyn, wondering how that went last night, his get-together with his daughter the prickly pear.

---

two

"People who get their news from Doonesbury," this Halloween refugee who was his grown daughter made fun of him--Mitch had to hope it was fun--as the pair of them put on blades. "What happens when you and Lexa run out of refrigerator magnets?"

"Boopsie will have a Web site by then," he said, trying to catch up as Jocelyn began to coast on her rollerblades.

Around them the horde on wheels kept thickening as more skaters pumped across the Embarcadero and glissaded onto the sidewalk in front of the Ferry Building. Several hundred, Friday-nighted to their

pierced eyebrows and gaudy fingernails, already had congregated beneath the building's clock tower and were milling around in various states of balance like a ballet school having a costume party. "How rav!" and "Dressed for excess!" sang this tribe of recreational outlaws. In khaki slacks and rental black knee pads and a messageless yellow T-shirt, Mitch felt next thing to naked. One or another of Jocelyn's hues--orange tank top, chartreuse leotards, knee pads painted a disturbing fleshy pink--flared in the corner of his vision as he and she rode their skates around clumps of waiting bladers. Not that he couldn't have kept track of her just by the way she jangled. Wherever Jocelyn got her fashion news from, it dictated a wristwatch with an industrial-strength expansion band, deliberately too big so that it slid up and down her arm. At her wrist she wore a bracelet made of what seemed to be links of an old tire chain, to blockade the watch from flying off. Time slithering back and forth, clinking and clanking ominously, Mitch did not need to be reminded of.

"Whatever. Advertising and I are over, I'm jacked on marketing now," Jocelyn drawled her way back to where they had been in the conversation.

before he brought down on himself that accusation of hopeless Doonesburial. (On himself and Lexa, which doubly smarted. So much for nonchalantly reporting on your current household partner to the child of your ex-wife's spiteful loins.) All he'd done was confess he had never heard of Jocelyn's latest employer, something called Juice Up, then stepped in it deeper by asking if she had written any juicy ads lately.

"Juice Ups are free-standing health drink kiosks," she severely recited for his benefit, although he still couldn't tell whether this mantra was advertising or marketing. "They're like a Starbucks out on the sidewalk, only citrus. Hey, really, you never've tried one?"

"I don't want to seem anti-citrus or anything, but..." This marked Jocelyn's fourth change of occupation that he knew of. Eyes cool in their applied shadows, hers the not yet moulded face of a growing girl there behind the swaying hank of reddened hair that fell past her left ear to her collarbone, she nonethless had turned twenty-five, the same age her parents had been when they tripped into marriage and produced her, and she already was a couple of careers ahead of Mitch (even if he counted college football) and four ahead of her mother. Mitch wondered

whether Jocelyn's generation kept some kind of family album of their jobs.

"We rolling!" someone bellowed in echo of the tower clock's first deep note, and by its eigth chime, were they ever. In one single accelerating commotion the massed rollerbladers let themselves loose, each of them a polymer marble in the spill that rolled toward Fisherman's Wharf. Tourists in rental cars wildly pulled over at the sight of this meteor shower of get-ups, the closets of San Francisco airborne on low-flying naiads and masquers, leftover Wavy Gravys and incipient Courtney Loves, retro flappers, bare-midriffed bodybuilders in stark Spandex, seasoned exhibitionists and heart-in-throat ~~rookies~~ first-timers alike borne on boots speedy as runaway midget locomotives. Skating the rim of the city, the rolling multitude hung a left at Bay Street and aimed its thundering wheels toward Fort Mason.

Carefully matching Jocelyn stride for stride somewhere near the middle of the throng, finding the side-to-side push and glide rhythm of the exercise laps he'd lately been taking on skates, Mitch one more time told himself to quit worrying. Hadn't he biked across Iowa, kayaked Glacier Bay? As much of Mitch as there was, he needed to keep

fit or watch himself inflate enough to leave the earth.

So, when he called Jocelyn about getting together before he flew home and she pleaded this weekly habit of skimming through the city (grooved San Franciscan that she was, after a half-year here), he had been able to say he did some rollerblading, too. A time or two, anyway.

"That'll work," she replied, which it had taken him a moment to decipher as an invitation. Or a challenge.

And now they were on the long straight glide past the Marina, where necklaces of lights out in the bay showed off the Golden Gate Bridge, when from nowhere a bareshouldered young man in salmon-colored overalls scooted up between Jocelyn and Mitch. Asian lithe and American friction-free, he seemed paused even as the three of them rocketed along side by side by side. "Primo outfit, Joss," he yelled above the chunga chunga chunga sound of urethane wheels. Appraising Mitch and their family resemblance, he gave Jocelyn a knowing look, left the advice "Be your blades!" and sped ahead like a breakaway hockey player.

Of the next many minutes of pushing and gliding, pumping and striding, Mitch later could summon up the amplified wail of a sidewalk singer

at the corner of Marina and Divisadero unsuccessfully bombarding the whizzing procession with "JeSUS is the waayyy, the truth and the light!" and then only a blur as the skating swarm honed in on the Palace of Fine Arts, a hundred bladers at a time peeling into its rotunda and joining hands to form a whirling roller snake there beneath the odd old umber orange-squeezer-of-Caesar dome, Mitch in some surprise at finding himself holding hands with a character who had a kazoo in his mouth letting out bleats like a dwarf foghorn as the merry-go-round of skaters spun. Then, centrifuged out to the columns around the rim of the rotunda, Mitch propped gratefully beside other bladers catching their breath (in his case, there was a lot of breath to catch) as bottled water popped into every set of hands, Jocelyn chugging down copious slugs of hers (eat your heart out, Juice Up, registered on Mitch) before the final six miles through this lovely mischievous city which from Lombard Street onward was, God help the beginning rollerblader, a labyrinth of hills.

Ahead of Mitch and Jocelyn as they made the turn off Lombard, the little red reflectors on the back of skaters' helmets straggled up, up, up in the night like Christmas lights strung too thin. A vast

apprehension sucked into Mitch. The conference he had been covering in Berkeley was called "Thinking Like a Mountain: The Place of Nature in a New Millenium." If he thought like the ski-slope street rearing in front of him at this instant, the mental result would be a hideous subterranean giggle at how much trouble humankind still had with uphill.

While he clambered at the slope in imitation of Jocelyn's short digging strides, what he tried not to think about was how many times his pounding heart had already beat, in fifty years.

Huffing and puffing, he floundered to a halt at the first plateau of intersection when Jocelyn called over to him, "Ready to skitch?" When a bread truck came laboring up the street, she grabbed onto the rear bumper, Mitch following suit, each sitting back on their skates for the hitchhike up the hill. They passed rowhouses of all pastel flavors, the corner of every block given over to coin laundries or tiny restaurants with prices more savage than panthers. Oh, San Francisco, dear and doomed, stacked so prettily on tectonic fracture. Mitch knew he ought to be writing in his head, tucking away fragments for use when he

fine-boned features, Jocelyn had been handed his bulk. Other than that, the only gene this father and daughter seemed to share was the shape of a rollerblade wheel.

They swooped out of the tunnel into a garlic precinct of North Beach.

"Hey, wait."

Breathing heavily, very heavily, Mitch managed to halt Jocelyn at the first street corner. "Let's watch, a minute."

"You like to watch?" Jocelyn said in insinuating imitation, but stayed next to him, turning in restless circles.

Skaters shot out of the tunnel in platoons, Mitch saw, a sorting of some kind occurring for this passage. Here came pairs of women in shimmy dresses holding hands, and now men in sequins line-dancing.

And next the half-Asian young Nureyev in overalls again, impossibly coasting sideways, even more impossibly each foot pointing an opposite direction in line with his spreadeagled arms, a human parallelogram from shoulder blades down to rollerblades as he drifted by like a beautiful winged statue passing. "Go ninja, Joss!" the flat knee-bent

form of him called out as he cruised around their corner in an effortless lean and set sail through Chinatown for Union Square and the stretch turn toward the Ferry Building.

As further skating contingents erupted from the tunnel like circus acts, Jocelyn gradually stopped twirling on her blades and settled into watching beside Mitch. Knowing better, he still couldn't help seizing the moment as a hope, maybe, that she was putting away the arsenal of resentment. This made twice that he and she had got together this year, (Seattle and here.) He would need to think all the way back to be sure, but twice seemed to him a new record in the twenty years since Marnie catapulted herself and the kids to Key West. ("Why'd you stop there?" Mitch had howled down thousands of miles of phone line at her. "Wouldn't they let you behind the barbed wire at Guantanamo?") Before that there had been a determined try at split custody but it turned out to be cruelty to small creatures, the bewildered kids never with either him or Marnie long enough to know where their next beddie-bye would take place. And so Mitch, knowing he would be condemned but quite used to it from life with Marnie, gave over daughter and son to her and away she went with them as far as she could

and still have the U.S. Mail deliver child support checks.

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Parked on her blades next to Mitch, Jocelyn eyed him, wondering why he felt he had to do this, make like he wanted to connect after all this time.

You're some late, Dadspace. You and Moms made your choice way back there. Now I'm supposed to what? Say "No prob, I never did want a father around anyhow, Momso's hairball sailboarders did just fine?"

But cool as she tried to be, she kept noticing his sopping wet T-shirt, the sheen of sweat rolling down out of his curly black hair, the seismic rise and fall of his chest. He looked buff enough, for his age. But taking some more time here on the corner probably wouldn't hurt. She didn't want him going dead in the midst of this. She did not want that.

#

He heard Jocelyn rattle a bit beside him. Joss, the kid in overalls called her. Chinese for idol, but all Chinese idols were plump as butterballs, were they not. What, Mitch wondered now, had he and Marnie been thinking of when they picked a name as breakable as 'Jocelyn'?

Evidently the same thing as when they christened her brother 'Laurits' and almost before he was done teething he was stuck with the nickname 'Ritz'.

But it wasn't nicknames that nicked a family to death, was it. He closed his eyes a moment, against the record of domestic misadventure brought west to him again with Jocelyn's move to his coast. Bad tempers and worse sighs, Marnie's toy store of a brain versus his infatuation with whatever story he was working on that week, the mattress the only surface in the house they put any effort into, the two kids too soon-- he could read it off like an old traffic ticket: 'Speeding into marriage while under the influence.'

Now this other traffic. He was about to declare himself ready for tonight's last lap of rollerblading when the stench hit his nose, quick as the flash of match next to him.

Over the cigarette she just had lit, Jocelyn blew out the wooden kitchen match from the bullet-like container she carried on her belt, Mitch involuntarily yanking his head back from the sulphur aftermath.

"Sorry," she offered in a peeved tone, shooing her smoke away from

him. "Didn't mean to second-hand you." It has come to this, he noted, people who will not give you the ice off their heart apologizing for letting their cigarette smoke touch you.

Jocelyn's surprise showed when he grinned grimly and said:

"What, never been around anybody who's allergic to matches before?"

Mitch was ~~inordinately~~ pleased to see she couldn't tell whether or not he was kidding. Given their family history or lack of, it couldn't hurt for him to be a different specimen than the one she had always been able to label simply Missing Dad. For both of them to know less about each other than met the eye, and start over from there.

After all, the cartoon collection on his and Lexa's refrigerator wasn't Doonesbury, it was The Far Side.

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three

Whether these particular mountains were thinking or not, they were showing unclouded brows and parading unconcernedly past the right-hand wingtip as Mitch flew back to Seattle in the morning.

Lassen and Shasta, Jefferson and Hood, Adams and Rainier, the fire alps of the Cascade Range shone in the sun one after another, dormant pyramids of glacier and snow higher than hell and once upon a time as potent. He knew that on a day this drastically clear even the lonesome cone to the north, blue-white Mount Baker, would be out and waiting to make its appearance when the plane hooked around above

Lake Washington into the SeaTac landing pattern.

More than willing to be seduced by every blessed one of them rather than tackle the Berkeley conference lurking in the PowerBook on his tray table, Mitch discovered over Shasta and Lassen he could catch a rare good look at each volcano's birthmark, its frozen scar of crater, by craning over the woman in the window seat. Elderly and teak-colored, Indonesian to judge by her batik raiment, she watched him with the flat attention of a sentry, which he was used to. Particularly on airplanes, people seated next to Mitch reacted as though they were being forced to share their picnic blanket with a St. Bernard.

It was on the tip of his tongue to attempt to tell her he had a son teaching English in Jakarta, but even if she understood, there were dead ends immediately ahead in that kind of conversation. Where in that city did Ritz live? No idea. Was he married? Not by last secondhand report. If Jocelyn was icy about Mitch taking himself off the battlefield of their childhood, Ritz was the silent Antarctica. No, the Rozier version of fatherhood would not do a thing for international relations. Mitch gave the woman a smile that turned out not to be

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worth the effort either, and went back to peering down at the mountains.

Edgy and rapt, shifting in the constraint of the plane seat, he could not escape the feeling that he was in suspension in more ways than one. He had been writing "Coastwatch" every week for more years than he dared to count. Had tried his damnedest to grope his way among all of it sprawled down there--the sea-bent coastal capes, the snake routes of rivers, the strangely serene cliff-faces of dams, the faltering forests, the valleys going to suburbs, suburbs, suburbs, the slumbering but restless earthquake faults, the cloud-high mountains made of internal fire. So how about, for a change, this chance to actually watch the coast, peep from here at thirty-five thousand feet down onto the wreath-green lovely untrustworthy →

Pacific littoral, the jagged edge of America. The Left Coast. The Sandal Republic. Home for him ever since he had, well, left home. So what if Bingford was going to give him freckled hell for not finishing up the Berkeley column by the end of today. He knew Cascopia's deadlines at least as well as Bing. Mitch shifted savagely in his seat again. A Cascopia deadline was the one instance he could think of, any more, where time was not truly lethal.

Impassive, the woman from Indonedia watched him. His big trunk of body, big face like the ugly Frenchman. A man so big should not squirm.

Mitch was scrooched around trying to find Mount Jefferson under the wing, ~~the southern~~ first tall sentinel of the Oregon peaks, when his shoulder came under assault from the aisle. The beverage cart squeezed past, making him tuck even more of himself into the ~~inadequate~~ ridiculously little seat space. Yow. Parts of his body he had not been in touch with for years were letting him know they resented last night's rollerblading escapade.

Any pangs on distant daughter Jocelyn, muscular or vascular, this morning? Didn't he wish he knew.

Now a food cart bumped past him, in surprise convoy with the beverages. He had lost track of whether there was some shred of government regulation left or the airline this early in the morning was simply shamed into dispensing something resembling breakfast. Whichever ~~was the case,~~ up at the front of the cabin a stick-thin young woman with the dark composed face of Hindu statuary began handing out food trays while an ash-blonde male offered coffee. Flight attendants; among his other passages through history Mitch went back to the old evil days of dating stewardesses. Every time he was aboard a plane he could not help but recall the valkyrie from United who leaned her unforgettable chest against him in the midnight bar at The Three Coins and suggested that he think of her as more than a stew, she was anything on the menu.

Yah, well, those son-of-a-gun Sixties, as Ingvaldson would say. Mitch made himself push away the old days, leaned over for more sightseeing but the plane was between volcanoes, and so, with a grimace, he faced his PowerBook.

Scrupulously he logged in the $2.35 that a cup of so-called coffee had cost him in the San Francisco airport. Even before the laptop computer, Bingford accused him of being the only person on the paper whose expense account was carried out to the third decimal place.

As he started scrolling his Berkeley notes up onto the miniature screen, something like glazed panic set in. What he had from the various speakers sounded like quotes from parrots who had been eating dictionaries, biome this and paradigm that. Maybe he was growing jaded, but the Berkeley sessions seemed to him one more case in the raging epidemic of conferencitis. The place of nature in a new millenium, right. What would conference throwers do without the year 2000 on our cosmic odometer?

A bit frantically he started searching the storage of his PowerBook for something, anything, melodic enough to lead with.

TIM, he punched up, and there it materialized on the little screen, "thinking like a mountain," Aldo Leopold his very self after wiping out wolves in New Mexico, turning himself around to preach holy caution in messing with things of the wild. "Only the mountain has lived long enough

to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf."

Mitch mulled trying something comparing the drone of conferences with wolf howls, and discarded it. He scrolled on through his laptop Leopoldiana:

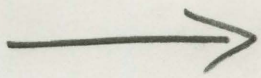
"...Reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes....I was young then, and full of trigger-itch..."

Been there, too, thought Mitch, at least the young and itchy part.

He hunched, uneasily transfixed, in the plane seat, thinking about the sainted Leopold trying to murder the last wolf. One time Mitch had interviewed a plant geneticist, a bitter-mouthed elfin woman tucked away in a federal agency for thirty-some years, who told him the human brain had been the equivalent of a nuclear catastrophe for all other life on earth. "We are a worldwide epidemic that causes extinctions," she had said in a teaching tone that he greatly resented at the time. "Smallpox was nothing compared to our effect on other species." Mitch had reeled out of that bilious government-green office realizing he would never be able to translate that into →

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print. Quote that mordant federal lifer, yes, put what she had said into newsprint in handy boxes on every street in the greenest corner of the nation, thrust her message into readers' hands, rub it into their



eyes; and the next week, the next day, the next hour, poof, human behavior would send something else extinct. Yet you can't go around deploring brains.

Mitch dry-scrubbed his eyes with both hands, drawing another stare from his Indonesian neighbor. He bit his lip, wishing his mind would quit playing tick-tack-toe with his work this way. What is this? he wondered. Columnlock, the environmental writer's equivalent of traffic gridlock? Whatever was slouching back and forth in his head, it was about time it ~~got~~ cleared out of there. Lexa would be sure to point out to him that a trip to the San Francisco Bay area isn't most people's idea of hard duty.

"Breakfast?" the thin flight attendant asked him in a Julie Andrews accent.

He shook his head against the choice of omelette or Cheerios and tried to go back to tapping out this week's "Coastwatch." But his seatmate kept saying something in a low singsong which the flight attendant couldn't seem to catch. They both waited for Mitch, bulking between, to mediate. He leaned over the Indonesian woman enough to hear "zhick-ken"

in a lovely soft chant.

"No chicken," Mitch told her as distinctly as he could. The woman looked at him with timeless South Pacific reproach.

Figuring "omelette" was beyond all their acting repertoires, he glanced around at the flight attendant, then turned back to his seatmate and tried "Eggs?" He made an approximate shape and size with his thumbs and forefingers. The woman by the window seemed to indicate reluctant agreement.

He went back to nature, so to speak, in his PowerBook. In a matter of moments, though, a strange angry crunching broke out beside him. He peeked sideways at the neighboring tray table. Thanks to Mitchell Rozier, Mr. Sign Language, the flight attendant had given the woman Cheerios.

He drew a resolute breath and concentrated into the handmirror-sized computer screen.

The mountains kept winking through the window at him, the old devils.

He sneaked a look at the sky-cutting outline off the wingtip now. Mount Hood, the mainsail of Oregon's mountains, standing there

spanking-white. Beneath the plane would be Portland, the Mister Greenjeans of cities, and the pewter beauty of the Columbia River.

Mitch felt himself tensing, dreading what was coming again. Where were clouds when you needed them?

He forced himself to wait a minute, then another. Another. One more.

Then abruptly lifted himself to see past the teak-skinned woman, downward.

Mount St. Helens, the blown cone, the reminder that volcanoes no matter how dormant are still loaded and cocked, had come under the wing now.

Mitch stared in sick fascination at the broken crown of St. Helens, the gaping bowl of crater and the ragged blown-out north half of the mountain. The lateral blast of the eruption had leveled forests for seventeen miles, sandblasted the soil off Coldwater Ridge six miles away, put up an ash cloud that blotted the sun all the way to Idaho, and churned millions of tons of rock debris and lava out over the blast area.

Juanita Trippe was still under there.

—

DROP CAP

The two of them had been taking turns at the camp on Coldwater Ridge, the simmering volcano was naturally Mitch's beat but Trippe was goofy for the mountain. She liked to brag that she had been in the first Girl Scout troop to climb St. Helens, even though that would have been an excursion really, a Sunday outing even for twelve-year-old girls to trudge up this most perfect and gentle of the Cascade cones, America's convenient Kilimanjaro. The spell held, though. The mountaineering that Juanita Trippe later did with like-minded female climbers who called themselves WOT expeditions--Women On Top--she always trained for on St. Helens.

When the mountain started acting up in the spring of '80, Trippe took it personally. She shed herself of the oxymoronic title of Cascopia's business manager and demanded in on the volcano story. Mitch didn't know a base camp from a bassoon, so it made sense for Trippe to set things up for them on Coldwater Ridge where they could monitor the monitors, the put-upon feds and excited university scientists who had set up shop there just outside the "red zone" that had been evacuated when the mountain's harmonic tremors

and burps of ash started getting interesting. Trippe more than pulled her weight in the watch on the volcano and she was a proven outdoors photographer, had a climber's alert eye for shifts of light on the face of a mountain. The Pompeii Bureau, they called themselves, and Mitch would remember those weeks as a sweet streak of writing, no environmental on-the-other-hands about a rumbling ten-thousand-foot peak.

He also was frankly relieved that his and Trippe's two or three after-party forays into bed ~~with each other~~ together, years before, had not led anywhere. Juanita was muscular, spoiled, bawdy, rich, coldblooded, and indefatigable, and she reminded him of a big-hat halfback he was glad enough to play beside but could stand to be without after the season.

She cheerfully bossed him off the ridge that last night. The volunteer Lighthawk pilot who was going to help Mitch tally up clearcut logging on the timberland around St. Helens could only fly early the next morning, Sunday. "Go, you big dink," Trippe instructed. "We can swap back at noon. Weather's good, I want to climb out early for some dawn shots anyway." That brilliant May morning Mitch and the Lighthawk pilot scoped out clearcuts--Mitch knew with satisfaction that

it would make a good gruesome "Coastwatch" piece after the shaking mountain resolved itself; portions of the forest were so chopped up it looked like the earth had the mange--and when they were through with that they buzzed St. Helens, mosquitoing for twenty minutes or so around and around the cone, before flying back to Seattle.

He and the pilot were barely out of the Cessna on the landing strip at Boeing Field when they heard the boom. It signaled Pompei-in-the-forest.

At observation posts and in campgrounds and on logging roads and at picture-taking perches like Coldwater Ridge, vigil-keepers caught in the same moment with Sunday larkers, they died and they died. Died they all, who were encamped along the north rim of the red zone as the power of Mount St. Helens welled over it, to a sum of fifty-seven.

#

The place of nature in what new millenium?

Ask Juanita Trippe, Mitch could not help but think, down there buried a millionfold with her camera in her mummified hand. Times like this, as he stared out at the blast from the past that was Mount St. Helens and then the giant fire kettles named Adams and Rainier and next

the inchworm traffic of Seattle on freeways and bridges underlain with earthquake faults, site after site where the old brute physics of the planet someday were going to have their say again, he had the terrifying suspicion that he was beginning to understand extinction, from the inside out.

At last the wingtip traced a great curve in the air, the northern horizon was revealed, and there Mount Baker waited.

Descent. On an airplane laden with people intent on their sales meeting at Boeing, their downtown Seattle seminar on escrow, their Army barracks at Fort Lewis, their tour ship to Alaska, their software presentation in Redmond, this flight where he was passenger 21D watched by a woman the color of an ancient tree, Mitch sat in a trance in his aisle seat, homeward bound to the surly earth.

there in the greenish water, seeming to pant, to muster themselves.

So why am I losing him, the sonofabitch.

Only a bit at a time, and there was more than a handful of Mitch left, for sure. But as a spousal equivalent lately he seemed to be evaporating, little by little in the way he came home edgy instead of eager; in a cat-kicking mood, so much so that Lexa had briefly contemplated getting a nimble tom for him to take it out on. The weight of the world on him alone, Mitch seemed to think. She had learned that was a formula for discouragement, and Mitch and discouragement were not a nice sight together. He was the kind who waded into his work up to his neck, then was always surprised when some rogue wave tossed unpleasantness up his nose. She could imagine other cutouts of life Mitch once could have fit, running a bookstore in Missoula or teaching high school English in Paonia, working the job to death in sorrowless surroundings. But times were always going to be tricky, any more, for a gospel such as "Coastwatch."

She stayed longer than she intended watching the exhausted salmon, survivors paused behind the glass wall.

---

five

"Seen Mitch?"

"I thought he's in Birkenstockley, doing the green thing."

"He's supposed to be back for this morning, the mutt." Bingford retracted his head into his office impatiently.

The Cascopia building was in the Fremont district, where the Sixties still roamed. The hempen necessities of life were available in Fremont, plus cafes with good rowdy names such as The Longshoreman's Daughter, plus deluxe junk shops, plus bars that were museum pieces from the days when hair was Hair. Indeed, the neighborhood merrily

ran the gamut from Lennon to Lenin, a twenty-foot-high bronze Eastern European clearance sale item depicting Vladimir Ilyich forging into the future with rifles stacked slyly beside him, but now peacefully surveying traffic at a particularly funky Fremont intersection. In such environs, employment at the weekly newspaper Cascopia was a lot like manning the drawbridge against the slick downtown Seattle skyline, for the building squatted at the north edge of the old steel bridge over the ship canal; only the bridge tender, making the twin halves yawn open by means of counterbalances, sat closer to the moat. Both Bingford and Mitch liked the racket of the Fremont Bridge's traffic gates clanging down and its girdered halves groaning and humming as they labored upward, on the best days many, many times. Others on the staff either quit in a hurry or made a major aural adjustment; the "Cityscape" columnist, Moira Mason, had been wearing earplugs for ten years now.

At the moment the bridge was up on its haunches more or less as usual, letting a single sailboat putter through while cars stacked up for a mile, and Mitch was killing time and dietary intentions at the Espresso A Go Go stand until he could stroll across to the office.

on the shore. By now enough of the great forest had been thinned away to let in a metropolis of two million people, and still coming. Seattle on the margin of America. the consummate doodler. The place had given the world some dervishes of the electric guitar, connoisseur lessons in coffee, The Far Side, airplanes by the stratosphereful, and now the alchemies of software. Twenty-five years ago it had given him "Coastwatch" to write, then ever since yawned, "So what?"

So he was working in a field where there was a saint every foot of the way and even so the world was turning out to be pavement. Not exactly the most inspiring thought for this week's column. Mitch fired a bank-shot of his crumpled coffee container into the recycle bin, the ghost chorus of his trade keening at him. Ed Abbey smoldering in his grave in the slickrock desert, Stegner magisterially whopping the nail on the head in every sentence of his hallowed "wilderness letter." Spooky Bob Marshall, walking himself to death in the mountains he so adored, forty-fifty miles a day, but what an epitaph: "How much wilderness do we need? How many Brahms symphonies do we need?" And back beyond them the sweet ponds of Thoreauvia. The whispering pines of Muirland. St.

feathered Francis, if you really want to go back. Gospel choirs of rhetoric, absolute anthems you could quote on behalf of the planet; whatever the hell else Spaceship Earth was running out of, it didn't lack for chaplains. And in Berkeley where Mitch had just come from, in this time on the cusp of the next millenium, academic bigfoots had spent two days in airless rooms arguing about the nature of the word "nature."

Clanging announced that the drawbridge was going down. Mitch headed across, envying Trixie her job.

#

Wishing ~~he was~~ himself spraddled against a mountain wall of granite somewhere, Bingford watched down at Mitch through his office window. Huge color photos of mountain climbers spidered onto crags covered the office's other three walls. Look closely, and in every case the wiry dangling man with a flaming sunburned face was Bingford. Successions of Cascopia staffers, where a generation amounted to around three years, had been stunned to see their editor/publisher arrive back from Denali or Acencagua or Everest with a face like a campstove victim. Gradually the effects of sunglare, cold, and wind at extreme elevations would peel away, and the freckles would crop out again. Watching this over

the years, Mitch had wondered if Bing added a freckle for each conquered mountain, the way fighter-plane aces painted downed victims on their cowlings.

At this moment Bingford was hesitating, something he was not often afflicted with. He found himself not wanting to go through with his intention to call Mitch in. What good would it do? By now the two of them knew each other's lines of argument like sailors knew rope knots. Bingford decided he didn't need the extra hassle of Mitch this morning.

Still, something kept him at the window, unable to tear away from watching Mitch come across the bridge in that peculiar tender-toed floating way he moved. Heft trained into grace, like the Lippizaner stallions Bingford had seen perform in Vienna during his trip to climb the Eiger. The mutt, he's always had some moves, the editor in Bingford speaking now. At his best, Mitch could write a column with a skateboarder's skill, with an eye for odd angles and fast surfaces. But he was a long way from his best, lately.

"Old times, guy," Bingford said quietly. "Golden moldies, you and me."

#

DROP CAP Spired and wooded and not a little stoned, the campus sprawled amid the 1960's like a disassembled cathedral. The University of Washington, thirty-five thousand students strong and restive as a mutinous barracks, was the upper left corner of the battle banner that was writhing through Berkeley and Stanford and Santa Cruz and Madison and New Haven and Morningside Heights, wafted by the highs of drugs and dorm sex and soon to be blown jetstream-high by the storm of opposition to the Vietnam war.

Mitch Rozier had come for football.

He was raw then, but he knew it and figured there might be a cure for that in a place like Seattle. His athletic scholarship had come like a bingo jackpot--the big kid from a small town playing his one card in life and having it pay off at the Shrine Game, the high school all-stars on the other side of the line strewn like train wreck victims in the wake of Mitch's three touchdown runs. In the stands was Washington's most junior assistant coach, assigned to recruit the longshots, and even though this fired-up running back was from some dinkyville, he liked the kid's unexpectedness on the field, his quicksilver quality; you didn't often see that in a

→

fullback. And so Mitch arrived to the green and gray city, the Elysian campus, and the bootcamp-like football practices of the Washington Huskies. The industrial brand of football played in the Pacific Coast Conference was savage compared to what he was used to, but he did not back off from it. Mitch was very sizable, and as determined as he was large. He had done enough chores in his life to blow off the robotic scrimmages and drills. Most of all, he knew a free ride into college and the future when he saw one.

After where he had come from, college was Coney Island. There had never been a ~~feeling~~ sensation quite like it in his life before, but as best Mitch could determine, he was undergoing something like amok evolution. Hurrying from class to class, he would have sworn he could feel one part of his brain grow, then another: exactly like that Biology 101 example of the chickadee's ability to expand one lobe when winter came and a greater number of feeding spots had to be remembered. For a while it surprised him every time, and then the surprise became reliable, that he all at once could stretch his mind around some bigger thing. Just then the UW campus

had some hot departments where things were about as sizable as they could get. History--God, man, over in History one of the profs had kicked William F. Buckley's fancy butt in a debate over Vietnam. And in English, to his and the department's mutual astonishment, Mitch found home. The white but Afroed TA for his Writing Skills section openly winced when he bulked into her classroom, but as soon as she discovered this was one football jock who seemed incurably curious about the insides of sentences and would rework a piece of writing to death, she fed him ~~reading~~ books. A nature freak herself, she turned him on to Loren Eiseley. To Stegner's Wolf Willow. To Rachel Carson, not just Silent Spring but The Sea Around Us. To the UW'S own just-dead star, Theodore Roethke, who had held forth in the exact classroom they met in; greenhouse ghost that he always was, Roethke ranted great whispers of poems through the windowpanes to Mitch's tuned-up ear. Down the coast, the human hawk Robinson Jeffers still lived--Mitch practically groaned sexually when he encountered the line the wind-struck music man's bones were moulded to be the harp for. It was a time when zinger sentences walked the earth.

Football, though. What the UW coaching staff wanted at fullback was a kamikaze short-gainer and what they had in Mitch Rozier was an excess of IQ for that role. Kranski, the starting fullback, was barely organized enough to put his socks on, yet turn him loose on third down and short yardage and he would ram into the line like a runaway ox. The second-string fullback, Buford, ran those plunges in his own can't-hurt-me-if-I-don't-think-about-it fashion. But Mitch, to his own revelation and certainly the coaches', always tried to fine-tune that situation of fighting for inches of gridiron; his timing was too fine, hitting the hole over left guard with precision but if the defensive line delayed the guard any--if an atom of dirt delayed him--the guard would find Mitch running up his backbone in the pigskin equivalent of a rear-end collision. It became apparent to all concerned: the only chance for the name Rozier to be inserted in the University of Washington starting lineup was if Kranski and Buford collided in the shower room and both fractured their tibias. For precisely such

a possibility, of course, a major football program needed a battalion of bodies, and nobody much minded Mitch being kept on the team as backup to the backup fullback, especially Mitch.

Busy lighting up in every way he could think of, came the day when Mitch went to football practice after his first experience with marijuana half scared to death that it would somehow show on him, he'd be singled out of the warmup drill by one of the assistant coaches screeching, "Hey you, Dope Fiend, outta here!" When no such thing occurred, it quite rapidly dawned on Mitch: these old white-socks guys were <u>afraid to know!</u> Within days he confirmed this by showing up in the locker room wearing a Levi jacket with a peace symbol painted on the back (he'd had to look all over Seattle to find a 'nik jacket big enough to fit him) and the coaches stared very hard but not one of them said a word to him.

There he sat, then, on into his junior year, All-Conference scholastically and benchwarmer into eternity, until the pivotal Saturday afternoon when the Huskies were playing at home against Southern California. Much to the disappointment of the mud-oriented Washington coaching staff,

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no drop of rain was falling on Seattle, the world capital of H_2O. On the dry field Southern Cal tailbacks were taking turns romping around the end of the elephantine Washington line. Bored, the Husky third-stringers were sneaking peeks at the cheerleading squad, envying the yell leader, a gymnastic imp named Mancini whose duty was to put his hands under the purple pleated skirts of the female cheerleaders and boost their pretty butts onto his shoulder.

Mitch in particular was engrossed in watching this activity when Bingford, the freckled and notorious editor of the UW Daily, detached



himself from the sidelines press and said something at length into Mancini's ear.

Lit up like a jack-o-lantern with inspiration, Mancini grabbed his megaphone and yelped:

"All right! Listen up, everybody. Just had a request to do a Go cheer for an institution that's dear to us all--North Dakota Agricultural and Scientific! Got it? Go, N-A-D-S!"

Even before the student section woke up brightly to the opportunity to roar "GONADS!" Mitch was laughing fit to rupture and lurched up off the bench. He dashed over, picked up Mancini under the arms and held him in mid-air like a squirming cat, and shouted:

"Now let's try S-P-E-L-I-G! SPELLING!"

He had barely set Mancini free when the backfield coach Jacobson boiled up beside him. "Rozier, are you in this game?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"Are you on something?"

"Twenty Questions does beat the crap out of this," Mitch jerked his head toward the scoreboard showing UW 0 USC 27 in bright buttons

of light. "But Jake, Coach is going to think both of us lack T-E-A-M S-P-I-R-I-T."

Mitch unsnapped his helmet, tenderly took it off with both hands, then reached back and slung it, sailing end over end, high into the ecstatic student section. It was the longest University of Washington pass of the day, and it concluded the football career of Mitch Rozier.

#

DROP CAP Not long after, Mitch was standing in a field carpeted with several thousand other zonked-out souls. When yet another of those funny-looking cigarettes made its way around to him, the hand that offered it was supremely freckled.

"You're the hippie fullback," said the possessor of the hand and the joint. "Or were."

Mitch took a drag, the better to contemplate Bingford.

"And you're the rich mountain climber's kid. No cure for that so far, though, huh?"

"Famous in our own time, guy," Bingford said with a world-weary sigh. He scanned the air. "Where's that mothering piano?"

Chords of Pink Floyd's "Let It Rain" jangled out of the earnest but challenged band that had set up on the flatbed of a sod-hauling truck. The platform of piled-together logs where the piano was to hit loomed like a sacrificial altar. Everywhere around, the crowd splashdanced in the creek or cavorted in the farm fields, green pastures of pharmacopia.

Still studying the sky, Bingford asked: "They take away your jock scholarship yet?"

"Does a bear go in the woods?"

Bingford cocked his head. "What're you doing for spare change?"

"Washing dishes at the House of Pancakes. And I work for a moving company, Saturdays."

Now the helicopter was approaching, whacking the air frantically. Beneath it the piano swung like a pendulum. The crowd scattered like chickens under a hawk, except for an unshirted young woman on an acid trip who loped along under the swaying Steinway, arms uplifted as if to hug it. She let out a cross between a moan and a wail when she was held back.

Mitch was finding he couldn't decide whether the idea of a piano

drop was the greatest thing yet or plain goofy. That was the stimulating part: he wasn't sure! Either way, here he stood, at this particular spot of time taken over by this spontaneous tribe, loose-limbed, barefoot, and not a few naked. Present and accounted for, at the dawn of a time when a piano would plunge from the sky. Margaret Mead--she was still alive, wasn't she? Then where the hell was she, if not here watching this? If she wanted to see a cargo cult, bigfella-in-sky-him-come-let-piano-drop, if she wanted to see Coming of Age in America Right Now, if she wanted real anthro, here it was. Okay, maybe some little bit of what he was feeling was the merrywanna starting to cook in him, but the ~~bigger~~ greater cause for exhilaration, he was convinced, was himself, and here, and this and now. Hadn't he been able to hold an intelligent conversation with Bingford, while inside him there was all this loosy-goosy stuff going on? If this wasn't something new in life, that you could stand out here with grass tickling your toes and holy smoke up your nose and feel giddy and perfectly sane at the same time, he didn't know what was.

Mitch inhaled deeply, air this time, and felt his brain settle back into his head a little.

Side by side he and Bingford contemplated the laboring helicopter, close now. For no particular reason, Mitch heard himself pop out with:

"My old man always calls the thing a helicopeter."

Realizing how hicky that sounded, he added:

"On purpose."

"My old man owns a couple," Bingford ~~traded~~ confessed in return.

The old men. Fathers, the ghosts of dead wars. Mitch and Bing, nor all the sons and daughters in the skin-plaid fields of the young that day and in the hirsute ranks they would form against the war in Vietnam, did not even need to name their names, those spent shells. Antecedents always think they still own the combat zone. Lyle Rozier, who evidently had the time of his life in the jungle of World War Two. Jerry Bingford, fighter ace in Korea and cocky toward earthbound mortality ever since. Young in their time, but too many turns of the world ago. While the news that counted now hovered here.

The chopper noise flooded over the pasture, tingling in Mitch the way the thunder of a football crowd always did. Used to. He glanced sideways at Bingford, who seemed similarly swallowed in the blissful storm of

noise.

The roar of the helicopter drowned out something Bingford said. Mitch cupped an ear at him.

"Come by the Daily office," Bingford repeated. He was looking off at the clattering chopper as it circled, the piano swinging like a watchcharm to amuse a baby. "The idiots let me have a budget. You can be our aviation reporter."

Having lifted its burden into bomb-run position a couple of hundred feet up, the helicopter now honed in on the log bull's-eye where the piano drop was to occur. Businesslike, the helicopter seemed to brake in the air. But the piano kept going. As, now, did the helicopter. Panicking at being towed by his cargo, the pilot let the piano loose.

Far overshooting the log platform, it plummeted to the earth with a dead thud. Not a chord, not a note, not so much as a plink.

"Encore," Bingford said softly.

Mitch could not have told why, but that decided him to show up at the Daily office.

#

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DROP CAP After his sidelined but bylined final years of college and a few more on a well-intentioned but criminally underpaying community newspaper, Mitch latched on as a rewrite rim dog at Seattle's morning daily, the Post-Intelligencer. Not the most sensational of jobs, and he still wasn't sure he even liked newspapering. But he liked being around people who liked newspapering. Accordingly, there he sat each day, fashioning the three sentences for the front-page weather box and boiling down wire copy into bite-sized stories called "Quicklies"; Marnie had taken to giggling and calling him the king of the quickies.

He was hunched over his keyboard ~~typewriter~~ trying to think of some fresh way to say "rain later today" when the call came that someone wanted to see



him down in the lobby. He never liked eerie stuff, but somehow he had the prickling feeling it was going to be Bingford.

The last that Mitch knew, Bing was in a Rocky Mountain high period, off to climb the sixteeners of Colorado and then goof around the Grand Tetons for a summer. That had been, what, considerably more than a a year ago, Mitch realized--an evening spent parked below the runway approach to SeaTac airport while the two of them smoked some reminiscent dope and let the roars of jets take them over as plane after plane waddled down a hundred feet overhead. Between the soul-emptying flushes of noise and the good weed, they gradually slid off philosophical deep ends. After what must have been an exceptionally potent puff, Bing revealed to Mitch his nearly paralyzed moments of fascination on rock cliffs sometimes at being suspended there by the nonslip piton his old man had invented and patented: he was hanging there by a combination of genetics and contrivance that just seemed awesome in those moments. Mitch in turn confessed his own latest source of awe, A Sand County Almanac--it singlehandedly had almost sent him back to do a master's degree in English, hell, you could opus-pocus your

whole thesis on Aldo Leopold's rhythms, the old boy wrote like the coming up of the sun and the going down of the sun and the stopless turning of the seasons...but then along had come Marnie and marriage, and Mitch had chickened out on going back to school, but who knew, maybe eventually he would. It had been one of those funny warped nights, much too much said in sloppy circumstances, and Mitch and Bing had both ended up a bit embarrassed by the time the last jetliner swept its cone of thunder over them. You couldn't really base a gutspilling friendship on aeronautical decibels, could you? Now Mitch headed down to the lobby decidedly on guard.

"How's life in the Quickly lane?" Bingford said as hello.

"Salaried," Mitch answered, steering him out ~~onto the street.~~ of the building. One never quite knew with Bing~~ford~~, whether he was simply stopping by to visit between conquests of tall peaks or whether he was here to unload on establishment journalism.

"Happy ~~upnder~~ under the big crapping bird?" Bingford resumed when they were outside, indicating upward to the P-I's massive revolving globe with the Hearst eagle the size of a pterodactyl squatting atop it.

"Close enough. Why? You curious about getting on a paper again?

They probably won't let you start right in as editor here, you know."

"I do know. So I figured I'd start my own."

"Your own paper? Bing, why don't you save time and just wad that money up and throw it out a window."

"This is one window people are going to throw money in. Tell you why, guy. Remember 'Hip spade wants to dig you'?"

Mitch laughed. All of them on the UW Daily staff had ~~been~~ gone bug-eyed when somebody brought in one of the underground weeklies with that first barrier-exploding classified ad. After that crack, the deluge. "The wanna ads, Bing? Hey, even we at the Pee Eye are running those these days. Kind of late to the orgy, aren't you?"

"Not if I gather ads from enough places out here and put them in enough corner boxes in all the good towns. People move around. The I-5 corridor--think about it, Mitch babe." It actually didn't take that much thinking. Bingford's scheme was based on the long skinny freeway archipelago from the Canadian border to the bottom end of the Willamette Valley, a day's drive to the south. That Interstate sluice of people alongside the Cascade range of mountains took in the campus

towns of Bellingham, Corvallis, and Eugene, it took in both state capitols, Olympia and Salem, with their burgeoning staffs of young guerrilla bureaucrats, it took in the groovy metropolises of Seattle and Portland: in short, the Pacific Northwest confederacy of beardedness and bralessness, ready to set out to explore the new backpage alphabet of desire.

The cute little bastard, Mitch thought with a shake of his head, he's going to be able to buy his own mountain. But said only: "Could pay off."

"Trippe is coming in with me on the idea," Bingford said as if it was the wildest of coincidences. Mitch could not have been less surprised. She had been at the UW with them and in and out of mountain-climbing with Bing, Juanita had. Hers was a branch of the Pan Am fortune. This was ~~one~~ another of the things about Seattle that Mitch could never get used to, there were these...seeps of polite wealth; neither Bingford nor Trippe would say family money if they had a mouthful of it.

"Rowdy-dow-dow for you and Tripper," Mitch softly patted the palm of one hand with the other.

"And--"

"And you only came by to give me the first subscription."

"--we have an opening," Bingford went on unperturbed. "You'd fit."

"Hey, here I get to write the weather every day. Wouldn't quite be the same in newspaper camp." Their old Daily phrase for various counterculture once-a-week-maybe excursions into print made Bingford wince. "'This past week, we had weather again,'" Mitch tested out. "Nope. Thanks anyway."

"Come on, guy. This isn't you." Bingford flapped a hand again at the P-I's taloned figurehead as if to shoo it off its roost. "We'll even scrape up the same salary for you."

"Bing, that doesn't cut it. I'm married and got a kid on the way, all right? Marnie already thinks my working for Hearst is next thing to picking up tin cans along the road. What's she going to say if I throw in with you just because we smoked some weed together at the U Dub?"

"Most of the time, you'll be out where you can't hear her," Bingford said helpfully.

"I what?"

In spite of what he knew ought to be a firewall of guilt

and shame, those words of Bingford's sizzled up the back of Mitch's mind. He had already started half-admitting to himself that Marnie was more of a flake than he'd bargained for, back in their dating days when she simply seemed turned-on in entertaining ways. Her latest phase, 100% wok cooking, had him sneaking cheeseburgers from the drive-in catercorner to the P-I. # Trying not to sound tempted, he asked: # "Out where, would I be?"

"Wherever." Bingford impatiently threw his hands in the air to illustrate out. "We want you to be our nature freak."

#

So much for history, that caravan route of distant spices. Now was now, and out of the haze of cannabis smoke and freckles had emerged Jerome "Bing" Bingford III, editor/publisher of an urban weekly newspaper for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon. From the shipwreck of a marriage and the raft he had sent his children away on and the shoals of a number of other major regrets had waded, big and drenched inside and out and environmentally the last of his kind, Mitchell F. Rozier, "Coastwatch" columnist and now quite late to work.

"I see we can call off the search party," he was met with by

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Jennifer, the duplicitous receptionist and chief spy for Bingford.

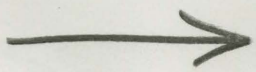
"You're back in time for the staff meeting."

"Right," Mitch growled. "Wouldn't want to miss that just for the sake of getting my work done."

In her notifying tone, Jennifer called up the stairs after him: "Bing wants everybody there."

"Bing shouldn't lust for us that way, Jen," Mitch tch-tched and tromped off to his cubicle.

A pair of eyes that were permanently parked in neutral and an



indiscernible murmur ~~greeted~~ met him as he stepped in. His cubemate was the new video reviewer, Shyanne Winters--monosyllabic, thin almost to the point of transparency, and black-lipsticked. In his time, Mitch had shared cubicle space with drunks and brooders and at least one proven felon, but Shyanne spooked him. He was pretty sure Shyanne would have spooked even Jocelyn. At the first staff meeting after she was hired, Shyanne had gone on and on in an avid near-whisper about corporately responsible non-lactic vegan dietary rules until it dawned on the assembled Cascopians that no milk in the office meant no lattes in the office, and she was rudely hooted down. Shyanne seemed to expect that the world was going to put nasty stuff on her. As a reviewer, she had the habit of tapping an instantaneous lead sentence into her computer, then dissolving into a sea of sighs. Mitch's attempts at sympathetic conversation during these longeurs of hers only dragged him into her swamp of despond as well. Mystified but also royally fed up, he finally had gone to Bingford about her.

"How about getting me out of range of Lips of Death there?"

"Oh, come on, Mitch." Instantly Bingford's management style,

counterattack, kicked in. "Everybody shares here, you know that. Buckle down, bucko."

"I didn't say I don't want to share," Mitch protested, although now that he thought about it a cubicle all to himself sounded paradisiacal. "All I ask is a cubemate who isn't a living X-ray."

"Can't you goddamnit be a little fatherl--" Bingford caught himself. "Be some help to her, she's young, okay?"

Now Mitch matched Shyanne's more-or-less greeting with something slightly less equivocal and went directly to his computer. But no more than had logged in "Coastwatch/Berkeley gasbaggery" when heads prairiedogging out of sundry other cubicles announced the staff meeting. The extent of Mitch's muttered cussing caused Shyanne to look over her shoulder fleetingly at him as they left the cubicle.

In the conference room the Cascopia staff was strewn on the edges of tables and windowsills. It struck Mitch that compared to Jocelyn and her rollerblading cohorts--always with the Transylvanian exception of Shyanne, of course--these looked like an Amish choir.

They had unholy mouths on them, though. While Bingford and Jennifer

conferred in the doorway to be sure everyone was on hand, the usual rabid factions went at it over whether staff meetings ought to be held oftener, or never. By reflex Mitch pointed out that in the distant past when Bing panicked on every publication day and called a lunchhour meeting to try to straighten matters out, they always got something worthwhile done: eat.

"Woo oo, it's IM time," somebody droned. Institutional Memory was not a prized attribute among the younger Cascopians.

"Hey, now, not me," Mitch protested with a chesty laugh. "Not as long as Flatley waddles the earth." He cocked his head around to find the restaurant reviewer who could recite what kind of sandwiches and pickles Bingford ordered in for lunch in 1971. Then realized everyone in the room was staring at him, a gallery of faces masked in mockery, embarrassment, and here and there shocking malice.

"While you were away," Bingford let him know. "Flats is no longer with us. He'd doing a CD-ROM for Microsoft on Pacific Rim cuisine."

Then Bingford came on in and sat at the table, carrying a single sheet of paper. "One announcement. A biggie." He rubbed his cheek

as if a freckle was bothering him. "The paper's going free."

Nobody said anything until Walmeier, who covered baseball, ballet, and brew pubs, asked: "How's that work?"

Our sinking captain didn't say it would work, Mitch mentally edited Walmeier, he merely said it would occur.

"Readership is dead in the water," Bingford was going on glumly. "Mailbox roulette"--the personal ads--"isn't what it used to be. People can feel each other up on the Internet now." Next he resorted to his lethal ~~sheet of~~ paper, trotting out the data. Free weekly newspapers--Mitch in his mind edited that, too: giveaway newspapers--were the national trend, it would build circulation and thereby hoist the advertising rates.

"I've talked to them Downtown," Bingford was saying, which always meant the hated rival Seattle Weekly, also known as Seattle Chicly. "They're going to have to go this same route. So are the Oregon guys, Willamette Week and The Eugene Scene. And Bellingham, the Bellyburg News. They're all taking the price off the paper."

Bingford paused and went after that bothersome freckle again.

The room stirred, or rather, Mitch stirred it. He had sworn to himself, over and over during Bing's predestined announcement, that he

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was going to keep his mouth shut.

What evil ventriloquist, then, was producing a voice exactly like his

to suggest to Bing the next logical step: pay people to take the newspaper,

why not? Rig up the vending boxes like slot machines: if a person grabs out one copy of Cascopia, the box pays him a quarter; if the customer takes, say, three papers, make the payoff a dollar. "Circulation will go through the roof, Bing, I can practically guarantee."

"Mouth, Mitch." Bingford primly patted his lips as if reminding Mitch to employ a napkin there. "When I want my ass kicked in front of an audience I'll go on Letterman, all right, old buddy?" Bingford crumpled his sheet of paper, signalling that the meeting was over. "This is where we are, people. Not easy times."

#

When he went back to his cubicle, Mitch settled himself into his erg chair but did not turn his computer on.

He was half a century old, and working for a giveaway newspaper. Put that in your Institutional Memory and smoke it, Rozier.

"Are you blocked?"

Mitch jumped as if goosed. Then spun his chair around to face the wraith in the doorway.

just what this day needed: his cubemate the witch doctor.

can feel each other up on the Internet now." He stopped to resort to his

Shyanne's health mania was, it could only be said, incurable. Assorted natural purgatives and other herbs lay stuck away in every desk drawer at Cascopia, courtesy of her fevered diagnoses and apothecary arts. Wary of what she might foist on him, Mitch now checked: "Are we on the topic of bowels here?"

"Writer's block," she specified eagerly. "I have it every time."

"Hey, huh uh." Mitch tried a smile, with the awful feeling that it was going to look sickly. "No, this is just a really hard piece to--"

"Strictly Ballroom was the worst," she broke in. "How can you write a review about something that's totally perfect?"

"Listen, ahm, Shyanne. I've got to start writing this piece or--"

"If you won't tell anyone? How I get past being blocked?" Shyanne came to roost on the edge of her chair, her sharp knees inches from Mitch's. She looked intense enough to cut diamonds with. "I always go: 'Reader, I married him.'"

Mitch's brow furrowed massively.

"Here, watch." She spun around to her computer and in the ritual keyboard flurry that Mitch recognized, he indeed heard her fingers

make the keys go Splocksplock, ock splocksplock ock and Charlotte Bronte's once deliciously inked words were conjured there on her screen in up-to-the-instant pixels.

Shyanne sat back, wan but wired. "See, there's my lead. I, like, borrow it a while. Until I think of something better."

"Your l--? Isn't that an ending?"

"Sure, but. It breaks through on the interpersonal level. There I am, talking to the reader. And that just really helps me to--"

"But that reader exists in England in 18-um-something," Mitch pointed out with a force that startled himself. "Charlotte Bronte's reader, out there ankle-deep in the moors. Who has never laid eyes on a video, let alone the forgettable Joan Fontaine as Jane Eyre."

Eyes vast, Shyanne suddenly was emulating the old Beatles song, A Paler Shade of White.

"So, don't you think going interpersonal with that reader is kind of"--Mitch knew that if there were a referee on the premises he would be whistled for piling on, but he couldn't stop himself--"unnatural?"

"You jealous puke!" Shyanne was vigorous enough in springing out out of her chair. "Be blocked, see if I give a zit! I am out of here. I will not work in the same space with a destructive aura. BING! I NEED A NEW CUBE!"

---

six

"Way cool! You can hear it eating it!"

The third-graders ~~in Lexa's group~~ shepherded by Lexa were in ecstasy at the unscheduled feeding time they were witnessing. Squirrels are cats with the brains left out, she reflected, judiciously watching the long-tailed gray tidbit being feasted upon by the zoo's eagle invalid, Spike. A minute ago the squirrel was bounding along, bippity bippity, at the grassy verge of the injured raptors' perch area, and the golden eagle, dragging wing and tether and all, nailed it with a huge noiseless pounce.

"SHHH. Listen."

Indeed, the sounds of Spike ripping apart the squirrel with his beak, tearing ligament from bone, could be clearly heard ~~quite well~~. Parents were in for twenty-seven graphic reports at dinner tables tonight.

Palmer wasn't even trying to hide his pride in Spike. Slipping the gauntlet onto his wrist, the raptor keeper said: "Little snack between meals there. But I don't want to see any of you attacking our squirrels with your bare teeth, hear?" The schoolkids moaned in adoration.

"While Spike chows down," Palmer continued, winking at Lexa where she stood behind the herd of kids, "let me introduce you to our other birds of prey."

The raptor casualty ward currently included a snowy owl, a kestrel, and a red-tailed hawk, besides the feasting eagle, and Lexa had heard Palmer's spirited spiel about each bird enough times that her attention drifted off to the zoo's Northern Trail again. She had taken this pack of schoolkids there--she took all the groups she led there--and naturally the bear enclosure wowed them. ~~The~~ two Kodiaks, big and bigger, frolicked in the pond dammed by the transparent viewing wall. The Kodiak male, eight hundred pounds of bad attitude, in particular

seemed aware of the audience. The kids delighted in scaring themselves by racing right up to the glassed-in bear, but Lexa, knowing it was silly, nonetheless always stood all the way at the back to watch the ~~big bear~~ creature from as much distance as possible.

#

The summer she had cooked for the bear tagging team, the team leader Zweborg was forever saying Gee gosh, I hate to see that when the massive pawprints would show up on the trail between them and the camp.

DROP CAP

The six of them and a hundred or two grizzlies were prowling the Kenai Peninsula. It was a great break for Travis, because on the research rungs of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game this was way up there, setting foot snares along streams choked with spawning salmon to catch huge and hungry grizzlies. Then, when you caught a bear, firing a tranquilizing dart into his shaggy hide and hastening (but not hurrying; Zweborg, the priss, always piped out We must not hurry, people, for we have no time to waste) through the procedures of fastening a radio collar on the medically controlled griz, taking its measurements, tagging its ear, and (even Travis did not much like this part) smearing blue tattoo ink under its upper lip and plier-pressuring a permanent identification number into there. The team looked like crazed surgeons air-dropped

into the middle of the wilderness, their implements spread on the back of the bear. Souped up on adrenalin, but not hurrying, each of them performed some chore on the ~~bear~~ animal--the two that always made Lexa catch her breath, times when she was along with the taggers on some bear trail near camp, were ~~Jane's~~ Ruthie's handling the needles of the bear-dope called atrophine, deadly to humans, and Travis's count-your-fingers-first task of tattooing the inside of the griz's lip.

Blued, tattooed, and construed, the grizzly then had to be given the shot of antidote and watched a while to make sure it woke up ~~satisfactorily~~ and went back to its bear ways okay. ~~There was~~ quite a lot of sentry duty in tagging bears. Lexa noticed, though, that the pawprints across the trail at the end of the day--the bear that wasn't there--spooked the F&G team more than their tagging work did, and they would all erupt into yodeling or nervous yelps to announce their presence. Everyone was armed to the teeth and beyond, the men packing shotguns loaded with slugs and ~~Jane~~ Ruthie the bear-drug dealer with a .375 Magnum revolver strategically on her hip, and the times Lexa was out with them she was about as concerned over all the large-calibre weaponry in the hands of fresh-

from-the-lab wildlife biologists as she was with the potential grizzly in the bush. Even Travis, who looked like Hunter Hank the minute you put him in the outdoors, was actually the genetically suburban son of a Phoenix airline pilot.

But the summer passed with nobody either eaten or shot, and Lexa looked back on it as a highly instructive season. Alaska was fresh to her then, but the trick of living beside the wild was known to her. Other than Zweborg, whose mind seemed to consist of a compartment labeled Everything about bears and another labeled Christian thoughts for the day, she was the one among them who had any history with grizzlies. When they were barely big enough to see over the dashboard of the Power Wagon, she and Mariah had watched as their father shot a sheep-eating bear, the grizzly trying its mightiest to tear off its own trapped toe and reach the man. There had been other family bear encounters as she grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern Montana. So, in a sense, she had already been where Alaskans were stampeding toward. The human population of the Kenai was multiplying as fast as the U-Haul trailers could be unloaded, and the idea behind the tagging team was to study how the bears were faring as their home range was encroached on. Lexa would not have said she was against science, exactly, but she was going to be mighty

surprised if the data indicated anything but grizzly life eroding away.

Hers not to reason why, though. Travis seemed to thrive there in bear camp. He had charge of the floatplane, out at the trailhead, and the flying lessons he had cajoled out of his father, back when he was a teenager, looked pretty smart now. There was one other side of Travis she hadn't had a chance to see before, the elastic way he could fit himself around whoever was in charge. In no time at all, Zweborg was writing evaluations on Travis that were the bureaucratic equivalent of frankincense and myrrh.

Not overly surprising, then, when at the end of each week Zweborg would clear his throat and send Travis and her out together on the supply run. Everybody knew it made no sense to send the cook out of camp for the day, but the rest of the tagging team gamely said nothing and put up with sandwiches and ~~corp~~ dried apricots in Lexa's absence. So, armed and pack-carrying, the two of them would head out on the trail, Travis's cute flat cowboy rear end close in front of her as they hiked fast and loudly announced themselves to possible bears. Travis's style was to caterwaul the Eagles' great song, You cain't hiiide yore lyin' eyes... In her turns, Lexa adapted top-of-her-voice commands that had worked well on the

McCaskill family sheepdogs. Jump in the truck, bear! Bear, go lay down!

Both of them would be thoroughly keyed up by the time they reached the lake and the floatplane moored there. Now at last came the conjugal part, the reason Zwee--bless his pointy old Jesus freak head--sent them out together. Nights in bear camp posed a marital problem, with four other people in sleeping bags a few feet away and half-awake anyway listening for grizzlies outside. But the sleeping bag she and Travis were promptly into here--the emergency-landing bag, stowed in the cargo area behind the plane seats--was gloriously their own, in solitude. Those quick sessions in the back of the ~~Cessna~~ plane were only half-undressed and makeshift and breathless and hard on certain ~~some~~ parts of the body but if you were young, newly wed, and turned loose in Alaska, what more could you want? It was the best summer she and Travis had together. The one good summer.

#

"So our buddy Spike has had his lunch, and now we'll show you a little aerial feeding of our other birds." Palmer was hitting his usual crescendo, the schoolkids silently agog at this climax to the raptor show.

Pulling the impressive leather gauntlet onto his left hand and forearm, Palmer shouted over to the raptor house for his assistant keeper Suzanne. An answering shout told him Suzanne would be a while, she'd had to make an emergency run for veterinarian supplies.

Lexa saw Palmer hesitate. Then he was calling over to her, behind the kids:

"Help me out with the food flight? You've seen how Suzanne tosses."

Lexa bit a little inside corner of her lip, but ducked through the white rail fence around the raptors' perching area and walked slowly out to Palmer.

"'Preciate this," he said, handing her Suzanne's gauntlet for her wrist. "We'll start with the kestrel, work our way up."

The pair of them went over to the perch where the kestrel sat, a



double handful of dignity and ferocity. Heart beating a little more than it should, Lexa focused on Palmer as he brought the hawk onto her wrist, lettling it settle there, ruffling a bit, to accustom itself to her. His familiar unhurried way of moving, keeping the routine smooth, nothing to alarm the bird. Palmer, like Travis, was a natural at such handling.

To the audience beyond the fence Palmer pointed out the sideburns pattern of the kestrel, and the hawk's brilliant eye spoke for itself. The schoolchildren were rapt when Palmer took the taut little hawk onto his own gauntleted wrist.

The bird riding the human limb, the keeper stepped away from the perch area and paced off fifty feet, before turning around to face toward Lexa.

She reached into the plastic bag of meat chunks Palmer had provided her and took out one the size of a vole. She held the morsel in her ungloved hand, tucked the meat sack out of sight on the side of her away from the hawk, and looked the question to Palmer.

"Ready on the right, ready on the left, ready on the firing line,"

Palmer called out in his good-sergeant style. He launched the hawk, and a breath later he sang out, "Toss!"

Lexa carefully flung the piece of meat up and away with an underhand toss, just enough loft to it for the bird in its springing swoop off Palmer's wrist to hurl itself onto the dropping target in an eyeblink. The meat speared in its ~~beak,~~ talons the kestrel resumed its perch and began tearing at its meal.

Chuckling, Palmer strode back to the area of the perches, collecting Lexa on the way with a "well done" squeeze just above her throwing elbow. He steered her to where the snowy owl, yellow-eyed within its intense shroud of white, sat tethered.

"Now we'll show you some hunting that's more of a gliide," began Palmer, smoothly playing out the word. "Casper here has a wingspan of more than three feet, and with that he's capable of floating real fast over the tundra until he sees..."

Lexa found she and Palmer had ended up quite close, practically touching, as they stood there while he discoursed about the unblinking

bird. A long sergeancy in the Army and a determined slog through night classes had brought Palmer to this zoo career. He was published in his field, the care and repair of crippled birds of prey. He had a perfectly fine second marriage, to a wife who sold real estate, and they had a couple of kids. Palmer's plate is full, Lexa reminded herself for not absolutely the first time, he doesn't need anything more on it.

Fishboat rules, she savagely told herself and stepped well away from Palmer, looking only at the arctic owl on his gauntleted wrist.

#

DROP CAP

Lexa
~~She~~ had landed in Seattle during a foghorn Christmas, the whoommm? and gimme roommm! of freighters and ferries droning in from Puget Sound like dueling bassoon players. Each streetlight had its pyramid of fog, and fir trees lost their outlines near the top. Cars, their lacquers muted by all the gray, looked anonymous and mousy.

Alaska when she left was sunlit, mountain after mountain shining. Let it, she told herself. Some sonofabitch will find a way to put it

in cellophane and sell it off.

As the cab crept from the airport to the half-erased city, she had this all worked out, how she would check into a motel and rent a car in the morning and head home. If the place where you go to announce your marriage has failed is home. More like out at first base, she tried to joke to herself.

She was barely into the motel lobby before she shucked her Kelty backpack and stacked it against her one suitcase and phoned him.

"Hi, it's Lexa Mi--McCaskill. I'm just...fogged in."

"We get that some, this time of year. Hey, how you doing?" Mitch's surprise at hearing from her sounded genuine.

"Been better," she answered honestly enough. "Driving across the mountains tomorrow. I--wondered if you'd be, too. Going home for the holidays."

"No, I don't do that any more."

"Probably smart. I'm going to have to tell them Travis and I split the blankets."

"Ah. One of those."

She could hear him saying the next thing ever so carefully, but he did not hesitate with it.

"Wait out this weather, why don't you. I've got room here. I'm going to some people's for Christmas dinner. Come with, no reason why not."

Now he paused.

"Lexa? The divorce news will keep. Believe me."

---

seven

Sky as clear as a vacationing meteorologist's conscience, sailboats sprinkled on either side of the floating bridge across Lake Washington like white tepees on a vast blue prairie, Mount Rainier sitting passive and massive over Seattle's southern horizon, even the chainlink commuter traffic grinding along less glacially that during most so-called rush hours--Mitch could scarcely believe such a death spiral of a day could yield an evening like this.

As he drove east toward the suburbs beyond the suburbs, where Lexa's catering job lay in wait, he gingerly checked around on his body

and found a place or two that felt better, some, for his having stopped at Gold's Gym and worked out vengefully on the weight machine. But the rest of him harbored one deep ache or another anywhere he cared to think about.

His mind kept returning to Bingford, that freckled rat. Giveaway, right; they'd all been given away, with ~~to~~ toe tags on, at the staff meeting. Bing might as well have folded up the whole business right there in front of them today, announced he was shutting down Cascopia or selling it off or giving it away to the Fremont bridgetender or whatever the inevitable disposal process was going to be. Now the next thing would have to be the d word, downsizing, and Mitch not so idly wondered whether Bing had enough guts left in him to go around from cubicle to cubicle saying fired instead. And if he was going to get around to saying it, Mitch fumed onward as he changed lanes and then changed back again in the thickening traffic at the Bellevue interchanges, he could have done so this morning and thereby relieved him, Mitch, of the rest of the day of stewing over the Berkeley conference piece, which had turned out to be a hash anyway.

In the fathoms of his bones, though, Mitch cringed at the thought

of no more Cascopia. He felt entitled to fear; he was very nearly the only person he knew of in America who had been doing the same thing steadily for the past twenty-five years. "Coastwatch" was the one long devotion he had ever been able to maintain in his life. Okay, sure, now there was Lexa, but...

Lexa. The unphoned.

He grabbed up the car phone that had been forced on him by Bing in one of his publisher moods, then realized. While he'd been busy writing down Lexa's phone message with the ring-around-the-rosy directions for getting to the party place, Shyanne tornadoed back into the cubicle to snatch up her cherished review video of The Gods Must Be Crazy, and he'd missed the phone number Lexa was giving. Nor, he found now, was Directory Assistance about to hand out the phone number of Aaron Frelinghuysen, latest cybernaire.

All Mitch knew was what everybody knew, that the guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had hit technology's latest jackpot with the library scanning program called Xandria, and out there in the night newly ruled by his cyberstorage, shelf after shelf in little old

Carnegie Publics was being zapped down to the size of a dust mote.

But, tough luck for the man who had next to everything, the prime mansion sites along Lake Washington had been used up by the earlier generation or two of computer richies, and so now the mode was to pick a spot along the next woodsy body of water, Lake Sammamish, and build something whopping. Mitch drove and drove and drove in the tangle of lakeside streets that turned into lanes and less, stopping four times to decipher Lexa's directions. Finally he found the driveway where, amid vehicles that must have cost big digits, sat her purplish VW van with Can't Complain Catering standing out in firm white script.

When she'd first found that van, it was painted in a flowery fantasia with scarlet lettering rampant, reading LOLLAPALOSER.

"The guy gave me a deal on it," Lexa had marveled.

"I'll bet he did." Mitch had circled the vehicle, twice. "You know, Ingvaldson will have a stroke if he sees this in the driveway."

"Henry should visit the twentieth century before it's too late."

Carefully Mitch tried again: "Are most people going to want their finger food delivered in something that looks like it's been

orbiting the planet since 1967?"

That struck home. "I'll paint it royal burgundy," she said.

The Frelinghuysen house much surprised Mitch. Cyber barons had been building their dreamhouses the size and decor of airport terminals, but this one, while extensive, was low and restrained, nestled under fine old undisturbed cedar trees.

He was let in by some physically perfect member of the Household staff, from the toned look of him probably Frelinghuysen's personal fitness trainer. All courtesy, the muscleman pointed him in the direction of the kitchen.

On Mitch's way down the hallway, though, a wall-size glass case of coastal Indian masks suddenly loomed. The fantastic oval eyes, the playful exaggerations of proboscis and incisor and claw and ear, the unquenchable life in the wooden grins and leers and anguished expressions floated there like a sorcerers' seance. Holy Kajesus, Mitch stopped, overpowered, look at this guy's collection. Haida, Tsimshian, Tlingit, the tribes of the greatest carvers were all represented in this hallway Valhalla.

Telling himself he didn't have time to stand around being overawed, he tore himself away from the art but immediately came to a nook where a computer screen was showing the first mask in the case, a thunderbird headpiece with an awesome nose so hooked that it circled back on itself, abalone-shell eyes eternally wide awake, and skulltop ears which had little faces in them. Helluva piece, but if you possessed it, why bother to computer-display it? Mitch gave it a glance, then looked again. The mask was dissolving on the screen. Outlines of templates, various sizes and shapes, revolved onto the screen until one descended into place and took form as the thunderbird's hooked beak. Then the template ghosted out of the beak and ascended, twice, and made the ears, the identical basic form as the beak. Ovoid templates spun into place and made the eyes, and then the equally mighty nostrils in the beak, and then smaller versions of the same template form made the littler eyes in the faces within the ears. White on blue, other lines formed themselves, the ceremonial mask inexorably growing in detail and power. Mitch realized he was watching a schematic of how the ancient carver had created the thunderbird head. <u>But no carver</u>. In an instant the complete mask

hovered there in the pleasant blue screen, then the screen seemed to turn to cedar. And the next mask in the collection, a flat-faced bulgy-eyed beaver, began to assemble from similar templates.

It was as hypnotic as it was spooky. Mitch knew that the original peoples of the coast loved to play with transformations, have two or more of the creatures they carved meld with each other in the same space by sharing body parts. Now the computer was taking apart the art by which the carvers had taken apart time and space and being and...

Mitch got out of there, caught his breath a little, and went on to the kitchen.

He found Lexa bossing her food help as if blasting off for Mars. It always unnerved him a little, her flinty way of running a crew. He had known her to fire the most charming kid on the face of the earth, kapow: "Told you once already, Kevin, learn to read your Mickey Mouse watch and be on time."

Now she leveled a look across the kitchen at Mitch and said:

"Well, hello there. A person of your description used to sleep with me."

"Used to? I thought that came with this job instead of Social Security."

He swapped quick greetings with the crew, Martha and Guillermo and Joe, and went right over to Lexa, aware he was more than a little late. "Bridge traffic," he alibied reliably. "Anyway, hi. Video night at Potlatch Acres, have we got?"

"Everybody shut your eyes while I make out with the bartender," Lexa directed. She stood on tiptoes and planted a gale-force kiss on him. "So, lucky, how was San Francisco?"

"Breath-taking." Mitch seized a fistfull of carrot sticks.

"And...?"

Lexa poked her hands into her apron pockets and stood there spraddled, looking up at him. Her no-bullshit-allowed-on-these-premises stance.

"Gory details later, how about," Mitch bargained ~~wearily.~~ tiredly. He munched and tried to look semi-willing for her. "Reporting for duty. Honest. More or less."

She gave him one more testing gaze, then said:

"Okay, right this way. The bar setup is over by the windows. You'll draw spectators."

He followed her on into a living room with a cedar-beamed cathedral ceiling and a glass wall out onto darkening Lake Sammamish, the lights of the other houses along the shore sparkling off the water. Subtly swank? Tastefully rarefied? Expensively understated? Mitch reminded ~~gave up~~ himself he was such a hopeless peasant that he wouldn't savvy the gradations of opulence anyway, and gave up. Glancing over the bar setup and trying not to sound edgy, he maintained to Lexa: "No prob, boss. Let the sipping hordes come."

Lexa pretended to adjust the tail of his tent-sized white bartending jacket, surreptitiously pinched his butt, then headed once more for the kitchen to shake up the troops there. But she stopped at the doorway to glance back at Mitch, busying himself at arranging glasses.

She speculated on him for a minute, bulking there against the nightblack water, the big man she had traded Alaska for.

———

DROP CAP Sitka was still dark, she was still the lawful wedded wife of

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Travis Midgett when the call came, Travis on his side of the bed saying into the phone, "God, they got it stopped? They don't? Okay, I'll be



there soon as I can get hold of a plane."

Lexa rolled over toward him, ~~squinting and~~ batting her eyes as he snapped the bedlight on and dove for his clothes on the chair.

"Got ourselves an oil spill."

He sounded like the usual apologetic Travis, but yanking on his pants there in the sallow bedroom light he looked put out but ~~excited~~ eager along with it. Lexa would think, after, of something her grandmother had said about men when they had a forest fire to fight: They turn back into absolute boys.

She had to ask Travis "Where?" twice before he glanced around from the vital business of tucking in his shirt tail.

"Hnh? The worst. Valdez."

That dim Alaskan morning, everything that could go wrong at Valdez was racing to do so before sleepy-eyed officials could begin to catch up with the dimensions of the disaster--the thousand-foot-long tanker having daggered itself so thoroughly on a reef that eight of its eleven cargo tanks were spewing oil, the spill response equipment too little and too late; then the next inevitable thing, the wind picking up and spreading the

feds and the media invasion; she vowed not to let the boomtown-of-catastrophe atmosphere get to her, but it constantly did. As did the tarred dead birds, the dead sea otters, the dead seals, the dead this and the dead that of Prince William Sound.

Feeling about half-sick as usual, she was disposing of the floppy carcass of one more cormorant that she and the other volunteer bird-rescuers had tried unsuccessfully to soap-rinse the oil from, when Travis came around with the familiar man. His size made him unmistakable around town, even from a distance. One of Valdez's fevered rumors was that the French movie star, whatzisname from Manon of the Spring, had showed up in town to view the oil spill, until someone took a good look and said Gerard Depardieu was a shrimp compared to this guy.

"Montana, right?" Lexa said the instant Travis introduced him.

~~Mitch appeared startled and none too pleased.~~

"Does it still show that bad?" Mitch sounded none too pleased.

"We had Roziers in the Two Medicine country, where I'm from," she elaborated. ~~filled in.~~ Her eyes lifted again to the curly black hair, the rocky set of his face while his eyes were busy investigating. "You look kind of like

their kissing cousin."

With the barest of smiles he owned up to that, saying that his family in Twin Sulphur Springs had shirt tail relations north there in the Two country, all right. "Probably they're the ones who got born with some sense."

Lexa held her tongue about that, and by now Travis was saying, "Giving him the full tour. Mitch's following this for his paper in Seattle."

A notebook was swallowed in Mitch's hand. "L-E-X-A, do I have it spelled right? You've been washing birds? How many of them pull through?"

The photo came then and there, Mitch of course asking if she minded but already cocking the camera as she collected the next oil-slicked cormorant against the chest of her rainsuit. This one was a beach find, she gave Mitch the vocabulary, maybe not quite as far gone as the floaters they found flopping out there in the actual curd of oil atop the water. She would remember that he then had question after question for her, and a barrage of others for Travis in his capacity as the state's wildlife monitor of this mess, before the commotion broke out at the town dock nearby.

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A fishing boat had tied up, grimy and loaded with herring cans of oil the fishermen had scooped up by hand. Photographers and reporters jammed around the fishermen who claimed they were capturing as many gallons of oil as the fleet of fancy skimming equipment combined. Then the crowd surrounded an embarrassed oil company spokesman, who had to call over even more



pretty far removed from where the foundations of the Roziers were poured, back there. Of course she was curious, as exiles everywhere are about each other, but not enough to make life tricky yet. Meanwhile Travis and he chimed with each other, Travis ~~openly gratified~~ keen to have somebody for once interested in the ins and outs of the whole coastal ecosystem instead of coming around for thirty seconds for the latest body count on wildlife. Out of that, out of the ~~two of them~~ men, she could later tell herself, came their pipeline flight.

They lifted off in a white and yellow Cessna 207 at first light one Sunday, Travis professionally laconic in talking to the tower. Riding stuffed into the co-pilot's seat, Mitch watched out the side window for the airborne moment from the times he had been up with the Lighthawk pilot--the plane wheel halting its spinning an instant after takeoff and sitting motionless in the air. He half-expected to see Mount St. Helens rise beside the climbing plane.

Travis first circled out over Prince William Sound, the fleet of oil-skimmers and collecting barges below like beetles on an oddly sheened pond, the filthy bathtub ring around Prince William Sound stretching

toward the Gulf of Alaska beyond the horizon. Then he aimed the plane back over Valdez and the farm of storage tanks, and the silver worm of the pipeline stretched ahead.

Mitch no longer liked flying, and he never had liked having someone looking over his shoulder. The coppery presence at the corner of his eye caused him to glance back every so often.

Perched on the front edge of the jump seat behind Travis, Lexa thought to herself Hey, bud, this is Alaska, life is close quarters here and rubbed it in:

"I hope this is okay, me hitchhiking along?"

"Oh, sure, fine," Mitch lied. Couldn't say much else, with her husband doing the flying. He eyed Travis sideways, though, wondering how they sorted things like this out, how much Lexa mixed into his work. Stuck her spousy nose in, so to speak, although it did seem to be a fairly acute nose.

Wrapped in the sounds of the Cessna, the steady force of its engine and the vibrating thrum of the cockpit, they settled back for the long day of flying with the oil aqueduct of Alaska constantly

pointing past Mitch's nose out the side window. To his further confusion, next she yelped something to Travis about getting his tattoo kit out.

Travis grinned around at her like a boy given candy and yelled, "Let's go see him." He stood the Cessna on its right wingtip and zoomed the plane into a tight circle. The tundra fanned past beneath them, little squib lakes appearing and then quickly erasing, the three of them on their sides there five hundred feet in the air and Mitch concentrating on not giving in and reaching for the sicksack, until at last Lexa pointed to the wingtip and the galloping clump of ~~bear~~ fur under it. Travis made a couple of swoops, so they could ~~see~~ view the bear from each side of the plane, then he put the Cessna atop the piped path of oil again.

They flew across cockeyed rivers, channels bending back on themselves as if trying to make knots. One such set of kinks, unruly and silty, was the Yukon. And constantly the pipeline...

...goes and goes and goes, tracing its bright solo strand across our ~~biggest~~ largest state. It is true that it is a mere thread in the carpet that is Alaska. It is also true that this single thread has magically dyed the rest of Alaska to the color of oil money...

much bumpy air to jostle that drift of thought, though. Marnie would have gagged at setting foot on a fishboat or even into one of the scabby Alaskan towns. And he himself? He had grown up in not much of anywhere. He had pulled out of there as soon as he could, too. He doubted he was Alaska material.

"Here," a little late, he thought to offer, "have some on my publisher." Lexa dug into his apple sack. Munching, they huddled out of the wind next to a ratty-looking snowmobile shed and watched Travis go about his plane chores.

Somehow demolishing her apple and managing to speak at the same time, Lexa asked as if suddenly curious:

"Ever wonder if you're doing any good at all? The things you write, I mean."

"I don't have the world straightened out quite yet," came back from him. "But it maybe doesn't hurt for me to keep poking around at it."

"Lots of us poked at this pipeline as hard as we knew how, and here the sucker came anyway."

"You're not big on oil, it sounds like."

"I'm not big on watching the spillionaires go at it. Travis and

to watch up at Mitch as she finished: "That way, you don't leave anything in the wilderness."

#

DROP CAP They had been back from the pipeline flight eight days, trying to cope again in Valdez's riot of contradictory measures, when Travis suggested at breakfast:

"Come on down the Sound with me this morning. Something you need to see."

At the first stretch of oil-smeared rocky beach, a barge-like craft with what looked like artillery aboard was moving in close to shore. Timmons, Travis's boss from the Juneau office, was on hand. There was much consultation, and then a cannonade of high-pressure water jetted onto the rocks, spray and crude-oil sheen flying.

It was like watching a powerful fireboat at work, only the target here was not fire.

"Whooee!" With the first hope she had felt in a long while, Lexa jiggled Travis in the ribs. "This is going to do it? They can just hose away the oil?"

"I can't use the name."

"Mitch, guy," Bing began, which he always did when he thought Mitch was getting in over his head.

"But it's somebody who knows somebody. It's solid."

"Only if you cover our ass--"

"I know, Bing."

"--every which way with--"

"Bing, you little craphead, I do know that."

"--reaction quotes from the poor bastards who signed off on the hot hosing."

"I was about to go do that," Mitch said, meeting the eyes of the woman whose marriage he was about to wreck.

#

I always knew, with Travis, that winters were going to be the worst. When we could get out, have some room around us, we didn't do too bad. But cooped up together, huh uh.

Posted by the kitchen door, Lexa was keeping watch on the expressions of the guests starting to circle the table of food. A bit of peering and comparing was good; slow stares at, say,

the curl of the lettuce leaves were not. This crowd seemed to be automatic grazers, plates on the move as they chatted over their shoulders, and she at least could breathe a sigh of relief at that. The space of white jacket across the room was less easy to map.

Mitch would be the same season all year long, if the world would let him. That's a lot of if. I hope I'm not feeling winter coming, again.

Lexa pushed the kitchen door sharply with her hip and disappeared to cutlery duty.

Meanwhile Mitch, with a touch of panic, was finding out that bartending had changed dialects since the last time he filled in at one of Lexa's feeds. Somewhere a switch had been flipped and everyone who had been drinking bottled spring water that cost more than perfume now could not get along without boutique beer. He had finally mastered the dozens of water labels; now here was the new zoo of brew. This was beyond ridiculous, he thought; this was getting as bad as wine. Still, he managed to maul the requested brands out of the army of dark little bottles until a twentysomething with hair like fine quills came

back to the bar complaining that he had been handed a Yukon Amber Ale when he'd asked for a Yukon Frontier Amber Ale.

"Right," said Mitch, ~~squinting~~ narrowing his eyes ominously at the offending label.

"Timeout," he announced to the waiting semicircle of thirsties. "Kiss your elbows, everybody, while I sort these brewskis." He clinked bottles around until the damned things were scrupulously alphabetized, Anchor Steam to Zyggurat Pale Ale, and re-opened for business by the time Lexa ~~came~~ marched back out of the kitchen to check on the vegetable dip supply.

While she hovered at the table and trafficked this or that onto people's plates--she always had the urge to pat a party into shape--Mitch kept on whipping beer out like a Las Vegas dealer. By and large, this was a gathering of the young and climate-controlled whose idea of a good time seemed to be to compare the flexing qualities of their polycarbonate eyeglasses. Mitch overheard conversation after conversation about what a killer app Xandria was going to be and what a rad 'naire Frelinghuysen was along with it, until at last came a momentary break in the line. Using the chance to replenish clean glasses, Mitch was started to hear a voice of about his own age urgently demand:

"Two six-packs of Pyramid Hefeweisen, my man."

Mitch looked over his shoulder at a chunky person with granny glasses and long hair parted straight down the middle.

"The band," the man growled impatiently. "I'm on guitar."

Mitch knew that if this was anything like all the other occasions Lexa had catered, she had already fought the band for territory during the setting-up and now they were lurking empty-handed in some far corner until time to play. He ponied up a six-pack. "One," he told the scowling guitarist, with a nod in Lexa's direction. "Boss's orders."

"She's a major bitch about who runs this gig," the musician complained. Cradling the six-pack, he still didn't leave. He glanced around and lowered his voice in asking:

"This it, for you?"

"Excuse me?"

"This how you bring in the skins?" the musician wanted to know. "I only ask because I'm looking. Running out of room on my plastic. Music's great, but it doesn't pay squat."

"Ah. No, ninety-nine-bottles-of-beer is only a hobby with me. I've

got a day job."

"At?"

Mitch flinched. Cascopia and "Coastwatch" he did not want to have to delve into. He fell back on: "Well, I'm a writer."

"I may give that a whirl," the guitarist mused, "when I get the time."

Mitch resisted the urge to pluck away the six-pack and send the music-player off dry as a dune. Instead he leaned over and said confidentially:

"Really, though, I work one more job to make a living. You know those 'Fire Danger' signs you always see alongside forests? Big pie chart kind of things, with a pointer set on LOW or MODERATE or HIGH? I go around, I'm the pointer changer."

"No kibble. What can that pay?"

"180K a year," Mitch said, ducking his head modestly.

"Woop! That'd do. Who hires?"

"They advertise every year, you never noticed?"

The guitarist shook his head.

"Right before the fire season," Mitch specified. "The ads run the same day every year--June thirty-first."

"I'll watch," the guitar player said with fervor, and evanesced off to wherever the band was holed up.

Another spurt of beer aficionados, latecomers, kept Mitch busy a while. Last of all, the physically supreme specimen who had let him into the house came through the line, accompanied by an equally blonde woman so lithe and tawny that her E-mail address must have been Sheena @ jungle.com. They were so gorgeous together they practically hurt the eyes. Mitch handed them a matched pair of beers and they strode away like cheetahs.

Amid his collection of pangs, Mitch singled out hunger as one he could do something about. He slipped over to the food table while Lexa was there inspecting its remnants to inquire:

"What do you want devoured?"

"Celery sticks."

"How come you never say the Swedish meatballs?"

Crunching away on the celery, he scanned around the room, curious.

"So where's our host? Off morphing himself into Bill Gates or something?"

Lexa gave him a funny look. "You just served him a beer, goof."

"That's Frelinghuysen?" Mitch yanked his head around to stare after the blonde muscleman. "Life is unfair, I can take. But this guy has more going for him than Jesus did."

Lexa shrugged. "What can I tell you, some jobs come with better perks than others."

A series of jarring chords indicated the band was tuning up. Lexa rolled her eyes. "See you around," she said and fled for the kitchen.

Mitch went and settled himself in back of the bar while the band, Cloak of Light, avalanched into its first set. "YOU left FIRST! YOU left WORST!" the lead singer grumbled to the accompaniment of blunt instruments, loud enough to be felt on the skin. Through that set and a bunch more, Mitch tried to keep himself tuned only to the industrial-strength music and dispensing an occasional beer. Watching Mister Granny Glasses wham away on the guitar, he felt scaly about setting him up for a nonexistent job on a phantom day in June. On the

other hand, the way the guy played he didn't have much more future than that in the guitar field.

Lexa sailed out of the kitchen only once and only long enough to snatch the last few slivers of smoked salmon away. She had on her hunkered-down-in-a-hailstorm expression. Mitch vamped a couple of dance moves for her benefit and she stuck her tongue out at him. He loved big helpings of sound and could not see why she clung to moany country-and-western; "There's no whang to it," he kept pointing out.

Now the band reached ~~came to~~ the end of another musical peregrination, and silence rang out.

"Primetime," someone near Mitch said. "Fre's going to play."

The band looked sour at Frelinghuysen coming up to share the stage, but hey, it was his stage. They shuffled around wanly while he vaulted up and went to his musical weapon of choice, which proved to be the synthesizer. Cries of encouragement chorused from the guests, Frelinghuysen deprecatingly waving them off. Then, ten of the world's richest fingers flexed themselves



once, twice, and began to caress the equipment:

Pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling pling pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling WAH DAH DAH DEE DAH DUH...

That Chariots of Fire theme suddenly conjured a wall of runners behind Frelinghuysen, the movie's familiar slow-motion frieze of British milers training on the beach for the 1920 Olympics. Except, everyone in the room caught on within moments, these were not those ancient Brits in frumpy shorts, these were younger and Lycra-clad and led by a significantly familiar figure.

The guests roared and applauded as the golden head rhythmically bounded along at the front of the pack and its still-golden current version bobbed over the keyboard.

"Fred did cross-country at Lakeside," Mitch overheard. "High school state champion."

The theme music underwent another electronic metamorphosis and abruptly another wall turned into a stadium with a cinder track, this time a newsreel-gray figure striding and striding in gawky detachment.

Roger Bannister at Vancouver in '54, breaking the four-minute mile. But the runner at his shoulder nobly setting the pace for him was no longer Chris Chamblin, it was Frelinghuysen. Fascinated and appalled, Mitch suffered the realization that he was the only person in the room who could remember when Bannister's historic mile happened, rather than having it cooked into his mind by television's backward glances. He peered as hard as he could at the spectacle playing out over Frelinghuysen's fingering, but the simulation, the templates or whatever they were--the mask of Frelinghuysen shouldering history along before he was born--looked utterly seamless. Now, as soon as Bannister burst his historic tape, a mountain came into the room and two figures were loping its African slope, Kip Keino training with the playful and predatory cyber-Frelinghuysen shadowing him up through the thin air of Kilimanjaro.

Just when that magnificent duo scampered into a mist and Mitch thought he had endured through, the music reverted to the movie theme's plings of portent and another beach took over a wall, this time unmistakably the Oregon coastline, broadloom of sand between forested bluffs and haystack rocks with surf



grandly breaking. At a distance, a shimmer of tiny figures was coming. As they grew ever closer, several dozen of them undulating in the satiny running, their track uniforms took on brightness against the tan beach and green bluffs; colors from a fever dream, maroon, lemon, vermilion. By now it could be seen that two runners were moving well out in front, like the quickest in a flock of sandpipers. The righthand one of course was the requisite Frelinghuysen. The other was longhaired and mustached and as intense as the shaped flame of a cutting torch. Steve Prefontaine, running the sand like the Coos Bay demon he had been.

"Pre!" the party guests shouted in media-reified recognition. Then began the chant:

"Pre! Fre! Pre! Fre!"

Ai yi yi, thought Mitch, and reeled to the kitchen.

Lexa was superintending the cleanup. Scraping, washing, and pouting, Joe and Guillermo appeared to be in agony at missing the music. She sent them a look that jerked them back to their chores, then turned to Mitch. "What in the name of Elvis is going on out there?"

"New group," he reported wearily. "Cyberman and the Synthetics."

#

Afterward, going on out to her van and his car, Lexa provided:

"That was different."

The mutter from Mitch sounded something like:

"We can hope so."

After a couple of tries they found their way out of the lakeside maze of streets and Lexa in the lead zoomed for home. She was the type of driver who gobbled up yellow lights like grapes. After three intersections in a row flashed red in the windshield of his Honda, Mitch grabbed the car phone and punched her van's number.

"Lexa, suppose you could slow down to the speed of sound, so we can talk?"

The van ahead shot along for most of another block, then out came an arm signal he hadn't seen since the Driver's Ed handbook, Lexa's arm right-angled down to indicate coming to a stop. Also downpointing was her extended middle finger. After the van jarred to a halt at the next stoplight, in went her arm and her voice came over the phone:

"I thought you were in a strong silent mode tonight."

"Just because a guy doesn't say anything doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to say."

"You lost me there in the doesn'ts. So, what's to say, that can't wait until we get home?" He wouldn't dump me by car phone, would he? The phone clapped to her ear, she peered into the sideview mirror, trying to glimpse Mitch past his headlights. The honk of the Honda's horn made her jump. The light had turned green.

"Make up your tiny goddamned mind!" she yelled into the phone and put the van in gear.

Mitch said mildly, "I ~~just~~ only wanted to report in that I missed you like hell."

"Is that supposed to warm my cockles?"

"If that's the part that could use some, sure. Just because a guy doesn't really know where your cockles are located doesn't mean--"

"Never mind!"

They drove in silence until the VW van and the Honda sailed in file onto the Evergreen Point floating bridge, shoreline lights reflecting toward them on Lake Washington. As they neared the western shore, Mitch inquired:

"Is this a fight?"

"It'll do until one comes along," Lexa said. "What is eating you?"

What could he answer, the bowels of the earth? The traitorous incisors of Bingford? His daughter the serpent's tooth? The golden gullet of Xandria?

"Been a day of win one, lose about a dozen, Lex." To start somewhere, he recited to her Bingford's scheme of turning Cascopia into a freebie paper.

"Wuh oh, sounds wrong from here," commiseration instantly came into Lexa's voice. "Our family motto always was, free stuff is that price for a reason."

"It's not just the freebie part," Mitch resumed after a moment. "It's--aw, hell, name it. Too many times up and down the field, I guess."

They drove in silence, Lexa waiting him out. It's his damned cell call.

Finally Mitch's voice arrived again, with forced brightness:

"On the other hand, I get the deck chair on the Titanic to myself now. Shyanne grabbed her herbarium and jumped overboard."

Goodo, at least he's not cradle-robbing. Lexa gunned the van toward

the next changing light, remembered, and reluctantly gave in to the brakes. As the Honda's headlights eased up behind her, she put to him:

"What, then, Mitch? If it isn't just Bing giving away the store, what's freaking you? Jocelyn give you a tough go? ~~or what?~~"

"Could say that, yes. It seems I've been awarded the permanent blame for trying to ~~control~~ limit the damage, back there when her mother and I split."

"You knew that then. It'd take brain transplants to ever get those kids of yours to change their minds about that. Maybe that's what kids are for, one of God's little ways of telling you life doesn't come cheap either. Mitch? You still do know the blame was worth it not to carve up those kids, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I was just reviewing for the test, I guess."

Ballard was tucked into its bungalows for the night. The vapor lights at the ship canal locks glowed blue in their nightlong duty, and there was the salt scent of Puget Sound as they parked both vehicles, bumpers nearly touching in the skimpy driveway. As Mitch came up to help

carry her catering gear in from the van, Lexa broke a laugh at him.

"What now?" He peered at her in the dimness outside the house. "Were you expecting one of those Fortune 500 twenty-year-olds to follow you home?"

"Can't stand to quit work tonight, huh?" She poked an indicative finger into the stiff white fabric still tented on him.

"Yeah, well," he glanced down at the bartender jacket he had forgotten to take off, "if you want me to say bartending is beginning to grow on me, so could fungus. Come on, Lex, let's get this stuff in. I'm about running on empty."

The phone message machine on the kitchen counter was blinking red-hot as usual. Lexa headed straight for it while Mitch arrowed up to the bedroom, unbuttoning his white jacket as he went. "If that's your next partythrower," he deposited over his shoulder, "tell her to have people bring their own bottles, okay?"

Shucking shoes and clothes right and left in the bedroom, all he could shed of the day, he felt a craving for sleep, geysering up out of his body's subterranean regions in the form of yawns. He made it as

far as pajamas before Lexa came into the room.

"Mitch. Some doctor named Loper, that call was. It's about your father."

He closed his eyes as if to see what it was like. Then blinked them open, looking at her with his face gone bleak.

"It would be," he said.