

THE COAST

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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 unplanned. Nose a bit

saucy. It all added up to what she <sup>ruefully</sup> 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 <sup>chef</sup> ~~geek~~, 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~~ <sup>g</sup> 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 <sup>indulge in</sup> ~~care for~~ alcohol. But he never liked taking orders, even if it was only "White wine, please." And tonight's catering job was way over



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 <sup>to</sup> ~~by~~ 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?"



"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.



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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 nonetheless 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 eighth<sup>h</sup> 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~~<sup>first-timers</sup> 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 chung chung chung 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, <sup>(Seattle and here.)</sup>

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 <sup>S</sup>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.

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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, Marmie'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.<sup>g</sup> 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



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 damndest 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,

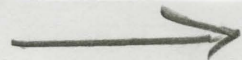
the faltering forests, the valleys going to suburbs, suburbs, suburbs,

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

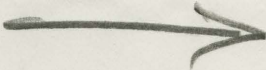




Pacific littoral, the jagged edge of America. The Left Coast. The Sandal Republic. Home for him ever since he had, well, left home. So what if Bingford was going to give him freckled hell for not finishing up the Berkeley column by the end of today. He knew Cascopia's deadlines at least as well as Bing. 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~~ <sup>first tall</sup> 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~~ <sup>ridiculously little</sup> 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,~~ <sup>5</sup>

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-blond 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..."

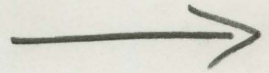
Been there, too, thought Mitch, at least the young and itchy part.

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 <sup>cleared</sup> about time it ~~got~~ 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 <sup>South</sup> 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~~<sup>she</sup> 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 ~~Cascadia's~~<sup>Cascopia's</sup> 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 <sup>(just outside)</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> 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 ~~together~~ ~~with each other~~, 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<sup>i</sup>-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.

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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 <sup>g</sup> 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.



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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 <sup>to the moat</sup>. 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.

# ————— himself  
Wishing ~~he was~~ 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."

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## 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 <sup>sensation</sup> ~~feeling~~ 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 <sup>books</sup> ~~reading~~. 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 <sup>still lived</sup> ~~--~~  
 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