"Jeez, I guess. You want one of these? Think I've got another one stashed in here *some*where--"

"Out here, we sippy-sip wine. I'll have a glass with you."

Ice and tapwater and the regal glug of Lord Calvert departing the midget plastic bottle, then the McCaskill sisters clinked glasses and in one voice toasted: "Here's at you."

"God," Mariah uttered after a very deep sip, "it's been forever since I had one of these."

"Mariah? Meet anybody?"

"Mate anybody, you of course mean? You coupled-up types just can't get that off your mind, can you?"

"Yeah, well--"

"There was a New Zealander, when I was shooting on the South Island there. But huh uh, nothing lasting."

"Some big something temporary, though, huh? Sis, I don't mean to pry, but you seem kind of--"

"--romantically exhausted?"

"--splattered against the bug screen."

Mariah looked over her motionless glass at Lexa. Finally she said: "Bingo, sweetie. It was not nice, calling it off with Colin--"

"'All the world's wayward except thee and me, and thee's a little wayward,'" Lexa dramatically burred one of their grandfather's mock-preacher quotes.

"Jeez, I guess. You want a slug of this good stuff? Think I've got another one stashed in here *some*where--"

"Out here, we sippy-sip wine. I'll have a glass with you."

Ice and tapwater and the regal glug of Lord Calvert departing the midget plastic bottle, then the McCaskill sisters clinked glasses and in one voice toasted: "Here's at you."

"God," Mariah uttered after a long slow swallow, "it's been forever since I had one of these."

"Mariah? Meet anybody?"

"Mate anybody, you of course mean? You coupled-up types just can't get that off your mind, can you?"

"Yeah, well--"

"There was a New Zealander, when I was shooting on the South Island there. But huh uh, nothing lasting."

"Some big something temporary, though? Sis, I don't mean to pry, but you seem kind of--"

"--romantically exhausted?"

"I'm going to crash pretty quick," Mariah announced, yawning magnificently. "Nice to be able to use that word and not think about five miles of air below me, for a change."

Her eyes met Lexa's a moment, then went reflective again.

"The bod starts to go," she mused. "I can't pull the all-nighters doing my prints like I used to, and the eight-day weeks kept catching up with me on my trip--the sonofabitching International Dateline *means* it, did you know that?" She stretched her every inch, managing to look like a million damn dollars while doing it, her sister thought. "We're not bulletproof any more, Lexa."

Lexa sat bolt upright. "No kidding? Then thank God I'm the younger sister."

"Snot. I know you'll be doing wheelchair barrel-racing over my grave, don't remind me." Another fetching yawn caught up with Mariah. "This feels like the cut-you-off-at-the-knees kind of jet lag. But it's not here yet, the sneaky little bugger. And until it is--" She rummaged in her camera bag until she found an airline mini-bottle of Lord Calvert. "I'm going to have a Lord ditch with my favorite and only sister, how about."

"Jello and alcohol both in one night? What's next, rolling naked on the lawn?"

Mariah didn't even have to stop to calculate before she said laughing, "Hey, kid, we've both done worse."

"Don't take this wrong, Mitch. Nothing against your mother, you know that." He shifted from one foot to another and glanced at the ground. "But I don't want to be down there."

Where, then? In a Mason jar on my mantelpiece in Seattle? Mitch took a breath for control. *Okay, then, damn it, I guess you're entitled.* "If you really figure we've got to start thinking about arrangements, I'd better start keeping track." He pulled out his PowerBook, feeling monumentally silly. *What do I even call it, the Lighting Up Lyle File?*

"There's a fire tower on Phantom Woman Mountain," his father impatiently was telling him. "I did the majority of the work building it, back when. Mitch, what I want you is for you to toss my ashes from that tower." Lyle looked hard at his son. "Right in the old girl's eye."

They were eighteen and unkillable, that Divide summer of 1939. Inseparable, practically joined at their tanned ribcages, he and Ferragamo. Life at the CCC camp was aiming them a bit, teaching them this and that and keeping them from either going hungry or going criminal, but the pair of young men had plenty of velocity left over after each day's labor.

Lyle Rozier was local. Was he ever. He knew just how to take advantage of that with their hitchhiked rides into Twin Sulphur Springs, anybody driving to town

wasn't even close to the usual punctual noonhour, he called Joe and Lyle down for lunch. Hammer dropped and drawknife set aside, they descended to where Eliason was nervously rubbing his hands on his ranger pants and the first person from Washington, D.C., they had ever met was waiting with handshakes for them, too.

The headquarteers guy made conversation like a house afire, asking them this, that, and the other about themselves and the CCC while he practically inhalted lunch. Obviously he was in a hurry and and didn't seem to be giving the firetower any particular going-over, but all through lunch, Eliason looked as if his diaper was being checked.

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

Eliason jumped to his feet and escorted Mr. Important over to the tower. Watching them go, Lyle wondered in a sarcastic whisper to Joe how a guy landed a job like that, drawing pay for loping around on top of the mountains. Joe had been wondering exactly that, too, but in awe. He had not been able to take his eyes off the Forest Service official, daydreaming of maybe being in charge of mountains himself, someday. With little grins back and forth the boys kept track of the rigamarole at the bottom of the stairs, where Eliason half bowed and half stepped out of the way to let the headquarters guest go first.

The two men had climbed the majority of the stairs, the bigwig talking over his shoulder to Eliason, when it hit Joe.

Lyle scaling rocks at a stump

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

The headquarters man froze, a step short of the top stair landing and the teetery floorboards Lyle had not secured with nails before he and Joe scampered down for lunch. Eliason was so close behind he nearly bumped into the other man's rump, but in a flash he reached around and gave a testing push to the board where the visitor's foot would have put weight. It tipped forward off the center beam of the landing like the trapdoor of a scaffold, then sailed off into air, plummeting to the ground thirty feet below with a clattering hit. Wordlessly Eliason reached down to Lyle's nail can and hammer and spiked each remaining board down. Joe sneaked a look at the belated expression on Lyle, stunned and guilty. To the amazement of both boys, the headquarters man gave them a chiding grin and made the schoolyard sign for *shame, shame*, one index finger whittling the other.

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

Eliason sent the boys back to the stairwork, then grimly disappeared into his tent to write up the visit from headquarters. Through the first hour of the afternoon Lyle steamed, then boiled over.

"I can't go this guy."

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

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

"I don't care if he's pasteurized Jesus," Lyle declared, "I've had enough of him." Down went his hammer with a thud of finality. "Come on, let's tell him we want our walking papers."

"I'm sticking."

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

"Lyle, I--it's different for me. You're from this country around here, acquainted anywhere you look. It's a long way back to Paterson for me, and there's not squat waiting when I get there." Ferragamo looked at his friend in appeal. "I'm going to try tough it out at this."

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

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

"Say, Lyle?"

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

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

Lyle gazed at him a long moment, then gave him a grin. "Sure. Sounds good. See you on buddy night."

That held. The two young men gravitated back together on those Saturday nights, even after Lyle quit the CCC and latched on at a haying job on the ranch next door to the Soda Creek camp. Ferragamo came out of his mountain summer honorably blooded, struck by a falling snag during the forest fire at a place called Flume Gulch. Across the next few years they stayed in touch with one another, and when the war came went in together and, still together, were destined into the 41st Infantry Division bound for the jungles of New Guinea, a lot more than half a world away from the mountain called Phantom Woman.

"In the old girl's *eye*?" Mitch stared at his father. "What the hell is that about?"

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

Dying man in front of him or not, Mitch couldn't help sounding puzzled:

"I didn't know Phantom Woman Peak meant such a lot to you."

"Oh, you bet it does."

"Tell me about it."

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

Lyle Rozier at one with the earth, mingled ash to dust? No, Mitch figured, it happens all the time. Deathbed conversions, they're called. He openly studied his father. *Why the mountains, why that mountain?*

"I'll take a dozen. They'll make fantastic Christmas presents."

"Huh uh," Lyle said at once.

The customer gave a businesslike smile, recognizing the time to dicker. "Then what kind of lots do you sell them in? I suppose I could use twenty--"

"Naturally you can buy one for yourself," Lyle ticked off on his fingers, "and I can let you have one for the wife--how many kids you got?"

"Two, but I want some for other--"

"Four family members total, then," Lyle added up for him. "So there's four irons, if you want. But you can't do it by just any old bunch.

with what looked to Joe like all the horses in the world strung out behind him, and asked where the crew boss might be. "Yeah. Yeah, mister, you bet, I'll get him!" Charging off up the ridge to fetch Spier and then tagging at his heels on the way back down, Joe was there all ears when the ranger asked whether he could borrow a few of the crew for a week or ten days, there had been a foulup at headquarters and he was short a couple of good workers to finish building a firetower.

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

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

He was surprised that Lyle showed hesitation about volunteering. It meant no town, no pal nights at the movies, for a week or maybe two, but wasn't it worth it to be on top of a mountain--of the Continental Divide--and leaving something built with your own hands?

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

By the time the rest of the jealous catcalling CCC crew was putting away its lunch utensils, Joe and Lyle were riding up the mountain like grinning cowboys.

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

The real work started as soon as they clattered down the stairsteps from the tower to the mountaintop again. The ranger led them over to the nearest of the rock formations surrounding the base of the tower. Eyebolts, he explained, had to be grouted into the stone formations and tension cables strung to the tower to prevent sway in the high winds up here. "Now then, laddy bucks," the young ranger piped. "Have you ever drilled rock before? No? Here's the procedure."

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

The boys survived the eyebolting and cabling and most of a week's worth of other unheard-of tasks before Eliason started fretting over the stairs. "Good golly, these will rot out in no time," he complained about the stairwork done by the framing crew that had put up the basics of the tower. The hefty floorboards on all three landings had been set flush

against one another, instead of being spaced half an inch apart--the ~~young~~ ranger had checked the manual, twice--so that moisture would drain through, nor had the edges of the steps been beveled to encourage runoff. "This just won't do," Eliason decreed and put Joe to trimming down the stair edges with a drawknife and plane, and Lyle, with his heft, at ripping out the stair landings with a pinchbar and a hell of a lot of grunted pulling of ten-penny nails with a hammer.

There was quite a kick to this work, a kind of steeplejack thrill as they progressed up and up the zigzag stairwell, ever farther into the air above the top deck of the continent. They seemed to be the only lucky ones permitted into the crow's-nest while the ship of earth sailed tremorlessly through the blue weather. They had reached the third and highest landing, Lyle having just finished tearing out the floorboards and ready to nail in the new set and Joe happily shaving just enough off a stair-edge a few steps below him, when the Forest Service bigwig swept through.

All the more surprise came from him showing up on foot, backpacking, rather than regally on horseback. Eliason, just then coming up the stairwell to mother-hen over Lyle as he spaced those floorboards, gawked in surprise, knit his brow, and clambered down in record time. The boys could overhear the visitor claiming that he wasn't really inspecting anything but scenery, but from the hesitant way Eliason shook hands with him he was obviously somebody important. They truly knew Eliason was rattled when, even though it

recognizing him half a mile off as the Rozier kid. Plucked from Paterson, New Jersey, Joe Ferragamo was grateful for a guide, a friend who didn't call him Joisey. What Lyle liked about Ferragamo was that he was swift about catching onto things. In his very first fistfight, there out back of the Civilian Conservation Corps barracks on Indian Creek, Joe didn't go in for the roundhouse knockdown style and instead concentrated on staying on his feet, the way the western boys fought. Lyle could see he'd been watching, soaking up. In no time the burly local kid and the weedy but improving East Coast youngster were a regular pair at getting in two-for-the-price-of-one, "pal night" at the Saturday night movies in Twin Sulphur Springs.

The mountains took Joe Ferragamo over. From his first footstep off the train, onto the depot platform at Browning clogged with boys from the East staring at the Rockies with apprehension or in some cases outright fear, Ferragamo felt excitement. The highest thing in Paterson, New Jersey, had been the falls that powered the silk mills, when there were silk mills.

Then when they were trucked south to the CCC camp, he saw the fingering layers of cliffs at the valley of the Two Medicine, touching toward the river and its canyon of air. This was the real it, Joseph Ferragamo decided.

They fell into the Phantom Woman job. Joe happened to be pickaxing a stubborn stony cutbank right at the new trailhead when the forest ranger came riding up the main trail

trailed by a cloned-looking Silicon Glen clan whose minds were plainly on their software presentation in Redmond--

There. Announced by her hair, Mariah.

"Sis! Over here!" Lexa lifted her right hand from its pocket perch and wigwagged it as high as she could reach.

Mariah, all footwork and grin, already was cutting a sharp angle through the concourse crowd. Bangles from probably Timbuktu flashing from her ears, and her gray eyes the quickest anywhere.

"Hey there, cowgirl. Aren't you the sight." They hugged the breath out of each other, *mmm mmm* ing in near-identical timbres.

Eventually they pushed back to arm's-length, gazing with frank investigative smiles into the family mirror they provided each other. Mariah as ever wore her contradictions like a gorgeous breastplate: she was starting to look her years, but those were only forty-two. The prime of life, Lexa granted, if you started with the assets Mariah had. She felt the stir in her blood, the forcefield of all the years of love and contention. Reuniting with Mariah always gave her a buzz on, a complicated one, heart and head kicking in at different times. There was nothing remotely like it, these first choked-full minutes back together with someone you have known as long and acutely as yourself.

Lanky and shapely as she propped herself against the kitchen doorway, she honestly didn't seem to know she still looked like a million dollars, Lexa thought

angling an elbow toward the photographic gear dangling various places on Mariah. One of their father's sagest observations was that Mariah liked to go around highly camera'ed up.

Says to tell you hi. He had to go off to Montana to head his dad off from some wild-hair scheme."

Mariah appraised her sister. "You're looking real good, cookie. Your own catering must agree with you.

"Umm, one of those."

Many hundreds of foot-pounds of baggage exertion later, they were at Lexa's van in the airport parking garage.

Mariah giggled. "Ghana," she explained. "I was in Accra, they give names to their jitney taxis there like *Consider Your Ways* or *Don't Do Sin*, paint it on the side. You ever go out of the fancy grub business, you and old*Can't Complain* have a future over there."

Lexa smiled wickedly. "We'll see what you think about that after you get a taste of my driving."

The good weather was holding, Seattle basking between the blue of water and distant blue forests. "Pretty pretty," Mariah said and left it at that.

"Remember the damned Gleaner?" The newspaper in Gros Ventre had run the headline: Jick McCaskill Goes to his Reward. Mariah still gritted over it. "Jick would've said he'd be happy to refund that one."

Lexa shook her head. "You're back from artsy-fartsying around the whole world, we've got every kind of catching up on each other to do, and we sit here talking about how people end up dead? What do you think, maybe the McCaskill sisters could stand to lighten up?"

The shaft of stone looked no less impossible in the glossy photo than it had on the l823 plans. The Bell Rock, off the east coast of Scotland, vanished with each high tide; to build it was a job stolen from the ocean.

Lexa had to grin. "Our own family stuff in the family album of everything? Pretty sneaky."

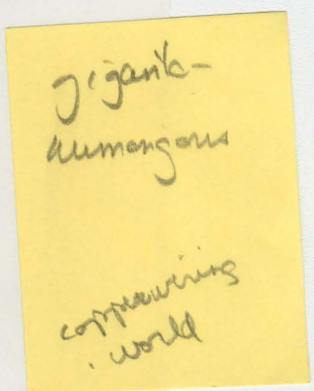
"Get this. You know what I was going to pair it with? The Black Eagle stack."

Lexa studied Mariah. "Say, babe, maybe your body clock is more radically out of whack than you think. Didn't they dynamite the absolute crap out of that--"

"--eight or ten years ago. You bet your rosy rear end they did. It's even worse than that, Lexa--I took pictures of that sucker when they blew it up. Umm, down."

The gigantic smokestack of the Black Eagle smelter was the tallest thing ever built in Montana. It started to show above the curve of the central Montana horizon as you drove within seventy-five miles of Great Falls and its Black Eagle hill, a smoking beacon against the sky.

"I was going to use it as--I don't know, the giant version of what started at Bell Rock. Signatures on the horizons, you know? The lighthouse giving its signals...the Black Eagle stack saying hey, we're the biggest furnace in the world here, we're smelting the copper guts right out of Montana. Anyway." Her eyelids closed, then opened



Mariah and Lexa were shaking their heads in unison.

Oats? barley? cottonseed cake?--each commodity suggested by their father drew another synchronized headshake from the girls.

"Well, then, now," Jick reached the stage of categorical statement. "I seem to be out of list and patience both. Lexa, whatever it is you've been up to, cut it out, hear? As for you, Mariah, you can figure that you've now got all the pictures of goats you're ever going to need in one lifetime, and it can remain a mystery why they like to prance right up and pose on that one sonofabitching rock for you. Savvy?"

The girls did, although what their male forebears never did manage to savvy was that Lexa's formula for making mountain goats line up and sniff with curiosity consisted of squatting here and there on that particular rock and simply peeing.

(transition back to Lexa and Mariah in Ballard)

"Here's the last thing I was working on," Mariah handed over a solo print.

The ocean looked like cloud, a lighthouse rising from the slightest spur of rock... (descriptive sentence or two of the Bell Rock lighthouse.)

"Alexander McCaskill's lighthouse, my dear Alexandra. The Bell Rock."

"Hoo hoo, *Col* in!"

"--but I couldn't see us long-term. Met him when I was doing the Mount Scott shoot. He's a glacier guide, is he ever. More like a souped-up sherpa, really--carries people's gear up while keeping them from falling into humongous crevasses. Talks like Hillary on Everest--after every trip up and down the glacier he'll say, 'Knocked the bastard off again,' and that'll be it for about an hour. And talk about a god bod--one look at him and you want to start eating him with a spoon."

Mariah paused in a major way.

"Lexa, he was twenty-four."

To help out, Lexa twirled her finger in a little cyclonic motion: "I guess it's not like water emptying out of the bathtub, they don't count years counterclockwise or anything down there so you could kind of reverse toward Colin's age, huh?"

Mariah tried with no luck at all to smother a huge amused smile, then stuck her tongue out at her. "Jesus, you are so full of sympathy."

"Serious now, sure you can't lighten up on the arithmetic part? I mean, guys get to play fast and loose that way on the calendar all the time, so why can't--"

"Twenty-four and young for his age."

"Ouch."

"Colin doesn't know diddly about anything except waltzing up and down glaciers. Doesn't care about getting anything done in life except that, either. I'd try show him what I was up to with my photo work, or tell him about doing the book, any of that left him cold. Sub-zero on the ambition scale, that was Colin. But he was a beaut."

Lexa studied the sister who had told her to always let the world see those wrist scars, *They show you've been through some life.* Lately Mariah had been through some herself, hadn't she, leaving-Bambi-on-the-glacier.

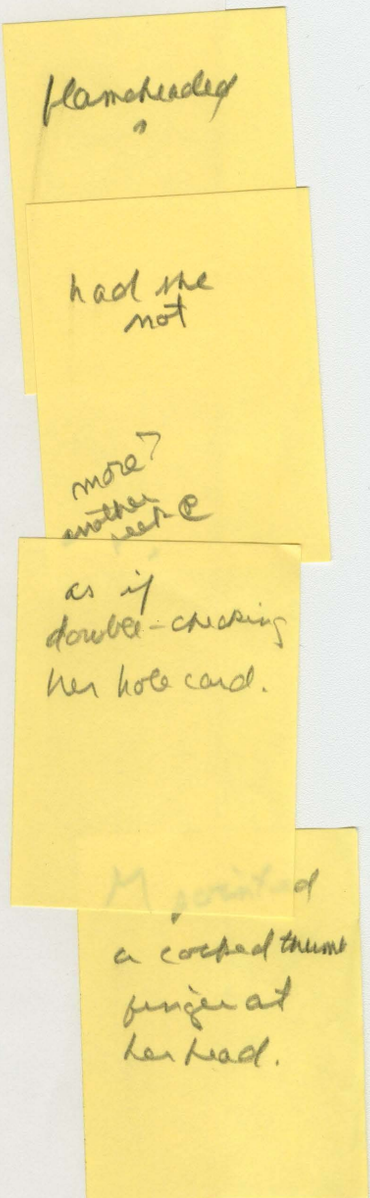
"Book," Lexa thought to prompt. "What's the book?"

Mariah swirled her drink, peering down into it as if taking a look at her hole card.

"I'm doing a family album of everything."

"Oh, everything," Lexa echoed after a considerable moment. She couldn't help a bit of mischievous smile as she asked: "Gonna take up the shelf space, isn't it?"

"Ooo, I asked for that one. Okay, earthly resemblances, how about. What I'm after is forms that are related to each other but we don't usually *see* them that way, think of them together. Desert dunes and ocean waves--how are they alike in the shapes they take, even if they're opposites in what they're made of, sand and water. Or sometimes how this resembles that, but isn't really *really* like it either. It's hard to explain, Lexa. It's christly hard to do, but it's even harder to explain. Let me think a minute."



When she had, she started:

"You remember what Jick used to say about the Hebners? 'All the faces in that goddamn family rhyme.' There were a bunch of families like that when you think of it. The Zanes, that long horsefaced look on every one of them? Or the way you could tell that bowlegged walk of any of the Frew family a mile off? Or those bighead bozoes Buddy and Bobby Rozier--oh shit, sorry."

"No prob. Mitch would be the first to agree evolution burped every so often in his family line."

"Okay, then. Anyway, that's what I'm after, the resemblances, the family of forms. I--" Mariah stopped and grinned. "What're *you* grinning at, shrimp?"

"You wouldn't just happen to have any of these so-called pictures, anywhere in your plunder?"

Mariah held out her arm, wrist bent. "Twist," she begged in a royally prim tone, then jumped to her feet and began digging out prints. "Stop me after a couple hundred, okay?"

(italicized graf here, rhythmic and evocative prose poem of sites and sights Mariah has photographed around the world. It leads into Mariah handing Lexa a pair of mountain photos, one of Mount Scott in New Zealand that is a rampart of ice and snow, the other the Rocky Mountain Front as a rampart of stone.)

Lexa drew in her breath. "Wooooh."

"Hey, who's letting herself run over in public now?" Pleased, Mariah produced another print. "Then this." (Rocky Mountain Front pic)

The remembered mountains. The month of June the greenest on the calendar of memory. Trailing the sheep up. The trails were carpets into the anteroom of the sky, up from Noon Creek and English Creek, past the falling-down homesteads, up across the foothills with their stands of timber, and then *up* that really meant it, the trails climbing the mountainsides. They went horseback, she and her father, sometimes Mariah, tending the sheep camps...

Lexa held the southern hemisphere moon-and-mountain picture squarely in both hands, brought it up within inches of her eyes, and frowned. "You're slipping, though. I knew you should have taken me along in your baggage."

"Slipping?" Mariah's voice rose. "You along, why? What for?"

Lexa turned the photo around and shook her head disparagingly. "No goats."

"Knothead," Mariah groused with a got-me grin. "You would bring those up."

The launch of Mariah's photography career had been from a point of rock on a mountain named Phantom Woman. She at thirteen and Lexa at eleven had lately graduated to separate horses--*Two is a lot of girls on one horse*, their father had admitted after their

previous summer of arguing and elbowing while riding double on camptending trips to Phantom Woman--and they were making the most of their new saddle freedom by exploring off a little way along the mountainslope while their father dealt with the sheepherder. The birthday camera practically burned in Mariah's hands, she was so eager to start working it. But already she had enough of a shooting eye to know that the mountain goats grazing idly around below that rocky reach of Phantom Woman were prime picture material, if they would just show more of themselves than they ever did.

"What would be neat," Mariah mused, "is if they'd get up on that rock, the saps."

"Make them," Lexa surprised her with.

"Oh, sure, herd mountain goats? Ninny, they're not like a band of sheep, they're wild--"

"You don't *know*?" Lexa was ecstatic with secret knowledge. "Nancy told me!"

What Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks, old and blind and murmuring out of her Blackfoot past, had passed along to Lexa worked like a charm. That summer the promontory rock turned into Grand Central Station for mountain goats, goats sniffingly curious, goats profoundly bemused, goats in winsome family groupings, goats in spectacular horned solo glory against the cliffline of the Rockies, roll after film roll of perfect posing goats. Mariah had pictures all summer long in the Gros Ventre *Gleaner*, the

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

Lyle figured this was as good a time as any. He cleared his throat and said to Mitch:

"There's disposing of."

Heirlooms by the dumptruckload, you bet. Mitch did not even bother to look around at it all, the equipment collection that overpopulated the yard, the branding iron warehouse, the no-account house chockful of borderline cases of rummage-or-garbage. "When the time comes, if I'm going to be your executor--sure, Dad, I'll naturally take care of..."

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

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

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

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

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

Lyle figured this was as good a time as any. He cleared his throat and said to Mitch:

"There's disposing of."

Heirlooms by the dumptruckload, you bet. Mitch cast a gaze around at the equipment collection that overpopulated the yard, at the branding iron warehouse, at the no-account house chockful of borderline cases of rummage-or-garbage. He tried not to sound as bleak as the prospect of getting rid of it all. "When the time comes, if I'm going to be your executor--sure, Dad, I'll naturally take care of..."

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

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

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

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

Mitch stared at this fathomless stranger his father. "Dad, sorry, but I just always figured you'd want to be buried next to Mother."

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

Where, then? In a Mason jar on my mantelpiece in Seattle? Couldn't say that to a dying person, though, could you. Not even this one. *Okay, then, damn it, I guess you're entitled.* "If you really figure we've got to start thinking about, ahm, arrangements, I'd better start keeping track." He pulled out his PowerBook, feeling monumentally silly. *What do I even call it, the Lighting Up Lyle File?*

"There's a fire tower on Phantom Woman Mountain," his father impatiently was telling him. "I did the majority of the work building it, back when. Mitch, what I want you is for you to toss my ashes from that tower." Lyle looked directly at his son, the sergeant look. "Right in the old girl's eye."

They were eighteen and unkillable, that Divide summer of 1939. Inseparable, practically joined at their tanned ribcages, he and Ferragamo. Life at the CCC camp was aiming them a bit, teaching them this and that and keeping them from either going hungry or going criminal, but the pair of young men had plenty of velocity left over after each

signed up for this. The houses along the way, lived in by people he no longer knew or who had become poor fits to the faces in his memory, didn't help.

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

On in to face life or whatever currently passed for it in the house, he found his father peering out the bay window, the back of his hand holding the wispy lace curtain aside.

"Here we go," Lyle called over his shoulder. "Come watch this."

Mitch joined the spectating. A gaggle of magpies, black and white and saucy as a masquerade party, had taken over the yard to try to boss Rin away from his dog dish, having no way of knowing their clamor was wasted on a deaf dog. Rin, resting by his dish with his nose behind his paws, looked almost in a doze. What must have been the leader of the magpies had alighted out in front of the dish and was striding around cocking a look at the out-of-it dog. Confident in its reconnaissance, the bird now took a brazen hop to the dish. It commenced to gobble the food, Rin watching like a sleepy pensioner. All at once he put a paw out, pinning down the magpie's long train of tail. There was just time

for a victimized squawk before Rin leaned his head forward and ended the magpie's career with one snap of his teeth.

The other magpies were outraged. They stalked around the dog, scolding him while he sampled his prize oblivious to their chatter. Every so often a bird would get behind him and peck him, Rin lifting his ears in surprise and glancing around at this, before going back to work on the bird in hand.

"He gets himself a lot of magpie suppers that way," Lyle said proudly, letting the curtain fall back.

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

"Dairy Queen. I get by on milkshakes pretty good. Or if you want to be fancy about it, you could open a can of pea soup."

Oddly heartened, Mitch made the obvious choice and went to the drive-in for fast food. By the time he got back, Lyle had run the magpies off and was settling onto the chopping block in the back yard. "Might as well eat out here," he indicated to another chunk of wood for Mitch to sit on, "pretty evening and all."

Mitch's cheeseburgers and Lyle's milkshake barely outlasted the sun as it encountered the crags and reefs of the mountains. The purpling time, the Roziers had always called this point of dusk when the mountains seemed to take a contemplative minute

and then come out in royal robes. Watching the sunset procession of shades, the older man sat and smoked, the younger man simply sat.

Lyle figured this was as good a time as any. He cleared his throat and said to Mitch:

"There's disposing of."

Mitch cast a gaze around at the no-account house, the branding iron warehouse, the equipment collection that overpopulated the yard. He tried not to sound as bleak as the prospect. "When the time comes, if I'm going to be your executor--sure, Dad, I'll naturally take care of..."

He watched his father lighting up another cigarette. Along with the first cascade of smoke Lyle let out:

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

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

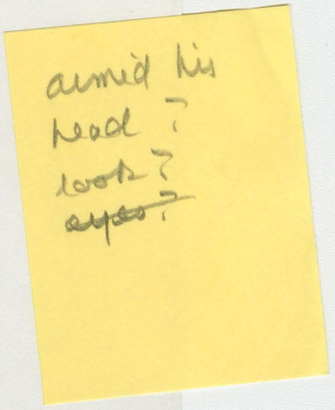
"Only kind I know of," Lyle said unperturbed, "unless you count these." He tapped the gray residue off the end of his cigarette.

Mitch stared at this fathomless stranger his father. "Dad, sorry, but I just always figured you'd want to be buried next to Mother."

"Don't take this wrong, Mitch. Nothing against your mother, you know that." He shifted around on the chopping block and glanced at the ground. "But I decided I don't want to be down there."

Where, then? In a Mason jar on my mantelpiece in Seattle? Mitch took a breath for control. *Okay, then, damn it, I guess you're entitled.* "If you really figure we've got to start thinking about arrangements, I'd better start keeping track." He pulled out his PowerBook, feeling monumentally silly. *What do I even call it, the Lighting Up Lyle File?*

"There's a fire tower on Phantom Woman Mountain," his father impatiently was telling him. "I did the majority of the work building it, back when. Mitch, what I want you is for you to toss my ashes from that tower." Lyle looked directly at his son, the sergeant look. "Right in the old girl's eye."



They were eighteen and unkillable, that Divide summer of 1939. Inseparable, practically joined at their tanned ribcages, he and Ferragamo. Life at the CCC camp was aiming them a bit, teaching them this and that and keeping them from either going hungry or going criminal, but the pair of young men had plenty of velocity left over after each day's labor. Lyle Rozier was local. Was he ever. He knew just how to take advantage of that with their hitchhiked rides into Twin Sulphur Springs, anybody driving to town recognizing him half a mile off as the Rozier kid. Joe Ferragamo, plucked from Paterson,

"Imagine that, a buyer," Mitch held himself to. "For what this time?"

The voice on the Montana end immediately rose. "The property, what the dickens do you think? The Rozier Bench!"

Mitch might have laughed if he hadn't been concentrating so hard on heading off his father's latest fit of enthusiasm.

"Better start at the start, Dad, okay? Lexa's on with us. I asked her to."

"Oh. How's every little thing, Missy?"

"Swell, Lyle," Mitch heard her say in the kitchen and echo on the phone. And more than half-guessed the part she was thinking: *Do I really want to be in on a Rozier family gutspill when I'm not any kind of a Rozier?*

"The bench deal took a while," Lyle swept on, "but we're about to close on it. That's why I'm calling, you know." Mitch gave a sharper wince. The benchland at the edge of his father's town of Twin Sulphur Springs was as speckled as a pinto pigeon egg: every dot a rock, or a batch of them. Some vagary of a glacier had left the elongated heap, topographical kin to the other low flat-topped buttes of that country but so stony it grew only thin tufts of buffalo grass. All those years ago Lyle had not precisely purchased the bald bulge of acreage from the XY ranch, he had swapped for it by putting up the ranch's hay for no charge. Mitch, seven or eight at the time, could recall his mother's fury, her tight repeated asking what they were supposed to use for money that summer while his

change "putting up" doing ranch's haying for nothing instead?

father was being paid off in dirt, no, rocks. Lyle steadfastly had answered her: *Priscilla, it's a chance to get hold of property.*

"What, ahm, what's your buyer want the famous bench for?" his skeptical son asked now.

"What it's good for. Gravel."

"Since when does that country need any more--"

"Gravel's only the best part of the deal, of course. That's why you've got to get yourself back here and do some eyeballing. There's all these papers, with the place involved and all. You have to be in on them. You're the heir, you know."

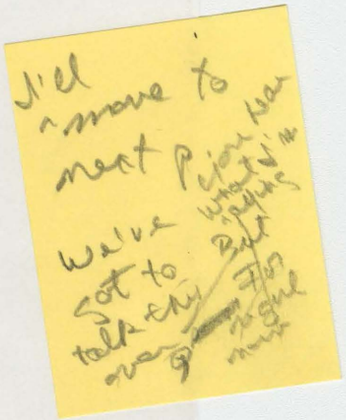
"Wait a minute. Your *place.* You just now said the bench--"

"It's all gonna go. The house. The stuff. Unless there's any of it you want. I keep telling you, that's why you've got to come and eyeball--"

"Dad, where are *you* going to go?"

"Aw, I'll think of somewhere."

Oldtimer's, Mitch thought in a panic, *my God, he's come down with it, Alzheimer's.* "Listen, don't do anything--don't sign anything, understand? I'll, I can get there by tomorrow. But in the meantime, whatever you do, don't--"



"Mitch, you been listening?" Lyle's sharpness of voice did not sound like a befuddled person. "I sure as the devil am not signing anything by myself, you're the one

who's got to come and be in on the paper-pushing. Lexa? You still there? Is his hearing all right?"

"It's better when he's not on the phone," she diagnosed.

"And if he hasn't worn his fingers off driving a typewriter," Lyle resumed, "he can come and dab his name on some papers, right?"

"He's got enough fingers for most purposes," Lexa further attested, giving Mitch a lewd grin around the kitchen doorframe. Flushed, he produced a rigid digit to her, all right.

"Mitch?" his father said now, pausing in that old rhythm--bluster and wait, boost some more and take advantage--that Mitch knew like elevator music. "I know you don't like coming over here much, but this is once you've just got to. Never bothered you on any of this before, now did I."

Mitch believed he could make the case that *bother* was the name of the game between them, approximately the past thirty-five years. But specifically this, bunching up everything in his possession and throwing it away--no, Lyle Rozier had not resorted to this, before.

"I'll come, but promise me you'll sit on your hands until I get there, all right, Dad?"

"Deal," said Lyle, and hung up.

Lexa was already coming into the living room as Mitch put down the phone receiver. "Not much for goodbyes, is he."

"I hate this! Why can't people divorce their parents!?"

His outburst drew him a considering gaze from Lexa. "Some problems with that, wouldn't there be," she said levelly. "Such as who would get custody of the bare-butt baby pictures."

"All right, all right," Mitch said with a hard swallow. "May my tongue cut off my right hand or something like that. Back to the rules. They gave us birth, and we give them kisses on the cheek." He rubbed his forehead as if trying to start things going in there. "If I'm going across the mountains to stop that father of mine from screwing up royally, I've got to call Bing for time off. If there's still anything to have time off from." But he turned back from the phone to Lexa. "I don't suppose you could come along? Ride shotgun down the avalanche?"

"Can't. Tomorrow we siblings get together and sible, probably tooth and nail."

Mitch blanked on that.

"Mariah's flying in," Lexa said with red-letter enunciation.

"I knew that." He sneaked a glance toward the refrigerator message center.

"Only child," Lexa shook her head. "You guys always got the whole birthday cake to yourself."

She saw him looking at her with surprising contemplation, given all else that was presently camping on his mind.

"Before I go," he announced. He held out his arms and tried to smile. His voice dropped. "Want to mud-wrestle, lady?"

She puckered as if thinking it over, then stepped into the hug, nuzzling encouragingly under his jaw with the top of her head. "Look at it this way," he heard her say into the hollow at the base of his throat, "dealing with your father might save you from the dread fate of bartending."

"Mitch, I hate having to put it this way. But could we postpone this fight for a little while?" Exhaling smoke slowly as if to settle his nerves, Lyle let out along with it: "It's getting harder to get along with Luke."

Another war with some neighbor. Or the brother of his cyber-gospelist Matthew? Mitch waited, but nothing resembling an explanation seemed to be nearing his father's horizon.

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

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

"Leukemia."

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

"Dad, hello? Is this for real? You're sitting there telling me you've got leukemia?"

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

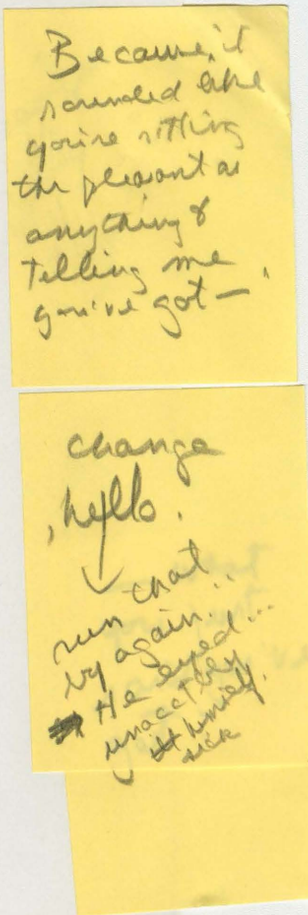
"How long've you--when did you find this out?"

"Aw, year or so. It goes slow, you know."

"Can't be that long. I was out here to see you just last fall."

Lyle's expression stayed infuriatingly reflective as he reiterated:

"No, a year now, it's been."



Mitch wanted to pick the old reprobate up by his ears and then start doing him serious damage, and simultaneously was horrified at himself for that reaction. As carefully as he had every said anything, he now said:

"You knew you had this the last time I was here and didn't say anything?"

"You got your own life, seems like," Lyle responded. Put that way, it did not sound a particularly commendable fact.

"Well, good God, Dad, we have to get you some medical atten--"

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

All of a sudden this was the hot-faced Lyle, the foreman who could fire a lazy hayhand so fast his head would spin. The father who blazed when a son defied him. The VFW Club veteran. *Choosing the ground to fight on one last time, old sarge?* Mitch wondered.

"They've looked me over every which way, down at the Falls," Lyle was saying, with a jerk of his head in the direction of Great Falls and its hospital hill. "And called in their visiting guy from the Mayo Clinic, just to make sure." Lyle cracked a match into flame and lit up another cigarettee before looking across the table at Mitch. "Everybody catches something they don't get over, I guess."

"Nothing to be done?" Mitch asked with his hands spread.

"Not by them, no. What they tell me is..."

Mitch listened to his father pronounce *myelogenous* and *terminal-indicative* and other medical adjectives, but his awareness was back there on the calm expulsion *leukemia*. One diagnostic word, all it took. The space of a breath had brought Mitch his turn in the gunsights of obligation. Bingford had buried his famous father in Aspen earlier this year. Ingvaldson's daughter the Unitarian minister had popped back from Duluth to frown compassion over his kidney stone episode last winter. Like the flyways of rattled birds, America's concourses were constantly crisscrossed with Baby Boomers trying to nerve up for the waiting bedside consultation, the nursing home decision, the funeral arrangements. Mitch could generally pick out the stunned journeyers home in airport waiting lounges, the trim businesswoman who lived by focus sitting there now with a ten-thousand-yard stare, the man celebrating middle age with a pony-tail looking down baffled now at his compassion-fare ticket. The time came, it always came. The when of it was the ambush.

SLUSH

The first one, Foster. Classmate at the Illinois Institute of the Arts. Her birthday or his--good grief, you'd think you could remember which--a Loop date, deep-dish pizza at the Uno and then music at the Do-Re-Mi Club on lower Dearborn. Whatever the jazz equivalent of a maitre'd is, he took one look at the pair of them--Mariah with the lanky beauty of a blood-bay colt that might win the Derby some day, Foster the finest young manhood Des Moines had to offer--and seated them up next to the piano, inches from the end of the keyboard. They each ordered a beer of a ~~kind~~ brand they had never heard of, and peeked around at the huge blowup photographs, Krupa on his drums sounding the wake-up call at Carngeie Hall in the Goodman concert, Billie Holliday, the one of Louis Armstrong with his cheeks and eyes as big as his horn, and above him the dance of lettering of his creed, **We all go do-re-mi, but you got to find the rest of the notes for yourself.** When Marian McPartland came on, slight woman in a velvet pantsuit, three-inch earrings dangling like dollhouse chandeliers, she sat down to the piano, glanced, a little startled, at Mariah and Foster and said, "Wow, music in the round." Then shifted slightly sideways toward the audience and began to play. Mariah took it all in, vowed earrings into her life, vowed a life of highwire grace. She watched the astonishing hands, already knobby on a couple of the knuckles, terrifically long spatulate fingers, and the music came and came, Ellington's velvet "Long Valley" and a Coltrane piece called

"Red Planet" that indeed sounded from beyond the bounds of this world and then McPartland's own "A Delicate Balance". Came request time--Mariah definitely remembered this--and someone called out, "Love Supreme." McPartland scoffed, "'Love Supreme', my God." But thought for a moment and caressed into it, her fingers at the black keys and sliding down to the seams of the white. When it was over, Mariah and Foster sailed out of the Do-Re-Mi in a certain state of ecstacy that they both know was going to lead to the next. Desire under the El. They kissed further and further in the swaying seat of the elevated train on their way back to campus and Foster's room--he had the collection of Rush Street lp's--and made love that was supreme in its ingenuousness. You could do worse than lose your virginity (she was pretty sure Foster was saying bon voyage to his that night, too) to Chicago jazz.

I am so slow at this.

That's two of us.

"You are going to have to get over all this, you know."

"Dispose of the disposing of, you mean. How about giving me a few days to get used to being a cripple again, okay? Then I'll work on--the everlasting Lyle and the rest of this."

Great. Meanwhile the house still needed cleaning out, interrupted by the Bob hike.

He had told Aggregate to take a hike.

"I know when I'm outgunned. Trying to make something out of life with Mariah would be like dating Picasso."

"I don't have to challenge her to a cookout, to see which of us gets you?"

Mariah crouched at the head of the coulee, wide-angle lens on her camera to take in the vee of rocks and the swirl of ashes when Mitch tossed them.

"You're lucky it's not quick-draw with cameras."

"You're right. That's a piece of luck."

"Why don't you stay."

"There's still a lot to be sorted."

Lexa studied her. "You're staying on?"

"Mmhmm. I need to hole up and finish the photo book."

"This is the only part of the world you can think of to do that?"

Mariah took a breath. "If you decide to hang around--then I won't."

"All right, Mariah, what is it with you--a sweet tooth for newspaper guys?"

"Seems like. And after I swore off twice, with Riley."

Mariah chewed a corner of her lip. "Damn it, damn it, *damn* it, Lexa. I didn't intend any of this. I hope you don't think--"

"The sonofabitch, I think I love him."

"I'm kind of that way about both him and you." Lexa tossed her head. "I could see it happening. First time I've had much sympathy for old Travis."

Erasing the blackboard of her mind as rapidly as she could, Lexa stammered to make sure:

"That game of tag is over?"

"I didn't say that." He reached and touched the corner of her lips with his forefinger. "We're It."

Over her shoulder Mitch started at the symbols on the screen. After a bit, he was the one who said:

"Let's get Matthew over here again.

but never figured out why. (But oh no, the Roziers couldn't have settled here where geography amounted to something.)

"...Last person in the world I would have expected to let himself in for love trouble. And with the wife of a guy he was probably closer to than anybody." Mitch broke off to look at the grizzly as they passed the bear pen. Lexa had insisted on stopping by the zoo, although he had been in favor of someplace where they could keep kissing less publicly.

"He must really have wanted to be that guy," Lexa said.

"Got another fellowship. It turns out you land one, you're figured to be qualified for others. Alaska. A dozen of us, painters mostly, to do stuff on the Copper River delta." Mariah looked away. "I thought I might look up Travis."

"Oh, hey. In that case."

She went and got Mitch's outsize purple sleeping bag.

"Travis is skinny," Lexa explained, "but he's pretty tall. Two of you will fit in this wonder, I'm sure of it."

Mariah swatted at her, laughing. "Eat dirt, sis."

With a long 00 finger Mariah traced the seared outlines of the nearest few of the brands blazoned into the wall. "Don't these remind you of...here, let's just check it out." She went to her camera bag and pulled out her PowerBook. The twin dents of concentration appeared between her eyes.

"This'd only be a sample, a real software program would have dingbats up the wazoo to work with, wouldn't it. But look."

Wordlessly he agreed and sat on the running board, his head back against the seat cushion where she was ensconced. Without disturbing herself under her hat Lexa reached down and cupped a hand around his shoulder as if he might fall off. They lazed there like that for a little while. Sun and silence for a change felt equally good to Mitch. The town was quiet, unattuned to anything but the welcome weather, there was that about a place that was marooned and knew it. Seattle could use a little of this toasty torpor. He felt his mind go out of high gear, slowing. While he was reposing that way he contemplated the Rozier back yard's maze of machinery carcasses, but drew no new conclusion.

He walked in the bunkhouse door, and his father was everywhere.

Mariah had arranged the prints all over the wall and the table and the bunk bed, and some propped atop her camera gear bags. She was moving around, judging, brisk as a jay.

"Hate to bother you, I know you're up to your neck in Lyle's leftovers around here, but I do need to check over the caption stuff with you. Make sure I know what I'm looking at."

The hard soil of age. Lyle looked dubious of everything over the horizon. Frame by frame around the room, Lyle began to leave life.

Mitch could look at his father with a reporter's eye, see the act there, and it made no difference. Lyle Rozier was a genuine item.

The bunkhouse held all the men who worked for Lyle. His father's crews always looked like kids (well, hard-used kids) playing pirate. Every so often, on a crew would be some prodigy with an axe or 00, a sunburst of skill into the do-it-good-enough-to-get-along way of ranching and farming. Fritz and Ferragamo and one-armed Eddie and the three Jensens and the mute Hutterite and...haymakers and drifters and drunks and those

who were just luckless, it was as if the ghost legion of them was mustered out of the daybook, crowded from wall to wall in this bareboard bunkhouse again now.

Mariah seemed to sense that Mitch was steeped in memory. Her arms crossed, she stood and watched him.

"Never thought I'd be saying so, but your pictures *are* my father. For better or worse." He smiled congratulations at her. "You nailed him."

"Just about."

Mitch took another scan around at the gallery of Lyles as if he might have missed something. "No, really, you--"

Back amid it all, the lost marriage. Riley and her too much with each other, working together at the paper. "Your husband, the camera," he'd once said. And then back together on the Montana centennial series and damned near making the same mistake all over again.

What is it with you, Mariah, a sweet tooth for newspaper guys?

He walked in the bunkhouse door, and his father was everywhere.

Mariah had arranged the prints all over the wall and the table and the bunk bed, and some propped atop her camera gear bags. She was moving around, judging, brisk as a jay.

"Hate to bother you, I know you're up to your neck in Lyle's leftovers around here, but I do need to check over the caption stuff with you. Make sure I know what I'm looking at."

As a word jockey always fighting for space in the narrow confines of a newspaper, Mitch could take photojournalism or leave it, preferably leave. But this was like a book known by heart. In one of his moments caught by Mariah you could see him sniffing, sneaking that extra air in; it tugged his face up... In another, his lower lip was pooched out as he thought over... Maybe in error, but never in doubt....His eyes drilling through the paper of the photo... There were a number of pictures with cigarette smoke around him like the haze of his life. Another, he was talking and you could tell that this man had a tongue in him like a clapper of a bell. Yet another, he was extended in his easy chair, his younger self on the screen, laidback before the term ever got thought of. Watching himself go by.

The hard soil of age. Lyle looked dubious of everything over the horizon. Frame by frame around the room, Lyle began to leave life.

Older than the volcanic cones Eons of geological thrust and fold, the sharp periods of glaciers... What seemed from the flatter earth to be a congregation on nearer inspection became individual landforms, each a variation of geological process. Roman Reef... Made of time, the mountains stood in ranks. This particular range was the ridgepole of the continent.

Lexa drove to Great Falls for U.S. Geological Survey maps. At their north lay the glossary of the McCaskills...She folded the quadrangle maps with the marked-in route showing out, and put them in a transparent waterproof packet.

Mariah seemed to sense that Mitch was steeped in memory.

Down at its hem, so to speak, was the comblike outcropping of Rooster Mountain. Eons of geological thrust and fold, the sharp periods of glaciers... This particular range was the ridgepole of the continent.

At the mountain's hem, so to speak, the timber was green-black with distance, then grayed away on the upward slopes where long-ago forest fires had woven.

Eighty miles of mountains stood behind these stone shields in jutting ranks. On nearer inspection, what seemed from the flatter earth down below to be a skyline congregation began to sort into individual landforms, each spinnaker pinnacle or blocky summit tipped in mid-dice-throw specifically shaped by geological chance--the tectonic overthrust action that upturned these northern Rockies into a series of tilted slabs like frozen tidal waves aimed east toward the continental beach of plains. Older than the volcanic sleepers of the coast ranges, these interior crags showed their bone structure of strata and their cliff faces gnarled and smoothened by glaciation, the grand intricacy of creation giving them their hewn beauty. In the third row of peaks stood the mountain with the stone suggestion of a woman's face. Fantasy, of a sort, for the features of Phantom Woman were an outcropping that only from a certain angle resembled a nose of delicacy, placement of eyes an accident of symmetry by winsome sockets of rockslide. In all likelihood, the bearing of the mountain brought it its name, comely at first glance but then oddly withdrawing; at its hem, so to speak, the timber was green-black and thick, then grayed away upward on its slopes where forest fires had been

flatsided fundamental rock formations as if the mountains had been tipped over and their undersides were in view.

Carrying the continent, dividing its waters and halving its scenery into the West and the rest, these mountains held lodes of time up their canyon sleeves.

Jericho Reef, two miles of sudden limestone palisade, appeared to arch its back in everlasting surprise as the plains butted into its bedrock.

Across a deep timbered gulch from Jericho, Roman Reef stood higher and a mile longer, its rimrock crest as regular as the frieze of a vestal temple but incalculably more ancient.

Grizzly Reef, true to its name, seemed to threaten on into eternity with its half-turned slab face targeting north toward the flanks of the other two.

The three hikers starting out, Lexa in the lead by unspoken vote, could glimpse between these stone shields the jutting ranks of mountains beyond. There in the skyline congregation of spinnaker pinnacles and blocky thrown-dice summits stood the crag with the stone suggestion of a woman's face. Imagination of course helped with the features of Phantom Woman, for only from a certain angle did its high central outcropping resemble a nose of delicacy, and the placement of eyes were sheerest accident of symmetry by winsome sockets of rockslide. And the invisible told most of all: atop this mountain's particular brow, the beadline of gravity rested. Down Phantom Woman's back, this meant, the snows and rains of the seasons ran off into the westgoing rivers that culminated in the

Columbia and the great gate to the Pacific at Astoria. Those trickling off its front streamed away to the Missouri River and thence the Mississippi River and at last into the vast delta catchment at the Gulf of Mexico.

The first pause in this continental descent came just here, between the farthest-in foothills of the Two Medicine country, in the form of the green-blue lake of Agency Dam.

In its mirror of water the nearest reef, Jericho, was pictured in motionless headstand onto its bowed summit, a perfect unwavering stalactite of itself.

Across the reflecting surface, the images of the two backpacking women and the bulk-carrying man hiking the shore trail were similarly caught upside down.

The sky could not have been more blue, the rim of Jericho Reef as exact as an arced bridge against it. Constant variety of scenery--peaks, square-set ranges with their knees in the air, canyons of Agency Creek,

Smokechasers ran in the family, her grandfather on the forest fires of the dry Thirties, her father a smokejumper at the Missoula base her college summers after World War Two. She had done some herself in Alaska, on the fireline at 00.

For Mitch, in his Coast life and confinement to The Springs whenever he was out here, the Rockies had existed mostly in his eyes and mind. Yet those were powerful old places too, he reminded himself. Carrying the continent, dividing its waters and halving its scenery into the West and the rest, these mountains held lodes of time up their canyon sleeves.

"Why can't I fluff up the sleeping bags while some warrior woman goes and attacks fish?"

Thin-skinned tectonics, a phrase employed by geologists who were not here on the concrete-hard gray clay of the rising trail, had upturned this section of the Rockies into a series of gigantic tilted slabs like frozen tidal waves aimed east toward the continental beach of plains.

He knew this country was just west of childhood, for them, and they had been along with their father when grazing allotments were allowed, before the expansion of the Wilderness Area.

He concentrated on his tent. Mariah had put up Lexa's tent and her own, and now scooted in out of sight.

A little bulk was worth it if it was food. She always put in the pack a couple of loaves of heavy bread, tough nourishing stuff. Protein was scarce, so cured sausage that would have set off cholesterol sirens in them all down on the flatlands would be welcomed by digestive systems up here.

Up here, the gray clay of the trail was like concrete, or where it wasn't that, it was talus.

"One of Dad's bored sheepherders."

"No, couldn't have been. It had to have been before 1940. This was set aside then. Marshall died the year before, the Forest Service got right on this."

"I thought guys are supposed to be naturals at playing with their food."

"Very very funny. Would you want..."

"We sit and think while gearheads are whipping the water with this stuff."

Those demon hikes were on top of his work.

"Cause of death: living too much. His obits say he went back to Washington from charging around the West on his high lonesomes and right away died on the train to New York.

Every so often, the flash of a doe on the trail ahead. They came out into Big Elk Meadow, a wide green park about a mile long, a fourth of a mile wide. (Mitch had never managed to break himself of estimating distances in football fields.)

. Imagination of course helped with the features of Phantom Woman, for only from a certain angle did its high central outcropping resemble a nose of delicacy, and the placement of eyes were sheerest accident of symmetry by winsome sockets of rockslide.

Green-again slopes below them, slowly changed from the great forest fire of 1929 when the mountain was determined to wear black, darts of flame jumping the firelines for three weeks, scattering the Forest Service crews like refugees under bombardment. And finally, after the climb through the wind, the mountaintop and the Divide.

The mountains opened into a tremendous bowl, mountains on three sides. Through a notch, the farmland pattern of the plains could be seen.

The continent was tipsy with mountains. There now were three ranks in front of them, and several behind, west. Geology and history kissed right here. Its invisible power could not have been more definite; the beadline of gravity rested up there on its brow. Down Phantom Woman's back, this meant, the snows and rains of the seasons ran off into the westgoing rivers that culminated in the Columbia and the great gate to the Pacific at Astoria.

To the north where the Two Medicine River carves its canyon through the prairie of the Blackfeet Reservation, the long flat tops of benchlands stood out as if drawn onto the sky with a yardstick and blackest inks.

They could see the meander-line of Soda Creek finding its way toward the Teton River. The role of drainages was laid out, from up here. Without the town in the way and the benchlands shutting in the Soda Creek valley, this was resounding country. Out there, the tick tack toe of America, squares of strip farming and now rangeland. Those fields salted with his sweat, in the rockpicking years. Those tall islands, the Sweetgrass Hills.

Looking back and below from the trail, he tried to decide if Twin Sulphur Springs would look so shabby if it didn't have the massive mountains around for comparison. Something about the human eye that does not want a close horizon.

They were going into the mountains, Lexa and Mariah, from north of childhood. The road in took them past the upper end of what had been the McCaskill ranch and was now a Nature Conservancy buffalo preserve.

The ranch had been a beauty for hay. Bottomland meadows of wild brome along Noon Creek, and the big field atop the Noon Creek-English Creek divide which grew dry-land alfalfa. In a wet year, the alfalfa soared up to knee-high and that wide benchland looked as deeply green as the Amazon jungle. English Creek meandered on and joined the Marias River, Mariah's namesake

It could have been country from a picture book. The hay meadows and fenced grazing land and winter wheat fields filled the countryside, a broad peaceful deck of pattern below the high backdrop of summer pasture. Spring and autumn, bands of sheep and herds of cattle could be seen trailing across the valleys in slow flows. The cattle would pool into a dark tide which you could follow from the moment they bawled past until they

drew over a far ridgeline. Sheep were harder to sort from the landscape at a distance, just a softer patch of gray which you had to squint hard at to find. The surest marked for sheep was the rounded white canvas of the herder's wagon, standing up out of the flat grass color like an igloo.

A lot of fencelines between here and there. She caught herself rubbing her wrist scars.

"Our distinguished hitchhiker--why did he want this?"

"Hell if I know," Mitch said. "He once pounded a nail or two into this tower, was the best I could get out of him." After a moment he added: "It wasn't like him. He didn't even come hunting in these mountains, he was a chase 'em with a pickup and gun 'em down on the prairie guy." This drew a look from Lexa.

... (Mariah's voice reciting poetry or singing Bell Rock ballad.)

The three of them just stood on the balcony for a minute, catching their breath in more ways than one.

geology and history raftered together, the construct of the continent angling away in both directions all the timeless twists and turns of earth and humankind.

These early minutes, she loved. Dawn was the part of the day when you met yourself without regrets.

Mitch will have to stay awhile to finish up with his dad's stuff, I guess.

rumpled and stubbled with whiskers and taking in the immense continental rumple of geology and history,

The early minutes, she loved. Dawn was the part of the day when you met yourself without regrets.

Abandoned for years, the cabin was elemental in its furnishings and not built for three.

"I am out of my mind, I already have fifty zillion pictures of clouds," Mariah said, going out onto the platform with camera in hand.

The Divide country had been as glorious as he expected Time was forever in short supply.Life was escapes, plunges, of this sort. His hurry was different this summer, some feeling that impelled him into as many mountains of the West as he could possibly get to. The miles were coming harder now, and there had been that spell of passing out--sunstroke, it only was, he repeated to himself--at 00. Never mind. He and brother George, schoolboys in Central Park playing Lewis and Clark. The family summer place in the Adirondacks.

He believed mountains made the difference. A world all lowland, entirely fields and plains, invited engineering and the tame patterns of residence.

"Help me out on this," he'd asked the Italian boy when the other two were at the tent for more food. "Did your friend say...?" The other CCC boy, though, the barrel-chested one. Something on his mind. Eating at him.

On that deer-hunting day, crisp and bright, her father pulled his .30-30 from the scabbard in the back of the Power Wagon, and looked at Jericho Reef. "Jesus, the country

this is. Lexa, let's go up on the Rocky Mountains and get us some venison." A few hours later and higher, with one of his squinted exact shots, Jick McCaskill downed a three-point buck. Lexa looked at the Power Wagon the size of a pencil point below them. Skid was the word. She took her turn in clear patches, grasping the antlers, the gutted deer sliding on its fur. She knew her father was letting her do a share of the work to make the experience last in her; put it into the bodily memory.

Camera gone too, naturally. She stuck her feet in her boots but didn't lace them, pulled on a sweatshirt and clopped out on the platform.

It was only everything else about life that Mitch, and historically speaking Mariah, would not listen to her about. *How do I keep getting hooked up with hardheads?*

Every so often she shot, not to let some piece of the scene get away.

For two persons who had started off with each other below room temperature, she and Mitch were co-existing surprisingly.

use w Lexa in Seattle after spent-up?

Sleep didn't come, although the recurrent dream that was memory did. The long ago. Growing up on the ranch, in all the weathers there were...by each January the gleam on the snow began to tarnish, and there were a hundred days yet until spring. Was that what turned her toward seasonless work, the camera lens its own fresh day every time? But Lexa with the same starting point had taken to horseback, to running the hills; somehow she was cut out for kid life on the ranch and the rhythm of chores taken in stride from then on. (*There seems to be a lot I'm not cut out for.)* Thinking about Lexa, it all tangled.

"Holler if you need me."

"You'll hear."

You hired on to be tough, didn't you? Their father's old saying whenever she or Lexa made a mouth at long chores. Day one of nursie in the tower had been tough enough on the nerves for anybody. Talk about tough, he looked it, pain-pinched and stubbly as he was. It was a few moments before he wanted to know:

He wondered how far along the trail Lexa was.

interior italics are needed for them on the hike

final Lexa-Mariah scene:

Mariah says she has another fellowship; Alaska for summer, Copper R. delta(?)

--Says she might look up Travis.

--Lexa: "Oh, hey. In that case." Goes and gets Mitch's outsize sleeping bag. "Travis is skinny, but he's pretty tall. Two of you will fit."

--"Eat dirt, sis."

flashbacks in this section can be brief, until the longer unfoldings during Lexa's run:

--Mitch weighing ashes

--Lexa and Jick deerhunting

--Mariah w/ Colin; Taiaroa?

Monuments have to be inserted fairly early into hike.

Mitch could fall down fire tower steps on hisxx own, jerking the ashes away from the railing, rather than because of Mariah (or Lexa).

--does Mitch have to think it's Mariah messing w/ the ashes, and it turns out to be Lexa?

--wd have advantage that her solo rescue hike is a redemption

--her forgiveness of Lyle would match w/ Marshall's?

Bob Marshall:

He's on a high lonesome to avoid Region 1 hq, where some still remember *him as bat-eared kid out of Johns Hopkins, the Adirondacks. They're uneasy w/ him in his high FS job.

*who would take off for the Brooks Range or some other mountain venue at the drop of a hiking boot.

--He about had the wilderness designation system in place.

fishing contest:
didn't tell me you've got
"No fair. You've got coordination."

"It's all in the...Yow!"

"Don't horse him!" Lexa shouted as Mitch instinctively yanked the pole back.
"Play him in toward you... You'll lose him, play him in~~x~~ slow
"Rightrightright. Okay, I'm playing him, come to Papa,come, fishie,

there's a good fishie...

Lexa was laughing so hard she let her line drift into a... "Shit!"

"What's this I here, profainity in the vicinity of my meal?

She recovered by outfishing him three to two in the next half-hour.

~~X~~supper Each catch brought ecstatic groans from them about supper.

No dirty talk around my food, please.

Night came to the Bob, (sequence of shadows on specific mountains, their colors, catching last light, etc.)

Lexa in fire tower confrontation: to the effect that Mitch has to separate the country and his father.