

I have to hand it to you, Ben. You made it back here in one piece. From the neck down, anyway.

In the ice-blue twilight that passed for illumination in the roadhouse, Cass drank him in from across the table. His months out there under the ocean sun had tanned him to a light bronze. The ginger hair was briskly cut in a way he must have caught from being around Marines, a curt bristle her fingers wanted into whenever they weren't otherwise engaged in the cabin out back a half hour ago. His face in its weary extent held both more and less than she remembered. Whatever else the Pacific trip had done to him, it had honed him down almost to thin, his every feature accentuated as if all excess had been pared away, bone truth underneath. *You were serious before, you're damn near drastic now.* The loss of his buddy at Guam was still with him any given moment, echoing off the stars and every surface between, but that was not all. Even when he was joking with her about the skunk juice the roadhouse passed off as scotch, there was a steady intensity to Ben, like a lamp flame trimmed low, burning through the night.

“Cass?” He spun his glass in the spot of condensation under it, as if studying the direction of the swirl. “Cass, how much longer do we have?”

She could tell he did not mean from then to morning. Her tongue caught on the words a little as she spoke back. “You could have talked all night, soldier, and not asked that.”

“Just wanted to brush up on how things stand.” He kept on watching the twirl of the glass as if it was going to do a new trick. “With us. The incurable ungodly galloping case of us, remember?”

They’d both had too much to drink, which still was not nearly enough. Right away their reunion had all but gone through the roof of that cabin. They climbed all over one another in the beat-up bed, fast and furious in their need. Their first lovemaking since Seattle, both of them went about it as if it was the last ever. Afterward, a bit dazed and winded, they adjourned out here to take a look at the matter of themselves through the comparatively cool reflection of drinks.

Carefully Cass steadied herself, both elbows on the table, chin up. Funny how a dive like this place was the one spot that didn’t care how tangled you were, showed some mercy. The jukebox was turned low into a kindly monotony, “Deep Purple” swinging along invisibly for about the dozenth time. On down the long bar from their corner, the place was empty this far into the night except for the roadhouse bartender and a local codger idly taking turns at playing the punchboard. So at least we don’t have to make fools of ourselves in front of anybody that counts. Yet. Braced, she looked Ben full in the face. “You’re the

one who's been out there in Tokyo's back yard, you tell me when the man I'm married to is likely to be told he doesn't have to invade any more islands."

Ben thought about it, showing the effort to get past the effects of the so-called scotch. Everyone in the Pacific theatre of combat was betting MacArthur would try for the Philippines pretty soon. That "I shall return" yap he let out in '42. As if he's going to come back to Manila and whip the asses of the Japs single-handed. Whenever the supreme general did try to retake the Philippine Islands, he would throw in all the troops he could find. Ben could not bring himself to tell Cass the overpowering likelihood, that jungle-veteran units such as her husband's would be used to mop up whatever MacArthur wanted mopped up. "It's anybody's guess, what'll happen out there," he came out with, aware it was hardly worth it.

Cass looked away. "Dan's got overseas points, up the gigi, but his whole National Guard bunch keeps getting extended. He's on some wreck of an island called Biak, they let them say that in a letter finally." She paused to do some thinking of her own. "He wrote me that it's supposed to be a recuperation area now, but it's sure as hell no Australia or Hawaii--his outfit figures they're being held there for one last shooting match." She broke off to take a hard sip of her drink.

This was a moment Ben knew he should feel honorable remorse or worse for trespassing into Cass's life with another man. As far back as their first time as lovers, qualms of that sort were somewhere just beyond the edge of the bed. But stronger emotions would always push those away, if he and she had a hundred

years at this. The nature of love is that it catches you off guard, subjects you to rules you have never faced, some of them contradictory. All of the ones about fidelity of heart and life knotted him to Cass, and as far as he could tell, always would.

He scrunched in his chair, not saying it until he could no longer stand to hold it in. "What happens then? When he does come home?"

"I don't damn know. I do not know, Ben, how can I? I'm going to be faced with a man I haven't seen in two years, it'll have to decide itself from there."

Watching her from across the table, he listened desperately, trying to determine if he was hearing ground rules of wingwalking again--Never leave hold of what you've got--or something more hopeful--until you've got hold of something else.

Cass was gazing steadily at him as she finished up. "If you were him, you'd feel entitled to that much."

"If I were him, I'd hate me."

"Hey, don't get going in that direction." She shook her head in warning.

"If anyone is going to be accused of messing up a marriage, start with me. Nobody held a gun on me and said, 'Go fall for that dishy war correspondent in the fleece jacket,' did they. I could have looked the other way and stayed in the rut I'm meant to for the rest of the war, one more pilot going nowhere."

"Come off that, will you?" he appealed. "Since when doesn't having a squadron count? I sure to Christ don't have one. You aren't anybody's idea of a pilot going nowhere."

“Not now. Wings on my brisket, bars on my collar, I’m a pretty good imitation of a fighter plane jockey on these ferrying runs, you bet I am. But what happens the minute the boys come marching home? Is the good old Army Air Corps going to treat WASPS like guys? No sign of it so far.” Cass jerked her glass up to her lips, found it empty, and set it down disconsolately. “I want the war over as much as anybody, but the war is what keeps me in that cockpit. There’s a pisser, isn’t it? And Ben?--[!]_Mus, chronic us? How do I know I could keep up with you after the war? If we did stay together? You’re probably going to be famous--[!]_M what am I saying, you’re famous or next thing to it already--[!]_M”

“Only as long as bullets are flying.”

“--[!]_Mand all in the damn world I’m good for is handling one half-assed kind of fighter plane.”

He lurched his chair forward. “Cass, we can’t put together life after the war until the sonofabitching thing shows us it’s going to be over, but we can stick together until we can figure out--[!]_M” breaking off, he peered across at her and demanded, “Are you bawling? Because if you are, I’m afraid then I’ll have to.”

“Damn you, Ben Reinking,” she said, fierce but snuffling. “I haven’t had a crying jag since I was eleven years old.” She wiped her eyes, then her nose. “Until you.”

For some moments he gulped back moist emotions of his own. Why of all the people in this war did the two of them have to be on the receiving end of something like this? What was wrong with backing away from this and snapping up an Adrianna instead, sweetly available and nowhere near as troublous? What

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was wrong with him? "This is just crazy hopeless," he said at last, his expression pretty much fitting that description itself. "I'm stuck on you even when we're doing our double damnedest to have a fight."

"Swell," Cass sniffled, "that's me, too." She straightened herself up so sharply it jarred the table. "There's another kink to this, you know," she went on, wiping the tears away with determination now. "Dan's not the only one they keep throwing out there to get shot at, is he. I don't pretend to know squat about what the types in Washington have you doing. I just herd airplanes. The wear is starting to show through on that ^(those) "supreme team" ^(about the team) set of stories, though, isn't it? I don't need to tell you that's getting to be an awful lot of dead heroes. Your guys are catching hell. And you're always going to be plunked right out there with them, Ben, you and just a pencil and paper, brave as anything--"

"I don't feel brave. I'm just doing it."

"--while every fool on the other side tries to draw a bead on you. Look what just happened to your pal the Marine. It could have been you. I am never going to be in favor of that part of your Tepee Weepy doings, you'd better know."

"Listen, they've got me under orders the same way you are, and I--"

"It isn't quite the same." She slapped the table for emphasis. "You've got some clout, you've got the name you've made for yourself."

"That works once in a while. And generally doesn't. I was ^{about to say if I} ever get the chance to drop the ^{supreme team} "supreme team" stuff, I'll do it in t
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“That works once in a while. And generally doesn’t. I was about to say, if I ever get the chance to drop the “supreme team” stuff, I’ll do it in the next breath. For right now, the worst thing I’ve got to do is cover Angelides’ funeral.” He tried to move along to a better face on things and did not quite get there. “Maybe it’s

} Is this change okay?

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just as well to have some practice at crying, hmm? Cass, the night's getting away from us. What would you think about seeing if the cabin is still standing?"

Her try at a better face came out more to everyone's benefit than his. "You haven't lost any of that ginger, is what I'd think."

He pretended a huff. "If you're not interested all of a sudden--"

"Didn't say I wasn't interested, preacher," she sounded more like herself.

"Pay the man again."

"Gladly. And just maybe I'll get us another drink along with it."

He headed up to the cash register, digging a few silver dollars out of his pocket as he went. What a hell of a thing, that all we've got is sack time together.

But at least it's something.

The bartender, an older man bald as a peanut, was sitting there alone nursing a cigarette. He cut a squinty look at Cass, then back at Ben. "You and the little lady figure on playing a double-header?"

Ben pushed the money toward him on the bar. "That's what these nice round silver things are about, yeah."

The bartender still looked at him, one eyelid pulled down against the cigarette smoke perpetually drifting toward it. "Soldier, ain't you?"

Oh, please. Now the citizenry of Vaughn Junction is going to get picky about who it rents out hot sheets to? Crossly Ben indicated to Cass. "The both of us. Why?"

The man behind the bar plucked a shred of tobacco off his tongue, then asked: "Been overseas any?"

"I was in on Guam."

The bartender shoved the money back to him. "It's on the house."

When Ben returned to the table with both drinks and dollars in hand, Cass had the immediate question, "What was that about?"

"My guess is he lost a son in the Pacific."

They drank silently for a bit. Then he peeked over in the dimness at her luminous wristwatch. "Is it tomorrow yet, Captain?"

She checked. "Just past midnight. What's special about tomorrow?"

He made a satisfied sound. "I have a VIP coming in, although he doesn't know it yet. I don't know who they're going to get to stand sentry over the rocks and sand, but I sprung him for a leave to come to Animal's funeral."

Cass caught on. "The guy out on the coast? The one you were afraid would shoot up everything in sight and himself with it?"

"That's him. Prokosch the Tommy gunner."

"No crap?" Cass sat up in surprise and awe. "The guy isn't even kin and you hassled them into letting him come to the funeral? You must've had to pull strings the size of anchor ropes, all up and down the line."

He nodded pious affirmation. "Right to the top." If Tepee Weepy constituted the apex of things military. "At least it gets him away from submarine games for a few days, and he can see his girl along with it."

SB

"Wake up, kid. Hey, hear me? Roust out, coastie."

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webs

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The off-duty sentry rolled away from the hut wall and with a groan elbowed up in his bunk. Two men with beach packs bulking on them were standing over him. The skinny sour-looking one was the chief petty officer from the Coast Guard station down the coast, the other was a peach-fuzzed seaman second class much like himself. "What's happening? The war over?"

"Dream some more, kid. Where's Prokosch?"

The off-duty man rubbed sleep crust from his eyes. "Sig? Out on patrol like he's supposed to be."

"Come on, I know that. Where the hell at?"

"How am I supposed to know, Chief?" Squinting at the twenty-four-hour clock on the radio table, he made an effort to concentrate. "He took off out of here this morning like his tail was on fire, him and the pooch. Must be up the beach quite a patch by now."

The other seaman was slinging belongings out of his pack onto Prokosch's bunk. "Hurry it up, Quince," said the chief petty officer. He glanced at the face of confusion trying to take this in from across the hut. "Quincy's his relief while he goes on leave, so get used to Quincy."

"Sig don't have leave coming."

"He does now. Something about a funeral. There's a plane waiting for him at Port Angeles." Waiting impatiently for Quincy to restow the pack, the chief petty officer ducked to the window facing the ocean and the rugged line of shore beyond, looked out and rolled his shoulders. "Hell if I know what it's about, but

I'm supposed to walk him out of here and put him on that plane. The way these orders smoked down the line, you'd think he was Jimmy Roosevelt."

The man still in the bunk looked more bewildered than ever. "You got to go after him on foot? Can't you just call him in?"

The chief petty officer turned from the window in final agitation. "Radio blackout. Jap sub sank a tanker, down off Oregon last night, the pricks. No transmissions that they might pick up until we get the all-clear. Ready, Quincy?" He tromped toward the door whether or not Quincy was ready. "Let's go. Maybe we can catch him before he gets to hell and gone up the beach."

The off-duty sentry rolled back into his bunk. "You don't know Prokosch."

Farthest out on the Pacific horizon from where Sig Prokosch happened to be patrolling, waves broke violently on a shelf of reef as if the edge of the world was flying apart.

Scanning from the distant mix of spray and drab rumple of the ocean, the Coast Guardsman strived to find a low-lying streak of white out there, a chalk trace on the greater gray, that would be the wake disclosing a periscope. He was keyed up, convinced this might very well be the morning he nailed the Japanese submariners. If not him personally, then the plane carrying depth bombs after he radioed in, blasting away beneath the surface in a relentless search pattern that would crack open the hull of the sub and give the damn Japs all the water they wanted.

Sig felt like winking at the oval moon, paling away as daylight approached. He was highly pleased at having figured it out, nights awake while waiting for sleep to catch up with him, gazing out the window of the hut at the moon furrow on the ocean--the enemy's evident pattern for those sneak raft trips to the creeks for their drinking water. The raft rats had to be using the lunar cycle. Not the round bright full moon, the obvious. Coast Guard headquarters had thought of that and orders from on high were for extreme vigilance along the coast during each such phase. But that had not produced anything except eyestrain among the nighttime sentries. No, the Japanese must be timing their shore excursions some number of nights either side of that, using the moon when it was just luminous enough to cast a skinny path to shore, Sig would have bet anything. That way the raft rats could paddle alongside the moonbeam glow on the water without having to use a torch and with less chance of being seen than during full shine. It made every kind of sense to him, and lately he had matched it up with times he found fresh crap at a creek mouth.

He cradled the Tommy gun. There was reassurance in the highly tooled grip of it that one of these times he would jump the raft rats, the odds could not stay in their favor forever. On this coast he was the constant, they were the variable, and all those accounting classes at TSU had taught him that the basic determinant was to be found in constancy. One of these times, the raft would get a late start from the submarine or be held up by choppy waves on the way in or happen into some other inconstant circumstance, and he would have them where he wanted them. Maybe this fresh morning.

SB

The pair from the Coast Guard station slogged down from the hut to the strand of sand between waves rolling in and the tumble of driftlogs lodged against the forest. Awaiting them were ~~were~~ bootprints of considerable size and the much more delicate scuffs made by dog paws. The tracks went straight as a dotted line the length of the sand and disappeared around the clay cliff of the headland ahead. The chief petty officer swore. "I hate to do it to you in this sand, Quince. But we've got to quick-march or we'll be chasing him all damned day."

SB

Once more Prokosch scanned outward from the thin crescent of beach. Stirred up by some distant storm, the waves coming to shore tumbled themselves into sudden rolling tunnels, crashing apart moments after they formed. A froth of spume piled itself high at tideline, chunks of it flying off in the wind like great flecks of ash.

At his side the Irish setter nosed at one of the spume clumps and brought on itself a wheezy dog fit of sneezing.

"Bless you, Rex," Sig said as if speaking to an equal. "But that's what you get for not paying attention to business, isn't it. Heel, boy." He lately had written to Ruby that he figured it was okay to talk to the dog, as long as he didn't start hearing the dog answer him. He smiled to himself, thinking back to all the conversation during Ben Reinking's stay. Starting with Japanese, when he had come upon the figure that turned out to be Lefty spraddled on that rock face. Funny at the time, but good practice for whenever he got the jump on the--

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The leash sprang taut in his grasp.

“What’s the matter, boy?” Sig’s voice dropped low, sentry caution even though no one, no sign of anybody, had appeared. Growling, the dog tugged toward the dark band of vegetation that fringed the outlet of a creek not far ahead.

Sig at once angled inland, steering the dog toward the bulwark of driftwood. The pair of them skirted along it, out of sight from the creek, until they were almost to the dunelike bank. There he silenced the dog with a whispered command and, Tommy gun ready, cautiously took a look over the bank. Below, at the edge of the brush at the creek mouth, there were marks in the sand that looked as if a rubber raft might have been skidded up out of the surf. Excitement came with the sight. Plain as anything to him, the Japs had been here at low tide. An hour or two ago.

SB

The chief petty officer clambered up onto the rocky snout of the headland and took a long look north along the shore. Below him, the light blue ^{the} clashed against chocolate brown of rocks covered with seaweed. When he resumed, the crescent of beach bowed around for a quarter of a mile or so before a brushy creek came wandering out of the thick forest.

AUTHOR

The young seaman panted up behind him, tugging against the pack straps that cut into his shoulders. “Any sign of him yet, Chief?”

“No, but he’s got to be up around that creek somedamnwhere--he didn’t have any too much head start on us.”

“How about we fire a shot?”

SB

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"How about we fire a shot?"

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The chief debated with himself. "We don't want to spook him, if he's at all touchy around the trigger finger. Try yelling again. Put everything into it--with this surf you can't hear yourself think."

"PROKOSCH! WAIT FOR US! YOU'VE GOT LEAVE, BUDDY!"

Squinting out at the ocean again in search of a telltale periscope wake, Sig was unshucking his pack to use the radio when the dog reared to the end of the leash, whining in agitation. "Rex, down," he hissed without effect. The dog was definite, straining now not in the direction of the creek but toward the salal and ferns and overhanging forest.

"Easy, boy," he whispered. "What is it you think you've got?" Alert to the possibility that the Japs were still ashore, holed up there in the woods, he weighed his options. Using the radio was slow and cumbersome and they might hear him talking into it. On the other hand, if they hadn't spotted him by now, he had the advantage of surprise. He knew these woods, the raft rats didn't. If he left the radio pack, he could ease ever so slowly into the undergrowth and see what was what. Although there was the matter of the dog.

He hesitated. If he tied the dog here to a limb of driftwood, it might bark. Besides, the Irish setter's nose was the quickest guide to any Japs. Patting Rex's head and murmuring soothingly to keep him quiet, he hooked the leash into his web belt and crept toward the forest.

Sniffing constantly, the dog led him on the leash through the head-high barrier of brush and into the forest-floor growth, until shortly yanking to a halt.

With his weapon up and every nerve afire for action, Sig even so was surprised, confused, by what awaited almost within touch of him. Not Japs at all, but a sizable wad of what looked like some odd kind of fabric. A pale shroud of it, crumpled in the salal. Parachute, he thought immediately. Before realizing it was balloon material.

In that fatal instant he saw the dog sniff at the explosive device tangled beneath and put a paw to it.

“Will you lay off that damn hymn? You’re driving me ape.”

Jake Eisman’s humming snapped off, but not his dolorous expression as he looked sidewise at Ben behind the steering wheel. “I for sure don’t want to be trapped in a moving vehicle with a pencil pusher gone apeshit, do I.” He mopped at his neck with his hand. “Man, I hope sweating is good for the health. How about cranking the windshield open?”

“Now there’s an original idea,” Ben changed his own tune. “Let’s give it a whirl, until we get grasshoppers in the teeth.”

The pair of them were in a ragtop jeep, all that Jones had been able to snag for them out of the East Base motor pool, heading down the height of bluff south from Shelby toward the brief green ribbon of trees in the Marias River bottomland. Each man had shed the jacket of full-dress uniform, and the cloth doors of the jeep were tied back to let air in both sides, and still it was like traveling in an oversize oven. The fields along the shimmering highway the next

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couple of hours to Great Falls, they well knew, would be the cooked results of summerlong sun, the waiting grain baked golden, the mown hayfields crisp and tan, the distant dun sidehills further tinted with broad scatters of sheep. Behind them were a good many miles of the same. They had buried Angelides the day before five counties away, Prokosch that morning in the remote little railroad burg of his upbringing.

Jake rested a foot the size of a shoebox against the dashboard and slouched back in the confines of his seat. He yanked at his tie again even though it was already loosened. Honor-guard pallbearer was not a role he was suited to. "At the rate we're putting people in the ground," he brooded to Ben, "you'd think the Japs had invaded Montana."

"I've noticed."

It was hard to say which funeral troubled the tired pair more, but Angelides' at Fort Peck yesterday had been the stark one. Only the bushy mustached uncle, off shift from the power house at the monumental earthen dam, to see the casket into the clay. Towering among the five other pallbearers rounded up by the funeral home, Jake throughout looked upset and angry over the scant farewell in the scarcely populated cemetery among some Missouri River badlands. Ben knew the feeling. He said now, "You've had more than your share of lifting coffins lately, Ice. Any chance you can spring a weekend pass for yourself?" At some level they were aware they were making talk so as not to be alone with their thoughts.

“Hah. It’s back to chauffeuring bombers to the Russkies again tomorrow,” came the glum reply. “I have to make up for all this inspiring funeral duty, don’t I. Aw, shit, what am I saying? Sig and Animal would’ve done it for me.” Jake’s gaze went distant, then came back. “Anyway, Benjamin, it was good to see your folks there this morning, huh? Your mother is a real pussycat.”

Ben looked across. Jake did not appear to be kidding.

“Your dad didn’t miss a lick of what was going on,” the one-sided conversation from the passenger side of things persisted, “Figure he’ll be writing about the funeral?”

“I’d bet my bottom dollar on it.”

SB

The Packard crested the long pull up from the Two Medicine River and slowed as if made shy by the sudden cliff-faced mountains--Jericho Reef, Phantom Woman Peak, Roman Reef--that stood up into view in the direction of Gros Ventre. It was considerably more car than Bill Reinking was accustomed to, and he drove in a skittish way that had Cloyce itching to take over. Montana men did not believe that a woman’s grasp in life included the steering wheel. It mattered not that she’d had use of the family roadster whenever she wanted, at the country place among the orange groves, when she was sixteen. As her husband nursed the high-powered automobile around another curve, she told herself yet again this was only to be expected; a shopworn luxury car running on black-market gasoline, both provided by a saloonkeeper (and presumably worse), was

AV

just the sort of thing that came with Gros Ventre, with marrying the complete town when you wed its newspaperman.

They had not said much on this trip back from the packed foursquare church across the tracks from the Devon depot out east of Shelby, Bill busy in his head, Cloyce in extensive thoughts of her own. Try as she would, she could not get over the Prokosch boy's watery-eyed mother and father, in sagging funeral clothes that they looked like they'd been sacked into. There but for the grace of something or other[!]_M despite what the preacher said in the funeral service, she could not credit an all-wise divinity in charge of every life and death in this immense war[!]_M wept Bill and herself, if Ben had not survived Guam and those other places. Even yet she could feel fate narrowly brushing past, back at the start of this unnatural week. She had been out in the back yard^(C) coddling her roses with root food, the shade of the cottonwood trees pleasant in the already warm summer morning. Around the corner of the house came Bill, a telegram in his hand. If she had not already been kneeling, she would have been thrust to her knees by the sight of the yellow message form known for carrying the savage words: WE^(c/sc) REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON[!]_M

With his head dipped to make out the dappled yard through his bifocals, Bill did not spot her soon enough, then froze at the look on her face. He fumbled out the sentences in contrite haste:

"Ben is back from the Pacific, he's all right. He has funeral duty. Twice."

"Is he coming home"[!]_M--it caught in her throat to say it[!]_M--^{cc}was usual?"

wcb

AV

“Not this time, for some reason. We’ll go to him. I’ll work it out somehow.”

Attending the Prokosch boy’s funeral had been better than nothing, she gave Bill that much, even though there had not been nearly enough time afterward with Ben before he and nice Jake had to start back to East Base. Back to the madhouse of war. How she wished Ben had gotten hold of himself and made the most of the chance she’d set up so perfectly at New Year’s--

“Dear?” She jumped a moment at the surprise of her husband’s voice, after the constant miles of silence. “Take something down for me, will you? There’s a notepad and Eversharp in my suit coat.”

Now she really was startled. Bill never did this. His work was kept so separate as to be almost holy, done either at the Gleaner office or in private in his upstairs library, and they would be home in Gros Ventre in no time if he would floor the gas pedal a little. She twitted him, “Isn’t the usual line, ‘Get me rewrite!’? Whatever are you thinking, Bill, this isn’t exactly the set for The Front Page and I’m not--”

“Cloyce, will-you-please-just-do-this.”

Speechless at the steel in that burst, she reached around into the back seat for the writing materials in the coat.

“Ready?” His voice bristling as much as his mustache, he started dictating at a deliberative pace. “You have seen the readymade insignia of the homefront all across our state, in our neighborhoods, on our ranches and farms, wherever there are window casements framing proud but anxious parents. The small satin

banner no larger than a tea towel---cross out 'small'---*hangs from the lock on the middle sash of the window. The gold-colored string, tasseled at the ends, holds a thin*---no, make that 'slender'---*dowel, and down from that the banner hangs like a quiet flag. Red-bordered, with a field of white, centered with a star. A blue star shows the world that a member of that family is serving in the military. A gold star testifies that the household has lost a family member in the war.*

"In the trackside house where Sigmund Prokosch grew up, the blue star---let me think a moment---*has been eclipsed by one of gold."* Working on the next sentence, he took his eyes off the highway only enough to make sure she was keeping up.

Cloyce was quietly crying.

Bill Reinking set his jaw. At the next turnoff onto a ranch road, he sideslipped the big car to a sharp stop. Resolute as a man with a mission from on high, he faced around to Cloyce. "You drive, while I write."

SB

Contrary to his custom, the Senator did not arise from behind the piles of books at his end of the table and plant a kiss on his wife's brow as she settled to her breakfast spot that morning. Suspiciously she peeked over at the reading material strewn around him to see if the Bible lay open somewhere there. His habit before an election was to thumb through until he found a pertinent verse about afflicting one's enemies, then righteously set out to do so by the lethal means known as Montana politics. The rough-and-tumble of another campaign did not seem to be this morning's order of business, however, as the volumes

surrounding his plate of drying egg yolk and bacon grease were the usual maroon tomes of military history and green-and-gilt biographies and memoirs of political figures. She looked on with fond exasperation as he pored over dense pages, taking notes in his leatherbacked notebook. Beaky old cowboy that the national press made him out to be, the husband and mealtime companion known to her all these years feasted on the holdings of the Library of Congress as no other member of the United States Senate ever did. Whatever was immersing him this particular day, she could be sure it was all part of the strong old scripture of seniority and power.

At length the Senator roused himself enough to rumble, "Good morning, Sadie, late-sleeping lady."

"Morning yourself, Luther. You wouldn't be so quick to hop out of bed either if knitting Red Cross socks with Eleanor while photographers watch was waiting for you." Such relationship as this politically apostate household had with the White House--scant--was by way of the Senator's wife. She held her tongue now as the broadbeamed cook marched in bearing her breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and crisp toast. As soon as the servant was out of the room, she arched a look at her still musing spouse. "And what is your own Christian mission this fine tropical day in Babylon-on-the-Potomac?" The honey she was trying to spread on the toast already was runny in the Washington heat.

"Roast an admiral or two," he anticipated, patting the volume *The Fate of Fleets*. "The fools still think they can yell 'Pearl Harbor!' and we'll forgive them

p. 421

any goddamn thing. The hearing may take a while before they're whimpered out. Don't look for me home till supper, my love."

As if reminded of the unremitting passage of time, he yanked out the dollar watch that had regulated his day through four terms of political infighting at the highest levels. There never were enough hours in the day, especially in wartime. Even so, he stayed sitting a little longer to dab more verbal ammunition into the cowhide notebook, his wife covertly watching. He still was ^{riled} steamed up from Sunday when Adrianna was home on overnight pass and they had listened to Meet the Forces, the special broadcast of the recording of the Guam landing by Bill Reinking's son. That young man was quite something. He did the job there in the hellish water in fine style. It about took your heart out, particularly what happened to that Marine sergeant, but the Senator had also heard something gutwrenching before that in the description of the quarter-of-a-mile wade from the so-called landing craft to the beach. He'd had his staff check, and that was as close in as those craft could maneuver against the reef. Accordingly he would peel the hide off the Navy at this afternoon's hearing--the gold-braid ninnies had taken half a dozen tries and most of the war so far trying to develop landing craft that could actually put men and trucks and tanks onto a beach instead of depositing them into the surf, and look at the Guam result: dead Marines thick in the water.

He clapped the notebook shut, ready for political battle even though it seemed unending. Targets in the military popped up almost faster than he could keep up with. He still steamed over those Air Transport Command nitwits who

AV

CMS
8.196

wrecks

had spent taxpayer dollars training women to fly and then wouldn't let them take the planes as far as Canada; hell, you could spit into Canada from Montana.

SB

"This is some war. Our guys are knocked off right and left," Jake lamented huskily, "and I can't even talk my way past a paper-ass general to get overseas and drop bombs on the worst human beings in history." He sneaked a glance at Ben, rigid behind the wheel again. "You don't happen to be doing it to me, are you?"

"What, keeping you on the Eskimo run? You give me too much credit, Ice." *You're not alone in that kind of wondering, though. You flying nowhere but to Alaska, apparently ever. Prokosch turned down for sea duty before he got blown up anyway, poor luckless kid. Danzer's soft assignment to MacArthur's palace guard was handed to him from somewhere, such as from way on high? While Animal gets flung onto beachhead after beachhead until a Jap bullet finally finds him, and Moxie is over there month after month trying to shoot down planes that are trying to bomb him. It looks just random, the war cuts some guys unhealthier orders than others. But a setup would want to be made to look like that, too, wouldn't it. If Tepee Weepy is picking and choosing who is supposed to stay safe and who goes into combat--*

"I wish Grandpa Grady would get off my case," Jake was saying. "Hell, it was only one floatplane, it wasn't as if we--"

"We? I was only the sandbag, remember?"

"--wrecked the whole goddamn Eighth Air Force. Hey, watch it!"

Ben saw it at the same time. Just ahead, in the middle of the highway, a magpie was eating a skunk. The long-tailed bird took a last impertinent peck, then lifted into the air, stunningly black and white as if having intensified its colors with those of its prey. Steering with one hand, with the other Ben frantically tried to crank the windshield closed.

Not in time. As the wheels straddled the squashed skunk, the smell swept into the jeep like a stink bomb through a transom. "Yow." Jake was blinking the sting out of his eyes, as was Ben. "That was some ripe polecat."

"The Montana state flower, Dex always called one like that," Ben managed after gasping.

"Dexter the Dexterous. That sounds like him, let the peasants scoop those striped pussies out of his way." Still fanning at the linger of the skunk, Jake thought of something. "Hey, our secret-mission guy must be about due to get his turn at fame from you again, ain't he? Then the milk-run pilot Eisman, specializing in pallbearing? My ma's got her scrapbook open, waiting."

"Tepee Weepy has loosened up a little about that, so if you treat me right, I might squeeze you in ahead of him this time," Ben hedged, aware it was drawing him a deeply inquiring look. Hastily he skipped on past the situation of Dex:

"That doesn't mean I'm going to fly into the cold blue yonder with you like last time. Besides, you've got enough company in Alaska without me." He was secretly relieved Jake was shelved there in the ATC icebox. *That's what comes of climbing into a Red bed, my friend.* "Fill me in, Yakov--how's the bewitching Katya?"

"Gone, is what she is."

"Say again?"

"She's vanished." Jake looked even more bleak. "I ask the other Russians about her and they just look at me and give the galoot salute." Illustratively he shrugged his more than sizable shoulders up around his ears. "Nothing I can do about it, Ben. Like everything else."

Governments and their coin tricks, with people instead of pocket change. Ben fell silent, into hard thinking about Tepee Weepy, as the jeep went up a rise from the Teton River bridge and there a couple of dozen miles ahead on the horizon stood the Black Eagle smelter stack, its plume dark against the sky. Off the western edge of the smoke cloud a set of specks separated from the smudge and kept on going, a flight of bombers setting out for Alaska.

"Home sweet home," Jake crooned. Somehow it came out pensive.

"Morning, Captain."

Yawning his way into the office, Ben met those words and looked back down the corridor apprehensively. No such intruding rank in sight. "You're getting absent-minded, Jones," he chided as he came on in and situated into his desk chair for another day on the calendar of limbo. "The captain's the guy around the corner, runs the mess hall, remember?"

The next surprise of the morning was the corporal's Wanted-poster face breaking into a grin that went halfway around his head. "*The worthy shall be risen,*" he quoted as if he had been waiting for the chance and passed across a ditto set of papers. "Your promotion orders came in today's packet. Congratulations, Captain Reinking," he delivered with nice emphasis. Leaning closer, Jones squinted around as if to make sure they were alone in the dinky office. "The personnel clerk let me in on something. General Grady is going to pin the new bars on you himself at next commander's call."

"Jesus ten-fingered Christ! What's he want to do that for?"

The expostulation turned Jones prim and enlisted. "No one shared the General's thinking with me."

"Any other surprises from our lords and masters?" Ben immediately went to, trying to sort by eye the thin contents of the daily TPWP packet spread in front of Jones. "Like maybe the Prokosch piece miraculously set in type?"

Jones shook his head.

Which caused Ben to twist his as if trying to relieve a pain in the neck.

You think General Grady's thought process is a mystery, Jonesie, what does that make Tepee Weepy's? Leave it to the military to think up its own form of purgatory and then not define it for you. Ever since he alit back at East Base from the Pacific, life with the Threshold Press War Project was every kind of a puzzle. The unseen powers in Washington had done everything with his Guam recording but play it over loudspeakers in place of the national anthem, and the account he wrote of Angelides' burial on the loneliest of prairies had likewise been punched up into maximum headline treatment. And the subsequent "Supreme Team" treatment that he had cobbled together about Jake^M--steadfast service hand-in-hand^{# #} with our stalwart Russian allies; the kind of thing his father called a Ph.D. piece, Piled Higher and Deeper^M--also went out and into newspaper pages across the country like clockwork. Yet the weeks since Sig Prokosch was blown to bits on American soil were turning into months, and that story still was spiked somewhere. Tepee Weepy was even less forthcoming, in Ben's baffled estimation, over Dex and Moxie. It was not a pure silence, the distracted kind, either.

^{c/sc} WHAT DO? he had telexed in frustration at the point on the schedule where he was due to write about one or the other of them and had heard nothing, and a message shot back short and cryptic: TIME OUT IN THE GAME. ADJUST PADS^{c/sc} ACCORDINGLY.

Well, by now he and Jones indeed were padding desperately, doing articles about scrap drives and Red Cross blood draws. Top off the situation with this

unlooked-for promotion (major, lieutenant colonel: he gulped at the thought that there were only two more ranks between him and the ghostly brass who operated TPWP) and Ben could not tell whether it was the altitude or the servitude that was getting to him.

“All right, corporal,” he braced up with a deep breath, “what journalistic exploit do we face today?”

“A twelve-year-old kid here in town invented a military vocabulary crossword puzzle,” Jones recited. “Tepee Weepy wants a picture and a thousand words.”

“One across, an unexploded shell, three letters,” Ben said tiredly. “Dud.”

Hill 57 had its hackles up, bunchgrass stiffly trying to resist the wind, as Ben started down the rutted path at the end of that afternoon. In off-duty civvies, he had on the canvasback coat he had worn that time here with Cass but was wishing for the flight jacket, at the rate the wind was breathing down his neck. As ever he had to be mindful of what the gusts might bring; Great Falls collected weather from all around. Over toward the Rockies, the waiting clouds were thickly gray and flat-bottomed as if ready to be sponged against the earth. The benchlands surrounding the leafy city were another picture entirely, with half a dozen squalls around the horizon, isolated showers that almost stopped at fencelines. By his estimate, the cylinder of none-too-warm autumn sunshine here between the storm systems just might last long enough for what he needed to do. It better. Could be the last chance at this. How many times now had he watched

the zigzag route to the white rocks, here and on the Letter Hill, turn to mush in spring and twisted iron in summer and then utterly sink off out of sight into snow for most of the rest of the year? Come winter, there was no telling where he would be, either. Somewhere on the continent of Europe where Moxie Stamper was among those taking aim at the heart of the Third Reich, if Tepee Weepy had any sense about "supreme team" assignments any more. Big if. On top of all the others.

At the base of the laid-out rocks, he squatted out of the wind in the shelter of the broad numeral 5. No Cass beside him this time and opera glasses handy. The sky equally empty of any P-39 piloted spearpoint at the lead of a squadron turned phantom now. He tensed nearly to the point of agony against thinking about it. If there was a more lonely time in his life, he did not want to bring it to mind. Although that at most amounted to only a postponement; his nightly craving did not know what to do with itself, without her. There's always the USO, right, Cass? The cookie-and-nookie crowd, as you liked to call it. Every faculty in him from his loins upward jeered at the notion of any substitute for Cass Standish.

Turning his head from the vacant spot next to him in the snug area against the rocks, he sent his gaze to the interlinked letters of the butte across the way. He had devoted so many otherwise soulless nights to the script about the Letter Hill was branded into his mind, yet he scanned the T as if, in the right light, it would spell out his hunch. He had tried the out on Jake during that long drive on funeral duty.

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Turning his head from the vacant spot next to him in the snug area against the rocks, he sent his gaze to the interlinked letters of the butte across the way. He had devoted so many otherwise soulless nights to the script about the twelfth man that the Letter Hill was branded into his mind, yet he scanned the TSU again now as if, in the right light, it would spell out his hunch. He had tried the supposition out on Jake during that long drive on funeral duty.

] S set in
Loldface

330

] TSU set in
Loldface

330

“Tell me if this is too crazy, Ice. But out there on the tin can with Danzer, I got to wondering why he was so rattled when I brought up Purcell’s name.

Remember that last practice, when our mad genius of a coach for some reason yanked him and stuck Purcell in? What if that wasn’t just some lame-brain substitution, what if Purcell was being seriously promoted to the starting team?”

“You figure Bruno was as tired of the Slick Nick act as the rest of us were?” Jake’s jackrabbit mind took a moment to go back and forth over that.

“Possible, I suppose. The Dancer could catch the ball and keep it, both, though.”

“But Purcell could run circles around him, and if Bruno could knock the dropping habit out of Purcell he had something better.”

“Yeah,” Jake agreed without quibble. “The kid was a ring-tailed wonder except for that one thing.”

“Then all that sonofabitch Bruno had to do,” Ben savagely rewrote that central page of the past, “was not be so hepped up about his damnable Golden Rule and simply play it straight with Purcell: ‘Hang on to the ball, Merle boy, and you’re the varsity end for the season. You’d like to be our eleventh man, wouldn’t you, kid? It’s yours for the taking.’ It shifts the whole thing, Ice. No No “supreme team” crap, then or now.”

“Possible,” Jake had allowed again. “I can’t see Danzer running out on that hill.”

Web

AUTHOR

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“Possible,” Jake had allowed again. “I can’t see Danzer running his heart out on that hill.”

(331) Is this okay? Or would you prefer to keep in the scene quotes? (Supreme Team)

That hill offered no more answer today than ever as Ben drew his eyes over it. So be it, one more time. He stood up, the wind keenly waiting for him, and started down to the shoulder of the coulee between that mute slope and Hill 57's tarpaper collection of shacks.

Picking his way through the bunchgrass and prickly pear cactus, he approached the solitary shanty at the coulee edge with no real hope. Other than its usual jittery honor guard of gophers, half a dozen at a time constantly popping from their holes and then receding as he neared, the ramshackle place appeared as short on hospitality as it was on all else; dilapidation never welcomes company. No smoke from the chimney again, although a fresh cord of charity wood was stacked against the tarpaper siding. Every Hill 57 shack he could see had one, the firewood considerably chopped into sticks not much bigger than kindling so heat could be eked out of rusty stoves as long as possible. Even so the woodpiles would not last through the winter and the Indian families would have to scrounge or freeze. He marveled again at the pride of Vic Rennie, trudging down cold to the bone from this prairie sidehill slum for four years, never asking anything from the sumptuous university when there were any number of Treasure State football boosters who would have given him a warm place and other favors on the sly.

Ben walked up to the weatherbeaten door and knocked strongly, the sharp sound like a punctuation of echo from another time and place.

"Catch her sober, after she gets over the shakes. That's the trick with a wino. Wait until allotment money's gone."

"End of the month, you mean?"

adj

webs

rom

AV

p. 60

"Middle. She's a thirsty one."

rom

AV

Three months in a row he had made the try, and Toussaint's formulation notwithstanding, not even come close to catching the aunt whom Vic had lived with here. Rapping on the door was bringing no result this time either.

Well, hell, does she live here at all or doesn't she? He tromped around the corner of the house to see whether any firewood had been used from the stacked cord.

And practically sailed face-first into the mad-haired figure moseying from the other direction.

They each rared back and stared.

The woman looked supremely surprised, but then, so did he.

askew, she swayed there all but lost in a purple sweater barely held together by its fatigued knitting and a dress that hung to her shoetops. The mop of steel-gray hair looked no less of a mess on second inspection. Fragile as she appeared to be, Ben felt wild relief he hadn't collided with her; in the raveled sweater her arms seemed no larger around than the thin-split sticks in the woodpile. The scrutiny she was giving him during this was more than substantial, however. She had eyes black as the hardest coal; bituminous is known to burn on and on, those eyes stated.

"Spooked me," she recovered a voice first. "Been visiting Mother Jones." She jerked an elbow to indicate the outhouse behind her. The coaly stare stayed right on him. "You aren't from here."

"No. From the base."

AUTHOR

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They each rared back and stared.

The woman looked supremely surprised, but then, so did he. Scrawny and

} Should this be
rared or
reared?
(???)

"Hnn: flyboy. What's a flyboy doing here? Looking for coochy?" She made the obscene circle with thumb and first digit and ran a rigid finger in and out. "Tired of white meat?" She chortled. "Long time too late for that, around here."

"I'm not here tomcatting," he tried to say it as though that were a reasonable possibility. The years of drinking had blurred age on her; she could have been fifty or seventy. "It's about Vic. We were friends, played football together across the way. You maybe saw us at it." He watched the woman closely as he said that, but the set face and burning gaze did not change. "I'm looking for Vic's aunt," he went back to ritual. "There's a thing I need to find out from her. It would have meant something to Vic."

She took her time about deciding. Finally she provided grudgingly:

"Maybe that's me."

"Mrs. Rennie, what I came to--"

"Hwah, you crazy? If I had that name I'd cut my throat and let it out of me."

Too late, he remembered the family battle lines of the Reservation.

"Excuse me all to pieces, Mrs. Rides Proud. I just thought, because Vic's last name--"

"Not his fault he was named that," she conceded. Absently she primped the nearest vicinity of flying hair. "You can call me Agnes. Everybody and his dog does." With that settled, she eyed him in bright negotiating fashion. "You came for something. Got anything on you to wet the whistle first?"

“It just so happens.” He produced the bottle of cheap wine from his coat’s deep side pocket and held it out to her for inspection.

Belatedly he remembered “*She don’t much know how to read,*” but she was nodding appreciatively at the spread-wing symbol on the label. “Thunderbird. Now you’re talking.” She quickstepped past him and wrenched the door open. “Come in out of the weather.”

The prairie came inside with them, bare dirt of the floor except for a splotch of torn old flowered linoleum under the kitchen table. Boxes of belongings far outnumbered the derelict furniture. A drafty-looking back area that elled off from the one big room must have been where Vic slept and studied, Ben decided. As he glanced around from tattered bedding to cardboard heaps, the woman was fussing at the cookstove. “I’ll make a little fire. Usually don’t until it gets cold as a witch’s tit.” Vaguely she gestured toward the table and rickety chairs. “Make yourself to home.”

Wasting no time, she fired up the stove with a shot of kerosene, from the smell of it, and joined him. A pair of jelly glasses clinked as she shoved them toward the Thunderbird bottle he had put in the center of the table. “Do the honors.”

He poured her a full glass of the sweet red wine and without regret set the bottle aside. “None for me, thanks.”

She would not hear of that. “You better have something so I don’t drink all alone. Kool-Aid, how about?”

“Sounds good,” he fibbed for etiquette’s sake.

Grunting, she got up and navigated into the kitchen clutter to try to find the drink mix for him. To keep any kind of conversation going, he called over: "They told me [^]your were at your daughter's."

"She kicked me out. Thinks she is somebody--[!]like her grunny don't stink."

One binge too many, Ben thought. "There are people like that." Still trying to sound conversational, he asked: "Agnes, were you mostly here when Vic was in college?"

Now the bituminous eyes showed a different temperature entirely. "I never went nowhere when Vic was getting his learning."

She followed that statement back to the table and slid a packet of Kool-[!]Aid to Ben. "Here you go." The water bucket and dipper were within reach from the table--[!]a lot of things were--[!]and he mixed the stuff for himself. She waited standing until he was done, then declared: "Bottoms up." Blithe as a bird, she alit into a chair and in the same motion leaned way forward and sipped from her glass where it stood on the table, touching it with only her lips. Not until then did he realize how bad she had the shakes.

Readying with a dry swallow, he kept his end of the bargain with a swig of the Kool-Aid. The flavor was grape, as purple as her sweater, and about as tasty as the wool dye would have been. He sleeved off the bruise-colored stain he suspected was left on his lips. Surprisingly, his drinking companion was sitting back watching him sharp-eyed instead of trying another guzzle. "You're not drinking up," Ben remarked.

She blinked at the extent of his ignorance. "Even Jesus stretched the wine."

This is getting me nowhere. He plunged in. "You remember when that fellow Vic and I played football with died on the hill, across the coulee?" He was not even sure what he was asking with this. "Just before the war?"

"That time." She shook her head, gray hair flopping. "They run that boy too much. I never saw that"--with both hands she managed to lift her glass and take a trembling drink--"before."

Ben felt his heartbeat quicken. "You saw him run up to the letters--the white rocks?"

"Used to watch all of you when I'd be outside. Wasn't anything before like that boy, though. They run him and run him. Made him do it."

"Made him? How?"

"The football boss kept making him run. He'd yell and wave his arm. You know, like when you're herding sheep and send a dog way around them?" She demonstrated the sweeping overhand gesture.

"Up and back one time, I know," Ben prompted. "But then on his own did the boy--"

"Hwah, one time? Where do you get that?" This shake of the head dismissed Ben's arithmetic as silly. "Crazy number of times. Up and back to that first rock thing." Agnes approximated a T in the air over the table. back to--what's that next one?" She waved the notion of an S away

EDITOR

“Hwah, one time? Where do you get that?” This shake of the head dismissed Ben’s arithmetic as silly. “Crazy number of times. Up and back to that first rock thing.” Agnes approximated a **T** in the air over the table. “Then up and back to--[!]what’s that next one?” She waved the notion of an **S** away, saying: “Then

] Should these be set in Coldface? Or can they be set in roman? (337)

he runs up again, pretty pooped now, I bet, and touches the third one of those. That football boss, maybe he couldn't count so good?"

"He could, all right." Bruno. Coach Almighty making his point that last practice day. I have to deal with a rube three-letter man. The bastard meant the ones on the hill. He was going to drill it into Purcell about no fumbles, once and for all. Something else surfaced in Ben. "Agnes, you started off saying 'They.'"

"The two of them, sure. Football boss and, I don't know, little boss?"

"What were they wearing?"

"Raft hats."

Stumped, he labored to come up with the kind of hats people on rafts wore.

"George Raft," Agnes broke in, impatient again with his capacity for not understanding. "Vic took me to a movie when he had a jingle in his pocket, you know."

Snap-brim hats. The cinematic emblem of tough guys. Bruno and his copycat pet sportswriter. Loudon was in on it, bastard number two. Ben's mind was working furiously. "So you saw them make him run the hill three times. Then what?"

"After that?" Both hands around the glass again, Agnes sipped with shaky delicacy. "It was getting good and dark. I came in the house. The bosses maybe were getting tired of watching, they kind of were wandering off, but the football boss gave another one of those waves. The boy still was on the hill. I just about couldn't believe it. Think to myself, how many times they gonna run that boy?"

She jerked her head toward the Letter Hill. "I don't savvy white men's games."

Ben sat there unmoving, everything she had described passing in order behind his eyes like camera shot after camera shot, the full scene playing out into dusk. Merle Purcell struggling to the dimming rocks, legs and the organ in his chest pumping in determination that could not be told from desperation. Running one lap too many on the steep zigzag path, either from the command of a coach who then turned blindly away or from his own excess will to measure up. In either case, pushed to the brink of what a body could stand, before the life the stem of the T.

"You told Vic?" It was as much an assertion as a question.

"Told him enough, you bet," Agnes vouched, draining her glass as if in a toast to the Hill 57 way of doing things. "Watch your fanny where those football people are involved, I said to him. End up like that white boy if he don't be careful."

Vic's silences. The scales of friendship are roomy, but nothing human is infinite. Ben sorted through the realization that the one person he thought he knew as well as himself had held back a thing this size. He could see the reason, seated as it was across the table from him. In vino veritas? Not in any court of law a half-bright defense attorney could find his way into. The word of Agnes Rides Proud did not stand a drunkard's prayer against whatever sworn version Bruno and Loudon would come up with.

Rolling the empty glass between her palms, Agnes looked over at the wine bottle and its neighbor, the Kool-Aid packet, in hostessly fashion. "There's more."

DESIGN

case, pushed to the brink of what a body could stand, before the lifeless collapse at

the stem of the T.

“You told Vic?” It was as much an assertion as a question.

] T in Goldface
339

"Not for me," Ben murmured.

SB

The rain was moving in by the time he started back up the shack-strewn hill. As he climbed, his mind kept spinning with the facts of Purcell's pointless dying. "They run him and run him. Made him do it." It wasn't even war, although it was mortal contest. Then it became cult of the fallen hero. "Merrrle! Merrrle!" The stadium's roars, the whole Twelfth Man shenanigan. From that, the eleven teammates who were borne by it to two kinds of uniformed fame. Pelted by the chilly autumn rain and challenged by the slick trail under him, Ben fought his way up the slope, mindful in every nerve and muscle of Purcell's struggle on that other sidehill. The Ghost Runner. Truer than the bastards knew. He had his ending for the script about all that, now. If he lasted long enough to see it onto the movie screen, the fundamental bastard Bruno would know he had been found guilty in a venue beyond all the courtrooms there are, his accomplice bastard Loudon would know, a great many followers of the fortunes of Treasure State University's once-in-a-lifetime team would know. For whatever that was worth.

SB

Half ⁼bushed and wet through and through but oddly fulfilled his hotel room with daylight nearly gone, the rain gathering the ground around his own. He climbed into dry clothes and poured a scotch, just one, as his reward before settling to the typewriter. The night was his to write. Custom dies hard, and sometimes never at all; before going to the script, he instinctively checked his

AUTHOR

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] This seems to be the prevalent style throughout the book. Okay? (340)

watch and with it the clock of war, the zone-by-zone whereabouts of the others, those who were left. Earlier by two hours in Fairbanks, whatever the weather waiting for B-17 crews between here and there; he hoped Jake was flying above the glop. Danzer smug across the dateline in tomorrow. Moxie on Berlin time, not by German invitation. Dex operating according to his hourglass of conscience. All those were old habit in Ben, and it was the new that sought him out at all unexpected times of the day any more. Cass Standish was on that clockface now.

“Listen up, officers.” She knelt to one knee on the wing of the P-63 opposite of the by-the-book briefing she was supposed to be giving, with schematic drawings and pointer in hand, in the ready room under the palm trees. She wanted the squadron’s collective eyes, its combined capacities, zeroed in on the actual planes. “Remember we’re pilots, not test pilots. Give these crates the same kind of going-over we always did with the Cobras, I don’t give a rat’s patoot that they’re new and improved. ‘New and improved’ just means nobody’s died in one yet.” She paused, looking down at the faces that had pulled through all kinds of flying conditions so far. “Everybody got that?”

The P-63 fighter planes, poised as birds of prey, sat in a row of a dozen on the taxiway. To Cass and her pilots, the brand-new aircraft looked like a pepped-up cousin of what they had been flying. Four blades on the propeller instead of three, more bite on the air. A sharper tail, aid to maneuverability. Gone were the despised fuel tanks underneath that had made the P-39 a barbecue waiting to happen in a belly landing. Sensible wing tanks, added bomb racks, a nose gun

SB

AUTHOR/EDITOR

wels

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SB

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Should this be set off
as a different kind of
space bunk?

341

almost twice the caliber of the old one: all of it added up, at least on paper, to a Lend-Lease attack aircraft that would give the Russians that much better chance of blowing up Germans and their implements of war.

Cass stayed kneeling a further minute, watching her pilots take in the P-63s that would be central to their existence from this day on. She could never get enough of this, the women in their canvas flying suits with manes brown, blonde, and black flowing over their purposeful shoulders as they eyed the new aircraft, keen as cats looking at available bacon. What needed doing--what was up to her to do--was to train these veteran fliers to take it slow with these hot planes. Isn't that a joker in the deck--me ending up like those bald coot instructors at Sweetwater. Holding in a rueful grin, she popped to her feet and gave a dismissing clap of her hands. "Okay, all concerned, find your tail number and go to work. Let's get with it."

The squadron members had drawn slips of paper out of a crush hat, letting chance decide who got stuck with a cantankerous craft and who ended up at the controls of a well-behaved one; it was a WASP article of faith that airplanes had personalities you could not change, short of the scrap heap. Cass walked around hers again for familiarity's sake, its unmissable 226323 stenciled large and white on the tail. Damn the deuces and treys, following me around. Don't be getting superstitious now, though. No time for that. She prowled the flight line, watching the eleven fliers comb the fighter planes. All of her pilots carried a lucky coin to unscrew the inspection plates. The hands-on testing started with that, reaching in and plucking each control cable to make sure it was hooked up to what it ought to

CAPS

be hooked up to. Up onto each wing next, take off the gas cap and stick a finger in to make sure the tank was full. Then into the cockpit, skepticism exercised on every gauge.

Spotting an opportunity, she eased her way over to where Beryl, with her swiftness of experience, already had the hood up on her plane. Cass clambered up next to where the tall matronly figure was studying the engine in back of the cockpit. "The factory geniuses didn't get this off the back of our necks, did they," Cass joined the appraisal. Then, low enough so only Beryl could hear: "Sorry it's not your four-barreled bomber, Bear. I tried again on your transfer, but it's still hung up."

Beryl turned and gave her that veteran smile that said they both knew what the military was like. "I suppose they'll wait until they transfer Gene out of range of the bomber factory."

"Probably your paperwork is just sitting on the desk of some shit-heel punk officer in Washington," Cass gave her honest assessment. "Hang in there, I'll keep after the personnel dimwits to jar it loose for you."

She climbed down feeling half guilty, dreading the day she would lose Beryl as wingman. Della Maclaine's performance thus far today did not help that mood. Right now the blonde head was languidly scanning the fuselage of her P-63 as if ready to try it on for size. Look down first, stupe. Coolant and fluid leaks would evaporate fast in the dry desert air; checking for puddles should be as automatic as zipping up the flying suit. With no small effort Cass resisted the impulse to charge across the runway and deliver Della a chewing-out she would

not soon forget. Ration it out or Goldilocks will turn into even more of a tail-
ender than she already is. The lowball instrument rating she was giving
 Lieutenant Maclaine, which would seat her in a simulation trainer for a good
 many hours across the next week, would get her attention soon enough.

When Cass was at last satisfied with the walk-around inspections, she
 gathered the squadron under the wing of the first P-63 again. "Observations,
 anyone?"

"Just guessing," Mary Catherine spoke up, "but these things might have
 more prop slop than we're used to."

"Righto," Cass backed that up. "Stay to hell out of one another's prop
 wash until we get used to handling these buggies." That especially means you,
Maclaine. Without making a show of it, she grazed a look down over Della,
 getting back a flip of blonde hair that might have meant anything. When everyone
 had had their say about the new planes, Cass slowly addressed the gathering:

"We all more than earned our wings on one of the most cockeyed planes in
 Creation, the P-39, and we're about to again on the P-63, whatever piece of work
 it turns out to be. It's going to be worth it, let me tell you, it would be even if these
 things were box kites. Friends and officers," her voice dropped, "flying is the
 second greatest thrill a woman can know."

She paused, taking in the expressions on her audience, patently quizzical
 on some, borderline lewd on others.

"The first, you goofs, is landing!"

edge, as tailored as a rajah abroad, appeared to be taking up in mid-session from two years earlier.

“Jones”--Ben held out a hand in that direction-- “may I see this week’s manifest of VIP arrivals again?” The corporal plucked up the list and passed it to him as if it was about to blow up.

“Spare your eyes,” the colonel advised. “Officially I’m not here.”

“Here or not, sir,” Ben struggled with everything wanting to uncoil within him, “you’re mightily in our thoughts.”

“I believe I detect a tone of concern over your recent assignments in that,” the colonel responded casually. In that same tone of voice: “Take a break, corporal. Make it a nice long one.”

Jones got out of there fast.

A puckish gaze from the visitor followed him. “Your clerk looks as if he stepped straight out of the homicide lineup, have you noticed?”

“Jones is washed in the blood of the lamb, sir.”

“Admirable, I’m sure.” The colonel went right to business. “One of your “supreme team” articles--very nicely done, let me say--has been co its absence in the newsprint of the land, hasn’t it, captain. Your pi Seaman Prokosch. We had to spike that piece, and I must tell you it will remain spiked.”

“I didn’t figure you were saving it for the gold-leaf edition.”

“You have every right to be testy about it,” the colonel granted. *Testy, my left nut. How about mad as hell? How about terminally pissed off, Mustache*

AV

Author

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(AV)

] Okay? Or do you want
to keep in the scare
quotes? 'Supreme Team'

Pete? "However," the practiced voice from Tepee Weepy rippled on, "the balloon bombs are a classified secret and no mention can be--" ^M

"Colonel?" If there was such a thing as whiplash inside the head, Ben suffered it now going from rancor to disbelief. "What's 'secret,'" he blurted, "about those? The Forest Service has people in lookout towers all over the mountains watching for the damn things, the [#]airbases out on the Coast are trying to shoot them down, anyone out here with ears on his head has heard about Jap balloons. We aren't giving away a thing that a dozen states don't already know, by saying a guy of ours met up with one." ^J

"This was not a TPWP decision," the colonel's voice rose a notch for the first time. "It comes from highest levels--there is a complete news blackout, in all American newspapers and radio broadcasts, about the balloons. ^{# bombs} Censorship has been applied for two reasons, we were told in no uncertain terms--to prevent panic by the public and to keep Japan in the dark about the balloons' effects." He favored Ben with an informative glance. "For what it's worth, captain, the Japs' 'secret' weapon is not starting forest fires anything like intended--the incendiary ^M devices appear to be faulty somehow." ^M

"But not the explosive part," Ben cited darkly. "It worked just fine in blowing Sig Prokosch to bits. And why won't it do it every time some poor fool who doesn't know any better comes across a strange gadget on the beach or out in the woods? Somebody who hasn't read about it because we kept it from them?"

"That calculation, as I said, is not ours to make," the colonel uttered with the patience of bureaucratic practice. "Your understandably heartfelt article on

webs

CA/S

AV

Seaman Prokosch needs a bit of fixing, is all. Simply approach it from the angle that he was killed in a munitions mishap, let it go at that, and then¹--”

Ben broke in:

“Like the old newspaper joke of describing a hanged man as having been found dead under a tree, do you mean, sir?”

It drew him a look of mixed regard and reassessment. One more time, the colonel cautioned himself that these westerners were prickly.

SB

The congressional hearing a few days before had been sailing along smoothly, the colonel concealed in plain sight amid the row of brass and braid and blue serge in back of the director of the Office of War Information as he testified, when a voice twanged out from down the line of senators.

“Mister Chairman, might I put in about two bits’ worth of questions, just to earn my keep?”

“I yield to my friend, the gentleman from Montana.”

“Thank you kindly.” The Senator pulled at his weathered beak of a nose for a long moment as if tugging loose whatever was stored in his head, then addressed the OWI chief. “There’s one setup here in the scheme of things you’re in charge of that I’m a little curious about. It for some reason gets funded as a ‘project’¹--year after year, I might add¹--instead of a line item. I think you know the one I mean.”

CAP

AV

The OWI man smoothed back his hair and made his bureaucratic escape. CAPS

"The colonel, here with me, will need to address that."

"Trot the fellow on up to the witness chair," drawled the Senator.

Hastily tucking away the dispatches he had been skimming, the colonel took the seat indicated. He was barely there before the Senator was asking, "How about enlightening us on just what your agency does?"

"Glad to, Senator. At TPWP we--" CAPS

"Where I come from," the Senator interrupted, "big initials like that are only used on the hides of cows. Might we have the full name of your outfit for the record?"

"Naturally." The colonel cleared his throat. "The Threshold Press War Project was conceived to disseminate news stories about our armed forces that otherwise would not reach the public. To fill a void in the home front's awareness, you could say." p. 14

"Why is the government in the business of dishing out news, through you?"

"If I may explain, Senator. The larger newspapers have their own war correspondents or the financial wherewithal to subscribe to the wire services. Our mission is to provide items of interest to the less prosperous news enterprises, primarily the smaller dailies and weeklies."

"That's all the newspapers, in my neck of the woods," the Senator noted.

"Would you say people in states such as mine get their picture of the war pretty much from you?"

“A decent proportion of it, Senator, if we’re doing our job right,” the colonel said carefully. “We want the folks at home to know the great service to this country their sons and daughters are providing--it’s all part of the war effort.”

The Senator leaned forward with a long-jawed smile, one old wolf to another. “Furnish them some heroes to help keep their morale up, would you say?”

“The genuine exploits of our fighting men and women deserve to be told, in our view,” the colonel skirted that as wide as he could. “I would submit, Senator, that your constituents are as eager as any others for such news.”

“In Montana we’re a little leery of bragging people up too much ever since General Custer,” the Senator stated, drawing laughter in the hearing room. He studied the colonel as if marking his place in a chapter, then sat back saying: “No further questions for now, Mister Chairman.”

“Let’s have a chin-chin about what’s wanted of you, Captain Reinking,” the colonel came out with now, still occupying a corner of the desk top in all apparent ease. He paused to tap one of the little Cuban stinkers out of a cigarillo pack and fire it up with a flick of his lighter. Considerately he blew the smoke away from Ben and at the same time fixed total attention on him. “You seem a bit bothered by the recent course of events in your war coverage. I sympathize, over Angelides and Prokosch--‘the dear love of comrades,’ as I believe a poet put it. But the war did not end with them. There are still your other teammates--”

“That’s what’s on my mind, sir,” Ben could not stop himself. “The way it’s turned out, some of the guys barely stood a chance of making it through while others--” He halted, not sure where the next words would take him.

“Share it out bold, captain. It’s just the two of us here.”

Ben mustered it for all he was worth.

“How much has Tepee--TPWP had to do with where the ten besides me have ended up in the war?”

The colonel managed to look surprised. “Why think the fate of your teammates is any of our doing? I grant you, some have had the worst possible luck. Need I point out that war does not necessarily deal the cards fair?”

“Does that mean the deck has to be stacked? Sir?”

“The ‘deck,’ to call it that, is too much for any of us to get our fingers around,” the colonel maintained.

“Maybe so,” Ben said, unsatisfied. “But sir, whatever accounts for it, this whole thing with the Supreme Team has turned out way to hell and gone different from what you projected, hasn’t it. I mean, why keep on with the series? Shouldn’t we just scrap it now? Six men gone--I’ve tried, but for the life of me I can’t see what’s to be gained by serving up my buddies in obituary after obituary.” He stared squarely at the colonel. “Dead heroes serve a purpose, do they?”

“We are not dealing”--the colonel stopped--“not trafficking in that sort of thing, captain, what kind of cynics do you think we are?” Reaching down to a waste basket, he mashed out the stub of his cigarillo, and treated himself to another. “Thanks to your talents,” he resumed levelly, “the story of the eleven of

you, whatever misfortunes have been along the way, is one of the epics of this war. So we are not, repeat not, going to scrap the series.” The tone softened. “Modify it a bit, perhaps.” He waved away a slight cirrus of smoke. “Let’s proceed to the reason I’m here. I wanted to brief you personally on the war outlook as we at TPWP see it, to provide some needed perspective”ⁱ--needed by you ^m CAPS
to the point where you now shut up and listen or else, his tone impliedⁱ--“about ^m
 your assignments from here on.”

Ben did listen, with every pore. The colonel’s briefing came down to saying he did not have to see himself as a war correspondent into perpetuity[^]; there was optimism at knowledg^eable levels in Washington that the war could be over within a year. From their lips to God’s ear, as Jake would say. [^] The colonel sprinkled in some pep talk about once-in-a lifetime coverage chances as Germany and Japan, in whichever order, were ground down into surrender. Depends on the lifetime, doesn’t it. By the time the TPWP view of things had been fully impressed upon him, not a word had been uttered about how he was supposed to handle the due pieces on Dex and Moxie, leaving him as baffled as ever. If that didn’t amount to scrapping the Supreme Team, what did? What was “modify” supposed to mean? wels

“Now as to your next orders, captain,” the colonel had arrived at. “It may not surprise you that you’ll be going overseasⁱ--” ^m

Well, here it is, and with something strangely like the spin of a compass in himself Ben began trying to set his mind to it, that ticket to Somewhere in Europe. Moxie, you win the sterling pencil ⁼pusher for a change. CAPS

"--you'll need to tidy up with your clerk, finish up any pieces you're working on, you may be gone a good while--"

Or a bad one, colonel, given the history of this.

"--and when the time is nearer, we'll let you know your departure date--"

Oh, swell, let's add waiting to the game.

"--for your old stomping grounds, the Pacific."

Ben was floored. What, again? Capital Y why? Danzer had about not all that long ago, there was nothing sane to be further said cushy boat ride through the war. It just did not make a lick of sense that he could see, returning to-- Wait a minute: return. Oh goddamn, no.

"Sir, begging your pardon, I don't want to seem out of line or anything, but damn it," everything in him blew, "are you sending me out there again just so Tepee Weepy will have an eyewitness when MacArthur wades ashore at Manila or Zamboanga or Leyte or wherever the hell he's going to do it? When that happens there'll be correspondents and photographers up the gigi, the general will have to wade through the cameras and reporters as much as the surf, and I don't see why I--"

"Calm down, captain. Watching Douglas MacArthur walk on water is not going to be your primary mission."

"Then what is?" he asked dubiously, still suspicious that somewhere in MacArthur's entourage as the great man returned to the Philippines would be Danzer flourishing a white tablecloth and a feast of pork.

AV

AUTHOR

AV

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_m

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that he could see, returning to^l-- Wait a minute: return. Oh goddamn, no.
_m

} Is change okay?

353

“The story is still developing, I’m not at liberty to tell you.” Reaching into the attache case at his side, the colonel extracted a file of clippings and dropped it dead-center on Ben’s work place at the desk. He smiled just enough. “It might not hurt, though, if you were to do some bedtime reading about the Montaneers.”

Beyond floored, this time Ben stared at the colonel in shock. The man might as well have said to him, “Learn the rules of dueling, you’re going to Dan Standish’s outfit.” All else being equal, he could have understood that the regiment that had been unendingly fighting up and down the jungle hellholes of the Pacific and now doubtless was destined for the invasion of the Philippines constituted a legitimate story to be written. All else was not equal, not even close; bedtime reading had already happened any number of times and it was indubitably the Braille of unclad lover to unclad lover while a Montaneer was out there in the jungle stuck with a matching wedding band. Still stunned, Ben grappled with two instant convictions, that coming face to face with Cass’s husband in the Montaneers’ next island assault was by all odds a long shot, and that in the perversity of this war it absolutely would happen.

He stood there stone-still, watched expectantly by the colonel, haunted in every direction he could look. The quantities of death he had seen in the world of war. All the times of sitting to the typewriter to turn teammates’ foreshortened lives into handfuls of words. Bruno’s eleven, fingered by fate when the coach’s ordained list of varsity starters was drawn up at that last practice. Loudon’s eleven, damn his gloryhound hide. The “supreme team” betrayed by the law of averages, with something that amounted to a moving wall of oblivion hinged to

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the war for them; a click at a time, it claimed life after life whatever the odds said. It surpassed understanding, yet the circumference of war plainly was different for these nearly dozen men. Until now Ben had been able to tell himself life went on until proved different, trusting to the unbidden gamble of the flesh that was the greatest and worst venture of his life, the love of another man's wife. Now this.

"Colonel," he finally found his voice, "I've had it. I can't go along with the way you want the war told, any more. Kick me out for 'nervous in the service' or some goddamn thing, I don't care." His lips were so dry he could barely make them function. He licked them to not much effect. "If it takes a Section Eight, I'm ready."

"You don't want to do that," the colonel said with utmost civility. "A dishonorable discharge follows a person the rest of his life." He inclined his head as if regretting that fact, while spelling out: "In a lot of fields, a person won't stand a chance of latching on after the war if he's labeled as a bobtail soldier."

The veil on that was thin as could be. Anyone with a byline knew what fields were meant in that implied threat. Hollywood. Any influential newspaper. The by-the-book wire services. All of the messengers who tended to fall under question for their messages, any time a hole in their patriotism could be found. None of those was going to want a wordsmith, no matter how good, with a military record that could not be held up to public light. A record of a soldier who quit.

Ben did not really have to say anything. The circumstances ahead, after the war, beyond Tepee Weepy but yet not, spoke it all. But he wanted the choiceless words inflicted on both of them in that room.

“Some decks are more stacked than others, aren’t they, sir.”

As the colonel departed the office, he gave Ben a passing pat on the shoulder, possibly a salute of sorts.

SB

“So what’s your secret?” Jake had just banged the hotel room with his foot, one hand busy trying to undo the clumsy horseblanket the military called an overcoat and the other bearing a rattling sack of beer. “How do you get them to ship you overseas easy as falling off a log, while they confine me to the North American continent?” His big coat went on the bed, the beer onto the dresser, and he faced around to Ben rubbing his hands briskly. “Brr. Getting chilly out there. ‘Frost on the pupkins, the poor curs.’ What’s that from a

AUTHOR/EDITOR

“*Stars Fell on Alamogordo*. Tallulah.” Ben put aside the we magazine—news magazines were always a week old—he had been through. “To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your comp

AUTHOR

“I thought it was sticking out all over me. Au revoir and all that.”

Ben shifted in his chair as if caught. “They’re keeping me in the dark about when I leave. I was going to look you up when I find out, honest.”

“Yeah, with your seabag over your shoulder and ten minutes before you’d have to catch a gooney bird out of here—I’m onto you. Besides, I’m kissing East Base goodbye a while myself. A month on the Fairbanks to Nome run. The

webs

SB

Should this be set
] off as a different
kind of space break?

“So what’s your secret?” Jake had just banged the hotel room door shut with his foot, one hand busy trying to undo the clumsy horseblanket the military called an overcoat and the other bearing a rattling sack of beer. “How do you get them to ship you overseas easy as falling off a log, while they confine me to the North American continent?” His big coat went on the bed, the beer onto the dresser, and he faced around to Ben rubbing his hands briskly. “Brr. Getting chilly out there. ‘Frost on the pupkins, the poor curs.’ What’s that from anyway?”

“*Stars Fell on Alamogordo*. Tallulah.” Ben put aside the week-old news magazine--news magazines were always a week old--he had been flipping through. “To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your company, Ice?”

rom

I wasn't able to find a song called "Stars Fell on Alamogordo." There was a jazz song called "Stars Fell on Alabama," written by Frank Perkins and Mitchell Parish.

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webs

Russkies are getting short of pilots, so some of us are detailed to fill in on that last leg. Some detail, huh? You can about see Siberia from there. Anyway, I brought a proper farewell. Got a church key?"

"Bottom drawer."

Jake pawed out the opener, did the honors on the bottles of beer, and handed Ben one before settling onto the groaning springs of the bed. "This place makes me feel better about the barracks. How come they stick you here?"

"Where commanding officers are concerned, I'm a marked man."

Jake snorted. "Aren't we all, one way or another." They drank a couple of pulls of beer, looking at one another with the awkward affection of men who have become oldest friends in not that long a time.

"Ben? Where they sending you this time?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you, or I would suffer the death of a thousand paper cuts from a manila folder."

"Backtrack Mac country, no crap?" It drew a whistle from Jake. "He's going to take back everything Filipino from the Japs or know the reason why, ain't he." The big man drank deep, then pointed his bottle toward Ben. "I don't want you getting the shit shot out of you out there, hear?"

Ben took a sip of his own before finding the voice to parry. "Look who's talking--the guy who wants to deliver bombs to Hitler on his chamber pot."

"Notice I want to do it from several miles away, up above the flak," Jake said as if setting him straight on the rules of the game. "I think that's the way the

Nazi pricks ought to get what's coming to them," he mused. "Just *blam*, something comes out of the sky and wipes them out of the human race."

"That'd be convenient," Ben found to say.

Jake leaned forward, adding gravity in all senses of the word. "Serious, Ben. Don't get fancy out in those islands. Things tend to happen around where you are. The time the Japs jumped you and Carlo," he took to reciting. "Then Animal getting it, damn near in your lap." Listening, Ben had to hear over the pounding of blood in the confines of his head. "That walk in the northern woods you took with me." Jake stopped, then said the rest as though it was the most natural of advice. "Bravery is just another way to die, my friend. Keep in the rear echelon for a change--who knows, it might be kind of nice there. The team is getting thin enough on the ground, without you crossed out."

"Ice, I intend to do everything I know how to stay on the living list."

"Good. We'll drink to that." Heaving himself off the bed, Jake fetched another pair of beers. In passing, he noticed the page of script in the typewriter. "You still tinkering with that? I thought you said it was done after you got the goods about Purcell."

"It is. I'm getting going on another one, I seem to be in the habit." Ben gazed at the waiting paper. "Vic and his grandfather, this is. You never met Toussaint. He's one they don't make any more."

"Busy hands keep a guy out of trouble," Jake proclaimed piously.

"Sometimes." They clinked bottles. "That's one more reason you've got to keep

yourself in one piece, you know--^I_MI've got a date with that movie of yours." The big man grinned crookedly. "I want to see you fry Bruno's nuts for him."

SB

The autumn that everyone at East Base hoped would be the last one of the war kept confusing itself with winter--^I_Ma snow squall for the first day of fall, then clouds that looked like they were lined with lead chronically hanging low over October's advance across the calendar. He was late arriving to the roadhouse, due mainly to weather delays of incoming flights with Very Important Persons aboard, Jones and his camera having needed a final tutorial in brazening it out when generals and admirals scowled at the presence of the lens.

It's all yours now, corporal old kid, Tepee Weepy be thy guardian angel.

As for himself, he kept trying to think only of these last hours with Cass before he climbed on the plane in the morning. Kept trying and failing. These few weeks since she came back from training her squadron to the new fighter planes had been time after time of glimpsed and gone, the P-63s flying north with the red star on their sides whenever he looked up, the stolen bits of love-making with her here at the eternal roadhouse or in his dumpy hotel bed too desperate and brief. All he had told her, all he could stand to tell her, was that he was being shipped out to the Pacific on assignments he would be filled in on when he got there. He meant it as a mercy, in not saying anything about being tossed in with the Montaneers in whatever bloody pocket of the ^(Philippines) ~~Leyte~~ invasion held them. Whether or not it was the right thing for Cass, it cost him plenty of sleep. *You're quite the specimen, Reinking. What are you going to do if you come face-to-face with Dan Standish*

webs

AV

out there, stick out your mitt and say "Hi, I came to cut the cards with you to see which of us gets Cass"? He still was trying to shoo away these thoughts as he dodged in out of the blustery weather to the permanent blue dusk of the roadhouse.

No sooner was he in the place than the usual bartender leaned across and muttered, "You're in for a ripsnorting time. She's belting drinks down about as fast as I can pour them."

Ben approached the table at the back as if testing thin ice. Cass looked at him mutely. She looked half swacked. And the other affected half was something other than alcohol.

"Cass, what in hell--"

"I lost one, Ben. First time."

He sank into a chair and reached across to cover her hand in his, which had the added effect of keeping her from hoisting another glass of scotch. That blonde number in her squadron, the one who always looked ready to climb a guy's leg-- "Cass, don't be blaming yourself, if that's what you're doing. You said last time she's an ingrown tailender and the new planes weren't helping any. It probably was just a matter of time before--"

The wobbly sway of her head stopped him.

"Not her." Cass slipped her hand out from under his and clamped onto the glass, taking a gulp before he could react.

"Beryl," she said amid the swallow, choking on the name. "My oldest best pilot. The landing gear folded on her and Beryl bellied halfway across

AUTHOR

Ben approached the table at the back as if testing thin ice. Cass watched him mutely. She looked half⁼swacked. And the other affected half[.] attributable to something other than alcohol.

“Cass, what in hell[!]--”
^M

“I lost one, Ben. First time.”

} Okay?
style preference
throughout ms. (360)

Edmonton.” Cass’s head went back and forth again, her voice thickening. “She didn’t stand a chance with that damn engine down her neck. Damn it all to hell, Bear logged hundreds of hours in that flying piece of crap the P-39 and we get the hot new planes and right away I lose her.” She clutched at the table to stop swaying. “Isn’t that a pisser? We get the ‘new and improved’ goddamn planes and right away--”

“Cass, look at me.” She made the effort, her gaze only approximate by now. “Listen up, you’ve got to. When are you on duty?”

She concentrated. “Tonight?”

“No damn way in this world are you flying tonight, I’ll call the ops section and tell them you’ve caught the twenty-four-hour crud. I know it raises hell with the squadron, but you can’t—”

“Who said anything about flying?” she said belligerently, all the drinks talking. “USO. Liaison officer to the cookie pushers, that’s me. Can’t lead a squadron worth a pork-and-beans’ fart, so might as well herd bashful--”

“Just sit here until I come back, okay? Just sit, don’t try to get up.” There still was a modicum of scotch in her glass, and he downed it so she wouldn’t. Swiftly he was onto his feet and headed to the front of the bar.

“Lit up like a church, whatever’s got into her,” the roadhouse bartender diagnosed as if a second opinion was needed.

Busy digging for silver, Ben specified: “That cabin with the whorehouse tub.”

CMS
6.43
opposite

"No can do," the man behind the bar replied with a minimum shrug.

"Don't get enough call for that one this time of year, so I shut down the water heater. Freeze your tails off if you was to get to piddling around in--"

"We're trying out to be Eskimos." Ben unloaded round dollars onto the bar until the bartender pushed them back, then returned to the matter of Cass.

She alternately tended toward limp and squirmy to handle as he maneuvered her to the cabin. The massive claw-footed tub stood suggestively not that far from the bed, and he was able to prop her there on the mattress and keep an eye on her while he resorted to the cold water tap. He shed his clothes first, then advanced to where she sat wavering on the bed. "Ben, sugar," she greeted him glassily, "I don't feel so hot. I know you're always ready for a go, and so'm I, but--"

"Radio silence, Captain Standish," he blared, baffling her into shutting up while he went to work on her buttons. He had undressed her in a hurry enough times before, but this one was of a different sort of urgency. Off fell her blouse, the revelatory brassiere, her zippered skirt, the tedious shoes and stockings, the panties as ever the last prize of all.

What is love but random magic? It applies itself in unexplainable ways. Tenderly he swooped Cass up as if carrying her across a threshold, kissed her in the sweet spot between the breasts, crossed the space to where the water was running and dumped her, squawking, in the frigid tub.

Gritting, Ben climbed in after her. It was all he could do to hang on to her, rubbing where he could to get the blood running, while she strenuously thrashed

and gasped. Sobering by visible degrees from the shock of the cold water, she let herself subside quivering into his arms. "M-m-maniac," she chattered, gratefully or not, he couldn't tell.

When she looked clear-eyed enough, he helped her from the tub and wrapped a towel around her and then himself around the towel. As warmth began to return with the clasp of body to body, the towel was pitched away and they gave themselves over to the ancient powers of bare skin.

His day of departure, it was raining hard enough to concuss the gophers of Hill 57. Water was standing all over East Base, as though the Pacific had decided to come to him, and eddies of wind caught at his travel pack in his sprint from the ready room to the C-47 idling on the taxiway. Struggling aboard with him came a couple dozen other dampened officers and airmen, cramming the transport plane to Seattle. Beyond that, he was jumpily aware, awaited the interminable flight to Hawaii, and from there the hopscotch journey to speck after speck of captured

island airfields that would ultimately land him to whatever awaited out there. As ever, the tight rounded confines of the plane cabin compressed such thoughts. The flying culverts that passed for Air Transport Command travel accommodations were his living quarters for these next days, and so far he was not l
 all, his bucket seat next that of a talkative major.

“How do, captain. Can’t help but notice your flight jacket, it’s a beauty. Pilot, are you?”

“The jacket,” Ben conveyed, “has a higher cockpit rating than I do.”

The major chortled, the kind that descends from the adenoids. “You still have a sense of humor, you must be passing through this glorified cow pasture on TDY.”

“No, I’ve been attached here. More or less forever.”

“Well, you can have Least Base, as far as I’m concerned. I was sent here for a week of detached duty--dot and dash stuff, I’m in the code area--and I’ll tell you, it seemed like Noah’s forty days and forty nights. I’ll be perfectly glad to get back to San Diego.” Companionably he looked Ben and his travel pack over again. “And where are you being sent? Somewhere sunny and warm, I hope?”

It was to be Leyte. The news would be on the radio about now, a central island of the Philippines invaded in MacArthur’s vaunted return. The coded travel order from Tepee Weepy had come in first thing that morning, and Ben had had to scramble to make this flight. He answered the inquisitive major minimally:

“I’m going to the tropics, probably not for my health.”

AUTHOR

island airfields that would ultimately land him to whatever awaited out there. As ever, the tight rounded confines of the plane cabin compressed such thoughts. The flying culverts that passed for Air Transport Command travel accommodations were his living quarters for these next days, and so far he was not lucking out at all, his bucket seat next that of a talkative major.

“How do, captain. Can’t help but notice your flight jacket, it’s a beauty.

Pilot, are you?”

Should this be
] next to that of
a talkative major

The C-47's engines revved loud enough to drown out conversation, to Ben's temporary relief. The aircraft shuddered into motion and out onto the runway, lumbering along at the ungainly hopeful uptilt that had given it the nickname of gooney bird. He braced back a bit out of long practice, his mind already racing the war clock ahead to wherever the Montaneers were digging in on some Leyte beach, while the plane strained to build up enough speed for takeoff. Suddenly the major pressed a cheek against the fuselage window. "Oh my God, hang on."

Ben craned to see past him. Down toward the end of the runway, above the meatwagon, dropping through the murk was the comet tail of a red # meant 'Abort the mission.' *ital.*

The transport plane lurched violently as the brakes were slammed on. Ben grabbed the seatframe and doubled over in crash position, all he could do to prepare if the aircraft was going to whirl into a ground loop on the rainslick runway, buckle its landing gear, and set itself on fire from the friction of the concrete. Beyond that was the terrible acceptance that for him the war, and heartbeat and breath, could end right here, smeared against a dank strip of East Base.

The wheelskid seemed to go on and on, the plane whipping back and forth enough to scare the power of speech out of everyone in the cabin. When finally the aircraft did one last slow half-glissade and jerked to a halt, someone said in a hushed voice: "I hope we fight the next war entirely on foot."

AUTHOR

Ben craned to see past him. Down toward the end of the runway, above the

meatwagon, dropping through the murk was the comet tail of a red flare which

meant 'Abort the mission.'

ital.

The transport plane lurched violently as the brakes were slammed on. Ben

} Styling okay?

366

The co-pilot surged out of the cockpit, boiling over. "Captain Reinking?" he demanded, his tone questioning why anyone of that rank was cause of this much concern. "The tower radioed. You're to get off this plane. Now." Ben could feel the indignant look from his neighbor the major.

"Here? In this?" Ben gestured in dumbfoundment, not knowing what motion was needed to indicate an obvious deluge. "Pal, it's coming down out there like a cow pissing on a flat rock."

"Now" means now, the pilot says to tell you. Orders are--

"I know what the chickenshit damn things are," Ben ground out, uncertainly unmooring from the bucket seat. "How are we supposed to do this in the middle of the runway?"

The co-pilot sandwiched past him. "I'll kick open the hatch and you'll have to swing down--we're supposed to make this snappy."

After as firm a hold as he could get on the bottom of the hatchway, Ben with a grunt dropped the slippery few feet to the runway, and his travel pack was swung down to him, followed by his typewriter case. With the propwash of the C-47's idling engines spewing entire puddles his direction, he had the was raining up out of ground at him. Hunched over, he duckwalked under the wing, around past the tail, and stood in the mud edging the the C-47 taxied away to a fresh tangent of takeoff.

Welcome back from nowhere, pilgrim. What's next, leaving me out here to drown through my hide?

After as firm a hold as he could get on the bottom of the hatchway, Ben with a grunt dropped the slippery few feet to the runway, and his travel pack was swung down to him, followed by his typewriter case. With the propwash of the C-47's idling engines spewing entire puddles his direction, he had the wild illusion it was raining up out of ground at him. Hunched over, he duckwalked out from under the wing, around past the tail, and stood in the mud edging the runway as the C-47 taxied away to a fresh tangent of takeoff.

Welcome back from nowhere, pilgrim. What's next, leaving me out here to drown through my hide?

Should this be

} raining up out of
the ground at him ?
1 (367)

A jeep was coming toward him at more speed than it should have been on the wet runway, its wipers sloshing madly. Between swipes when it pulled up, he could make out the stumpy figure of Jones at the wheel. An isinglass window flapped open and the corporal delivered the non-news:

“They scrapped your trip, captain. Better climb in.”

So soaked he did not really want the company of his own clothes and skin, Ben squished into the passenger seat. “Tepee Weepy’s orders--they sent the message in the clear, just put it on the wire,” Jones was saying as if having been present at a miracle. “Boy oh boy, captain, it’s hard to figure these things out, isn’t it?” He squinted back and forth from the windshield to Ben. “I went around to the clerk in the situation room and bugged him until he’d tell me what was up. You’d think we’d have heard about something like this, but Washington wanted the lid kept on the news, and so I guess we couldn’t have had any idea of--”

“Jones, cool down and don’t skid this thing into a parked plane. Now, in English if you can, what is up?”

“The Philippines. All heck is breaking loose out there.”

The war licked its chops over the battle of Leyte Gulf, as it came to be called, with the inevitability from day one that history would speak of such a gang-fight of fleets in the same breath with the Spanish Armada, Trafalgar, Jutland, and Midway. Ben all but moved in to the wire room at East Base to follow reports of the military struggle shaping up around the Philippine Islands. It proved to be like reading *War and Peace* standing up.

The battle unfolded across most of a week, dawning halfway across the world day by late October day as censored reports cautiously kept score of enemy vessels sunk versus the toll on the American fleet. The two American fleets, in actuality, for besides the aircraft carriers and battleships in Admiral "Bull" Halsey's task force stationed in that part of the Pacific as the U.S. Navy's trustworthy heavy weaponry, on hand also was Douglas MacArthur's mongrel fleet. Consigned to the touchy Army general's command to protect his amphibious assault forces in the island-hopping invasions, this more plebeian navy consisted of battleships that had aged past being top-of-the-line; half-size "escort" carriers built on merchant ship hulls; and a pack of support ships from pesky destroyers on

up. MacArthur's navy was going about its business of bombarding beaches and giving air cover to the Leyte landing when spotty reports began to arrive that the Japanese fleet en masse seemed to be steaming toward those same Philippine waters.

In the end there would be a seaful of dead sailors from both sides, but first came the interlude between strategy and tactics as the navies formed up in modern warfare's unbelievable proportions. Ben had experienced those at Guam, but even so, the reports he grabbed out of the teletypes as the fleets maneuvered on the margins of the Philippines made him question the accuracy of his eyes. The same was happening on the bridges of the ships involved. Reconnaissance planes from Halsey's carriers bit by bit counted seven Japanese battleships--two of them the mightiest in the world, distinctive floating fortresses with toplofty superstructures like steel pagodas--thirteen cruisers and nearly twenty destroyers in the oncoming battle array. Cloud cover and the labyrinth of islands and straits masked Tokyo's surprise fleet time and again as it kept coming, frustrating Halsey's intelligence evaluations. The one thing clear was the Japanese intent, to do away with MacArthur's navy and devastate the American assault force on the beaches of Leyte.

From the hour the Japanese fleet crept out of an archipelago maze into Leyte Gulf, the battle became, as these nautical epics have been down through time, a contest of seagoing monsters with dim vision. Halsey with all his battleships and heavy carriers chased off after a decoy of Japan's lesser ships. The Japanese battleship commanders dithered and wavered and failed to close the

pincers on either the Leyte beachhead or MacArthur's outgunned fleet. That patched-together collection of assault support ships bore the brunt of the fighting, the mightier Japanese vessels slaughtering any escort carrier they found within range but torpedo attacks by the American destroyers and salvos from the second-rank battleships effectively crippling the Japanese attack. Ultimately the sea battle was won from the sky, with U.S. carrier planes hunting and killing enemy warships like exhausted whales.

Ben kept a reporter's habitual count, day by day, as he inhabited the wire room during this. His own taste of shipboard war clung in him as the reports of sunk ships rattled in on the teletypes. The carrier Princeton, gone down; someone he knew back in the distant days of pilot school was a liaison air officer aboard there. One Japanese battleship sunk, another put out of action. The destroyers Johnston, Roberts, and Hoel perished. Two more Japanese battleships and a cruiser destroyed. The escort carrier Gambier Bay, gone down; Ben himself had been on that one less than six months ago, a hop in the journey to Australia. Old visions of the gray mass of ships around him and Animal when they talked and joked at Eniwetok gripped him while he endlessly bummed coffee from the communications section clerks and sifted the constant combat reports. The five bells of a wire machine would go off again, and there were two fewer Japanese cruisers on the ocean surface. More clatter of the teletype keys and another chapter of smoke-veiled military engagement came in.

Throughout, he felt the hot breathing presence of history's proposition for a reporter, any true chronicler. The question is brought by Mnemosyne, goddess of

memory, high priestess of knowledge, as she steps from the tall grove on Olympus with each hand cupped to you. In one is the grant of a long uninflected life, peace without pause to be looked back on. In the other lies the chance, issued only once per lifetime, to witness Waterloo from a spot within range of the guns. And in your most honest self, which would you choose? The oncoming shadow of the sea battle, not to mention the less than divine hand of Tepee Weepy, had done the choosing for him this time, in the shutdown of air traffic to the Philippines. Which hand of fate he would have chosen for himself, he was not perfectly sure. He prowled among the chatter of the teletypes vitally aware of having been spared one more time and conscientiously restless with not being out there when history pivoted on an obscure archipelago. In his reporter's vigil there was not even anyone to talk this over with, Cass back on track on the Edmonton run, Jake among the igloos, Jones scrambling to handle the office by himself. Alone with his insistent sense of something granted and something held back, he haunted the wire machines and drank coffee and waited for the next turn of the war.

It came on the fifth and last day of the Leyte Gulf battle, as the American victory became undeniable. With its fleet cut to pieces, the Japanese high command unveiled a fresh weapon. This lethal new contrivance would be launched more than three thousand times in the remaining months of the war, leaving carnage of an unprecedented kind when it struck, and even when it missed, it distributed terror into all who were anywhere in its way. It was called kamikaze—“divine wind,” which in this instance meant fury aimed from heaven, consisting as it did of a sacrificial airplane with a bomb strapped under each wing

and a pilot with glazed acceptance of a last mission. Its method was a suicide dive onto whatever American vessel it could find.

SB

Slick with sweat from the heat and tension of that Pacific noon, the officer of the watch stood clutching the railing on the wing of the McCorkle's bridge, transfixed by the sight of the escort carrier St. Lo blowing up repeatedly in the near distance. His rational side of mind knew that each thunderous explosion was another of the Lo's bomb and torpedo storage compartments going up, but the spectacle of blast after equally fiery blast erupting through the flight deck was beyond reckoning. In equal disbelief, the executive officer next to him cursed methodically while trying to figure out how the Japs had unobtrusively struck a ship in the middle of a victorious fleet; no sonar trace of a submarine had been reported. The gunnery officer now yelled out from the bridge something about a plane, although the destroyer lookouts had not spotted any aircraft overhead before the carrier began blasting apart, and the exec hustled back inside, leaving the watch officer alone in his spellbound state. None of the past hundred and some hours were supposed to go anything like this; the Cork's role at Leyte was to have been grandly ceremonial, delivering MacArthur into the bay for the historic moment of his promised return to the Philippines. The Japanese navy got in the way of that. Accordingly, the general found a lesser floating platform for his symbolic wade ashore while the McCorkle was scrambled into the battle formation with all other destroyers in the support fleet. In the ensuing near-endless days and nights, the man on watch believed he had done nobly--not heroically;

that was a dimension he did not care to approach--^lat his post inside at the battle status board, keeping straight the tremendous number of ship names and their whereabouts during the constantly changing struggle. Now, sweaty and fatigued as he was, he felt entitled to a markedly more triumphant watch than this was turning out to be. By now Leyte Gulf was signed, sealed, and delivered for the American side, as would be the campaign ribbons and the commendations to go on one's service record. Yet there was the St. Lo, not that far off, still exploding like a gunpowder factory every few minutes.

Then he glimpsed the plane, in the low-hanging murk of smoke from the burning carrier. The half-hidden aircraft was skimming almost down onto the water, one of the carrier's own trying to ditch, he thought at first. But no, as it emerged incredibly low and fast out of the pall of smoke its wing markings flashed into view, the red ball of the Rising Sun bringing flame to the bridge of the McCorkle, the last thing Nick Danzer would ever see.

(SB) (c/sc)

YOUR CHUM KIA CONFIRMED. SORRY. STORY NEEDED SOONEST.

What was there to say? His first thought when the bells began going off on the TPWP teletype had been that surely it must be a case of mistaken identity. How was it conceivable that Danzer, of them all, would not maneuver through the war without so much as getting a toenail broken, until he came home a medal-polished version of the Dancer? But that notion or any other could not withstand a suicide plane.

(CAP's) (AV)

Helplessly clutching the teletype message as if it had attached itself to him, it took him a little time to stop trying to outstare the blind numbers it brought with it. The Pacific war, its odds askew, now had chosen both Animal and Danzer for death out of what should have been statistical security. One wearing a uniform for what he could put into it, and the other for what he could get out of it, and it made no difference to the creeping wall of oblivion. "We've had the casualty figures from other wars run... Many more soldiers survive than people think, and our figures merely back that up..." Sure, colonel, tell that to Bruno's eleven, marked down to four all of a sudden. When the hell is it ever going to let up?

The job brought Ben out of that, the newspaperman's allegiance to the story. Faced with writing a farewell to Danzer fit for the world to read, he felt like a mechanic without tools. The task was there to be done, but how? The report of the kamikaze attack was coldly without details. There was not even a service record to cadge from, the grim file with the red tag on the upper corner; the war's initials for combat death simply were banged onto teletype paper along with reams of other military lingo quantifying the Leyte Gulf carnage. It was times like this when the making of words turned into frantic manufacture, and Ben started out of the wire room sickly dreading what it would take to bring an obituary version of Slick Nick out of his fingertips across the next some hours.

Behind him, the TPWP teletype bell rang five times again.

As Pacific amphibious landings went, Leyte was not as murderous as Tarawa and Peleliu and Guam had been, nor Iwo Jima and Okinawa yet to come.