

1943

changes made  
in Jan. '08  
re-read

1

Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last bend in the road, supertime lights coming on here and there beneath its roof of trees. As the bus headed up the quiet main street toward the hotel, where the lobby served as bus depot, Ben Reinking saw the single lighted storefront on the block with the bank and the beauty shop. Of course. Thursday night. His father putting the newspaper to bed after this week's press run.

"Here will do," he called to the driver.

The bus driver jammed on the brakes and heaved himself around to take a better look at this final passenger. Using all the breath he could summon, the man let out slowly: "I'll be goddamned. You're him. Awful sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't--"

"I'll live." Most civilians could not read the obscure shoulder patch on his flight jacket, and any camouflage he could get anytime suited Ben.

Right there in the middle of the street, the driver laboriously dragged out the duffel bag from the luggage bay and presented it to him. The man looked tempted to salute. Ben murmured his thanks and turned away toward the premises of the *Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner*. Well, he told himself as he swung along under the burden of his duffel, now to see whether his father had picked up any news about the repeal of the law of averages, as it apparently had been.

Habit dies hard, even the military variety that never came natural to him; he caught himself surveying these most familiar surroundings in terms of ambush and boobytrap, and with a shake of his head sought to change over to observation of a more civil sort. Storefront by dozing storefront, the town still looked as if the world of war had nothing to do with it, yet he knew better. It was simply that buildings don't read casualty lists. He tried to put that thought away and just think about being home. Gros Ventre, he learned growing up here, was the same age as the tree rings in the mature cottonwood colonnade along its streets, and altered itself as slowly. Only the season had changed appreciably since the last time he had to do this, early evening unrolling a frosty carpet of light from the front of the *Gleaner* building now as he approached.

He stopped to read the window as he always did. Posted beneath the gilt lettering on the plate glass were handbills announcing a war bonds box supper and a farm machinery auction on lower English Creek. Both were set in the familiar exclamatory typeface his father called Visual Braille. Fooling around as a printer paid for the indulgence of being a small-town editor, Bill Reinking liked to say. Just this moment, Ben spotted him there at the back of the office in the job shop, running the addressograph himself. As ever, his father looked like a schoolmaster out of place, peering foggily through his bifocals while he fed the dogtag-sized subscription plates into the small machine for it to stamp those names and addresses onto the out-of-town mail wrappers. Ben remembered now: the office help, Janie, had moved to Arizona where her husband was stationed.

Past his own reflection in the glass of the door, Ben watched his father at his lonesome chore until it started to hurt. *This part doesn't get any easier either, does it. Two bylines under one roof. At least we both write with the pointed end, he taught me that.*

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With that he stepped inside to the subtle smell of ink fresh on newsprint, calling out as cheerfully as he could manage: "All the news that fits, again this week?"

"Ben!" The addressograph made empty thumping sounds onto wrappers until his father could shut it down. "Surprise the living daylights out of a man, why don't you. We weren't expecting you until the weekend."

By now Ben was better at bad news than he'd ever imagined he could be. "Well, guess what, the Air Transport Command turns out to be full of surprises. It's only a forty-eight hour leave, not the seventy-two I put in for." He tried to cover the next with a shrug. "And there's something I have to do out of town tomorrow. Other than that, I'm the perfect guest."

"Better enjoy you in a hurry, hadn't I," his father said in his textbook dry way as they shook hands. His face alight, the older man gazed at the younger as if storing up on him. He was dying to ask what was behind this trip home, Ben could tell, but doing his best to be a father first and a newspaperman second. That was fortunate, because Ben himself did not have the right words anywhere near ready. In the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, this one was the hardest yet to talk about.

Bill Reinking saw most of this. Not wanting to prompt, he ventured only: "You've seen a lot of the world lately."

More than enough. England, bombed stiff by the Luftwaffe. New Guinea, beachheads backed against Japanese-held mountains two miles high. The close call from ack-ack over Palau on the B-17 ride; the even closer one no one was being told about. Not exactly pleasant conversation, any of it. Ben got rid of it for now in mock heroic fashion: "It was hell out in them islands."

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then

last did this, but he was finding that all of it gripped him as tenaciously as ever. The team's story, his, Jake's, Dexter's, the rest of the unique starting eleven. More than ever now, Vic's story; Slick Vic, most slippery runner in the conference, leaving after practice every afternoon to walk back to the Indian shacktown on Hill 57 over there. Bruno's story, everlasting bastard as football coach; and Loudon's, ruthless bastard as sportswriter. Under and over all the others, Merle Purcell's story, the most famous substitute who never played a game: the twelfth man's story. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, staircase-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium; the Letter Hill. The mental camera in Ben moved across it all with deliberation, panning the scene for the screen, until at last the bus reached the highway and veered north.

He patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although even there, the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

Bill Reinking had missed out on war--younger than wanted in the first worldwide one, old enough to be ignored in this one--but he knew the calibre of a war story when he saw one.

"Quite the piece you did on those pilots," he was saying with professional gruffness. "It should have people all over the country burning their tongues on their coffee in the morning." He plucked a *Gleaner* off the top of the mailing pile and pitched it to his son. "I gave it three columns of page five. More than I gave myself, I'll have you know."

Quick

weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the afternoon sun. The air was good, out here in the grassland beyond the reach of the smelter stack, and he savored it while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved these blue-and-tan days of the crisp end of October.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying turned out to be right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came. Right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new fighter planes incoming on the hop from Seattle. The unmistakable dart-nosed silhouette of P-39s; Airacobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was validated now that he had met Cass. In the month since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this half a dozen times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Planes poured into East Base from three directions for the Lend-Lease transit onward to Alaska and Russia, but the run from Seattle was all Cass's.

Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a snap, the turbulent peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and unmistakable guideposts abundant on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the grand Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle smokestack. His imagination soared up there with her, her cat-quick hands on the controls, her confident wiry body in the tight-fit cockpit of the lead P-39.

She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Standish also had a reputation for bringing in her flights safely no matter what the weather or visibility. (*"She can navigate in zero visibility like a*

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*wild-ass Eskimo,*” a crusty tower officer had provided the quote he used after cleaning it up.) He shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17 bombers and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, where his TPWP minder in Washington wondrously would not exist, his piece about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. Getting something like that across between the lines was becoming a specialty of his.

Still mesmerized, he stood in the parking lot with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the fighter planes as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of that roadhouse over there, thoroughly caught up in one another. Uniforms cast off and forgotten. Romantic maniacs renting by the hour. The whispered prattle of love talk, after: *“So it’s true what they say about redheads.” “I’m wrongly accused. It’s ginger, not red.” “Ginger? That’s a spice. No wonder.”* Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of four hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking.

That was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over with a roar, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Watching the Cobras glint in the sun as they diminished away toward East Base, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. As quickly as the planes were gone, the frustration filled him again. He drew a harsh breath. He knew perfectly well he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but it stuck with him day and night any more, the overriding hunch that for him the war’s next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that, and after that--might go on and on as his first two years

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of so-called service had, yanking him away on non-combatant assignment to some shot-up corner of the world and then depositing him back here for this kind of thing, time after time. And, worse now, Cass always out of reach. At this rate, he could foresee with excruciating clarity, her letters to him would add up into a string-tied packet in the bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Lovesick. Try as he would, he could not clear away the relentless feeling. Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. An incurable case of Cassia Standish, he was definitely suffering from, its symptoms rapture and queasiness simultaneously. *Vic would think I've gone off my rocker.* Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. No surer way to risk loss of rank and beyond that, dishonorable discharge, him and her both. *Sometimes I think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out naked from bed the other night to stroke that new silver bar on his uniform and meanwhile leering at him as effectively as Hedy Lamarr ever did at a leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?" *Not hardly.*

"Ready to hit the road if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the window and shut his eyes to wait out all the road miles yet before home. Sometimes he dozed and sometimes he didn't, but either way he dreamed of Cass and more Cass.

"Don't let me interrupt your enjoyment of great literature," the imperative note in his father's voice snapped him out of his absorption in the version of her he had put into newsprint. "But I have to get back at it." Bill Reinking indicated

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toward the job shop and the table where the addressograph waited. "Had any supper? There's some macaroni salad and fried chicken left."

Ben looked at the bucket supper from the Lunchery down the street, then back at his father.

"Your mother is in Valier," came the explanation. "Play rehearsal. They're doing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and she couldn't pass up being Lady Bracknell, could she?"

"Can't imagine it," Ben conceded in the same deliberately casual tone his father had used. "Let me get some chicken in me, then I'll take over on the addresser, how about."

"No, that's fine," his father spoke hastily, "I'm used to this by now. You can help wrap when I get to that." Turning away, he started up the addressograph again and, a sound his son had grown up on, the name-and-address plates began clattering through like metal poker chips as each alphabetical stack of half a dozen was fed in. Ben left him to it and moved toward the other end of the worktable to put together a semblance of supper. He still felt off balance about being back amid the comfortable inky clutter of the newspaper office after so much military life. Food would be a good idea, even the Lunchery's.

He was reaching into the meal bucket when he heard a lapse in the addressing machine's rhythmic slap-slap on the wrappers. Out the corner of his eye he watched his father quickly palm a subscription plate off the stack he was working with and slip it into a pants pocket. Ben frowned. His father always chucked aside any discards into a coffee can, there by the addressograph for that purpose, until there were enough to be dumped into the linotype melt pot.

"Hey," Ben called softly. "I saw that." He held out his hand for the discard. "Gimme, gimme, my name is Jimmy."

His father stood frozen there with his hand still in his pocket.

“Dad? What’s up?”

A stricken expression came over the older man. “I--I didn’t want you to come across this one in the wrappers. Ben, I’m sorry if--”

He handed the flat little piece of metal to his son as if it were a rare coin. Flipping it over to the raised side, Ben instantly spelled out the inverted letters of type. Reading backward was a skill that came with growing up in a newspaper office, and right then he wished he didn’t have it.

VICTOR RENNIE CPL. SERIAL #20929246  
C CO., 11TH REGIMENT, 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION  
C/O U.S. ARMY OVERSEAS POST OFFICE  
NEW YORK, N.Y.

Confounded, he stared at his father. “How’d you already know it’s Vic? They sit on the names until I--” He gestured futilely.

“I didn’t, really.” Bill Reinking’s face was at odds with his words; father and newspaperman both, his first look at Ben told him this was not anything like the other times he had come home on unexpected leave. “If it turned out to be some other reason you’re here, I was going to hand-address this one at the post office.”

Ben swallowed hard. Tonelessly he told his father what had happened to Vic Rennie in the minefield in the Sicilian countryside.

Bill Reinking blanched; two years of hardening from handling war news didn’t help with this. It had to be asked:

“Everybody else--?”

“All accounted for, Dad, relax. I checked this morning.” As he did every morning. Day by day he knew exactly where each one of them was, in the world of war. It was his job to know.

Carl Friessen in New Guinea.

Jake Eisman piloting at East Base.

Animal Angelides on a Marine troop ship.

Sig Prokosch patrolling a shore in the Coast Guard.

Moxie Stamper with a tank corps somewhere in England.

Nick Danzer on the destroyer *U.S.S. McCorkle* in the Pacific.

Dexter Cariston at the camp that was not supposed to be mentioned.

Stanislaus Havel and Kenny O'Fallon in graves under military crosses.

And Vic, whose chapter of the war had to be put to rest with this journey.

Every soldier, in the course of time, exists only in the breath of written words. The gods that govern saga have always known that. There were times Bill Reinking stood stock-still in this newspaper office, hardly daring to breathe, as he tore open the week's Threshold Press War Project packet and pawed through the drab handouts until he spotted the words *The 'Supreme Team' on the Field of Battle...by Lt. Ben Reinking*. It awed him each time, Ben's unfolding epic of them, impeccably told. Taken together, they amounted to an odd number--eleven--whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1941 on a windblown football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war. Montana boys, all, grown into something more than gridiron heroes. One by one, the Treasure State teammates--the much-heralded entire varsity now enlisted one way or another--were individuals rehearsing for history, in newsprint across America. The one with the TPWP patch on his shoulder, with the mandate from somewhere on high to write of them all, now pocketed away the dogtag-sized piece of metal cold in his fingers, as his father wordlessly watched.

The bitter arithmetic was not anything Ben could put away. "Three casualties, *bang bang bang*, how's that for being a 'chosen' team? If this keeps on, we can play six-man."

Instantly he wanted that choice of words back. *That's what gave us Purcell. Does it all start there?* Not a one of the '41 starters came up out of six-man football, but Merle Purcell had, the newcomer from nowhere who met his

anti-aircraft

There was a bad sign, literally, the moment he stepped into the dooryard; a blotch of something written in red on the rusty weathered door, like lipstick on a witch. Walking up to it with a sinking feeling, he found it was a shingle tacked to the doorwood and lettered on it in barn paint the message: ELK SEASON.

Incredulous, Ben squinted west, met there by half the mountains in North America. Hunt a hunter in one day, in all that? It was too much, this whole deal of Slick Vic and a roving grandfather old as the hills. Toussaint Rennie must be crowding eighty-five. He didn't have any business going after elk alone.

While Ben stood there stewing, the silence of the dried-up little ranch seemed to reprove him. Out where weeds took over from the yard, the pole corral stood empty except for one broomtail pony, and the barn looked like it would fall down if a person blew his nose around it. All right, he conceded, maybe pursuit of elk was the only business Toussaint did have. But where in this rugged upper end of the Two Medicine country would the old reprobate have a favorite hunting ground?

For a moment--more than that, actually--he was tempted to give this up and concoct whatever he could, from football times together, for the piece about Vic. Give it the Loudon treatment for once. Loudmouth it, the Treasure State team had learned to refer to the guff put out week by week by the scruple-free sportswriter climbing to fame on their backs in '41. Ted Loudon's coarsest lead followed Vic's four-touchdown game: *Wyoming was scalped on its home field today, by a halfback marauder from the northern plains named Vic Rennie*. Ben would have given plenty, then and now, to see the copy Loudon handed in and verify whether the sonofabitch had actually written *halfbreed halfback* and a queasy editor struck it out, or if Loudon slyly just let it smirk there in the shadows of *marauder* and *scalped*. He and Jake Eisman and most of the rest of the team had wanted to go to

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Bruno and tell him to shape up his mouthpiece buddy Loudon, but Vic only said he was used to that kind of crap.

Conscience makes tough company, Ben found again. Concocting would not do--this was Vic, and the last time he would be written about, possibly ever--and besides, in the zipper pocket of the flight jacket was what he was supposed to give to the old man who had raised his friend; he would have sworn he could feel the weight of the thing in there, feather-light though it was. No, at the very least he had to ask around. *This is such a famously friendly neighborhood, right, Vic?* He trudged back up to the Packard, patted it in apology, and navigated it across a barely wide enough stringer bridge to the reservation side of the river, to look up Toussaint's Blackfoot relatives. In-laws, rather, and that proved to be the problem.

"That skunk fart--why would I keep track of him?" was the extent of the answer at the first ranch of the Rides Proud family clan that he tried.

Ben had been afraid of this. It was notorious throughout this Blackfoot end of the Two Medicine country that the Rennie bloodline was from away--some adamantly mysterious route that seemed to take in hazy tribal background to the east and the Metis rebellion in Canada to the north and very likely a French trapper named Reynaud somewhere along the way--and Toussaint Rennie reveled in perching just outside the edge of the reservation, knowing everyone else's business and never showing his Blackfoot neighbors any of his own hand except the back of it. He conspicuously never got along with his Blackfoot wife, Mary Rides Proud, while she was alive, and to judge by how good a job her blood relations were doing of keeping up hostilities in memory of Mary, even long after. Twice more Ben underwent it, amiable leather-faced men emerging from corral or barn in greeting, then turning away when he mentioned the name Toussaint. *Goddamn it, you'd think they were the Germans and the Russians going at it.* As he pulled in to the

last ranch on that stretch of the river, he was watching cautiously for the next Rides Proud man on the prod.

This time, though, a Blackfoot woman came out on the front steps, her hands in the folds of her checkered dress, and told him in the flattest of voices her husband was up on the bluff fixing fence.

Something in her features reminded Ben of Vic. He gave it a try: "I'm looking for Victor's grandfather."

"Victor," the woman tested the name and ignored the rest. "His mother was my cousin."

Ben gingerly fished into the tangle of family. "The closest relative Victor had left by the time I knew him was his grandfather. It's important that I find him. Where would he go to hunt elk, do you think?"

The woman kept her gaze on Ben for some seconds, then came down off the steps. She turned her back to the mountains and pointed. "Likes to say he has his own herd."

Totally surprised, Ben stared east into the deep vee of the river valley and the distant patches of prairie captured between the outline of the bluffs. He had never in his life heard about any elk herd in the Two Medicine bottomlands. *She's putting me on. What do I do now?* Then it sank in on him. The woman was pointing all the way east, to the horizon. To the Sweetgrass Hills, rising like three mirage islands on the earthbrim where the sun came up.

Back in the car, before starting it up he took another sighting on the ghostly trio of distant hills. He figured the trip at a hard two hours' drive, but he didn't mind that as much as the direction. He still could not shake the creepy feeling that the law of averages was not working, something was cockeyed; every point on the compass since this set of orders caught up with him in New Guinea was *east*.

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East Base had changed beyond sane recognition when he alit there, the month before. Only the Black Eagle smokestack stood the same as ever on the transformed prairie--the military in its inexplicable fashion having chosen to install an airfield almost under the shadow of the highest manmade obstacle between Seattle and Minneapolis. Who would have thought Montana was destined to become a staging area for the war in the first place? But the world of war shifted massively when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, and with the task of conveying thousands of aircraft to the forces of America's new ally Joseph Stalin, the Air Transport Command had snatched up this base since the last time Ben landed here. Up until now he had not paid much attention to the ATC, something of a stepchild in the military scheme of things, other than the jeer he'd heard in fighter pilot school that the initials stood for Allergic To Combat. Never mind, he tried to tell himself, hadn't he pulled temporary duty at out-of-it outfits before?

Reporting in, fatigued from bucket-seat flights in C-47 transports to reach there, he presented his paperwork in the same tired routine as he'd done countless times, countless places. This time the processing clerk, a bald corporal, furrowed up over the orders before stamping them and handing them back with a dubious "There you go, lieutenant"--they all did that--then jabbed a finger to the base map on the wall. "Here's your next stop, the clap shop."

"Cut the crap, okay? I don't have anything." In no mood for dealing further with a cynical paper-pusher, Ben was trying in vain to pick out the Bachelor Officers Quarters on the map; whatever else the Air Transport Command transported, it brought buildings by the dozens.

"That's what all the boys say, sir," the clerk sang out. "Commander's orders. He's on a tear about VD. All incoming personnel have to be checked out, first thing."

Drawing on his annoyance to plot how he might get away with *infectious* in a piece on the level of enthusiasm here, Ben stepped out into the world of East Base. Now that he had a chance to take a good look around, there wasn't a trace of the tar-paper infirmary he remembered before, nor anything else from his last quick TDY here. Mammoth tin-colored hangars yawned open onto the longest runway he had seen yet in his war travels. Deep inside the hangar nearest him, swarms of mechanics on platform ladders squirmed into open bays of fuselages. Fresh new bombers and fighter planes had to undergo shakedown here after being flown in from factories on the West Coast and before being handed over to Russian pilots waiting in Alaska, he understood that much of the Lend-Lease operation. But he puzzled over the relatively empty flightline, no clusters of aircraft rolled out and sitting ready to go. Instead, great batches of unpainted planes were lined up on an apron behind the hangars, like shorn sheep trying to get out of the weather. A sudden wild gust that had him grabbing at his crush hat made him laugh in spite of himself. *Think about it, Reinking. You're in Great Falls, home of the seventy-yard punt when the wind is up.* Those planes were tied down to mooring rings back there so they wouldn't blow over.

At least the wind was something familiar. He had not paid enough attention to where the irksome clerk pointed on the map. Casting around for directions, he wandered into the huge hangar and over to the nearest P-39 where a lone mechanic was up on a wing and head-down in the engine compartment. "Hey, buddy, which way to the clap shop?"

The figure in coveralls withdrew from the engine and a fetching brunette hairdo and hazel eyes with temper in them came with it. "Cozying up to strange women," the voice was feminine but oh how it carried, "is usually a good start toward it."

Ben stood there wondering if he looked as mortified as he felt. All over the hangar other heads popped out of other planes: a set of blonde curls here, a hairnet there, and everywhere chest-high indications in the coveralls. The place was all women. A majority of them, it seemed to him as he tried not to gape, were devoting full attention to him and this vixen high over him on the airplane wing.

Wiry within the folds of the coveralls, she was wiping her hands on a grease rag while she eyed Ben up and down. If looks could kill, she did not need a fighter plane on her side. Squinting up as she glared down, he parked his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket, hoping a casual approach might simmer her down. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm only checking in. Which means I have to be checked out, they tell me. Look, miss, I'm not trying to be fresh."

She did a little something to the collar of her greasy coveralls, and an insignia flashed out. "Try 'Captain,' why don't you."

Too late he caught sight of the ready-bag sitting in the cockpit hatch, with WASP wings and a squadron leader's striped star stenciled on it. *Just my luck with this base, I light in here and brush up against a queen bee.* "Next time I'll be sure to, Captain. Steer me to the infirmary and I'll have my IQ checked along with the rest, how about?"

"Three buildings down from Ops, where the control tower is, and ask for the short-arm inspector. If your IQ is where I think it is, you can have both done at once." She finished him off with a last dismissing look. "Crew chief!" she was moving on to her next victim even before he turned away. "Who looked over this engine, Helen Keller? The points are burned. I want them filed down and reset before I take this crate for a checklist run."

Glad to get out of there with his hide on, Ben went and presented himself at the infirmary for the evidently important process of dropping his pants. A clean bill of health promised to be his only gain for the day, however. At his next stop, the

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BOQ clerk did not even make a pretense of looking up an empty bunk for him.

“You’re billeted downtown, transient basis. The Excelsior Hotel.”

A memory clicked from college days; the Alka-Seltzer was one of the wine flophouses on First Avenue South. “How the hell come? I’m here TDY, not transient.”

“Because it says so here. Orders from headquarters, sir.”

Ben resisted the impulse to whip out his higher set of orders and wipe the smirk off the clerk with them. He didn’t want that reputation until he knew more about what this damn base had become. Stoically he listened to the clerk recite the daily schedule of the shuttle bus between the base and downtown Great Falls. Meanwhile a fresh-faced private with an armband marking him as the runner from the day room had come in, and was hovering nearby. He broke in:

“Lieutenant Reinking?”

“I was when I got here.”

“General Grady wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“The commanding officer of the base, sir. Wants to see you.”

“As in, this minute?”

The runner nodded nervously.

Ben slung his duffel behind the desk where the clerk had no choice but to watch it. Before turning to go, he asked: “Do you have a Lieutenant Eisman bunked here?”

The clerk showed a sign of life. “Sure do--the football guy? Ever see him play? I bet he didn’t even have to run, he could just walk through the other team.”

“Tell him the moving target is back.” Ben glanced at the day-room runner waiting edgily to escort him to the headquarters building. “Lead on, Moses.”

all-am?

As if some signal had been given, East Base began to hum with activity while the runner walked him through the military maze of buildings. Fire engines trundled to their ready spot near the end of the runway, followed by the medical corps ambulance, known on every airbase as the meatwagon. Next, the flightline went from empty to maximally busy in a matter of minutes. A spate of P-39s took off one after another and headed north, leaving their chorus of roar behind. Other fighter planes, likely the check-out flights, were being rolled out of the big hangar he had blundered into. Ben watched it all; another day in the war, of the five hundred and some he had been through. Back here, he could tell time by the sun, and he aligned the other zones around the world with it now. The clock of war was in his head every waking minute. It was close onto noon here, so in England the day was drawing down and Moxie Stamper would be in a supper chow line on a secure bomber base if he was lucky. Carl Friessen would be in a foxhole listening to the night noises of the New Guinea jungle. On the destroyer zigzagging in the Pacific, Larry Danzer already was in tomorrow; Danzer, with his taste for any advantage, would like that. Member by member of the supreme team, Ben memorized anew the time difference from here to there, adjusting himself toward the schedule of telexes that followed him from base to base.

The one-star officer in charge of East Base evidently had been building up a head of steam while waiting for the TPWP interloper. Base commanders generally did. Ben sometimes wondered if that's why they were called generals.

Ben's salute still was in the air when this one, an obvious old ranker with a face like he'd been eating fire, started in on him. "So you're here to make us famous. I'm not sure I like that."

*Nice even-tempered base you run here, General--everybody pissed off all the time.* Ben stood his ground by holding his salute until the personage behind the desk was forced to say, "At ease, shit's sake, man." The general peered at the

TPWP  
10

lieutenant down all the rungs of rank between them. "Well? Why us? Why can't we get on with what we're doing without your outfit, whatever it is"--he glanced with abhorrence at the Threshold Press War Project patch on Ben's shoulder-- "sticking its nose in?"

"Somebody cut me the orders, sir. Confidentially, I'd prefer to be doing something else in the war."

The *confidentially* did not go down well with the general. "Then tell me this. Are you here to play up the women pilots?"

The presence of WASPs and the hangerful of female mechanics had come as definite news to Ben when he blundered into it all. The commander's resistance sharpened his instinct some more. "It depends, sir."

The commander dug a finger in his ear. "On what?"

"What you mean by 'play up.' Just so you know, General"--Ben had a moment of panic; he had been in front of so many of these one-star lifers in charge of obscure bases that he'd lost track of the name here. "General Grady," he picked it up from the nameplate on the desk and plunged on, "I'm an accredited correspondent as well as a soldier. Those hats don't always fit the way other people would like to see them, but I'm stuck with wearing both. You have to understand, sir, I'm assigned to write about things of interest to--"

"These females were wished onto me, and so were the Russkies," the commander blared; for a moment Ben wondered if the man was deaf from too much propwash. "That doesn't mean everybody and his dog has to read about them." He shot a non-negotiable look across the desk. "Those 'supreme team' write-ups of yours, bunk like that, that's all right. Good for the war effort. Lieutenant Eisman has a wild hair up his ass whenever he's on the ground, but he's a good flier--write your brains out about him for all I care. As long as I'm in charge here,

WASP  
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that's the kind of thing I want to see, due tribute for my men who fly these planes to Alaska. Is that understood?"

"Duly noted, sir. I'll be doing a piece on Jake Eisman as soon as-- "

"That's all, Reinking," the commander swung around in his chair to peruse some imagined event out on the flightline. "Go see the adjutant," came the imperial drift of order over his shoulder, "he'll fix you up with desk space somewhere."

*Where does the military find these types, Central Casting?* Ben let silence do its work before he cleared his throat and uttered:

"But sir?"

The general's chair grudgingly swiveled in his direction again.

"The situation is," Ben stated as if he had been asked, "I'm under orders to do other stories, too, wherever I see them." He had been in front of enough base commanders to have perfected a polite stare that nonetheless underlined his standard message: "Orders from Washington, sir."

"Lieutenant, shit's sake, we're all under orders from Washington!"

*Not like mine, Buster.* He reached to the zipper pocket of his jacket. "May I?"

Eyeing him more narrowly now, the general reached for the folded orders. He opened them with impatience and read at top speed. Then went back over the words, evidently one by one. Sucking a breath, he handed the paper back to Ben. "Why didn't you say so?" he rasped. "Carry on, Lieutenant, it sure as shit looks like you will anyway."

On the way out, Ben took a closer look at a base map to locate the ready room where the WASPs would be waiting for takeoff.

East Butte, the farthest of the Sweetgrass Hills, was keeping its distance as Ben drove the undeviating dirt road from the map-dot town of Chester where he

WASP  
sc

“True.” Softly but swiftly to get it over with, he told what had happened to Vic.

When that was done, Toussaint looked out past the old contested country of the tribes, off somewhere into the swollen world of war. His voice turned bleak and Ben wondered whether a chuckle would ever enter it again.

“They blew up my boy?”

“He was pretty badly torn up by the landmine. They had to amputate.”

A grunt came from the grandfather, as dismal a sound as Ben had ever heard. Quickly he reached to his jacket pocket. “I don’t know if it helps, but I brought you a letter from Vic.”

The old man held the pale blue sheet of paper at arm’s length to read it. Watching this, Ben felt uncomfortably responsible for its contents, whatever those were. He’d had to move military heaven and earth--Tepee Weepy, which amounted to the same thing--to get word to Vic and then speed the resulting letter through top channels. The courier, a naval attache from the embassy in London, had stepped off the plane at East Base disdainfully looking over Ben’s head for the almighty TPWP officer in charge. “I’m him,” Ben had announced, and the attache’s expression only grew worse when the briefcase handcuffed to his wrist was unlocked to produce a single slim envelope that looked like ordinary mail. Ben wished him a nice flight back and tucked the letter in his jacket. Now Toussaint lowered the piece of paper and refolded it carefully.

“Vic writes he can’t get a new leg. All the things they can do these days, they can’t get him a new leg?”

Ben shook his head.

Neither man spoke for a while, Toussaint still creasing the letter, until at last he asked the question his visitor had been dreading most:

“Why don’t they send him home to me?”

pe. >  
change  
London >

Ben hoped it wasn't because a one-legged hero did not fit with TPWP plans. He could hear the strain in his voice as he tried to put the secretive hospital in the English countryside in the best light. "There's a facility--a place there where they help people pull through something like this. It's an estate." It was for depression victims. Mangled Royal Air Force pilots. Commandoes wrecked in body and mind from the disastrous Dieppe raid. And, Tepee Weepy had seen to it, a "supreme team" running back with an empty pantleg.

He left all that last part out; from the look on the man who had raised Victor Rennie, bringing the letter maybe was bad enough. After a bit Toussaint said absently: "Vic says it's awful green there. Hedges."

"Toussaint, you better know. I'm supposed to write something about Vic. It's my job."

"Funny kind of job, Ben, ain't it?"

*You don't know the half of it, Toussaint, not even you.* He tried to explain the ongoing articles about the team, the obligation--if it was that--to tell people what had happened to Vic while he was fighting in the service of his country.

"Country." Toussaint picked up that word and seemed to consider it. He gestured in the direction of Great Falls. "Hill 57," he let out as if Ben had asked for an unsavory address. "You know about that." Something like a snort came from him, making Ben more uneasy yet. After a long moment, he held up the letter. "Here's what's left of Vic, that I know of." He handed it over. "Take down what it says."

Nonplussed, Ben unfolded the piece of stationery and read it through. He chewed the inside of his mouth, trying to decide. It had been offered and he couldn't turn it down. "You're sure?"

Toussaint shrugged as if surety was hard to come by.

7.6  
Dunkirk  
Hill 57  
cases?

The others eyed her. They knew Cass had the best cockpit nerves in the human race; when she was not at the controls, things could fray at the edges now and then. Beryl, ritual elder of the group, was about to say something but thought better of it. This time, Della only crept her fingers a little way toward Cass's pile, asking as if it was a matter of etiquette: "Another for Mother?"

Catching up to the fact that she needed to get a grip of the situation, Cass theatrically fanned at her mouth as if shooing off flies, then forked over another dollar for swearing during the game. As everyone laughed, she sneaked another glance at the nearest window port and still saw only fog; Seattle was socked in tighter than she could ever remember--that was saying a lot--and there were mountains out there. Even she, who had to have faith in instrumentation, was ready to divert to sunny Moses Lake. She caught the eye of Linda Cicotte, B flight leader, and pointed urgently toward the cockpit. Linda nodded, teetered to her feet and felt her way forward to talk to the pilot. The rest of the dozen women, all in the baggy flying gear called zoot suits, slouched in sling seats along one side of the aircraft; the entire rest of the cabin was taken up with bulky crates. TARFU Airlines, these numbing transport trips in the equivalent of a boxcar with propellers were known as: Things Are Really Fucked Up. Circling in Grade A fog this way was worse than usual, on these trips to the Coast, but there was nothing to do about it but go with the routine. Linda's team of fliers as usual were curled up as best they could, trying to catch some sleep. C flight, Ella Mannion's, did crossword puzzles and read books. Cass was not sure she wanted to know what it said that hers always sat on their parachute packs in the tail of the plane and played cutthroat poker.

Right now Mary Catherine palmed the deck in cardslick fashion, ready to keep dealing. "Cards, sisters in sin?"

2 nest  
remainder  
majority

“Honey”--Della was only from somewhere in southern Ohio, but when she poured it on, she sounded like Tallulah Bankhead on a bender--“I couldn’t possibly stand one more good card.”

Cass flinched inwardly. *What am I getting myself into here? A lot of that going around lately.* Saying “Hit me twice,” she slid the deuce and trey to the discard pile. The new cards might as well have gone straight there, too. *Lucky in love doesn’t seem to count in poker either, Ben.* Even so, when Della upped the ante, she stayed with her. Della raised her again, which mercifully was the limit. Cass met the bet and, fingers crossed, produced the jacks.

“Pair of ladies.” Della laid down queens and scooped up cash. “Thank you for the money, y’all, it’ll go for good causes, widows and orphans and the home for overmatched poker players.”

Cass looked at Mary Catherine, and Mary Catherine at Beryl. Simultaneously they reached to their piles and each flung a dollar into the cuss pot. “*Piss in the ocean, Della!*” they chorused.

“My, my,” Della drawled, cocking a delicate ear. “Do I hear a whine in one of the engines?” Cass had to hand it to her; shavetail latecomer or not, she was sharp as a porcupine on most things. The full lieutenants, Beryl Foster and Mary Catherine Cornelisen, had earned their wings in the very first contingent of WASPs, as Cass herself had. The three of them together had endured the bald old goat of a flight instructor at Sweetwater, Texas, who claimed women pilots would never amount to anything because they couldn’t piss in the ocean--the Gulf of Mexico, actually--from ten thousand feet through the relief tube like the male pilots. If that had been deliberate motivation toward every other kind of flying skill, it worked in their case. Sometimes the aircraft they ferried from the plant were finished products and sometimes they weren’t. Mary Catherine once had been going through a cockpit check on the factory floor when the engine of the shiny

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#9

new fighter burst into flames; pure textbook but against all human inclination, she rammed the throttle open and blew out the fire. And Beryl knew what it was to land at East Base with nothing but fumes left in a leaky auxiliary tank. With scrapes enough of her own, Cass would not have traded their cool heads for reincarnations of Amelia Earhart. Della, though. Nearly a year behind them in flight school and immeasurably more than that in experience, Della still showed signs of thinking of herself as a hot pilot. Hot pilots tended to end up dead pilots. Cass knew she had her work cut out for her with Della.

Starting about now; Della was shuffling the cards in such a fashion that they purred expectantly, but she did have the smarts to check with Cass before dealing out another hand.

Cass shook her head. "That's it, officers. Time to ready up." She climbed to her feet, stiff from all the sitting. "M.C., where'd you put those newspapers?" They had grabbed up a pile of the *Great Falls Tribune* before takeoff; the article about them and the picture of the squadron proudly posed on the wings of an Airacobra had brought whoops of tribute to the inquisitive war correspondent in the fancy flight jacket. *And they're not even in the sack with him.* Cass tried to stifle that thought and keep a straight face as Mary Catherine uncovered the newspapers from under her gear and began passing them out. "Here you go, read all about our classy squadron leader and her Flying Women. How many does everybody want? Cass?"

"Oh, a couple." *One to send to Dan. What a case I am. Show the hubby the nice things the other man I love writes about me.* Dry-mouthed, Cass hoped she was better at a straight face than she was at stifling.

During this, Linda Cicotte came weaving her way to the back of the plane. "We're in the hands of a hero, Cass." She jerked a thumb toward the cockpit. "He still says he's going to get us on the ground in Seattle."

“He didn’t happen to say, ‘Or die trying,’ did he?” Cass asked wearily.

Linda simply rolled her eyes. “Are we going to fly out in this, do you think?”

“Too soupy for good health.” Cass herself didn’t mind instrument flying, bracketing the radio beam and the rest of the things you did to let the machine navigate itself through limited visibility. But she couldn’t risk her fliers; Della in particular tended to trust her own instincts over the instruments, a good way to meet a mountain. “You know what a hard-ass this dispatching officer can be,” Cass shared her thinking with Linda, who had flown the Seattle run nearly as many times as she had. “I’ll work on him unmercifully. Tell your bunch and Ella’s we’re going to try to RON this one.” Remaining overnight, when they were supposed to be picking up planes and heading back, would not be popular with the higher-ups at East Base. It also threw off tonight with Ben. Briefly she felt better about herself for not letting either of those get in the way of her decision.

Beryl looked up from the newspaper she was holding. “Cass? I didn’t know that about the ring. Mine won’t come off even if I wanted.”

The line in there about the ringless hand, nothing between it and the controls of an Airacobra: *Damn it, Ben, you don’t miss much, but I wish you’d been looking the other way that time.* They’d started off deadly stiff with one another when he showed up to interview her and the other WASPs, as was to be expected after that run-in in the hangar. The atmosphere started to thaw as soon as he discovered she gave a straight answer no matter what the question and she found out he knew his business about flying. The true tipping point came, though, when she climbed into a tethered P-39 to show him the cockpit routine, automatically slipping off her wedding band as she slid into the seat and he wanted to know what that was about. Somehow will power--*won’t power, too*, she ruefully corrected herself--went out of control from then on.

*"My husband is too busy to mind about something like a ring, he's in New Guinea."*

*"So is one of my football buddies--I was there a little while back."*

*"You were? Is it as bad as they say?"*

*"I'll bring you the piece I wrote there, you can decide."*

All that. Then before they knew it, nights at the roadhouse or his room at the Excelsior. She had done anything like this only once before, during the spree in Dallas after winning her wings, when that well-mannered tank officer as viewed through a celebratory haze of drinks looked too good to resist. That was strictly a one-nighter, and she had no illusions that Dan Standish never partook of similar flings when he was loose on leave in Brisbane and Rockhampton among the Sheilas of Australia. Supposedly it was different for men, their urges painted as almost medical, 'the screw flu'; to hear them tell it, nature was to blame. But what about the strain of being a woman in singular command of a squadron of nerve-racking planes and pilots both, and Ben Reinking happens into your life, nature's remedy for desolate nights if there ever was one? In the world of war, turn down such solace just because chance made you female? It had started off as only friendly drinks, Ben still asking her this and that as he worked over his piece about her squadron, the two of them sudden buddies over the topics of planes and New Guinea, until all at once he was revealing to her that he'd been wounded during his correspondent stint there. Every word that followed had stayed with Cass ever since:

*"Where?"*

*"Place called Bitoi Ridge. Kind of a jungle hogback, in from the bay at Salamaua."*

*"Modest. I meant on you."*

Ben had paused. *"I don't generally show it off."*

She'd bolted the last of her drink, nevertheless there was a challenging dry tingle in her mouth as she spoke it: "*Never make an exception?*"

And ever since, the part she hated: if she wanted to hang onto her marriage and officer's rank, they didn't dare get caught at it. Tell no one. Show nothing. Staying casual as you hid a lover was a surprising amount of work, but now she managed to shrug at Beryl's remark. "I've just always done it. Dan and I knew a mechanic who slipped off a ladder, caught his ring on a bolthead. Pulled it right off."

"The ring?" Della was deep in admiration of the newspaper photo, where the flip of her blond hair showed to advantage. "So what?"

"The finger, fool."

"Yipe. Guess I better stay single, keep on playing the field."

"Is that where you head out to with that warrant officer who has the Jeep," Mary Catherine wondered, "the nearest field?"

"Nice talk, Mary Cat. I don't see you around the nunnery." Della tucked away the newspaper into her ready-bag. "Maybe I ought to set my sights higher, a war correspondent. Anybody find out, is he taken?"

To not let that hang in the air, Cass handled it crisply: "I didn't have any reason to ask, did I. Everybody, strap on those chutes in case this moron pilot isn't any better at reading a fuel gauge than he is the weather."

Mary Catherine couldn't resist a last dig on Della. "That correspondent you have your eye on is bound to be married," she spoke with the air of one who had been through enough men to know. "The good ones always are."

"Lieutenant Reinking, sir? I've been looking all over for you."

*Oh Christ, not again. Doesn't that damn general have anything else to do, like run the base?* On edge anyway, Ben had intended to slip into his office only

FIND  
Jeep

for a minute before heading to the communications section and then checking the flight board again. The last two times, the board showed NTO ZV--no takeoff, zero visibility--for Cass's squadron. It spooked him--possibly more than it should, but it spooked him nonetheless. Fog induced crashes, and P-39s such as Cass's WASP 1 squadron flew were notoriously deadly in a crash; that 1200-horsepower engine in those things was situated directly in back of the pilot seat, like a cocked catapult. *Seattle wrote the book on fog, surely to God they'll scrub the flight, won't they?*

Along with fretting about Cass and trying to wind down from leave, he had spent the afternoon with his typewriter in a back room at the base library wrapping up the piece on Vic. The war did not recognize Sunday, but somehow it was the slowest day of message traffic and his intention was to send in the piece while the sending was good. In the way of that stood a squat broken-nosed hardcase in rumpled uniform, nervously fiddling with his cap. Ben eyed him distrustfully until he realized there was no armband of a day-room runner on this one.

"All over is the right place to look for me," Ben admitted. "What's on your mind, soldier?"

"Didn't they tell you, sir? I'm your new clerk."

Caught off guard, Ben shot a glance at the desk in the corner; it had been swept clean of everything except the typewriter and the Speed Graphic camera, making his own chronically overloaded desk look even more like a dump. "What happened to Wryzinski?"

"Nobody told me that, sir." The anthem of the enlisted man.

Ben had just been getting used to Wryzinski. "Right, why did I even ask. Tepee Weepy taketh away and Tepee Weepy giveth." He offered the new man a handshake. "What do I call you?"

"Jones, sir."

“Nobody’s named that,” Ben responded, grinning to put him at ease. “It’s taken.”

“I don’t quite catch your meaning, sir.”

This was going to require some care, Ben realized. “Let’s do this over, soldier. First off, I’ll try to remember to wiggle my ears when I’m making a joke and you try to pretend there is such a thing as a joke. Second, drop the ‘sir’ when there’s no one here but us, and that’s all the time.” The makeshift office that had been tossed to Ben--in earlier life it was some kind of overgrown storage bin, for onions from the smell of it, at the rear of the mess hall--at least provided seclusion. “Maybe then we can get along reasonably well, okay?” The plug-ugly face indicated it was determined to try. “So, Jones, enlighten me--what did you do in civvie life to condemn yourself to being assigned to me?”

“College. Religious Studies, ahead of seminary.”

Ben examined him. Jones looked as if any study time he had put in likely would have been with Murder Incorporated. “No kidding. At any place I ever heard of?”

“Out at the university.” This drew him closer scrutiny from Ben. “I was a freshman in ‘41. Yelled my head off at every game, lieutenant. What a team you guys were.”

“Then you know what this is about,” Ben indicated the overloaded small office. “Go ahead and move into that desk. I’m just on my way over to the com section and--”

“Sir--I mean, lieutenant? I was just over there. Figured I could at least check on things until you showed up.” Jones looked uncomfortable. “There’s a slew of messages, but they said for your eyes only. They told me to, uhm, get lost.”

corporal

'00  
corporal

*They told you to go get fucked, didn't they, Parson Jones. Welcome to the East Base version of close combat.* "I'll have a word with them about giving you confusing directions like that. Just so you know, I need to sign off on all messages. Don't ask me why, I don't write the regulations." The war clock ticking in his head, he suddenly asked: "Any skinny about where these came in from?"

Jones pursed his lips as if calculating where gossip fell on the scale of sin. "Uhm, I did pester the telex operator until he'd tell me that much. Pacific theatre, lieutenant."

Friessen and Animal Angelides and Danzer. Rest camp in Australia and troop ship in convoy and destroyer on noncombat station. Those should be okay; routine reports this time of day. Relieved, Ben grabbed up the materials from his desk that he had come for and turned to go. Jones still stood there fidgeting.

"Lieutenant, I better tell you, I don't have the least idea what I'm supposed to be doing here. I never heard of this TPWP outfit until I was assigned to you."

By now Ben could have recited it in his sleep, the same spiel he had given Wryzinski, and Torvik before him, and Sullivan before that, that the government was in the habit of setting up special projects for certain war priorities. There was one for lumber production, and one for the artificial rubber called guayule, and a rumored strange one going on out in the desert at Hanford, Washington, that no one would talk about officially, and who knew how many others. "In ours, we produce boilerplate for the newspapers, to put it politely. You do know how to handle a typewriter and a camera, right? Where is it you were stationed, before?"

"The Aleutians. I was on the base newspaper at Dutch Harbor, the *Williwaw*." A mistily nostalgic expression came over the thug face. "They really had the weather up there. It was great for Bible study."

go screw  
yourself  
6 ways  
from Sun.

“I’ll just bet.” If the Aleutian Islands were known for anything, it was sideways rain. That remote Alaska outpost also was about as distant as possible from Montana and any logical assignment to this office. Another of those chills blowing through a gap in the law of averages crept up Ben’s spine as he inspected Jones again. The war tossed people like scraps of paper to far corners of the world, except those who happened to have attended Treasure State University in ‘41. Those it was busily sifting back to Great Falls. Jake Eisman, first. Then himself, and now this clerk with nothing sticking out on his record except piety. Would coincidences never cease: the tangled situation with Cass, and all of a sudden a Ten Commandments officemate who would definitely know which number the one against adultery was.

“Tell you what, Jones, things are kind of slack at the moment and it’s late in the day,” he resorted to, wanting time to think over this latest circumstance, “so why don’t you just get settled in the barracks. I’ll collect the messages and we’ll start work in the morning--with any luck, the two of us will have the war won by noon.”

Jones cleared his throat. “Sir? We have company.”

Another soldier was standing in the office doorway wringing a cap. This one wore an armband.

“I have been reprimanded,” the base commander set fire to each word. “Because of you, Lieutenant Reinking.”

Standing at attention in the same old spot at eyechart distance from the desk nameplate that read GENERAL GRADY, Ben mentally tried out “*I was just trying to do my job, sir,*” and decided silence sounded better.

The general continued, at volume. “A certain United States Senator from here read your article on the WASPs. Ordinarily that wouldn’t matter a shit’s

unexpected  
corporal

worth, but he's a busybody on a committee the Pentagon has to get along with. It seems he wants to know why, if women have the training to fly these airplanes of ours in American air, they can't cross a meaningless line on the ground called the Canadian border and do the Alaska run. The interfering old fart."

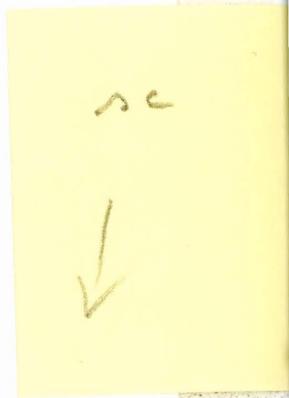
"Sir?" Ben risked. It drew him a glare, but also a nod for him to speak if he dared. "Could you maybe fill me in as to why the WASPs can't fly north?"

The general said sardonically, "I thought you were supposed to be bright, Reinking. I use the Alaska run to weed my pilots. It's the next thing to combat flying."

He whirled in his chair and slammed a hand to the wall map behind him. "Shit's sake, man, just look at the terrain! The hop from here to Edmonton, anybody in ATC can fly that with one eye closed. But then comes the real flying, every goddamn Canadian mountain there is and then the Alaskan ones. That flight is long, the weather is bastardly, the Fairbanks airport is no cinch--do you see what I'm driving at? Those who can hack it on the northern hop"--the general reached high to resoundingly slap the Alaska portion of the map--"I see to it that they have a good shot at transferring over to be fighter or bomber pilots. Those pilots, perhaps you have noticed, lieutenant, according to United States Army Air Force regulations need to be m-e-n." The general spelled it out for him ever further: "Letting the goddamn WASPs onto that run would get in the way of that."

"I see, sir." *Does the Senator?*

General Grady slumped back in his chair as if under the weight of that thought. "Not that it matters, now that I have to screw the mongoose on this"--Ben did not let his face show how much he savored that description--"but what do I have to look forward to next from you, Reinking? I am supposedly in charge of all personnel on this air base, yet you have orders from somewhere on high that lets you flit around here doing whatever you damn please. Exactly who is behind this



*They told you to go screw yourself six ways from Sunday, didn't they, Parson Jones. Welcome to the East Base version of close combat.* "I'll have a word with them about giving you confusing directions like that. Just so you know, I need to sign off on all messages. Don't ask me why, I don't write the regulations." The war clock ticking in his head, he suddenly asked: "Any skinny about where these came in from?"

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Teletype

Colonel Whoever-he-was meanwhile had given Ben an equal looking-over and now said as if it was the first of many decisions, "Light one if you've got one. Or try one of my Cuban 'rillos?" He held out a pack of thin dark baby cigars.

"I don't smoke, sir."

"Still in training, good." The colonel flipped open his lighter and puffed a cigarillo to life. His sudden question caught Ben off guard. "Did you happen to hear the Ted Loudon show last Saturday?"

*Loudmouth? You couldn't pay me enough to listen to that creep.* Ben stuck to, "Can't say that I did, sir."

"Too bad. You were prominently mentioned. Here's a transcription." He held out a fold of yellow teletype paper for Ben to take.

THRESHOLD PRESS WAR PROJECT PICKUP FROM CONTINENTAL BROADCASTING SYSTEM, the slugline read. And beneath in the familiar staccato spatter of wire-service copy:

*"Good evening, America, and our fighting men and women everywhere. This is Ted Loudon with the latest Sports Lowdown. And have I got a super-size scoop for you tonight." Ben could just hear that rat-a-tat-tat radio patter. Not for the first time, however, Loudon's brand of spiel went beyond anything that could be expected. "On the gridiron of life, champions now are taking the field in a game for all the world to see. Every true follower of football will remember the war-cry of the Golden Eagles of 1941. That Treasure State University team gallantly rallied to the memory of its 'twelfth man,' the teammate whose heart tragically gave out on the practice field, and went on to an undefeated season. Now those Golden Eagle players have heroically committed themselves to victory on a field as large as the world. Every starting player of that unforgettable Treasure State team--now get this, fans--those eleven players all are now in the service of their country.*

*"I have searched the records high and low, folks,"--Ben would have bet most of it was low, wherever Loudon was involved--"and with the natural exception of the military academies of West Point and Annapolis, no college football team has ever before offered up every member in simultaneous service to our country. Count on it, friends, Hitler and Tojo are in for some rough tackling from these fellows. The roster of this supreme team is quite amazing:*

*Moxie Stamper, the slinging quarterback.*

*Jake Eisman, 'the Iceman,' cool head at fullback who always delivered when vital short yardage was needed.*

*Slick Vic Rennie, as fast as a halfback gets.*

*Dexter Cariston, deceptive as a ghost at the other halfback spot.*

*Then the outstanding line, beginning with ends Larry Danzer and Ben Reinking, two of the catchingest receivers this side of Don Hutson."*

On down the list. The one surprise to Ben was Dexter Cariston, who always claimed the only blood he intended to be around any time soon was in med school. Dex must have decided not to wait for the draft.

Ben passed the transcription back to the colonel, wishing he could wash Ted Loudon off his hand. "All due respect, sir, I already knew most of that." Swallowing hard against the possibility that he was going to throw up, he managed to croak out: "Could you possibly tell me why was I yanked out of pilot training to read a wire story?"

"For one thing," the colonel said mildly, "because you know what a wire story is. Two summers with the United Press bureau in Helena ripping and reading the teletype, am I right? And you know how to meet a deadline, as well. 'Letter from the Hill' every week for, what, three seasons?"

Staring at the man, Ben felt a rush of blood through his head, although he couldn't have told whether it was draining from his face or coloring it up. His

Quick  
Change  
Slick Vic  
FIND!  
Nick Danzer  
Fall-Air

football diary had run in only the college newspaper; what was the Pentagon doing reading the *Treasure State Nugget*?

“An upbringing in your father’s newspaper office on top of that,” the colonel was going on as if he was ordering parts for something he wanted built, “and you were sharp in class, your grades always up there on the dean’s list. Plus that famous football season. Quite the pedigree.” Abruptly he shifted ground. “Was it a pact? The eleven of you talking it over and deciding to go into the war sooner than later, one for all and all for one, that sort of thing?”

“No, sir.” All for one, one for all? However much else this Pentagon whiz knew, he didn’t know Stamper and Danzer. Nor, for that matter, Dex. “Sure, a few of us went to the enlistment office together right after Pearl Harbor. But other than that it was strictly one by one, guys trickling in as they felt they had to, from what I hear.”

“Pity. But that doesn’t change the essential story, fortunately.”

The colonel sprang it then, the ‘supreme team’ coverage for the duration of the war, that Ben’s background singled him out for. He listened in a daze as the colonel brought it all home to him. “Naturally we will accredit you as a full-fledged correspondent. You’ll be on detached duty to TPWP for the duration, and there are a few ins and outs that go with that. But you’ll learn the ropes quickly enough.” Then the brief one-sided joust, with Ben heatedly asking whether he had any choice in this and the colonel replying, “Not really. Your orders already have been cut. In fact, I have them here.” The man patted an attache case of an elegance that had nothing to do with military issue.

Heart thudding, knowing this would take endless sorting out between the writing chance of a lifetime and the loss of flying, Ben ended up blurting what he had to:

Warily the base commander took another look at Ben. "That's a shame, I'm sure. What about the article you said you'd do on Eisman?"

"His turn is coming. Will that be all, sir?"

The flight board still was not doing Cass nor him any favors. Chalked slots swarmed with on-time departures and arrivals across the entire vast trellis of routes into and out of East Base, every B-17 and P-39 and all the birds of the air evidently having enjoyed a day of fine weather for flying, with the lonely exception of Squadron WASP 1 still sitting in murderous fog in Seattle. Swearing under his breath, Ben banged out of the Operations building. He hit the communications section next to send off the piece on Vic, remembering to threaten the telex clerk with certain demotion and possible dismemberment if he didn't keep a civil tongue toward Jones.

Back out in the dusk breeze where the runway yawned empty, he stood there so sick with the mix of worry and love he felt incapacitated. Nothing prepared a person for this. The way he and Cass had fallen for each other was as unlikely as a collision of meteors. But since it had happened, as hard to sort out, too. Finally he decided there was nothing to be done but call it a day until further word on her flight. His body agonized that there was little hope now of seeing her tonight, even if her squadron lifted off before sunset in Seattle; his brain tried to fight down the wave of desire and encourage the fog to hold so Cass would bunk there for the night instead of flying blind into murk and mountains.

Jake Eisman wasn't bunked in anywhere, he could count on that. Halfway up the whitewashed walkway to the Officers Club, Ben caught the sound of his penetrating baritone--in their playing days, Jake was restricted to whispers in the huddle lest he be heard the length of the football field--in the mob of song emanating from within; the Club always tuned up drastically when a planeload of

Read  
to  
new

teletype

10

with you? Send the next one my way, and you can freeze your ass over the Yukon while I party.”

“Why would they hand me an airplane when they barely trust me with a pencil?” Ben roused himself and got busy deflecting the topic of his leave. “No substitutions allowed anyway, you ought to know that. Grandma Grady himself told me within this very hour you are the pride of the ATC--”

“Only because I slipped him tickets on the fifty-yard line for the Homecoming game.”

“--so there you go, who’ll mush the flying dogsleds north if not you? The serum must reach Nome, Nanook.”

Jake snorted. “Alaska runs on vodka these days, ain’t you heard?”

“War is heck,” said Ben, cracking a smile in spite of himself.

“I’ll clink to that.” Jake tapped Ben’s beer bottle with his own, drained what he had left, and reached for the next bottle. “Been meaning to ask you, Ben friend. If I’m so all-fired popular, when do I get my moment of fame again?”

That particular question had more behind it than Ben wanted to deal with. Juggling the ‘supreme team’ pieces into some kind of monthly sequence was always tricky enough, even without what had happened to Vic and what waited in the file after his. Now this, thrown in. *Time to get yourself some radar, Reinking--* he hadn’t walked in here at all expecting this from Jake. He said shortly, “Dex is next. No cutting in line.”

Jake leaned in, covering the table like a cloud but grinning as he came.

“Where is he, Ben? C’mon. Where’s the dexterous one putting in his war?”

“Goddamnit, Ice, will you lay off that? I still can’t tell you. They’d have me cleaning latrines from here to eternity if I did.” *And you wouldn’t like knowing.*

“That rich sneak,” Jake was saying appreciatively. “He’s in something like the OSS, isn’t he. Greased his way in there with Archie Roosevelt and the other

Pa  
1

Impatiently Jake wiped that away with a paw: "I have it on good authority. Shame on you, earning yourself a purple one in your spare time over there in the paradise of the Pacific. What are you, some kind of incognito hero?"

"You're too swift for me," Ben exhaled in some relief, although Tepee Weepy did not want it made known that its supposedly unarmed correspondent had a combat exploit and a scar to show for it. "Where did you pick that up?"

"Carlo the Friesian, who else." Jake sat back, folding his firelog arms in satisfaction. "Probably comes as a surprise to arty-farty ends, but tackles can write and fullbacks can read. Letter from Carl the other day says you and him got a New Guinea welcome from the Japs and you came out of it with the wound, the Purple Heart, the commendation, the whole schmear. How come you didn't tell me about it?"

Ben started to hide behind a swig of his beer, but was afraid it would come right back up. "It was just a graze." It was everything beyond that for the infantryman an arm's length away from him and Friessen. *And the Jap*. The memory churned in him. The grotesque hand-to-hand struggle on that jungle trail. His three weeks of impatient mending on the hospital ship, the radio in the sick bay tuned to Tokyo Rose as she tirelessly alternated between taunting American soldiers all over the Pacific and playing the likes of "*Deep Purple*" and "*String of Pearls*." (The Japanese were good at such propaganda, he acknowledged; the German counterpart, Lord Haw Haw, sounded like P.G. Wodehouse construing Bertie Wooster.) The swollen thoughts of that time, as haunting as they were contrary. A main one: in the brutal dispensing of fate on that bloodslick trail, why couldn't Carl Friessen, with his life at risk every day of the past New Guinea year, why couldn't he have come out of it with just enough of a nick to retire him from the war? The million-dollar wound, a peppering of grenade shrapnel in the back, a stray bullet in the lower leg, that sent a soldier safely home for good. His own seemed to him the

?

*Good thing, too. That's all I'd need next after Jones, you linking up with that she-wolf blonde in Cass's flight.* "Airships that pass," Ben philosophized hopefully.

"Besides, I don't need any of your hotshot WASPs," Jake stated with startling primness. Then leered goofily. "I've got something of my own going. Tell you about her sometime." Ben was surprised. It wasn't like Jake to be mysterious about any female conquest.

"You made them sound pretty good, you know." This time Jake spoke soberly, and Ben went back on guard. "Like maybe they could handle the Alaska run, Ben buddy?"

"All I say in the piece was some of them, all right, a bunch of them have as much flying time as any of you and if they were handed a map could quite possibly find their way to Fairbanks. But I didn't mean--"

"I'm for it," Jake broke in. "Let the WASPs fly that run and send me after Germans. Sooner the better."

Ben sat up. "Jake, serious a minute. Bombers over Germany get the guts shot out of them--I've seen them land with holes the size of boxcar doors. You really want in on that?"

"If that's what it takes, hell yes. I don't like what Hitler has in mind for me if the crazy bastard wins."

"Plenty of those bomber pilots end up bailing out over occupied territory," Ben said slowly. "POW camps are no picnic." His throat was tight as he tried to find a right way to say it. "What I hear is that the first thing they do is check dogtags to sort people out. No telling what they'd do to you, Ice."

"You think that's not on my mind?" Jake replied in the quietest tone he was capable of. "But I figure it this way," the voice took on a calculating timbre, "those

p.c.

2

When I  
was over  
the doing  
piece  
on Mexico

ack-ack assholes have to single me out from a lot of guys dropping bombs on them, first.”

*Goddamn it, don't count on that.* Half in despair, Ben stood ready to point out that the law of averages had not been any suit of armor for certain ‘supreme team’ members so far, but Jake knew as much about that as he did, almost. It was always a mistake to see the formidable fullback known as the Iceman as mainly a physical specimen. Jake stood 6’3” in stocking feet but the upper several inches were brain. The chips in his grammar from smelter work were deliberately maintained, Ben understood; in Black Eagle, the melting pot under the smokestack, someone like him had to make his words register on people high, low, or in between, as needed. Drinking with Jake was treacherous, but in any other human endeavor Ben would have trusted him with his life. Seven years they had been friends, since the high school all-star game that put them together on a team for the first time. Then hundreds of TSU football practices, banter, bull sessions, a long winning streak of camaraderie. Josting arguments were nothing new between them; this had turned into something far beyond that. Ben felt he had to pierce the matter:

“That’s why you wanted me to hurry up and do the piece on you, isn’t it. So you could wave it at somebody who might have some influence and say, ‘Hey, I’m a famous guy, wouldn’t it be great to have me over there bombing the balls off the Germans?’”

“Couldn’t hurt, could it?” Jake responded defiantly. Then just as quickly looked sheepish. “Sorry I asked. Sonofabitching war, I don’t know what gets into a guy.” He set about working himself toward normal with a boost of beer. “I mean it, though, about getting over there somehow. Ben? I’m not saying you got any pull, because if you did, you’d be up, up and away like the rest of us, wouldn’t you. But if you ever stumble across any, remember your poor deserving teammate,

all-amen

okay?" The old grin came back. "Who's gonna look out for me if not you? What's that poem"--Jake pronounced it *pome*-- "O captain! My captain!"

Relieved, Ben responded in the same vein: "You're looking for pull from someone who took a demotion from civilian life, are you? Good thinking, Ice. Didn't I help you crib your way through the logic course any better than--?"

Jake was holding up a hand for silence. He cocked an ear at the preliminary commotion from the piano. "It's bad luck not to sing this one. Everybody in." Swinging his beer bottle to the beat, Jake joined in mightily to the swelling roar of music that filled the building:

*"Bought the farm, bought the farm!*

*Crashing the plane leads to harm!*

*There was blood on the cockpit,*

*and blood on the ground.*

*Blood on the cowling,*

*and blood all around.*

*Pity the pilot,*

*all bloody and gore,*

*For he won't be flying*

*That airplane no more."*

After the last chorus tailed off into drinking, Jake looked across at Ben.

"You're not singing these days?"

"Frog in my throat."

"You really are off your feed. C'mon, Ben, it's just a song. Lets off the steam."

"I know what it lets off, for Christ's sake." He shoved back from the table and popped to his feet. "Just remembered, I need to check something in Ops. A

VIP flight I'm supposed to keep tabs on in case there's any brass worth interviewing. Be right back."

He sprinted to the Operations building, slowing only as he walked into the room where the flight board covered one wall, hoping the clamor of his heart was not loud enough for the night Operations staff to hear. As ever, he whipped out his pad and stood there jotting random flight information, scanning the entire board like a good working reporter, but the chalked entry for WASP 1 midway down instantly had told him what he needed to know. Since meeting Cass he had never imagined looking forward to a bed without her in it, but the blessed three white letters RON up there for 'REMAINING OVERNIGHT' did the job.

Back at the Officers Club, before rejoining Jake he veered to the bar. He told the barman, "Fill the tray."

The bartender crowded beer bottles onto the round serving tray until there were ten or a dozen, Ben didn't bother to count. He picked it up and steered toward the table.

Jake surveyed the forest of bottles on the tray. "What's all this?"

"Anesthesia. I have something to tell you about Vic."

3  
1

“This is more than that, Cass, you know goddamn good and well it’s more.”

“--call it what you want to, it always comes down to one of two things, doesn’t it. We either quit with this, or go at it like crazy while we still have the chance. Right now we don’t seem to be much good at quitting, I’d say.” She flicked him the urgent smile that showed the irresistible tiny gap between her front teeth, and he melted like a schoolboy and knew it. Deeply and rigorously they kissed again, running their hands silkily here and there, as if keeping track of everything in the book of hotel-room romance. “Welcome back, by the way,” he murmured when their heads were clear enough. “I never knew I hated fog so much.”

Her voice rose from where she lay, a good thing because otherwise it would have scorched the pillow. “Those shiny-pants bastards last night couldn’t make their minds up to scrub that flight when they couldn’t even see to the control tower.” Talk about fitness for command--Cass here and now disposed of the Seattle military hierarchy while flat on her back. “They held us in the ready room until full dark, the chickenshits. What did they think, we’d be able to see better in the fog at night, like bats?”

She rolled sharply up onto an elbow, facing Ben from so near he could feel the warmth of her breath on his face. “While I’m at it. Know what, Scar?” she resorted to a mock growl as her free hand lightly traced along the groove in his skin where he had been wounded. “You need a thicker hide in more ways than one. You’d be better off not checking the flight board when I fly.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’d be worried to death that way too.”

Something like a wince came to her hazel eyes. He saw her start on a word, then draw it back.

idiots  
lametrans

“Two minutes is a long time for a football player.” He wanted out of the dead end of conversation about the duration as badly as she did. “The wingwalking. You’re, ah, not going back to that, are you? After the war?”

“Don’t know yet. A lot depends.”

He shook his head, resorting to mock rue, some of it not so mock. “A woman who flies a fighter plane with a ceiling of thirty-five thousand feet, and as if that isn’t enough fooling around with altitude, she wants to get out and stroll along the wing of some cropdust clunker. I have to inform you, Captain Standish, that’s the long way around to get your kicks. A nuthouse doctor would definitely call that a promiscuous acrophiliac tendency.”

Cass’s smile crept out and grew impish. “Know what? You make it sound dirty.”

“A guy can hope.”

She peeked down. “I see he can. And there’s still some night left.”

The telex clerk looked up nervously when he strode into the wire room, early if not bright, the next morning. Ben was used to causing dismay this way. He knew he was hated by innumerable men around the world who had never laid eyes on him. Public affairs officers required to keep close track of the doings of whatever member of the ‘supreme team’ they were unfortunate enough to have in their unit. Code clerks who had to make room for the priority dispatches to some destination known as TPWP. All of them wondering, what in the name of brassbound military rigamarole was this about? Hell, he wondered that himself too much of the time. Resolutely trying to clear his head of the lingering effects of the scotch and Cass, he grabbed the nearest message pad--it happened to be the jittery clerk’s--and wrote down in block letters:

Teletype

P.C.

ODD MAN OUT STILL OUT. WHAT DO?

As the clerk took it to code it and send it, Ben added an instruction guaranteed to further mess up the man's day: "Let me know as soon as the reply hits that machine. Not a runner. You."

Ben had settled into his desk chair to try to look busy and Jones was assiduously sorting old piles of accumulated paperwork into new piles when the clerk surprisingly soon stuck his head in their office. "It just came in, sir."

What there was of it. Standing over the teleprinter as the clerk fed in the decoded version, he frowned at the sole word that chattered out:

PUNT.

*Very funny, you bunch of sadistic deskwarmers.* Actually he had no idea whether Tepee Weepy's cryptic messages emanated from an entire bureaucratic swarm or from that mustached colonel single-handedly thrusting pieces of paper at some frazzled wire clerk. Either scenario, it came to the same: orders were supposed to be orders. Drawing a long breath in the face of that, Ben pulled the message pad to him again and wrote out:

FIELD SLIPPERY HERE, PUNT INADVISABLE. GO TO CAMP?

He didn't even make it back to the office before the clerk chased him down. The reply awaiting him this time was anything but brief.

DO NOT REPEAT NOT GO TO CAMP. MAKE STORY LOUD ON BACKFIELD ANGLE. IMPERATIVE.

Ben's groan alarmed the clerk. *Sonofabitch.* Loudon, of all damn people to be expected to imitate. *If they want the Loudon approach--*twelve hundred overripe words about the glory days of the Treasure State backfield, the cloud-of-horseshit kind of sportswriting Ted Loudon could produce in his sleep--*then why don't they just put the jerk in my uniform and be done with it?*

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Cops

change  
bastard  
m. twist  
ferts

Taking quick leave of the director, Ben climbed back into the ragtop jeep Jones had requisitioned. He still felt somewhat guilty about dropping Jones outside Helena, all by his lonesome, to do the dreary photo shoot on military sled dogs and their earnest trainers, but not overly. Jones and everyone else had to be left out of this. The last thing in the world Tepee Weepy wanted made known was that one of its 'supreme team' heroes was sitting out the war at a pacifist camp. For that matter, it was the last thing the others on the team, up to their necks in the armed struggle, would want to find out. As he drove around the end of the airstrip and pulled up to the infirmary, Ben found himself half hoping Dexter Cariston, marked down from dead, was in there on crutches with a fractured something-or-other; **Injured in Training Camp** was a story he could fiddle around with and not have to say just what kind of camp.

A cow bell clattered above the door as he stepped into the infirmary. Medical clutter was everywhere, shelves and tables of it. Over by a rack of crutches a single shabby desk sat unoccupied. Through a doorway toward the back, however, a sandy-haired figure could be seen bent over a microscope. "Be with you in a jiffy," came the glossed voice, as incongruous here as it was in a football huddle, "quick as I dispose of this strep culture."

"Take your time, Dex, it's looking like a long war."

Dex's twiddling of the microscope ceased for a bare instant, but his head did not budge from the eyepiece. "They all are, Ben."

Ben watched him deal with the glass slide beneath the lens, step out to the sink and soap up and wash as exquisitely as a surgeon--Dex had only to come into a room and the air grew rarefied--then with only a hairbreadth of hesitation arrive across the board floor with right hand extended. *Handshakes are the last to go*, Ben thought as their palms met. "Something tells me you're not here to fish famous Seeley Lake," Dex was saying in his easy way. Next, though, a held-in

just

expression twitched across his sturdy Scotch face. "Hated to hear that about Vic. Always has had more than his share of hard luck, hasn't he."

The roar of engines drowned out anything Ben might have had to say about how luck was distributed. Landing briskly, a Ford Tri-Motor blasted up dust as it trundled along the airstrip toward the next set of parachute trainees. Dex moved to the window to watch as if it were his sworn duty, leaving Ben to join him or not. After a moment, he went over. *What do I know about how they run this preachy outfit, maybe this is some kind of rite--they all worship the Tin Goose every takeoff.* Whatever the foreman was hollering now at the chutists ducking aboard was lost in the plane's racket, but Ben would have bet significant money these next practice jumps would be closer to the mark. He turned and asked:

"I'm curious--how come you're not out there leaping into thin air with the rest of the smokies?"

"Don't think I didn't," Dex answered tightly, eyes still glued to the shuddering aircraft filling with jumpsuited men. "Twice. Both times I threw up in the face mask. Ever try to steer a parachute into a forest of hundred-foot Ponderosa pines with a faceful of vomit, Ben?" Consciously or not, Dex rubbed his mouth with the back of his thumb before managing to say: "They washed me out of jumper training. All the years of football and Bruno and his bastardly Letter Hill, and five minutes of bumpy air does me in. Isn't that a corker?"

That needed no affirmation. Dex had been the team's best natural athlete, elastic as a circus performer, comfortable on the field as a cavalier at a lawn party. And here he was, handing out crutches without even earning one. Ben glanced around the infirmary. "You're it, here? Doesn't this kind of setup need a medical staff?"

"The Rochester doctor I didn't get to be, you mean."

They both laughed in their old way, briefly.

change  
bastardly  
out

linemen, the brawn brigade, always had their own slant on things, all of them calling him 'Lefty' because he was the left end. The right end, Danzer, they just called 'Danzer.'

Now, as if remembering his manners, the pajama-clad soldier left off work on the carbine and ceremoniously came to unloosen the netting. "Quick, step inside out of the skeeters."

They whacked one another like kids and talked without letup. One by one, Ben caught him up on the other team members, Carl wagging his head at each report. "In on something secret, huh?" he said to Ben's quick passing over of Dex. "He would be, the sonofagun." The goodnatured grin appeared again, but not for long. "This's been all kinds of fighting, Lefty," he sounded veteran far beyond his years. "Three months nose to nose with the dinks to get this"--he sent a heavy look around the pulverized jungle of the Sanananda battle perimeter--"though I don't know why anybody'd want it." Morale did not stand much of a chance here, Ben had to acknowledge. New Guinea notoriously was a back door of the war, everything about it shabby and short-shrift while the bulk of Allied military effort was addressed to the battle for Europe. Yet a continent was at stake here, too, the Japanese army almost within touch of Australia as long as it clung to outposts on the New Guinea coastal plain. The patchwork force of desperate Aussies and scraped-together National Guard units were assigned to root the enemy out pillbox by pillbox, sometimes sniper tree by sniper tree. Even if Ben had not seen the battle reports on the savagery of this death struggle in the jungle, it could be read in the lines of Carl Friessen's face. "We're nowhere near done, either," the bony infantryman was saying. "The hot rumor is a landing up around Salamaua." He estimated Ben with a flat gaze. "You come all this way to go in with us?"

"Alongside you, Carl," Ben replied more calmly than he felt about it, "that's the idea. Although they only let me carry paper and pencil."

Montaneers  
regiment  
unit

Friessen wagged his head again. "Suit yourself, Lefty. We've tried all other kinds on the Japs, why not pencil lead?"

A week later, the two of them were on a slippery trail in the head-high grass on the ridge above the Bitoi River, with the other seven men of Carl's squad. Ben intended to call it quits as soon as they made it back to the invasion perimeter. His pad was full with the past days. The pre-dawn scene in the landing craft as it broached in a big wave and sea-sick soldiers had to dodge a sliding jeep that broke loose from its fastenings. The Australian commandoes guiding them ashore with blinking signal lights after wading in from behind enemy lines through a swamp and swimming to the assault beach, the winks of brightness showing each man of them standing in the sand proudly naked except for his Digger hat. The steady advice from Carl during the endless crawl for the shelter of the treeline as Japanese bullets flew over them: "*Keep your head and butt down. Remember gopher hunting? We're the gophers here.*" By now, abundantly shot at but not shot up, Carl's platoon was dug in inland from the beachhead and everyone agreed they had lucked out so far. The Japanese line had bent back up the height of ground overlooking the Bitoi River and the plan was to let the artillery plaster them there for awhile. Sent on patrol before daybreak to sight out a forward observation point, the squad had mapped and azimuthed a good spot and, job done, were heading gingerly back down the trail, the scout out front with a Tommy gun, followed by the buck sergeant in charge, then Carl with Ben tagging close behind, the rest of the column bringing up the rear. When something plopped in the mud at the heels of the scout, it took a split second for them all to realize it hadn't dropped from his pack. That left very little time before the grenade would go off.

"Down!" the buck sergeant screamed. Carl hit the ground, Ben an instant behind him. The grenade's explosion heaved the trail under Ben's belly. He heard somebody cry out, hit by fragments. The trailside grass tore open, Japanese in

camouflage uniforms pouring out, five, six, *Christ, will they never stop coming*, eight. Carl reared onto his knees and shot one before his rifle was clubbed out of his hands by a Japanese mortarman madly swinging the mortar barrel like a sledgehammer. The American on the other side of Ben was being bayoneted by a surprisingly large enemy soldier. Fumbling for the only weapon he had, a trench knife, Ben rolled that direction and slashed the tendons across the back of the Jap's legs. As Ben scrambled to his feet above the shrieking flopping enemy soldier, a shot came from someplace--he never knew where--and tore a piece of meat off the tip of his left shoulder. It missed bone and bicep by a fraction of an inch, but the impact and pain sent him reeling. Around him the trail had turned into a muddy trench of men clubbing, grappling, firing. Another American went down, then two Japanese blown away by the buck sergeant's .45 pistol. Carl was kicking at the maniacal mortarman who in a final wild sling hurled the mortar and grabbed for a grenade on his belt. Carl swarmed onto him and the two went down in a pile together, the Jap's arm outstretched and the grenade twitching in his hand as he tried to dislodge the pin. Wound and all, Ben flung himself, desperately pinning down the struggling arm, his blood dripping over the tangle of the three of them, until Carl clambered astraddle of the Jap and with no other weapon at hand beat the man to death with his helmet.

“What's this, the poor man's Hemingway green around the gills?” Dex's tone turned unmistakably medical and concerned. “Something wrong with you?”

Trying not to let the effort show, Ben forced himself back to the task that had brought him to Seeley Lake.

“Sick of what we're all going through, isn't that enough?” he evaded with another modification of truth. He had led the camp director to believe Dex's decision not to fight could be read between the lines of whatever he wrote about the

smokejumper camp; try as he might, people would need something stronger than Dex's microscope to find anything of the sort, Tepee Weepy would see to that. He had told poor Jones before leaving him to the dogs that he was going into Helena to spend the day covering a war bonds bingo marathon; half an hour had taken care of it, then he'd headed here. *Big day for the one-man liar's club.* He was starting to feel like he needed a bath. Something had to be said, and he put all he could into it:

"Dex? Guess what, it's your turn to be written about and I'm up against it."

"I thought so." The well-bred Cariston face smiled the slightest bit. "Isn't there a saying from one of your movie moguls, 'Include me out?'"

Ben shook his head. He tweaked the TPWP patch on his arm. "The outfit I'm assigned to believes in all or none, and they're not interested in none."

"Can't they count better than that? I'm only one man out of eleven and--"

"Nine, now. Counting Vic."

Dex winced. "Ben, all right, I am the only one without his rump on the firing line somewhere." He eyed his listener speculatively. "Even yours on occasion, if I don't miss my guess. You have the look of someone who wants 'at them.'"

*I've been at them. They've been at me. My shoulder hurts, thinking about it.* "Let's don't argue about each other's reasons, Dex. Pearl Harbor and the Luftwaffe are signs enough to me they're out to get us, and I don't like being got."

"Granted. But I believe several million others are 'suited up for democracy'"--Dex cast a meaningful look at Ben's flight jacket--"to forestall that. There will never be a shortage of people to fight wars, will there. Would the eleven of us be missed if it wasn't for this mysterious menagerie you write for?" He arched his head to one side as if a thought had just come to him. Ben was remembering the time Dex had stopped football practice cold by asking Bruno why football-field lines always were laid out in skin-eating lime instead of talcum.

cut  
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 head  
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“Take that further,” he was formulating now, “what if all of us together had said ‘No’ to induction--”

“You’d have had to hogtie Animal.”

“--and instead--”

“And coldcocked Stamper and Danzer because they wouldn’t get to show off at parades.”

“--shut up a minute, will you; and volunteered for something like this outfit instead? The team that followed its conscience away from war instead of toward it.” Dex’s gaze at him had grown as intense as it could get. “You’re the writer, Ben, what’s wrong with a story like that?”

“You want my two-bits’ worth? First, we wouldn’t be known as the famous Golden Eagles of ‘41 any more, we’d be called the Golden Chickens. Maybe that’d be a relief, I don’t know.”

“Not necessarily,” Dex put in drily. “There’s still a reputation attached. When we hitchhike to town from here, the local yokels try to run over us.” Somewhere overhead the Ford Tri-motor droned around and around, no doubt dropping little weighted windage test chutes. Dex glanced up. “We even have to watch our step around our Forest Service trainers. Some are okay about us, some aren’t.”

“I imagine. To answer what you asked, though. If the rest of us pleaded conscientious”--he tried to glide nicely over the *conchie* sound in that-- “alongside you, I figure we’d all add up to a footnote in some philosophy book someday. A one-paragraph kiss on the cheek from Bertrand Russell, tops. One thing sure, the United States military wouldn’t be demanding a piece on you peachy-keen gridiron heroes from me every month.”

“We’re nothing but trophies, you’re saying.”

“No, on top of that you’re a friend and a pain in the ass.” Ben checked his wristwatch and grimaced. “Dex, listen, I only came here because I have to know. This is it for you?” He swept a hand around at the camp. “For good?”

The uncommon furrow across Dex’s brow showed he took that as an affront. Before he could say anything, Ben spelled out:

“For the duration. For however long this bastard of a war takes. If there’s any chance you’re going to change your mind, get tired of people trying to run you over and decide to waltz off into a medical deferment from a friendly doctor your family might happen to be acquainted with”—he locked eyes with Dex and kept them there—“I need to know now. If I wiggle hard, I could skip writing about you maybe a month or two yet.” He paused. “What I can’t do, you better understand, is some piece that outright says you’re a conscientious objector. They’d throw that away so fast it’d set the wastebasket on fire.” Ben shifted from one foot to the other, as if adding body English to what he was about to say. “But I’m not the only scribbler in existence. If that’s the story you want out, you could put it out yourself. The *Chicago Tribune* loves anything that shows up Roosevelt and his crowd. Or go the other direction, the parson who runs this place likely would have some ideas about how to show you off to the world as pacifist Exhibit A.”

“Don’t think he hasn’t brought it up.” Now Dex was the one who looked anguished. “You want to know if I’m here until the last shot is fired. All I can tell you is, I made the hardest choice of my life to be here and I *am* here. Believe me, I’ve lost sleep over it. Most nights.” Ben read his face in a way he had never had to before; Dex was not the confessing sort. “You aren’t able to write the plain truth about me,” he could hear the cost in the words, “and I don’t dare make it known either. One guess why, Ben. Cariston Enterprises. I have two brothers-in-law in the war. I’m the direct heir, but there’ll be a family fight for control, down the line. The gaffer”—Ben wondered just how much wealth one had to grow up with to call

bastard &  
damned

one's father that-- "is backing me, so far. But he doesn't want it shouted around that the last male Cariston refuses to shoulder arms for his country." Dex broke off, offering a bleak smile. "There. Secrets of the rich."

"One size fits everybody," Ben said wearily.

"So, you have to hide me in plain sight." The idea seemed to intrigue Dex. "I'll be interested to see what you come up with."

*So will I, Dex, so will I.* Before turning to go, there was one more thing he had to tend to. "I'll bet an outfit like the Forest Service would have a jerry can of gas they could loan to a man. Particularly if they didn't know about it."

"Stuck your neck out to get here, did you?"

"Only about seventy-five miles."

Dex clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, there's a back door to the fuel shed."

The next day, his conscience objecting every word of the way, he wrote Dexter Cariston into undesignated war duty, a medic repairing men who parachuted into fields of fire, the type of fire not specified.

I forgot to ask. Do you like football?

I like a certain football guy." Ben smiled; that was good enough. Among women of his acquaintance only his mother <sup>evinced</sup> ~~showed~~ real understanding of the <sup>he'd</sup> contrary grace he found in playing the roughest game

ballerina class  
fencing--girlhood in B Hills had

The right muscles still know the rules. Dancing with your father.

"It must be

I can hardly every say so, but you take after me in this, Ben. I loved that same feeling in ballet lessons"--had its advantages. "It stays with you, the right muscles still know the rules. Even square-dancing with your father."

kids were in fits of giggles as they peeked at one another through the wrong end of the lenses, and by kickoff time their elders were dividing their time between beer and binoculars.

Settled onto the blanket by Cass, Ben nudged her. "I wondered why that basket was so hellishly heavy."

"Might as well get some benefit from having to make nice to the damn USO at the Civic Center, I figured. The Gilbert and Sullivan bunch won't miss these until tonight." She checked to make sure all other eyes were on the football game, then leaned against him and kissed his ear. "I was starting to get lonesome. What were you doing so long with our buddy over there, negotiating a treaty?"

"Just agreeing that Custer had it coming." The petite binoculars nearly lost in his hand, he watched a Treasure State pass fall flat against the Colorado team while Cass scabbled in the picnic basket. "Here, have a sandwich. There's Spam or Spam."

"Yum."

"I know, but it's the best I could do." They munched on the manufactured meat and had nips of scotch as the game went along. Cass did not know nor care much about football and scanned elsewhere half the time, but Ben was not really conscious of that, lost in his private tunnel of vision back to the scrimmage where everything began in the season of 1941.

The play was whistled dead before the ball could be snapped, the shrill echo in the empty stadium halting the practice game sooner than usual, and varsity and second-stringers alike uncoiled from their stances reluctantly.

Animal Angelides spat toward the sideline. "Here it comes. Why the hell can't he stay over there playing pocket pool with Loudon instead of frying our nuts?"

Jim  
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plans