

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 briskly told the driver.

The bus driver jammed on the brakes and looked around at him as if Ben just had torn off a mask. Using all the breath he could summon, the man let out slowly: "I'll be goddamned. You're him. Sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't--"

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

4 ?

The town still looked as if the world of war had nothing to do with it, but he knew better; it was simply that buildings didn't read casualty lists. Gros Ventre, he had 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 was here, 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 gone 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.*

Taking a deep breath and opening the door, he called 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 daylight out of a man, why don't you. We weren't expecting you until the weekend."

detail?  
sight?  
smell?  
a sense of OB  
came over  
him?

or OK?

2 here  
came home  
(on leave)

His uniform

On last  
glance

he  
did this,  
he had to do this

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 three-day pass, not the five 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. Ben could tell he was dying to ask what was behind this trip home, but doing his best to be a father first and a newspaperman second. That was fortunate, because he 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.

Not wanting to prompt, Bill Reinking 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. 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."

His father laughed uncertainly. After a moment, the bifocals tilted up in appraisal. "Nice addition to your uniform, by the way. The Ernies"--Pyle and Hemingway pre-eminently, but newsman slang for war correspondents as a species--"don't have that."

"This?" Self-consciously Ben rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. Another hole in the law of averages. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindsides that landed him back at East Base yet again. He lacked the time in grade, base commanders were

part  
march  
I've been close  
and he wasn't  
telling anyone  
about.

never glad to see him coming, and for its own murky reasons the Threshold Press War Project did not bother with fitness reports--*So why boost me from shavetail all of a sudden? What do the bastards have in mind for me next?* For his father's sake, he forced a grin. "It doesn't amount to that much, Dad, to outrank civilians."

All during this they looked one another over to see how each was holding up, since last time. Bill Reinking was bald to the back of his head, but his ginger mustache still matched the color of Ben's hair. His strong glasses, windows on his eyes, schooled a square-cut face on a chunky man into the most eager kind of lookout--a newsdigger's close curiosity that he had passed on to his son. That and the ginger follicles and not much else. Ben had the Hollywood lineaments of his mother's people--the bodily poise, the expressive hands. Those and that unbuyable mark of character: a deeply longitudinal face, with latitudes of experience--a surprising amount for a twenty-three-year-old--evident in the steady sea-blue of the gaze. The difference in stature between the two men was longstanding. Tall enough that he just skimmed under the Army Air Force height limit, Ben had an altitude advantage over his father in a number of ways, although he usually tried not to press it. The college education, the football fame, the TPWP correspondent patch, the bylines and datelines from his stopovers in the world's many combat zones, those all came home with him every time he had to do this, and both men stood back from it a bit.

"How was the trip up here?" his father asked, to be asking something.

"Like *Gone With the Wind* without somebody to neck with," Ben responded. "Long."

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, early that afternoon he had stepped out into the familiar blowy weather of Great Falls and

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Bill hopes  
Ben has  
but his quick  
laugh

his son

Ben  
1

pointed himself toward the same old tired bus that again and again had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, he had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued "God bless you real good, sonny," along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. He tried to slip his duffel into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and possibly nap during the familiar trip, but the hunched driver grabbed it away and insisted on stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

*Which one?*

Keeping that to himself at all costs, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers, farm people with their city shopping clutched in their laps, long since had claimed specific seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Swiftly nodding in everyone's general direction the way he imagined someone who looked like a hotshot pilot was counted on to do, he deposited himself nearest the door as always, the coat leather crackling as he folded his considerable height into the worn confines of the seat. In his travels through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered away from the depot and rumbled west onto the bridge across the Missouri, he had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. Scrunched in the perpetual bus seat he felt less comfortable than ever with the thought that this smokestack-marked city--the Anaconda Copper smelter stack over there on Black Eagle Hill was the world's tallest, five hundred feet into the sky of centermost Montana and with a constant plume of smoke that could be seen from forty miles in any direction--seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

*Four times in a little over a year. How the hell is it possible? How's this for a scene, Mr. Zanuck:*

*"What did you do in the war, my boy?"*

*"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I set the record for making hardship trips home."*

There. He had managed to laugh at himself, if nervous laughter counted; maybe he wasn't utterly losing his grip on who and what he was. This still amounted to too many hardship trips, though. *Compassionate leave. Vic wouldn't have had any trouble laughing over that, poor buddy--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.*

"Can't ever get used to the size of that stadium," he suddenly heard come his way, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source. Always wary of this sort of thing, he kept on staring out his side of the bus, making believe the remark in his direction was an announcement the bus driver routinely offered up at this point of the route.

"Big old sister, ain't she," the driver persisted. "They don't build 'em like that any more."

Ben still pretended that had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. But as he had known he would, ultimately he pulled his gaze away from the dominating smokestack and put all his attention to the very different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the Treasure State University stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football.

He felt his throat dry out. If the pair of years since were any evidence, he was in danger of unwanted conversation about TSU's fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time, thanks be, he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, evidently had not recognized him.

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, Ben leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur almost as if he had never played here. The art deco golden eagles, wingtip to wingtip up there around the entire edifice. The colosseum archways that funneled in the biggest crowds in the state's history, to watch the unbeatable '41 team. The perimeter of flagpoles around the entire top of the stadium, like unlit candles on a giant birthday cake. Not for the first time he took in each morsel of detail in writerly fashion, digesting them for the script. *If I can ever get the damned thing written at all.* It had been, what, half a year since he last did this, but he was finding that all of it gripped him as tenaciously as ever. The team's story, his, Howie's, Dexter's, the rest of the famous 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. Merle Purcell's story, the most famous substitute who never played a game; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, everlasting bastard as football coach; and Loudon's, ruthless bastard as sportswriter. 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.

there

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."

"Christ, is that in already? I can't keep up." Ben rattled the newspaper open, and the headline his father had put on the piece all but hit him in the face:

**Rainbow of Planes from Montana to Russia.**

Hastily he read his lead to make sure it had survived--*The pulse of war can be felt the minute you step onto East Base, a former buffalo prairie on the sunrise edge of Great Falls, Montana, where the ground vibrates under you not from eternal stampede but modern 12-piston fighter plane engines--* and skimmed on down, holding his breath. Of all the perplexities that went with a TPWP byline, the most constant was the red pencil of the invisible copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. Inimical to logic. After a year and half of this, Ben was as mystified as ever by the inner workings of the Threshold Press War Project, what was let past and what wasn't. He full well understood that the name was meant to

I was  
hoping  
that it'd be in.

Christ, I  
didn't see  
ago.  
they held  
it long  
enough



invoke the doorstep homefront, the breadbasket America served by mid-size dailies and small-town weeklies such as his father's; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war. But it never left his mind for long that a threshold also was where people wiped their feet on something.

Not this time. The cherished name, the bit about the ringless hands at the P-39 controls, all that was still in there. *Foxed the bastard. Can't every time, but--*

His father had been watching in surprise. It wasn't like Ben to nuzzle his own prose. "Maybe I had better go through that piece again myself. What did you sneak in there, an invitation to neck on the bus?"

"Bad business, giving away a trade secret to an editor," Ben intoned, his expression saying he couldn't wait to. "My minder back at Tepee Weepy went for a decoy. I threw in a graf about Red stars over Montana, and he cut that clean as a whistle." He described to his father the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Russian air force were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes before they were delivered north. "No way they'd ever let that graf stand, I figured, and maybe I'd get away with the rest of the piece. It worked out."

"Shame on you," said his father, reaching for a pencil and paper. "I don't suppose you'd remember that particular paragraph?"

Ben recited it as his father jotted. When he was done, the older man sighed. "I'll need to be a little careful with this. Probably half the county thinks there's a Red star on me, I wrote so many editorials in favor of Lend-Lease."

"You and Franklin D. got it, you clever devils," Ben's voice imitated newsreel pomposity. "Two hundred planes to our esteemed Soviet allies last month. Three hundred a month by the end of the year, if East Base doesn't freeze up solid."

Bill Reinking cocked his head. "Should you be telling me all this, Lieutenant?"

Ben wasn't listening. Eyes down into a certain section of the newspaper piece, he was back in the world of pilots.

The sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great Falls, but he had piled off right behind the bus driver anyway. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to.

While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse. A slow little conciliatory smile worked its way onto his extensive face as he thought about the other times here, with her. A laugh helplessly followed the smile. At least there was one thing new about this trip: Cass, coming out of the blue to him.

Checking his wristwatch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; a bit of hope there, maybe, that the 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 Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable dart-nosed silhouette of P-39s; Airacobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Seattle

10

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid 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 Spokane 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 Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. ("*She can navigate in snow like a fucking 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 at Vaughn Junction with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust

Seattle

fog?  
when  
visiting  
2/28/40

more-  
descriptions  
of Cass?

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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot. Kiss me some more."* 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 three 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 sharp 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 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. Shaking his head, try as he would he could not clear away the feeling. Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. A serious case of Cass, 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.

hanson

offense?

*Sometimes I think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out 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 go 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 Cass he had put into newsprint. "But I have to get back at it." Bill Reinking indicated 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 said 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

1ST REGIMENT, THIRD 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.

with  
small &  
8 pages 7.  
week -

“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.

Howie Blake piloting at East Base.

Animal Angelides on a Marine troop ship.

Sig Prokosch with the landing force in Italy.

Moxie Stamper at a bomber base somewhere in England.

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

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

Wallace Pennington and Larry 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

Jake  
Edman

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 freshman from nowhere who met his doom in eleven-man. Two years hadn't made any of it less raw on the nerves. Fast and skittery as an antelope, Purcell materialized from some tiny high school out in the sagebrush where they played six-man, and given a chance on the scrub team, he ran circles around the Treasure State varsity in practice until he would poop out. And subsequently ran himself to death on the Letter Hill trying to toughen up enough for TSU football. He was still there in Ben's mind's eye, struggling up the giant slope to the white rocks and trudging back down to do it again; strange jinxed kid who by the miracle of modern sports mongering had been made to live on as the inspirational 'twelfth man' of the perfect season. Ben knew it wasn't fair, he had barely known Purcell, but the interior truth was that he would not have traded a dozen of him, or any like him, for Vic Rennie.



“Son.” Bill Reinking did not use that word much, in the presence of the tall man in uniform acrosss the table from him. “I know you’re having it rough, the whole bunch of you, but--”

“Never mind.” He looked over at his father, the shielding eyeglasses, the oblique composure. *This won’t do. We skimp past this every time.* “This is getting to me, Dad,” he huskily spoke the necessary. “You have anything to do with it?”

“I wouldn’t be much of a newspaper editor if I didn’t point out that’s an indefinite pronoun.”

“You know goddamn good and well what I mean. This crap assignment they’ve got me on. Anybody you happen to know happen to be behind it, just for instance?”

His father’s tone turned dry again. “I assume you mean the Senator. Just because I throw the awesome weight of the *Gleaner* behind him every six years doesn’t mean we’re in bed together. I would remind you, the Senator doesn’t want anything to do with this war--the only side he wants us on is Switzerland’s.”

“Then is it Mother’s doing? Hers and Uncle Lloyd’s?” The words exploded from Ben with a force that shook both men. The level of his voice came down but his vehemence did not. “Did she talk him into picking up the phone and calling Robert Sherwood or Elmer Davis or Jesus D. Christ in the White House himself and say, ‘Guess what, there’s somebody I’d like to see grounded and stay glued to a typewriter for the next dozen years or the end of the war, whichever comes first.’ Well? Did she?”

“Ben, will you kindly quit? Unlike you, your mother and I are a bit grateful you’re not stationed somewhere getting shot to pieces.” His father took off his glasses and polished the lenses clean with the page of a torn *Gleaner*; only window-washers and newspapermen knew that stunt. “To answer you for once and all,

though--we know better than to pull strings for you, even if we had any. You made that clear to us long ago." Bill Reinking went on in a milder tone. "I hate to bring up a remote possibility, but just maybe you were picked out for this because you're the natural person for it."

"You don't know how the military works," Ben scoffed. But there was no future in arguing his TPWP servitude with his father, not tonight. "Speaking of that." He reeled off what he needed for his trip out of town in the morning.

"I wish we'd known," dismay took over his father's voice. "Your mother has been putting on the miles, these rehearsals--"

"Never mind. Dad, don't look like that, it's all right. I know where I can always get it."

His father sighed. "We both know that. Why don't you go tend to it before he closes for the night? Then you can give me a lift home so I can ride in style for a change."

Ben walked briskly two blocks up the street and stepped into the Medicine Lodge. The saloon was as quiet as if empty, but it was never empty at this time of night. Inert as doorstops, at the far end of the bar sat a bleary pair of shepherders he recognized--Pat Hoy from the Withrow ranch, and the other had a nickname with an amount of geography attached. Canada Dan, that was it. Puffy with drink but not falling-down drunk, the two evidently were winding down a usual spree after the lambs were shipped, when there was half a year's wages to blow. Ever conscious of his uniform, Ben had a flash of thought that except for polar explorers, these befogged old herders off alone in their sheepwagons somewhere would have been about the last people to hear of the war, back in December of 1941. It did not seem to be foremost on their minds now, either, as they and the

third person in the saloon expectantly looked down the bar in Ben's direction like connoisseurs of the color of money.

"Goddamn," said Tom Harry from behind the bar. Ben was beginning to wonder why the sight of him made people mention damnation. "You're back, huh? I thought you'd be up in an aeroplane someplace winning the war single-handed, Reinking."

"Nice to see you again too, Tom." With a ghost of a smile, Ben patted his way along the rich polished wood of the bar as if touching it for luck. The Medicine Lodge was not much changed since his high school Saturdays of wrestling beer kegs and emptying spittoons and swamping the place out with broom and mop. "*Saturday night buys the rest of the week, kid,*" Tom Harry would always say as he paid Ben his dollar or so of wages. Hundreds of such nights produced a saloon that by now had a crust of decor as rigorous as a museum's. Stuffed animal heads punctuated every wall; the one-eyed buffalo in particular was past its prime. The long mirror in back of the bar possessed perhaps a few more age-spots of tarnish than when Ben had been in charge of wiping it down, and the immense and intricate oaken breakfront that framed it and legions of whiskey bottles definitely had more dust. Still pasted to the mirror on either side of the cash register were the only bits of notice taken of the twentieth century: a photo of Tom Harry's prior enterprise, the Blue Eagle saloon in one of the Fort Peck dam project's hard-drinking boomtowns, and a 1940 campaign poster picturing a President Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term that it can only have made any Republican cringe.

Taking all this in, for the narrowest of moments Ben could almost feel he had never been away from it. Illusions had to be watched out for. He got down to business, which meant Tom Harry. "Do you still sell beverages in this joint or just stand around insulting the customers?"

Tom Harry cast a glance to the far end where the raggedy shepherders were gaping hopefully in Ben's direction. "Hard to do, on some of them. What can I get you?"

"Whatever's on draft," Ben said before it registered on him that he was home now, he didn't need to nurse away the evening on beer. "No, wait, an Old Fashioned." *Trying to get in the spirit, Cass.* He had made the joke to her the other night when they hoisted a few drinks in the roadhouse before adjourning to the cabin, that the only clear way he saw to ever becoming an old-fashioned pilot again was to drink them. Now he dug into his wallet. "Give the choirboys a round. Catch yourself, too."

"Thanks, I'll take mine in the register. Save you the tip." Schooners of beer flew down the bar, the whiskey and paradoxical bitters and sugar was magically mixed, Ben watching fascinated as ever at the skill in those hands. Tom Harry could never be cast as a bartender, he decided. He overfilled the part. The slicked-back black hair, the blinding white shirt, the constant towel that swabbed the bar to a gleam. The pre-eminent saloonkeeper scowled now in the direction of the shepherders, which seemed to make them remember their manners. In one voice they quavered a toast to Ben: "Here's at you."

With that tended to, Tom Harry put his towel to work on the trail of the glass after he slid it to Ben. "Just get in?"

"Hour ago."

"Been places, I hear."

"They ship me around, some."

"Gonna be anybody left on the face of the earth when this war gets done?"

During this the shepherders conferred in mumbles. Celebrating their largesse of beer, the two were counting out their pooled small change, pushing the

coins together with shaky forefingers. "Barkeep?" Canada Dan cleared his throat importantly. "You got any of them jellied eggs?"

"Jesus, gourmets," Tom Harry muttered, carrying the briny crock of preserved boiled eggs down the length of the bar along with his disgust. While the egg transaction dragged on, Ben quietly sipped and gazed past the reflections in the plate glass window to downtown Gros Ventre at night. The civil old trees. His father's newspaper office, still alight down the street, another timeless pillar of the town. On the next block beyond the *Gleaner*, the Odeon theater where teen-aged Ben Reinking every Saturday night of his life stayed on through the second show--the "owl show" at nine that repeated the feature movie for a tardy gathering of drunks, late-arriving lovers, and insomniacs--to dissect how the makers of movies made them. Centralities of his growing up here, those, along with the one where he sat now. He knew there was no denying the influence of bloodline, but by quite a number of the readings he could take on his life so far, Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, out there in the dark, served as a kind of parentage too. Whatever he was, this was where it came from.

Tom Harry returned, still shaking his head over the jellied egg binge. Ben twirled his glass indicatively on the dark wood. "Any more of this in the well?"

"The war must be teaching you bad habits," Tom Harry grumbled as he mixed the refill.

"Speaking of those." Ben watched for a reaction, but could see none. Standing there lightly twirling the towel, Tom Harry showed no sign he had ever been acquainted with practices such as providing working quarters for prostitutes, bootlegging, and, now with the war, operating in at least gray margins of the black market. "Here's what it is. I need a car and a bible of gas coupons."

"Where you think you're gonna drive to with those--Paris, France, to get laid?"

“You ought to know. Probably all over hell, but I’ll start at the Two Medicine.”

The uncomprehending look on the bartender was a reminder that not all of the world knew about Vic, at least yet.

“Shit oh dear.” Tom Harry rubbed his jaw after Ben told him.. “Knew that kid since he was a pup.” He flicked a look at Ben. “Weren’t you here for funerals the last couple of times?”

Ben gulped more of his drink than he’d intended, unsteadied by having something like that attached to him. O’Fallon’s and Pennington’s, those were. The mouthy mick left guard and the taciturn baby-faced center. Tepee Weepy wanted every drop of drama from the ‘supreme team’; it had submitted his piece about the Butte slum wake held for O’Fallon for a *Quill* award. He hadn’t even liked O’Fallon.

How much does history rehearse? he had to wonder. The first funeral of all was Purcell’s. The entire team in that tumbleweed cemetery of Purcell’s hometown. Bruno giving the eulogy into the KOPR microphone at graveside. Didn’t it set the pattern, the team’s every movement on the airwaves and in the headlines from then until--? All at once he realized Tom Harry still was eyeing him speculatively.

“There’s a war on,” he managed to say levelly. “Things happen to people.”

“Must get kind of old, is all I’m saying.” Tom Harry tossed the towel aside. “Drink up. The Packard is out back.”

The long black car, its grandeur a bit faded from ten years of imaginative use, seemed to fill half the alley behind the saloon. Ben circled the streamlined old thing as Tom Harry stood by, proprietorially. “How are the tires?”

“What do you think,” Tom Harry grunted, “thin as condom skin. Here, throw these in the trunk.” He rummaged in the shed room piled high with amazing

items that Medicine Lodge customers with more thirst than cash had put up as collateral for drinks, and rolled two spare tires toward Ben.

“Reinking.” Tom Harry tossed him the keys to the car, then the packet of gas ration coupons. “Tell Toussaint for me I’m sorry his grandkid got it that way. If you can find the old coyote.”