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The weather ever since Christmas had not been able to make its mind up, thawing and then turning cold, and candles of ice hung silvery on the otherwise darkened eaves of Gros Ventre. Now snow flurries and the breeze courting them waltzed across the surfaces of light spread onto the hardened ground from the front windows of the festive house, lit up in more ways than one this last and most celebrated night of the year. All evening long Cloyce Reinking had reminded her husband to keep the drinks flowing, people in this town soaked it in in a fashion that would have put a Beverly Hills crowd under the rug. She appraised the heightened conversations filling the living room from corner to corner and took as much satisfaction as she would allow herself in how the party was going.

“Unfair.” Carnelia Muntz materialized at the buffet table as Cloyce was trying to deploy the buffet remnants to better effect. “How am I supposed to top this when I have the canasta club over, spike the angelfood?” Carnelia was the banker’s wife and always regally aware of it. She sighted over her glass to the circle of guests around the prize of the evening, the Senator and his wife and daughter. “You’re a hard act to follow, Cloycie.”

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“You sound like Bill. He accuses me of a pagan passion for New Year’s Eve.”

“Your night to shine. I see Ben finally made it.”

“The bus was late. This weather.”

Carnelia negligently nibbled a crumble of the colorless cheese from the local creamery which neither woman would have stooped to if it hadn’t been for rationing. “He’s quite the hero one more time, isn’t he, walking away from that plane wreck.”

Cloyce held her tongue; other people’s only further sharpened Carnelia’s tonight just enough hint of storm to make the ranch couples at Cloyce Reinking’s party start to worry about the roads. She looked across the jammed room past the medleys of the socially positioned of the town--doctor, lawyer, mayor, school superintendent, county agent, on down to postmaster and druggist, and their wives in holiday best--to the kitchen hallway where her son’s ginger hair overtopped her husband’s. What now? she wondered with a frown as the pair of them in their nook stayed oblivious to the wall-to-wall guests. Midnight was not that far off, and Ben still had not been into general circulation.

“So we won’t be seeing much of you for a while.” Bill Reinking’s knuckles whitened on his bourbon glass.

“Mine not to reason why,” Ben responded, tired through and through from trying to do exactly that. “I’ll let Mother know tomorrow.” What his latest set of orders, courtesy of Tepee Weepy, had in mind for him in the weeks and months ahead passed for creative in the military, but that didn’t make it any less daunting to handle. All during the bus trip from East Base, calendar and map of war blended together into a twisty scroll he could see no end of, and arriving home under these circumstances further blurred the proportions of the existence being asked of him.

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Even the favorite old civilian clothes he had slipped into felt unfamiliar. The rising and falling crescendoes of party hubbub seemed otherworldly, echoes from some sorrowless spot of time when mead and feasting greeted a solar change of fortunes. Yet this year's version held one prominent difference from his mother's other annual extravaganzas, there across the room where the Senator was holding forth about something and everyone around him was nodding as if keeping time. "Our hostess with the mostest hit the jackpot tonight, didn't she," Ben acknowledged. "The big sugar himself. How'd you drag him in on this?"

"The incalculable power of the press, of course," came the puckish answer. Bill Reinking elaborated that the lawmaker was in town on the start of a swing to sprinkle reclamation appropriations down the Continental Divide watersheds where his big voting majorities lay county by county. In short, the Senator had his own way of celebrating the onset of an election year. "When his press mouthpiece-- sorry, his spokesman--phoned wanting to know if the Senator could get together with a few people while he was here, all I said was, 'How about half the town?'" The proprietor and opinion-setter of the *Gleaner* sighed. "Now I have to give the old boy a hard time in a couple of editorials to show he doesn't have me in his pocket."

"The fun and games of dealing with Washington. I'm going to have to take lessons from you." Ben did not smile as he said it.

"Don't I wish I had the formula to give you," came the swift response. "How hard did TPWP kick about your piece on Vic?"

"Enough to smart for a while," Ben had to admit, the welts from the hard-edged telex messages back and forth still with him. "I finally had to dig in and point out to them they got all the goddamn combat angle they could possibly want in the one I had to do on Friessen."

A cascade of laughter from the contingent surrounding the Senator caused Ben to pause and look over there, then back at his father. "It was just Tepee Weepy's view of the war against mine, Dad. I'm over it." He wasn't. The whole thing with Vic still haunted him. Escorting caskets had that effect. When Corporal Victor Rennie was interred with full military honors in the cemetery up on the hill, the scene drew everlasting lines in the sod of memory. Toussaint ancient and alone on one side of the grave, the Blackfoot relatives at a little distance on the other side. Jake thumping around on his cast served as a pallbearer; Dex sent word he couldn't. Ben withstood it all except for the final three words in granite. *I managed to wangle out of my story what the lying bastards wanted in, buddy, but I couldn't keep it off the gravestone for you.* He glanced out the nearest window-well of light at the flurries lacing the bases of everything with whiteness; the stone-cut line KILLED IN ACTION soon would be covered until spring, at least.

Bill Reinking in his time had thrown away bales of news releases less fanciful than the Threshold Press War Project version that bestowed a heroic death in a combat action on a one-legged hospital patient confined to a wheelchair. "What've you been able to find out," he asked now, one journalist to another, "about the honest-to-God circumstances?"

"It wasn't pretty," Ben began tightly, "but it wasn't that different from what England has been put through all the time, either." Once more he imagined Vic there in the green and gray countryside where distant skytrails of smoke marked the ongoing battle between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe. "Officially they called what happened a bombing raid on the hospital--that's how they tagged it 'combat' because it's a military installation of a kind and maybe somebody there did take a shot back at a plane." He lifted his shoulders, the universal *who knows?* In the scene in his mind, what counted was the amputee on wheels suddenly left to himself, his perch on the rolling lawn forgotten in the general scurry away from the

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“Keys to the kingdom, A to Z,” he said guardedly.

“There’s one bad part of the clerk job.” Adrianna made a face. “Carbon paper. Our seersucker uniforms sop it up.” She leaned a trifle closer, confidentiality coming with it. “Know how I get it off?”

“I have to confess I don’t.”

She looked around, then right up at him. “I climb in the bathtub with the uniform on and scrub the carbon off. It’s a bit like using a washboard. Rub a dub dub.” Hands in front of her chest, she surreptitiously pantomimed washerwoman motion on that prominent part of herself for him. “Then drain out the blue water, take off the uniform and hang it to dry,” she said ever so innocently, “and go ahead and have my bath. It works.”

“I’ll bet it does.” The back of his throat felt dry. There was a great deal more than a fleck of attraction in the thought of rub a dub dub. A debate had started up in him like dueling lightning. When someone such as Adrianna handed herself to him on a platter like this, was he obliged to do his best to drop it? After all, you can cordon sex off from love. Soldiers did it all the time. He told himself he didn’t feel guilty about letting himself be drawn into a flirting contest, although what did he feel?

“That’s up to you,” Cass was saying to the problem pilot across the table from her. Leave it alone, she told herself. Let her turn into a groundpounder if that’s all she has the brains to do. And heard herself asking: “How come, Della?”

A flip of the blond hair heralded the answer. “There’s no room for me to move up in the squadron, is there. I’m always going to be Tail End Charlie.”

Cass lifted her hands from the table and let them fall back.

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"I'm not kicking about that, understand," Della hastened to say. "It's the way things are, seniority is something I can't do anything about. Buy you a drink, to show there are no hard feelings?"

The Alaska vodka lesson staying with him, he sipped cautiously as Adrianna steered the conversation.

"TPWP is sort of hush-hush, isn't it." She treated this as though it were a secret between just the two of them. "You have your own code--it's off-limits to us."

"Mysterious are the ways of Tepee Weepy, I'm the first to agree."

"Tepee Weepy," she laughed low in her throat, "oh, that's funny. We have all kinds of those abbreviations in Washington. My father likes to say the government is nothing but a big pot of alphabet soup."

Ben glanced now at that senatorial father, still holding forth to the other half of the room as inexhaustibly as if he were filibustering. *Sharp-cornered old devil. To look at him, you'd never know he's busy shopping for a son-in-law.* Right there in the fray, feeding the occasion in more ways than one, was the zealous hostess of all this. Ben had the passing thought that his mother should be the one writing a movie script. *Mr. Touchdown Goes to Washington*, by Cloyce Carteret Reinking.

The drink offer was the only good thing Cass had heard out of Della since she plopped down at the table. "Can't. Going on duty at midnight." Which, she figured, Della well knew when she volunteered to buy. *Why the hell can't she strut her stuff when it counts?* "It's a shame, though," Cass said as if the words were too stubborn to keep in. "You throwing away your wings." *Messing up the squadron just when I was finally starting to get you straightened out.*

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Della checked her for sarcasm. "What do you mean, a shame?"

"Don't you remember?" Cass waved accusingly in the general direction of Texas. "From day one at Sweetwater, those bald old coots who called themselves flight instructors said that about us. 'Most of you women won't stick around in that pilot seat,'" she mimicked their seen-it-all drawl. "'Something will git on your nerves and you'll take up being a pedestrian again.'"

That set off a blond flare in the chair opposite. "Cass, that is in no way fair. My nerves are perfectly fine and I am not most women."

"It's rough," Cass led into, "to be low schmoe on the totem pole, I know. I've been there." She drained the last of her lonely drink and cast a look at the clock. "But lack of seniority doesn't last forever, if you keep on breathing." She mulled how to say the rest of this, knowing she should be strenuously debating with herself about saying it at all. *What the hey, bluff on through, you have nothing to lose but a Tail End Charlie.* She honored the fact that Beryl did not want her request for a transfer to the Wichita bomber factory run bandied about, but a hint would serve the same purpose, would it not. "There are a dozen slots in the squadron, there just might be some turnover."

It changed Della's approach markedly. "I'd have a shot at being wingman?"

Cass rose to go on duty. "Only if you hang onto your wings. Happy new year, Lieutenant."

One thing was leading to another more precipitously than Ben wanted to be led, all signs pointing to a celebratory kiss at midnight to start off the Adrianna era. He could wish dozens of things for the coming year, starting with Cass and him in circumstances that did not know war or inconvenient husband. All that went into the tosspile of dreams, however, if he got involved with what was standing in front of him in snug maroon. "My father just gave me the high sign about something,"

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he made up on the spot. "Let me get you a drink while I go see what's on his mind."

"I'll hold out for champagne," Adrianna said with a wink. "Hurry back."

A sign of some sort was in what Ben had spotted across the room, his father slipping away from the party hubbub to the quiet book-lined room upstairs. Hearing Ben step in, Bill Reinking turned from the window where he was looking out at the snow sifting down. "What's this, another absconder from the merrymaking?" He smiled faintly. "You needn't take after me in that bad habit."

"The merrymaking can stagger along without us for a little while, Dad."

His father nodded. Swirling his glass, he turned back to the snow scene of the window. "Vic Rennie," he said barely above a murmur. "I owe it to Toussaint to write a little something more about him." He chugged the last of what was in the glass. "Don't worry, I'll stay away from how he died. I'll stick to the soldier-from-the-Reservation peg, although I goddamn sure won't make it heartwarming." He shook his head. "Poor divvied-out kid, always caught between. What was he, halfbreed, quarter-?"

"I don't even know," Ben answered. "When anybody would ask, he'd say 'Enough.'"

Bill Reinking grunted and moved off from the window-well to the bookshelves that walled the room. His son followed him with his eyes, the old feel of the words in wait enwrapping the two of them. Ben never forgot the touchable value of the books in this room, his boyhood times of running his fingers across the collected spines standing on the shelves like delicately-done upright bricks. All the goodnights when he would pad in to find this bespectacled man deep into Thycydides or Parkman or Tolstoy, and there would come the brief contented smile and the adage, time and again, "History writes the best yarns." As Ben watched now, his father scanned the rows of titles as if reminding himself there was this

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room to come back to after tonight. Thinking aloud, the older man said: "Your mother will nail both our hides to the wall if we don't pitch in at the party pretty quick."

"Mine, anyway," Ben conceded. "I'm supposed to be down there making out like mad with fair maiden Adrianna."

His father took down a book and put it back without looking at it. "Peril is not confined to the theaters of war, son."

This from the man known to have put in as the filler at the bottom of a newspaper column *The matrimony vine is also called boxthorn*. Ben shifted restlessly. He had pieced together the story of his father and his mother considerably beyond even the evidence he grew up around in this house. The opening scene: the glamorous set of grandparents he had never met, Clyde and Joyce Carteret, early Hollywood royalty, silent-movie producer and actress. In 1919 the Carterets had brought their film company to Glacier National Park and the adjacent Blackfoot Reservation, to shoot a quickie movie full of Indians and headdresses. While there, their teen-age daughter Cloyce met and fell for the young man on assignment from the *Gleaner*, Bill Reinking. They bedded and wedded, in a hurry both times; natural inquisitive reporter that he was, Ben long since had figured out that his parents' was a shotgun wedding. And early in that marriage, the Carterets of Hollywood and Beverly Hills were killed in a car accident on location and Cloyce, reluctantly of Gros Ventre from then on, was left with another of those utterances fit to sneak beneath a column of type, "*God made the country, man made the city, and the devil made the small town.*"

Family, the oldest argument on earth. Ben gazed across the room at the male half of the one that endured under this roof. "I'm open to ideas that won't put both of us in the doghouse, Dad."

Bill Reinking paused in his roaming of the bookshelves as if he had come to what he was looking for. "If you want to head down to the Medicine Lodge," he said over his shoulder, "I'll cover for you. I'll tell your mother you just remembered you had to cadge some gas coupons, she really can't argue with those."

Ben grinned for the first time that night. "The daughter of a senator up for re-election can't afford to be seen trotting off to a saloon with a soldier, would you say?"

"I would. Don't forget the gas coupons."

The fillers at the bottom of columns. *The matrimony vine is also called boxthorn.*