

"I know, Dad, it's okay. I lost it there for half a second, is all." *Don't get on your high horse*, he chided himself, *this is just the Officers Club of the home front*. He knew he ought to rouse himself to the business of festivity even though he had no stomach for it away from Cass. "*Any chance to be home, do it*," she had urged him to take the holiday pass, a case of use it or lose it.. "*Get away from this military madhouse. I'm on standby that weekend anyway, you won't be missing any ton of fun here. Go, palooka.*"

She at that moment was nursing her one lonely scotch in the back area of the Officers Club known as the 'orphans' corner.' It felt odd to be there with the handful of male loners--for some reason, they tended to have tidy little cookie-duster mustaches like department store floorwalkers--who sat one by one staring out darkened windows as they toyed with their drinks. However, it was the safest territory around. A woman sitting alone anywhere else in the building invited the interest of every brass type who had ever had a touch of the screw flu. Here Captain Cass Standish was just another withdrawn officer trying to drink slow and write a letter. Besides, at midnight she had to go back on standby in the ready room; unless Germany or Japan directly attacked Great Falls, that meant another stint of killing time until 0800. Nineteen forty-four did not look like anything to celebrate yet; she hoped Ben was having better luck where he was.

In the piano realm of the Club, out of sight of Cass although definitely not out of hearing, the throng around the piano player was belting out "*Pistol Packin' Momma*" as Della Maclaine and her date frisked in from outside. They were somewhat mussed from fooling around with each other on the way over, but in the overriding smudge of cigarette smoke and pall of alcohol, no one was paying attention to personal tidiness. The motor pool officer Della was with gallantly broke a trail through the packed bar toward a table at the quieter far end. Passing

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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 Hollywood 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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Afterward, he could have kicked himself for not anticipating what Danzer had up his sleeve. It seemed like just one more helping of riding out the war smoothly on the *McCorkle*, though, the dinnertime when Danzer turned to him over dessert and announced for all to hear: “You can’t deprive us of your company this evening, Ben. It’s movie night.”

He trooped to the wardroom with the topside contingent and the petty officers invited up from below, figuring he was in for a yawn session of John Wayne or Dana Andrews winning the war single-handed.

“Is that all her, do you think?” So he had his share of loin fever, and then some,...

But first came the newsreel.

“Nick, we saw this last week,” a voice complained.

“Our guest didn’t. Humor us old athletes.”

He knew some of what was coming.

“Murphy the bed has experience longer than a flatfoot’s lunch hour,” he gave it the tough-guy treatment, “at such matters as this. The first time Murph lays his mattress-button eyes on the likes of you, he’s gonna say, ‘This is a lollapalooza I could happily fold away with forever--’”

“See!”

“--but she is too classy to do that to. No, I’m gonna keep my frame on the floor for her, just to show my respect. The second I seen her I says, Murph, this dame takes the icing--”

“That’s Captain Dame to you and Murph,” she snipped in, “or I’ll call my buddies, the Mps.”

“--and like I was saying, it ain’t many femmes in the land of Murphy that’s also an officer and a gentleman, in a manner of speaking. No, I tell you, Murph the bed has seen his share and then some, and this woman is like the royal jewels shined up. Like the Taj Mahal in a skirt. Like--”

“Like a lunatic about to be with the guy for the last time in a blue moon,” she took over the formulation, voice husky.

“That, too,” he conceded wistfully. “Let’s make this drink a quick one.”

Out in the night the ferries came and went, shuttles on the dark loom of water. The port city in its nightspots and unbuttoned privacies settled to the business of such places down through time, harboring lovers and warriors.

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wouldn't hesitate a smatter of an instant on him. Yet Prokosch somehow navigated this shore on foot, didn't he, proving it could be done. *Or maybe he's learned amphibious rockclimbing by now.*

Feeling like a tightrope walker about to launch into space between tall buildings, he nerved himself up and was testing the first footholds in the rock mass when a voice and a growl broke out in startling duet close behind him. The growl was universal, but whatever the voice was saying, it was in Japanese.

A nest of saboteurs: that was the first terrible thought flashing into his mind. Followed by the immediate that this was prelude to an invasion, the follow-up on Pearl Harbor by the Empire of the Rising Sun. Whatever trick of war he had stumbled into on this alien coast, the enemy language numbed him like a bite by something poisonous. Spreadeagled upright, he could do nothing but cling motionless there while, ever so slowly, a mansize form and a lower one crept into the edge of his vision.

"Sonofagun, Lefty," Sig Prokosch spoke in English this time. "You aren't a Jap at all. Come on down."

Unsticking himself from the rockface, Ben dropped none too gracefully to the beach sand. He turned all the way around to a chesty gray-helmeted figure much more bulkily outfitted than when they had been in football uniform together. A radio pack rode high on Prokosch's back and above that waved the antenna like a giant insect feeler; his field jacket bulged with other military items, including a .45-calibre pistol holstered on one flank of a web belt around his sturdy waist. Hooked into the other side of the web belt was a leash, with a copper-red Irish setter at its end.

The dog ceased its steady growl when Sig dropped a hand to it. Recovering his voice, Ben could only blurt: "You're a tough pair to find."

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“Supposed to be,” came the modest reply. By now Sig had slung his Tommy gun around into proximity with the radio pack and had a hand free to shake with Ben. “Been me, I’d of waited at the hut.”

Ben did not go into reportorial reasoning, which was that his previous piece on this old teammate happened to occur during the Coast Guard’s version of basic training and amounted to a look at a taciturn block of young male trudging a treadmill of routine; in short, snooze news. This time around, he had come determined to portray Sigmund Prokosch, Seaman Second Class, true-blue Coastie, on an unknown foreshore of the war. First question: “How’d you get so fancy in Japanese?”

“All it means, ‘Don’t move or I’ll shoot.’” Sig shrugged. “They give us these phrase books.”

“Well, it sure as hell did the job on me.” With the indiscretion of acquaintances who had not laid eyes on one another since their world changed, the two of them traded extended looks. Not that the practiced sentry could be matched at that. One of Sig’s traits was a prairie gaze; he seemed to blink only half as much as other people. Those pale blue eyes under wheat-colored hair, in a meaty mess of a face; a fairly alarming combination staring out from a football helmet or a metal military one. Prokosch had played guard next to Animal Angelides at tackle on the right-hand side of the line. Ben would not have wanted to be on the other team opposite those two, one a marauder, the other a boulder. Mindful that he knew the habits more than the person, he unshouldered his pack and searched into it. “Before I forget, I brought you some Hersheys.”

The box of candy bars produced a bashful acknowledging smile on the recipient. During football road trips he’d had the reputation of practically living on chocolate sundaes.

“Thanks a bunch, Lefty,” Ben received in return. He was going to have to get used to this for the next few days. The nickname applied to him by only five people in the entire world--three now dead--like a tattoo he hadn't asked for. The TSU middle linemen, the brawn brigade, always had their own slant on things.

The candy transaction was watched by the Irish setter with keen interest to the point where his master broke off a square of chocolate and carefully fed it to him. As man and canine chomped in unison, Ben used the chance to ask, “What's the dog about?”

“I say ‘Get him’ and he gets you.” Delivered with a straight face, this was either what passed for a joke with Prokosch or the stolid actuality. Another shrug. “Give you my guess, I think he's supposed to be company for us.” The dog's back was stroked with a beefy hand. “Naw, though, Rex here is trained to sniff out Japs, aren't you, boy.”

Catching Ben's skeptical glance at the untrodden shore, Sig laid it out tersely: “Fresh water. Their submarine crews sneak in on rubber rafts to fill up.” His listener envisioned the possibility. Constant creeks with water the color of tea had intersected the beach all during Ben's hike to here, some he'd been able to scramble across on logs, others he had needed to ford up to his thighs. As he unsheathed his notepad, the thought that he could have stumbled onto Japanese submariners replenishing their drinking supply from this seeping shore made the whole place more creepy than ever to him.

What Prokosch was saying furthered the feeling. “Raft rats, I call them. If I ever catch them at it and they give me any trouble, I'll put Tom to working on them.” He patted the stock of his Thompson sub-machine gun.

Ben took due reportorial care over *if*. “These rafts, Sig--ever laid eyes on them yourself?”

Prokosch shook his head. "Just signs. The buggers can't resist taking a crap on dry land, for sure. Find piles around the creek mouths." His expression registering offense at that, he petted the dog again. "Rex here smells out that stuff and any drag marks that look like where a raft came in and so on. If the signs look fresh enough, we call in the depth charge boys from the air base at Port Angeles. Done it a couple of times already."

"Have you." Ben groped for any certainty in this. If ever there was a coastline that would breed phantoms, it was this murky one. But Prokosch must be able to tell human crap from bear shit, mustn't he? Or was all this just classic jumpy nerves of an isolated sentinel? By any sum it was more than a notepad-carrying visitor bargained for. How would Tepee Weepy react to the story of a Supreme Team member in hide-and-seek with Japanese naval forces, genuine or imagined, in America's own backyard? There was one way to find out. "Any luck?" Ben inquired as he scribbled away.

"Never know," the sentry blunt as the coast he walked. "The flyboys think they spotted an oil slick after they bombed like hell one of those times. Could have been a decoy." He kicked some sand as if his next thought might be hidden under it. "Those tin fish are out there, though. We got a report a while back that a Jap sub came up in broad daylight down in Oregon. Fired a few shells onto some beach. Just to prove they could, I guess." The contemplative Coast Guardsman scanned out past the curling white sets of breakers to the vaster ocean as if mildly daring the enemy to try that on his patrol route, then turned unblinking eyes to Ben. "About time to head for the hut. Ready for a hike, Lefty?"

It was work every step of the way, trying to fathom Sig Prokosch those next days on the challenging coast. Trudging the hours of patrol with him, Ben would catch himself yearning for Jake Eisman's wisecracks or even Dex Cariston's

highflown sparring. Somewhere between shy and offhandedly mum, Sig went his route like a man who had left his conversation at home. Questions to him had to be doled out, circled back to, followed to conclusions somewhere down the road, and there were times Ben felt he would have better luck talking to the dog.

Gradually, though, the thickset guard gave out glimpses of himself unsuspected in four years on the football field and in the locker room. Sig liked to cook; at the hut it invariably fell to him to prepare any meal fancier than fried Spam with canned pineapple atop. He was a twin, a truly startling thought; his sister was a missionary in the Yukon Territory. *If she's anything like him, the natives will convert just to see what's on her mind.* The Prokosch family came from Zurich, one of the depot towns sprinkled out of an atlas in the last century when the Great Northern Railway needed names for its stops in the middle of nowhere across the top of Montana. The lower end of Zurich at that, Ben divined: the father had always worked as a common section hand, riding a speeder on the conquering rails across the prairie in worst of weathers to wrestle creosoted ties into place and disgorge brush and muck from clogged roadbed culverts. A modern coolie. Sig with his accounting degree aspired to one of those American human cannonball advancements in a single generation, a desk job at the railroad home office in St. Paul. Ambition, incentive, a path in the mind with sufficient byways: little by little, the personality practically buried under that gray Coastie uniform began to assume shape as Ben made notes. Yet something kept nagging about Sig's enlistment in the Coast Guard and Ben could not get at it. Phrase it every which way, no clear answer could be drawn as to why someone from one of the most landlocked towns imaginable had chosen to turn into a beachpounder.

Until it emerged that Prokosch had a girl waiting for him back home in Zurich. Inasmuch as Sig would have been a serious contender in an ugly contest, this constituted news. It also prompted in Ben a sense of relief that he was not sure

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 in worst of weathers

he could defend, that the not particularly imaginative man at his side had chosen, with marriage aforethought, to put in his military time away from the front lines. Back at East Base in the farewell round of beers at the Officers Club, Jake Eisman had leaned back and shrewdly observed, "Benjamin, you're maybe just as glad some of us are stationed stateside." How deny it? Given the toll on overseas members of the Supreme Team, if any of the others could be hoarded to safer duty, so much the better. Obituaries were the dregs of writing; if he never had to write another one it would be soon enough. Now Ben took a fresh look at Seaman Prokosch and asked, "What's this wonder woman's name?"

This brought a bashful dip of the head and the smitten intonement:

"Ruby."

When Sig spoke it, the word glowed as if it were her namesake gem. Love and the salt taste of absence, old as Odysseus, thought Ben as they tromped onward up the beach with the punctual waves always at their side. Wide open at the heart now, Sig poured forth the life he and Ruby were trying to plan in the time to come; that touchstone of all soldiers, after the war. Look that in the face long enough, and you begin to question the current sorry state of things. Sig at length reached the point where he brought out:

"Been going to ask you something. You get around in the war. You know about those balloon bombs?"

Ben merely nodded, to see where this would go. As if in some final desperate frenzy, Japan on its side of the Pacific had begun launching slim long-range balloons with explosive devices attached. The aim was to set the forests of the western United States on fire. Some of the balloons, weirdly like miniature paratroopers, had drifted as far as the Rockies. No great damage had been reported as yet, but the devices were worrisome if, as intelligence estimates had it, they were launched hundreds at a time.

Sig indicated the oceanic sky. "We spot any coming, we're supposed to shoot them down, ha." His gaze dropped to the watery horizon and stayed. "Maybe Animal will get first crack at them--Marines are supposed to take the lead, aren't they." A considering tilt of the head. "Kind of funny to think of him at the other end of this water, somewhere." Ben noticed he did not include Danzer, on destroyer duty in what was equally the Pacific, in this musing. Reflection evidently over, Sig fixed his attention back toward Ben. He for once looked bothered. "They tell us the Japs even have their little kids in school making those balloons. Think that's so?"

"I don't really doubt it."

Sig's expression changed for the worse, which was saying a lot. "There's no limit to what people will do, I guess."

Just then they were coming to a creek mouth, and the Irish setter tugged at the leash.

"Rex thinks he's got something," Sig murmured as he swiftly unslung his Tommy gun. In the next motion he handed Ben the weapon from his holster. "Just in case."

Ben took in the situation uneasily. Where the brown-colored creek snaked out of the forest, vegetation proliferated. The dense greenery, too thick to see into, could handily hide a rubber raft and a raftload of touchy Japs. The American jungle: he had never expected to be going into combat here. Sig showed no such concern.

Weapons ready, the pair of them stayed out of sight as best they could behind driftlogs and approached the verge of the overgrown patch, led by the stalking dog. The question ran in Ben's mind, what armaments would Japanese submariners bring to shore with them? *Probably a hell of a lot more than one Tommy gun and one pistol.* As he and Sig edged in, far enough apart not to be raked by a single burst of gunfire, the bloody path above the Bitoi River came back

to him full-toned as a film on a screen. In New Guinea the cover for ambush had been tall boonie grass; here it was salal, brush, fir forest. He tried to creep silently through the undergrowth that crowded the flow of water, watching the twisting creekbank ahead for any movement. Sig, with the dog now alertly obedient behind him on the leash hooked into the web belt, was in view one moment and then wasn't. Ben braced, reminded himself to blaze away with the pistol rather than sight in--the .45 would knock an enemy down if it so much as nicked him--and parted the last underbrush into a glade of grass.

Sig was standing there peering at the beaten-down vegetation. "Deer," he called over and shouldered his Tommy gun. The dog wagged, awaiting praise.

It was when they resumed their line of march on the other side of the creek, raft rats receding back into the hypothetical, that Sig's line of thought circled around to:

"You got somebody like Ruby?"

"I do." Ben was surprised both by the question and his own answer. By any reading of law civil or military, Cass was anything but that definite in his prospect. And the war was not nearly done with either of them. Yet, for the life of him, he could not have replied other than he did. "She'll be in Seattle when I get there."

"Good for you."

So it went, those days of pounding the beach side by side with Prokosch. Bit by bit Ben absorbed the feel of the continental coast, the inevitable linkage of the Pacific to national destinies. *The ocean named for peace now rims the widest war in history*, his piece would begin. *The circumference of war takes in even those who lived farthest from the muster of the surf*. And Prokosch himself he liked in the way you like an oddball cousin met up with at a family gathering. Let him be vigilant against raft rats, quite possibly more imagined than real; it put a human

boulder into place out here among the shore rocks, Ben could attest to that. For once he felt he was writing about duty without bloodshed hanging over it like a red cloud about to burst. Prokosch's modest odyssey, a saltwater watchman on watch, suited the coastal subject with the ease of a hearthside tale. So he thought.

"Lefty?" On the last day, patrol nearly over, the hut within welcome distance, Sig had halted. He kicked at the sand, a sign Ben recognized. Then came out with it:

"I want to get up north. The Aleutians."

The grimness of a chronicler whose storyline had abruptly veered off the page took Ben over. *You and Jones. That makes two of you out of the entire human race, maniacs for the Ablution Islands.* He knew that a rain-quiet snuggerly in which to read the Bible was not Sig's reason. He asked anyway:

"Why there instead of here?"

"Better chance to actually see what a Jap looks like before the war is over," Sig reasoned thinly as if still rehearsing this. "Instead of just their turds." He looked at Ben with gathered determination. "Sea duty on a patrol frigate, is what I'm thinking. Wondered if you could help any on that?"

"There's real war up there," Ben argued. The newsreel of the Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor, smoke boiling above Alaskan soil, brought that home to America; he wondered if it had missed Prokosch. "Coast Guard service, though, that's still considered home waters, right? Won't bring you any overseas points toward discharge."

"Naw, it's not that." The unblinking gaze stayed on Ben. "I want to get back at them some for the other guys." O'Fallon, Havel, Friessen, Rennie. Three fellow linemen and everyone's favorite backfield teammate. The outsize loss that preyed on those were left. The war's arithmetic that nullified reason.

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Two men and a dog, they stood there in the surf sound, its grave beat upon the shore. Finally Ben said, "Sig, I don't have that kind of pull." Fully aware of his unsureness whether he would use it in this instance if he had it.

"You ever get some, Lefty," came the stolid reply, "keep me in mind."

“Save the beer.” Ben watched the fighter plane go. “It’s going to be a long night.”

The five miles took them all the next day. Jake peglegged the distance, his twisted ankle splinted with halved tree branches, while Ben humped along with the precious duffel and picked out their compass route. At noon, barely halfway and their energy depleting fast, they made the decision to cram down all the C-rations to give their bodies something to work with. Ultimately both men were staggering, but always in the direction pointed by the compass needle in Ben’s hand, as they lunged out of the forest to a lakeshore just before dusk. Half a mile away at a mooring buoy, a floatplane revved its engine and began to cruise across the surface of the water. In terror that it was taking off, the two of them futilely tried to shout the roar of the engine. Then the skimming floats beneath the plane cut an arc on the lakewater like skates curving on ice, and the aircraft slowed to a chug, aiming in to shore exactly at them.

Twenty-four hours later, with Jake unhappily tractioned in a hospital bed by the Canadian medical authorities. Ben mustered himself as the C-47 shuttle from Edmonton touched down at East Base. He ached in every possible part of himself and he still had the entire slew of writing about the B-17 journey to Alaska to be done. *Am I imagining, or am I losing ground faster than I can type?*

Jones was waiting for him on the runway, faithfully rumped and homely as a mud fence. “Welcome back, lieutenant. I spent yesterday going over the regulations about escorting a coffin, but I’m glad it’s you instead.”

“Jones, you say the sweetest things.” Even as the wind added its pesky greeting, Ben had to admit East Base looked like an oasis after where he’d been.

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The superior tinge in that answer did it. Anguish went through Ben like a convulsion. *There's more to know about blood than shows up in a microscope, you medical Jesus conchie!* He stood there unsteady, momentarily mindblind, wondering whether he had screamed that in the frozen face of Dexter Cariston.

The New Guinea jungle, a few months back. Everyone warned him the place dripped voracious insects when it wasn't oozing rain warm as piss, and by the time he tracked down Carl Friessen in a rear-echelon tent encampment along the Sanananda road, the crisp new combat fatigues he'd been issued were wringing wet and he was trying hard not to scratch numerous bites that itched like hell. *At least nobody's shooting at me. Yet.* Standing there smacking mosquitoes with one hand and then the other, he peeked in through the bug netting that served as a tent flap trying to make sure he had the right man. In their football years Friessen had been hefty enough to plug more than his share of the line at right tackle. Now he was rawboned, worn down to sheer frame. Deliberate as ever, though, he hunched there on his bunk wearing thin black Jap pajamas--Ben thought he had seen every conceivable form of war souvenir, until now--while cleaning his carbine with an old toothbrush.

"How's the hunting been, Carl?"

The lantern jaw that had tempted football opponents to mention the word 'horseface'--invariably to their regret--swung around from the rifle-cleaning task. "Benny! They let just anybody in this bugger of a place, do they?" The same dromedary grin, even if its wearer was a barely passable imitation of the Friessen of old in any other way Ben could see. "Better 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

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crazy monkey
crazy

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, Benny," 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."

Friessen wagged his head again. "Suit yourself, Benny. 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 called 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 stark 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, Benny. 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. “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 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.

Moxie Stamper with a tank corps somewhere in England.

Larry 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 doom in eleven-man. Two years hadn't made any of it less raw on the nerves. Fast

Nick

“Clear at Edmonton. It starts to heavy up after that. Cumulo-nimbus to thirty thousand, the whole ball of horseshit.”

“Hear that, Ben? Arranged a ceiling flight for you.”

Christ and a bear, that's seven miles up in one of these things. “Just don't drop me, Lieutenant Eisman.”

“Haven't lost a scribbler yet.”

Soon the Sweetgrass Hills crouched beneath the plane, their three ancient summits the only sentinel points in uncountable miles of prairie. For a fleeting moment aligned with the bomb-aiming panel of plexiglass directly in front of Ben, Devil's Chimney looked like the front sight of a rifle zeroed in. He thought back to Toussaint Rennie and hoped a dressed-out elk was hanging in that windsprung barn on the Two Medicine. Scanning the passing geography and jotting frantically, crystals of detail for the Tepee Weepy piece, snatches to write to Vic, his thinking as ever quickened with the vantage point of defied gravity. *Maybe I was meant for thin air. Or is that birdbrain logic?* Either way, he had the giddy feeling of being on top of it all. The colossal modern warp of time claimed everywhere below him; only a man's puny lifetime ago, the swiftest things on this shoulder of the planet were buffalo and Indian ponies. B-17s annihilated every pace of the past and along with it substituted sky for high ground. 'Space is the bride of time.' Elemental Gaussian physics, weirdly brilliant even back there in the stolid print of the college textbook, the blindered genius Carl Friedrich Gauss sitting in Gottingen unaware of the Napoleonic Wars going on around him while he figured out basics of the universe. The goddamn Germans, too bad they were born with brains.

The intercom interrupted. “Friendlies at three o'clock, skipper.”

“I see them. Our sisters in arms.”

“Not in mine,” moaned another voice on the intercom.

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loudly stomping and rubbing warmth into themselves, then leaned in close to Ben and whispered:

“I’m getting Russian tail.”

Still numb enough that he was not sure he had heard right, Ben checked the extent of the lusty expression on Jake and saw that he had. “Are you. They owe you some, I guess.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t the cossacks just cream their britches?” Jake grinned proudly.

“Who’s the unlucky woman?”

“She’s a pilot.”

Ben stared at him.

“Well, was a pilot. She’s missing a few parts--got all the right ones, though. But a couple of fingers.” Jake waggled a hand with the last two digits down out of sight. “Those pissant Nazis like to shoot back. Now she’s a bug driver.”

This, Ben found nearly as stupefying as the pilot part. The runway they had just come in on was pulverized ice, gray banks of chips spewed up by metal grippers in countless plane tires, with furrows that were more like ruts to land into. Buzzing around out there on the equivalent of a skating rink in thirty below on one of the little tow tractors called bugs sounded to him like a job for only the hardest Eskimo. Or a madwoman. Or worse.

“Jake, or should I just say Dummy--”

“Ben, Ben, hold it down, okay?”

--get your mind up from between your legs and think about this a little, will you? Anybody the Russians trust enough to station here is apt to be a Red, like those big stars on the sides of these planes, remember? And the United States government does not look kindly on the Communist party.”

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reminded him alarmingly of Cass--translated Jake's effusions and Russian spatters of questions.

"They say, how big bomb pile?"

"Bomb load, right, two thousand pounds," Jake made an expansive gesture. "A ton--do you have those back home?"

"*Tonna*," Katya reported, drawing the first smiles from the Russian airmen.

At first Ben had been relieved to see other American uniforms in the roomful of brown drab, a plump major and a couple of shavetail aides sitting with an ascetic looking Russian majordomo of some sort. The major proved to be the liaison officer, which meant he was there only under obligation, and in a matter of minutes had sent over the more diminutive of the aides to inquire why they were not in their own mess hall with everyone else. *Awful good question, shorty*. Jake pulled out all the stops, citing Ben as a big shot war correspondent chronicling Lend-Lease and the peerless pilots of both nations. When the underling relayed that, the major gave them an edgy look, but he directly departed and so did the thin-featured political commissar or whatever he was. The entire room sat at attention until the man was out the door. The moment he was gone, Katya relaxed and turned to Ben. "You are from *gazeta*?" Her voice was throaty and adventurous, and in spite of himself he could imagine how smoky it would sound in bedroom circumstances.

"Gazettes of all kinds, right, Ben?" Jake trumpeted. "He's as important in our country as your guys on *Pravda*."

"Thanks all to hell for the comparison," Ben snapped. The Russian airmen were getting to their feet, taking their leave with stiff nods. As the mess hall began to empty out, a contingent dressed like Katya, male and female alike in thick-ply ground crew coveralls, drifted over curiously. She rattled out something and they

Yakov
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combat
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sat down. *Wonderful, Ice. Now we're the main attractions at the zoo.* Of all there was to worry about in this, he figured he might as well start way up the list. Katya was watching him bright-eyed. "You have the same name as a very famous person," he speculated.

She burst out laughing. "No, no! Marshal Zhukov is not my family. He is great man, we are no ones."

Ben wanted that to be true. Zhukov was the titan of the Eastern Front, reputedly able to stand up even to Stalin's midnight military whims, and with geography on his side he had held out until he could start bleeding the German invaders to a slow death. The glut of war on Soviet soil seemed beyond sane comprehension. Three years now since Hitler made Napoleon's old mistake and turned thousands of miles of Russian snow into the blood of both sides; Ben had access in the correspondents' pool reports to the riveting dispatches of the Red Army front-line daredevil Vasily Grossman and discerned from Grossman's crafty coverage that survivors of the struggle had been through hell from both the enemy and their fanatic rulers. His eyes slipped to Katya's right hand and the sacrificed fingers. The million-dollar wound. A piece of body exchanged for a grant of existence. Before he could ask her what kind of aircraft she had flown--he had a spooky feeling it was a P-39, but that very well may have been Cass on his mind-- Jake interjected. "They use this place as a canteen after it shuts down. Get ready to toast Mother Russia, Benjamin my boy."

Vodka made an immediate appearance. Glasses were splashed full and hoisted in accompaniment to a unison cry of "*Na zdroya!*" Jake winked across at him. "That much Russian I know. 'Good health,' buddy." Wary from Cass's coma cola elixirs, Ben tested what sat so innocently clear in his glass. It tasted like spring water that had been tampered with by a moonshiner. While the Russians tossed theirs down he took a medium swig and clamped his fist around the glass to

hide the fact that he hadn't emptied it. Nonetheless the bottle was making the rounds again and another toast was necessary, this one Jake's "To *bolshi semnadtsi!*" The Russians banged the table in homage to big bombers and gulped down. Here came the bottle again. *Holy damn, they inhale the stuff.*

Katya leaned toward him as if what she was about to say was vital.

"Kheminveh. You have meet in the war?"

The Ernie question. He'd had it dozens of times. *You'd think Hemingway invented the written word.* "I met him once, yes." He did not say it had been in the bar of the Savoy in London. He hiked his shoulders up and huffed out his chest to show the Hemingway mien. "Built like a bull. He was on assignment for *Collier's*--

"Coal? Kheminveh write about stove thing?"

"It's a magazine." Ben pantomimed flipping pages.

"With us *magazin* is on gun." Katya was impatient to reach her point.

"Question. Kheminveh famous in Soviet Union, we all read. Hero in *The Sun Up Again*. Is he steer, not bull?"

Jake woke up to the topic. "Wait a minute. I read that. The guy lost the family jewels? Where'd it say so?"

"That's Hemingway for you," Ben sought to explain and realized the vodka wasn't helping. "He doesn't outright *say*--"

Jake shook his head in disbelief. "Weird. Did you ask him?"

"Of course I didn't ask him, the whole point of the goddamn book is--"

"Whoa. How can that be, the guy has lost his valuables and we're supposed to read it between the lines? I'd say that's news, it ought to be spelled out in black and white."

"Kheminveh is kid us, *da*?" Katya contributed. She shook her head censoriously. "We have saying: 'What is write in ink, axe can not cut off.'"

world's many combat zones, those all came home with him every time, and both men stood back from it a bit.

"How was the trip up here?" Bill Reinking asked, to be asking something.

"Like *Gone With the Wind* without somebody to neck with," his son said and laughed in a way he did not recognize. "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 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, although that wasn't what the sloganeers meant. 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

integrated
to convey.

1944

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Candles of ice hung silvery on the otherwise darkened eaves of Gros Ventre. The weather ever since Christmas had not been able to make its mind up, ^{a week or} producing a halfhearted thaw, ^{5 or over} then a freezing cold snap, and here at the Reinkings' on the last and most celebrated night of the year, ^{hard} snow flurries and the breeze courting them ^{Now} waltzed across the surfaces of light spread onto the hardened ground from the front windows of the house, lit up in more ways than one. 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 Hollywood 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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1944

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Candles of ice hung silvery on the darkened eaves of Gros Ventre in the
 hour before midnight. The weather since Christmas had not been able to make its
 mind up, producing a halfhearted thaw, then a freezing cold snap, and tonight just
 enough hint of storm to make the ranch couples at Cloyce Reinking's party start to
 worry about the roads. Snow flurries and the whiffs of wind courting them waltzed
 across the surfaces of light spread onto the hardened ground from the front
 windows of the house, lit up in more ways than one this last and most celebrated
 night of the year. Cloyce Reinking 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; a minute ago she had reminded her
 husband to keep the drinks flowing, people in this town soaked it in in a fashion
 that would have put a Hollywood crowd under the rug.

"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
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^{chatting} While candles of ice hung silvery on the otherwise darkened eaves of Gros
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