

## 12

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

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

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

The pair of them were in a ragtop Jeep, all that Jones had been able to snag for them out of the East Base motor pool, heading down the height of bluff south from Shelby toward the brief green ribbon of trees in the Marias River bottomland. Each man had shed the jacket of full-dress uniform, and the cloth doors of the Jeep were tied back to let air in both sides, and still it was like traveling in an oversize oven. The fields along the shimmering highway the next couple of hours to Great Falls, they well knew, would be the cooked results of summerlong sun, the waiting grain baked golden, the mown hayfields crisp and tan, the distant dun sidehills

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further tinted with broad scatters of sheep. Behind them were a good many miles of the same. They had buried Angelides the day before, Prokosch that morning.

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

"I've noticed."

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

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

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

"Your dad didn't miss a lick of what was going on," the conversation from the passenger side of things persisted, "from the look of him. Figure he'll be writing about the funeral?"

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Ben found the first bit of smile in a long while. "I'd bet my bottom dollar on it."

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

They had not said much on this trip back from the packed foursquare church across the tracks from the Dunkirk depot out east of Shelby, Bill busy in his head, Cloyce in extensive thoughts of her own. Try as she would, she could not get over the Prokosch boy's watery-eyed mother and father, in sagging funeral clothes that they looked like they'd been sacked into. The sight of those crying parents disturbed Cloyce. There but for the grace of something or other--despite what the preacher said in the funeral service, she could not credit an all-wise divinity in charge of every life and death in this immense war--wept Bill and herself, if Ben had not survived Guam and those other places. Even yet she could feel fate narrowly brushing past, back at the start of this unnatural week. She had been out in the back yard coddling her roses with root food, the shade of the cottonwood

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trees pleasant in the already warm summer morning. Around the corner of the house came Bill, a telegram in his hand. If she had not already been kneeling, she would have been thrust to her knees by the sight of the yellow message form known for carrying the savage words: WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON--

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

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

*"Is he coming home"--it caught in her throat to say it--"as usual?"*

*"Not this time. We'll go to him. I'll work it out somehow."*

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

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

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

for some  
Eversharp.

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

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

“Ready?” His voice bristling as much as his mustache, he started dictating at a deliberative pace. *“You have seen the readymade insignia of the homefront all across our state, in our neighborhoods, on our ranches and farms, wherever there are window casements framing proud but anxious parents. The small satin banner no larger than a tea towel---cross out ‘small’--hangs from the lock on the middle sash of the window. The gold-colored string, tasseled at the ends, holds a thin--no, make that ‘slender’--dowel, and down from that the banner hangs like a quiet flag. Red-bordered, with a field of white, centered with a star. A blue star shows the world that a member of that family is serving in the military. A gold star testifies that the household has lost a family member in the war.*

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

Cloyce was quietly crying.

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

Contrary to his custom, the Senator did not arise from behind the piles of books at his end of the table and plant a kiss on his wife’s brow as she settled to her breakfast spot that morning. Suspiciously she peeked over at the reading material strewn around him to see if the Bible lay open somewhere there. His habit before an election was to thumb through until he found a pertinent verse about afflicting

one's enemies, then righteously set out to do so by the lethal means known as Montana politics. The rough-and-tumble of another campaign did not seem to be this morning's order of business, however, as the volumes surrounding his plate of drying egg yolk and bacon grease were the usual maroon tomes of military history and green-and-gilt biographies and memoirs of political figures. She looked on with fond exasperation as he pored over dense pages, taking notes in his leatherbacked notebook. Beaky old cowboy that the national press made him out to be, the husband and mealtime companion known to her all these years feasted on the holdings of the Library of Congress as no other member of the United States Senate ever did. Whatever was immersing him this particular day, she could be sure it was all part of the strong old scripture of seniority and power.

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

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

"Roast an admiral or two," he anticipated, patting the volume of Mahan on naval warfare. "The fools still think they can yell 'Pearl Harbor!' and we'll forgive them any goddamn thing. The hearing may take a while before they're whimpered out. Don't look for me home till supper, my love."

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

He clapped the notebook shut, ready for political battle even though it seemed unending. Targets in the military popped up almost faster than he could keep up with. He still shook his head over those Air Force nitwits who had spent taxpayer dollars training women to fly and then wouldn't let them take the planes as far as Canada; Christ, you could spit into Canada from Montana.

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

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

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

“We? I was only the sandbag, remember?”

“--wrecked the whole goddamn Fifth Air Force. Hey, watch it!”

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

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

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

“Dexter the Dexterous. That sounds like him, let the peasants scoop those striped pussies out of his way.” Still fanning at the linger of the skunk, Jake

thought of something. "Hey, our secret-mission guy must be about due to get his turn at fame from you again, ain't he? Then the milk-run pilot Eisman, specializing in pallbearing? My ma's got her scrapbook open, waiting."

"Tepee Weepy has loosened up a little about that, so if you treat me right, I might squeeze you in ahead of him this time," Ben hedged, aware it was drawing him a deeply inquiring look. Hastily he skipped on past the situation of Dex: "That doesn't mean I'm going to fly into the cold blue yonder with you like last time. Besides, you've got enough company in Alaska without me. Fill me in, Yakov-- how's the bewitching Katya?"

"Gone, is what she is."

"Say again?"

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

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

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

~~"Morning, Captain."~~

Yawning his way into the office, Ben met those words and looked back down the corridor apprehensively. No such intruding rank in sight. "You're

“Morning, Captain.”

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

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

“Jesus ten-fingered Christ! What’s he want to do that for?”

The expostulation turned Jones prim and enlisted. “No one shared the General’s thinking with me.”

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

Jones shook his head.

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

WHAT DO? he had telexed in at the point on the schedule where he should have been assigned to write about one or the other of them and had heard nothing, and a message shot back short and cryptic: TIME OUT IN THE GAME. ADJUST PADS ACCORDINGLY.

Well, by now he and Jones indeed were padding desperately, doing articles about scrap drives and Red Cross blood draws. Top off the situation with this unlooked-for promotion (major, lieutenant colonel: he gulped at the thought that

there were only two more ranks between him and the ghostly brass who operated TPWP) and Ben could not tell whether it was the altitude or the servitude that was getting to him.

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

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

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

Hill 57 had its hackles up, bunchgrass stiffly trying to resist the wind, as Ben started down the rutted path at the end of that afternoon. In off-duty civvies, he had on the canvasback coat he had worn that time here with Cass but was wishing for the flight jacket, at the rate the wind was breathing down his neck. As ever he had to be mindful of what the gusts might bring; Great Falls collected weather from all around. Over toward the Rockies, the waiting clouds were thickly gray and flat-bottomed as if ready to be sponged against the earth. The benchlands surrounding the leafy city were another picture entirely, with half a dozen squalls around the horizon, isolated showers that almost stopped at fencelines. By his estimate, the cylinder of none-too-warm autumn sunshine here between the storm systems just might last long enough for what he needed to do. *It better. Could be the last chance at this.* How many times now had he watched the zigzag route to the white rocks, here and on the Letter Hill, turn to mush in spring and twisted iron in summer and then utterly sink off out of sight into snow for about six months? Come winter, there was no telling where he would be, either. Somewhere on the continent of Europe where Moxie Stamper led a tank contingent fighting its way

toward the heart of the Third Reich, if Tepee Weepy had any sense about 'Supreme Team' assignments any more. *Big if. On top of all the others.*

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

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

*"Tell me if this is too crazy, Ice. But out there on the tin can with Danzer, I got to wondering why he was so rattled when I brought up Purcell's name. Remember that last practice, when our mad genius of a coach for some reason yanked him and stuck Purcell in? What if that wasn't just some lame-brain substitution, what if Purcell was being seriously promoted to the starting team?"*

*"You figure Bruno was as tired of the Slick Nick act as the rest of us were?"* Jake's jackrabbit mind took a moment to go back and forth over that. *"Possible, I suppose. The Dancer could catch the ball and keep it, both, though."*

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

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

*"Then all that sonofabitch Bruno had to do,"* Ben savagely rewrote that central page of the past, *"was not be so hepped up about his damnable Golden Rule and simply play it straight with Purcell: 'Hang on to the ball, Merle boy, and you're the varsity end for the season.' It shifts the whole thing. No twelfth man. No 'Supreme Team' crap, then or now."*

*"Possible,"* Jake had allowed again. *"I can't see Danzer running his heart out on that hill."*

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

Picking his way through the bunchgrass and prickly pear cactus, he approached the solitary shanty at the coulee edge with no real hope. As usual, the ramshackle place appeared as short on hospitality as it was on all else; dilapidation never welcomes company. No smoke from the chimney again, although a fresh cord of charity wood was stacked against the tarpaper siding. Every Hill 57 shack he could see had one, the firewood considerately chopped into sticks not much bigger than kindling so heat could be eked out of rusty stoves as long as possible. Even so the woodpiles would not last through the winter and the Indian families would have to scrounge or freeze. He marveled again at the pride of Vic Rennie, trudging down cold to the bone from this prairie sidehill slum for four years, never asking anything from the sumptuous university when there were any number of

Treasure State football boosters who would have given him a warm place and other favors on the sly.

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

*“Catch her sober, after she gets over the shakes. That’s the trick with a wino. Wait until allotment money’s gone.”*

*“End of the month, you mean?”*

*“Middle. She’s a thirsty one.”*

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

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

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

They each rared back and stared.

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

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

“No. From the base.”

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

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

She took her time about deciding. Finally she provided grudgingly: “Maybe that’s me.”

“Mrs. Rennie, what I came to--”

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

Too late, he remembered the family battle lines of the Reservation. “Excuse me all to pieces, Mrs. Rides Proud. I just thought, because Vic’s last name--”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds good," he fibbed for etiquette's sake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Made him? How?”

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

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

“Hwah, one time? Where do you get that?” This shake of the head dismissed Ben’s arithmetic as silly. “Crazy number of times. Up and back to that first rock thing.” Agnes approximated a **T** in the air over the table. “Then up and back to--what’s that next one?” She waved the notion of an **S** away, saying: “Then he runs up again, pretty pooped now, I bet, and touches the third one of those. That football boss, maybe he couldn’t count so good?”

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

“The two of them, sure. Football boss and, I don’t know, little boss?”

“What were they wearing?”

“Raft hats.”

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

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

Snap-brim hats. The cinematic emblem of tough guys. Bruno and his copycat pet sportswriter. *Loudon was in on it, bastard number two.* Ben’s mind

was working furiously. "So you saw them make him run the hill three times. Then what?"

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

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

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

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

Vic's silences. The scales of friendship are roomy, but nothing human is infinite. Ben sorted through the realization that the one person he thought he knew as well as himself had held back a thing this size. He could see the reason, seated as it was across the table from him. *In vino veritas?* Not in any court of law a half-bright defense attorney could find his way into. The word of Agnes Rides

Proud did not stand a drunkard's prayer against whatever sworn version Bruno and Loudon would come up with.

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

"Not for me," Ben murmured.

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

Bushed and wet through and through but oddly fulfilled, he reached his hotel with daylight nearly gone, the rain gathering the gray of dusk to its own. He climbed into dry clothes, poured a scotch, and propped up on the bed, his mind still restless. On the hour he flipped on the radio for the war news. In the Pacific, carrier aircraft had conducted a bombing raid on Japanese positions around Manila. In Europe, Patton's tanks were acrpss tje Meuse River, and the Russians were approaching Warsaw. what the Germans and Japanese had up their sleeves. By iron habit he checked his watch and with it the clock of war, the zone-by-zone

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

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

“Everybody got that?”

The P-63 fighter planes, poised as birds of prey, sat in a row of a dozen on the taxiway. To Cass and her pilots, the brand-new aircraft looked like a pepped-up cousin of what they had been flying. Four blades on the propeller instead of

of  
wing-ward

three, more bite on the air. A sharper tail, aid to maneuverability. Gone were the despised fuel tanks underneath that had made the P-39 a barbecue waiting to happen in a belly landing. Wing tanks, bomb racks, a nose gun almost twice the caliber of the old one: all of it added up, at least on paper, to a fresh Lend-Lease aircraft that would give the Russians that much better chance of blowing up German s and their implements of war.

Cass stayed kneeling a further minute, watching her pilots take in the P-63s that would be central to their existence from this day on. She could never get enough of this, the women in their canvas flying suits with manes brown, blonde, and black flowing over their squared shoulders as they eyed the new aircraft, keen as cats looking at available bacon. What needed doing--what was up to her to do--was to train these veteran fliers to take it slow with these hot planes. *Isn't that a joker in the deck--me ending up like those bald coot instructors at Sweetwater.*

Holding in a grin, she popped to her feet and gave a dismissing clap of her hands.

“Okay, all concerned, find your tail number and go to work. Let’s get with it.”

The squadron members had drawn slips of paper out of a crush hat, letting chance decide who got stuck with a cantankerous craft and who ended up at the controls of a well-behaved one; it was a WASP article of faith that airplanes had

Sensible  
impressive  
adv on  
bomb rack

improve  
squared  
purposeful

personalities you could not change short of the scrap heap. Cass walked around hers again for familiarity's sake, its unmissable 226323 stenciled large and white on the tail. *Damn the deuces and treys, following me around. Don't be getting superstitious now, though. No time for that.* She prowled the flight line, watching the eleven fliers comb the fighter planes. All of her pilots carried a lucky coin to unscrew the inspection plates. The hands-on testing started with that, reaching in and plucking each control cable to make sure it was hooked up to what it ought to be hooked up to. Up onto each wing next, take off the gas cap and stick a finger in to make sure the tank was full. Then into the cockpit, skepticism exercised on every gauge.

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

mutually

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

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

She climbed down feeling half guilty, dreading the day she would lose Beryl as wingman. Della Maclaine's performance thus far today did not help that mood. Right now the blonde head was languidly scanning the fuselage of her P-63 as if ready to try it on for size. *Look down first, stupe.* Coolant and fluid leaks would evaporate fast in the dry desert air; checking for puddles should be as automatic as zipping up the flying suit. With no small effort Cass resisted the impulse to charge across the runway and giving Della a chewing-out she would not soon forget. *Ration it out or Goldilocks will turn into even more of a tail-ender than she already is.* The lowball instrument rating she was giving Lieutenant Maclaine, which would seat her in a simulation trainer for a good many hours across the next week, would get her attention soon enough.

you

deliver

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

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

"Righto," Cass backed that up. "Stay to hell out of one another's prop wash until we get used to handling these buggies." *That especially means you, Maclaine.* When everyone had had their say about the new planes, Cass slowly addressed the gathering:

"We all earned our wings once, and we're about to again. It's going to be worth it, let me tell you. Friends and officers, flying is the second greatest thrill a woman can know."

She paused, taking in the greatly assorted expressions on her audience.

"The first, you goofs, is *landing*."

Over the hooting laughter, she grinned and gave the order, "Five times, everybody, touch and go. Linda's bunch first, then Ella's, mine last so I can be right here watching, pilots. Don't get caught up in the scenery, all it means to us is thermals. Let's go." As her aviators headed to their aircraft, she looked around at

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goamy  
hoo, hoo,

the palm trees. Only the military would put pilot training in the California desert for planes the Russians would have to fly across Siberia. She tucked that away for when she wrote either to Dan wherever he was in the festering Pacific or Ben back at East Base. She made it a point of honor not to write the same thing to each of them.

“How goes it this fine filthy day of Great Falls sleet, Jones?”

“Uhm, morning, sir. We’ve got--”

“For crying out loud, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me--”

The words swerved off in the direction Jones’s eyes were trying to indicate, to the figure perched on the desk corner. “--Colonel,” Ben finished.

“Greetings, captain.” A touch of gray had come to the Gable mustache, and there were crinkles at the corners of the eyes.

“Leave us alone.”

Jones got out of there fast.

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

Considerately he blew the pungent smoke away from Ben and at the same time.

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

“It’s not a case of TARFU yet, I don’t think--probably the paperwork is just sitting on some desk somewhere,” Cass put as good a face on it as she could.

“Hang in there, I’ll keep riding their butts about the transfer.”

She climbed down feeling half guilty, dreading the day she would lose Beryl as wingman. Della Maclaine’s performance thus far today did not help that mood. Right now the blonde head was languidly scanning the fuselage of her P-63 as if ready to try it on for size. *Look down first, stupe.* Coolant and fluid leaks would evaporate fast in the dry desert air. With effort Cass held back from <sup>no small</sup> <sup>resulted. impulse to</sup> <sup>charge</sup> <sup>a major</sup> <sup>annoying</sup> scorching across the runway and giving Della yet another chewing-out. Parceling out what Lieutenant Maclaine had coming to her took ungodly patience, but Cass was doing her damndest.

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“Flying is the second greatest thrill a woman can know.”

“The first is landing.”

“Five times, everybody, touch and go. Linda’s bunch first, then Ella’s, mine last so I can be right here watching, pilots. Don’t get caught up in the scenery. Let’s go--yours, Linda.” She looked around at the palm trees. Only the

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“Leave us alone.”

Jones got out of there fast.

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

Considerately he blew the pungent smoke away from Ben and at the same time.

The colonel smiled just enough.

“Your Prokosch piece. I’m afraid

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

Isn’t that like describing a hanged man as having been found dead under an okay tree, sir?”

Dunkirk.

“Sir, begging your pardon, that’s

“Share it out bold, captain. <sup>Reinforce</sup> It’s just the two of us here.”

“Need I point out to you that war does not necessarily deal the cards fair?”

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

Ben’s lips were dry. He licked them to not much effect.

“I’m not at liberty to tell you. You might familiarize yourself with the Montana National Guard.”

Dan Standish’s outfit.

“You don’t want to do that,” the colonel said with utmost civility. “A bobtail discharge follows a person the rest of his life.”

“This place makes me feel better about the barracks. How come they stick you here?”

"I'm a marked man."

Jake snorted. "Aren't we all, one way or another."

"Yeah, with your seabag over your shoulder and ten minutes before you'd have to catch a gooneybird out of here, I know you. I brought a proper farewell."

"I don't want you getting the shit shot out of you out there, hear?"

"Bravery is just another way to die."

"Look who's talking--the guy who wants to be dropping bombs on Hitler while he's on the toilet."

"Notice I want to do it from several miles away, straight up. I think that's the way they ought to die. Just *blam*, something comes out of the sky and wipes them out of the human race."

The chatty major next to him. "Oh my God."

Ben looked out. Above the meatwagon, a red flare which meant "Abort mission"

The big bomber lurched as the brakes were slammed on. Ben grabbed and hung on.

The co-pilot emerged from the cockpit. "Captain Reinking?" he called out, his tone questioning why anyone of that rank rated this kind of treatment. "The tower radioed. You're to get off this plane."

A Jeep was coming at high speed, the stumpy figure of Jones at the wheel.

"Tepee Weepy's orders--they sent them in the clear channel. I asked the clerk in the situation room if he knew what was up. It's the Philippines. All heck is breaking loose out there."