

“Not now. Wings on my brisket, bars on my collar, I’m a pretty good imitation of a fighter plane jockey on these ferrying runs, you bet I am. But what happens the minute the boys come marching home? Is the good old Army Air Corps going to treat WASPS like guys? No sign of it so far.” Cass jerked her glass up to her lips, found it empty, and set it down disconsolately. “I want the war over as much as anybody, but the war is what keeps me in that cockpit. There’s a pisser, isn’t it? And Ben?--us, chronic us? How do I know I could keep up with you after the war? If we did stay together? You’re probably going to be famous-- what am I saying, you’re famous or next thing to it already--”

“Only as long as bullets are flying.”

“--and all in the damn world I’m good for is handling one half-assed kind of fighter plane.”

He lurched his chair forward. “Cass, we can’t put together life after the war until the sonofabitching thing shows us it’s going to be over, but we can stick together until we can figure out--” breaking off, he peered across at her and demanded, “Are you bawling? Because if you are, I’m afraid then I’ll have to.”

“Damn you, Ben Reinking,” she said, fierce but snuffling. “I haven’t had a crying jag since I was eleven years old.” She wiped her eyes, then her nose.

“Until you.”

For some moments he gulped back moist emotions of his own. Why of all the people in this war did the two of them have to be on the receiving end of something like this? What was wrong with backing away from this and snapping up an Adrianna instead, sweetly available and nowhere near as troublous? What

was wrong with him? "This is just crazy hopeless," he said at last, his expression pretty much fitting that description itself. "I'm stuck on you even when we're doing our double damnedest to have a fight."

"Swell," Cass sniffled, "that's me, too." She straightened herself up so sharply it jarred the table. "There's another kink to this, you know," she went on, wiping the tears away with determination now. "Dan's not the only one they keep throwing out there to get shot at, is he. I don't pretend to know squat about what the types in Washington have you doing. I just herd airplanes. The wear is starting to show through on ~~that "supreme team" set of stories,~~ ^{those} ~~about the team~~ though, isn't it? I don't need to tell you that's getting to be an awful lot of dead heroes. Your guys are catching hell. And you're always going to be plunked right out there with them, Ben, you and just a pencil and paper, brave as anything--"

"I don't feel brave. I'm just doing it."

"--while every fool on the other side tries to draw a bead on you. Look what just happened to your pal the Marine. It could have been you. I am never going to be in favor of that part of your Tepee Weepy doings, you'd better know."

"Listen, they've got me under orders the same way you are, and I--"

"It isn't quite the same." She slapped the table for emphasis. "You've got some clout, you've got the name you've made for yourself."

"That works once in a while. And generally doesn't. I was about to say, if I ever get the chance to drop the ^Qsupreme team^{is} stuff, I'll do it in the next breath. For right now, the worst thing I've got to do is cover Angelides' funeral." He tried to move along to a better face on things and did not quite get there. "Maybe

“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 one-sided conversation from the passenger side of things persisted. “Figure he’ll be writing about the funeral?”

“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 sudden 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 use of the family roadster whenever she wanted, 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 its newspaperman.

They had not said much on this trip back from the packed foursquare church across the tracks from the Devon 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. 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 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--^uas usual?"



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 sitting a little longer to dab more verbal ammunition into the cowhide notebook, his wife covertly watching. He still was ~~steamed~~^{riled} 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 also heard something gutwrenching 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 steamed over those Air Transport Command nitwits who

“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 grin that went halfway around his head. *“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?”

rom
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mark

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

“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. You’d like to be our eleventh man, wouldn’t you, kid? It’s yours for the taking.’ It shifts the whole thing, Ice. No twelfth man. No ⁶supreme team ¹²crap, 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 Ben 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. Other than its usual jittery honor guard of gophers, half a dozen at a time constantly popping from their holes and then receding as he neared, 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?"

rem ✓

"Middle. She's a thirsty one."

nom ✓

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."

"Greetings, captain." A touch of gray had come to the Gable mustache, and the crinkles at the corners of the commanding eyes appeared substantially deeper. Otherwise, the colonel from Tepee Weepy perching there on the desk edge, as tailored as a rajah abroad, appeared to be taking up in mid-session from two years earlier.

"Jones"--Ben held out a hand in that direction-- "may I see this week's manifest of VIP arrivals again?" The corporal plucked up the list and passed it to him as if it was about to blow up.

"Spare your eyes," the colonel advised. "Officially I'm not here."

"Here or not, sir," Ben struggled with everything wanting to uncoil within him, "you're mightily in our thoughts."

"I believe I detect a tone of concern over your recent assignments in that," the colonel responded casually. In that same tone of voice: "Take a break, corporal. Make it a nice long one."

Jones got out of there fast.

A puckish gaze from the visitor followed him. "Your clerk looks as if he stepped straight out of the homicide lineup, have you noticed?"

"Jones is washed in the blood of the lamb, sir."

"Admirable, I'm sure." The colonel went right to business. "One of your ²supreme team ¹²articles--very nicely done, let me say--has been conspicuous by its absence in the newsprint of the land, hasn't it, captain. Your piece about Seaman Prokosch. We had to spike that piece, and I must tell you it will remain spiked."

"I didn't figure you were saving it for the gold-leaf edition."

"You have every right to be testy about it," the colonel granted. *Testy, my left nut. How about mad as hell? How about terminally pissed off, Mustache Pete?* "However," the practiced voice from Tepee Weepy rippled on, "the balloon bombs are a classified secret and no mention can be--"

"Colonel?" If there was such a thing as whiplash inside the head, Ben suffered it now going from rancor to disbelief. "What's 'secret,'" he blurted, "about those? The Forest Service has people in lookout towers all over the mountains watching for the damn things, the airbases out on the Coast are trying to shoot them down, anyone out here with ears on his head has heard about Jap balloons. We aren't giving away a thing that a dozen states don't already know, by saying a guy of ours met up with one."

"This was not a TPWP decision," the colonel's voice rose a notch for the first time. "It comes from highest levels--there is a complete news blackout, in all American newspapers and radio broadcasts, about the balloons^{bombs}. Censorship has been applied for two reasons, we were told in no uncertain terms--to prevent panic by the public and to keep Japan in the dark about the balloons' effects." He favored Ben with an informative glance. "For what it's worth, captain, the Japs' 'secret' weapon is not starting forest fires anything like intended--the incendiary devices appear to be faulty somehow."

"But not the explosive part," Ben cited darkly. "It worked just fine in blowing Sig Prokosch to bits. And why won't it do it every time some poor fool

who doesn't know any better comes across a strange gadget on the beach or out in the woods? Somebody who hasn't read about it because we kept it from them?"

"That calculation, as I said, is not ours to make," the colonel uttered with the patience of bureaucratic practice. "Your understandably heartfelt article on Seaman Prokosch needs a bit of fixing, is all. Simply approach it from the angle that he was killed in a munitions mishap, let it go at that, and then--"

Ben broke in:

"Like the old newspaper joke of describing a hanged man as having been found dead under a tree, do you mean, sir?"

It drew him a look of mixed regard and reassessment. One more time, the colonel cautioned himself that these westerners were prickly.

The congressional hearing a few days before had been sailing along smoothly, the colonel concealed in plain sight amid the row of brass and braid and blue serge in back of the director of the Office of War Information as he testified, when a voice twanged out from down the line of senators.

"Mister Chairman, might I put in about two bits' worth of questions, just to earn my keep?"

"I yield to my friend, the gentleman from Montana."

"Thank you kindly." The Senator pulled at his weathered beak of a nose for a long moment as if tugging loose whatever was stored in his head, then addressed the OWI chief.  "There's one setup here in the scheme of things



Well, here it is, and with something strangely like the spin of a compass in himself Ben began trying to set his mind to it, that ticket to Somewhere in Europe. Moxie, you win the sterling pencil pusher for a change.

“--you’ll need to tidy up with your clerk, finish up any pieces you’re working on, you may be gone a good while--”

Or a bad one, colonel, given the history of this.

“--and when the time is nearer, we’ll let you know your departure date--”

Oh, swell, let’s add waiting to the game.

“--for your old stomping grounds, the Pacific.”

Ben was floored. *What, again? Capital Y why?* Danzer had been written about not all that long ago, there was nothing sane to be further said about his cushy boat ride through the war. It just did not make a lick of journalistic sense that he could see, returning to-- Wait a minute: return. *Oh goddamn, no.*

“Sir, begging your pardon, I don’t want to seem out of line or anything, but damn it,” everything in him blew, “are you sending me out there again just so Tepee Weepy will have an eyewitness when MacArthur wades ashore at Manila or Zamboanga or Leyte or wherever the hell he’s going to do it? When that happens there’ll be correspondents and photographers up the gigi, the general will have to wade through the cameras and reporters as much as the surf, and I don’t see why I--”

“Calm down, captain. Watching Douglas MacArthur walk on water is not going to be your primary mission.”

“Then what is?” he asked dubiously, still suspicious that somewhere in MacArthur’s entourage as the great man returned to the Philippines would be Danzer flourishing a white tablecloth and a feast of pork.

“The story is still developing, I’m not at liberty to tell you.” Reaching into the attache case at his side, the colonel extracted a file of clippings and dropped it dead-center on Ben’s work place at the desk. He smiled just enough. “It might not hurt, though, if you were to do some bedtime reading about the Montaneers.”

Beyond floored, this time Ben stared at the colonel in shock. The man might as well have said to him, “*Learn the rules of dueling, you’re going to Dan Standish’s outfit.*” All else being equal, he could have understood that the regiment that had been unendingly fighting up and down the jungle hellholes of the Pacific and now doubtless was destined for the invasion of the Philippines constituted a legitimate story to be written. All else was not equal, not even close, bedtime reading had already happened any number of times and it was indubitably the Braille of unclad lover to unclad lover while a Montaneer was out there in the jungle stuck with a matching wedding band. Still stunned, Ben grappled with two instant convictions, that coming face to face with Cass’s husband in the Montaneers’ next island assault was by all odds a long shot, and that in the perversity of this war it absolutely would happen.

He stood there stone-still, watched expectantly by the colonel, haunted in every direction he could look. The quantities of death he had seen in the world of war. All the times of sitting to the typewriter to turn teammates’ foreshortened lives into handfuls of words. Bruno’s eleven, fingered by fate when the coach’s

norm

“Busy hands keep a guy out of trouble,” Jake proclaimed piously. “Sometimes.” They clinked bottles. “That’s one more reason you’ve got to keep yourself in one piece, you know--I’ve got a date with that movie of yours.” The big man grinned crookedly. “I want to see you fry Bruno’s nuts for him.”

The autumn that everyone at East Base hoped would be the last one of the war kept confusing itself with winter--a snow squall for the first day of fall, then clouds that looked like they were lined with lead chronically hanging low over October’s advance across the calendar. He was late arriving to the roadhouse, due mainly to weather delays of incoming flights with Very Important Persons aboard, Jones and his camera having needed a final tutorial in brazening it out when generals and admirals scowled at the presence of the lens.

It’s all yours now, corporal old kid, Tepee Weepy be thy guardian angel.

As for himself, he kept trying to think only of these last hours with Cass before he climbed on the plane in the morning. Kept trying and failing. These few weeks since she came back from training her squadron to the new fighter planes had been time after time of glimpsed and gone; the P-63s flying north with the red star on their sides whenever he looked up, the stolen bits of love-making with her here at the eternal roadhouse or in his dumpy hotel bed too desperate and brief. All he had told her, all he could stand to tell her, was that he was being shipped out to the Pacific on assignments he would be filled in on when he got there. He meant it as a mercy, in not saying anything about being tossed in with the Montaneers in whatever bloody pocket of the ^{Philippines} ~~Boyle~~ invasion held them. Whether or not it was



A jeep was coming toward him at more speed than it should have been on the wet runway, its wipers sloshing madly. Between swipes when it pulled up, he could make out the stumpy figure of Jones at the wheel. An isinglass window flapped open and the corporal delivered the non-news:

“They scrapped your trip, captain. Better climb in.”

So soaked he did not really want the company of his own clothes and skin, Ben squished into the passenger seat. “Tepee Weepy’s orders--they sent the message in the clear, just put it on the wire,” Jones was saying as if having been present at a miracle. “Boy oh boy, captain, it’s hard to figure these things out, isn’t it?” He squinted back and forth from the windshield to Ben. “I went around to the clerk in the situation room and bugged him until he’d tell me what was up. You’d think we’d have heard about something like this, but Washington wanted the lid kept on the news, and so I guess we couldn’t have had any idea of--”

“Jones, cool down and don’t skid this thing into a parked plane. Now, in English if you can, what *is* up?”

“The Philippines. All heck is breaking loose out there.”

endless days and nights, the man on watch believed he had done nobly--not heroically; that was a dimension he did not care to approach--at his post inside at the battle status board, keeping straight the tremendous number of ship names and their whereabouts during the constantly changing struggle. Now, sweaty and fatigued as he was, he felt entitled to a markedly more triumphant watch than this was turning out to be. By now Leyte Gulf was signed, sealed, and delivered for the American side, as would be the campaign ribbons and the commendations to go on one's service record. Yet there was the *St. Lo*, not that far off, still exploding like a gunpowder factory every few minutes.

Then he glimpsed the plane, in the low-hanging murk of smoke from the burning carrier. The half-hidden aircraft was skimming almost down onto the water, one of the carrier's own trying to ditch, he thought at first. But no, as it emerged incredibly low and fast out of the pall of smoke its wing markings flashed into view, the red ball of the Rising Sun bringing flame to the bridge of the *McCorkle*, the last thing Nick Danzer would ever see.

YOUR CHUM KIA CONFIRMED. SORRY. STORY NEEDED SOONEST.

What was there to say? His first thought when the bells began going off on the TPWP teletype had been that surely it must be a case of mistaken identity. How was it conceivable that Danzer, of them all, would not maneuver through the war without so much as getting a toenail broken, until he came home a medal-polished version of the Dancer? But that notion or any other could not withstand a suicide plane.

Helplessly clutching the teletype message as if it had attached itself to him, it took him a little time to stop trying to outstare the blind numbers it brought with it. ~~The~~ Pacific war, its odds askew, now had chosen both Animal and Danzer for death out of what should have been statistical security. One wearing a uniform for what he could put into it, and the other for what he could get out of it, and it made no difference to the creeping wall of oblivion. *"We've had the casualty figures from other wars run....Many more soldiers survive than people think, and our figures merely back that up..."* Sure, colonel, tell that to Bruno's eleven, marked down to four all of a sudden. *When the hell is it ever going to let up?*

The job brought Ben out of that, the newspaperman's allegiance to the story. Faced with writing a farewell to Danzer fit for the world to read, he felt like a mechanic without tools. The task was there to be done, but how? The report of the kamikaze attack was coldly without details. There was not even a service record to cadge from, the grim file with the red tag on the upper corner; the war's initials for combat death simply were banged onto teletype paper along with reams of other military lingo quantifying the Leyte Gulf carnage. It was times like this when the making of words turned into frantic manufacture, and Ben started out of the wire room sickly dreading what it would take to bring an obituary version of Slick Nick out of his fingertips across the next some hours.

Behind him, the TPWP teletype bell rang five times again.

As Pacific amphibious landings went, Leyte was not as murderous as Tarawa and Peleliu and Guam had been, nor Iwo Jima and Okinawa yet to come.

But murderous enough, predictably, where the hard-luck Montaneers were involved.

On Leyte the bloodiest combat moved inland a lot sooner than in most other island assaults, with the Japanese line of defense swiftly pulling back from the usual hellish beach to higher, even more horrendous jungle terrain. The day the sailors' long-range battle out in the gulf drew to an end, the Montaneers after most of a week of costly attacks managed to secure a strategic but otherwise worthless ridge called Dry Gulch Hill. Probably there was a Dry Gulch Hill on every ^{Pacific} island where the Montaneer regiment had seen action. ~~New Guinea,~~ ~~Hollandia, Biak~~ but none had been more treacherous than this. This one was about as high as a football field is long, a desolate muddy hump that had been given an artillery haircut, leaving only palm snags and a general air of determined destruction. With a completeness like that of fog, the stench of corpses of Japanese soldiers rotting in the sun hung over the trails up the hill. The fighting had moved on, and high on the most recently battered section of slope the first two stretcher bearers to arrive were at work amid the wounded and worse than wounded under an embankment that had become an aid station. The one in charge glanced around as a second pair of bearers came slipping and sliding up the trail, cursing the red mud. "Where you been, sightseeing?"

"Stopped for cigars and caviar, what the hell do you think?" the lead man snapped back. "Murray's carry strap gave out and we had to pull up to tie the sonofabitch together. What's the picture here?"

"I'm doing what I can to keep blood in people," back there amid the warless parachutes of the smoke jumper camp, *"instead of letting it out of them."*

rem

Fine, well and good, Dex, that was your decision, as large as life itself.

But then? What got to you? The hundredth time some yokel along the Seeley Lake road shouted "yellow belly" at you? The feeling of odd man out, nagging at you in those nights you struggled to sleep? You were made of stronger stuff than that, though, you could shrug those off even if they did get under your skin. No, it took something that hurt you down to the bone, and I was a witness to it coming. You died of gossip. Mere goddamn gossip.

Slumped against the wire room wall, the two messages crumpled and then uncrumpled in his helpless hands, Ben numbly added and subtracted elements in the weighing of both lives. Gossip was never mere if you were a mercantile prince, an heir with rivals to the prideful fortunes of the Cariston name, was it. And if you sliced conscience with a blade of disdain like Danzer's, there was nothing unnatural about skewering a rival not even going through the motions of serving in uniform, right, Slick Nick? *Talk about enemy action. The war didn't invent that particular one. Goddamn Danzer, I did what I could to head him off while I was on the ship. But all he had to do was wait until people forgot that shark piece a little bit and then have his wolfpack of haberdashers start the gossip about Dex, the conchie who would not serve his country in uniform.*

And Tepee Weepy fit into this--where? TPWP and the colonel, simply lost in the forest of good intentions? He felt entitled to doubt that. Yet as furiously as Ben searched for its red hand in it all, he could tell that Tepee Weepy's influence

was not necessarily there this time. To his certain knowledge, it had kept hands off Dex all the while he was at the conscientious objector camp; if it had ever tried to push him into military service, the politically connected Cariston dynasty would have shown the Threshold Press War Project what real pull was. No, go over it every way he could find, it kept coming out the same: Dex surely must have enlisted on his own, and matters took their own course from there. A medic for the smoke jumpers, he offered himself as one for the infantry. Another Montanan built rugged enough to tackle jungle life, off he went to the next jungle awaiting invasion. All Tepee Weepy had to do was sit back and keep track, these past several months, and at the right time send Ben out to the Montaneers and there was the story, Dexter Cariston in charge of uniform and conscience. It was heartless, but only heartlessly professional.

Feeling like he was in a vise the size of the TPWP teletype, Ben headed for the nearest wire room clerk. He grabbed up the paper pad, made two quick jabs with a pencil, and handed it over. The teletype operator blinked at it. "I can't just send a punctuation mark."

"You goddamn well will or you'll be peeling spuds until your thumbs fall off."

Sourly the ~~telex~~ operator hit the single key.

"?"

The reply came in a matter of minutes.

GOOD QUESTION, YOUR ANXIETY ABOUT PRIORITY UNDERSTOOD. FILE
KAMIKAZE PIECE FIRST. CARISTON TO HAVE FUNERAL. NO REMAINS OF
DANZER; YOUR STORY THE LAST WORD. SEND SOONEST.

He had to give it a number of tries, but by late that night he had a thousand words that managed to say between the lines that it had taken the largest naval battle in history to corner the Dancer.

The eleventh day of the eleventh month came white and gray in Helena, sticky snow in the early morning hours and sullen overcast for the afternoon. At the cemetery, Ben and Jake were encased in the coarse military overcoats besides their dress uniforms, but it was cold on the feet. They picked their way through the slushy snow toward the graveside where the Cariston clan and what looked like half of Helena were assembling, Jake grousing at the weather and the war and funerals and the Alaska duty he still was stuck with. "Nome sweet Nome, they ought to give the place back to the Eskimo~~s~~es," he was ending up with. "Thanks for getting me out of that frozen dump for a couple of days for this, I guess."

"Habit by now." The words came from Ben as chilly as the fog of breath around them, and Jake looked at him with concern. He didn't notice. He could feel everything about this day crushing in on him, this icy conclusion of Dex's life to be written, and what waited later. Armistice Day with the world caught up in an even worse war was in itself not anything to help a mood. Fingers stiff and

in 1918? The numerous Caristons with their set Scotch faces were not a family one could see into.

When the burial was done, they shook hands with the family and said their condolences. Jake showed surprise when Ben begged off the gathering at the Montana Club afterward, saying the two of them had something else they had to tend to in town before heading back to East Base.

“Something better than good whiskey at the fanciest place in Helena?” Jake asked righteously as they left the cemetery.

“You’ll see,” Ben said.

He took him along to meet Cass.

They met out at the edge of town in the Broadwater Hotel, which was not far from the Fort Harrison military hospital. Its landmark turrets and spreadeagle porches caked with snow, the elderly hotel looked under the weather in more ways than one, having seen better days and ritzier assignments. Cass, in uniform, was waiting in a faintly Victorian parlor off the lobby.

Standing to greet the pair of them, she led off with a pinpoint smile to Ben. “I see you brought some reinforcement along, good.” She and Jake knew each other by sight from East Base life, but shook hands pilot to pilot for the first time. “Ben was just telling me about you,” he said with ponderous neutrality.

Cass looked more worn out than Ben had ever seen her. “I don’t have as much time as I’d like”--she gazed at him and then included Jake--“I had the nurse

tell Dan I was going to the drugstore. He's most likely asleep. He sleeps huge amounts since he was brought back."

They sank into the nearest plush triangle of chairs. In the awkward settling in, Ben went first: "What are they telling you at the hospital?"

Cass steeled herself and began. "Dan got shot through the shoe top. Doesn't sound like much, does it?" She looked at the two men who were sound of limb as if reluctantly translating this for them. "Wouldn't you know, though, the bullet caught the leg dead center. There'll need to be a bone operation and a skin graft and--we don't know what all yet." She shuddered a little, not just for effect. "No wonder they call the place Fort Hairy." Rushing now to get this part over with, she listed off: "As soon as he has enough life back in that leg, they're sending him to California. There's some specialist there--he takes a tendon from somewhere else and patches it into the leg. Dan will have to learn to walk."

The thought sat there, until it was Jake who rumbled, "That's a rough go, for both of you."

Cass tried to grin gamely. "I'll have time. They're kicking me out of the service around Christmas." Seeing Ben's expression become even more tortured, she quickly went on: "All the women pilots, not just me. They're inactivating the WASPs." She toughed it out for a few sentences more. "The boys are coming home. Nobody needs the female of the species in the cockpit from here on."

Was there anything the war could not warp? After all of Ben's times of wanting Cass out of fighter planes with half a ton of engine riding at the back of her neck, now he sorrowed for her over this, too.

treatment. Then we got to talking, just stuff. Next thing we knew"--by now his voice was down to where pain comes in, and it hurt to listen--"we couldn't live without each other. It gets into your blood before you can turn around, Ice."

Jake seemed to gathering his thoughts around that before finally saying:
 "Even porkies find a way to make love."

"I'll have to think about that."

"It takes two, Ben."

With Jake's words lodged in him he sat there lost in himself, seeing her in every phase of their time together--Cass over him, under him, clothes on, clothes off, making a face over coma cola, the long talks, the quick jokes, the wedding ring that only came off in the cockpit pocket of a P-39. "Her husband's outfit regularly got the raw end in the Pacific," he heard himself saying as if under ether, "there wasn't a whole lot of chance he would make it through the war. But I never damn once hoped for that. Not once. You can't and stand yourself." He halted. "There was no lifetime guarantee on me, either. The eleven of us haven't been any insurance agent's dream, have we. Why shouldn't she hang on to her marriage when every time she turned around I was being sent someplace where people were getting knocked off? I can't blame Cass."

The car moved on in the silence of the canyon, the cuts of the road hemmed to the river now with seams of snow. This was territory for black ice and Jake tapped the brakes a few times to gauge the road surface. Between, he asked:

"So I was the chaperone, back there at the hotel?"

"You guessed it."

END SUPREME TEAM SERIES NOW? GETTING LONELY, JUST WE THREE.

The final line was trickiest of all to come up with, possibly because it was hard to write with fingers crossed.

WHAT IF TOKYO ROSE AND LORD HAW HAW KNOW HOW TO COUNT.

“Don’t you want me to put a question mark on this, sir?”

“It’s not a question, soldier, it’s a supposition. Just send it.”

Nothing came back that day, no matter how much Ben hung around the wire room and mooched coffee and sprang alert every time a teletype bell went off.  *Come on, you TPWP SOBs. Answer. Call off the damned series. Or are you going to tell me and the couple of thousand newspaper editors watching for this byline you set me up with that eight dead heroes aren’t enough?*

The days after that, he sent Jones to check for a reply so many times that at last the corporal just gave him a funny look and started off before he could get the words out. Finally, at week’s end, a wire room clerk stuck his face in the doorway and said there was a five-bell message waiting.

TPWP MINDFUL OF HAW-HAW AND TOKYO ROSE. FULLY INTEND ENEMY PROPAGANDA WILL NOT SCORE BIG ON SUPREME TEAM. SERIES WILL BE MODIFIED. DETAILS FOLLOW SOON.

Ben read and re-read the sheet of wire copy for what it said and did not say. That damned “modify” again. The Tepee Weepy meaning of SOON was also clear as mud. He plainly enough had their attention, though, with that dig about what the master propagandists in Berlin and Tokyo could do with the obliteration of any more of the team. *So, okay, that does spook them and it’s up to me to keep*

Get it, colonel and your partners in manufacturing the news? I damn sure am sick of guys from the team turning into dead men whenever the sonofabitching war feels like it, whatever the odds are supposed to be. If you can't pull strings to save Jake's skin and Moxie's and for that matter mine, then kick me out with a dishonorable piece of paper for refusing orders, see if I goddamn care. I may be blackballed for life, but at least I'll be in one piece. He sent this message knowing he really was playing a thin hand now, but gambling that Tepee Weepy had its own stake in keeping him in the game.

ILLNESS UNDERSTOOD, the answer clattered back within minutes. PLAN IS TO HONOR STAMPER, EISMAN, YOU, AS SURVIVORS OF SUPREME TEAM SAGA. FEELING BETTER?

Hovering at the clerk's shoulder, he sent right back:

SOME. WAITING TO SEE WHAT MEDICINE IS INVOLVED.

The wait this time stretched his nerves to the sagging point. It was growing dark enough outside for the five bells of the TPWP wire machine to constitute a vesper serenade before the return message began coming in.

MANDATORY BURN THIS AFTER YOU READ.

I guess I have their attention. "Loan me your lighter and nab a clean butt can for a bonfire." The clerk sighed and complied.

The whacking teletype keys seemed to spell out the message with particular emphasis now.

STAMPER IS FINAL STORY, BLAZE OF GLORY, ALL THAT.

"Quick, shoot this off to them." Ben was grabbing for the notepad.

whitened town. Flakes were coming down featherlike, yet every so often the wind dislodged a branchload from the cottonwood trees, producing a commotion like white dust rising back up, more clods falling within it. The all but silent crash of snow lent an otherworldly quality to this night, the first of many such the two of them were going to have to get used to.

“Where do you think he is by now?” Cloyce asked in a hushed voice.

Bill cleared his throat. “The Long Island field, maybe.” All during the day he had studied Ben’s route on the wall map of the *Gleaner* office every time he glanced up. New York. Newfoundland. Greenland. Iceland. England. Europe and whatever that portended.

“At least we did get to see him,” she mused, as if still trying out for her role as mother. “Even if it was slim pickings as holidays go.”

It was not a Spam Thanksgiving as she had warned Ben in his last-minute phone call that it might need to be, but it was venison pot roast, dry and gamy, procured by Bill in some manner that he would not divulge. The guests’ dishes similarly tasted of improvisation: Carnelia Muntz’s tomato-soup-and-olives aspic, without the olives; Mae Vennaman’s dried apple pie, craftily achieved with saved sugar coupons. A decidedly mixed review, Cloyce told herself, but better than none. The duration sat right up to the table with them all, and the talk among the older people, which was everyone but Ben, kept coming back to whether the war would be over by the end of the year. “Sure,” Ben had replied, “I just don’t know what year.” It had drawn a laugh from everyone except his parents.

nam

Now Cloyce gauged her husband and what was stacked in front of him on the desk. "You've been reading it again, haven't you."

Nodding, he reached around and squared the pages of the script. "You're the expert, but I'd call it one hell of a movie."

"You're right, it's a wonderful work." She paused, the tip of her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "They actually did that to the Purcell boy?" It both was a question and not.

"They did. Ben has a first-hand source."

"I just wish he hadn't been so dramatic about leaving it with us," she murmured. ~~"Mother, Dad, I don't make it back, do what you can with this, okay?"~~ ^{his words still were in the air of the house, "if} nom

Bill Reinking smiled gently. Just sitting there in her nightgown, she looked ready for a director to sing out *Action!* "I can't imagine where he gets it from."

She gave back a soft laugh, then looked out into the sift of snow again. "I would give years off my own life to have kept Ben from being sent into danger all the time." She turned her gaze to Bill. "I did try, you know."

"How would I?" His head dipped as he looked at her through the very tops of his glasses. "You never said so, Cloyce."

She smiled the slightest bit. "That's what comes of living with newspapermen. If I'd told you, it would have gone right into his ear." The smile flicked off. "As you can tell, I couldn't get the job done. All those family friends in Washington, Bill? People my parents were thick as thieves with in the old

days? Not a one of them,” her tone deadly level, “would find a safe spot for our only son.” It was not like her to curse, but she found the coldness of voice for it now. “The short-memored bastards.”

Bill touched the script again. “If--we have to do something with this, do you think you can?”

Her chin came up. “That’s different, thank goodness. The Carteret name still means something at Zanuck’s studio and some of the others.” She nodded slowly. “I can get them to read *The Ghost Runner* and that’s all it will take, I guarantee you. Ben’s movie will be made, it’s too good not to.”

Cloyce saw her husband’s mood uncloud just a bit and smiled further encouragement to him. “Ben will get to tend to that himself,” she said firmly. “I told him I was counting on him for New Year’s again.”

He was cooling his heels in a few hours’ layover in Newfoundland when a clerk tracked him down.

“Sir? Are you the TPWP captain? I’m from the wire room. Message there for you.”

Wondering *What now?*, he let the soldier lead him to the communications building. The teletype sheet was ripped and ready, waiting for him. He read it, went outside and threw up in the snow.

A week. And I didn’t have so much as a goddamn hint about it. Jake’s plane had been missing on the flight between Fairbanks and Nome for seven days,

the official time for giving an aircraft and its crew up for lost. Oblivion of the worst kind; it was not known whether the B-17 ^{bomber}perished in the Alaskan mountains or the Bering Sea. Ben felt as if his soul had been operated on, an essence of life cut out of him. *Why Jake? Why now?* There in the Newfoundland cold, he tried to grapple himself together. Back in to the wire room. Dull jots on the message pad, handed to the clerk to be sent to Tepee Weepy.

I NEED TIME.

Tersely TPWP arranged a layover until the next morning's flight to Europe.

He spent a terrible day, wrestling the words out.

Sky-high in his hundred-mission crush hat, loud as a good takeoff, Lt.

Jacob Eisman flew through life amending the laws of gravity as he went. He was Jake to the world, and jake with us, those who knew him in all his big ways.

A line, two, would come, and then he would have to abandon the typewriter, go outside to clear his head in the elemental Newfoundland weather.

He came to this war from a thousand years of one-sided battles, his family becoming American--All-American in the finest truest use of those words--out of a past ridden over by Cossacks too many times. And by one of the quirks war is so good at, he piloted bombers to Russian comrades waiting in Alaska, back door to Siberia, in the airborne supply line to the Eastern Front where the largest battles in history are being fought.

At the end, he sought out the base library to look it up.

An officer, stubby and bright-eyed, stepped in front of him. Amid the wardrobe explosion of uniforms it took Ben a moment to identify this one as British, the sainted Royal Air Force.

“Captain Reinking, is it?”

The mellifluous accent issued from a boyish ruddy face with a nose on it like the round end of a hammer. From that ballpeen nose on down, the blue-clad officer was built about as square as a man could be without a loading pallet under him. “I trust you had a good flight? I’m Lieutenant Overby. Assigned to you, it seems. Your liaison to the sector communications branch.”

Ben did not like the looks of this. By this stage of the war, he had caught the enlisted men’s aversion to fresh-faced lieutenants; that first syllable dangerously rhymed with “new” and green looey were trouble in combat. He wasn’t looking for combat, but he wasn’t looking for whatever trouble might come with this British version of shavetail, either. “Lieut--leftenant,” he acknowledged this one with a dubious nod.

“I’m instructed to see to your needs,” the pleasant tumble of words ensued again, “show you the ins and outs of the ticker room, and all that. Oh, and your mother branch--TPWP, if I have the alphabet mix right?-- sends its regards. Let’s see, I copied it off: ‘END ZONE IN SIGHT. BRIEF TIMEOUT. HUDDLE UP, SCORING PLAY IS ON WAY.’” The RAF man glanced up at him with polite reserve. “A bit over our heads in the code department, I’m afraid, and we do hope we managed to descipher it correctly. Make sense to you, does it, captain?”

The lieutenant sent him a quick hard look. Down went the pack, and he took off his cap and ran a hand contemplatively over a dome of bald head. With the cap absent, Ben could see Overby was a good deal older and more seasoned than he'd first seemed. A lip was being chewed dubiously in the ruddy face. "It's a bit of a step--a fair number of miles, forth and back."

"I don't care how far it is."

"Not a problem, then." Overby set his cap as if aiming it on a compass heading and moved off with the travel pack, leading Ben to a hard-used jeep.

"Away we go, captain."

The jeep rattled along a cobblestone road so worn down that the Duke of Wellington's troops might have marched on it. Ben realized Antwerp was farther away than it had appeared from the airfield, the murky constant half-fog of the low country making it tricky to judge distance. Overby at the steering wheel seemed intent on making up for the lost career as a Spitfire pilot; every time he took a curve at a leaning angle, Ben missed Jones and his old-maid driving.

"The heater's up as much as it will go," Overby informed him as if he had asked. "Comfy?"

"Enough." Actually he felt highly uncomfortable with the weighty .45 automatic strapped on his right hip. When the Britisher or whatever he was proffered the weapon, web belt, and holster to him before setting out, he'd tried to turn it down with "I'm a correspondent, I don't pack a gun."

“I’m afraid you’re in for a lot of bother if you decline to,” Overby had launched into. “Top command’s orders. The military police are instructed to pick up anyone off-base without at least a sidearm, and it must be loaded at all times. Of course, it is an individual decision whether or not one puts the gun to use, but that is a different cup of tea from whether one must carry--”

“Okay, okay,” he had cut off the discourse, “give me the damn thing. You’re responsible if I shoot my foot off.” Now he was back to trying to figure out how much to trust this Overby. *Assigned to me in what way? To keep an eye on me for Tepee Weepy so I don’t mess up their hoopla for Moxie? To lay down his coat for me every time I cross a mud puddle? To pull out his red pencil when I--*

Brakes screeching, the jeep pulled to a stop, facing a moving wall of military trucks and a frowning MP directing traffic. They had come to a ring road, at what looked to be a couple of miles out from the edge of Antwerp. “Convoys run day and night from the port,” Overby raised his voice to be heard over the rumble of the trucks. “You’re seeing the main supply line to the front.” They watched the big Army 6x6’s carrying food, fuel, medicine and munitions roll by as if on an assembly line until at last there was a slight break in the traffic. The MP danced aside in the intersection and motioned hurry-up, and the jeep shot across.

“You were posted to England,” Overby picked right back up, evidently duty-bound to make conversation, “earlier in the war, captain? You saw something of the Blitz, then?”



“That’s right, lieu--leftenant. Look, can we go by first names?”

“Assuredly, if you prefer.” He tapped an attache case lodged between the seats with *Lt. Maurice Overby RAF* stenciled on it.

“Same song, second verse,” Ben said. “Does that translate to ‘Morris’ or ‘Moreese’?”

“Either, actually. Whichever I try to specify, half of the human herd get it wrong anyway.”

“I’ll go with ‘Moreese,’ it makes me feel like I’m in distinguished company.” He still was trying to solve the RAF subaltern’s mannerisms. “I wouldn’t say I can always tell Hackney from cockney, but you don’t sound like anyone I was ever around on bases in England.”

“Oh, heavens no,” accompanied by a scoffing chuckle at any trace of Englishness. Maurice was navigating past spates of Belgians on bicycles, men and women both and nearly all as thin as living scarecrows, close enough to reach out and touch. “New Zealand’s my home--the real country, south of the Bombay Hills. Place called Christchurch.”

“Well, sonofagun,” Ben pulled his attention away from Belgium moving past on spokes and wheels, “Erewhon, huh?”

“You know of it? This is magical!” Maurice showed genuine enthusiasm for the first time. “Not many people can locate ‘nowhere’ spelled backwards, more or less. A devotee of the works of old Samuel Butler, are you then, Ben?”

“Not especially, read him some in college. Odd facts run in the family.”

"I know it's only a book done ~~where~~[#] where I was bred and raised," nostalgia wafted from behind the steering wheel, "but still, old Sam caught the country around Christchurch to the very blades of grass. To this day, freshets off his pages play against my pores."

"Maurice? Not to put too fine a point to this, but what in hell did you do in civilian life?"

"I professed," the occupant of the jeep driver's seat said as though it was perfectly obvious. "I was professor of rhetoric and argumentation there at Canterbury College. The war rather took care of that. The Japanese were closing in on Australia, and New Zealand looked to be next, so I joined up to fight for the homeland"--he looked aside at his uniformed passenger--"didn't we all.

Naturally, the instant I had my commission, I was seconded to London. Plopped into the RAF, plopped again into the communications branch, put in charge of a pencil. Daft of the higher-ups, but there you are." He glanced over again.

"You're a considerable word man yourself, as I understand it, the byline and all."

Ben shifted the aggravating .45 on his hip. "Tepee Weepy seems to think so or they wouldn't keep sending me to places like this."

"Tepee--? Oh, ha. Very good."

In what amounted to a blink at the rate Maurice drove, they passed one last open field and were in the city, aged three-and four-story housefronts with steep crenulated gables and tall skinny chimneys suddenly everywhere. An unwilling spectator to any more misery of war, Ben had to spectate nonetheless. Antwerp had gone gaunt during the occupation years, the German army had seen to that.

A gunnery sergeant was poking his head out of the pit. "One incoming, cap," he called out. "Five minutes."

Moxie took charge before the words were out of the air. "Acknowledged, Smitty. Get on the horn to fire control and the spotters"--Ben could not help but hear come into the voice the snap of cadence used for good effect in football huddles--"tell them smoke break and grab-ass is over. And chew out the loaders on Charlie gun while you're at it, yesterday they were slower than a three-legged race." He glanced at Ben and Maurice as though they were an afterthought. "It's time to shoot something down. If I was you two, I'd get my butt in back of those sandbags over there."

The pair of them hustled behind the head-high stack between gun pits, Ben asking: "They can track the things that far out?"

"Radar, yes, but it's not so much that," Maurice replied, checking his wristwatch. "When the Germans are at this, they launch one every quarter of an hour. They're quite Teutonic about that habit, in the worst sense. Oh, right, that prods the old memory box. Here," he dug in a flap pocket of his uniform for something, "as a healthy measure, carry this with you when you're out and about."

Ben looked in bafflement at what he had been handed. It appeared to be a pocket watch, but with only one hand and no crystal.

"It's a cocotte clock, in case you're wondering," the explanation was diplomatically put. "A chef's timer, actually, but French prostitutes use these to keep track of the various phases of their services. I have done the necessary research." Maurice paused dreamily. "Ah, Paris. What was that term you used--"

buttons the giddy night in Seattle...*One of those that folds down out of the wall? Genius, what's to keep it from folding back up into the wall just when things get interesting?* Cass snuggling next to him in the shelter of the Hill 57 rocks, the Homecoming game losing their interest...*Do I have a better offer?*

“Hey, we’re not hearing any fooling-around report out of you, Ben.”

Moxie was feeling better and better as the beer and the night went on. “Haven’t you hooked up with anybody yet?”

Silence was no longer an option, with the two moony faces turned to him.

“I did for a while. She’s a,” he swallowed hard, “a nurse, too--of a kind.”

Nine time zones away, Jones was trying to make a readable press release out of East Base’s announcement of another one thousand Lend-Lease aircraft successfully transported into Russian hands. He hummed a snatch of hymn when he was alone and bored, and he was humming now; there were six previous announcements of this sort and even he did not regard this as the freshest of news. He was trying to decide whether it was worth it to change *seven thousand* to the *seventh thousand* when he became aware someone had paused at the office doorway.

He glanced around, and for this officer rose nicely to his feet as he had been taught to do at home.

“Help you with something, captain?”

“If you’re feeling full of Christian charity,” said Cass with a lump in her throat.

He remembered in all ways. The heart never forgets anything; the flesh remembers indiscriminately. *There were all those times I caught myself wishing you'd get a tiny one--just another scar--and be out of the war for good. But if Dan's is any indication, the price is awful damn high. I take him over to Fort Hairy once a week for the bone doc to test how his leg is coming along, and he hates that routine. He's on crutches in between--he hates that, too. Sometime after the first of the year, they'll ship him to the specialist who'll patch that tendon in and then all the time in rehab, as they call it. We go around and around about whether I stay with him in California for all that. I say of course I will. He says like hell I will, he can be a cripple just the same without me around, go do something useful with myself. In some odd way I think he wants to be with other Montaneer guys--you know what a bloody mess Leyte has turned out to be, bunches of the worst wounded from his regiment are ending up there in San Diego--more than with me. I'm not crying on your shoulder, Ben, I just needed to tell somebody who knows up from down when it comes to a man and a woman.*

Enough of that. This is the last time you'll ever hear from Capt. Standish  *-his eyes misted instantly at that--in WASP uniform. They're inactivating us the middle of the month--happy holidays, P-39 birdwomen, huh?--and the squadron will scatter to the winds. Mary Cat is going into schoolteaching. Della has her hooks into a major in Ops, and he's ga-ga enough she'll probably get him to marry her. I have my hands full with Dan, but I've been wondering whether to try to get on with the Forest Service after a while, flying smoke patrol. It'll be the*



same old thing, though, will they hire a woman pilot? Maybe it'll all sort out okay after the war. But that's too far away to think.

He pinched the bridge of skin between his eyes waiting for the worst of the thought to pass: if there is an *after*. Then he blinked back into reading the last of the letter.

I suppose I could tell you I miss you something awful. But too much truth is maybe not a good idea, given the situation. You are always going to be a part of me, despite the gold string on my finger that ties me to Dan. I couldn't Dear John him while he was out in the Pacific, and I can't do it to you while you're over there. I think of you more than is healthy, and I just want you to know I regret not one damn thing of our time together.

It is getting late, and it's snowing like sixty--the O Club windowsills look like igloo territory--and I have to get back to the apartment. Now all this is off my chest--no wisecrack about that sort of thing, you--and on its way to wherever you've ended up. Take care, Ben--I don't need another hole in my life.

Hugs and tickles,

Cass

Back and forth, he walked the narrow confines of bunker room, holding the letter as if memorizing it. For all his skills at what was said between the lines, supposition resisted him here as he read the sentences over and over.

In her feisty Cass way she wished him well, and maybe cast a major wish beyond that, but nothing under the ink had really changed, had it?

all had been eaten during Belgium's starving years of Nazi occupation, including the horses.

The graying snow on the farmyards and fields like a tablecloth on an abandoned empty table, they drove on into the flat midland of Belgium. In that world with all the noise smothered out of it, he and Maurice could talk comfortably. Moxie had told him they were goofy for going out on this. "You haven't seen enough battlefields to last you for one lifetime, Rhine King?" Not enough ones gone quiet. "I don't know if these are the same roads Wellington and Napoleon had," Ben remarked as he pointed out the next turnoff, "but you're sure as hell making better time than they did." Maurice handled the jeep as if captaining a yacht, swinging wide on the curves and making up for it with unfurled speed on the straight stretches.

rem ✓

"Ah, well," the figure presiding at the wheel said loftily, "one likes to get there in timely fashion, forth and back."

Not for the first time in honor of the New Zealander's locutions, Ben chuckled. "Is that a Southern Hemisphere way of looking at things, like the bathtub draining the opposite direction?"

"Hmm? Not at all, it's simple logic. One cannot, Ben, go *back* before one goes *forth*, therefore--

Ben pursed a smile. "Spoken like a professor of argumentation."

"We shall see how I am as a battlefield muse." Maurice patted the attache case between them. "*The Trekker's Guidebook to the Historic Battle at Waterloo*. Gift from my father, right off, when he learned I'd been posted to Belgium."

member of her squadron out of a thousand by the way the hat sat. She inspected them one last time as they stood at attention.

“Della, half step right. M.C., half step left. That’s Beryl’s spot between you.”

With a deep breath she gave the command, and the squadron marched along the flightline to the hangar where the inactivation ceremony would be held.

Work on the unpainted bombers and P-63s stilled for a moment as the women mechanics in hairnets and overalls looked around from the wings and platform ladders they stood on to the WASPs crisply saluting the waiting general. The gathering was not large. A perfunctory honor guard, rifles at rest and flag drooping in the still air of the hangar. The fresh-faced Canadian liaison officer, down from Edmonton for the occasion. Jones with a Speed Graphic camera, blazing away with flashbulb after flashbulb; he had worshipfully let Cass know there would be a set of photographs for each pilot.

The general at the portable podium his aide had set up shuffled his papers as if this were one more chore, glanced up at Cass as if she were personally responsible for his being saddled with Grady’s Ladies all this while, and gruffly began.

Standing at attention determined to show him not so much as a quiver, she wondered if there would have been a ceremony at all if the general hadn’t had to read out the special letter of commendation--*the renowned flying women of East Base.....service above and beyond the call of duty*-- from the Senator.

sometimes did. "First thing, I need to futz around in the mail room a little." His wife made a face as he left the table; she didn't like *futz*.

Nor the mail room, for that matter. She never set foot into the alcove library where he felt most at home in the otherwise womanized house. And the ~~colored~~ ~~Negro~~ maid was not let in the room, not since the time she tidied by stacking everything together. With the satisfaction of familiarity the Senator again gazed around at the musty bookshelves, the favorite framed *Chicago Tribune* political cartoon showing him as a bowlegged wrangler roping a runaway bull with the head and face of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and last and most comforting of all, the outmoded military trestle tables waiting with seven batches of newspapers, eight to a pile. The weeklies from all fifty-six Montana counties, right here in the Potomac swampland ready for his perusal whenever the spirit moved him. Of all the senatorial perquisites there were, this one especially tickled him. He knew his staff drew straws to see which of them, at the dawn of each week, would have to take a taxi down from the Hill with the bulging mailbag of newspapers and lay them out in prescribed order, and the fact that they despised the chore only made him snort to himself in amusement. Montana was big as hell and just as tricky to represent, and he long since had figured out that having the local view of things fetched into this room for him beat trying to chase down the moods of constituents across a six-hundred-mile swath of earth.

Actually, there was more to it than that. In dismal bunkhouses and drafty line cabins when the century and he were unconquerably young, this gaunt old bone-sprung prairie Caesar had read his way up in the world via weekly

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(TPWP priority dispatch--Antwerp--byline Reinking)

German armored columns pierced the Allied lines in a surprise counterattack today along the Ardennes front. The German offensive, spearheaded by ~~Panzer~~ tanks, took advantage of a ghostly infiltration by English-



the extent of the strategy, "it makes quite good sense from the Hun point of view, doesn't it. Therefore HQ here thought wise to put the word out--your words, actually--before Supreme Headquarters clamped down on the embarrassing news that the Germans caught them with their ~~pants~~^{trousers} very much down."

Practically dead on his feet, Ben moved off from the TPWP teletype, clapping Maurice on the shoulder as he passed. "Tepee Weepy and me, always glad to be of service."

Moxie was taking the Battle of the Bulge personally. Wound tight, he sat on the edge of his bunk as if about to spring. "Those sneaky kraut SOBs. They're going for broke." It was the best military analysis Ben had heard yet. "Goddamn it, Reinking, are we still going to get out of heretomorrow?"

Propped in the doorway, Ben answered with each sentence taking effort. "If the USO bunch gets here, I don't see why not. The brass will have to get them back out, and they can squeeze us onto the plane. Maurice keeps checking, the flying looks OK--the Luftwaffe isn't so much in this, it's more a hell of a ground attack." He looked at the man rooted to the bunk and before he knew it heard himself saying what he was thinking: "You know, Mox, there's no law that you couldn't get off your duff and see what you can find out--"

"I am. I have." Moxie shifted to one side on his perch, then right back. "I was about to tell you. I hunted up our ack-ack intelligence officer, we go back a long ways together. They figure when Supreme Headquarters gets its head out of its butt, they'll be able to stop the Germans about halfway here. Ten days or two

Ben steeled himself and headed toward the familiar snapbrim hat in the small huddle near the stage steps. Bareheaded bored newsreel technicians stood on either side of ~~Loudon~~^{Ted}. The taller one, evidently a cameraman, was saying reluctantly: "All right, we can shoot that if we have to. What's the name of the damn place again, the Roxy?"

"Where do you think you are, back in palookaville?" Even in what passed for conversation, ~~Loudon's~~^{the sportscaster's} pace of talk any more was the fastest an ear could keep up with. "It's the Rex, you're in a country with a king, get it? So what I want is--"

"He caught sight of ginger hair and an impassive longitudinal face. "Ben Reinking! Captain Reinking. Captain on the gridiron, captain in the service of his ~~country.~~^{the contriver of the Supreme Team and much else.}" The idea seemed to entertain ~~Loudon~~. "What a piece of luck you're here to be on the show with Moxie, two heroes for the price of one." He waved off the newsreel crew. "You know the drill, boys. See you when you get back. Ben, you still look like you're in great shape. Bet you could still run down one of Moxie's passes. Hey, I wonder if--"

"Ted, no funny stuff with a football for the show. We're in a goddamn war zone and Moxie and I both are on our last legs and--"

"Sure, sure. Anyway, how's it feel to make All-American? Catches you up with Eisman." Loudon's flat inexpressive face did not match the voice. "Hell of a thing with him and Danzer, isn't it--beyond dead, turned into part of the atmosphere." It took great effort, but Ben did not respond to that. "You guys as a team were something else," Loudon was going on, exuding sincerity. He did a

slight jerking motion of his head to one side as if making a check mark with his chin. "Something else."

Ben jammed his fists in his pockets to hide their readiness. "Look, Loud-- Ted, how about showing me what pony trick you want me to do on the broadcast, so I can go get some rest."

"Sam?" Loudon yelled across the room to the show director. "Doing a walkthrough with my guest star. Come on up, Ben." Loudon trotted up the ~~makeshift stairs~~ ^{makeshift stairs}. The singing-and-dancing sister act was rehearsing on the stage, in gowns that looked spun from cotton candy. "Excuse us, ladies," Loudon pushed past with Ben following, "All-American coming through." At the far end of the stage was a folding mockup of a stadium broadcasting booth, pennants painted on and *The Loudon Lowdown* lettered large amid those. Rapidly the sportscaster rehearsed Ben in coming onstage when the 'Supreme Team' cue was given and slipping into a seat behind the microphone in the fake booth. "It's tight for three," ~~Loudon~~ ^{he} jabbed a thumb at the empty seat on the other side, "but we'll make it work. Moxie'll be along later, he's getting dressed up. Hey, wasn't that tough about Bruno's team not making the Rose Bowl? One lousy touchdown short in the Stanford game."

"Tough."

"Anyway," ~~he~~ ^{Loudon} thrust a copy of the script at Ben, "look over my questions so there're no surprises. Keep your answers short. Hell, I don't need to tell you the ropes--you're a star in your own right." The checkmark with the chin again. "That Guam broadcast. Whooh."

stream of men, women, children--some so blackened with blast dust and dried blood you could not tell which they were. Army doctors and nurses swarmed around the stretcher cases, scissoring off clothing, shunting the prone patients into surgery or wards. Constantly dodging out of the way, Ben hunted down the medical staffer keeping track of the military wounded and dead, learned most of the victims were Antwerp civilians so far, and Moxie's and Inez's dogtags were not among those the staffer had copied onto his clipboard list. *Okay, they're among the missing,* Ben tried to reason himself into, *that's a different list.* They could still be at the theater, Moxie by nature would take over any rescue task he could, she was a nurse--

The decision churning within him, Ben zeroed in on an ambulance driver outside under the archway smoking a cigarette. Throat dry--*Comparatively few direct hits compared to what?*--he stepped out into the wintry Antwerp night, calling to the driver: "Sarge, the movie theater that caught it--are you going back in?"

The driver stiffened but the cigarette stayed cupped in his saluting hand. "Probably all night, captain, why?"

"I'm riding with you."

The driver shrugged, not wanting any more trouble on the night. "If you want, you can hop in back. Hang on to something, we give it the gas going in."

Out the back windows of the jouncing ambulance he could see spikes of light driven into the blackness, searchlights on the hunt for buzz bombs.

pointed across to the collapsed front of the theater, a chunk of the marquee with the enormous maroon letters REX sitting in the street crookedly but otherwise strangely unharmed. "They weren't even going in, the movie had already started. These old buildings"--his hand shook as he motioned up at the ornamented guildhall gables--"Loudon had that major scout these out, he told us it would make a terrific backdrop. So, we were just doing a second take, everything going fine, when the bomb hit."

Ben stared into the empty air where the balcony of the theater would have been, the projection room, the offices above, and then to where it had all fallen into a crumbled heap of bricks and broken wood and bodies.

The cameraman followed his gaze and hesitantly told the rest. "We were across the street here, it made a nice angle shot, the marquee there... Mike's my sound man, he was knocked over by the blast. I got thrown around pretty good myself. Just as everything started to, to come down"--the man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and managed to speak again-- "the captain grabbed his cap off and threw it to us while he pulled the nurse to him with his other arm and covered her with himself. I don't know how he did both at once."

"He was an athlete," Ben said dully. The cap in hand, he turned and walked off to catch a ride to the base in one of the ambulances.

"Hey, captain, uh, sir?" the cameraman called after him. "Do me a favor? Lug this film back for me?" He gestured up at the night sky, quiet at the moment, tracer-lit a minute ago. "In case something more happens here?"

Ben took the film can and kept on walking toward the ambulances.

Climbing out at the hospital bunker, he handed the cap to one of the medics. "Give this to the guy taking down names. Tell him Nurse Mazzetti was with the captain."

The long tunnel of bunker corridors resounded to his footsteps as he headed for the Wonder Bar, his mind cold and clear. Inevitability was claiming him.

The wall of oblivion had moved closer one more notch, its tenth, Moxie the next to last off the living list. The others, back at the start--O'Fallon, Havel--and on up the black climb of odds--Friesen, Vic, Prokosch, Animal--and off the chart of any foretelling--Dex, even Danzer, Jake--teamed one final time in his resolve. He was giving himself over. With Moxie gone he was the eleventh man, the perverse odds now solely out to get him and they would, he could see them piled overhead as if he were in the bottom of an hourglass looking at the deathly sand above. He knew it would happen according to the war's whim of time, when he would go out into the Antwerp night after doing this. If a buzz bomb did not find him this night, something else ultimately would. A leftover booby trap in whatever hiding place he sought out. A guildhall wall, wearied by the constant return of war, collapsing on him. The Germans barreling into the city, if the Bulge was not turned back, and dooming him in their pogrom of able-bodied defenders. He accepted, he couldn't not, that the war would see to him, one fatal way or another. But first, this. He could find no reason in himself not to rid the world of Loudon. The .45 still had bullets in its clip.

Ben entered the hubbub of the Wonder Bar. Several members of the USO troupe were beside the stage signing autographs for early-comers, the confectionary colors of the singers and dancers glossy against the olive drab of the G.I.s. Loudon and the major, in conference at the show director's desk, spotted him and waved him over frantically.

"Ben! We've been looking everywhere for you." Loudon's words came faster than ever. "It's Moxie, he's--" The expression on Ben stopped him. "You heard. You're upset. Can't blame you."

Ben dropped the film can on the desk with a clatter.

"This is what's left of him."

Beneath the snapbrim hat the eyes guardedly
~~Loudon's eyes~~ darted down, then back to Ben. "Awful, what happened.



We've got to make this into a tribute to him. Sit down, why don't you, we'll work over the script with--"

"I need a few minutes with you, Loudon. Just us. Now."

"Use my office," the major offered, all solicitude.

As soon as the door was shut, Loudon started again. "My God, who could have imagined this. Moxie the tenth one, I mean, there's no story ever like it." The chin doing the checkmark, confirming to himself the Supreme Team saga. "You and me--well, no way it can be called lucky, watching it happen to all those poor guys, but at least we saw to it that they'll always be remembered." He sat down at the major's desk and beckoned Ben over. "Okay, the script, we have to make changes." The undercurrent of excitement still was in his voice. "Got your copy?"

Supreme Team's wholesale bad luck. A crazy laugh broke from Ben. No, he realized, the sanest one in a long time.

"Okay, we both have it out of our systems," Loudon was saying, nervous at that laugh. "Now let's forget all that and get busy on the script, airtime will be here in--"

"I'm not going on the show."

Loudon gaped at him.

"The Supreme Team is yours, it always was." Ben found he could say it calmly. "Give it a funeral any way you want."

"Listen, Reinking--Ben." ^{The famous} ~~Loudon's~~ voice rose. "We don't have to be pals about this, we just have to do the show. You'll get your gravy from this as much as I will. Everything's set up for us. The network time. The news cameras. The whole USO--"

A rap on the door and the major was in the room almost before the sound.

"I couldn't help hearing the ruckus. Something I can help with?"

"It's him," Loudon flared. "Says he won't go on the show. Drive some sense into him, major."

"You most certainly are going on the show," the major scolded Ben as if he were a Sunday schooler. "I've looked over Ted's script, you're everywhere in it. Let's not complicate things for him."

"Let's."

The major took another look at Ben. "Captain, I order you to pick up that script and prepare for the show." Loudon at the desk whacked his hand down on his copy to second that.

"Not a chance, major," Ben said, stepping away. "I am a TPWP war correspondent, I have a story to write about what killed Moxie Stamper, and I am going out that door now and write it."

Commotion had spread to the other side of the door, from the sound of it. The major raised his voice, "Quiet, out there! We're in conference in--"

He stopped short at the sight of Maurice Overby striding in, military policemen in white helmets and white spats on either side of him, two more taking up a station at the door.

Maurice paused, glanced at the major's angry face and Loudon's angrier one, and raised his eyebrows at Ben. "Have we come at an inconvenient moment?"

"I don't know how you got wind of this, lieutenant, but you're right in time," the major recovered. "Have your MPs ready." He leveled a deaconly finger at Ben. "How does arrest for disobeying an order from a superior officer and a Section Eight sound to you, Reinking? If you don't--"

"Actually, sir," Maurice broke in as if to save the major the trouble of saying more, "I'm here on orders from considerably higher up. I speak of the general. We"--Maurice swept his hand around graciously to indicate the military police contingent--"are to place Captain Reinking aboard a plane. In the word from HQ command, 'soonest.'"

I hope I heard that right. I hope I'm not dreaming this.

Loudon's face went from bad to worse, a good sign to Ben. "This man can't go anywhere," the major protested. "He's to be on the show or else--"

"I beg to differ, sir." Not without a bit of flourish, Maurice produced a set of paperwork. "He is being sent forthwith 'stateside,' again in the phrasing of the order. I have that order here should you wish to examine it, major." The major did not touch it. Maurice nodded to the MPs, who moved in around Ben like bodyguards. "So. If you'll make your farewells, captain, we can be on our way."

Ben looked straight at Loudon and said as if it was a vow, "See you in the movies, sucker."

Within the wedge of MPs, the blue-clad RAF officer and the flight-jacketed American cut through the gathering crowd in the Wonder Bar and swung out into the long bunker corridor where the footsteps were their own.

"Maurice, am I ~~dreaming this~~ completely wacko," Ben asked urgently out the side of his mouth, "or were you bluffing back there?"

"Not at all," came the benign reply. "I might admit to providing a pinch of dramatic effect in the matter, but that's all. No, you are in mightier hands than mine. Your TPWP people had to come clean in their 'urgent' message a bit ago to convince HQ command you're worth high priority. A home-state Senator--is that the phrase for a political old tusker in America?--raised rather a ruckus about the number of soldiers' lives your Montana has contributed to the war. I believe you know whereof I speak." The New Zealander turned a solemn gaze on him, then resumed. "All in all, it has become in Tepee Weepy's best interest to fetch you

back alive and in one piece as speedily as can be.” Maurice patted the side pocket of his uniform jacket. “I procured you a copy of all that, it should make pleasant reading on the plane. I don’t mean to take the cherry off the top ahead of you, but I do think you’d like to know, Ben--you’re to be mustered out as soon as you’re back at that base in Montana and write the piece about Stamper.”

At the mouth of the bunker was a stocky MP with a two-way radio clapped to his ear. He held up a hand like the traffic cop he had probably been in civilian life. “Hold it here, everybody--ack-ack is tracking one in.”

In the shelter of the concrete archway, Ben and Maurice and the armbanded soldiers watched the sudden cat’s cradle of searchlight beams over Antwerp. The arcs of white frozen lightning swung and swung, hunting, until fastening onto a glint far up in the black sky. Flashes from gun batteries pulsed on the low horizon, and as the flying bomb seemed to slow and hesitate, tracer bullets converged toward it like the ascending lines where the arches of a cathedral meet. Then the buzz bomb lost course, faltering off in a drifting glide, away from the battered durable old city.

“One less to worry about,” Maurice pronounced briskly. Turning to Ben, he tapped his watch. “Fifteen minutes. The plane can take off in ten.” Choked up, Ben could only shake hands wordlessly. The stubby lieutenant gave him an unreserved smile. “Fare thee well, Ben Reinking. Happy ride home.”

The jeep thrummed under him on the steel grid of runway as it raced toward the plane, the guardian MPs riding shotgun front and back, the war behind him in the darkness. With luck--it was an amazing feeling to trust that word again ¹_M

