



The Eleventh Man

Also by Ivan Doig

Fiction

The Sea Runners

English Creek

Dancing at the Rascal Fair

Ride with Me, Mariah Montana

Bucking the Sun

Mountain Time

Prairie Nocturne

The Whistling Season

Nonfiction

This House of Sky

Winter Brothers

Heart Earth

NOT BF



The Eleventh Man

Ivan Doig

Harcourt, Inc.

Orlando

Austin

New York

San Diego

London

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To Becky Saletan

editor extraordinaire

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The Eleventh Man

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CN

Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last bend in the road, supertime lights coming on here and there beneath its roof of trees. As the bus headed up the quiet main street toward the hotel, where the lobby served as depot, Ben Reinking saw the single lighted storefront on the block with the bank and the beauty shop. Of course. Thursday night. His father putting the newspaper to bed after this week's press run.

["Here will do," he called to the driver.

regular
indent

The bus driver jammed on the brakes and heaved himself around to take a better look at this final passenger. Using all the breath he could summon, the man let out slowly: "I'll be goddamned. You're him. Awful sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't--

”

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

Right there in the middle of the street, the driver laboriously dragged out the duffel bag from the luggage bay and presented it to him. The man looked tempted to salute. Ben murmured his thanks and turned away toward the premises of the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner. Well, he told himself as he swung along

ital.

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8.178

under the burden of his duffel, now to see whether his father had picked up any news about the repeal of the law of averages, as it apparently had been.

Habit dies hard, even the military variety that never came natural to him; he caught himself surveying these most familiar surroundings in terms of ambush and booby[#]trap, and with a shake of his head sought to change over to observation of a more civil sort. Storefront by dozing storefront, the town still looked as if the world of war had nothing to do with it, yet he knew better. It was simply that buildings don't read casualty lists. He tried to put that thought away and just come to terms with being home. Gros Ventre, he'd learned growing up here, was the same age as the tree rings in the mature cottonwood colonnade along its streets, and altered itself as slowly. Only the season had changed appreciably since the last time he had to do this, early evening unrolling a frosty carpet of light from the front of the Gleaner building now as he approached.

He stopped to read the window as he always did. Posted beneath the gilt lettering on the plate glass were handbills announcing a war bonds box supper and a farm machinery auction on lower English Creek. Both were set in the familiar exclamatory typeface his father called Visual Braille. Fooling around as a printer paid for the indulgence of being a small-town editor, Bill Reinking liked to say. Just this moment, Ben spotted him there at the back of the office in the job shop, running the addressograph himself. As ever, his father looked like a out of place, peering foggily through his bifocals while he fed the do subscription plates into the small machine for it to stamp those names and addresses onto the out-of-town mail wrappers. Ben remembered now: the office

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p. 29

]"Addressograph" isn't in Webster's. It sounds like it might be a trademark, but I'm leaving it lowercased. (12)

help, Janie, had moved to Arizona, where her husband's tank corps was in training.

Past his own reflection in the glass of the door, Ben watched his father at his lonesome chore until it started to hurt. This part doesn't get any easier either, does it. Two bylines under one roof. At least we both write with the pointed end, he taught me that.

With that he stepped inside to the subtle smell of ink fresh on newsprint, calling out as cheerfully as he could manage: "All the news that fits, again this week?"

"Ben!" The addressograph made empty thumping sounds onto wrappers until his father could shut it down. "Surprise the living daylights out of a man, why don't you. We weren't expecting you until the weekend."

"Well, guess what, the Air Transport Command turns out to be full of surprises. It's only a forty-eight⁼ hour leave, not the seventy⁼ two I put in for." He tried to cover the next with a shrug. "And there's something I have to do out of town tomorrow. Other than that, I'm the perfect guest." AU

"Better enjoy you in a hurry, hadn't I," his father said in his dry way as they shook hands. His face alight, the older man gazed at the younger as if storing up on him. He was dying to ask what was behind this trip home, Ben could tell, but doing his best to be a father first and a newspaperman second. That was fortunate, because Ben himself did not have the right words anywhere near ready. In the strange labyrinth of TDYs^l--temporary duty assignments--^lthat Ben

Reinking's war somehow had turned into, this one was the hardest yet to talk about.

Bill Reinking could see most of this. Not wanting to prompt, he ventured only: "You've seen a lot of the world lately."

More than enough. England, bombed stiff by the Luftwaffe. New Guinea, beachheads backed against Japanese-held mountains two miles high. The close call from ack-ack over Palau on the B-17 ride; the even closer one no one was being told about. Not exactly pleasant conversation, any of it. Ben got rid of it for now in mock-heroic fashion: "It was hell out in those there islands."

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

"This?" Self-consciously Ben rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. Another hole in the law of averages. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back at East Base yet again. He lacked the time in grade, base commanders were never glad to see him coming, and for its own murky reasons the Threshold Press War Project did not bother with fitness reports--So why boost me from shavetail all of a sudden? What do the bastards have in mind for me next? For his father's sake, he forced a grin. "It doesn't amount to that much, Dad, to outrank civilians."

All during this each looked the other over to see how he was holding up since last time. Bill Reinking was bald to the back of his head, but his ginger

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

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

“Like *Gone With the Wind* without somebody to neck with,” his son said and laughed in a way he did not recognize. “Long.”

SB

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, early that afternoon he had stepped out into the familiar blowy weather of Great Falls and pointed himself toward the same old tired bus that again and again had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, he had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued "God bless you real good, sonny," along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, without doubt, although that did not seem what the sloganeers intended to convey. ^{Ben} He tried to slip his duffel into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and possibly nap during the familiar trip, but the hunched driver grabbed it away and insisted on stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

Which one?

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

through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Can't ever get used to the size of that stadium," he heard come his way, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source. Always wary of this sort

of thing, he kept on staring out his side of the bus, as if the remark was an announcement the bus driver routinely offered up at this point on the route.

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

For a few seconds longer, Ben carried on pretending that the remark had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. Then, as he had known he would, he pulled his gaze away from the dominating smokestack and turned it to a very different landmark coming up, the mammoth Treasure State University stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football.

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

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

The team's story, his, Jake's, Dexter's, the rest of the unique starting eleven. More than ever now, Vic's story; Quick Vic, most slippery runner in the conference, leaving after practice every afternoon to walk back to the Indian shacktown on Hill 57 over there. Bruno's story, everlasting bastard as football coach; and Loudon's, ruthless bastard as sportswriter. Under and over all the others, Merle Purcell's story, the most famous substitute who never played a game: the twelfth man's story. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, staircase-style, high on the butte that loomed over the stadium; the Letter Hill. The mental camera moved across it all with deliberation, panning the scene for the screen, until at last the bus reached the highway and veered north.

He patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although even there, the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

Bill Reinking had missed out on war--younger than wanted in the first worldwide one, old enough to be ignored in this one--but he knew war story when he saw one.

"Quite the piece you did on those pilots," he was saying with professional gruffness. "It should have people all over the country burning their tongues on their coffee in the morning." He plucked a Gleaner off the top of the mailing pile

man's story. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium; the Letter Hill. The mental camera in Ben moved across it all with deliberation, panning the scene for the screen, until at last the bus reached the highway and veered north.

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Later in the book, these letters are set in boldface. Do you also want them in boldface here? (19)

Webb
This is also the style in Prairie Nocturne (p. 179) (19)

and pitched it to his son. "I gave it three columns of page five. More than I gave myself, I'll have you know."

"I was hoping that'd be in. Christ, they held it long enough." Ben rattled the newspaper open, and the headline his father had put on the piece ^{rem only} hit him in the face: Rainbow of Planes from Montana to Russia.

Hastily he read his lead to make sure it had survived--¹*The piece*
be felt the minute you step onto East Base, a former buffalo prairie on the sunrise
edge of Great Falls, Montana, where the ground vibrates under you
*eternal stampede but modern 12-piston fighter plane engines--*¹*and*
down, holding his breath. Of all the perplexities that went with a TPWP byline, the most constant was the red pencil of the invisible copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. Inimical to logic. After a year and half of this, Ben was as mystified as ever by the inner workings of the Threshold Press War Project, what was let past and what wasn't. He full well understood that the name was meant to invoke the doorstep homefront, the breadbasket America served by mid-size dailies and small-town weeklies such as his father's; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war. But it never left his mind for long that a threshold also was where people wiped their feet on something.

Not this time. The cherished name, the bit about the ringless hands at the P-39 controls, all that was still in there. Foxed the bastard. Can't every time, but--¹

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

AUTHOR

AUTHOR

AU

"I was hoping that'd be in. Christ, they held it long enough." Ben rattled the newspaper open, and the headline his father had put on the piece all but hit him in the face: Rainbow of Planes from Montana to Russia.

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

Headlines are set in caps and small caps throughout the ms. See p. 254, for example. (20)

Would states' names be abbreviated in newspaper copy (e.g., Mont. for Montana)? (20)

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

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

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

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

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

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

SB

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SB

(21) Just to double-check...
there should be a
space break here, correct

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

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

Checking his wristwatch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. First snow had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; a bit of hope there, maybe, that the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the afternoon sun. The air was good, out here in the grassland beyond the reach of the smelter stack, and he savored it while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved these blue-and-tan days of the crisp end of October.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying turned out to be right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came, right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new fighter planes incoming on the hop from Seattle. The unmistakable dart-nosed silhouette of P-39s; Airacobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another expression that was validated now that he had met Cass. In the month since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this half a dozen times and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Planes Base from three directions for the Lend-Lease transit onward to A Russia, but the run from Seattle was all Cass's.

AUTHOR

Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a snap, the turbulent peaks of the abruptly dropping behind past the continental divide and unmistakably abundant on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the grand Missouri, and matter, the Black Eagle smokestack. His imagination soared up there with her, her cat-quick hands on the controls, her confident wiry body in the tight-fit cockpit of the lead P-39.

AUTHOR

She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the [#]airbase he'd learned Cass Standish also had a reputation for bringing in her flights safely no matter what the weather or visibility. ("She can navigate in zero visibility like a wild-ass Eskimo," a crusty tower officer had provided the apt quote, although Ben had to clean it up.) He stirred up inside just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women Air Force Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17 bombers and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, where his TPWP minder in Washington wondrously would not exist, his piece

Web

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CAPS

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CAPS

I have marked all abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms to be set in full caps rather than small caps. (23)

Continental Divide (23)
] style in Chicago (8.57).
Also capped in Buckling the Sun (p. 89) and Rascal Fair (22, 239).

about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. Getting something like that across between the lines was becoming a specialty of his.

Still mesmerized, he stood in the parking lot with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the fighter planes as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of that roadhouse over there, uniforms cast off and forgotten, romantic maniacs renting by the hour. The whispered prattle of love talk, after: *"So it's true what they say about redheads."* *"I'm wrongly accused. It's ginger, not red."* *"Ginger? That's a spice. No wonder."* Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of four hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking.

That was hoping for too much. The flight swept over with a roar, the P-39s as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Watching them glint in the sun as they diminished away toward East Base, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. As quickly as the planes were gone, frustration filled him again. He drew a harsh breath. He knew perfectly well he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but it stuck with him day and night any more, the overriding hunch that for him the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that, and after that--might go on and on as his first years of so-called service had, yanking him away on non-combatant assignments to the shot-up corner of the world and then depositing him back here for thing, time after time. And, ^(the worst part) worse now, Cass always out of reach. At this rate, he

rom

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This is the style in p. 111
of ms. Also the style in
Whistling Season (p. 10).

p. 111

AV

24

could foresee with excruciating clarity, her letters to him would add up to a string-tied packet in the bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Lovesick. Try as he would, he could not clear away the relentless feeling. Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. An incurable case of Cassia Standish he was definitely suffering from, its symptoms rapture and queasiness simultaneously. Vic would think I've gone off my rocker. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. No surer way to risk loss of rank and beyond that, dishonorable discharge, the Section Eight "deemed unfit to serve" bad piece of paper, him and her both. Sometimes I think I've gone off my rocker. "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out naked from bed the other night to stroke that new silver bar on his uniform and meanwhile leering at him as effectively as Hedy Lamarr ever did at a leading man. "What's next, a Good Conduct medal?" Not hardly.

"Ready to hit the road if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the window and shut his eyes to wait out all the road miles yet before home. Sometimes he dozed and sometimes he didn't, but either way he dreamed of Cass and more Cass.

"Don't let me interrupt your enjoyment of great literature," the imperative note in his father's voice snapped him out of his absorption in the version of her

he had put into newsprint. "But I have to get back at it." Bill Reinking indicated toward the job shop and the table where the addressograph waited. "Had any supper? There's some macaroni salad and fried chicken left."

Ben looked at the bucket supper from the Lunchery down the street, then back at his father.

"Your mother is in Valier," came the explanation. "Play rehearsal. They're doing The Importance of Being Earnest, and she couldn't pass up Lady Bracknell, could she?"

"Can't imagine it," Ben conceded in the same deliberately casual tone his father had used. "Let me get some chicken in me, then I'll take over on the addresser, how about."

"No, that's fine," his father spoke hastily, "I'm used to this by now. You can help wrap when I get to that." Turning away, he started up the addressograph again and, a sound his son had grown up on, the name-and-address plates began clattering through like metal poker chips as each alphabetical stack of half a dozen was fed in. Ben left him to it and moved toward the other end of the Food Food put together a semblance of supper. He still felt off balance about the comfortable inky clutter of the newspaper office after so much Food would be a good idea, even the Lunchery's.

He was reaching into the meal bucket when he heard a lapse in the addressing machine's rhythmic slap-slap on the wrappers. Out the corner of his eye he watched his father quickly palm a subscription plate off the working with and slip it into ^{his} a pants pocket. Ben frowned. His father

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webs.

} off-balance
^
style in Whistling Season,
p. 234. (26)

} Change okay? (26)

chucked aside any discards into a coffee can, there by the addressograph for that purpose, until there were enough to be dumped into the linotype melt pot.

"Hey," Ben called softly. "I saw that." He held out his hand for the discard. "Gimme, gimme, my name is Jimmy."

His father stood frozen there with his hand still in his pocket.

"Dad? What's up?"

A stricken expression came over the older man. "I--I didn't want you to come across this one in the wrappers. Ben, I'm sorry if--"

He handed the flat little piece of metal to his son as if it were a rare coin. Flipping it over to the raised side, Ben instantly spelled out the inverted letters of type. Reading backward was a skill that came with growing up in a newspaper office, and right then he wished he didn't have it.

VICTOR RENNIE CPL. SERIAL #20929246
C CO., 26TH REGIMENT, 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION
C/O U.S. ARMY OVERSEAS POST OFFICE
NEW YORK, N.Y.

DESIGN

Confounded, he stared at his father. "How'd you already know it's Vic? They sit on the names until I--" He gestured futilely.

"I didn't, really." Bill Reinking's face was at odds with his words. "If it turned out to be some other reason you're here, I was going to hand-address this one at the post office."

Ben swallowed hard. Tonelessly he told his father what had happened to Vic Rennie in the minefield in the Sicilian countryside.

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C CO., 26TH REGIMENT, 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

C/O U.S. ARMY OVERSEAS POST OFFICE

NEW YORK, N.Y.

Address set by Linotype

*Note specific
style (small caps)*

(27)

Bill Reinking blanched; two years of hardening from handling war news didn't help with this. It had to be asked:

"Everybody else--?"

"All accounted for, Dad, relax. I checked this morning." As he did every morning. Day by day he knew exactly where each one of them was, in the world of war. It was his job to know.

Carl Friessen in New Guinea.

Jake Eisman piloting at East Base.

Animal Angelides on a Marine troop ship.

Sig Prokosch patrolling a shore in the Coast Guard.

Moxie Stamper bossing an anti-aircraft gun pit in England.

Nick Danzer on the destroyer U.S.S. McCorkle in the Pacific.

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

Stanislaus Havel and Kenny O'Fallon in graves under military crosses.

And Vic, whose chapter of the war had to be put to rest with this journey.

Every soldier, in the course of time, exists only in the breath of written words. The gods that govern saga have always known that. There were times Bill Reinking stood stock-still in this newspaper office, hardly daring to breathe, as he tore open the week's Threshold Press War Project packet and pawed

drab handouts until he spotted the words The "Supreme Team" on
Battle by Lt. Ben Reinking. It awed him each time, Ben's unfolding

them, impeccably told. Taken together, they amounted to an odd number--eleven--
whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1941 on a windblown football

Wells

CMS
8.124

AUTHOR

AU

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I've left the quotes (28)
] around Supreme Team here
to indicate "scare quotes"
(used frequently by newspapers).

(AU)

field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war. Montana boys, all, grown into something more than gridiron heroes. One by one, the Treasure State teammates--the much-heralded entire varsity now enlisted one way or another--were individuals rehearsing for history, in newsprint across America. The one with the TPWP patch on his shoulder, with the mandate from somewhere on high to write of them all, now pocketed away the dog tag-sized piece of metal cold in his fingers, as his father wordlessly watched.

The bitter arithmetic was not anything Ben could put away. "Two dead and Vic a cripple, how's that for being a 'chosen' team? If this keeps on, we can play six-man."

Instantly he wanted that choice of words back. That's what gave us Purcell. Does it all start there? Not a one of the 41 starters came up out of six-man football, but Merle Purcell had, the newcomer from nowhere who met his doom in eleven-man. Two years hadn't made any of it less raw on the nerves. Fast and skittery as an antelope, Purcell materialized from some tiny high school out in the sagebrush where they played six-man, which was pretty much football and hundred-yard dash, and given a chance on the scrub team circles around the Treasure State varsity in practice until he would subsequently ran himself to death on the Letter Hill trying to toughen up enough for the TSU relentless steamroller brand of football. To this day Purcell was there in Ben's mind's eye, in the script ingredients, struggling up the giant slope to the white rocks after practice and even on his own on weekends; strange jinxed kid who by the miracle of modern sports mongering had been made to live on as the

AUTHOR

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Should this read (27)
] "a cross between football
and the hundred-yard dash"?

inspirational "twelfth man" of the perfect season. Ben knew it wasn't fair, he had barely known Purcell, but the interior truth was that he would not have traded a dozen of him, or any like him, for Vic Rennie.

"Son." Bill Reinking did not use that word much, in the presence of a tall man in uniform across the table from him. "I know you're having a whole bunch of you, but--"

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

"I wouldn't be much of a newspaper editor if I didn't point out that's an indefinite pronoun."

"Don't hand me that, you know as well as I do what I mean. This haywire assignment they've got me on. Anybody you happen to know happen to be behind it, just for instance?"

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

"Then is it Mother's doing?" The words exploded from Ben with a force that shook both men. The level of his voice came down but his vehemence did not. "Did she talk some old family friend in Beverly Hills into picking up the phone and calling Robert Sherwood or Elmer Davis or Jesus D. Christ in the White House himself and say, 'Guess what, there's somebody I'd like to see

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} Okay to delete
comma (used in
restrictive sense)?

grounded and stay glued to a typewriter for the next dozen years or the end of the war, whichever comes first.' Well? Did she?"

"Ben, will you kindly quit? Unlike you, your mother and I are a bit grateful you're not stationed somewhere getting shot to pieces." His father took off his glasses and polished the lenses clean with the page of a torn Gleaner; only window-washers and newspapermen knew that stunt. "To answer you for once and all, though--we know better than to pull strings for you, even if we had any. You made that clear to us long ago." Bill Reinking went on in a milder tone. "I hate to bring up a remote possibility, but just maybe you were picked out for this because you're the natural person for it."

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

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

~~"Never mind--"~~ Dad, don't look like that, it's all right. I know where I can always get it." (9) (AU)

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

(SB)

Ben walked briskly two blocks up the street and stepped into the Lodge. The saloon was as quiet as if empty, but it was never empty

EDITOR/
AUTHOR

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

SB

Ben walked briskly two blocks up the street and stepped into the Medicine Lodge. The saloon was as quiet as if empty, but it was never empty at this time of

Should this be set off
as a different kind
of space break? (31)

night. Inert as doorstops, at the far end of the bar sat a bleary pair of sheepherders he recognized--^MPat Hoy from the Withrow ranch, and the other had a nickname with a quantity of geography attached. Canada Dan, that was it. Puffy with drink but not falling-down drunk, the two evidently were winding down a usual spree after the lambs were shipped, when there was half a year's wages to blow. Ever conscious of his uniform, Ben had a flash of thought that except for polar explorers, these befogged old herders off alone in their sheep[#]wagons somewhere would have been about the last people to hear of the war, back in December of 1941. It did not seem to be foremost on their minds now, either, as they and a third occupant ~~in the saloon~~ expectantly looked down the bar in Ben's direction like connoisseurs of the tints of money. in webs. Think

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

"Nice to see you again too, Tom." With a ghost of a smile, Ben patted his way along the rich polished wood of the bar as if touching it for luck. The Medicine Lodge was not much changed since his high school Saturdays of wrestling beer kegs and emptying spittoons and swamping the place out with broom and mop. "Saturday night buys the rest of the week, kid," Tom Harry would always say as he paid Ben his dollar or so of wages. Hundreds of such nights produced a saloon that by now had a crust of decor as rigorous as a museum's. Stuffed animal heads punctuated every wall; the one-eyed buffalo in

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] Is the spelling
"aereoplane"
intentional?

particular was past its prime. The long mirror in back of the bar possessed perhaps a few more age spots of tarnish than when Ben had been in charge of wiping it down, and the immense and intricate oaken breakfront that framed it and legions of whiskey bottles definitely had more dust. Still pasted to the mirror on either side of the cash register were the only bits of notice taken of the twentieth century: a photo of Tom Harry's prior enterprise, the Blue Eagle saloon in one of the Fort Peck dam project's hard-drinking boomtowns, and a 1940 campaign picturing a President Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term have made any Republican cringe.

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

The sole proprietor and entire staff of the Medicine Lodge glanced to the far end where the raggedy shearers were gaping hopefully in Ben's direction. "Hard to do, on some of them. What can I get you?"

"Whatever's on draft," Ben said before it registered on him that he was home now, he didn't need to nurse away the evening on beer. "No, wait, something with a nip to it--an Old Fashioned, how about." *Still in the mood, Cass.* The other night in the roadhouse when they were priming themselves by playing coma cola roulette--each buying the other some unlikely concoction off the mixed drinks list before adjourning to the cabin for the night--she'd wickedly ordered him up one of these, saying it might put him in the mood for an old-fashioned

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Webs

p-428

AU

]

Fort Peck Dam
This is the style on ms.
p. 428.

pilot like her. Now he dug into his wallet. "Give the choirboys a round. Catch yourself, too."

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

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

"Hour ago."

"Been places, I hear."

"They ship me around, some."

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

During this the shepherders conferred in mumbles. Celebrating their largesse of beer, the two were counting out their pooled small change, pushing the coins together with shaky forefingers. "Barkeep?" Canada Dan cleared his throat importantly. "You got any of them jellied eggs?"

"Jesus, gourmets," Tom Harry muttered, carrying the briny crock of preserved boiled eggs down the length of the bar along with his disgust. While the egg transaction dragged on, Ben quietly sipped and gazed past the reflections in

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"Thanks, I'll take mine in the register. Save you the tip." Schooners of beer flew down the bar, the whiskey and paradoxical bitters and sugar ^{were} ~~was~~ magically mixed, Ben watching fascinated as ever at the skill in those hands. Tom Harry could never be cast as a bartender, he decided. He overfilled the part. The

] Change okay?

the plate glass window to downtown Gros Ventre at night. The civil old trees. His father's newspaper office, still alight down the street, another timeless pillar of the town. On the next block beyond the Gleaner, the Odeon theater where teenaged Ben Reinking every Saturday night of his life stayed on through the second show--¹_m the "owl show" at nine that repeated the feature movie for a tardy gathering of drunks, late-arriving lovers, and insomniacs¹_m to dissect how the makers of movies made them. Centralities of his growing up here, those, along with the one where he sat now. He knew there was no denying the influence of bloodline, but by quite a number of the readings he could take on his life so far, Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, out there in the dark, served as a kind of parentage too. Whatever he amounted to, this was where it came from.

The keeper of the bar returned, still wagging his head over the jellied egg binge. Ben twirled his glass indicatively on the dark wood. "Any more of this in the well?"

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

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

"Where you think you're gonna drive to with those--¹_mParis, France, to get laid?"

AV

"You ought to know. Probably all over hell, but I'll start at Medicine."

AUTHOR

The uncomprehending look on his listener was a reminder that not all of the world knew about Vic, at least yet. He again told what the minefield had done.

"What a hell of a thing to go through life like that." Eyes reflective, Tom Harry wiped slowly at the bar wood after Ben told him. "Knew that kid since he was a pup." He flicked a look at Ben. "Weren't you here for funerals the last couple of times?"

AU

Ben gulped more of his drink than he'd intended, unsteadied by having something like that attached to him. O'Fallon's and Havel's, those were. The mouthy mick left guard and the taciturn baby-faced center. Tepee W... wanted every drop of drama from the "supreme team;" it had sent the Pulitzer piece about the Butte slum wake held for O'Fallon. He hadn't even l... O'Fallon.

AUTHOR

How much does history rehearse? he had to wonder. The first funeral of all was Purcell's. The entire team in that tumbleweed hometown cemetery. Coach Bruno piously delivering the eulogy into the radio microphone at graveside. Didn't it set the pattern, the team's every movement on the airwaves and in the headlines from then until--

All at once he realized Tom Harry still was eyeing him speculatively.

"There's a war on," he managed to say evenly. "Things happen to people."

"Must get kind of old, is all I'm saying." The bartender slung the towel aside. "Drink up. The Packard is out back."

"You ought to know. Probably all over hell, but I'll start at the Two Medicine."

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In this context, should
"hell" be capitalized?
It's used as a place-name
on pp. 60, 63, 116, 135.

AV

I have capitalized Supreme
Team here (and some other (36)
places) to match prevalent
style throughout ms. FYI.

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

"What do you think?" the Packard's beset guardian barked. "Thin as condom skin. Here, throw these in the trunk." He rummaged in the shed room piled high with amazing items that Medicine Lodge customers with more thirst than cash had put up as collateral, and rolled two spare tires toward Ben.

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

How did you ever stand it out here in hermit heaven, Vic? Looking
around from the height of the river bluff at the silent miles of prairie in three

directions and the mute cliffs of the Rockies in the other, Ben reconsidered. Make the question, how did his best friend ever stand being crammed into Army life after an existence populated only by wind, buffalo grass, and a wraith of a grandfather? Military routine could tie a person's guts in knots; he knew the feeling himself.

Impatiently he checked his wristwatch again; half the morning was gone just getting here. Cass was curious, the other night, why this had to be circled in on, phony days of leave and the bus ride home and all, and he couldn't blame her. In between kissing him silly she had asked why he couldn't just requisition a motor pool car for a day and get back in time to attend to business in bed. The answer was not a damn bit more satisfying now than it was then: because that wasn't how Tepee Weepy did things. There's the easy way and their way.

Leaving the Packard on what passed for a road along the gorge of the Two Medicine river, he picked his way on foot through ruts that led down to the Rennie ranch buildings huddled at the river. The log house did not show any activity as he approached, although all too plainly a visitor was a rarity.

There was a bad sign, literally, the moment he stepped into the dooryard; a blotch of something written in red on the rusty weathered door, like lipstick on a witch. Walking up to it with a sinking feeling, he found it was a shingle tacked to the doorwood and lettered on it in barn paint the message: ELK SEASON.

Incredulous, Ben squinted west, met there by half the mountains in North America. Hunt a hunter in one day, in all that? It was too much, this whole deal of

Leaving the Packard on what passed for a road along the rocky upper gorge of the Two Medicine river, he picked his way on foot through the braid of ruts that led down to the Rennie ranch buildings huddled at the river's edge. The log house did not show any activity as he approached, although all too plainly a visitor was a rarity.

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] Okay to
capitalize?

(38)

Quick Vic and a roving grandfather old as the hills. Toussaint Rennie must be crowding eighty-five. He didn't have any business going after elk alone.

While Ben stood there stewing, the silence of the dried-up little ranch seemed to reprove him. Out where weeds took over from the yard, the pole corral stood empty except for one broomtail pony, and the barn looked like it would fall down if a person blew his nose in its vicinity. All right, he conceded, maybe pursuit of elk was the only business Toussaint did have. But where in this rugged upper end of the Two Medicine country would the old reprobate have a favorite hunting ground?

For a moment--more than that, actually--he was tempted to give this up and concoct whatever he could, from football times together, for the TPWP piece about Vic. Give it the Loudon treatment for once. Loudmouth it, as the Treasure State team had learned to refer to the guff put out week by week by the sportswriter climbing to fame on their backs in '41. Ted Loudon's coarsest lead followed Vic's four-touchdown game: Wyoming was scalped on its home field today, by a halfback marauder from the northern plains named Vic Rennie. Ben would have given plenty, then and now, to see the copy Loudon handed in and verify whether the sonofabitch had actually written halfbreed halfback and a queasy editor struck it out, or if Loudon had chosen to let it just smirk there in the shadows of marauder and scalped. He and Jake Eisman and most of the rest of the team had wanted to go to Bruno and tell him to shape up his mouthpiece buddy Loudon, but Vic only said he was used to that kind of crap.

CAPs

AU

Web's

Conscience makes tough company, Ben found again. Concocting would not do--this was Vic, and the last time he would be written about, possibly ever-- and besides, in the zipper pocket of the flight jacket was what he was supposed to give to the old man who had raised his friend; he would have sworn he could feel the weight of the thing in there, feather-light though it was. No, at the very least he had to ask around. This is such a famously friendly neighborhood, right, Vic? He trudged back up to the Packard, patted it in apology, and navigated it across a barely wide enough stringer bridge to the reservation side of the river, to look up Toussaint's Blackfeet relatives. In-laws, rather, and that proved to be the problem.

"That skunk fart--why would I keep track of him?" was the extent of the answer at the first ranch of the Rides Proud clan that he tried.

Ben had been afraid of this. It was notorious throughout this Blackfoot end of the Two Medicine country that the Rennie bloodline was from away--some adamantly mysterious route that seemed to take in hazy tribal back east and the Metis rebellion in Canada to the north and very likely trapper named Reynaud somewhere along the way--and Toussaint in perching just outside the edge of the reservation, knowing everyone else's business and never showing his Blackfoot neighbors any of his own hand except the back of it. He conspicuously never got along with his Blackfoot wife, Mary Rides Proud, while she was alive, and to judge by how good a job her blood relations were doing of keeping up hostilities in memory of Mary, even long after. Twice more Ben underwent it, amiable leather-faced men emerging from corral or barn in greeting, then turning away when he mentioned the name Toussaint.

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] This word is accented
in Webster's: Métis
Do you want to include
acute accent? (40)

Goddamn it, you'd think they were the Germans and the Russians going at it. As he pulled in to the last ranch on that stretch of the river, he was watching cautiously for the next Rides Proud man on the prod.

This time, though, a Blackfoot woman came out on the front steps, her hands in the folds of her checkered dress, and told him in the flattest of voices her husband was up on the bluff fixing fence.

Something in her features reminded Ben of Vic. He gave it a try: "I'm looking for Victor's grandfather."

"Victor," the woman tested the name and ignored the rest. "His mother was my cousin."

Ben gingerly fished into the tangle of family. "The relative who'd raised Victor by the time I knew him was his grandfather. It's important that I find him. Where would he go to hunt elk, do you think?"

The woman kept her gaze on Ben for some seconds, then came down off the steps. She turned her back to the mountains and pointed. "Likes to say he has his own herd."

Totally surprised, Ben stared east into the deep vee of the river valley and the distant patches of prairie captured between the outline of the bluffs. He had never in his life heard about any elk herd in the Two Medicine bottomlands. She's putting me on. What do I do now? Then it sank in on him. The woman was pointing all the way east, to the horizon. To the Sweetgrass Hills, rising like three mirage islands on the earthbrim where the sun came up.

CMS
7.6.7

Back at the car, he took another sighting on the ghostly trio of distant hills. He figured the trip at a hard two hours' drive, but he didn't mind that as much as the direction. He still could not shake the creepy feeling that the law of averages was not working, something was cockeyed; every point on the compass since this set of orders caught up with him in New Guinea was east.

SB

East Base had changed beyond sane recognition when he'd a month before. Only the Black Eagle smokestack stood the same as ever on the transformed prairie--the military in its inexplicable fashion having chosen to install an airfield almost under the shadow of the highest manmade obstacle between Seattle and Minneapolis. Who would have thought Montana was destined to become a staging area for the war in the first place? But the world of war shifted massively when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, and with the task of conveying thousands of aircraft to the forces of America's new ally Joseph Stalin, the Air Transport Command had snatched up this base since the last time Ben landed here. Up until now he had not paid much attention to the ATC, something of a stepchild in the military scheme of things, other than the jeer he'd heard in fighter pilot school that the initials stood for Allergic To Combat. Never mind, he tried to tell himself, hadn't he pulled temporary duty at out-of-it outfits before?

EDITOR/AUTHOR

Webb

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Should this be set off
as a different kind of
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(42)

Webs

} Change okay?

(42)

"There you go, lieutenant" ¹they all did that ¹--then jabbed a finger to the base map on the wall. "Here's your next stop, the clap shop."

"Cut the crap, okay? I don't have anything." In no mood for dealing further with a cynical paper-pusher, Ben was trying in vain to pick out the Bachelor Officers Quarters on the map; whatever else the Air Transport Command transported, it brought buildings by the dozens.

"That's what all the boys say, sir," the clerk sang out. "Commander's orders. He's on a tear about VD. All incoming personnel have to be checked out, first thing."

Drawing on his annoyance to plot how he might get away with infectious in a piece on the level of enthusiasm here, Ben stepped out into the world of East Base. Now that he had a chance to take a good look around, there wasn't a trace of the tar-paper infirmary he remembered before, nor anything else from his last quick TDY here. Mammoth hangars yawned open onto the longest runway he had seen yet in his war travels. Deep inside the hangar nearest him, swarms of mechanics on platform ladders squirmed into open bays of fuselages. Fresh new bombers and fighter planes had to undergo shakedown here after being flown in from factories on the West Coast and before being handed over to Russian pilots waiting in Alaska, he understood that much of the Lend-Lease operation. But he puzzled over the relatively empty flightline, no clusters of aircraft rolled out and sitting ready to go. Instead, great batches of unpainted planes were lined up on an apron behind the hangars, like shorn sheep trying to get out of the weather. A sudden wild gust that had him grabbing at his crush hat made him laugh in spite of

Webb

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} This is the style in
Prairie Nocturne, p. 190.

himself. Think about it, Reinking. You're in Great Falls, home of the seventy-yard punt when the wind is up. Those planes were tied down to mooring rings back there so they wouldn't blow over.

At least the wind was something familiar. He had not paid enough attention to where the irksome clerk pointed on the map. Casting around for directions, he wandered into the huge hangar and over to the nearest P-39 where a lone mechanic was up on a wing and head-down in the engine compartment.

"Hey, buddy, which way to the clap shop?"

The figure in coveralls withdrew from the engine and a fetching brunette hairdo and hazel eyes with temper in them came with it. "Cozying up to strange women," the voice was feminine but oh how it carried, "is usually a good start toward it."

Ben stood there wondering if he looked as mortified as he felt. All over the hangar other heads popped out of other planes: a set of blonde curls here, a hairnet there, and everywhere chest-high indications in the coveralls. The place was all women. A majority of them, it seemed to him as he tried not to gape, were devoting full attention to him and this vixen high over him on the airplane wing.

Trim as a terrier within the folds of the coveralls, she was wiping her hands on a grease rag while she eyed Ben up and down. If looks could kill, she did not need a fighter plane on her side. Squinting up as she glared down, he parked his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket, hoping a casual approach might simmer her down. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm only checking in. Which means I have to be checked out, they tell me. Look, miss, I'm not trying to be fresh."

She did a little something to the collar of her greasy coveralls, and an insignia flashed out. "Try 'Captain,' why don't you."

Too late he caught sight of the ready-bag sitting in the cockpit hatch, with WASP wings and a squadron commanding officer's striped star stenciled on it. Just my luck with this base, I light in here and brush up against a queen bee. "Next time I'll be sure to, Captain. Steer me to the infirmary and I'll have my IQ checked along with the rest, how about?"

"Three buildings down from Ops, where the control tower is, and ask for the short-arm inspector. If your IQ is where I think it is, you can have both done at once." She finished him off with a last dismissing look. "Crew chief!" she was moving on to her next victim even before he turned away. "Who looked over this engine, Helen Keller? The points are burned. I want them filed down and reset before I take this crate for a checklist run."

Glad to get out of there with his hide on, Ben went and presented himself at the infirmary for the evidently important process of dropping his pants. A clean bill of health promised to be his only gain for the day, however. At his next stop, the BOQ clerk did not even make a pretense of looking up an empty bunk for him. "You're billeted downtown, transient basis. The Excelsior Hotel."

A memory clicked from college days; the Alka-Seltzer was one of the wino flophouses on First Avenue South. "How the hell come? I'm here TDY, not transient."

"Because it says so here. Orders from headquarters, sir."

CAPs

Ben resisted the impulse to whip out his higher set of orders and wipe the smirk off the clerk with them. He didn't want that reputation until he knew more about what this damn base had become. Stoically he listened to the clerk recite the daily schedule of the shuttle bus between the base and downtown Great Falls. Meanwhile a fresh-faced private with an armband marking him as the runner from the orderly room had come in, and was hovering nearby. He broke in:

"Lieutenant Reinking?"

"I was when I got here."

"General Grady wants to see you."

"Who?"

"The commanding officer of the base, sir. Wants to see you."

"As in, this minute?"

The runner nodded nervously.

Ben slung his duffel behind the desk where the clerk had no choice but to watch it. Before turning to go, he asked: "Do you have a Lieutenant Eisman bunked here?"

The clerk showed a sign of life. "Sure do--the football All-American? Ever see him play? I bet he didn't even have to run, he could just walk through the other team."

"Tell him the moving target is back." Ben glanced at the ^{orderly} day-room runner waiting edgily to escort him to the headquarters building. "Lead on, Moses."

As if some signal had been given, East Base began to hum with activity while the runner ^{led} walked him through the military maze of buildings. Fire engines

trundled to their ready spot near the end of the runway, followed by the medical corps ambulance, known on every airbase as the meatwagon. Next, the flightline went from empty to maximally busy in a matter of minutes. A spate of P-39s took off one after another and headed north, leaving their chorus of roar behind. Other fighter planes, likely the check-out flights, were being rolled out of the big hangar he had blundered into. Ben watched it all; another day in the war, of the five hundred and some he had been through. Back here, he could tell time by the sun, and he aligned the other zones around the world with it now. The clock was in his head every waking minute. It was close onto noon here, the day was drawing down and Moxie Stamper would be in a supper at a secure bomber base if he was lucky. Carl Friessen would be in a foxhole listening to the night noises of the New Guinea jungle. On the destroyer zigzagging in the Pacific, Nick Danzer already was in tomorrow; Danzer, with his taste for any advantage, would like that. Member by member of the supreme team, Ben memorized anew the time difference from here to there, adjusting toward the schedule of teletype messages that followed him from base.

The one-star officer in charge of East Base evidently had been at a head of steam while waiting for the TPWP interloper. Base commanders generally did. Ben sometimes wondered if that's why they were called generals.

Ben's salute still was in the air when this one, an obvious old ranker with a face like he'd been eating fire, started in on him. "So you're here to make us famous. I'm not sure I like that."

Webbs
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AUTHOR

CAP

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change okay?

(47)

Teletype is listed as a trademarked term in both Webster's and The AP style book.

(47)

TM

CAPs

Nice even-tempered base you run here, General--everybody pissed off all the time. Ben stood his ground by holding his salute until the personage behind the desk was forced to say, "At ease, shit's sake, man." The general peered at the lieutenant down all the rungs of rank between them. "Well? Why us? Why can't we get on with what we're doing without your outfit, whatever it is"--he glanced with abhorrence at the Threshold Press War Project patch on Ben's shoulder-- "poking its nose in?"

"Somebody cut me the orders, sir. Confidentially, I'd prefer to be doing something else in the war."

The confidentially did not go down well with the general. "Then tell me this. Are you here to play up the women pilots?"

The presence of WASPs and the hangerful of female mechanics had come as definite news to Ben when he blundered into it all. The commander's resistance sharpened his instinct some more. "It depends, sir."

The commander dug a finger in his ear. "On what?"

"What you mean by 'play up.' Just so you know, General"--Ben had a moment of panic; he had been in front of so many of these one-star lifers in charge of obscure bases that he'd lost track of the name here-- "General Grady," he picked it up from the nameplate on the desk and plunged on, "I'm an accredited correspondent as well as a soldier. Those hats don't always fit the way other people would like to see them, but I'm stuck with wearing both. You have to understand, sir, I'm assigned to write about things of interest to--"

CAPS

"These females were wished onto me, and so were the Russkies," the commander blared; for a moment Ben wondered if the man was deaf from too much propwash. "That doesn't mean everybody and his dog has to read about them." He shot a non-negotiable look across the desk. "Those "Sup write-ups of yours, bunk like that, that's all right. Good for the war Lieutenant Eisman has a wild hair up his ass whenever he's on the ground, but he's a good flier--write your brains out about him for all I care. As long as I'm in charge here, that's the kind of thing I want to see, due tribute for my men who fly these planes to Alaska. Is that understood?"

"Duly noted, sir. I'll be doing a piece on Jake Eisman as soon as--"

"That's all, Reinking," the commander swung around in his chair to peruse some imagined event out on the flightline. "Go see the adjutant," came the imperial drift of order over his shoulder, "he'll fix you up with desk space somewhere."

Where does the military find these types, Central Casting? Ben let silence do its work before he cleared his throat and uttered:

"But sir?"

The general's chair grudgingly swiveled in his direction again.

"The situation is," Ben stated as if he had been asked, "I'm under orders to do other stories, too, wherever I see them." He had been in front of enough base commanders to have perfected a polite stare that nonetheless underlined his standard message: "Orders from Washington, sir."

"Lieutenant, shit's sake, we're all under orders from Washington!"

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Thind

} Did you want to keep
scare quotes around
Supreme Team?

Not like mine, Buster. He reached to the zipper pocket of his jacket. "May I?"

Eyeing him more narrowly now, the general reached for the folded orders. He opened them with impatience and read at top speed. Then went back over the words, evidently one by one. Sucking in his cheeks, he handed the paper back to Ben. "Why didn't you say so?" he rasped. "Carry on, Lieutenant, it sure as shit looks like you will anyway."

On the way out, Ben had taken a closer look at a base map to locate the ready room where the WASPs would be waiting for takeoff.

East Butte, the farthest of the Sweetgrass Hills, was keeping Ben drove the undeviating dirt road from the map-dot town of Chester where he had gassed up again; every time he looked, the rumpled rise of land ahead added another fold of steep ridge, another tuck of timbered canyon large enough to swallow an elk herd and an old hunter.

The geography definitely did not budge in his favor while he had to change flat tire number two, in a wind doing its best to blow the hubcap away. Off to the west where he had started this day, the Rockies were a low wall on the horizon. Ben glanced up at the mid-afternoon sun and cursed with military formality. Toussaint, you old SOB, I can about hear Vic laughing at what you're pulling me through. I thought I liked hunting, until today.

While he grunted over the lug nuts and the bumper jack and the lug nuts again, that other time of hunting came back to him, the Christmas vacation--in

SB

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Should this be set off
as a different kind of
space break? (50)

} mid-afternoon (50)
style in Mountain
Time, p. 249.

1940 before the war meant much in America¹ when Jake Eisman and Dexter Cariston and Vic rode home from college with him to go after deer. So ungodly much had happened to the Treasure State teammates since, but what a benign autumn that was. Bruno's coaching had not yet turned apocalyptic as it would the next season, and they could feel reasonably good about the team's seven-and-three record, topped off by beating Butte Poly in the Copper Cup game. Ben searched closely in his memory as he tightened the tire on. Did he have it right, were he and his hunting companions already breathing the heights of the next football season, their senior year of crazy glory, there under the mind-freeing palisades of the Rockies? Time colors such occasions. By then the draft was somewhere on their horizon, but so was the knowledge that the previous time the world had gone to war, America sat out most of it. So, as far as the four of them knew then, in some not distant future they would victoriously hang up their cleats, Ben would take a newspaper job until he mastered the art of movie scripts, Dex would go on to medical school and save the human race, Jake would return to the Black Eagle smelter but in a spotless office where his Engineering and Metallurgy degree hung on the wall, and Vic would play basketball for the barnstorming Carlisle 'Skins from one end of the continent to the other.

You could dream those types of dreams when the rifle in your hand was of civilian make. The whole batch of them tramped their legs off in the rough country there below the mountain reefs for a couple of days, never even seeing a deer but honing in on one another in high spirits. When Vic and Dex stopped to catch their wind on a sharp slope, Jake, who was mass and momentum combined,

style,
p. 400

blew them a fart in passing and went on up the trail telling the world two halfbacks did not add up to a fullback. How lucky, the puffing pair agreed between themselves, to have someone the size and mentality of a horse along to pack out all the meat the two of them were going to get. It was Ben's country, there along the continent-dividing upthrusts west of Gros Ventre, and he was content to guide and grin until his face ached and try to stay on the lookout for deer. The last afternoon, a fine four-point buck strolled out of the timber on the ridgeline above them, nicely silhouetted but at extreme range. The other three looked at Vic, who had grown up on rifle-taken venison. Dex Cariston in particular stood back; his family, pioneer Helena merchants risen to various kinds of financial dominance, could have bought the Rocky Mountains as a hunting preserve, and he went out of his way never to appear presumptuous. "I'll give him a try," Vic accepted the general vote of confidence and flopped down to settle his .30-06 across a downed tree. But he was rusty--a man can't spend his autumns playing major college football and keep his shooting eye up too--and after he fired, the buck simply turned its head, antlers tipped a bit to one side, as if quizzical about all the noise. Ben and the others crouched waiting for Vic to touch off a second shot, but instead he clicked the safety on his rifle and looked up at them, poker-face serious. "Isn't that the damndest thing you ever saw? A dead deer standing there looking at us." They all were laughing so hard they could not get their rifles up before the deer bounded off into the jackpines. We'll never get him now, will we, Vic, old kid.

SB

AUTHOR

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SB

WebS

There should be a
space bunk here,
correct?

52

Ben threw the flat tire on top of the other one in the trunk of the car and dusted off his hands. Some night soon, he knew, he and Jake would meet at the Officers Club to do their best to drink away what had befallen Vic, and the next morning they would put on their unbloodied uniforms the same as always. He winced at the next thought: Dex was another story.

Right now the puzzle was geography. Stumps of a mountain range that they were, the Sweetgrass Hills sat wide on the prairie and Ben knew he could not afford to waste miles circling East Butte the wrong way. He guessed west--^{1/2} traveling by wagon, Toussaint might have come cross-country from that way--^{1/2} and aimed the Packard in that direction on the loop road around the sprawling butte, hoping. This time the first place he asked at, a wind-peeled farmhouse, paid off. The farm couple, the Conlons, were acquainted with Toussaint Rennie, not necessarily by choice; for as long as they could remember, he passed through their place at this time of year, nodding politely and heading on up to elk territory. If they had to guess, they would say he might be somewhere up the old mining road to Devil's Chimney. Something tingled at the back of Ben's neck: east again.

He jounced the car up the steep rocky road, praying for the tires with every jolt, as far as he dared, then set out on foot. He skirted timberline above a creek that dropped with a pleasant-sounding rush down through a coulee filled with tall grass and wild roses. He had never seen a more likely place for elk to browse, and there wasn't a one in sight. Nothing wanted to cooperate today. D
moment when he would have to abandon oldest etiquette and sho
name in the possible presence of game, he scanned farther up the

AUTHOR

grass and wild roses. He had never seen a more likely place for elk to browse, and there wasn't a one in sight. Nothing wanted to cooperate today. Dreading the moment when he would have to abandon oldest etiquette and shout out a hunter's name in the possible presence of game, he scanned farther up the slope toward the

Should this be
"abandon
the oldest etiquette"?
^

(53)

gloom-gray chimney of rock at the forested summit, turning an ear to the wind in one last attempt to conjure the sound of an elk herd on the move somewhere out there in the timber. What he heard came into his other ear from not ten feet away.

"Looks like Ben."

Ben nearly levitated out of his flight jacket.

When he spun and looked, at first glance he still couldn't pick out the man in the shadowed patch of juniper and downed trees. "Saw the car," the old voice came again, a chuckle entering it. "That Packard. Stories it could tell." A swag of juniper branch lifted, not quite where Ben expected, and the walnut crinkles of the aged face came into view.

"Christ, Toussaint, they could use you in camouflage school. Room in there for one more?"

"Make yourself skinny."

Ben eased in from the back of the hunting blind and found himself in something like a man-sized thatched nest. Toussaint had bundles of long-stemmed sweetgrass stacked all around the interior of his lair; the place smelled like a sugarcane field, and no passing elk would get any scent of man. Ben tried to get used to the confined space in a hurry, shaking hands with Toussaint as he inched past him. Sitting there pot-bellied on a rickety kitchen chair, in faded wool pants and a mackinaw that had seen nearly as many years as he had, the old hunter peering up at him put Ben in mind of a Buddha that a pile of grubby clothes had been tossed on. The rifle propped against the side of the blind showed a catalogue

Wells

shine of newness, however. Toussaint chuckled again. "Sold a cow to get the gun to hunt elk. Don't know if that's progress."

He gestured hospitably. "Pull up a rock, Ben." Ben settled for a log end. Dark eyes within weathered folds of skin were contemplating him as if measuring the passage of years. "Haven't seen you since Browning," Toussaint arrived at. "You were catcher."

Ben smiled. ~~"End-~~It's called 'end' in football, Toussaint."

"Did a lot of catching, I saw."

A dozen catches, in that final high school game against the reservation town; good for three touchdowns. Gros Ventre always pounded Browning into the ground in football, just as Browning always ran up the score sky-high against Gros Ventre in basketball. That game, though, Ben and his teammates had a terrible time handling a swift Browning halfback named Vic Rennie. "Vic damn near ran the pants off us."

"He knew how to run."

Ben's heart skipped when he heard the past tense. Had word reached Toussaint already? It couldn't have. He bought a bit more time with an inquisitive jerk of his head toward the far-off Rockies. "The last I knew, the Two Medicine country had elk. Why hightail it all the way over here to hunt?"

"Those buffalo."

Toussaint spoke it in such a way that Ben nearly looked around for shaggy animals with horned heads down in the high grass.

The old hunter swept a hand over the farmed fields below the Sweetgrass Hills, the gesture wiping away the past seventy years. "It was all buffalo color then, Ben. Too thick to count, that herd. I was just yay-high"--a veined hand indicated a boy's height--"and mooching my way to that Two Medicine country. The Crows gave me a horse, let me ride here with them--don't know why. All the tribes came here for those buffalo. Too busy hunting to fight. Even those Blackfeet." The dark eyes, a spark of mischief in them, held on the visitor again. "Could be some leftover luck here, so I come hunting."

"I'm glad I asked," said Ben.

"You are not here about buffalo. Elk either."

"True." Softly but swiftly to get it over with, he told what had happened to Vic.

When that was done, Toussaint looked out past the old contested country of the tribes, off somewhere into the swollen world of war. His voice turned bleak and Ben wondered whether a chuckle would ever enter it again.

"They blew up my boy?"

"He was pretty badly torn up by the landmine. They had to amputate."

A grunt came from the grandfather, as dismal a sound as Ben had ever heard. Quickly he reached to his jacket pocket. "I don't know if it helps, but I brought you a letter from Vic."

The old man held the pale blue sheet of paper at arm's length to read it. Watching this, Ben felt uncomfortably responsible for its contents, whatever those were. He'd had to move military heaven and earth--Tepee Weepy, which

amounted to the same thing--^Ito get word to Vic and then speed the resulting letter through top channels. The courier, a sleek young Pentagon officer exuding importance, had stepped off the plane at East Base disdainfully looking over Ben's head for the almighty TPWP officer in charge. "I'm him," Ben had announced, and the courier's expression only grew worse when the briefcase handcuffed to his wrist was unlocked to produce a single slim envelope that looked like ordinary mail. Ben wished him a nice flight back to Washington and tucked the letter in his jacket. Now Toussaint lowered the piece of paper and refolded it carefully.

"Vic writes he can't get a new leg. All the things they can do these days, they can't get him a new leg?"

Ben shook his head.

[Neither man spoke for a while, Toussaint still creasing the letter, until at last he asked the question his visitor had been dreading most:

"Why don't they send him home to me?"

Ben hoped it wasn't because a one-legged hero did not fit with TPWP plans. He could hear the strain in his voice as he tried to put the secretive hospital in the English countryside in the best light. "There's a facility--^Ia place there where they help people pull through something like this. It's an estate." It was for depression victims. Mangled Royal Air Force pilots. Commandoes wrecked in body and mind from the disastrous Dieppe raid. And, Tepee Weepy had seen to it, a "Supreme Team" running back with an empty pantleg.

He left all that last part out; from the look on the man who had raised Victor Rennie, bringing the letter maybe was bad enough. After a bit Toussaint said absently: "Vic says it's awful green there. Hedges."

"Toussaint, you better know. I'm supposed to write something about Vic. It's my job."

"Funny kind of job, Ben, ain't it?"

You don't know the half of it, Toussaint, not even you. He tried to explain the ongoing articles about the team, the obligation--if it was that--to tell people what had happened to Vic while he was fighting in the service of his country.

"Country." Toussaint picked up that word and seemed to consider it. He gestured in the direction of Great Falls. "Hill 57," he let out as if Ben had asked for an unsavory address. "You know about that." Something like a snort came from him, making Ben more uneasy yet. After a long moment, he held up the letter. "Here's what's left of Vic, that I know of." He handed it over. "Take down what it says."

Nonplussed, Ben unfolded the piece of stationery and read it through. He chewed the inside of his mouth, trying to decide. It had been offered and he couldn't turn it down. "You're sure?"

Toussaint shrugged as if surety was hard to come by.

Ben took out his notepad and jotted steadily. When done, he handed the letter back and put a hand on the rough shoulder of the mackinaw. "I'll get word to you when they give Vic the okay to come home, I promise." Drawing a last

deep breath of sweetgrass, he started to get up. "You know how to put on the miles. I have to get back to Gros Ventre yet tonight."

Toussaint nodded. "Say hello. Your father is good people."

"Ask a hard question when you have one foot out the door," that father schooled into every cub reporter, including his son, who passed through the Gleaner office. "A person turns into an answering fool to get rid of you." Ben hesitated. Toussaint Rennie was never going to be an answering fool or any other kind.

The question did not wait for him to reason it out. "Help me with something if you can," he blurted, turning back to the seated figure. "Did Vic ever say anything about that kid on our team? Merle? You know the one I mean."

He watched the eyes encased within wrinkles; something registered there. "The one that died on that funny hill?" the voice came slowly. "With all the white rocks?"

"That's him."

"That one. Nobody ought to run that much." Now the old man scrutinized him in return. "Vic comes home, you can ask him."

"I want to. It's just that he's never brought it up."

"That's that, then." Toussaint glanced away, then back again. "Better look up that aunt of his."

Ben's hopes sagged. He had knocked on the door of that Hill 57 shack any number of times, trying to reach the elusive relative Vic had lived with during college. "She's never there."

"Downtown, drunk," Toussaint grunted as though he could see the woman from where he sat. "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."

"I'll give her another try." Ben touched the bowed shoulder again as he edged past.

"So long, Ben." The old man shifted his weight, settling deeper on the spindly chair. "See any elk, shoo them this way."

SB

It was forming in his head by the time he reached the car. He could have kicked himself for not having brought the typewriter. He ransacked the glove compartment and came up with some old whiskey invoices billed to the Medicine Lodge. The backs of those gave him enough to write on. First he carefully tore out the notepad pages the letter was copied onto and laid them in order on the car seat, reading them over a couple of times. Then he began to scrawl, sheet after sheet, more like scribbling than writing, things crossed out often, but the words that survived felt right to him. He worked like fury at it, and the piece grew under the pencil.

*In the hills he had made his own, the grandfather heard from
war only by farthest echoes. Little Bighorn. Wounded Knee. San J
Montana boys, neighbors' sons, at a place from Hell called the Argonne Forest.
Pearl Harbor. He knew death did not send a letter, but harm was likely to. He*

DESIGN

pencil.

In the hills he had made his own, the grandfather heard from the world of war only by farthest echoes. Little Bighorn. Wounded Knee. San Juan Hill. Montana boys, neighbors' sons, at a place from Hell called the Argonne Forest. Pearl Harbor. He knew death did not send a letter, but harm was likely to. He

David Hough's design memo recommends setting off Ben's writing in something other than italic. (C)

opened this hand-delivered one past the return address of the grandfather who had raised--¹_m Cpl. Victor Rennie, somewhere in England.

"Old man, the friend who will bring you this will tell you what happened. All I will say is that it was like dynamite going off under me.

"No more hunting for me. My left leg is gone, almost to the hip. These doctors treat me the best they can, but they can't bring back the leg.

"You will want to know what this place is like. There is a green lawn as big as our horse pasture, and hedges as high as the corral. It rains here. Days are all the same. You remember my folks' funeral. This is like being at my own, every day. They say I will adjust, whatever that means. I can't see it, myself. The crazy thing is, it reminds me of going to a movie with my friend Ben. We got a kick out of the Westerns, a stagecoach always going around and around those big buttes in Monument Valley while the Indians chased it. Time after time, same butte, stagecoach and Indians going like hell around it again. Grandfather, you are going to have to know--¹_m when I come home, my life will be like that, nothing but the same, over and over."

Vic's chapter of the war ends there, but not his story. When this war has its valley of monuments, in the tended landscape of history, they will not all look alike. One will be what we call in Montana a sidehill, a slope populated with shacks at the edge of a thriving American city. The nickname, Hill 57, speaks to the variety of hard luck there--¹_m poor, Indian, jobless--¹_m and it was from Hill 57 that Victor Rennie each day walked to college and, one farther day, into the world of war. His Army unit was in hard fighting in the invasion of Sicily. Vic survived

opened this hand-delivered one past the return address of the grandson he had raised--[!]_M*Cpl. Victor Rennie, somewhere in England.*

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All I will say is that it was like dynamite going off under me.

} Is there a specific reason why this is set in roman?

that, as he had survived so much else. Then came the bivouac outside Messina in a stretch of country the German forces supposedly had retreated through too fast to set landmines. The routine patrol led by Vic set out at first light...

Football never entered into the piece.

equal
spacing

Wells

3

CN

“Cass? Are you in, captain ma’am, or folding like a sane person would?”

Walled in by the drone of the cargo plane and the din of her own thoughts, Cass Standish forced her attention back to the cards in her hand. Pair of jacks, deuce, trey, ten. Could be worse, but just as easy could be better. The flight plan of the C-47 gooneybird, monotonously circling in bumpy air for the last half hour, could have stood improvement, too. I’m not in charge of that, at least. Just the

p. 350

lonely one-eyed jacks staring her in the face. Across from her, Della teased a finger back and forth across the edge of her cards as if sharpening them for the kill. Glancing right and left, Cass caught up to the fact that Beryl and Mary Catherine had already thrown their face^o down on the makeshift table of parachute packs, bluffed out. It was a shame Della was not as good a pilot as she was a poker player. webs

"I'll see you in Hell first, Maclaine." Cass took a dollar bill from her depleted stack and tossed it into the ante.

"Tsk, Cassie. That's one for Mother." Reaching across, Della plucked up another wrinkled bill from Cass's pile of ones and dropped it aside into the cuss pot, which they always divvied after the game.

"What's the program here," Cass said crossly, "to get rich off my vocabulary? That's chickenshit, Della."

The others eyed her. They knew Cass had the best cockpit nerves in the human race; when she was not at the controls, things could fray at the edges now and then. Beryl, ritual elder of the group, was about to say something but thought better of it. This time, Della only crept her fingers a little way toward Cass's pile, asking as if it was a matter of etiquette: "Another for Mother?"

Knowing that she needed to get a grip of the situation, Cass fanned at her mouth as if shooing off flies, then forked over another swearing during the game. As everyone laughed, she sneaked another glance at the nearest window port and still saw only fog; Seattle was socked in tighter than she could ever remember--that was saying a lot--and there were mountains out there. ADDITION

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] Should this be
"get a grip on the
situation"? (63)

Even she, who had to have faith in instrumentation, was ready to divert to sunny Moses Lake. She caught the eye of Linda Cicotte, her B flight lead pilot, and pointed urgently toward the cockpit. Linda nodded, teetered to her feet and felt her way forward to talk to the pilot. The rest of the dozen women, all in the baggy flying gear called zoot suits, slouched in sling seats along one side of the aircraft; the majority of the cabin was taken up with bulky crates. TARFU Airlines, these numbing transport trips in the equivalent of a boxcar with propellers were known as: Things Are Really Fucked Up. Circling in Grade A fog this way was worse than usual, on these trips to the Coast, but there was nothing to do about it but go with the routine. Linda's team of fliers as usual were curled up as best they could, trying to catch some sleep. C flight, Ella Mannion's, did crossword puzzles and read books. Cass was not sure she wanted to know what it said that hers always sat on their parachute packs in the tail of the plane and played cutthroat poker.

Right now, Mary Catherine palmed the deck in cardslick fashion and kept keep dealing. "Cards, sisters in sin?"

"Honey"--Della was only from somewhere in southern Ohio, but when she poured it on, she sounded like Tallulah Bankhead on a bender--"I couldn't possibly stand one more good card."

Cass flinched inwardly. What am I getting myself into here? A lot of that going around lately. Saying "Hit me twice," she slid the deuce and troy to the discard pile. The new cards might as well have gone straight there, too. Lucky in love doesn't seem to count in poker either, Ben. Even so, when Della upped the

AUTHOR

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} I couldn't find "cardslick" in the dictionary. Did you mean "cardsharp" perhaps? (64)

ante, she stayed with her. Della raised her again, which mercifully was the limit. Cass met the bet and, fingers crossed, produced the jacks.

"Pair of ladies." Della laid down queens and scooped up cash. "Thank you for the money, y'all, it'll go for good causes, widows and orphans and the home for overmatched poker players."

Cass looked at Mary Catherine, and Mary Catherine at Beryl. Simultaneously they reached to their piles and each flung a dollar into the cuss pot. "Piss in the ocean, Della!" they chorused.

"My, my," Della drawled, cocking a delicate ear. "Do I hear a whine in one of the engines?" Cass had to hand it to her; shavetail latecomer or not, she was sharp as a porcupine on most things. The full lieutenants, Beryl Foster and Mary Catherine Cornelisen, had earned their wings in the very first contingent of WASPs, as Cass herself had. The three of them together had endured the bald old goat of a flight instructor at Sweetwater, Texas, who claimed women pilots would never amount to anything because they couldn't piss in the ocean--the Gulf of Mexico, actually--from ten thousand feet through the relief tube like the male pilots. If that had been deliberate motivation toward every other kind of flying skill, it worked in their case. Sometimes the aircraft they ferried from the plant were finished products and sometimes they weren't. Mary Catherine once had been going through a cockpit check on the factory floor when the engine of the shiny new fighter burst into flames; pure textbook but against all human inclination, she rammed the throttle open and blew out the fire. And Beryl knew what it was to land at East Base with nothing but fumes left in a leaky auxiliary

rom

AU

CAPs

tank. With scrapes enough of her own, Cass would not have traded their cool heads for reincarnations of Amelia Earhart. Della, though. Nearly a year behind them in flight school and immeasurably more than that in experience, Della still showed signs of thinking of herself as a hot pilot. Hot pilots tended to end up dead pilots. Cass knew she had her work cut out for her with Della.

Starting about now; Della was shuffling the cards in such a fashion that they purred expectantly, but she did have the smarts to check with Cass before dealing out another hand.

Cass shook her head. "That's it, officers. Time to ready up." She climbed to her feet, stiff from all the sitting. "M.C., where'd you put those newspapers?" They had grabbed up a pile of the Great Falls Tribune before takeoff; the article about them and the picture of the squadron proudly posed on the wings of an Airacobra had brought whoops of tribute to the inquisitive war correspondent in the fancy flight jacket. And they're not even in the sack with him. Cass tried to stifle that thought and keep a straight face as Mary Catherine uncovered the newspapers from under her gear and began passing them out. "Here you go, read all about our classy squadron commander and her Flying Women. How many does everybody want? Cass?"

"Oh, a couple." One to send to Dan. What a case I am. Show the hubby the nice things the other man I love writes about me. Dry-mouthed, Cass hoped she was better at a straight face than she was at stifling.

Linda Cicotte came weaving her way to the back of the plane. "We're in the hands of a hero, Cass." She jerked a thumb toward the cockpit. "He still says he's going to get us on the ground in Seattle."

"He didn't happen to say, 'Or die trying,' did he?" Cass asked in exasperation.

Linda simply rolled her eyes. "Are we going to fly out in this, do you think?"

"Too soupy for good health." Cass herself didn't mind instrument flying, bracketing the radio beam and the rest of the things you did to let the machine navigate itself through limited visibility. But she couldn't risk her fliers; Della in particular tended to trust her own instincts over the instruments, a good way to meet a mountain. "You know what a hard-ass this dispatching officer can be," Cass shared her thinking with Linda, who had flown the Seattle run nearly as many times as she had. "I'll work on him unmercifully. Tell your bunch and Ella's we're going to try to RON this one." Remaining overnight, when they were supposed to be picking up planes and heading back, would not be popular with the higher-ups at East Base. It also threw off tonight with Ben. Briefly she felt better about herself for not letting either of those get in the way of her decision.

Beryl looked up from the newspaper she was holding. "Cass? I didn't know that about the ring. Mine won't come off even if I wanted."

The line in there about the ringless hand, nothing between it and the controls of an Airacobra: Damn it, Ben, you don't miss much, but I wish you'd been looking the other way that time. They'd started off deadly stiff with one

CAP3

another when he showed up to interview her and the other WASPs, as was to be expected after that run-in in the hangar. The atmosphere started to thaw as soon as he discovered she gave a straight answer, no matter what the question, and she found out he knew his business about flying. He'd done his homework on P-39s, was familiar with the Cobra's reputation as a tricky aircraft, with the engine mounted in back of the cockpit creating a center of gravity different from more stable fighter planes. And he had looked into the Lend-Lease lore that what was gained from the radical design was ideal room up front for a 30-millimeter cannon poking out of the propeller hub like a stinger; the Russians were said to adore P-39s for strafing, just point the nose of the plane at German tanks and convoys and blaze away. Cass drew a grin from him when she agreed it was a flighty aircraft, one you had to pilot every moment, but she confessed she didn't mind that about the Cobra, weren't you supposed to pay total attention when you were in the air? As to the funeral ticket always there in that big engine right behind the pilot's neck, she offhandedly said the answer was to not get in a situation where you had to make a belly landing. That drew somewhat less of a grin from him. The true tipping point came, though, when she climbed into a tethered P-39 to show him the cockpit routine, automatically slipping off her wedding band as she slid into the seat and he wanted to know what that was about. Somehow willpower--won't power, too, she ruefully corrected herself--went out of control from then on.

"My husband is too busy to mind about something like a ring, he's in New Guinea."

rom

AV

"With the Montaneers? So is one of my football buddies--I was there a little while back."

"You were? Is it as bad as they say?"

"I'll bring you the piece I wrote there, you can decide."

rom

AU

All that. Then before they knew it, nights at the roadhouse or his room at the Excelsior. She had done anything like this only once before, during the spree in Dallas after winning her wings, when that well-mannered tank officer as viewed through a celebratory haze of drinks looked too good to resist. That was strictly a one-nighter, and she had no illusions that Dan Standish refrained from similar flings when he was loose on leave in Brisbane and Rockhampton among the Sheilas of Australia. Supposedly it was different for men, their urges painted as almost medical, "the screw flu"; to hear them tell it, nature was to blame. But what about the strain of being a woman in singular command of a squadron of nerve-wracking planes and pilots both, and Ben Reinking happens into your life, nature's remedy for desolate nights if there ever was one? In the world of war, turn down such solace just because chance made you female? It had started off as only friendly drinks, Ben still asking her this and that as he worked over his piece about her squadron, the two of them sudden buddies over the topics of planes and New Guinea, until all at once he was revealing to her that he'd been wounded during his correspondent stint there. Every word that followed had stayed with Cass ever since:

"Where?"

rom

AU

"Place called Bitoi Ridge. Kind of a jungle hogback, in from the bay at Salamaua."

rom

AU

"Modest. I meant on you."

Ben paused. *"I don't generally show it off."*

rom

She bolted the last of her drink, but there was a challenging dry tingle in her mouth as she spoke it: *"Never make an exception?"*

rom

And ever since, the part she hated: if she wanted to hang onto her marriage and officer's rank, they didn't dare get caught at it. Tell no one. Show nothing. Staying casual as you hid a lover was a surprising amount of work, but now she managed to shrug at Beryl's remark. "I've just always done it, Bear. Dan and I knew a mechanic who slipped off a ladder, caught his ring on a bolthead. Pulled it right off."

"The ring?" Della was deep in admiration of the newspaper the flip of her blond hair showed to advantage. "So what?"

"The finger, fool."

AUTHOR

"Yipe. Guess I better stay single, keep on playing the field."

"Is that where you head out to with that warrant officer who has the jeep," Mary Catherine wondered, "the nearest field?"

"Nice talk, Mary Cat. I don't see you around the nunnery." Della tucked the newspaper into her ready-bag. "Maybe I ought to set my sights higher, a war correspondent. Anybody find out, is he up for grabs?"

"The ring?" Della was deep in admiration of the newspaper photo, where the flip of her blond hair showed to advantage. "So what?"

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} This is the prevalent style throughout the book.

"He's engaged," Cass made up on the spot. "Head over heels for the lucky girl, from the sound of it. Everybody, strap on those chutes in case this moron pilot isn't any better at reading a fuel gauge than the weather."

Mary Catherine couldn't resist a last dig on Della. "You're losing your touch, Delly. You might have known that dreamboat of a correspondent is taken." She spoke with the air of one who had been through enough men to know. "The good ones always are."

SB

"Lieutenant Reinking, sir? I've been looking all over for you."

Not again. Doesn't that damn general have anything else to do, like run the base? On edge anyway, Ben had intended to slip into his office only for a minute before heading to the communications section and ^(then) checking the flight board again. The last two times, the board showed NTO ZV--no takeoff, zero visibility--for Cass's WASP 1 squadron. It spooked him--possibly more than it should, but it spooked him nonetheless. Fog induced crashes. That 1200-horsepower engine situated directly in back of the pilot seat, like a cocked catapult. Seattle wrote the book on fog, surely to God they'll scrub the flight, won't they?

AU

CAPs

CAPs

Along with fretting about Cass and trying to wind down from leave, he had spent the afternoon with his typewriter in a back room at the base library, wrapping up the piece on Vic. The war did not recognize Sunday, but somehow it was the slowest day of message traffic and his intention was to send in the piece while the sending was good. In the way of that stood a squat broken-nosed

hardcase in rumpled uniform, nervously fiddling with his cap. Ben eyed him distrustfully until he realized there was no armband of a ^{an orderly} day-room runner on this one.

“All over is the right place to look for me,” Ben admitted. “What’s on your mind, soldier?”

“Didn’t they tell you, sir? I’m your new clerk.”

Caught off guard, Ben shot a glance at the desk in the corner; it had been swept clean of everything except the typewriter and the Speed Graphic camera, making his own chronically overloaded desk look even more like a dump. “What happened to Wryzinski?”

“Nobody told me that, sir.” The anthem of the enlisted man.

Ben had just been getting used to Wryzinski. “Right, why did I even ask. Tepee Weepy taketh away and Tepee Weepy giveth.” He offered the new man a handshake. “What do I call you?”

“Jones, sir.”

“Nobody’s named that,” Ben responded, grinning to put him at ease. “It’s taken.”

“I don’t quite catch your meaning, sir.”

This was going to require some care, Ben realized. “Let’s do this over, corporal. First off, I’ll try to remember to wiggle my ears when I’m making a joke and you try to pretend there is such a thing as a joke. Second, drop the ‘sir’ when there’s no one here but us, and that’s all the time.” The makeshift office that had been tossed to Ben--in earlier life it was some kind of overgrown storage bin, for

Web

AU

CAP

AU

onions from the smell of it, at the rear of the mess hall--at least provided seclusion. "Maybe then we can get along reasonably well, okay?" The plug-ugly face indicated it was determined to try. "So, Jones, enlighten me--what did you do in civvie life to condemn yourself to being assigned to me?"

"College. Religious Studies, ahead of seminary."

Ben examined him. Jones looked as if any study time he had put in likely would have been with Murder Incorporated. "No kidding. At any place I ever heard of?"

"Out at the university." This drew him closer scrutiny from Ben. "I was a freshman in '41. Yelled my head off at every game, lieutenant. What a team you guys were."

"Then you know what this is about," Ben indicated the overloaded small office. "Go ahead and move into that desk. I'm just on my way over to the wire room and--"

"Sir--I mean, lieutenant? I was just over there. Figured I could at least check on things until you showed up." The incipient clerk looked uncomfortable. "There's a slew of messages, but they said for your eyes only. They told me to, uhm, get lost."

They told you to go screw yourself six ways from Sunday, didn't they, Parson Jones. Welcome to the East Base version of close combat. "I'll have a word with them about giving you confusing directions like that. Just so you know, I need to sign off on all messages. Don't ask me why, I don't write the

style in
Buckley
the Sun

AV

AV

regulations." The war clock ticking in his head, he suddenly asked: "Any skinny about where these came in from?"

Jones pursed his lips as if calculating where gossip fell on the scale of sin. "Uhm, I did pester the teletype operator until he'd tell me that much. Pacific theatre, lieutenant."

Friessen and Animal Angelides and Danzer. Rest camp in Australia and troop ship in convoy and destroyer on noncombat station. Those should be okay; routine reports this time of day. Relieved, Ben grabbed up the materials from his desk that he had come for and turned to go. Jones still stood there fidgeting.

"Lieutenant, I better tell you, I don't have the least idea what I'm supposed to be doing here. I never heard of this TPWP outfit until I was assigned to you."

By now Ben could have recited it in his sleep, the same spiel he had given Wryzinski, and Torvik before him, and Sullivan before that, that the government was in the habit of setting up special projects for certain war priorities. There was one for lumber production, and one for the artificial rubber called guayule, and a rumored strange one going on out in the desert at Hanford, Washington, that no one would talk about officially, and who knew how many others. "In ours, we produce boilerplate for the newspapers, to put it politely. You do know how to handle a typewriter and a camera, right? Where is it you were stationed, before?"

"The Aleutians. I was on the base newspaper at Adak, the Williwaw." A mistily nostalgic expression came over the thug face. "They really had the weather up there. It was great for Bible study."

"I'll just bet." If the Aleutian Islands were known for anything, it was sideways rain. That remote Alaska outpost was about as distant as possible from Montana and any logical assignment to this office. Another of those chills blowing through a gap in the law of averages crept up Ben's spine as he inspected the unexpected corporal again. The war tossed people like scraps of paper to far corners of the world, except those who happened to have attended Treasure State University in 41; those it was busily sifting back to Great Falls. Jake Eisman, first. Then himself, and now this clerk with nothing standing out on his record except piety. Would coincidences never cease: the tangled situation with Cass, and all of a sudden a Ten Commandments officemate who would definitely know which number the one against adultery was.

"Tell you what, Jones, things are kind of slack at the moment and it's late in the day," he resorted to, wanting time to think over this latest circumstance, "so why don't you just get settled in the barracks. I'll collect the messages and we'll start work in the morning--with any luck, the two of us will have the war won by noon."

Jones cleared his throat. "Sir? We have company."

Another soldier was standing in the office doorway wringing a cap. This one wore an armband.

"I have been reprimanded," the base commander set fire to each word.

"Because of you, Lieutenant Reinking."