

The other interior linemen groaned along with him and Ben at left end held in his own with effort. He watched with the others as their coach and chief tormenter came striding onto the field as if he personally owned Treasure State stadium. In his camelhair topcoat and snapbrim hat Lionel Bruno could strut standing still, so when he added some relish to it as he did now, he was practically parting the grass like the Red Sea. It was times like this when Ben wished he had been elected, say, water boy instead of team captain.

Hastily he checked over his shoulder to see how the backfield was taking this development. Moxie Stamper smirked unmercifully behind his quarterback privileges, about as expected. At the left halfback position, Vic shook his head at Ben as if he couldn't believe what was happening to this season either. At right half, Dex was coldly watching the coach's progress onto the field. Bulking between the pair of them, Jake had yanked his helmet off and stood tapping it in agitation against his thigh pads.

As if scripted, Bruno marched straight to the football. He plucked it off the ground and walked back and forth through the players holding the ball in front of their faces as if all twenty-two of them were nearsighted morons. Ben couldn't even guess which speech it was going to be this time, there were so many.

"If the bunch of you would pull your heads out of your butts," the coach started in on them, "and put aside the lesser things of life to concentrate on the basic game of football"--

*Oh oh, that one.*

--"then you just possibly might have the makings of a genuine team." At the word *might*, Bruno squeezed the ball so hard it threatened to pop. "Forget nights on the town. Forget dessert and the cigarette after. Forget about trying to get into your girlfriend's pants," he preached with rising intensity. "This"--he brandished the football higher--"this is the one and only object of your desire from

this moment forward, people. You have to want this ball. You have to lust for this ball. You have to *love* getting this ball and handling it as if you are the only ones on the face of God's green sod it is entrusted to." Pausing for emphasis or maybe it was breath, Bruno nursed his disgust in front of them for all it was worth.

There was more than one audience for this. Ben risked a glance toward the near sideline where Ted Loudon, Bruno's pet sportswriter and nobody else's, was taking in the coach's every word hungrily. *Why? He'll keep making up whatever he wants to about "the team that can't find itself" anyway.*

"Listen up, people," the coach intoned as if they had any other choice, "do you know what you want to be as a team? Slick. Operating together smooth as shit through a goose. I want teamwork from you so slick the bastards across from you won't see be able to see straight, you hear me?"

Nearest across the scrimmage line from Ben, Purcell uncomfortably did. The lanky sophomore was blushing red-hot at the coach's choice of language. *Where the hell was he raised, in a Sunday school?* A walk-on from six-man nowhere, Merle Purcell had been turning pink since the first day of practice when he stepped into the locker room wearing a droopy high school sweater that showed he had lettered in football, basketball, and track. Instantly he became known as *the three-letter man* and crude suggestions were made as to what those letters stood for. He wasn't necessarily hazed any harder than any other sophomore scrub, but on him it seemed to stick. On the field the freakish kid could outrun anything said about him--Ben, who was quick, comprehended the cosmic difference between that and fast--yet when he wasn't in motion he lapsed into a sitting duck. Purcell was a handful in more ways than one, but right then Ben had everyone else on the squad to worry about.

Bruno paused again, then resumed like a thunderclap:

Loudon  
mimicked  
merle's hat

Alas!

“There is not, I repeat, *not* an opponent on the schedule that the Treasure State University Golden Eagles of nineteen hundred and forty-one can’t beat the living piss out of, if you will merely play this game my way. *If!* Do you hear that word? *I-F!* And now that I have your attention, may I point out to you something there is no goddamn if about. It is one week from today to the season opener. *One week!* That gives you seven days to pull together into a team that devotes itself heart, soul, and fart hole to this ball.”

Now--Hollywood could not have cued him better, Ben had to admit--the coach put the football down gently as an egg. By then varsity and second-stringers alike knew Animal indeed was prophetic, here it came. “People?” the coach addressed them as if dubious about that. “To help you concentrate on the loving care of this miraculous object, you are now playing under the Golden Rule.”

Despair followed those words like jackal tracks behind a caravan. The only thing biblical about Bruno’s Golden Rule was that it was blunt-edged and carried the whiff of Hell. The dreaded maxim was actually a catchall of his wrathful coaching canons--no fumbling the football, no missing a tackle, no messing up a play, no timeouts to fix shoulder pads, no anything else that could conceivably offend the exacting eye on the sideline--but what sane person in a football uniform was going to stand out there arguing singular and plural with the gridiron lord and master?

Not Ben, not quite yet. *Not in front of everybody. He’d run the legs off all of us up to those big white sons of bitches just to show me.*

His involuntary glance toward the butte looming out there beyond the end zone stands was not the only one. The Letter Hill was roundly hated. Of all of Bruno’s raging innovations this year, trickier drills, tougher calisthenics, full-length slambang practice games that pitted the varsity against the scrub team twice a week, the punishment runs up to those pale letters halfway into the sky were the

hardest to take. Penalty laps around the field were a custom as old as football cleats, but nobody had signed on to clamber up a junior mountainside any time a volcanic coach blew off steam. Dex would be his bet, for the first to shove the Golden Rule in Bruno's face and walk off the team, followed immediately by Animal and Jake. Today could be the day. Even the Butte hardcase at left guard, Kenny O'Fallon, looked mutinous. Sig Prokosch, the other guard, built like an engine block and usually as imperturbable, showed similar signs. Stan Havel would stay, hiking the ball was the one thing he was fluent at. Moxie Stamper and Larry Danzer were Bruno's cubs, they couldn't be driven off this field by any means known to mankind. Carl Friessen could tip either way, easygoing but a razor streak of sensibility under it. Ben himself--*God damn it, this isn't football, it's Russian roulette.*

Still looking supremely disgusted at what he had to work with, the coach gathered himself to go. "All right, Stamper"--another mark of Bruno was that he did not acknowledge the existence of first names--"show us something that resembles football."

Instantly Moxie yapped at the varsity, "You heard the man, huddle up, everybody get your ass in gear." In his ornery style as quarterback, he had in his favor a quick slinging way of passing that made it hard for the defense to see the ball coming. On the first play now, he hit the right end, Danzer, with a screen pass for ten yards. Right away he caught the scrubs by surprise with the same play again, good for a dozen yards this time. The second-stringers, no slouches, did not like being patsies on such calls and Danzer didn't help the matter any. Physically flawless as a swan, the lithe receiver preened past them with an exceedingly leisurely trot back to the huddle; Narcissus was an amateur compared to Danzer. Ben by contrast, with no action on his side of the field but to block the daylights out

private -  
captain

of Purcell, was starting to feel like a paying spectator; his hands itched for the ball but he couldn't argue with first downs.

Rubbing his passing arm fondly, Moxie looked very full of himself in the huddle. It did seem to cross his mind tangentially that there were others in the backfield besides him, as he handed off to Jake for four yards up the middle. Then, though, like a roulette player repeating his bet on one lucky number, Moxie called yet another screen pass to Danzer.

"Christ, Mox, again?" Animal panted. "What the hell you trying to prove?" The tackle, guard, and center had to check-block on the play, then muscle their way downfield to form a blocking wedge in front of the pass receiver; this meant Animal, Sig, and Stan were pulling double-duty on every one of these right-side trick plays. "Is Danzer the only guy who gets to handle the precious little old ball besides you?"

"I'll do the play calling, Angelides, you just do the blocking," Moxie snapped. Ben could feel the tightening circle of tension in the huddle. Stamper and Danzer were the only ones on the team who weren't fed up with the Stamper-to-Danzer aerial circus in these practice games. But he couldn't say anything without looking like he wanted more catches for himself. Which was true enough.

Animal muttered something to Sig and Stan as they left the huddle. When Moxie took the snap, all three blocked no harder than feather pillows and scrambled on through, leaving the line of scrimmage wide open. Barely did Moxie have the football in his hands before he was smothered under a gleeful avalanche of scrub-team players. Interestingly, the whistle on the sideline stayed silent over this, and Animal sent Ben a wink of triumph. Moxie got up slowly, wiping at a trickle of blood out the corner of his mouth and glowering at the right-side linemen as everyone shambled into the huddle. But this time the play he called was "Reinking, left-side slant pattern long."

Precise as the moment the center snapped the ball to Moxie, Ben feinted and broke free as though catapulted. The exhilaration of momentum took him over, the field flying under him so instinctively sure that he knew to the instant when to veer past the scrambling pass defender, and at top speed aim himself to the unknowable but sure spot where he and the airborne ball would intersect. He looked back only then, the looping pass coming to him as if in a recurrent dream, from backyard lobs by a bespectacled father when he was ten to the Gros Ventre high school field's skyfull of leather pluckings to this supreme stadium's ordination of sure-handed catches, another one now. How miraculous it always seemed, then and when the war trained him into the start of a pilot, the grace of gravity that kept a propelled object aloft; the substantiality of air which some first human eye surely mused on with lasting wonder at a leaf floating by. It all gathered, half-known half-sensed, into him with the conclusive feel of the ball finding the skin of his hands. The pass secured, he raced final yards and was in the end zone.

Still whooping after that and the extra point, the eleven of them lined up across the green field to kick off to the scrub team. And in that permanent moment, time previous going to shadow and all else now lit from what they were about to become, Vic boomed the kick high and far, and the Treasure State University varsity raced down the field.

By chance the kickoff sailed to Purcell, and everyone bayed a warning and went into high gear to head him off. Vic himself managed to nail the scrub team speed demon at about the thirty-yard line, and they all breathed in relief.

Eyes downcast as the second-stringers broke their huddle and flooded to the line of scrimmage, Purcell lined up opposite Ben. As ever, Ben felt like he was looking across at wasted evolution. Reedy, long-limbed, big-eyed, Purcell resembled some creature Nature shaped for speed but forgot to give fang or claw. Bred to flee, but not to block and tackle in the flatten-'em-into-the-ground manner

preached by Bruno. No coach could resist that tantalizing speed entirely, so he stuck Purcell in at right end on the scrub team. Until the varsity wised up in a hurry, the wispy speedster caught a few passes in the open and gained so much yardage it began to look like mileage. But from the very first pass that the kid juggled and dropped, Ben divined what was going to be Purcell's problem: he heard footsteps. When a defender closed in on him, Purcell would flinch, maybe infinitesimally but that was enough. It was a matter of guts: the one necessary requirement for an end was to hang in there and catch the ball first, however much of a hit was coming at you. Anybody, Ben included, could look at Purcell's leggy insubstantial build and sympathize, but sympathy couldn't make up for a leak in fortitude.

True to form, Purcell flitted all over the field on the next series of downs, but the scrub quarterback played it safe and let his backs pack the ball. Ultimately the scrubs had to punt and managed to contain Dex on the runback. Moxie was impatiently ragging the varsity into the huddle when the whistle blast from the sideline cut in.

*Now what?* As startled as everyone else on the field, Ben swung a look toward where the coach was standing. Bruno kept to game conditions when the Golden Rule was in force, and that meant no substitution except for injury. But as they watched, Purcell was imperiously waved in to the sideline by the coach. Bruno jawed hard at him for a minute, Loudon hovering right there lapping it up. For the life of him, Ben was unable to understand why Bruno constantly went so rough on the sophomore. That speed of his alone qualified as true talent. Why wasn't the kid being brought along with encouragement, as Ben and Danzer had been before Bruno ever entered the scene, to groom him for one of their positions after the only thing left for them to catch was their diplomas? *What is this, pound him into the ground to make him grow? What if he shrinks instead?*

At last Purcell, head down, jogged back onto the field and crossed the scrimmage line to the varsity huddle.

Puzzled, Moxie watched him approach. "Look who's here from Cow Pie High. You trying to set a record for being farthest offside, Purcell?"

"Coach sent me in for Danzer," Purcell reported bashfully.

"The hell you say." The quarterback's face clouded. As Ben read them, though, most other faces in the huddle showed no dismay.

"I could use a rest," Danzer said languidly if unconvincingly and sloped off to the sideline.

"Let's get to business," Moxie snapped out. "Our fancy sub on a fly pattern." Purcell's Adam's apple bobbed for everyone to see, but he looked determined as he took his stance at left end.

On this pass play to the other side of the field Ben was to knock the defensive end opposite him off balance, which he thriftily did, then Carl Friessen rotated onto the man, springing Ben loose into the secondary to block as needed when the catch was made. From the corner of his eye he saw Purcell already was twenty yards downfield. The kid did travel like a flash.

Moxie's pass was one of his patented flings, not that much on it but it somehow sailed and sailed to give the receiver time to get under it. Almost. Purcell not only got there but had to pull up a bit and, off balance from broken momentum, he juggled the catch, the ball bouncing on and off his fingertips, those phantom footsteps distracting him just enough. Racing toward him from the opposite direction Moran, an ambitious scrub, snatched the ball before it could settle into Purcell's hands and lit out up the sideline for the end zone seventy yards distant, the entire TSU varsity strung out behind him like barnyard puppies trying to catch up with a coyote.

If Bruno whistled the play dead, no one heard it. But before everyone had even stopped running, the coach had stormed the middle of the field, shaking his head as if trying to clear away what he had just witnessed.

Unexpectedly, when he spoke there was clemency for some. "Second string, head for the showers, you at least have earned it." Then, though, he turned savagely to the varsity.

"The passing game, people, only works if the receiver hangs on to the ball." Bruno was enunciating now like a coroner giving a tutorial. "Can you grasp that, Purcell? Along with the football, perhaps? Purcell, I did not hear your answer."

"Yup, coach, I--I'll do better."

"You will also do the Hill," Bruno decreed, "you heard me invoke the Golden Rule. In the meantime, get your droopy butt over there to the bench and wait for me. The rest of you," the coach swept a hand as if to get them out of his sight, "head for the locker room and while you're there, see if by any chance you can talk each other into playing some actual football next week. *Seven days*, people!" he flung over his shoulder as he stalked toward the sideline.

The team, half of whom had flubbed chances to teeter Moran out of bounds, stood rooted in surprise that Purcell was the only victim among them, Ben more caught by it than any. Then and there, he gave up on waiting for the right moment, there did not seem to be such a thing around Bruno. Of course Loudon had been absolutely sopping all this up on the sideline. *Just what we need*, a slobbering columnist spending the next week ranting about the sputtering TSU football machine and its noble mechanic of a coach trying desperately to fix it. Sportswriter be damned, Bruno and his Letter Hill had to be dealt with somehow, the faces of the team were saying as much to Ben.

Four-fifths of them, rather. Already jogging to the locker room, Moxie Stamper looked piously murderous, while Purcell, the object of that, went slinking

moving  
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(app.)  
suddenly  
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his jowly  
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off the field in the opposite direction. The other eight teammates hung on around Ben. "Purcell got the shaft on that, Benny," Carl Friessen stated the case from the linemen. "Could have been any of us on any old thing."

"Moxie underthrew that ball," Vic said quietly.

"Maybe not by accident," Dex fitted on to that.

Jake and Animal were not saying anything, worse than if they had.

"All right, I know. I'll try my goddamnedest to make Bruno hear us on this," Ben promised. "But I want to do it out of range of Loudmouth."

"That'd be good." Sig Prokosch seldom spoke up, so when he did everyone pointed an ear. "Coach has got his hand up Loudon's ass, he operates him like a puppet."

All around Ben the expressions moodily backed up that assessment. "I'll be a while, guys." Everyone else filed off the field, and he trudged over to speak with the gesticulating coach in one-sided conversation with Loudon.

"Off the record for now, Ted, but what does it take? You heard me lay into the entire bunch of them to shape up or else and look what--" Bruno broke off his grouching to the sportswriter when he became aware of Ben approaching. Up close, the coach was thickset and biscuit-faced, but there was always that slick hat and concealing coat. Now he brushed a dark speck, probably a gift of the smelter stack, off a camelhair sleeve and looked up, farther than he seemed to want to, at the taller younger man. "Look who's honoring us with his presence. Reinking, I was just discussing the mob you are unlucky enough to be the captain of. Can't you do anything to jack them up?"

"I need to talk to you about some of that, coach." Ben glanced at Loudon and stepped away a few paces. "All the way off the record."

"Excuse us, Ted," Bruno adjusted to that in the bat of an eye. "Catch me in my office later." He jerked his head at Ben and strode to the middle of the field, out

cut  
Benny

of earshot of the sideline just in case the sportswriter was slow to withdraw. At the fifty-yard line, the stocky coach halted and gazed around the stadium as if he couldn't get enough of it. "So what's on your mind?" he asked Ben in a narrow tone. "It better have to do with how to win football games."

It did and it didn't. That always seemed to be the case where Purcell was involved. Resolutely Ben indicated to the troublesome figure slumped on the bench waiting for his Letter Hill fate. "It's him. That was his first play on the starting team, remember, and he didn't have any time to settle down. Besides, Moxie didn't get quite enough zip on that pass." He watched the eyes that should have seen that, but the coach yielded nothing. "The guys pretty much think you ought to go easy on Purcell this once."

Bruno's scowl gave off cold. "Is that what they think." He looked at Ben oddly. "I'm surprised at you, sticking up for Purcell. You're a grab-ass buddy of his, are you?"

"Not so as you would notice. The Hill is on everybody's nerves, coach, we all think you should lay off it now. You've made your point." *And made it and made it.*

"That again." Bruno managed to sound put upon. "Your touching concern for Purcell is misplaced. The dumb damn kid comes out and runs the Hill himself, even Saturdays and Sundays, you know that."

This was true enough. Gawky Purcell trying to build himself up with a struggling solo run to the base of the letters was a common if sad sight. Ben stuck to the obvious. "That's different from doing it when he's pooped out after sixty minutes of a practice game, and with full pads on."

There still was something strange in Bruno's expression as he faced around to Ben. "You're an interesting case, Reinking." The impression was he could have said vastly more on that score, but that was not what came out: "It's getting late,

out  
even

and I have to deal with a rube three-letter man. You can tell your friends in the locker room they needn't worry about themselves so goddamn much." The coach spun away in a manner that warned off any impulse to follow him. Ben watched his receding back as he stalked toward the gangly figure on the bench, but not needing to see more than that, did his own angry pivot toward the locker room and the task there.

"No go, Purcell's still going to get it," he reported tightly as all the faces in there turned to him. "Maybe not the rest of us from here on out--I think I got through to our esteemed coach that we've had enough of that Hill crap."

In the lateness of the day, everyone showering and clearing out in a hurry, it was not noticed that Purcell never showed up in the locker room.

He was found the next morning almost all the way up the Letter Hill, at the stem of the T. Word raced through the dorms, and instead of breakfast the team went to the locker-room meeting hastily called by Bruno. White-faced, he reported that he had watched Purcell make his run to the base of the letters and head back down, before he himself quit for the day and went to his office. Never dreaming, he vouched, that Purcell would take further punishment on himself and keep running the Hill, evidently time after time, until his heart gave out. The funeral was to be on Wednesday, just three days before the opening game and most of the way across the state, but as though it was the most natural thing in the world, the coach announced the whole team had been named honorary pallbearers and would attend.

And out there in a dried-up homesteader cemetery with tumbleweeds banked against a wire fence, they climbed off the team bus and gathered at the grave, outnumbering Purcell's relatives and townspeople. Ben sensed something as soon as he spotted the metal call-sign initials on the radio microphone at graveside: KOPR, statewide coverage. What unsettled him more was the sight of Ted Loudon instead of a radio newsman stepping to the mike before the funeral service got

underway. In a rapid-fire patter he obviously been practicing, Loudon reeled off phrases of pathos: *“Not since the sad demise of Notre Dame’s George Gipp in the prime of his playing life has football seen a tragedy such as this....Now in the eternal annals of the game, The Gipper is joined by The Ghost Runner, for that is what Merle Purcell’s teammates called him for his fleet-footed elusiveness on the gridiron....Every lad of the TSU team is here today to do him honor...”*

Having grown up around journalistic boilerplate, Ben knew beyond the shadow of a doubt Loudon’s same words would show up in tomorrow morning’s sports column in virtually every daily paper across Montana. The copper company owned those as well as the statewide radio network. For whatever reason, Purcell was getting a sendoff from the powers that be.

Stepping up to the mike, Bruno dramatically cleared his throat and the ears of countless listeners. “We at Treasure State University, and indeed this great state for which is named,” he boomed his words out as if to make sure they reached from border to border, “have suffered a loss before the football season of record has even begun.”

Dex and Jake and several others of the team stirred uneasily with Ben at equating a death on the Letter Hill with losing a game played with a ball. Vic, who knew all about treacherous slopes from his daily ascension of Hill 57, simply listened cold-eyed. Moxie Stamper still was trying to adjust his slack face to the posthumous promotion of Purcell to The Ghost Runner.

The coach of them all swept right on. “But valor can rise from a field of loss. That is the lesson we must take from this tragedy. Merle Purcell was among us for too brief a time on the patch of earth he loved above all other, the football field. What better site, then, to remember him on.”

Now Bruno sprang it.

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suit  
that had  
thour on

“I have gone to the president of Treasure State University. Mr. and Mrs. Purcell”--he inclined his head solemnly their direction; it proved to be first of pauses emphatic as bullets--“are to be our honored guests at every game, home and away. As shall Merle, present in spirit. In our commemoration of the undying valor of giving his life for the sport he sought to excel at. There will be eleven men on the field each Saturday, but by the presence of his memory among us, he will be there too. I ask every member of the Treasure State team in their endeavors on the field, and all TSU alumni and supporters in your cheers in the stands and beside your radios, to dedicate this season to Merle Purcell, our twelfth man!”

Notepad pages flipping, Ted Loudon was writing it all down like a mad monk.

Afterward, Ben could look back and see the team had been trapped. By the trappings draped all over TSU home games from then on, if nothing else. The stadium-shaking stomping roars of “*Merrrle!*” led by the student section as Twelfth Man pennants flew in their hands. Purcell’s awkwardly dressed-up parents unmissable in the guest seats of honor. While up there in the KOPR booth, inflated to sportscaster by the heady vapors given off by his prose back there at graveside and the days of headlines after, Loudon rattled on about the uncanny inspiration driving the team to destiny.

Did the eleven of them buy into it? Not fundamentally. But there is always a *but*. Among themselves they acknowledged the so-called season of the Twelfth Man, seized upon by Bruno and Loudon and their helper bosses to transform a yokel kid who blew a gasket on his heart doing something he shouldn’t have into a football saint. There were times in the huddle when Moxie, having had to motion the crowd to settle down so his signals could be heard, would crack something like “*Never knew Purcell had lung power like that*” and draw cynical laughs. But as the victories piled up, something unaccountable had to be credited. Even Ben, their

elected skeptic, could feel it. They all, every one of them, were playing every minute as if their lives depended on it. This season was like no other; it was that simple and that complicated. They could try to ignore each weeklong buildup of expectation or joke past the game-day din all they wanted, but Purcell's fate up there on the hill over them sobered their talent to a certain purity. Death was death, no matter how you cut it. Ben did not quite have the words for it yet, but somewhere deep he came to understand that for these inexplicably singled-out young men he was among, one short of a dozen, what had happened to that remindful twelfth man was like an alarm clock going off murderously early in someone's room next to yours.

"Hey." Long thoughts left him at halftime as Cass passed the scotch bottle back and forth under his nose like smelling salts. "Better revive yourself, your team could stand a shot of something, too."

"Nothing a wholesale bunch of touchdowns couldn't cure." He'd have felt better about the shellacking TSU was taking if Bruno still were the coach. Naturally the bastard had parlayed the '41 season into the job at a California football powerhouse. *Scum always rises.*

A covey of waist-high Indian boys blasted past, tussling and trying to tackle one another. Ben glanced down the line of white-rock seating to see how his and Cass's welcome was holding out. Opera glasses clapped to their eyes--somewhat unevenly in the case of the most serious beer drinkers--the Hill 57 grownups were engrossed in the gyrations of the marching band and the cheerleaders. He did justice to the scotch and passed it back to Cass.

She had been watching him. "Old times getting you down?"

“Hey, careful,” he chided. “I don’t want to have to pick you out of somebody’s junkyard down there.”

“It’s your fault, Romeo. I’m usually in a cockpit when I’m up this high.”

The view of Great Falls stretched below them, the squarely laid-out city with the renegade river winding through where it pleased, the smelter stack like a monstrous chess piece at the farthest city limits, the university cozy amid its groves of trees at the closer edge of the street grid, and nearest of all, the stadium cuddled at the base of the butte across the way, with game-day flags flapping brightly in the breeze. “How do you like football so far?” he asked with a solicitous grin as he gave her a hand around a patch of prickly pear cactus.

“My hunch is, it’ll never replace poker.” Cass stopped short, staring ahead. “Ben?” she murmured. “Are you sure this is such a hot idea?”

“Let’s find out what our hosts think about it.”

There were twenty or so of the Hill 57 residents on hand as spectators, mostly ragged-looking men but a couple of families with kids in charity clothes, all sitting with their backs against the pale curve of rocks that made the bottom of the 5 and now all looking over their shoulders at two unexpected visitors. Ben tried to read the line of Indian faces, but the scatter of rough-built shacks and even more miserable lean-to shanties farther down the hill said enough; tar paper and gabardine would never meet comfortably. He clutched Cass by a tense elbow and they stood waiting a minute. Finally a chesty man at the near end of the group lurched to his feet and faced up the slope toward them. Tottering alcoholically or arthritically or both, he rumbled out: “You folks a little lost?”

“We came to watch the game, if you wouldn’t mind some company,” Ben called back. He gestured toward the stadium in the middle distance. “I played football with Victor Rennie, down there. Then we went in the service together.”

Homecoming

At her words, emotions rose up in him like contending creatures and the nearest one won out. He slipped a hand to the back of her slacks. "New times don't have that problem. You want to see the rest of this travesty of football?"

"Gee, do I have a better offer?"

"Not much of a game, I hear. Ain't civilization declined since we hung up our jockstraps? Whup, I saw that, don't wear yourself out reaching for your dough--this round's on me. Here's to *bolshi semnadtsi*." Jake tapped the first Officers Club bottle of beer of the night against Ben's and swigged enthusiastically.

Ben didn't lift his. "Call me suspicious, but I don't drink to anything I can't savvy."

"Where's your linguistic skills, Benjamin? It's Russian for 'big seventeens.' Uncle Joe's gang in Fairbanks goes around yakking that every time we hand over those nice shiny new bombers to them." Beer in hand, he leaned back like a Murphy bed going up and angled a look across at Ben. "There, now that I've educated you. How's the war treating you these days?"

"Same as usual. Dodging bullets from the teleprinter."

"I've got the cure for that." Jake could hardly wait to get it out. "Whyn't you come along on the Alaska hop tomorrow? See what a real airplane is like instead of those puddlejumper you flew."

Surprised enough that he didn't trust his tongue--*Do you actually sit up nights thinking of ways to complicate my life?*-- Ben waited a bit to respond. "I thought the ATC drill is you always fly with a full crew, no hitchhikers."

"Yeah, well, my bombardier has had enough practice at not pulling the trigger on trapper cabins. Fact is, he feels like he's coming down with three-day flu. Twenty bucks' worth. I figured you could take it out of petty cash from that oddball outfit you work for."

“Short notice, Ice, I’ll need to get busy and run this past Grady--”

--who like a sane general thinks this is the perfect chance to grab off some long overdue notice for his star B-17 coolie, the modest but capable Lieutenant Eisman. I already cleared it with him. C’mon, Ben, Dex got his rah-rah for slapping splints on guys somegoddamnwhere. How about mine, what’re you waiting for?”

He had to resist yanking his feet off the floor of the Plexiglass nose cone as the bomber shuddered across acres of unforgiving concrete in what seemed to be a never-ending takeoff. Then, like an elevator going up, the B-17 Flying Fortress lifted, turned its tail to the smelter stack, and began the long climb north.

Beneath and on all sides of him, old known earth mapped itself on the underside of the plastic shell where he huddled in fascinated suspension. Wheatfields winter-sown and fallow stretched below like checkered linoleum laid to the wall of the Rockies. There to the west he could pick out the long straight brink of Roman Reef and its dusky cliff, and the snakeline of watercourse that would be English Creek. Gros Ventre, though, held itself out of sight beneath its cover of trees. The four big engines drummed loud enough he regretted he had not brought earplugs. However, that would have denied him the company of Jake and the crew via the earphones.

“Everybody copacetic? Navigator, the pseudo bomb jockey still with us? Make sure he doesn’t touch anything that can go off.”

“I’ll slap his hands, skipper.”

Ben was pretty sure they were kidding. On the other hand, twin half-inch guns poked up from the cheeks of the plane just on the other side of the plastic from him and he made a hurried inventory of switches not to bump.

Jake got back to business. “Sparks, how’s that weather by now?”

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

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

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

“Haven't lost a scribbler yet.”

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

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

“I see them. Our sisters in arms.”

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

Ben reached behind him to the airframe and grabbed binoculars out of their wall pouch. Sleek as the four points of a prong, the formation of Cobras was overtaking them as if the bomber was a lumberwagon. Flying tight and right. He knew, he just knew. Cass in her element.

“Bruiser at nine o’clock, captain, fifteen hundred yards, same heading as ours.”

There could not be a better wingman than Beryl. Cass radioed back, “Acknowledged. Hold course, everyone, it’s enough elbow room.” *And our route just as much as theirs, now.* She grease-penciled this portion of the Edmonton hop onto the flight plan map strapped to the right thigh of her flying suit; the Canadian border stood out down there like the edge of a new jigsaw puzzle, the patterns of its fields contrasting with the American side. Automatically she checked how the rest of her pilots were doing. The other wingman, Mary Catherine, was perfectly in place, smooth as a mirror reflection. Even Della, bringing up the rear, matched up with the formation without wandering today. *Damn. You just get something going good and it starts coming apart.* She was going to hate to lose Beryl if her transfer came through. Couldn’t blame her, wanting in on the Wichita factory run, closer to her husband. And getting to ferry B-17s like that one, now that the high brass had decided women of a certain height and heft could possibly handle the controls of a bomber in the most wide-open airspace in the country. Cass had to laugh. There wouldn’t be all this half-step stuff if it had been the Wright sisters at Kitty Hawk.

As the flight of P-49s pulled away to the north, Jake’s voice crackled on the intercom again. “There they go, Grady’s Ladies into the Great Canadian Beyond. You happy now, newspaper guy?”

“All God’s chillun got the wings they earned, Ice.”

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From Edmonton on, the flight was a relay race from one bush-country airstrip to the next, with malicious weather in the way. Between Watson Lake and Whitehorse, Ben had to abandon the nose cone; he hated losing the vantage point, but riding there had become too much like being the hood ornament on a snow tractor. Shaking with chill, he retreated to the table corner offered by the navigator. Then through the earphones came the further numbing news that the aircraft's heater had frozen up and quit. He'd thought it might be a prank back there in sunny Great Falls when Jake made him put on double layers of long underwear, three pairs of heavy socks, a furlined hooded flying suit over his flight jacket, and a chamois face mask. The Yukon climate was not impressed. The cold, some perverse apex at this altitude, went through fur, fabric, and skin alike. It seemed possible his blood had turned to slush. He not only couldn't take notes, he could not even make a fist. Time seemed frozen to a standstill. What the hell did Jake want missions over Germany for? This was bad enough. Hunched there helplessly in the refrigerated body of the bomber, he could not get beyond wishing he had something to thaw out with. A blowtorch, maybe. When Ladd Field at Fairbanks at last presented its snowy self, he was hoping the frigid chamois would not take his face off with it when he removed it.

In the warming hut that seemed tropical, Jake drew him aside. "So, Benjamin, the transport from Nome doesn't pick us up until morning. How do you want to celebrate the layover?"

"Thawing out."

"Wallflower." Jake delicately fingered a frost-abused ear as if to make sure none of it had dropped off. "Got a little something I better tell you." He took a circumspect look toward the other end of the hut where the rest of the crew was

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

“I’m getting Russian tail.”

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

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

“Who’s the unlucky woman?”

“She’s a pilot.”

Ben stared at him.

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

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

“Jake, or should I just say Dummy--”

“Ben, Ben, hold it down, okay?”

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

“What are they going to get me for, consorting with an ally?” Ben’s point did cause Jake to reflect. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she diddled a commisar or two along the way to get here. She knows her diddling.”

“Will you listen a goddamn minute? You and Tractor Woman--”

“Katya. Katya Alexandrovna Zhukova. The Russians really go in for names.”

“Jake, we’re heading to the mess hall,” the co-pilot called. “You two coming?”

“My scribe and me have got matters of national importance to attend to. You’re in charge, Charlie, see you at breakfast.”

The co-pilot gave a wave and was on his way. “What happens when you get famous.”

Ben was furiously fumbling out of the last of his layers of flying gear. “Do you have a lick of sense left at all? Maybe you’re living on love, but I need chow.”

“You’re going to get it, don’t worry,” Jake soothed. “The Russkies have their own mess hall and they like to talk shop with B-17 pilots. C’mon, you’re gonna meet Katya.”

He wondered if he was imagining, but the crowded mess hall smelled to him straight off the pages of Dostoevsky. Cabbage, dank wool clothing, copious boot grease. Feeling as if he was in another world, he spooned up the formidable soup and devoured hunks of bread while Jake alternately ate and banked his hands through the air in testimony to the maneuvering capabilities of B-17s. Across the table, Russian pilots who either looked like plowboys or middle-aged pirates--the generation between had largely been wiped out by the Germans’ demonic sieges from Leningrad to Sevastopol--listened monastically. Amid the bulky men, a woman who was not at all what Ben had expected--trim, keen, authoritative; she

Gyorgy

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

"Yakov, they say, how big bomb pile?"

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

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

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

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

"Thanks all to hell for the comparison," Ben snapped. The Russian airmen were getting to their feet, taking their leave with stiff nods. As the mess hall began to empty out, a contingent dressed like Katya, male and female alike in thick-ply ground crew coveralls, drifted over curiously. She rattled out something and they sat down. *Wonderful, Ice. Now we're the main attractions at the zoo*. Of all there

was to worry about in this, he figured he might as well start way up the list. Katya was watching him bright-eyed. "You have the same name as a very famous person," he speculated.

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

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

Vodka made an immediate appearance. Glasses were splashed full and hoisted in accompaniment to a unison cry of "*Na zdroya!*" Jake winked across at him. "That much Russian I know. 'Good health,' buddy." Wary from Cass's coma cola elixirs, Ben tested what sat so innocently clear in his glass. It tasted like spring water that had been tampered with by a moonshiner. While the Russians tossed theirs down he took a medium swig and clamped his fist around the glass to hide the fact that he hadn't emptied it. Nonetheless the bottle was making the

rounds again and another toast was necessary, this one Jake's "To *bolshi semnadtsi!*" The Russians banged the table in homage to big bombers and gulped down. Here came the bottle again. *Holy damn, they inhale the stuff.*

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

"Kheminev. You have meet in the war?"

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

"Coal? Kheminev write about stove thing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It hit him then, along with whatever shot of vodka the count was up to by now. He chortled and couldn't stop, laughing himself silly while others around the table tittered in anticipation. Finally he caught enough breath to say it. "That character's name is Jake! Get it, Ice? He's a *Jake* and his working part is missing in action and yours is present and accounted for and--" Jake guffawed and vowed to write Hemingway a complaining letter. Katya reddened and grinned foxily, translating in a rapid low purr to the other Russians. They caught on and roared.

Wiping his eyes--a bit of a sting there; he crazily wondered whether vodka could reach the eyelids--he focused as best he could on Katya. "Question for you." Her expression froze at a degree of politeness. "You flew. Tell me about that, please?"

"Nacht hexen." Katya rapped her breast sturdily, then fluttered a hand through the air while giving out an eerie high-pitched whistle. It was the kind of sound you could feel on your skin, and Ben tried not to twitch.

"It stumped me at first, too," Jake broke in. "But they've got great big mothwing biplanes called Polikarpovs that just about float through the air. Our darling here flew one of those. Two-seater, so what they'd do, she and a woman bombardier would go out in the middle of the night and get up a little altitude, just behind the front lines, then cut the engine and glide over the German side," his outsize hands tracing that out in the air. "The bombardier had the explosives in her lap, she'd toss the bomb package out, blow up some Germans, and Katya would rev the engine back on and they'd haul ass out of there." Jake nearly bent double in fealty to the next episode. "Here's the best part. The Germans are down there scared shitless, all they can hear is the wind in the wingstruts as Katya and her chum come drifting over. They run around yelling 'Nacht hexen!' Night witches!"

“Was good, flying,” Katya said quietly. She pantomimed steering a tow tractor. “Day witch now.” Shrugging, she reached for the latest vodka bottle with the remnant of her hand.

Dazed, Ben sat out the rest of the evening that stretched toward morning. He felt he had to, he was Jake’s alibi for consorting with allies who happened to be Red as their crimson flag. The conversation whenever toasts weren’t being made crashed along in two languages and in between. At some point Jake volubly told the joke about the dude who was invited to a fancy barbecue and worried whether he would be able to tell cow pie from caviar and which fork to use with which. Katya’s back-and-forth lingo had turned giggly, but Ben was numbly aware she could hold the tongue-tangling booze better than he could, they all could. In the haze of alcohol muddled images kept coming to him. Cass wingwalking amid the struts of a whopping biplane with a grinning Katya in the cockpit cutting the engine, on and off, on and off. *Sonofabitching war. Women didn’t start it, why does it have to drag them in?* He tried to ward it off, but New Guinea replaced Alaska at terrible intervals, the grassy ambush with gashed bodies everywhere mingling with a teletype ticker absurdly chattering in the middle of the trail.

He pinched himself in hidden places to drive off those blears. Sick with longing for Cass--*shame to waste all this drinking without her*--he endeavored to concentrate on the troubling matter of Katya. Suppositions were not in shortage. Suppose she had a husband somewhere? Suppose she had a Communist party commissar somewhere? Suppose she actually was the daughter of the great general Zhukov, performing whatever patriotic duty it was to hang out with clueless Yanks? No, wait, the clues simply were different, each to each. Jake’s forebears had two thousand years of periodic murder directed at them. If anything, it had given Jake immunity from common fear. Jake didn’t have to back up for any Mother Russia or anybody else. Determinedly he took stock of his massive friend

across there amid the merry Russians, and that did it. The broad Slavic faces around the table all at once reminded him of Havel from football. And along with Havel, O'Fallon. Vic with greatly more cut off him than a pair of fingers. The others, out there in the treacherous time zones. He felt like sobbing. The team and its mortal dangers were a mere handful compared to the innumerable slaughtered in the vaster jaws of war, no question there. But they were his handful. God damn Jake and pulling *Pravda* out of the air. He was more than just a mouthpiece for a government propaganda organ, wasn't he? Had to be. Tepee Weepy only had him in its custody, it didn't own him. His mind lurched to the piece waiting to be written about Jake and this polar oasis where big bombers were handed off. *Good old ink, get it down with just enough between the lines, can't even cut it off with an axe, right, Ernie?* He wished he had a typewriter then and there, to capture all that was going to seem incredible in the sober light of day. Here the pair of them were, Jake and him, up near the top of the world, frozen though it was, thrust out of the lives they'd thought they would lead and in the company of a female warrior who proudly answered to the name of Night Witch.

Four time zones to the east, Bill Reinking rolled out of bed, careful as always not to disturb his wife. Cloyce was a notably late sleeper. Not many of those in a town like Gros Ventre, and he reflected on the distant passion that had brought this particular woman from satin bedcovers to the quilts they had shared for nearly two dozen years. She was all for any manner of bedding at the time. *As was I.* This time of year first light detached itself from night in stubborn gray and he put on his glasses to track down his clothes and shoes. Padding across to the window that gave a glimpse of horizon through the giant trunks of the cottonwoods, he checked the sky as usual, not that the weather of the moment meant anything in Montana. The day ahead of him began cumbrously sorting itself

out as he crept down the stairs--the county agent's session at the high school on food production for the war effort, all afternoon given over to typesetting the gleanings sent in by his rural correspondents, a Ladies' Aid pot-luck supper nominally nonpartisan where the Senator would just happen to whip through and speak his mind about the condition of the nation. By now he could forecast those indignant sentiments almost ahead of the words coming out of the Senator's formidable mouth, and the Senator no doubt could parrot off his dogged editorials before they were written. *We're as bad as an old married couple.* That stray thought stung. He tried to yawn it away, stoking up the kitchen stove in the semi-dark to hurry the coffee. It was a terrible habit for a newspaper editor, rising at dawn after late nights. Yet he had always done so and figured he always would. *The early bird gets the worm, but is that a balanced diet?* Fumbling for a pencil and pad on the sideboard, he wrote that down to use as a column-bottom filler.

While the coffee perked, he put on his mackinaw and hat to go out and scrape the frost off the car windshield. Another bit of headstart that did not gain a soul much in the long run, but it was something to do. Besides, the dawn air brought him a little of Ben now that he was stationed at East Base once more. That rainbow of planes to Alaska and then Russia: any amount of time Ben put in where virginal aircraft were flying instead of bullets was to be prized. *Praise be, Franklin D. I knew Lend-Lease was worth the abuse I took every week for being for it.* He paused bent over the whitened windshield, taking in the silence that ushered the slow change of morning light. As a newspaperman he had to hew to the necessary enlistment of all men's sons in this war against the evils of Hitler and Tojo, but as a father he could privately covet any interval of amnesty for Ben. Scraping off another peel of frost, he paused again to listen. East Base started up even earlier than he himself did. It was an added habit now, delaying out here in the daybreak until he could hear the first distant sound of planes in transit.

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His bunk was shaking and he wanted it to quit. Any motion made his head feel on fire, approximately to the roots of his hair. When he finally unclenched his eyelids, Jake was standing over him with one big mitt of a hand rocking the bunkframe. "Another day, another dollar, buddy. How you feeling?"

"Next thing to dead, if you really have to know."

"The more you sleep, the less you sin," Jake said cheerily as he opened the blinds and let in sunlight harshly magnified by snowdrifts. "You ought to be pure as a daisy."

Ben shielded against the brightness with an arm. Groggy as he was, it occurred to him to ask: "What time is our plane back?"

"It's gone." Jake busied himself at his ready-bag. "The other guys went with it, but I got us a better deal. We are now the captain and crew of our very own bush plane, Benjamin."

Ben woke up entirely. "Bush plane?"

"Sort of, yeah. You'll see. Weather people up here use it. Needs a little fixing up, so they're sending it south. It'll get us there, don't worry."

"When?" He wrenched up in bed, with something like congealed panic oozing past dizziness and hangover. "Have you gone even more crazy than usual? I've got to get the piece on you done and in to Tepee Weepy on time or the bastards will never let me live it down."

"You're on assignment, ain't you? So assign yourself a nice leisurely flight and relax. You can write in the air as good as you can on the ground, I bet."

"Jake, square with me a minute, okay? Am I hallucinating or something? Won't it take goddamn near forever to make it to Great Falls in the kind of kite you're talking about?"

"That's the whole point," Jake explained with magnanimous patience.

"Hours in the air, Ben--guys like me have to live by 'em. This'll put me up on anybody else in the East Base group by twenty or more hours of flying time. That much closer to the real war, my friend."

"Let me catch up here." Ben shook his head to try to clear it, which proved to be a painful mistake. "This field just lets you walk off with one of their planes to go home in?"

Jake rubbed his jaw. "It took a radio message to Grandma Grady. He said he could spare me for a couple extra days. Said he could spare you indefinitely."

"I'm trying to decide whether to commend you or bust your nuts in my report, Eisman." The Fairbanks operations officer petulantly kicked the tire of the parked aircraft as if shopping the last jalopy on a used-car lot. "At least it gets this thing off our hands. But when you said your friend here has his wings you didn't bother to tell me he hasn't used them since, did you." His eyes bored into Ben. "I've never let a paper-airplane pilot be a co-pilot before."

"He's just along as sandbag, sir," Jake soothed, "strictly a glorified hitchhiker."

"That is precisely what he needs to be. Reinking, is that your name?" The ops officer appeared dubious about even that. "Unless Eisman goes deaf, dumb and blind, or has some other kind of shit fit, you are not to touch those controls. Do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, sir. I am to sit at the right hand of flying ace Eisman and be inert bodyweight for the next two or three days." Ben's answer drew heavy gazes from both men. "Does that about sum up my heroic role in the war effort?"

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Jake piously stepped in. "Don't mind him, major, he rolled out of the sack on the wrong side this morning. I'll throw him out the cargo hatch if he tries to wrest the controls from me."

"With my blessing." The ops officer walked away as if the pair of them might be contagious. "Hand in your flight plan and vacate my airfield, lieutenants."

Skeptically Ben studied the aircraft again. "All right, Ice. What did you say this piece of junk is?"

"A Grumman Widgeon. Quite the rig, ain't it?" Jake was going through the motions of his inspection walk around the plane, although they both knew he was going to give it a clean report unless a wing dropped off and brained him.

Exhausted as the Widgeon OA-14 looked, Ben considered that a possibility. A spiderweb crack across half of the cockpit window--on the co-pilot's side, naturally--lent it a wall-eyed appearance. Perhaps fittingly for a weather plane, most of its paint from nose to tail had been swiped away by Alaska's vicious moods of climate. Dents in the struts of its wing pontoons indicated it had encountered more than occasional tree limbs while docking at inlet weather stations. Ben felt doubt in his gut. He had flown in amphibious aircraft before, but this one seemed designed to dither between sea and land. Beneath the cockpit and the first few passenger seats was a belly hull for it to float on, and spraddle-legged landing gear with narrow tires called bicycle wheels poked perilously out of that hull, barely holding the craft up off the concrete runway. Not since the most rudimentary biplane, back in earliest pilot training, had Ben seen aircraft wheels like these, and the rubber was so aged and bald it looked to him as if it very well could have been the same weary set of tires.

He could not help eyeing the low belly of the semi-seaplane and the accumulated runway glop. "Will this thing clear?"

“Just,” Jake said as if were a sure thing. Coming around the nose of the plane, he lobbed a bundled flying suit which Ben instinctively caught. “Ready to go for a ride?”

With Jake applying considerable body English to make up for two fewer engines and a couple of thousand fewer horsepower than he was used to, the Widgeon crawled into the air above Fairbanks. After the B-17, which was like traveling in a submarine in the air, to both men the floatplane felt like a flying raft, fickle every time it met a new air current. Slowly, slowly, it wafted over the tin rooftops of Fairbanks, its shadow lagging and shrinking behind it as if reluctant to leave the safety of the city limits. While Jake was busy coaxing the engines to smooth out, Ben peered out his side window at the glistening ice of the Tanana River and the curd of war materiel along its banks, instantly reaching for his pad. The supply dump, as it was aptly called, consisted of an infinite number of crates of aircraft parts, heaps of tires, long ranks of belly tanks, runway equipment of every sort; some of it tarped over and some of it not, the Lend-Lease mountains of supplies resembled an otherworldly tent encampment, strangely peopleless, strewn beside the frozen river for miles on end. Ben jotted as fast as his hand could go, adding the scene to others of untold weaponry stacked on Pacific atolls and Atlantic docks. He had read that the weight of impounded water in gigantic dams, Fort Peck and Dnieperstroï and their serpentine ilk, in theory added up to enough to affect the rotation of the earth. Looking down at the enormity of the random arsenal piled up on one Alaskan riverbank, it could be readily imagined that the depots of war were pooling into a mass force certain to make the world wobble on its axis.

“Pilot to co-pilot,” Jake intoned from two feet away. “Say farewell to Fairbanks, it’s all bush from here on.”

Ben glanced up and out over a sunlit wilderness seemingly unmarred by anything but the frail cracklines of the cockpit window. Sky, land, perimeter of the earth, all seemed to enlarge as the plane throbbled out into the circle of blue morning. To his astonishment, winter gradually gave way as they headed southeastward toward Yukon Territory. Fairbanks was caught in some isobar that had slipped from the North Pole, but snow had only seeped into the highest elevations along the upper Tanana. The river threaded ahead of them, marked as far as the eye could see by the gold of birches captured in its valley, amid spotty spruce and tundra everywhere else around.

Expansive as the outdoors around them, Jake grinned over at him. "Not bad, huh? Feel like Jack London yet?"

"Trapped this way in a tiny cabin with White Fang for days on end, yes, I do."

"My, you are cranky today. We'll purr into Northway in time for lunch, you'll see."

Time slowed, attuned to the stately beat of the engines. Half-hypnotized by the ceaseless tapestry of scenery, Ben sat back and let his mind drift. First of all to Cass, the situation with her always up in the air, an apt locution right then but one that made his lips draw tight. Off sideways to the piece he'd done on Dex, legerdemain he couldn't maintain forever for Tepee Weepy and was not at all sure he should. Back around to Jake, sitting here hoping to ride written words and padded flying time to the air over Germany. Afloat over a corner of the world the war had not found, Ben uneasily traversed such thoughts as though they were air pockets, unbidden but there.

The plane was droning along at 4200 feet--he would forever remember that altimeter reading--when Jake announced:

"I feel a pimple coming on my butt and therefore deem myself incapacitated. Take over."

Ben made a derisive noise. "Thanks anyway, Ice, but it's been too long since--

"Bullshit, Ben. Once a pilot, always a pilot. Get busy and fly this heap."

"Knock it off, will you?" Unearned favors did not go down well with Ben, never had, never would. "That prissy ops officer had it right, I *am* a paper-airplane pilot any more, and nothing--hey, where're you going?"

"To take a leak in the jug, what does it look like?" Jake vacated the pilot's seat and turned sideways to edge past Ben, patting him on the head as he did so. "Better fly the plane, kiddo, somebody has to."

"Bastard," Ben hurled over his shoulder, his hands clamping onto the controls. The Widgeon gave a sharp lurch, nosing upward, as Jake's weight moving toward the rear of the cabin radically altered its center of balance. His hands managing to tame that without any conscious help from the rest of him, Ben frantically scanned the infinite banks of dials, switches and gauges of an instrument panel that now seemed the size and complexity of a cathedral window. Flight school had never included this peculiar breed of aircraft in the first place. He could hear Jake back there humming loudly to himself while peeing, which did not help. Still inventorying the instrumentation, he kept coming up one short. Precisely now, of course, the Tanana River chose to turn cockeyed, twisting away in fresh directions, glinting like a silver snake. Alert in every corpuscle, Ben could see wire-like trees down there on its banks, he could see the carpet of yellow leaves on the ground, he could see the bald tops of hills regularly passing under the wingtips. What he could not spot, somewhere right under his nose, was the most basic aeronautical instrument.

Barland 0127  
You  
damned  
fool

While he was trying to navigate without it, the Widgeon gravitated below four thousand feet and he hurriedly dropped the flaps for some lift. Just then Jake returned to the cockpit, gyrating into the pilot's seat as the plane bounded upward. "Ride 'em, cowboy. I will say, you fighter jockeys fly livelier than us old bomber drivers."

"Funny as a crutch, Ice," Ben gritted out, hands and eyes busy in several directions. "Here, do something with this airplane."

"Just when you're getting used to it? Wouldn't be fair." The big man sat back comfortably to spectate. "Don't worry, Uncle Jake is here to hold your hand."

"Then get busy and do it." Ben squirmed, feeling his face redden as he had to put the question the rawest rookie pilot would hate to ask. "I give up --did they forget to put the compass in this turd bird?"

Yawning, Jake squinted into the glare of the morning sun. "What, you don't know east when you see it?"

*That again. Isn't there any other direction any more?* "Goddamn it, Jake, I mean it. If I can't get a compass bearing I'll eventually have this thing headed off the map somewhere. Let's don't fool around in the middle of Alaska, all right?"

Jake was unfazed. He sat there loudly humming the chorus that went "*Some people say there is no Hell, but they're not pilots, so they can't tell*" until finally, when Ben had run out of swearwords, he rolled his eyes.

Ben's gaze ascended along with his, to the front ceiling of the cockpit where the compass hung like a bat.

"That maybe is one of the things they're gonna modify in this clunker," Jake speculated as Ben sheepishly adjusted course to the compass setting.

"Now then, you ready to fly like a sane person?"

"Damn you, you know I am."

Bursting into laughter even though he still was struggling to tame the Widgeon's twenty-eyed dials and sluggish wings, suddenly Ben had never felt better. It ran through him like the thrill when he first soloed, the magic of being lightly attached to the sky. With Jake there beside him to coax and scold and to master any of the alchemy of the cockpit he erred on, the plane was his until they reached the barrier mountains and tricky downdrafts, perhaps half an hour yet. In that window of time, he hoped with all he was worth that Cass right then was flying too, the invisible musculature of the air supporting them both at once.

Eventually Jake took over and thriftily landed at the dirt runway at Northway at noon, and by late afternoon they were far into Yukon Territory. They overnights in a cold Quonset hut at Whitehorse, then kept to the pattern the next day, Jake handling the plane in and out of dirtpacked Canadian refueling fields and then Ben's exultant turn at the controls whenever the terrain was not producing choppy air or something else insidiously murderous. His flying intervals became less as mountains grew, and he believed even Jake was relieved when at last they crossed the Rockies and ahead lay the hill country around Newbride, the final refueling stop before the big base at Edmonton.

"Circle a few times so they can get a good look at us," Jake unexpectedly turned the plane over to him when they were a few miles out from Newbride. "The radio's on the fritz, let me work on that." Slipping his own earphones on, Ben heard static and a voice that sounded a lot farther off than the airfield in the middle distance. Treed hills and straggles of the town penned in the field, but it appeared to be a more substantial runway than the dirt patches they had been putting down on farther north. Ben was ready to be on the ground and regather. The air turned bumpy, and he concentrated on holding the altitude while Jake fiddled with the radio as if profanity was the sure cure. After many oaths, a particularly lurid outburst got through and he turned toward Ben and winked. "Sorry about that,

tower. Requesting permission to land. Over.” When the radio back-and-forth was done, Jake checked the altimeter and throttle settings and everything else Ben had conscientiously been trying to mind, but made no move to do more than that.

“Want to brush up on your landing skills?”

Temptation nearly overwhelmed Ben. “Love to, but the air has more lumps in it than I like. You take it.”

Jake sighed. “Okay, if you don’t want any fun out of life. Looky there, nice gravel runway and everything, and you chicken out. I just don’t know about you sometimes, Ben buddy.” Taking the controls, he aligned with the runway, and as if showing how it was done, waddled the plane down to a perfect touch.

Abruptly the runway seemed to devour the Widgeon. With a sickening lurch the plane nosed over and skidded along on the belly hull at high speed, metal screeching hideously on the runway surface.

Ben shouted, “Put the wheels down!”

“The sonsabitches are!” Jake shouted back. “It’s *fresh* gravel!”

The savage grating sound continued to fill the cockpit, both men tossed in their seats by the rough ride, as the plane plowed along. Eventually it ground to a halt.

There was a moment of sickening silence, then the strange wail of the Canadian version of a meatwagon reached them.

“I thought you were going to land it, not fly it into the ground, Ice. You all right?”

Jake rose out of the pilot’s seat as if it had offended him. “Never mind me, how’s the frigging airplane?”

They scrambled out as the ambulance crunched to a stop a little distance away and a Royal Canadian Air Force officer came leaping off its runningboard. The back doors flung open and a couple of teams of medics poured out, stretchers

ready. They all halted at the sight of Ben and Jake standing nearly to their ankles in the runway gravel, gazing at the furrows made by the Widgeon's thin wheels in the loose surface and cursing violently together.

"Tch, tires of that sort," the Canadian officer said with a mild frown when things settled down. "We've had your P-39s and our own planes through here, no trouble. If it's a hard surface you're looking for, though, you're a bit preliminary." He gestured toward heavy equipment parked at the side of a hangar. "We'll have it tarmacked by this time next week, we figure."

Jake looked pale as he turned toward Ben. "I'll miss the next bomber run to Alaska. Grady will have my ass."

*And your flying time will be just what it was. And Tepee Weepy will turn me inside out for missing a deadline.* "Try it in the morning?" Ben came out with, not knowing what else to say, as a bulldozer coughed to life and clanked out to tow the Widgeon to the paved apron outside the hangars.

They were out on the flight line in the Canadian dawn. Like odd postulants, the two of them knelt under the Widgeon's scarred but intact hull and almost prayerfully began to let air out of the narrow tires on the landing struts. When the tires squished down to nearly flat, Jake proclaimed: "Let's see if that gives the bastards enough surface."

They strapped in, and Jake taxied out, revved the engines to an alarming roar and started down the runway. The entire airfield personnel clustered outside the hangars to watch, and the meatwagon had its motor running.

Shuddering and rattling, the Widgeon struggled mightily to free itself of the ground and there was a brief moment when Ben thought it had. But the more power Jake fed it for takeoff, the more the acceleration of force on the skinny wheels drove them down into the coarse gravel, even as deflated as they were.

As sharp as if it were on their own skin, both men felt the first scrape of the underside of the plane coming into contact with the runway. There was another interminable hideous screech of aircraft metal against rough surface until the Widgeon skidded to a stop, stranded there in the middle of the airfield like a fish on land.

Jake killed the engines.

“Damn,” he said, barely above a whisper. The bulldozer lurched out and towed them back to the parking apron.

Before getting out to face the Canadian contingent, Jake sat in the cockpit chewing his lip. “I hate to start taking the plane apart. Grady will--”

--have your ass, and rightly so. But maybe only half your ass,” Ben told him with more hope than he felt, “if we can get what’s left of this thing back to East Base more or less on time.”

Looking over his shoulder, Jake took inventory of the interior of the plane and conceded. “Okay, okay. Let’s see if our hosts would like some nice plane seats for their canteen.”

Once the ground crew had unbolted the passenger seats and lugged them off merrily as scavengers given a shipwreck, Jake lined the lightened plane up with the waiting runway and gave it the gas. Glued to the side window as the twin engines raged and the plane shuddered against the drag of the wheels in the gravel, Ben saw they were past their previous skid marks and thought they might make it this time. Then, agonizingly, they heard the telltale scrape again and in no time the friction of another skid slewed the Widgeon to another dead stop in the middle of the airfield.

“This is starting to get on my nerves,” Jake spoke first in the quiet of the cut engines.

Ben indicated toward the bulldozer operator climbing back onto his big yellow machine. "Think how bored that catskiner is getting."

While they waited to be towed back to the hangar apron again, Jake softly tapped a big fist against the steering column. "Got one more trick up my sleeve. It takes some doing, old buddy. By you."

"As long as it doesn't take buckets of blood," Ben answered, "let's hear it."

He listened without saying anything more until Jake laid out the whole scheme. This time he indicated toward the forest at the end of the runway. "If it doesn't work, don't we end up with a plane in those trees?"

"The damn thing isn't any good to us the way it is," Jake provided in all reasonableness.

That much was unarguable, and the rest came down to the skills the two of them could muster in what they had been trained in. Ben took another look at the trees and swallowed hard, but got the words out: "Go for broke, Ice. You're the pilot, rumor has it."

Jake clapped him on the shoulder. "And you're the sandbag, so here's how I want you to do it."

Back at the hangar apron, they ran through the maneuver in the silent plane a number of times. The Canadian ops officer puffed out his ruddy cheeks when Jake told him what was intended, but the truth was, he wanted the high-and-dry floatplane off his airfield as badly as they did. "Have a go," he bestowed ultimately and went off to alert his ambulance crew.

Ben climbed in behind Jake, keyed up and as ready as he could ever make himself be. No sooner had Jake put on his headphones than he motioned to the co-pilot's seat as if it was an easy chair.

"Sit down and relax. We need to wait half an hour, the sissy in the tower won't clear us for takeoff until they get here."

“Who?”

“The volunteer fire department from town. They’re particular about their trees up here.”

Ben settled in the seat, put up the collar of his flight jacket and tried to nap. The world of war marched through his head, ridiculous incongruities on parade. Years in uniform dwindled to this, two men trying to get an aging floatplane off a gravel runway some thousands of miles from the nearest combat. Survival perhaps dependent on a meatwagon and a fire engine in somebody else’s country. The contradiction that an airplane amounted to anyway, a machine nominally too heavy to stay airborne due to the colossal engines needed to keep it airborne. Cass, all her P-39 flights with those hundreds of pounds of mechanism in back of her ears. A miracle every time. How long could miracles go on?

Jake was shaking him. “Here we go.”

Ben snapped to. This time, he saw, the Canadian officer had positioned the medical rescue squad near the far end of the runway, with the firefighting equipment added.

“All right, Ben my boy.” Jake sounded reconciled or ready, it was hard to tell which in the startup throb of the Widgeon engines. “Third time is the charm.”

“It beats ‘Three strikes and you’re out,’” Ben had to grant. He squeezed Jake’s shoulder as he edged up out of the co-pilot’s seat. “See you in the wild blue yonder, Ice.”

He went to the rear of the cabin and crouched. Up front, Jake fed the throttles even more and started down the runway at full force again, the squishy plane wheels doing their determined best to plow into the gravel. Imagination ran rampant in a situation like this, but with his weight back there shifting the center of balance toward the tail, it did feel to Ben as though the plane poised itself a trifle higher, at a more alert angle, up there at the nose.

Noise poured over him and the ride was so rough he had to brace himself with both hands on the floor; otherwise, he stayed in football stance, ready to go at Jake's signal. He could tell they were nearly to the point of the runway where the drag of the wheels drew the plane into the gravel on previous tries. The part of the mind that deals with such things considered whether the battered metal of the hull would hold up through another high-speed skid or whether it would split open and he and Jake would smear against gravel at seventy miles an hour.

"NOW!" Jake roared, his hands busy with the stick and the throttles, and Ben leaped catlike toward the cockpit, grabbing onto the crank that controlled the wing flaps. As fast as his hands could go he dropped the full flaps, and an instant later, hoping Jake's brainstorm had something to it, yanked the lever that pulled the landing gear up.

Its support gone from under it, held barely above the runway only by sudden upthrust of air from the flaps, for a terrible moment the Widgeon seemed to hover in defiance of gravity, like a leaf on a last breath of breeze. It then gave a slight lurch upward as if startled. *Don't stall!* was the single thought in both men's minds. Jake did something, although Ben wasn't sure what, and the plane stabilized. They were airborne, at least at the elevation of a few feet. Now the line of trees was approaching fast. Delicately Jake fingered the controls and yelled, "Sandbag!"

Ben flung himself to the back of the cabin, half rolling into his crouched position again, trying to make himself heavy. As he did so, the nose of the plane lifted with the shift of balance, but he still could see green spears of treetops everywhere in the cockpit window. "Hang on!" he heard the shout from Jake.

Instead he gave a little jump from his crouched position, and when he came down the front of the plane teetered a bit higher, still staggering toward the treetops.

He did it again, the Widgeon's nose once more bobbing up ever so slightly. By now the wall of dark green branches was rushing at them so close and hard the effect was hypnotic. This was it, he knew, that daylight nightmare of Cass's engine hurtling forward to crush her but in this case two engines to rip loose and plow flesh, one each for Jake and him. His mortal organs getting busy with their last task, Ben braced himself into the back corner of the cabin for the crash, staring uncontrollably at the ridiculous agency of his oncoming death, the tops of evergreens as serene as Christmas trees.

Then sky.

It took some moments for this unexpected lease on existence to register on him. He huddled there not daring to move lest any twitch of a muscle disturb whatever equilibrium the Widgeon was struggling itself into. Its engines still at full throttle, he could feel the floor of the plane lurching drunkenly under him, but along with it was what could be construed as--*Jesus, is it? Is it?*--the sensation of lift.

Then the engine noise settled to a guttural effort and Jake was calling over his shoulder in a shaky voice: "Nothing to it. You can come out of hiding now."

Ben stumbled his way forward and dumped himself into the co-pilot's seat. Trees still were not very far below, but the Widgeon laboriously kept on rising above the branches' reach.

He saw Jake was wearing a grin big enough to eat pie sideways.

"Kind of puckers a guy up, down there in the seat of the pants, don't it? Better get busy writing all this up, scribe, so they'll give us medals for getting this tub off the ground."

"Right, Ice. A piece of gravel pinned on with a band-aid. How about if I just sit here and let my insides catch up with me?"

They flew giddily, men given wings, for the next little while. Canada's immense share of the earth spread around them in the clear autumn morning in timber thick as fur and pocket mirror lakes and rivers flowing north.

Fondling the controls, Jake was chortling and calculating aloud how long it would take to fuel up in Edmonton and then the flying time to reach East Base for supertime beer at the Officers Club, when one of the engines went rough, smoothed out, sputtered a time or two, and quit.

"Now goddamn what?" Jake indignantly checked the instrument panel. "Take a look, it's the one on your side."

Before the words were out of Jake's mouth, Ben had craned around to give the stilled engine a looking-over. It only took an instant. The engine cowling was wet and aviation gasoline was whipping away behind it in a fine mist. "It's slobbering fuel like crazy," he reported hoarsely.

"Then I guess we don't try to restart the sonofabitch, do we." Jake rammed that throttle off. "We'll have limp on in to Edmon--"

The other engine quit.

--"aw, shit," Jake finished his sentence.

In the vacuum after that, the only sounds the wind in the struts and the creaks of a gliding plane that was too heavy to glide for very long, the pair of men stared the question at each other and made the same guess without having to say it. The Widgeon's repeated rough treatment on the gravel runway must have ruptured the fuel lines, and the gravity-defying takeoff over the treetops had encouraged leakage. By now Jake was striving to maintain altitude by madly pumping the flaps, the equivalent of using rowboat oars to try to move a barge, while Ben twisted in every direction in search of water they could set the plane down on. Off in the distance a lake gleamed, but too far for any sinking airplane to reach.

"I can't hold us in the air much longer," Jake said with strained calm.

"How about we belly in on that clear patch down there?"

*With gas all over us?* Shielding the sun from his eyes with his hands, Ben scanned the stretch of forestless terrain coming under the plane, like a shaved-away spot on a mammoth pelt. He had to grit to give Jake the news that a windstorm had done the clearing. "It's full of downed trees, Ice. Tangled all to hell."

"That changes things. Raise Newbride, quick"--as Jake spoke, Ben already was on the radio chanting their position--"then grab the chutes. Toss me mine and the bivvie bag and you go. I'll pump the bastard as long as I can."

As Ben clambered into jumping position, aware of the tail and the struts and other portions of the plane that he did not want hitting him when he went out the hatch, crazily he thought of Cass's wingwalking. "*Never leave hold of what you've got until you've got hold of something else.*" He gripped the ripcord ring so hard his fist hurt. Great gulps swept through him as he tried to blot out Dex's experience of puking in mid-air. Clinging in the hatchway, he stared past the toes of his flight boots, trying to judge. The Widgeon was losing altitude like mad, he could see individual stumps and logs down there; wasn't the ground too close for jumping?

"Get out! Now!" Jake's bellow and the sickening shift of the plane as he abandoned the cockpit sent Ben out into the air.

Two things happened almost simultaneously, the teeth-rattling jerk as the parachute opened and the uprush of a monstrously large downed evergreen directly beneath him, its rootball splayed toward him like a natural mantrap. With everything he could muster, dangling and falling at the same time, he tugged at the parachute's lines in an effort to miss the log. At the very end of his mid-air dance of trying to twist aside, a limber root end raked up his body, swatting him under the side of the jaw and taking some face skin with it.

barford  
crate

The next thing he knew he was on his side on the ground. The tree, as prone as he was, was close enough he could reach out and touch it. Still foolishly gripped tight in his hand was the ripcord ring.

Raw-faced and wincing from the sideswipe by the tree root, he lay there testing himself for anything broken. Except for his breath, nothing seemed to be. He was gasping his way toward normal intake of air when he heard, somewhere off across the mess of downed trees, the nasty sound of a crash. *Too big for Jake. Had to be the plane.* That started his thought process whirring. Before he even was onto his feet he was calling at the top of his voice:

“Jake! Jake?”

It took several shouts, but then a voice not all that far away answered.

“Tone it down, Ben. I don't want my ears hurting too.”

“Where are you?”

“How the hell do I know? Over here.”

Using the rootball as a rough ladder, Ben managed to climb high enough to see across various logs to where a white drape of parachute indicated Jake's location.

“I'm on my way. Doctor yourself till I get there, can you?” The optimistically named bivouac bag, containing a medical kit and other emergency essentials, was with Jake.

“Who said I need doctoring?”

To Ben, that response did not sound particularly convincing. Wasting no time, he bundled up his own chute in his arms like dirty laundry and began picking his way through the maze of downed trees. Mostly the forest here had been tipped over by a big wind, roots and all, like a spill of wooden matches. A good many tree trunks, though, had been snapped off, leaving stray splintery snags tall as totem poles. Here and there stood survivor trees, incongruous loners with their

kilts of evergreen branches above it all. The muskeg footing was laborious. Ben was sweating by the time he rounded the last big log and there was Jake, upright but grimacing as he stood there flexing the ankle in his unlaced left boot.

“How bad?” Ben asked.

“I feel beat to hell, about like you look.”

Another spasm chased across the big man’s face as he put weight on that foot. “Think maybe it’s a sprain, not a break. Not gonna take the boot off to find out, the way the way the damn thing is swelling.”

Jake’s eyes met Ben’s. “Tell you what really hurts--I dropped the bivvie bag coming out of the plane. Piss-poor time to fumble. Sorry about that, Ben.”

“Don’t worry,” Ben spoke it with effort. “We’ve still got our chute packs. Can you walk?”

Jake hobbled around to test that out. “More or less. We’re not going anywhere for awhile anyway, I guess.” Both men turned and gawked south where a pillar of smoke marked the burning aircraft. After a bit, Jake said: “That was a sad-ass aircraft, you know that?”

“Never mind that, let’s see what we’re supposed to live on.” Ben knelt to unzip the pack portion of his parachute for its emergency items, and Jake did the same. Each reached in and pulled out they first thing they found. They stared at the short machetes in their hands.

Next to come out was a tiny fishing kit, followed by rocklike pieces of chocolate called tropical bars.

“Jungle issue,” Jake said tonelessly. “Goddamn sonofabitching goddamn supply depot bastards--”

“Quit,” Ben ordered. “Eat. We’ve got to keep our strength up.” He tried the chocolate and nearly broke a tooth. “Petrified.”

“Must be what the machetes are for,” Jake muttered.

They sawed their way through the chocolate and sucked on it while they spread out the white parachute canopies as a marker for any search plane. Around them hung the ear-ringing silence of the Canadian forest. It was at the forefront of both their minds that in country this far north, it was always about five minutes to winter.

“Man oh man, this is not so good,” Jake eventually observed out loud. “Where are the Canucks with all their rescue regalia when we want them?”

Wondering that himself, Ben said, “Takes a while to fly here, you know that. We’d better get busy, just in case. Firewood. Come on, let’s get to whacking with these daisy cutters.”

They had amassed a woodpile of the driest branches they could find to cut and were digging in the muskeg trying to reach water--none too successfully--when they heard the sound of a plane.

A small spotter aircraft of some kind, it looked about the size of a moth as it pattered through the air, in over the forested edge of the windfall and ever so slowly toward them, an arm waving out the co-pilot’s window in good cheer as it made a pass over them. No airplane created could land in the jumble of trees, snags, and logs, so both Ben and Jake knew what to expect, the drop of a bag of survival gear. Around again came the plane and again the cheery wave, but no bag was dropped.

“I wish he’d hurry up,” Ben muttered as the small plane buzzed off to circle in for another try. “Puddlejumpers like that don’t carry all that much fuel.” Jake simply fixed a solid glare at the visiting aircraft as if the emergency bag could slide down on that.

One more time, here the frail aircraft came, propeller whirling like a child’s pinwheel, and a sizable soft object was lobbed toward them. It blossomed out in a little parachute all its own, then decided to ride the breeze, straight toward the

topmost branches of one of the taller standing trees nearby which Ben and Jake had paid no particular attention to, until now.

The chute neatly snagged on the worst of the high branches, tangled itself, and dangled the bag sixty feet above the cursing pair of men.

They bayed obscenities at the rescue bag festooned in the treetop like a Christmas trimming, until better sense kicked in. Meanwhile, the light plane wagged its wings--in the circumstances, it seemed more like a regretful shrug--and flew off in the direction of Newbride.

It was Jake, sounding almost pensive, who remarked, "That guy wasn't waving for exercise, was he. He wanted us out away from this shit-eating tree."

Taking stock of the situation, they could tell it was impossible to climb an evergreen that tall and spindly; the upper branches would break off under the weight of a man and so might the whole crown of the tree. On the other hand, the base of the tree looked appallingly substantial when the only thing you had to chop it down with were machetes meant for jungle vines.

The first half hour's worth of excruciatingly careful chopping, so as not to break the blades, produced a notch about as big as a beaver could chew in minutes. Panting and arm-weary, they had just resigned themselves to another hour or so of chipping away, when the sound of a more powerful aircraft engine reached them.

They looked up. This one was arriving from what they figured was the direction of Edmonton and coming like a streak.

Ben identified the silhouette and wondered if he could be hallucinating.

"VIP treatment this time around, Benjamin." Jake shaded his eyes. "We rate a P-39. Hope the guy is bringing us long woolies and his aim is better than that last prick's."

There were thousands of Airacobras in the sky of war, hundreds of pilots gunning a twelve-piston engine to a full four hundred miles an hour at any given

time. This one roaring in on them had no business being flown by her, Ben knew in the deepest reasoning part of himself; Cass could be on the Seattle run, or on the ground at East Base, or anywhere between. But reason did not stand a chance as he craved her into creation there in the sun-glint of the rapidly oncoming cockpit. As he watched, afraid to blink, the P-39 lowered its nose and dove toward them. Jake, waving both arms, froze into semaphore position as the plane skimmed into the clearing in the forest, low as a crop-duster and fast as an artillery shell. Facing into the madcap flyover, Ben no longer knew whether to pray it was Cass or not at those controls.

The P-39 tore past so close over them they could feel the propwash. Now he was sure it was no one but her. He felt queerly responsible: Cass only would have flown a circus stunt like that to see what condition the crash left him in.

“That,” Jake declared in the corridor of dwindling roar as the fighter plane climbed sharply, “is one shit-hot pilot.” Both men watched the Cobra’s ascent as fliers do, as if counting contour lines of elevation.

At around fifteen hundred feet the plane pulled up and settled into circling over them.

“What the hell now?”

“Writing a message,” Ben somehow was sure. “Come on, let’s get way out in the middle of this mess, we don’t want the drop bag to end up in another tree.”

Clumsier than vertical bears, they plunged through the fallen-timber maze until they reached a marginally more open patch of muskeg. They planted themselves in anticipation there, and Jake took up waving again. “The goddamn guy doesn’t have to check his spelling,” he complained as the Cobra kept to its droning orbit over them for the next some minutes. “Just tell us how they’re gonna get us out of here.”

“He will.” Ben had nearly admitted *She*. “Next pass, watch for the drop bag.”

Both of them tensed, ready to chase down the weighted leatherene bag, like a long yellow stocking, wherever it landed.

What came sailing out of the P-39 was the size of a bulging mail sack, so accurately aimed it very nearly hit them.

Jumping back until they were certain it was through rolling, Ben and Jake needed a further instant to realize it was a duffel bag. Together they pounced and opened it. They pawed through like pirates at a treasure chest. C-rations. Wool socks and gloves and watch caps. A down mummy bag. Matches. Two canteens of water. Two thermoses of hot coffee. Four cans of beer. Nestled amid it all, the message drop bag, and inside, the scrawled note:

*Flyboys:*

*Happy to see you up and around. Proceed five miles, compass heading S/SW, to nearest lake. Bush plane will be waiting for you tomorrow--sorry I can't, but Cobras don't swim.*

*Only room for one sleeping bag in the duffel, you'll have to share. Don't snuggle any closer than I would.*

*Hugs and tickles,*

*Cass Standish, Captain, WASP*

Jake looked up from the note as the P-39 cut another perfect tight circle over them, as if they were the bullseye of a target the size of Canada. “Bitch, whoever she is,” he said in admiration.

The only acknowledgment Ben could think of was to throw up his hands in the possible direction of Edmonton--*Go! Go!* Jake looked at him for a moment, then commenced rummaging through the duffel bag. “Here’s a dilemma--coffee or beer?”

take of  
Cass's  
name  
etc.  
WASP

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

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

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

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

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

of his  
face & head  
like he  
had been  
in a fight  
w/ a bobcat

“Tepee Weepy radioed,” Jones reported, awed at having heard the voice in clear air. “They want your first-person story of the crash right away. ‘Soonest,’ they said--I didn’t know that was a word.”

“It is with them.”

“Uhm, lieutenant, I’m supposed to tell you. Commandant’s orders, you’re to report to the infirmary before you do anything else.”

“If Grandma Grady thinks I’ve had time to bring a dose of clap in from Canada--”

Jones surveyed Ben’s black-and-blue jaw and skinned-up face. “Somehow I don’t think it’s that.” He leaned in as if giving solace to a parishioner. “My guess is, he considers you a hero and wants to make sure you’re all right.”

“I’m touched,” Ben growled.

“You maybe want to look at this while you’re getting checked over--it came yesterday, highest priority.” Jones handed him a wax-sealed packet. “The courier didn’t want to give it to me, but I told him it was that or he could go find you in the Canadian wilderness.”

“You’re getting the hang of this, Jones.” Throatily Ben pushed the words out past the chokehold of apprehension brought by the packet, the kind his transfer orders to another base ordinarily came in. He didn’t want to open it with Jones watching. “Meet you back at the office.”

“Don’t forget the--”

“--clap shop, I won’t, thank you very much, Jones.”

Ben stood there at the edge of the East Base runway buffeted by the wind, his thoughts whirling wildly. *If they yank me out of here now...How will I ever see her...When will the war ever quit...* He trudged toward the nearest hangar--it happened to be the one where he had first laid eyes on Cass--and ducked in out of the wind. Not a P-39 in sight; a B-17 bomber, clean-skinned and somehow the

more ominous for that, was being worked over from nose to tail by a swarm of female mechanics. A hairnetted crew chief more muscular than Ben immediately slipped over to him. "Help you with something, lieutenant?"

"Something sharp, chief, to open this with?"

The brawny woman pointed to a workbench strewn with tools. Ben went over and picked up a chisel. He lightly gouged the wax, the clock of war turning in his head. How many time zones away from Cass Standish could a man stand to be? Her husband was fourteen away, if that was any guide. *And look what's happening to him.*

He reached in and instead of orders pulled out a P-file, the standard military personnel folder, with the name, rank, and serial number inked in the upper right corner. In the opposite corner the file bore a red KIA tag, denoting Killed In Action. Carl Friessen was dead.

Stunned, Ben took in the words--*On patrol to secure the Hollandia perimeter in the New Guinea campaign ...enemy ambush...* No million-dollar wound nor any other kind short of lethal for the laconic lineman he had played next to, in the faraway of two years ago. Somehow Friessen's number had come up on the wrong side of the law of averages with the earlier two, and a sick fury at the merciless twist in arithmetic filled Ben. Making a fist, he crumpled the envelope to hurl it in the waste barrel at the end of the bench; something inside resisted. He shook the envelope onto the worktable. Another file fell out, also with a KIA tag.

This one was Vic Rennie's.

1944

6

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

“Unfair.” Carnelia Muntz materialized at the buffet table as Cloyce was trying to deploy the buffet remnants to better effect. “How am I supposed to top this when I have the canasta club over, spike the angelfood?” Carnelia was the banker’s wife and always regally aware of it. She sighted over her glass to the

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circle of guests around the prize of the evening, the Senator and his wife and daughter. "You're a hard act to follow, Cloycie."

"You sound like Bill. He accuses me of a pagan passion for New Year's Eve."

"Your night to shine. I see Ben finally made it."

"The bus was late. This weather."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

→ maronley  
overlating

TPWP  
OC

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

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

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

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approaching sounds of bombs. "Since no buildings were hit, my guess is it was some Jerry dumping his load before scooting back across the Channel and a few bombs strayed onto the hospital grounds."

The next words he organized with slow care, not wanting them to be too theatrical. "There's one of those old canals they have everywhere in that part of England, at the bottom of the slope from the hospital where they used to haul supplies in by barge. During all the commotion, Vic's wheelchair went in the water. They didn't find him until the next day."

Ben stopped there, although he need not have. He was certain as anything that while the hospital attendants were ducking for cover, Vic had taken one last sharp look around and given the wheelchair a running start down the slope toward the deep-sided waterway, his chosen exit from a life that no longer held anything for him.

"Not quite like the official handout, was it," Bill Reinking spoke in the dry tone of a veteran editor. Uneasy with what Ben had to contend with, he asked: "Who makes a decision like that, how they classify that kind of a death?"

"Someone who wants every dead soldier in any uniform of ours to be a shining hero." *Four for four, so far. The Supreme Team stays perfect with a little help from Tepee Weepy and in spite of me. Or Vic.*

Just then Chick Jennings, the postmaster, reeled past on his way to the bathroom. "You sure know how to throw a party, Bill. And how you doing, Ben?" he delivered with a passing clap on the shoulder. "What do you think, this the year the boys will whip the Japs and Krauts and get to come home?" It was common knowledge Chick's son was a Navy quartermaster safely tucked away in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

"Not all of them," Ben said through his teeth.

"Ben," his father began, "people say things they don't--"

arid

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

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

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

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 pagination

the piano, she could not help but notice the big pilot with a rakish flop to his dark hair giving her the eye as she went by, but she was not in the market for the glee club type. Better someone with a Jeep or better wheels.

On past the singing drinking coterie, she spotted Cass holding down one of the spots for the socially backward. Captain Standoffish, out in the open. Too occupied with herself to join in the celebration along the bar. Seizing the chance, Della cooed an excuse in the ear of her date and promised him better things to come, then headed for Cass.

“Care if I join you, captain ma’am?”

Cass looked up in surprise from her writing paper. “What the hey, Lieutenant Maclaine, sit yourself down.”

Ben felt a hand, loving but firm, at the crook of his elbow. “Time to break it up, you two. I need to borrow my soldier.” Words warm as toast, and the crust there for emphasis. His mother’s diction made her a standout in amateur theatricals, the loftier the dialogue the better. Certainly she looked like the leading lady of tonight with her hair freshly fixed and her aquamarine party dress on, and both men self-consciously shrugged around in their clothes a bit as if that would help to approach her level. “Bill, I think people are ready for another round.”

“Next year I’ll just hand out bottles instead of glasses,” the response came nonchalantly enough it was not clear whether it was a joke or a vow.

As his father went off to liquor duty, Ben set himself to escort his mother sociably around the room as she no doubt wanted. But she didn’t move toward that and her tone was forgiving--he tried to think for what?--as she said: “Are your ears burning? We were just talking about you.”

“And here I thought that was frostbite from the bus ride,” he endeavored to make it sound teasing. “So,” he watched his mother for a further moment to see where this might go, “what did you conclude?”

She had not expected that he would treat her remark as more than a pleasantry to warm him up for the meeting and greeting ahead. But then Ben was inadvertently dramatic tonight, the last healing traces of scrapes from that plane crash like character lines drawn strong on his face. “If it were up to me,” she decided to venture, “I’d say that you look like you could use more than a night off. I’m worried about you, you’ve been all over the map without letup. Doesn’t that strange unit of yours ever have furloughs?”

Ben drained the last of his drink. “The war doesn’t take furloughs, Mother, so TPWP sees no reason to. I’m theirs for the duration, lock, stock and typewriter.”

She looked at him critically, hoping Carnelia Muntz didn’t cross paths him while he was like this. “Are you tight?”

“Sober as a gravedigger.” The old saying fit his frame of mind, if not the moment.

“Ben.” His mother’s intensity broke the spell of debate. “I know you’ve had a hard time of it recently, but heavens, it’s New Year’s Eve. Can’t you enjoy yourself for that long?” She slipped her arm in his. “Come on over and meet the Senator’s daughter. Adrianna is in the service too. She’s stationed in Washington. You’ll have a lot to talk about.”

So that was it. Glancing across the gathering, he picked out the significant young woman in the cluster around the Senator and his wife; no male of military age in sight there or for that matter anywhere else in the room. He nearly laughed out loud, wishing Cass were here to see what happened when good intentions met up with his mother’s designs.

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Cass took a quick look at the moonstruck officer Della had left parked at a table to wait for her; another new one, chronically the case with Della. *Playing the field. I wonder what that's like. I hope to hell I never find out.* The question of Dan or Ben constituted as much choosing as she ever wanted to have to do in one lifetime.

“Tough night to draw standby.” Della’s sympathy did not sound overwhelming. Actually, Cass was unprepared for any at all from her after their run-in at Edmonton just before Christmas. On that flight up, Della had piloted like a Sunday driver, lagging the formation and straying off the radio beam. Luckily the group of planes hadn’t hit heavy weather or Cass would have had a lame duck back there to worry about along with everything else. It had taken a monumental chewing-out and a threat to ground Della if she didn’t shape up, but it had worked, for the time being. Right now she had her eyes modestly down on the blue air-letter paper Cass’s pen rested on. “Catching up on your correspondence?”

“To my husband. Della, what’s on your mind?”

“I’m thinking of putting in for a transfer. To ground duty.”

*Happy New Year to you too, gutless wonder.*

The entire party seemed to somehow have shifted about a step and half toward the far wall of the living room, leaving a pocket of expectation where he and Adrianna were left together to make the most of this chance to get acquainted. *The young people, herded together as if nature intended. You’d think the two of us were being bartered by our tribes.*

“I heard you on ‘Meet the Forces,’” she was saying, wasting no time, “telling about your plane crash. You made it sound all in a day’s work.”

“They put anybody who can deal in consecutive sentences on that show.”

“That’s awfully modest of you.” She studied the traces on his face as though they were gladiator souvenirs. “You maybe can guess--my folks have followed your doings ever since football. They tell me when you set out to do something, you’re the best at it.”

It took just a few such battings of the eyes for Ben to realize that she was being a good deal more than daughterly civil in making talk with him. And he had to admit, being around her was not hard duty. Adrianna was cute and a dash exotic in the same glance. Slender but substantial in the right places and in a snug maroon skirt and matching sweater that showed that off well enough. Caramel-colored hair that no doubt received a hundred brush strokes a day. Almond eyes and olive complexion. It was well-known that she was adopted, the senatorial couple setting an example of humanitarianism after that first inhumane world war. From somewhere on the Adriatic, or was he simply mixing that up with her name? She was a WAVE, that much he was sure of; the Senator had a practiced chuckle when he’d introduced her as his daughter the sailor.

For the next minute or so they kept on trading generalities--she told him she was just another of fifteen thousand Navy women serving in Washington wartime offices; he told her he was just a typewriter soldier being sent off on an overseas assignment early in the new year--until he came around to asking, “What do they have you doing?”

“I’m in the wire room.”

Ben tried not to show any sign of the disputes he’d had with telex clerks of many kinds down through time. Maybe she wasn’t one of those, maybe she was in charge of changing the spools of teletype tape. Which he immediately doubted; a Senator’s daughter would not be doing the chores.

Her man.

Teletype

Telex  
ribbon.

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

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

“I have to confess I don’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

handy

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

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

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

“Mysterious are the ways of Tepee Weepy, I’m the first to agree.”

“Tepee Weepy,” she laughed low in her throat, “oh, that’s funny. We have all kinds of those insane abbreviations in Washington. My father gets a charge out of saying the government is nothing but one big pot of alphabet soup.”

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

The drink offer was the only good thing Cass had heard out of Lieutenant Maclaine since she plopped down at the table. “Can’t. Going on duty at midnight.” Which, she figured, Della well knew when she volunteered to buy. *Why the hell can’t she strut her stuff when it counts?* “It’s a shame, though,” Cass said as if the words were too stubborn to keep in. “You throwing away your

AC

## 9

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*Why have I never been able to stand Danzer? Let me count the ways. On the team, there was no love lost between the Dancer out there at right end grabbing glory with his jersey clean and the rest of the linemen beating their brains out throwing blocks for him with never any thanks. The only good word he ever had in the huddle would be for Moxie. "Good call, Stomp," I can still hear it, as if a Stamper-to-Danzer pass play didn't take the other nine of us to make it work. Jake used to say Danzer was so stuck on himself he had gum in his fur.*

*That was football, only a game, supposedly. Games have any number of outcomes, though, personal scores that are not settled. If the ground of chance that brought us together had been in England, no doubt I'd be remembering a cricket match with Danzer in the whitest pants--and it still would be called only a game and count as eternally as if score was being kept in the Doomsday Book.*

"You're sure this is the only way to get there, Chief?"

Ben arrived alongside the USS *McCorkle* to find a chasm of disturbed gray-green seawater between it and him, with canyon walls of ship steel on either side. Consistently the swell of the open ocean lifted the destroyer, across there, atop a foaming crest while wallowing the oil ship he was aboard in the trough of the wave. The ships then would dizzily trade elevations. Between the rising and falling hulls stretched the pulley rope that was supposed to carry him across. The line looked to him as thin as spiderspin.

“The motor launch might get crushed between if we tried that, sir,” the oiler’s grizzled chief petty officer replied, unflappably tugging the breeches buoy into place around Ben’s hips like an oversize canvas diaper. “Not to worry, lieutenant. We’ll haul you across in a jiffy and you’ll get a real nice reception on the *Cork*-- the mail sack is following you over. Ready, sir?”

“No, and never going to be, so let’s get it over with.”

Legs sticking out of the canvas sling and arms tight around the ring buoy that the sling hung from, he was sent bobbing into mid-air, dipping and soaring with the teetertotter rhythm of the ships, the line with its dangling human cargo above the viciously sloshing water but not that far above it. The sleek gray hull of the destroyer loomed nearer and nearer until he began to be afraid the next toss of ocean would splatter him against it like a lobbed egg. Then there was a powerful yank from the crewmen handling the haul rope attached to the pulley and he spun up over the side of the hull into a sprawling descent onto deck.

A helping hand came down to him, and an unmistakable dig along with it. “Welcome aboard, eminent war correspondent. You’re just in time for the invasion of Europe.”

*Great start. Looking at my reflection in the Dancer’s famous shoes.*

Unharnessing himself from the apparatus, Ben got up off his hands and knees and sought his footing, the deck of the destroyer livelier than that of the slow-rolling oil supply ship the past many days.

Meanwhile Danzer stood planted like a yachtsman in an easy breeze. Even though both men knew it did not fit their acquaintanceship, he had put on for general show his languid smile, as if about to say something then disdaining to.

Already irked--*What was that Europe crack about?*-- Ben gave back the briefest of handshakes. “One of us has his oceans mixed up, Nick. I was under the distinct impression this is the Pacific.” Without taking their eyes off the new

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arrival a number of sailors went about rote chores around them, their faded blue work attire a contrast to Danzer's khaki uniform, crisp in every crease.

Elaborately considerate, Danzer drew him away from the rope-and-pulley rig. "Stand aside, Ben, here's the real cargo." The mail sack came zinging down the line to the cheers of the sailors, followed anticlimactically by Ben's travel bag. "Come on up to the wardroom and catch the broadcast of how the war is being won for us."

He realized Danzer wasn't just woofing him. Up there in officers' country it was standing room only, those who were off-duty blearily awakened by the news and joining the morning watch in listening to the transmission piped in from the radio room. The entire compartment fell silent as General Eisenhower's crackling voice, half around the world on the Atlantic side of the globe of war, addressed his cross-Channel invasion force. "You are about to embark upon the great crusade toward which we have striven these many months...In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in arms on other fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine...The tide has turned. The free men of the world are marching together to victory...." Ben furiously scribbled down snatches of it, needing to do something while history was dispensed without him. *D-Day somewhere on the coast of France and I'm out here with the albatrosses. Thanks a whole hell of a lot for the heads-up, Tepee Weepy.*

In the wardroom's explosion of speculation that followed the Allied supreme commander's brief pronouncement, Danzer murmured aside to Ben: "A gentleman's C, on that pep talk by El Supremo?"

*You're the one who would recognize one.* "You were spoiled by Bruno," Ben came back at that. "Half-time dramatics don't sound that good with real blood involved." This was not a time he wanted to be standing around trading smart remarks, however. Like a change in the weather sensed in the bones, he could feel

~~Travel bag  
Pack?~~

the time coming when the dateline on what he wrote would read SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE. "Moxie is in that invasion force," he thought out loud, "you can about bet."

Did he imagine, or did Danzer draw back a little in surprise at those words?

Ben shot him a curious look, but the Dancer was elusive there in his naval crispness. He still was as lean as when he lined up at opposite end from Ben and as apart. "You knew he was stationed in England, didn't you?"

"Merry Old Moxie," Danzer said as if that constituted an answer. "You're bunking in the sick bay. I'll show you to it."

*Nicholas Edwin Danzer. 'Ned' when he was growing up in Livingston, but 'Nick' as soon as he hit Treasure State University and figured out what rhymed nicely with 'slick.' His family has the Paradise Gateway Toggery, outfitter to moneyed tourists on their way to Yellowstone Park. The snappy Stetsons. The gabardine slacks, men's instant fittings by a male tailor right there on the premises, women's by a female one. The specialized cowboy boots with walker heels, which takes the nuisance of cowboying out of them. How it all must have rolled into the cash register, and out of that, the vacation home up the Paradise Valley, the fishing trips with the Governor, the high school football camp at the Rose Bowl while most of the rest of us were teenage muscle sweating through summer jobs at a dollar a day. Born with a silver shoe horn in his booties and he took advantage of it. Give Slick Nick the benefit of the doubt, allow as how it was okay for him to be the clothes horse of the locker room and a mile around, for that matter. The more-wised-up-than-thou attitude he wore, that was not okay.*

*It was Vic, rest his soul, who shut him off at the mouth. Sooner or later it might have been Jake or Animal or, I like to think, me, but Vic drew first honors. That day Bruno had run us ragged in practice, all of us were out of sorts, and*

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Moxie*

*Danzer made the mistake of pushing past Vic into the showers with "Move it along, Tonto." Vic hit him in the chest with the base of his fist the way a person would bang hard on a door and that finished that. From then on, Danzer's attitude still showed but he kept it buttoned.*

*And here he is, supply officer on the destroyer U.S.S. McCorkle, on station probably a thousand miles from the nearest Japs. As cushy an assignment as there is in a theatre of combat, how ever he snagged it. He makes Dex Cariston look like an amateur at foreswearing war. For once, I wish I had less knowledge of the person I'm supposed to write about.*

*But that's not how it is, or ever going to be, with the Dancer. I know him right down to his shoe size. Or in his case, to his shoe polish.*

The story galloped among the former teammates, after Animal Angelides picked it up from a troopship navigator who went through officers candidate school at Great Lakes with Danzer. Inspections were ferocious in their barracks, a terminally picky commander stalking through the squad bays handing out gigs--demerits--for specks of dust imaginary or not. Always with one exception. Danzer's shoes dazzled the man, as well they should have; shiny as black glass, sheerly flawless as obsidian. It reliably drew Danzer an approving nod and a squint at his nametag, and everyone knew that the good regard of the commander was the one sure route around wading the chickenshit that customarily awaited an officer candidate. Danzer's shoeshine secret, whether he bribed it out of some crafty yardbird at Great Lakes or more likely devolved it from making those fancy boots gleam to best advantage in the show window of the Toggery, was to press the polish into the leather with a spoon made hot by a cigarette lighter, buff it, melt some more polish in, buff some more. It wrecked the shoes for wearing--Danzer had to hop into an ordinary pair when inspection was over--but could not be beat for display.

“Better have another pork chop, Ben. I had to practically buy out the hog farms of Queensland to get them.” The gloss on Danzer these days shone up from the capacious plates the officers of the *McCorkle* ate off of. It had the reputation of a ship that fed exceedingly well, and did just as well for itself at the greater table of chance besides.

“No thanks. My stomach still wants to be back on land.”

Which he knew would take another week yet, before the destroyer put in at Brisbane. *And the Dancer can keep on with the war effort by bargaining the Aussies out of groceries.*

Supply and demand were immaculately matched in Danzer and this ship, he had already determined. By whatever flick of fortune in the chain of command, the vessel was something like a palace guard to the commander-in-chief in the Pacific, General MacArthur, headquartered in the Australian port. Or as those less kind put it, driven into exile there by Japanese triumphs. MacArthur’s war thus far had been an early series of ghastly defeats--Corregidor, Bataan, then the entire Philippines--now somewhat assuaged by amphibious invasions that had rolled back the enemy from New Guinea and a handful of other strategic map spots strewn down the South Pacific. The *McCorkle*’s war this far along consisted of patrol duty and support chores here in the conquered waters central to MacArthur’s realm. Ben didn’t think he could get away with writing it, but the Southern Cross in the night sky was a constellation of extreme luck for the crew of this ship.

“Lieutenant Reinking? I can’t resist telling you”--this was on its way from a redheaded officer so young and junior in rank that he practically shined--“I read one of your pieces in JWP at Northwestern. The one where they held the wake for your teammate in a bar.”

Ben wished the junior ranker had resisted speaking up; there were too many faces in that messroom plainly ready to savor morsels beyond any found on the

plates. "Kenny O'Fallon, that was," he reeled off to try to get rid of this. "Butte knows how to give a person a sendoff." He sent a knotted look back along the table. "What's JWP?"

"Journalistic Writing Practice," the young admirer reddened as he said it. As he spoke, a white-jacketed mess attendant went around the table pouring coffee and dealing out fresh forks for pie. The Navy's ways made Ben feel at sea in more ways than one. Except for whoever was on the bridge the dozen or so officers all ate together at the one long table in obligatory lingering fashion, which meant the talkers got to talk endlessly and the listeners got to listen eternally. Cliques showed through the crevices in conversation; this nonfighting destroyer mostly was officered by a mix of merchant marine retreads, such as the gray slump-shouldered captain who sat at the head of the table regarding Ben without pleasure, and ninety-day wonders (example: Danzer) turned out by officer candidate school. All meal long, Ben had to behave like an anthropologist tiptoeing between tribes.

Right now, with more pluck than sense the redheaded one-striper was back at what he had read in college:

"I'm trying to remember, in that piece. Your football buddy, your and Lieutenant Danzer's--he was killed out here in New Guinea, wasn't he?"

Ben sat there struggling to measure out a more civil reply than *No, shavetail, that was another dead one of us.*

He was aware of being worn to a thin edge by the time he reached the destroyer. Ever since shipping out of Seattle in what seemed an eon ago, he had filed stories from latitudes of the Pacific theatre of combat. The Pacific conflict was a strange piecemeal war, fought from island to island, mapping itself out more like a medieval storming of castles, if the castles had been of coral and moated by hundreds of miles of hostile water and defended by men committed to die for their

emperor rather than surrender. Out here, a war correspondent's movements from one jungle-torn place to another were like continually journeying into the black fire of nightmare. He had seen things it took all his ingenuity to put into words that TPWP would let pass into print, and some that would never surface in civilized newspapers.

The dirt road at Rabaul, the dust carpeted with excrement, where the retreating Japanese had evacuated their hospital patients in some manner of forced march, the sick and wounded defecating while they walked like cows with the drizzles.

Constant corpses, the accumulations of death on every fought-over island, decay and flies always ahead of the burial squads.

The pilot who fell to earth--New Guinea again--near enough the American forces that a patrol was sent out to recover him.

Ben was with them when the spotter plane dropped its flare where the Hellcat dive bomber had failed to come out its dive and they thrashed through the jungle in search of the pilot. No one had seen his parachute open for sure, nor did it. The lead man practically fell in the hole the body made in the jungle floor, three feet deep. Then and there Ben had been seized with a stomach-turning fear for Cass, the altitudes at which she did her job a deadly chasm as constant as the sky over him after that. No remedy in sight. He had tried to shake that feeling in his gut--he had enough of those already--but the thought of life without her refused to quite go away. It was going with him throughout this ocean of war, a hue of loneliness always accompanying him now, like another depth to his shadow.

Solitary in the company of the destroyer officers, he at last came up with a response to the question that had pasted O'Fallon's fate onto Friessen's. "No, you're thinking of another teammate of ours. We've lost more than our share."

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Danzer had been watching throughout, grey-eyed as a stone visage. He showed no sign any of this fazed him. "It's strange how war has imitated life," he said as if mastering the philosophy for them all. "The middle of the line has taken the hits. Ben and I had the luck to be the ends." Smiling to take the edge off mortal matters, he knocked on the wood trim of the mess table.

"We're jealous of Danzer, you know," one of the older officers said in a joshing tone, if that's what it really was. "You're here to make him famous back home, and as dog robber he already gets to be the first one off the ship when we hit port."

"You wouldn't want the burden of being him," Ben answered the officer oratorically enough to draw a laugh. Danzer joined in.

"Still, it's an interesting morale device, isn't it," the executive officer spoke up briskly. The exec was a Naval Academy man, and chafing at this becalmed post in his career climb if Ben did not miss his guess. "Giving people a periodic glimpse--not that your talents can be entirely captured at any one time, Nick--of someone all throughout the war. Rather like time-lapse photography."

Before the executive officer could hold forth further, Ben put in "Right now I'm the one lapsing," barely covering a yawn. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen"--he tried to intone it without irony and could not be sure he succeeded--"I'm going to have to hit the sack."

The one advantage of bunking in the sick bay was privacy, which he craved in the crowded confines of the ship. *Just me and the aspirin and the sawbone's slab.* Those and the unsettling sense of being cast backward in time.

Hands under his head, he lay there on the berth and mulled. It had been, what, nearly a year since his impatient period of mending in a similar medical compartment on the ship off New Guinea. The swollen thoughts of that time

~~Slick~~  
Stick ?