

returned to him, as haunting as they were contrary. A main one, borne back by the dinner episode: why couldn't Carl Friessen have come out of the hand-to-hand combat on that bloodslick trail with just enough sacrifice of flesh to retire him from the war? [The million-dollar] wound, shrapnel in the back, a stray bullet in the lower leg, that sent a soldier home for good. His own seemed to him the two-bit variety, scarcely deserving of a Purple Heart or anything else, yet the twinge in his shoulder was a message of what might have been. At the time he was disturbed with himself for wanting any of the Supreme Team out of the war; Friessen, Vic, the others were in it of their own choice and who was he to wish carefully calibrated harm to any of them? With what he knew now, he should have called down the heavens in support of such wish.

That and ten cents would buy a person a dime's worth of difference in this life, wouldn't it. He swung up off the bunk, determined to leave the mood there, and crossed over to his typewriter on the cubbyhole desk. First, though--another habit back from that other sick bay stay a year ago--he flicked on the radio tuned to Tokyo Rose. As ever, the sultry voice was there, alternating between taunting American soldiers all over the Pacific and playing the likes of "*Tuxedo Junction*," the rhythm that began swelling out now. The Japanese were good at such propaganda, he acknowledged; the German counterpart, Lord Haw Haw, sounded like P.G. Wodehouse construing Bertie Wooster. Swing music outdid a drone any old night. Something to keep in mind, would-be scriptwriter, he told himself. He tuned the sound just low enough to be background, and settled to his routine.

His things were laid out on the slablike medical table and he reached over for fresh paper and rolled a page into the typewriter. He took his time at this, which would have astounded Jones or anyone else back at East Base who had ever seen him put a typewriter to work. On TPWP pieces he wrote as fast as the keys could tolerate, never needing to glance down--one of the blessings he owed his

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father was those boyhood sessions at the training typewriter in the *Gleaner* office, with bunion pads hiding the letters on the keyboard. But nights on his movie script, which were many, he deliberately slowed to a sculptor's pace, letting the imagination feel its way toward the shape of trueness. The scene he was working on took place on the Letter Hill. The character based on Purcell was the last player to reach the whitewashed rocks--*Camera: the slope below him appears steep and endless*, he tapped onto the paper--and others of the football team sagged against the stone emblem trying to catch their breath. His fingers resting on the keyboard, he tried out dialogue in his head, trying to catch words out of the air. It was a pursuit that enabled him to stand the slow, slow passage of military hours, the way some other man in uniform somewhere might endure the duration by nightly reading in *War and Peace*, and upon finishing it, starting over. (He made a mental note to find out what Danzer did to pass the time, if he did anything.) It was an abiding mystery, the script, that promised to reveal itself only in the measured workings of his mind and his fingers. And it was something Tepee Weepy could not reach.

He lurched through the next days at Danzer's side, listening over and over to him regulate a cook here, a baker there, a storeroom swabbie down in some gloomy hold at the bottom of the ship. All of it about as exciting as the derring-do of the corner grocer. 'SUPREME TEAM' MEMBER BATTLES ENEMY WITH BISCUITS, he could just see the headline. Tepee Weepy would be thrilled to the gills with this piece. Sure it would. As military service went, what he was reporting on aboard the *U.S.S. McCorkle* amounted to the essence of quiescence.

Meanwhile the long lean destroyer itself was never at rest. The *Cork* was aptly nicknamed, bobbing with every bit of weather. Yet that was the only discernible peril it faced. There were moments, staring out at the methodical ocean,

when he pined for a genuine storm to shake matters up into something he could write about with some life to it, before snapping back to his senses. *Think about it, Reinking. Throwing up your guts doesn't help you do your job. Just ask Dex.*

So, it seemed like just another helping of the idly floating *Cork's* routine when Danzer turned to him over dessert one dinnertime and announced for all to hear: "You can't deprive us of your company this evening, Ben. It's movie night."

Well, why not? he figured. *Let's see if the Dancer supplies popcorn and soda pop along with the main feature.* He trooped into the wardroom with the topside contingent and the petty officers invited up from below and sat there in tight quarters watching *Compromised* with Edward G. Robinson and Bette Davis chewing up the scenery and each other. That soapy drama, however, did not stand a chance of staying with him after what flickered onto the white metal wall at the end of the room first. He should have known Danzer had something of the sort up his sleeve. The short reel, *Your USO On the Go*, blared into action standardly enough, jaunty Italian music as the blondest of Hollywood blonds entertained the troops on a woodsy stage somewhere near the Anzio beachhead. The announcer had just begun to boom in when someone in the wardroom spoke up:

"Nick, I could look at Betty Grable's prow every night, but we did see this last week."

"Our guest didn't," Danzer grandly dealt with that from his presiding spot near the projector. "Humor us once-upon-a-time athletes for a little bit, if you'd be so kind."

Ben tensed, glad his face could not be seen in the dark. *Oh, goddamn. Here comes the load of crap.* Slouching down in his seat in a way he had not done since he was a kid captive to the screen back in Gros Ventre, he took in Bob Hope rattling off jokes and the McGuire Sisters spunkily harmonizing. Then the soundtrack music trumpeted off in the direction he was expecting and dreading, and

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here came the voice like hail on a tin roof, resounding back from the season of the Twelfth Man into the darkened compartment.

“Hello and a hurrah, for you fighting men and women everywhere! This is Ted Loudon with your USO sports report. Once again, the United Services Organization and the man at the mike, yours truly, are in your corner as we bring you the events of--”

Loudon’s mouth, Ben had long ago decided, was like a cheap revolver, ready to go off in any direction. Newspapers, airwaves, celluloid, the so-called sportscaster was everywhere but the backs of matchbooks and that was probably next. Ben set himself to endure another kaleidoscope of cliches, still trying to figure out Danzer’s purpose in thrusting this in front of him. *There’s no football this time of year. Is he just throwing Loudmouth at me to see what will stick?* Meanwhile in close focus there on the wardroom wall, Loudon himself was grandiosely shepherding an over-the-hill heavyweight boxer onto a hangar stage at the big air base in Newfoundland. In the space of the next breath, he was spouting his way through Opening Day of baseball season, replete with himself among the wounded troops in the box seats at the Washington Senators game.

Then the projector beam gave a wink of light between scenes, composed itself into gymnasium bleachers full of cheering soldiers, and onto a basketball court surged a pair of teams, one wearing no jerseys and the other wearing beards that reached to the chest letters on theirs. *“For the troops at Fort Dix gathered in the USO fieldhouse, it’s basketball, down to hide and hair!”* Ben jolted up in his seat. *“Yes, folks, it’s the Carlisle ‘Skins versus the House of David! These barnstorming teams have entertained America from coast to coast, playing a brand of ball that their ancestors would not recognize but they have adapted for their own.”* Eerily he watched five fleet ghosts of Vic Rennie racing up and down the hardwood floor, the Indian team in just its trunks running and shooting like boys let

loose. For their part, the big bearded men on the other team set up passwork plays of geometric grace. In between the pure basketball there were stints of showmanship nonsense, as one of the bearded giants held the basketball in one hand over his head and a couple of the shorter Indians jumped and jumped and couldn't come close to reaching it, then in the next sequence the Indians sped upcourt passing to one another so swiftly through the windmilling House of David players that the ball seemed to be in two places at once. It was all circus to Loudon, who in his patter managed to ignore superb run-and-gun plays to concentrate on exaggerated pronunciation of names like Hunts at Night and Buffalo Scraper, and for that matter, Perlmutter and Rosenthorn. Numbly Ben blocked out all of that he could, summoning instead the intrinsic memory of Vic with his hopes set on the 'Skins, on the playing career beyond football that would take him anywhere but Hill 57. Until his leg disappeared from under him. And then his life.

I get it, Danzer, you bet I do. Luck looks after those with shiny shoes, not the ones in mocassins. You've got the recipe for cynical.

The instant the lights went up at the end of the main show, Ben ducked out. He didn't know what the movie night protocol was, coffee and cookies and conversation afterward or what, but he didn't care, he simply wanted time alone. Sleep was nowhere in the picture, he was too worked up. No sooner had he closed the sick bay door than he was across at the radio to flip on Tokyo Rose for some distraction. *Might as well make it a full night of propaganda.*

He settled to the cubbyhole desk and his typewriter as the Rose of Tokyo pleasantly promised doom ahead.

"Poor American boys. Your ships go up in flames every day and your planes are shot from the sky every hour of that day. There are too many islands where your death waits for you, while slackers at home sit out the war. Go home,

G.I.s, before a bullet brings you the sleep that lasts forever.” Out wafted the eternal strains of Brahms’ *“Lullaby”*.

“Sweet dreams to you too, Rosie,” Ben mocked back but kept the music as he twirled a half-finished page of script into the typewriter. A warm awareness different from other writing nights kept coursing through him. As much as he hated to admit Ted Loudon could possibly amount to any kind of inspiration, that rapidfire voice worked as a goad, evoking the Golden Eagles stadium, the clefted team poised to charge onto the football field, the gilded season that led to so much else. They probably didn’t teach that in Journalistic Writing Practice. His fixated gaze at the waiting white space was just beginning to find the forms of words when a rap on the door broke the trance.

Oh, goddamn came to mind one more time, and he went to answer the knock hoping it would be any other of the officers, even the lecture-prone exec. Naturally it was not.

“You scooted out of the wardroom before I could catch you, Ben.” Danzer stood there in the passageway as crisp as the cutout of a naval recruiting poster. “I thought we ought to have a chat, old lang syne and all.”

“It’s your boat, Nick.” Ben gestured him in.

Gliding by, Danzer assumed a seat on the bunk and cocked an ear as he did so. “Blotting out the war with Beethoven?”

“Brahms.”

“Same difference?”

“Hardly. ‘Beethoven’s is music to move the universe, Brahms’ is to move the heart.” Ben reached over and clicked the radio off. “Sorry. I picked that up somewhere and it’s always stuck with me.”

“You were the word man among us and that hasn’t changed,” came the response from behind the held smile. “Our old friend Loudon hasn’t lost his touch either, has he.”

“Nope. Bullshit stays green for quite a while.”

That did not appear to be the reaction Danzer had been counting on. He scrutinized his host briefly, then leaned forward, hands steepled together as if aiming a prayer. “I hope this isn’t stepping on your toes, Ben, but I wanted to make sure you’re coming along all right on your article. Two more days until we’re in Brisbane, and you’re off to wherever’s next. It would be on my conscience if I haven’t provided everything you need.”

Ben studied the slick source of those words. *You’re a provider if there ever was one.* Danzer, monarch of the cold storage locker and master of the cooks and bakers and servers; the story that really interested Ben was how he had cozied himself into this slot in the American logistical empire. Some alliance of convenience made back there in shiny-shoe OCS? Some influential Yellowstone tourist, togged out by the Toggery, who knew someone on MacArthur’s staff? Pull was involved somewhere, Ben would have bet his bottom dollar. There was nothing wrong with being a storekeeper. What rankled was Danzer being Danzer, his every pore exuding the attitude that he was entitled to a free pass through the war.

“Well, Nick, I’ll tell you. It’s a little tough to make the commissary sound like a knife at Japan’s throat. I’ll come up with something along those lines, though. Breadknife, maybe.”

That drew a chuckle of sorts. “I’m the first to admit, patrolling MacArthur’s backyard is a tolerable tour of duty. There’s a nice amount of leisure.” Danzer pronounced it as if it rhymed with *pleasure*. “But don’t forget it’s a long war for

me, too. They also wait who only stand and serve.” Ben could tell it was not nearly the first time that line had been trotted out.

“By the way, how did you like the show, over all?” Danzer switched to, as though it was considerate of him to ask. “Loudon’s loud mouth aside, the bit of basketball was interesting, wasn’t it? I thought you would get a kick out of it.” *Is that what you thought. Somehow I doubt it.* Danzer steadied his gaze on his reluctant listener. “I never had anything permanently against Vic, you know. If his idea in life was to play shirts and skins, I’d have been glad to see him do it,” not quite saying *on the side of the redskins, naturally.*

“Life never did cut Vic a break,” Ben answered shortly. *Or the other three who lined up with us in that stadium.* He did not want to go over that territory, the team’s lives taken by the war, in the clammy companionship of Danzer. “Moxie’s all right, by the way. I checked. His tank column hit a lucky pocket at Normandy, not much resistance.”

“Is that what that was about, the code traffic ahead of the captain’s morning messages,” the other said drily. “The skipper thinks you have more radio priority than Roosevelt.” He thought to tack on, “Good for Moxie,” before bringing the conversation to where Ben saw it had been aimed all along.

“I have a bit of news of my own,” Danzer delivered it with relish on the side. He looked off around the room as if gathering his statement. “I know where our buddy Dex is and the reason why.”

Ben felt a lurch the ship was not responsible for. He shifted in the chair as he eyed his now truly unwelcome caller.

“Is that so. You’re busier than you look, Nick.”

Danzer spread his hands. “This fell in the family lap. A boot representative”--it took his listener a moment to translate that to traveling shoe salesman--“we deal with has a line of work wear he thought might interest the

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Forest Service. Just right for smokejumpers, you know? The Cariston stores are one of his accounts too, so imagine his surprise when he paid a call to Seeley Lake and spotted Dex in there with the conchies. The rest of the conchies, I think it's safe to say."

Knowing what the answer would be, Ben grimly asked anyway:

"Are you spreading this around, back home?"

"Word might get out, I imagine. You know how these things are. People have no idea the heir to Cariston Enterprises is taking the yellow road through the war otherwise, do they." The offhand manner in which Danzer said it made Ben realize he had underestimated the man's disdain for the rest of humankind. He was the sort whose contempt you couldn't tell from the wallpaper. It was always there in back of whatever he said or did.

"That was one of your pieces I did happen to see, on Dex"--Ben stared back while Danzer delivered this straight at him--"and 'conscientious objector' did not leap out at me. At any rate, it might not reflect on him any too well, do you think? What with the rest of us putting in our tour of duty."

I get the message, you manipulating bastard. Make you look good or you and your Toggery bunch smear Dex and me along with it for covering for him.

Silently Ben wrung the neck of the words he had just heard. Tour of duty. That's what Danzer was doing with it, all right, touring duty like a cynical sightseer for every spot of advantage it might offer him. The pampered tourist of the war who knew how to keep on pampering himself. The gleaming face confident it would never know doom until its allotted threescore and ten years, or more. For several seconds he did not trust himself to respond to Danzer, because the response he most wanted to give was to knock some teeth out of that smile.

"Nobody's perfect," he at last managed to keep it to, too much at stake not to, "but I do my goddamnedest to give everyone I write about a fair shake."

“Then I’ve been speaking out of turn about Dex and all, haven’t I,” Danzer provided with the grace of one who had won. “A man’s best is all he can do.” Showing every appearance of being pleased with that bromide, he made as if to go, but paused when the paper in the typewriter caught his eye. He cocked a look at the ragged margins of the typing, as when he had deigned to notice the classical music. “Writing poetry in your spare time?”

“If you have to know, it’s a screenplay.”

“Is it.” Danzer seemed to weigh that information. “As I suppose they used to ask of Shakespeare, what’s it about?”

None of your goddamn business. Something contrary sparked in the back of Ben’s mind, and he gambled it on out.

“Purcell. The twelfth man. Football as we knew it, Dancer, war by another means.”

Danzer’s expression slipped several degrees of control. Ben thought he saw bleak surprise in those flinty eyes, something buried threatening to come out.

“It’s about an accident of nature, then,” the chiseled voice quickly recovered, at least. “Two of them. That freak kid himself and what happened to him on the Hill. I’m surprised you can’t find anything more worthy of your talent, Ben.”

You think you’re surprised. Purcell does the trick on Slick Nick: that’s a surprise.

Sitting there gratified at discovering a way to get under Danzer’s skin, Ben still was finding it murky territory to try to explore. True, in the famous ‘41 season Purcell became the most glorified scrub there ever was, but still a scrub; he made the team only posthumously. What was there about the raw kid from nowhere to upset, even now, the receiving end of that impervious passing combination, Stamper-to-Danzer? ‘Stomp and Dance, the touchdown prance.’ Ted Loudon

always went nuts over that, he had plugged it into his column all season long. *You had your share of fame, Dancer, did you want Purcell's leftovers too?*

Something had colossal staying power from back then, but what? The time since had changed the mortal balance in too many ways that Ben had seen, but not in this case. The Dancer was still scoring plentifully in the game of life, the Twelfth Man was still dead. Whatever grasp the specter of Purcell had, let Danzer squirm under it, he decided.

"Don't judge my script too soon, Nick," Ben flicked the page resting in the typewriter. "Maybe it'll turn out to bring back valuable memories for you."

Danzer regarded him stonily for moment, then in turn tapped the radio where the Brahms had been. "Do you know your trouble, Ben? You let your heart be moved too easily. Dex. Purcell. The list doesn't stop there, I'm sure. You're the type lame puppies and roundheeled women sniff out, would be my guess."

That last was flicked lightly enough, but the lash was unmistakably there.

"Whatever it is," the adversary on the bunk was finishing up, "you let it get to you too much."

"Is that what's wrong with me?" Ben acted surprised although he had to work to hold it to that. *The sonofabitch can't know about Cass, too. Can he?*

"And here I thought it was an old pain from football acting up."

Danzer smiled that sterile smile as he got up to leave. "Those last on and on, don't they. Good night, Ben."

"GENERAL QUARTERS. ALL HANDS, MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS."

He woke up fighting mad at Navy games in the middle of the night and trying simultaneously to put on a light and his clothes.

Country club Sunday sailing sonsofbitches. If that captain thinks he is going to give me something to write about besides Danzer's pork chops by pulling a drill, he has another think coming.

The squawkbox in a corner of the ceiling still was blating the alarm when the compartment door flung open and the medical officer hustled in. He made a face at the clutter on the operating table. "I need that cleared," he said matter-of-factly and with the sweep of an arm began gathering Ben's belongings and dumping them under the bunk.

"Hey!" Half-dressed, Ben lumbered across the room and protectively scooped up his typewriter and its carrying case. "What's all the rush?"

"A submarine is trailing us," the medico recited as if it were common knowledge. "You need to put your gear on and get out on deck, fast."

Feeling like he was in a severely bad dream, Ben in haste donned the helmet and life jacket he had been given and tumbled out of the sick bay into a passageway full of tousled sailors pulling on battle gear of their own. The general scurry conveyed him out onto deck, where the crew members spilled toward gun mounts and fire control hoses and other stations to which they were assigned.

Pandemonium? Expertly drilled response to the worst of alarms? He couldn't tell which. The one thing he knew for dead sure was to stay out of the way, and he ducked off clear of any doors or deckpaths to let all the traffic pass. For whatever crazy reason he took notice of the full moon over the bow of the ship, like a searchlight barely on. In a rolling motion that made him stagger to keep his balance, the destroyer could be felt surging to a new speed and heeling in a fresh direction at the same time. He tried to think where in the maze of the ship Danzer's battle station might be, cursing himself for not having paid any real attention to that. Bolstering against the steel side of the superstructure while more figures in helmets pounded past, he was nearly knocked over by a crewman skinning down a ladder.

He grabbed the man, recognizing him as one of the mess attendants. "Where's Lieutenant Danzer?"

"Chart house, should be, sir," the man stammered and raced off to pass ammunition.

Staying wary of anyone else plunging down the rungs from overhead, Ben climbed in spurts toward the bridge of the ship. There he slipped into the warren of tense officers and lookouts with binoculars pressed to their eyes. That frieze of unmoving figures glued to the night horizon could not have been more different from the scramble below. In the low level of light everything looked sepulchral. Out beyond, it was a perfect Pacific night, the water trembling under the stars. Catching himself on tiptoe as he tried to see everywhere at once on the moonlit ocean, he realized the futility of that; long before he ever could, the binoculars would pick up any deadly white streak that was the wake of an oncoming torpedo. *Too late then anyway. This thing can't outrun one of those.* All during this, the captain peevishly snapped out orders and the orders went down the line of command into the nerve system of the ship, to what effect Ben couldn't discern. The destroyer was zigzagging, dancing with an invisible devil, but was that enough? He had to hope the *McCorkle's* evasive action was as unreadable to a sub captain at a periscope as it was to him.

Not reassured by the scene on the bridge, he backed out to hunt up Danzer and found him in equally ghostly circumstances in the busy chart room, the combat analysis center. The dim greenish light etched ashen shadows beneath the battle helmets and into the hollows of cheeks. Here the executive officer was in charge, leaning over a translucent tabletop where the careening course of the destroyer was being plotted and exchanging aggravated questions with the strained-looking young communications officer and other distressed types crowded around the massive table. From what Ben could catch it amounted to an argument over whether to cut

and run or turn and fight, and he didn't like any of what he was hearing or seeing. Faces that had not shown a worry in the world in the wardroom now appeared aggrieved, unsure. One person or another around that table swallowed hard too often. Fear not sliding down easily. Not ever. Now he had his own sudden taste of that lodged in his throat, the apprehension of dying in company such as this, unavailing, insufficient. *How'd they get us into this in the first place?* Among other things, a destroyer was a submarine-hunting machine. How had this one managed to become the hunted?

Danzer was off to one side, near the forward bulkhead, looking removed from the intense debate at the plotting table. Ben edged around to him. Danzer's duty station there, he deciphered, must have been to maintain the battle status board with code-names and whereabouts of other U.S. ships in the fight. The problem with that was that there were not any, none nearer than somewhere around the Australian port in one direction and New Guinea in the other. Just the *Cork* and the enemy. *Different war than it was a couple of minutes ago, isn't it, Dancer.*

Reaching Danzer, he whispered: "How are they going to shake us loose from this?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Danzer whispered back and for once sounded nervous.

"What's a Jap sub doing way down here? Who spotted the thing?"

"Who do you think? I was officer of the watch."

"No crap? You saw it?" Ben began surreptitiously scrawling in his notepad, trying to hear what was being said at the plotting table and listen to Danzer at the same time. Here of all things was the heroic piece on Slick Nick. If he stayed alive to write it.

"It's dark out in case you haven't noticed," Danzer muttered sarcastically.

"Sonar picked it up. Can't you hear it?"

The pips registered on Ben then. PING *ping*. PING *ping*. Until that moment, the pulsations of sound had gone by him as some piece of the destroyer's equipment that might contribute to raising hell with the submarine. Now that it was identified as the pulse of hell coming the ship's direction, the pinging sounded louder.

Ben peered at the stiffnecked supply officer anew. If Danzer turned out to be the Paul Revere of the South Seas, the only thing to do was to write him up that way. "What then?" he resumed the under-the-breath interview urgently. "You got on the horn and ordered general quarters? On your own?"

"No, that's not by the book," Danzer said between his teeth. It was remarkable how nettled a whisper could sound. "There's a standing order to call the captain." Which in this case meant waking him up with maximum bad news. Danzer's drawn expression suggested it was an experience that stayed with a person.

Just then the exercise in exasperation around the plotting table broke up. "We're not shaking the bastard at all," the exec was saying, striding for the bridge. "We need to tell the skipper our only chance is to go at it."

Hearing that, Ben banged Danzer roughly in the vicinity of the collarbone for luck--he only later realized it was the old shoulder-pad slap the team traded before the game started--and bolted out onto the wing of the bridge to watch.

Sea air rushed by, there on the steel promontory into the dark. A mane of moonsilver flowed back from the destroyer's bow, and a matching tail of wake behind it. As his eyes adjusted, Ben could just make out the long narrow deck below, armaments jutting ready if they only had a target, faces of the gun crews pale patches foreshortened by helmets. Whatever discussion the executive officer had with the captain did not take long. The ship cut sharply to one side and kept on leaning like a skater fashioning a circle. Standing there witnessing the might of a

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bastard?

fully armed vessel turning on its nagging foe could have been thrilling, Ben was duly aware, except for the distinct chance of being blown out of the water at any second. Drowned like a kitten in a sack. He tried to swallow such prospects away, down a throat dry as paper. The lack of any least sign of the enemy out there in the total surround of ocean seemed to him the worst part. On land he had been shot at by experts and never felt this much fear.

Determinedly not watching for a salvo of torpedoes except for moments when he couldn't stand not to, he strained instead to follow the burst of action at the *McCorkle's* fantail, farthest back. He could just see the shadowy figures of the depth charge crew crouching ready, their barrel-like explosives neatly racked for firing. At some chosen point in the attack maneuver--he wondered whether it was decided by hunch, or some definitive echo out of the sonar equipment; on this ship, it likely did not come from combat experience--the commands were hurled out:

“FIRE ONE!”

“FIRE TWO!”

--The firing kept on, each charge sprung into the air like a fat ejected shell, out away from the ship, then to sink to the depth that would detonate it. Nothing happened for long enough that Ben began to suspect duds. Then he felt the shudder up from the water. Astern, explosions bloomed white in the darkness. Knowing this to be one of the sights of a lifetime, he watched with an intensity near to quivering. Not often is it given to you to stare away death, see it go instead in search of your sworn enemy. There in the destroyer's wake, the geysers of destruction blew and blew. It was impossible to imagine anything human surviving in that cauldron of concussions.

Poor bastards. They'll never see the surface again.. On the wing of the bridge, existence seemed benignly extended, stable as the feel of steel underfoot.

Forgiving the *Cork* and its lucky-star crew all their sins of leisure, Ben raced back into the chart room to see how they marked the sinking of an enemy submarine.

He could have spared himself the effort. The jammed room was as still as a funeral parlor except for the pinging.

"It's still there, sir," the sonar operator called out, perhaps in case anyone's hearing had gone bad. In the greenish gloom, Danzer's face was a study in trepidation.

The executive officer at last spoke up. They must have taught logic at Annapolis. "Something's fishy about this. They can't shadow us that close after we blew up half the ocean floor."

Once more, the exec went calling on the captain. This time, their conference produced a marked slowing of the vessel. All hands stayed at battle stations as the sonar deepfinder was reeled in for inspection. Ben was there, scribbling like mad, when the sonar technician took a look at the sound head at the end of the cable and sourly gave his diagnosis:

"It's all chewed to hell, messed up the signal. A shark must have got at it."

Ben waited until general quarters was called off, waited while the decks emptied of cursing sailors and sheepish officers, waited as the medical officer vacated the sick bay, waited until he was alone in the soundless compartment. Then he put his hands to his face and laughed into them until he had to gulp for breath.

Chortles were still coming like hiccups when he sat up to the typewriter in its restored spot. He was at full speed on the keys by the time the rap on the door came.

Danzer stepped in looking dazed.

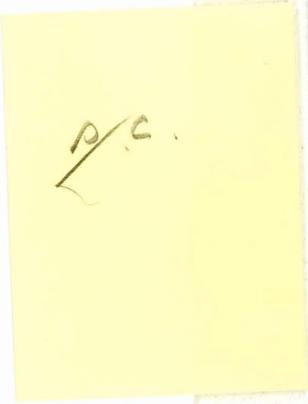
"If it isn't the famous officer of the watch," Ben greeted him. "I guess next time you'll roust out the sonar tech ahead of everybody else, huh?"

With visible effort, the caller let that pass. He squared up as much as he was able and began: "I'm on a bit of a spot. The captain sent me to ask if you'll be writing anything about"--Danzer looked as if he would rather bite off his tongue than say it--"what happened tonight."

Ben couldn't help but grin and tap the typing paper in answer. "The case of the submarine that never was. Can't you see the headline? THE HUNTING OF THE SHARK. Beware the frumious Bandersnatch next, Lieutenant Danzer."

Danzer's face was a funny color, as if the ghoulis light of the chart room stayed with him. "Damn it, if you--"

Ben held up a hand. "Don't. As much as I'd like to, I'm not going to skin you in public. The outfit I have to answer to isn't going to let you look ridiculous, don't worry." He tapped the typing paper again, this time in a tired manner. "Oh, I could write it that way, hell yes, and it'd be red-penciled beyond recognition. So I'll do up tonight's stunt and then TPWP will take its turn. And in the end it'll come out as just one more unpleasant thing that can happen in war, Dancer."



D.C.

11

I have to hand it to you, Ben. You made it back here in one piece. From the neck down, anyway.

In the ice-blue twilight that passed for illumination in the roadhouse, Cass drank him in from across the table. His months out there under the ocean sun had tanned him to a light bronze. The ginger hair was briskly cut in a way he must have caught from being around Marines, a short curt bristle her fingers wanted into whenever they weren't otherwise engaged in the cabin out back a half hour ago. His face in its weary extent held both more and less than she remembered. Whatever else the Pacific trip had done to him, it had honed him down almost to thin, his every feature accentuated as if all excess had been pared away, bone truth underneath. *You were serious before, you're damn near drastic now.* The loss of his buddy at Guam was still with him any given moment, echoing off the stars and every surface between, but that was not all. Even when he was joking with her about the skunk juice the roadhouse passed off as scotch, there was a steady intensity to Ben, like a lamp flame trimmed low, burning through the night.

"Cass?" He spun his glass in the spot of condensation under it, as if studying the direction of the swirl. "Cass, how much longer do we have?"

She could tell he did not mean from then to morning. Her tongue caught on the words a little as she spoke back. "You could have talked all night, soldier, and not asked that."

“Just wanted to brush up on how things stand.” He kept on watching the twirl of the glass as if it was going to do a new trick. “With us. The incurable ungodly galloping case of us, remember?”

They’d both had too much to drink, which still was not nearly enough. Right away their reunion had all but gone through the roof of that cabin. They climbed all over one another in the beat-up bed, fast and furious in their need. Their first lovemaking since Seattle, both of them went about it as if it was the last ever. Afterward, a bit dazed and winded, they adjourned out here to take a look at the matter of themselves through the comparatively cool reflection of drinks.

Carefully Cass steadied herself, both elbows on the table, chin up. Funny how a dive like this place was the one spot that didn’t care how tangled you were, showed some mercy. The jukebox was turned low into a kindly monotony, “*Deep Purple*” swinging along invisibly for about the dozenth time. On down the long bar from their corner, the place was empty this far into the night except for the roadhouse bartender and a local codger idly taking turns at playing the punchboard. *So at least we don’t have to make fools of ourselves in front of anybody that counts. Yet.* Braced, she looked Ben full in the face. “You’re the one who’s been out there in Tokyo’s back yard, you tell me when the man I’m married to is likely to be told he doesn’t have to invade any more islands.”

Ben thought about it, showing the effort to get past the effects of the so-called scotch. “Everybody’s betting MacArthur will try for the Philippines pretty soon,” he came up with. “That ‘I shall return’ yap he let out in ‘42. As if he’s going to come back to Manila and whip the asses of the Japs single-handed. He’ll throw in all the troops he can find.”

Cass looked away. “Dan’s got overseas points, up the gigi, but his whole National Guard bunch keeps getting extended. He’s on some wreck of an island called Biak, they let them say that in a letter finally.” She paused to do some

change
Philippine
repe.
Ben doesn't
tell her?

thinking of her own. "He wrote me that it's supposed to be a recuperation area now, but it's sure as hell no Australia or Hawaii--his outfit figures they're being held there for one last shooting match." She broke off to take a hard sip of her drink. "You probably just said the magic word--Philippines."

Ben scrunched in his chair, not saying it until he could no longer stand to hold it in. "What happens then? When he does come home?"

"I don't damn know. I do not know, Ben, how can I? I'm going to be faced with a man I haven't seen in two years, it'll have to decide itself from there." Watching her from across the table, he listened desperately, trying to determine if he was hearing ground rules of wingwalking again--*Never leave hold of what you've got*--or something more hopeful--*until you've got hold of something else*. Cass was gazing steadily at him as she finished up. "If you were him, you'd feel entitled to that much."

"If I were him, I'd hate me."

"Hey, don't get going in that direction." She shook her head in warning. "If anyone is going to be accused of messing up a marriage, start with me. Nobody held a gun on me and said, 'Go fall for that dishy war correspondent in the fleece jacket,' did they. I could have looked the other way and stayed in the rut I'm meant to for the rest of the war, one more pilot going nowhere."

"Come off that, will you?" he appealed. "Since when doesn't having a squadron count? I sure to Christ don't have one. You aren't anybody's idea of a pilot going nowhere."

"Not now. Wings on my brisket, bars on my collar, I'm a pretty good imitation of a fighter plane jockey on these ferrying runs, you bet I am. But what happens the minute the boys come marching home? Is the good old Army Air Force going to treat WASPS like guys? No sign of it so far." Cass jerked her glass up to her lips, found it was empty, and set it down disconsolately. "I want the war

cut
Cass's rope
to PH's plane

remove?

3rd use -
change
this or
~~2nd use~~

over as much as anybody, but the war is what keeps me in that cockpit. There's a pisser, isn't it? And Ben?--us, chronic us? How do I know I could keep up with you after the war? If we did stay together? You're probably going to be famous-- what am I saying, you're famous or next thing to it already--"

"Only as long as bullets are flying."

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

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

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

"Until you."

For some moments he gulped back moist emotions of his own. Why of all the people in this war did the two of them have to be on the receiving end of something like this? What was wrong with backing away from this and snapping up an Adrianna instead, sweetly available and nowhere near as troublous? What was wrong with him? "This is just crazy hopeless," he said at last, his expression pretty much fitting that description itself. "I'm stuck on you even when we're doing our double damnedest to have a fight."

"Swell," Cass sniffled, "that's me, too." She straightened herself up so sharply it jarred the table. "There's another kink to this, you know," she went on, wiping the tears away with determination now. "Dan's not the only one they keep throwing out there to get shot at, is he. I don't pretend to know squat about what the types in Washington have you doing. I just herd airplanes. The wear is starting to show through on that 'Supreme Team' set of stories, though, isn't it? I don't

need to tell you that's getting to be an awful lot of dead heroes. Your guys are catching hell. And you're always going to be plunked right out there with them, Ben, you and just a pencil and paper, brave as anything--"

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

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

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

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

"That works once in a while. And generally doesn't. I was about to say, if I ever get the chance to drop the 'Supreme Team' stuff, I'll do it in the next breath. For right now, the worst thing I've got to do is cover Angelides' funeral." He tried to move along to a smile and did not quite get there. "Maybe it's just as well to have some practice at crying, hmm? Cass, the night's getting away from us. What would you think about seeing if the cabin is still standing?"

Her try at a smile came out somewhat better than his. "That's pretty frisky, is what I'd think."

He pretended a huff. "If you're not interested all of a sudden--"

"Didn't say I wasn't interested, preacher." Her smile was heating up in a hurry. "Pay the man again."

"Gladly. And just maybe I'll get us another drink along with it."

He headed up to the cash register, digging a few silver dollars out of his pocket as he went. *What a hell of a thing, that all we've got is sack time together. But at least it's something.* The bartender, an older man bald as a peanut, was sitting there alone nursing a cigarette. He cut a squinty look at Cass, then back at Ben. "You and the little lady figure on playing a doubleheader?"

risant
doings

change ?
smile -

Ben pushed the money toward him on the bar. "That's what these nice round silver things are about, yeah."

The bartender still looked at him, one eyelid pulled down against the cigarette smoke perpetually drifting toward it. "Soldier, ain't you?"

Oh, please. Now the citizenry of Vaughn Junction is going to get picky about who it rents out hot sheets to? Wearily Ben indicated to Cass. "The both of us. Why?"

The man behind the bar plucked a shred of tobacco off his tongue, then asked: "Been overseas any?"

"I was in on Guam."

The bartender shoved the money back to him. "It's on the house."

When Ben returned to the table with both drinks and dollars in hand, Cass cast a glance where he'd been and wondered, "What was that about?"

"My guess is he lost a son in the Pacific."

They drank silently for a bit. Then he peeked over in the dimness at her luminous wristwatch. "Is it tomorrow yet, Captain?"

She checked. "Just past midnight. What's special about tomorrow?"

He made a satisfied sound. "I have a VIP coming in, although he doesn't know it yet. I don't know who they're going to get to stand sentry over the rocks and sand, but I sprung him for a leave to come to Animal's funeral. Got him an extra forty-eight hours to see his girl along with it."

Cass caught on. "The guy out on the coast? The one you were afraid would shoot up everything in sight and himself with it?"

"That's him. Prokosch the Tommy gunner."

"No crap?" Cass sat up in surprise and awe. "The guy isn't even kin and you hassled them into letting him come to the funeral? You must've had to pull strings the size of anchor ropes, all up and down the line."

He nodded pious affirmation. "Right to the top." If Tepee Weepy constituted the apex of things military.

"That clout of yours I was talking about," she cautioned softly, "is it worth using any of it up that way, you think?"

"Had to do it, Cass. It's because of the Pacific again. I found out I don't like submarine games."

"Wake up, kid. Hey, hear me? Roust out, coastie."

The off-duty sentry rolled away from the hut wall and with a groan elbowed up in his bunk. Two men with beach packs bulking on them were standing over him. The skinny sour-looking one was the chief petty officer from the Coast Guard station down the coast, the other was a peach-fuzzed seaman second class much like himself. "What's happening? The war over?"

"Dream some more, kid. Where's Prokosch?"

The off-duty man rubbed sleep crust from his eyes. "Sig? Out on patrol like he's supposed to be."

"Come on, I know that. Where the hell at?"

"How am I supposed to know, Chief?" Squinting at the twenty-four clock on the radio table, he shook his head. "He took off out of here this morning like his tail was on fire, him and the pooch. Must be up the beach quite a patch by now."

The other seaman was slinging belongings out of his pack onto Prokosch's bunk. "Hurry it up, Quince," said the chief petty officer. He glanced at the face of confusion trying to take this in from across the hut. "Quincy's his relief while he goes on leave, so get used to Quincy."

"Sig don't have leave coming."

made an effort to concentrate

“He does now. Something about a funeral. There’s a plane waiting for him at Port Angeles.” Waiting impatiently for Quincy to restow the pack, the chief petty officer ducked to the window facing the ocean and the rugged line of shore beyond, looked out and grimaced. “Hell if I know what it’s about, but I’m supposed to walk him out of here and put him on that plane. The way these orders smoked down the line, you’d think he was Jimmy Roosevelt.”

The man still in the bunk looked more bewildered than ever. “You got to go after him on foot? Can’t you just call him in?”

The chief petty officer turned from the window shaking his head. “Radio blackout. Jap sub sank a tanker, down off Oregon last night, the pricks. No transmissions that they might pick up until we get the all-clear. Ready, Quincy?” He tromped toward the door whether or not Quincy was ready. “Let’s go. Maybe we can catch him before he gets to hell and gone up the beach.”

The off-duty sentry rolled back into his bunk. “You don’t know Prokosch.”

Farthest out on the Pacific horizon from where Sig Prokosch happened to be patrolling, waves broke violently on a shelf of reef as if the edge of the world was flying apart.

Scanning from the distant mix of spray and drab rumple of the ocean, the Coast Guardsman strived to find a low-lying streak of white out there, a chalk trace on the greater gray, that would be the wake disclosing a periscope. He was keyed up, convinced this might very well be the morning he nailed the Japanese submariners. If not him personally, then the plane carrying depth bombs after he radioed in, blasting away beneath the surface in a relentless search pattern that would crack open the hull of the sub and give the damn Japs all the water they wanted.

looking
down
in final
agitation.

Sig felt like winking at the oval moon, paling away as daylight approached. He was highly pleased at having figured it out, nights awake while waiting for sleep to catch up with him, gazing out the window of the hut at the moon furrow on the water--the enemy's evident pattern for those sneak raft trips to the creeks for their drinking water. The raft rats had to be using the lunar cycle. Not the round bright full moon, the obvious. Coast Guard headquarters had thought of that and orders from on high were for extreme vigilance along the coast during each such phase. But that had not produced anything except eyestrain among the nighttime sentries. No, the Japanese must be timing their shore excursions some number of nights either side of that, using the moon when it was just luminous enough to cast a skinny path to shore, Sig would have bet anything. That way the raft rats could paddle alongside the moonbeam glow on the water without having to use a torch and with less chance of being seen than during full shine. It made every kind of sense to him, and lately he had matched it up with times he found fresh crap at a creek mouth.

He cradled the Tommy gun. There was reassurance in the highly tooled grip of it that one of these times he would jump the raft rats, the odds could not stay in their favor forever. On this coast he was the constant, they were the variable, and all those accounting classes at TSU had taught him that the basic determinant was to be found in constancy. One of these times, the raft would get a late start from the submarine or be held up by choppy waves on the way in or happen into some other inconstant circumstance, and he would have them where he wanted them. Maybe this fresh morning.

The pair from the Coast Guard station slogged down from the hut to the strand of sand between waves rolling in and the tumble of driftlogs lodged against the forest. Awaiting them were were bootprints of considerable size and the much

ocean

more delicate scuffs made by dog paws. The tracks went straight as a dotted line the length of the sand and disappeared around the clay cliff of the headland ahead. The chief petty officer swore. "I hate to do it to you in this sand, Quince. But we've got to quick-march to try catch up with him or we'll be chasing him all damned day."

Once more Prokosch scanned outward from the thin crescent of beach. Stirred up by some distant storm, the waves coming to shore tumbled themselves into sudden rolling tunnels, crashing apart moments after they formed. A froth of spume piled itself high at tideline, chunks of it flying off in the wind like great flecks of ash.

At his side the Irish setter nosed at one of the spume clumps and brought on itself a wheezy dog fit of sneezing.

"Bless you, Rex," Sig said as if speaking to an equal. "But that's what you get for not paying attention to business, isn't it. Heel, boy." He lately had written to Ruby that he figured it was okay to talk to the dog, as long as he didn't start hearing the dog answer him. He smiled to himself, thinking back to all the conversation during Ben Reinking's stay. Starting with Japanese, when he had come upon the figure that turned out to be Ben spraddled on that rockface. Funny at the time, but good practice for whenever he got the jump on the--

The leash sprang taut in his grasp.

"What's the matter, boy?" Sig's voice dropped low, sentry caution even though no one, no sign of anybody, had appeared. Growling, the dog tugged toward the dark band of vegetation that fringed the outlet of a creek not far ahead.

Sig at once angled inland, steering the dog toward the bulwark of driftwood. The pair of them skirted along it, out of sight from the creek, until they were almost to the dunelike bank. There he silenced the dog with a whispered

Lefty

command and, Tommy gun ready, cautiously took a look over the bank. Below, at the edge of the brush at the creek mouth, there were marks in the sand that looked as if a rubber raft might have been skidded up out of the surf. Excitement came with the sight. Plain as anything to him, the Japs had been here at low tide. An hour or two ago.

The chief petty officer clambered up onto the rocky snout of the headland and took a long look north along the shore. Below him, the light blue of ocean clashed against chocolate brown of rocks covered with seaweed. Where the sand resumed, the crescent of beach bowed around for a quarter of a mile or so before a brushy creek came wandering out of the thick forest.

The young seaman panted up behind him tugging against the pack straps cutting into his shoulders. "Any sign of him yet, Chief?"

"No, but he's got to be up around that creek somedamnowhere--he didn't have any too much headstart on us."

"How about we fire a shot?"

The chief shook his head. "We don't want to spook him, if he's at all touchy around the trigger finger. Try yelling again. Put everything into it--with this surf you can't hear yourself think."

"PROKOSCH! WAIT FOR US! YOU'VE GOT LEAVE, BUDDY!"

Squinting out at the ocean again in search of a telltale periscope wake, Sig was unshucking his pack to use the radio when the dog reared to the end of the leash, whining in agitation. "Rex, down," he hissed without effect. The dog was definite, straining now not in the direction of the creek but toward the salal and ferns and overhanging forest.

“Easy, boy,” he whispered. “What is it you think you’ve got?” Alert to the possibility that the Japs were still ashore, holed up there in the woods, he weighed his options. Using the radio was slow and cumbersome and they might hear him talking into it. On the other hand, if they hadn’t spotted him by now, he had the advantage of surprise. He knew these woods, the raft rats didn’t. If he left the radio pack, he could ease ever so slowly into the undergrowth and see what was what. Although there was the matter of the dog.

He hesitated. If he tied the dog here to a limb of driftwood, it might bark. Besides, the Irish setter’s nose was the quickest guide to any Japs. Patting Rex’s head and murmuring soothingly to keep him quiet, he hooked the leash into his web belt and crept toward the forest.

Sniffing constantly, the dog led him on the leash through the head-high barrier of brush and into the forest-floor growth, until shortly yanking to a halt. With his weapon up and every nerve afire for action, Sig even so was surprised, confused, by what awaited almost within touch of him. Not Japs at all, but a sizable wad of what looked like some odd kind of fabric. A pale shroud of it, crumpled in the salal. *Parachute*, he thought immediately. Before realizing it was balloon material.

In that fatal instant he saw the dog sniff at the explosive device tangled beneath and put a paw to it.

16

Days at East Base were a muddle after that. Ben avoided the flight line, the ready room, any flying-suited flock of WASPs in the distance, all the avenues of everyday that might conceivably lead to Cass. Putting in his time in the office and the wire room, he looked tensed up and narrowed in, like a man out on a limb that no one else could see. And he was. He started what he knew had to be the last battle of words with Tepee Weepy the day after Dex was buried.

The funeral piece he filed spared nothing about the highborn Cariston name joining the oversize list of Helena sacrificial soldiery beneath the doughboy statue, but that was not the issue. Apprehension behind every word, that next day he fed the block-letter sentences one by one to the telex operator.

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

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

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

Inhabiting
Habituated
Con/used
any 1 who
encountered
putting in
his time

To Jones in
office &
any 1
unlucky
enough to
cross paths...
?

~~teletype~~
~~wire~~
~~machine~~

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

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

Nothing came back that day, no matter how much Ben hung around the wire room and mooched coffee and sprang alert every time a teletype bell went off.

Come on, you TPWP SOB's. Answer. Call off the damned series. Or are you going to tell me and the couple of thousand newspaper editors watching for this byline you set me up with that eight dead heroes aren't enough?

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

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

Ben read and re-read the sheet of wire copy for what it said and did not say. That damned ‘modify’ again. The Tepee Weepy meaning of SOON was also clear as mud. He plainly enough had their attention, though, with that dig about what the master propagandists in Berlin and Tokyo could do with the obliteration of any more of the team. Immediately he holed up in his office and went back to block-letter work.

MODIFY IS MIDDLE NAME HERE AT EAST BASE. HOW ABOUT WRAPUP PIECE ON STAMPER AND EISMAN AS SURVIVORS?

Again, a last line onto that was the hard stunt. Before deciding whether to send all three, he had Jones bring him the regulations to see what it took to be court-martialed for insubordination. Not that much. He sucked in his cheeks and had the third sentence sent anyway. FIRST THEY MUST SURVIVE.

pc

inferior
key re?
spoiled...

Tepee Weepy's response practically jumped out of the teletype, the bells chorusing before he had even turned around to leave the wire room.

WRAPUP PIECE IS SHARED GOAL. YOU WILL GIVE IT SHINE AND SHADOW AT RIGHT TIME, RIGHT PLACE.

Ben waited expectantly for the clerk to pass him the next decoded sentences. The clerk shrugged and held up empty hands.

"That's it? It can't be, look again."

"I already did. That's all they wrote, sir."

Fuming, Ben stoked up on coffee and claimed a vacant desk there in the wire room. He jotted and wadded three versions before hitting on the one that upped the ante unmistakably enough.

UNSURE I CAN TOUGH IT OUT UNTIL RIGHT TIME, RIGHT PLACE. ILLNESS DISCUSSED WHEN COLONEL HERE MAY RECUR. DIAGNOSIS NOT SO HOT, DETAILS MIGHT HELP WITH CURE.

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

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

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

gaps

SOME. WAITING TO SEE WHAT MEDICINE IS INVOLVED.

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

MANDATORY BURN THIS AFTER YOU READ.

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

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

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

"You want me to break in on a priority message from Washington?"

"You heard me." He jotted the words big and bold and handed them to the reluctant clerk. WHERE IS STAMPER, ANYWAY?

STAMPER STATIONED WITH NEW ACK-ACK UNIT AT HQ EUROPEAN THEATRE. VITAL DRAMATIC STORY THERE.

Ben paused over that. Supreme headquarters where the invasion of Europe had been planned and carried out were in England. England meant London, and every correspondent from Ernie Pyle to Hemingway had a soft spot for London and the British, so dauntless under the bombing of the Luftwaffe in the first years of the war. He had learned to love the old city himself in his early stint of reporting there, and now the Luftwaffe bombers had been driven from the sky over Great Britain. There was second allure in what Tepee Weepy was proposing; while he could not have put a name to her, Mnemosyne once more was gliding forth from the eternal grove with that double handful of tantalizing choice. If the Allied forces took Berlin by the end of the year, as everyone was saying could happen, London would be a fine place for a reporter to write the end of the war. Ben cast his lot. I'M LISTENING.

showing me
i next
message/
next
cap

That shd-
be so bad.

battered
Luftwaffe
ahead of
D-day.

• buzz a bomb
attacks had
dropped off

AS WE WERE SAYING, the TPWP teletype implacably resumed. STAMPER A SHORT-TERMER NOW IN ACK-ACK DUTY. HE WILL BE MUSTERED OUT WITH COMMENDATIONS AND APPROPRIATE CEREMONY, OVER THERE, THEN BRING HIM HOME AS HERO. EISMAN TO BE HERO BY THEN TOO, LONGEST-SERVING ATC PILOT ON ALASKA RUN, ALSO WILL BE MUSTERED OUT. SATISFIED?

With a sense of relief, he sent back: FEELING BETTER ALL THE TIME.

GLAD CURE IS TAKING HOLD. WIND UP AFFAIRS AT EAST BASE NEXT FEW WEEKS. EARLY DECEMBER YOU WILL PROCEED FORTHWITH TO--

At first he thought the clerk at the Tepee Weepy end had garbled together some wrong keys in typing the ultimate word. Then he still had to think for a moment where Antwerp was.

*Tepee Wee-
We going
to Europe*

fix
pagination
221

The war changed tongues somewhere in mid-ocean as Ben hooked rides on anything that flew in the days beyond Australia. The spatter of sand and syllable where he eventually put down was a sparse island called Eniwetok, and out around it in the central latitudes of the Pacific were scattered other lingual odds and ends now synonymous with the battles on their beaches--Kwajalein and Tarawa, with Saipan and Okinawa and Iwo Jima and others yet to come. Eniwetok itself, Ben found, had been remade from the waterline up in the few months since being taken from the Japanese. Laundries, volleyball nets staked like flags, movie amphitheater, officers club, enlisted men's canteen, chapel, library: it was all there, the practically magical portable platform of American amenities that materialized wherever U.S. fighting forces went. The skinny but vital island, key link in an atoll with a lagoon that went to the horizon, was surrounded by countless moored naval vessels; if a typhoon blew through, the yanking anchor chains would pull the plug on the Pacific.

It took some asking around, but ultimately he hitched a ride on a supply launch to the troop ship that was his destination.

Confronted with Ben's orders, the deck officer made the usual face of discomfiture. "Ordinarily we could stow you in the sick bay, but we're crammed with assault force officers and there's no way --"

"Don't sweat it, I'll bunk below."

Below meant four decks down, each more fetid than the one before. The transport seemed cavernous after the destroyer. Ben's head swam a bit as he laboriously maneuvered his travel pack and typewriter case deeper into the sweltering hold of the ship. He wondered if he was coming down with something tropical. Three months in the Pacific had convinced him humidity by the skinful ought to be in the medical texts.

He came out at the bottom of the labyrinth of ladders and hatchways to a steel bay the width of the hull where dozens of sweating men were stacked in racks of bunks that reached from deckfloor to ceiling. Most were shirtless or in their skivvies as they tried to read or nap or clean their already cleaned rifles. Amidst everything a permanent poker game of the sort to be found in the countless coin pockets of the war was underway. Ben could tell from the cash in the pot it was too rich for his blood. He sidled through the alleys of bunks, his shoulder patch drawing quizzical squints, inquiring until someone pointed him past the toilets to the showers. "The large sarge, you mean? He's either smarter or crazier than the rest of us, he takes about half a dozen a day."

Leaning his pack and typewriter against the bulkhead, Ben stepped to the hatchway and called in to the naked personage camped under a drizzle from a showerhead: "Is that the usual Marine uniform in these parts, Sergeant Angelides?"

"I'll be go to hell, it's our recording angel, right out of nowhere," came the response just short of a shout. "How'd you ever find this stinking rustbucket, Lefty?" *That again. Remember it's me, not the nearest southpaw.*

Reaching behind to turn off the shower with one hand, Angelides grabbed Ben for a sopping handshake with the other. "Somebody sent me your piece on Sig. Going right down the strong side of the line, are you."

"Danzer jumped in front of you this time," Ben manufactured a dismissive smile, "so I'll have to make it up to you by playing up your saintly side, Animal."

Angelides guffawed and began toweling himself rigorously. "Got your work cut out for you. So is the Dancer still defending Backtrack Mac with the gleam of his shoes?"

"Still is."

A shake of the broad-browed swarthy head and a glance so quick it was more like a glint. "What would we do without Danzer, prick of the month all year long." Angelides wrapped the towel around his hairy middle like a king kilting up. "Come on, we'll get you set up in a fart sack and you can see how Uncle Sam's finest live."

Up on deck out of the stifling quarters as soon as Ben's things were bunked in, the two of them found a sliver of shade beneath the superstructure to hunch under and talk.

"These tubs are the ass-end of the Navy," Angelides declared of life cooped up on one troop ship after another. "The swabbies lug us around to wherever the Japs are holed up on the next chunk of coral"--he flipped a hand disparagingly toward Eniwetok and its recent past--"and we hit the beach. Never know how that'll go. Waipu was a breeze, we walked right in. Tarawa was total hell, they threw everything at us. One way or the other, it all counts toward getting our outfit's part of the war over." Shoulders set, he prowled over to the deck rail as he spoke, all the old impressions coming back to Ben as he watched that lithe restless motion. Indestructible on the football field, Andros Angelides had been rechistened

'Animal' by the team for the fallen prey surrounding his spot in the line--offense or defense, it didn't matter, where Animal roved opposing players ended up strewn in the grass. But in Ben's mind, he had actually seen the creature of nature equivalent to Angelides, one time on a high-country hunting trip. A ripple of tan against the timberline caught his eye, and by the time he blinked had resolved itself into a cougar on the move. The resemblance was still there in the man at the deck edge. The extensive body, muscled everywhere that counted. The large rough hands, quicker than paws that size could be expected to be. The deep flicker of the eyes back under the bonebox of brow. All that taut animal vitality coming out now as the impatience of a fighting man ready to march into Tokyo and trapped amidship on a transport scow going nowhere fast.

Another of those glinting glances that Ben could practically feel as Angelides turned from the railing. "So what you're in for with us is the Marine Corps tradition of practicing a thing to death." He bared his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Next worst thing to Bruno and his stinking Letter Hill." He jerked his head for Ben to come have a look over the side of the ship. All along the hull a hefty web of ropes hung down from the deck to the water.

"You want to see a bunch of trained grunts who can climb down a cargo net in their sleep, that's us," Angelides was saying conversationally. "Samey same, over and over on maneuvers like this--the landing craft takes us in, dumps us in the water up to our peckers, and we storm the shores of Eniwetok one more time. It's a wonder the Red Cross isn't there selling us coffee and doughnuts when we drag up onto the sand." He fixed the kind of resigned gaze known as a thousand-yard stare on the practice island. "Aw, hell, it's pretty much necessary. A lot of our guys are cherries, replacements after Tarawa. Anyway, Lefty, you get to see this good stuff yourself tomorrow at 0500," the Marine topkick batted Ben's shoulder

with the back of a hand as if to make sure he'd be awake, "and then the real thing whenever the hell some general makes his mind up."

"You sound like you can't wait, Animal."

Angelides cut him a telling look. "You know what, any more I go by 'Andy.' It's just easier around the guys in the unit."

Ben seized the chance to trade. "Funny, that's how I feel about 'Lefty.' It's been a long time since I lined up at opposite end."

Angelides belly-laughed his agreement to the deal. "I guess this retires us from football for goddamn sure."

The squawk of a loudspeaker in some tuck of the ship broke in on them. Overhead came the shufflefoot sounds of sailors doing whatever sailors do. Ben waited for those to pass before testing out: "The real thing when it comes--you know where?"

It drew a shrug. "Scuttlebutt says it'll be Guam."

That was how Tepee Weepy figured it, too, Ben knew, or he probably would not have been on this troop deck with this particular member of the Supreme Team at this moment. No other target in the island-hopping campaign would rate bigger headlines. Guam had been surrendered in the war's earliest days when American garrison troops in pie-tin helmets found themselves facing a Japanese invasion juggernaut; there wasn't an admiral or a general in the Pacific who didn't want it back with a vengeance. Ben felt he needed to share his reading of the situation. "Andy? Say it is Guam. The big brass will pull out all the stops if it is. But the Japs aren't saps. They aren't about to say, 'So sorry, here, have your famous island back.' It could be a bloodbath."

Angelides looked at him solemnly and turned to go below. "I prefer showers."



At barely first light, the side of the troop ship gray as a lingering shade of night, the Marines in full combat gear descended the cargo nets.

Below in the landing craft that kept bumping against the ship hard enough to jar him half off his feet, Ben craned up at the mass of humped forms as they came. Angelides was a marvel to watch. Somehow keeping an eye on the entire teeming shipside, he shambled down the mesh of rope rungs one-handed, reaching to any of his unit who needed steadying on the swaying net, injecting alacrity into those who lacked it: "Come on, you guys, you're slower than smoke off of shit. Move, move!" Only after the last of his men thudded safely into the boat did he swing free of the net and give the high sign to the coxswain at the tiller.

Ben's notepad could not hold it all. The bay was a serrated wall of troop ships, the landing boats busy around each in the chopped moat of ocean, helmeted men collected in shoulder-to-shoulder embarkation as ancient as Troy. As soon as a landing craft was loaded to crowded capacity, it revved away into the coral shallows just offshore. Ramps flopped down like drawbridges and the Marines waded into the crotch-deep surf.

Ben piled off with the others, struggling against the weight of the water. Angelides, large sarge to the life, surged ahead while steadily prodding his outfit. "Everybody spread out. Six feet apart. Benson, don't you know what six feet looks like? It's the size of your goddamn grave if you don't spread out, meathead. Michaels, Krogstad! Haul that sonofabitching thing in closer, I don't give a rat's ass if it is bigger than you are." That pair was pulling a rubber raft, empty but still all they could handle in the surf swirl. The footing was treacherous on the sharp coral and more than once Ben had to catch himself from going face-first into the water. Around him by the dozens, and along the shoreline by the hundreds, Marines advanced at an encumbered gait with their rifles held high and dry. After about a hundred yards of this, the assault force clambered off the coral reef to the

sands of Eniwetok. By all evidence visible to Ben the practice landing had gone as well as such things could. On the other hand, on the slight lift of land beyond the beach were situated volleyball courts rather than Japanese gun emplacements.

Panting and soaked to his midriff, Ben stayed close to Angelides as he lustily deployed his forces. When the order came down the line to halt the landing exercise, Angelides turned to check on him. "How do you like island-hopping so far?"

Ben shook his head ruefully. "Why couldn't you have joined the ski troops or some other outfit that isn't half-drowned all the time?"

"And miss tropical paradise like this? No way." The big sergeant got busy again issuing orders, one of which sent a couple of men back down to the waterline to collect the small rubber boat, and Ben asked what it was for.

"What, that?" Angelides looked bemused to be asked. "You're looking at our hospital ship."

Ben prickled at the remark, before realizing Angelides knew nothing of his own shipboard infirmary stay--the Purple Heart suite--after the shoulder wound. "Part of the Corps lore," he was saying as if he had been asked that section of the Marine manual. "Get the wounded to shore with the rest of us. That thing's the best way I know how." He rumbled a humorless laugh. "A lifeboat for the wet-ass infantry, you could call it."

Ben gazed at the rubber boat, Angelides' seagoing ambulance. He thought of Prokosch, the width of the ocean away, on watch for the enemy floating in to a creek mouth. Rafts. In the middle of the most mechanized war in history. *What are the odds? Huck and Tom against the gods of war.*

#

Back aboard the troop ship, the entire lower half of his uniform stiff with salt from the surf, Ben had barely made it to his bunk when a seaman stuck his head through the main hatchway and bawled: “Reinking? Lieutenant Reinking?”

“Over here, sailor.”

“Message for you, topside.”

DANZER PIECE A DANDY. WILL BE EXCELLED ONLY BY YOUR NEXT, SPOKEN AS WELL AS WRITTEN: NEW FIELD FOR YOU TO STAR, ARCHIVAL RECORDING OF BEACHHEAD INVASION. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ASKED THIS FAVOR AFTER ARMY, NAVY AND AIR FORCE ALL NIXED IT. TPWP KNOWS POSTERITY WHEN IT FALLS IN LAP, THUS RECORDING EQUIPMENT BEING RUSHED TO YOU. FOLLOW MARINES ASHORE AT WHATEVER ASSAULT BEACH WITH EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT AND ALL POSSIBLE SOUND EFFECTS. HISTORICAL RECORD, ORAL AND AURAL, IS THE GOAL.

P.S. TECHNICAL AIDE ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT, DON'T FRET.

Ben read it again with just as much disbelief as the first time through.

Where do the bastards come up with these ideas? They're turning me into the khaki version of Loudon. A play-by-play of an invasion. Starring, naturally, a certain keyed-up sergeant and his platoon.

The ship's radioman and the code clerk both were watching him with apprehension. “Any reply, sir?” the coder asked as if he very much hoped not.

“Yes. Send: POSTERITY DOESN'T KNOW WHAT IT'S GETTING.”

When he went back down into the hold to tell Angelides he was going to be famous of a kind, the bunk compartment was in such uproar he figured the poker game had drawn blood. It turned out to be simply mail call. Squirming through clamorous Marines clutching letters and packages from home, he worked his way

Add
Cass
of
reprint
from
here

~~Cass~~
1

to his bunk hoping to hear his name called, but it was all already there on the blanket, postal riches in a heap.

Flat on his back in the next bunk reading the sole V-mail letter that had come for him--from his uncle--Angelides commented: "You're a popular guy. I must have answered up for you twenty times."

"The stuff's been chasing me all over the Pacific, thanks for nabbing it," Ben rattled out his gratitude. As if fondling gifts he sorted the pieces of mail into piles. The long-awaited treasure, Cass's letters. Weeks' worth of *Gleaners*, his father's fillers at the bottom of columns peeking out: *The only hope a person can be sure of is his own hatful*. Envelopes with his mother's well-schooled penmanship. A couple of blunt cheery notes from Jake Eisman done in pencil and beer. So many patches of his life, suddenly catching up with him. Almost reverently he slit open the letters from Cass and speeded through the first one and the last, saving the others to savor more leisurely.

Ben, love--

How does a person write to a writer? I feel like a backward kid with crayons. Maybe I can start with saying how much there is of you to miss. I can't turn around without remembering some crazy thing we did together. You've only been gone a week and I already have such a bad case, what is this going to be like from here on?...

...Nine weeks gone, letter no. 9 to you, and I at least know you're okay so far by reading you in the paper. You look good as ever in print, but no substitute for the warm body. Must sign off for now, we take off for Edmonton in an hour. I'll waggle my wings toward Hill 57 as we go.

Keep low out there, you with the typewriter.

Cass
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Cass's
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up

Spellbound by the immediate presence of Cass in the inked words, he read the letters over again knowing all the while there was another recipient of her lines of love or whatever approximated it, as the case may be.

Angelides watched him at this. Ben looked overcome. Life is a sum of unlikelihoods, but in his wildest imagining he could not have seen ahead to this, sharing professions of love with another man's wife. Were those letters to a long-absent husband somewhere at mail call on a jungle island like these? They couldn't be, the soul issued assurance. Why wouldn't they be? said the demons of the heart.

Only belatedly did he become conscious of being observed in his troubled seance with the set of letters. Trying not to show the extent of his embarrassment, he of course did. Angelides gruffly offered up:

"This appears serious."

"I have to hope she is," Ben trying a doomed grin along with it.

Angelides waited, attentive to more to come.

"I'm in a fix, Andy. She's married."

The sentences escaped from him before he knew it. He hadn't told Prokosch when he had the chance. Never would he have told Danzer. Angelides in alert stillness on the next bunk he would have trusted with his life, but the confession he had just made came under another category entirely. Ben creased the letters closed. "Keep it under your hat, okay? I can't take any pride in being a homewrecker. If that's what I turn out to be, even."

"Sorry, I'm no help to you there," Angelides said as if it was a test he hadn't taken. "All I've ever been round is love 'em and leave 'em. I got left."

Ben looked over at him. One spill of guts for another. It seemed his turn to come up with something medicative. "You'll have better luck later on. Civvie life will be full of lovelies looking for Marines in shining armor, you'll see."

He had
even told
her, but

In an exceedingly swift motion Angelides no longer was flat on his back but sitting tight as a coil on the edge of his bunk. "Ben? Something you maybe better know. In case it affects what you want to write or something like that. When the shooting match is over"--that always meant the war in conversations like this--"I'm staying in." He worked up a rough grin behind the exchange of confidences. "True-blue to the stinking Corps."

Ben did not say anything immediately, confounded once again by a teammate he was supposed to know like an open book. War mocked the notion of some sort of order in the human race. The only sane route he thought he knew--it was also true of Cass, Jake, anyone he would lay down his life for and they for him--was to serve as dutifully as you could during the duration, then reconstitute yourself when peace came in whatever measure. Get on with the existence you were cut out for, write your own ticket from there on. Yet here was Angelides, capability itself, turning his back on the TSU degree and probably married life, to stay on in uniform as a glorified groundpounder foreman, rewarded with stripes on his arm and little else. A garrison career for enlisted men was boredom with bad surprises sewn in; just ask the poor suckers stationed on Guam in 1942 when the Japanese imperial army showed up. By now Ben's silence was saying much in itself. How could the knowledgeable man in front of him not see military duty as an emergency to be met and then leave it at that, or we are servants of war forever? It was blindingly similar to the argument he would have made to Dex Cariston.

"You're sure," he tried with Angelides, "you just want grunt life to go on and on?"

The bared smile. "You can't tell by looking? It fits me like a cork in a virgin."

#

Word came that a piece of cargo with highest priority and his name all over it awaited at the airfield, and when Ben went to fetch the dreaded recording equipment, it was attended by the wearer of the most disheveled uniform on Eniwetok.

“Hi, lieutenant. Gosh, it’s hot here.”

“Jones!” Elated to see that familiar ugly puss under the crumpled fatigue cap, he fought back the impulse to ask a torrent of questions about East Base, especially the WASP side of things. “Old home week, right here in equatorial Eden. I can’t believe Tepee Weepy took a fit of sanity and sent you along. I can use all the help there is.” Saying so, Ben circled the recorder in its carrying case distrustfully. It basically resembled the bulkiest suitcase imaginable. He looked around the cargo shed for the technician whiz promised with it, then realized.

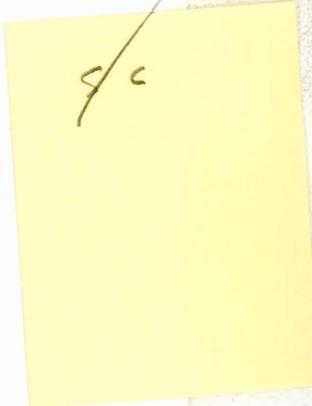
“Jones, I hate to take your name in vain, but please don’t tell me you’re the tech aide, too.”

“That was the order that came down,” this stanza of the enlisted men’s repertoire practically sang from the bedraggled corporal. He puckered in contemplation and came up with a morsel of solace for Ben: “They did give me the manual and I read it on the flight over.”

Oh, great. He can pray over the machine when it goes flooey. “Let’s get this thing to the ship,” Ben said in resignation. “Posterity beckons.”

The Marine assault force command plainly regarded the TPWP pair and their recording assignment as a nuisance, and just as plainly had been ordered in no uncertain terms to put up with them. Angelides was mostly amused. “Seems dumb-ass to me--who needs more proof people are shooting at us out here?”

The machine when Jones opened its case and started trying to figure out its workings was not the Pandora’s box Ben had anticipated, it was worse. It ran on a

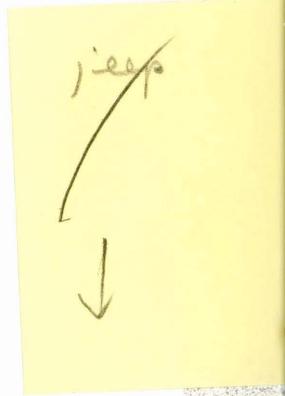


battery as heavy as a concrete block. It had delicate reels and a delicate needle. It was corded to the hand microphone not much longer than a dog leash. His brow creased, Jones at length looked up from the so-called portable recorder. "You know what, lieutenant? If we're going to pack this thing from here to shore, what we really need is--"

"--a Jeep," Ben admitted like someone coming down with a headache. "Excuse me while I beg my way through the Marine chain of command."

Across the next couple of days, with Jones in earphones as he fiddled madly with the recorder's dials, Ben stood on the fantail of the troop ship and practiced until his vocal cords were tired. Speaking into the microphone required an entire different mentality from what he was used to at the typewriter. How did Edward R. Murrow do it? For that matter, how did that moron motormouth Loudon do it?

"Eniwetok's harbor is jammed with ships of the assault force," he stared around at the obvious and could only recite it in strained fashion. Wanting to say: *Cass, you should see this. You can't imagine the steel mills it took to do this, wall an entire island with ships.* "The Marines aboard this one say they are ready for the real thing after weeks of practice landings here." *They say it in the filthy language of war, naturally--pilots aren't the only ones with the vocabulary, Cass. Poor Jones goes around the ship looking like his ears hurt. Angelides these days has a mouth on him like a blowtorch. Invasion is a hellish thing to go through. Nobody is actually ever prepared to die, are they--it's not human nature, the imagination can't handle obliteration. And so the guys below decks talk tough, so the fear doesn't have a chance to speak up.* Again aloud: "Equipment of all sorts is in the cargo bays waiting to roll aboard the landing craft. Artillery, half-tracks, Jeeps--"



“Sorry, start again,” Jones muttered, repeatedly, from where he hovered over the temperamental recorder. *Oh God, Jones, so to speak. At Guam are we going to stick our necks out from here to Thomas Edison and only get a reel full of blank air out of it?*

When at last they got done with the rehearsal reel and played it back, Ben winced over his voice. He sounded dry and stiff as sticks rubbed together. As for the quality of what he was coming up with to say, if he had it on typing paper in front of him he would have been wildly crossing things out and scribbling in changes.

In the silence at the end of the reel, he gloomily turned toward Jones. “So what do you think, maestro?”

“Maybe it would help if you had some kind of a script?”

Guam was ear-shattering.

Fiery salvo after salvo from the big muzzles of the American battleships and cruisers, more rapid fire from the guns of the rest of the convoy spread across the horizon of ocean, the bombardment ahead of the invasion was like all the sky’s lightning dropping all its thunder at once. Explosions erupted on shore every few seconds, smoke and dust spewing as if from volcano vents. After enough of this the entire island looked like it was on fire.

While Ben struggled to jot the scene down amid the jostling swarm of Marines along the deck rail of the troop ship, his memory tunneled back to the Salamaua beachhead in New Guinea. The advantage of darkness there. Friessen’s temporarily lucky National Guard unit crawling ashore unhit. The worn-down Japanese defenders heading for the hills. A victorious landing if there ever was one. *And I still ended up shot, didn’t I.* He looked out again at the island being smashed by shells and bombs from the invasion armada. Guam was an ugly lump

in the ocean, rocky bluffs and jungle ravines looming behind the crescent of shore called the Devil's Horns. At least he and Jones did not have to follow on inland to the hand-to-hand fighting here, their task ended at the beach. *Look where the bastardly thing is, though. This isn't anything like Eniwetok.* There the distance from where the landing craft disgorged the assault troops to the practice beach was about the length of a football field. Here, for real, the shore of Guam lay beyond what looked more like a quarter of a mile of coral shelf. The assault force would have to wade it all. Prowling through his riflemen as he checked over their packs and combat equipment hung all over them, Angelides looked ready to leap over the side and swim the distance. He had been through two of these to Ben's one. *You're the professional soldier, Animal. If the odds on this don't make you look bothered, maybe I worry too much about the difference between practice and the real thing. Shelling the living hell out of the place this way ought to even things up some. When we go in with the damn recorder, dead silence on shore would suit me.*

Struggling through the Marine mass toward him was Jones, a steel helmet somewhat lopsided on him. He had to shout to make himself understood to Ben a foot away. "They're telling us, 'Load up.'"

"Then let's go do it."

After a maximum of administrative runaround they had been allowed the back seat of a Jeep assigned to Headquarters Company. It and a few others of a small motor convoy would follow--more aptly, wallow--in over the broad reef behind an armored half-track mounted with a 75 mm. cannon and a machine gun. Angelides' contingent wading in would be in clear sight off to the side. The Jeep had nothing else to recommend it as a battle vantage point; a temporary steel panel had been installed where the windshield ordinarily was, with a slit for the driver to see through.

change
bastardly?
damn
place

Jeep
OK
75
millimeter
BT

"It's still awful open, lieutenant," Jones had pointed out when they looked over the vehicle in the cargo hold.

"Don't I know it. We'll need to crouch down until we're kissing the floorboards."

Now as they started to make their way below to get themselves established in the motor convoy's landing craft, the din of the invasion bombardment growing even louder overhead, a hand gripped Ben's shoulder. Startled, he in turn grabbed Jones to a halt and turned around. Angelides, looking lethal in his camouflage helmet, was there roaring in his ear: "Get in the half-track. You and Bible boy. Not the Jeep, savvy? I fixed it with the loading officer and he fixed it with the trackie crew."

Ben hesitated. The half-track would be in the lead crawling across the coral and draw enemy fire accordingly. "You're sure?"

Angelides winked. "One of us ought to keep his pecker dry in case fun in the sack ever comes back into style. Might as well be you." He slapped Ben on the shoulder, purposely right on the TPWP patch. "See you on the beach, recording star." Ben watched the big figure draped in ammunition bandoliers and grenade pouches recede back to his men at the deck rail.

All was commotion in the flotilla of landing craft bobbing against the ship. Jones had been down earlier to secure the recorder in the Jeep, and now he and Ben wrestled the hefty equipment case out and into the back of the half-track and climbed in after it. The gunners there in the well of the half truck and half tank turned and met them with dubious looks. One cracked: "Hitchhikers, huh? That gorilla sergeant says we're gonna make history taking you along."

"That's the theory," Ben vouched. His voice sounded tight, and he rubbed his throat to try to relax it. Jones squirmed down beside the recording equipment,

Jeep

o
v

manipulating plugs and scanning dials as though they were compasses in a stormy sea.

The minutes of waiting before launch dragged by. The gunners slouched amid their stocks of ammunition and smoked, which maybe helped their nerves but not those of the pair at the recorder. At last the dispatching officer, lordly on the troop ship, gave the signal and their landing craft and the one with Angelides' group of Marines putt-putted away like ducks abreast.

The half-track a metal box within a larger floating metal box, Jones and Ben could not see out during the short yet endless voyage. Engine noise and wave slosh and ominous clatter from the gunners as they made ready seeped through the crashing intervals of the bombardment. As best as Ben could tell, the shelling so far was all one-way, the naval barrage suppressing whatever waited on shore. At least the landing craft was not being blasted out of the water. Yet. *'Waipu was a breeze, we walked right in,'* Angelides' times at this replayed unrelentingly within Ben, *'Tarawa was total hell, they threw everything at us,'* the one against the other. Either outcome, he had to somehow summon into the microphone in his hand. Jones had traded his helmet for earphones--Ben hoped that kind of faith would be rewarded--and looked up expectantly with his finger over the ON switch, but Ben shook his head. "Not until we're on the reef. This is recess."

When the broad-beamed craft ground to a halt against the shelf of coral and the landing ramp descended, everything changed as if a single order had been given to every enemy soldier bunkered against the bombardment. Guam erupted back at the invasion force. As the half-track clanked down the ramp, geysers in the surf met it left and right when the Japanese artillery opened up. Bullets pinged off the armored sides like terrible hail. "Inhospitable bastards," one gunner grouched. Grimacing, Ben held the microphone out the back of the half-track to catch the sounds of being under fire. When Jones gave him thumbs up that the recorder was

~~signal him
to hold off.~~

functioning for sure, he climbed over the tailgate and slid into the water to his thighs, holding the mike up out of the wet.

“War has many calibres,” he began speaking from the shelter of the rear of the half-track. “The Marines wading ashore here at Guam are getting an earful of the Japanese arsenal.” A nasty *sploosh* nearby punctuated that. When his flinching was over, Ben reported: “That was a mortar shell, fairly close.” No sooner had he said so than a larger eruption sent jarring tremors through the water and the air. “And that was big artillery, probably a howitzer in a shore emplacement. In the background you can hear Nambu machine guns. Their muzzle flashes are red, like Fourth of July rockets going off everywhere on the bluff above the beach.” Tallying such details in words as exact as he could make them was crazily vital to him right then, something other than fear for the mind to try to hold onto in the midst of battle. Jones’ suggestion of a script turned out to already exist in him, accumulated from as many combat zones as the correspondent patch on his arm had taken him to. The lore of war. An unsought education. Spectator to himself in this, he talked on into a seeming abyss of time, the assault occurring in unreal slow-motion, infantrymen moving at a heavy-legged slog against the water and the coarse shelf of reef. He clung to the tailgate with one hand to help his own footing, the half-track creeping over the rough coral at the same methodical pace as the wading Marines on both sides of him.

“Off to my left the rank being led in by Sergeant Andros Angelides is strung out wide. Bullets are hitting the water around them.” So far, though, the rubber raft rode high and empty near the medical corpsmen as it was towed. Ben described that, the infantry lifeboat voyaging into the sea of hostilities. Leading the wave of men ahead Angelides surged steadily along, turning sideways occasionally to present less of a target as he looked things over and bawled an order. Keeping up the running commentary of whatever arrived to him--the distinctive whumping

RIP
Marines
make
a better
a better

sound of a Japanese mortar round; the carcasses of landing craft burning on the reef in back of the men in the water; the confused mix of smells, fine fresh salt air, stinking exhaust fumes, gunpowder odor from the half-track's cannon firing furiously--Ben consistently tried to estimate how far the first of the Marines were from the beachhead and by any measure it was too long a way while being shot at. While he looked on, soldiers near Angelides crashed over into the surf, one, two. All along the advance line of wading troops were other dark blobs of bodies in the water.

"Men are being hit as they come into closer range of enemy fire," he somehow kept the words coming, "too many to count. Someone's helmet just floated by upside down."

Just as he was at the point of describing the medical corpsmen splashing to the rescue of the pair in Angelides' unit but having to give them up for dead, an explosion close behind the half-track flung him against the tailgate. Breath knocked out of him, he cringed there as metal debris sailed through the air, miraculously holding the microphone up enough to catch the sound of it striking the water around them. Leaning out over the tailgate, a white-faced Jones had hold of him with one arm. Not knowing if the recorder was still working, beyond caring, Ben in a raw voice spoke into the mike for their own posterity if no one else's:

"That was the sound of a Jeep blowing up in back of us, from a direct hit."

Jones vanished into the well of the half-track then came up nodding, twirling a finger to indicate the reel remained running. Wiping saltwater out of his eyes and ears and the corners of his mouth, Ben groggily mustered himself and swung around in the surf to take stock, checking on Angelides and his men--*I owe you one, don't I, Animal, for stuffing us in the half-track instead of that Jeep--*as the line of them advanced like walkers with lead in their boots. Halfway to shore.

jeep

✓

He gave the distance out loud, words tumbling from somewhere. The next ones that reached the microphone did not come from him.

“SARGE IS DOWN! CORPSMAN, CORPSMAN!”

The cry--it was more of a wail--arose from a young Marine near the leading edge of Angelides' outfit. Where the stalking broad-shouldered shape had been a moment before, there now was a sodden form face-down, and Marines on either side struggling to hoist him up long enough for the raft to come.

“Sergeant Angelides has been hit,” Ben instinctively reported in a voice he would not have recognized as his own. “His men are bringing the rubber boat they use to carry their wounded.” Even as he spoke that last word, he could tell this was no million-dollar wound, no ticket out of the war. He watched heartsick as the medics splashed their way to the big figure with a torso drenched darker than water would do, checked his vital signs, shook their heads at each other, and made the stark decision to leave his body to the tide. Numbly Ben told of this, finishing up:

“The liferaft is there, but passing him by.”

He choked up. Death had won one more time. Animal Angelides the indestructible, no more.

“Lieutenant?” A hand from somewhere, grappling away the microphone. “Lieutenant, climb in!” Jones was frantically tugging at him, trying to wrestle him upward into the back of the half-track. “It's over, lieutenant. We're out of reel.”

I have to hand it to you, Ben. You made it back here in one piece. From the neck down, anyway.

In the ice-blue twilight that passed for illumination in the roadhouse, Cass drank him in from across the table. His months out there under the ocean sun had tanned him to a light bronze. The ginger hair was briskly cut in a way he must have caught from being around Marines, a short curt bristle her fingers wanted into whenever they weren't otherwise engaged in the cabin out back a half hour ago. His face in its weary extent held both more and less than she remembered. Whatever else the Pacific trip had done to him, it had honed him down almost to thin, his every feature accentuated as if all excess had been pared away, bone truth underneath. *You were serious before, you're damn near drastic now.* The loss of his buddy at Guam was still with him any given moment, echoing off the stars and every surface between, but that was not all. Even when he was joking with her about the skunk juice the roadhouse passed off as scotch, there was a steady intensity to Ben, like a lamp flame trimmed low, burning through the night.

"Cass?" He spun his glass in the spot of condensation under it, as if studying the direction of the swirl. "Cass, how much longer do we have?"

She could tell he did not mean from then to morning. Her tongue caught on the words a little as she spoke back. "You could have talked all night, soldier, and not asked that."

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“Just wanted to brush up on how things stand.” He kept on watching the swirl of the glass as if it was going to do a new trick. “With us. The incurable ungodly galloping case of us, remember?”

They’d both had too much to drink, which still was not nearly enough. Right away their reunion had all but gone through the roof of that cabin. They climbed all over one another in the beat-up bed, fast and furious in their need. Their first lovemaking since Seattle, both of them went about it as if it was the last ever. Afterward, a bit dazed and winded, they adjourned out here to take a look at the matter of themselves through the comparatively cool reflection of drinks.

Carefully Cass steadied herself, both elbows on the table, chin up. Funny how a dive like this place was the one spot that didn’t care how tangled you were, showed some mercy. The jukebox was turned low into a kindly monotony, “*Deep Purple*” swinging along invisibly for about the dozenth time. On down the long bar from their corner, the place was empty this far into the night except for the roadhouse bartender and a local codger idly taking turns at playing the punchboard. *So at least we don’t have to make fools of ourselves in front of anybody that counts. Yet.* Braced, she looked Ben full in the face. “You’re the one who’s been out there in Tokyo’s back yard, you tell me when the man I’m married to is likely to be told he doesn’t have to invade any more islands.”

Ben thought about it, showing the effort to get past the effects of the so-called scotch. Everyone in the Pacific theatre of combat was betting MacArthur would try for the Philippines pretty soon. *That ‘I shall return’ yap he let out in ‘42. As if he’s going to come back to Manila and whip the asses of the Japs single-handed.* Whenever the supreme general did try to retake the Philippine Islands, he would throw in all the troops he could find. Ben would not bring himself to tell Cass the overpowering likelihood, that jungle-veteran units such as her husband’s

Cofull

would be used to mop up whatever MacArthur wanted mopped up. "It's anybody's guess, what'll happen out there," he said

Cass looked away. "Dan's got overseas points, up the gigi, but his whole National Guard bunch keeps getting extended. He's on some wreck of an island called Biak, they let them say that in a letter finally." She paused to do some thinking of her own. "He wrote me that it's supposed to be a recuperation area now, but it's sure as hell no Australia or Hawaii--his outfit figures they're being held there for one last shooting match." She broke off to take a hard sip of her drink.

This was a moment Ben knew he should feel honorable remorse or worse for trespassing into Cass's life with another man. As far back as their first time as lovers, qualms of that sort were somewhere just beyond the edge of the bed. But stronger emotions would always push those away, if he and she had a hundred years at this. The nature of love is that it catches you off guard, subjects you to rules you have never faced, some of them contradictory. All of the ones about fidelity of heart and life knotted him to Cass and as far as he could tell, always would.

He scrunched in his chair, not saying it until he could no longer stand to hold it in. "What happens then? When he does come home?"

"I don't damn know. I do not know, Ben, how can I? I'm going to be faced with a man I haven't seen in two years, it'll have to decide itself from there." Watching her from across the table, he listened desperately, trying to determine if he was hearing ground rules of wingwalking again--*Never leave hold of what you've got--or something more hopeful--until you've got hold of something else.* Cass was gazing steadily at him as she finished up. "If you were him, you'd feel entitled to that much."

"If I were him, I'd hate me."

benches
he came
out of,
aware of us
hardly noticed

“Hey, don’t get going in that direction.” She shook her head in warning. “If anyone is going to be accused of messing up a marriage, start with me. Nobody held a gun on me and said, ‘Go fall for that dishy war correspondent in the fleece jacket,’ did they. I could have looked the other way and stayed in the rut I’m meant to for the rest of the war, one more pilot going nowhere.”

“Come off that, will you?” he appealed. “Since when doesn’t having a squadron count? I sure to Christ don’t have one. You aren’t anybody’s idea of a pilot going nowhere.”

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

“Only as long as bullets are flying.”

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

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

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

“Until you.”

For some moments he gulped back moist emotions of his own. Why of all the people in this war did the two of them have to be on the receiving end of something like this? What was wrong with backing away from this and snapping up an Adrianna instead, sweetly available and nowhere near as troublous? What was wrong with him? "This is just crazy hopeless," he said at last, his expression pretty much fitting that description itself. "I'm stuck on you even when we're doing our double damnedest to have a fight."

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

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

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

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

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

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

every fool

as well to have some practice at crying, hmm? Cass, the night's getting away from us. What would you think about seeing if the cabin is still standing?"

Her try at a better face came out somewhat better than his. "That's pretty frisky, is what I'd think."

He pretended a huff. "If you're not interested all of a sudden--"

"Didn't say I wasn't interested, preacher." Her facial contribution was heating up in a hurry. "Pay the man again."

"Gladly. And just maybe I'll get us another drink along with it."

He headed up to the cash register, digging a few silver dollars out of his pocket as he went. *What a hell of a thing, that all we've got is sack time together. But at least it's something.* The bartender, an older man bald as a peanut, was sitting there alone nursing a cigarette. He cut a squinty look at Cass, then back at Ben. "You and the little lady figure on playing a doubleheader?"

Ben pushed the money toward him on the bar. "That's what these nice round silver things are about, yeah."

The bartender still looked at him, one eyelid pulled down against the cigarette smoke perpetually drifting toward it. "Soldier, ain't you?"

Oh, please. Now the citizenry of Vaughn Junction is going to get picky about who it rents out hot sheets to? Warily Ben indicated to Cass. "The both of us. Why?"

The man behind the bar plucked a shred of tobacco off his tongue, then asked: "Been overseas any?"

"I was in on Guam."

The bartender shoved the money back to him. "It's on the house."

When Ben returned to the table with both drinks and dollars in hand, Cass cast a glance where he'd been and wondered, "What was that about?"

"My guess is he lost a son in the Pacific."

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41

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They drank silently for a bit. Then he peeked over in the dimness at her luminous wristwatch. "Is it tomorrow yet, Captain?"

She checked. "Just past midnight. What's special about tomorrow?"

He made a satisfied sound. "I have a VIP coming in, although he doesn't know it yet. I don't know who they're going to get to stand sentry over the rocks and sand, but I sprung him for a leave to come to Animal's funeral. Got him an extra forty-eight hours to see his girl along with it."

Cass caught on. "The guy out on the coast? The one you were afraid would shoot up everything in sight and himself with it?"

"That's him. Prokosch the Tommy gunner."

"No crap?" Cass sat up in surprise and awe. "The guy isn't even kin and you hassled them into letting him come to the funeral? You must've had to pull strings the size of anchor ropes, all up and down the line."

He nodded pious affirmation. "Right to the top." If Tepee Weepy constituted the apex of things military.

"That clout of yours I was talking about," she cautioned softly, "is it worth using any of it up that way, you think?"

"Had to do it, Cass. It's because of the Pacific again. I found out I don't like submarine games."

"Wake up, kid. Hey, hear me? Roust out, coastie."

The off-duty sentry rolled away from the hut wall and with a groan elbowed up in his bunk. Two men with beach packs bulking on them were standing over him. The skinny sour-looking one was the chief petty officer from the Coast Guard station down the coast, the other was a peach-fuzzed seaman second class much like himself. "What's happening? The war over?"

"Dream some more, kid. Where's Prokosch?"

The off-duty man rubbed sleep crust from his eyes. "Sig? Out on patrol like he's supposed to be."

"Come on, I know that. Where the hell at?"

"How am I supposed to know, Chief?" Squinting at the twenty-four clock on the radio table, he made an effort to concentrate. "He took off out of here this morning like his tail was on fire, him and the pooch. Must be up the beach quite a patch by now."

The other seaman was slinging belongings out of his pack onto Prokosch's bunk. "Hurry it up, Quince," said the chief petty officer. He glanced at the face of confusion trying to take this in from across the hut. "Quincy's his relief while he goes on leave, so get used to Quincy."

"Sig don't have leave coming."

"He does now. Something about a funeral. There's a plane waiting for him at Port Angeles." Waiting impatiently for Quincy to restow the pack, the chief petty officer ducked to the window facing the ocean and the rugged line of shore beyond, looked out and grimaced. "Hell if I know what it's about, but I'm supposed to walk him out of here and put him on that plane. The way these orders smoked down the line, you'd think he was Jimmy Roosevelt."

The man still in the bunk looked more bewildered than ever. "You got to go after him on foot? Can't you just call him in?"

The chief petty officer turned from the window in final agitation. "Radio blackout. Jap sub sank a tanker, down off Oregon last night, the pricks. No transmissions that they might pick up until we get the all-clear. Ready, Quincy?" He tromped toward the door whether or not Quincy was ready. "Let's go. Maybe we can catch him before he gets to hell and gone up the beach."

The off-duty sentry rolled back into his bunk. "You don't know Prokosch."

Farthest out on the Pacific horizon from where Sig Prokosch happened to be patrolling, waves broke violently on a shelf of reef as if the edge of the world was flying apart.

Scanning from the distant mix of spray and drab rumple of the ocean, the Coast Guardsman strived to find a low-lying streak of white out there, a chalk trace on the greater gray, that would be the wake disclosing a periscope. He was keyed up, convinced this might very well be the morning he nailed the Japanese submariners. If not him personally, then the plane carrying depth bombs after he radioed in, blasting away beneath the surface in a relentless search pattern that would crack open the hull of the sub and give the damn Japs all the water they wanted.

Sig felt like winking at the oval moon, paling away as daylight approached. He was highly pleased at having figured it out, nights awake while waiting for sleep to catch up with him, gazing out the window of the hut at the moon furrow on the ocean--the enemy's evident pattern for those sneak raft trips to the creeks for their drinking water. The raft rats had to be using the lunar cycle. Not the round bright full moon, the obvious. Coast Guard headquarters had thought of that and orders from on high were for extreme vigilance along the coast during each such phase. But that had not produced anything except eyestrain among the nighttime sentries. No, the Japanese must be timing their shore excursions some number of nights either side of that, using the moon when it was just luminous enough to cast a skinny path to shore, Sig would have bet anything. That way the raft rats could paddle alongside the moonbeam glow on the water without having to use a torch and with less chance of being seen than during full shine. It made every kind of sense to him, and lately he had matched it up with times he found fresh crap at a creek mouth.

He cradled the Tommy gun. There was reassurance in the highly tooled grip of it that one of these times he would jump the raft rats, the odds could not stay in their favor forever. On this coast he was the constant, they were the variable, and all those accounting classes at TSU had taught him that the basic determinant was to be found in constancy. One of these times, the raft would get a late start from the submarine or be held up by choppy waves on the way in or happen into some other inconstant circumstance, and he would have them where he wanted them. Maybe this fresh morning.

The pair from the Coast Guard station slogged down from the hut to the strand of sand between waves rolling in and the tumble of driftlogs lodged against the forest. Awaiting them were were bootprints of considerable size and the much more delicate scuffs made by dog paws. The tracks went straight as a dotted line the length of the sand and disappeared around the clay cliff of the headland ahead. The chief petty officer swore. "I hate to do it to you in this sand, Quince. But we've got to quick-march to try catch up with him or we'll be chasing him all damned day."

Once more Prokosch scanned outward from the thin crescent of beach. Stirred up by some distant storm, the waves coming to shore tumbled themselves into sudden rolling tunnels, crashing apart moments after they formed. A froth of spume piled itself high at tideline, chunks of it flying off in the wind like great flecks of ash.

At his side the Irish setter nosed at one of the spume clumps and brought on itself a wheezy dog fit of sneezing.

"Bless you, Rex," Sig said as if speaking to an equal. "But that's what you get for not paying attention to business, isn't it. Heel, boy." He lately had written

to Ruby that he figured it was okay to talk to the dog, as long as he didn't start hearing the dog answer him. He smiled to himself, thinking back to all the conversation during Ben Reinking's stay. Starting with Japanese, when he had come upon the figure that turned out to be Lefty spraddled on that rockface. Funny at the time, but good practice for whenever he got the jump on the--

The leash sprang taut in his grasp.

"What's the matter, boy?" Sig's voice dropped low, sentry caution even though no one, no sign of anybody, had appeared. Growling, the dog tugged toward the dark band of vegetation that fringed the outlet of a creek not far ahead.

Sig at once angled inland, steering the dog toward the bulwark of driftwood. The pair of them skirted along it, out of sight from the creek, until they were almost to the dunelike bank. There he silenced the dog with a whispered command and, Tommy gun ready, cautiously took a look over the bank. Below, at the edge of the brush at the creek mouth, there were marks in the sand that looked as if a rubber raft might have been skidded up out of the surf. Excitement came with the sight. Plain as anything to him, the Japs had been here at low tide. An hour or two ago.

The chief petty officer clambered up onto the rocky snout of the headland and took a long look north along the shore. Below him, the light blue of ocean clashed against chocolate brown of rocks covered with seaweed. Where the sand resumed, the crescent of beach bowed around for a quarter of a mile or so before a brushy creek came wandering out of the thick forest.

The young seaman panted up behind him tugging against the pack straps cutting into his shoulders. "Any sign of him yet, Chief?"

"No, but he's got to be up around that creek somedamnowhere--he didn't have any too much headstart on us."

“How about we fire a shot?”

The chief shook his head. “We don’t want to spook him, if he’s at all touchy around the trigger finger. Try yelling again. Put everything into it--with this surf you can’t hear yourself think.”

“PROKOSCH! WAIT FOR US! YOU’VE GOT LEAVE, BUDDY!”

Squinting out at the ocean again in search of a telltale periscope wake, Sig was unshucking his pack to use the radio when the dog reared to the end of the leash, whining in agitation. “Rex, down,” he hissed without effect. The dog was definite, straining now not in the direction of the creek but toward the salal and ferns and overhanging forest.

“Easy, boy,” he whispered. “What is it you think you’ve got?” Alert to the possibility that the Japs were still ashore, holed up there in the woods, he weighed his options. Using the radio was slow and cumbersome and they might hear him talking into it. On the other hand, if they hadn’t spotted him by now, he had the advantage of surprise. He knew these woods, the raft rats didn’t. If he left the radio pack, he could ease ever so slowly into the undergrowth and see what was what. Although there was the matter of the dog.

He hesitated. If he tied the dog here to a limb of driftwood, it might bark. Besides, the Irish setter’s nose was the quickest guide to any Japs. Patting Rex’s head and murmuring soothingly to keep him quiet, he hooked the leash into his web belt and crept toward the forest.

Sniffing constantly, the dog led him on the leash through the head-high barrier of brush and into the forest-floor growth, until shortly yanking to a halt. With his weapon up and every nerve afire for action, Sig even so was surprised, confused, by what awaited almost within touch of him. Not Japs at all, but a sizable wad of what looked like some odd kind of fabric. A pale shroud of it,

crumpled in the salal. *Parachute*, he thought immediately. Before realizing it was balloon material.

In that fatal instant he saw the dog sniff at the explosive device tangled beneath and put a paw to it.

CRX
/ix
pagnation

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

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

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

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

to hell
Man, v hope
jeep

further tinted with broad scatters of sheep. Behind them were a good many miles of the same. They had buried Angelides the day before five counties away, Prokosch that morning in the remote little railroad burg of his upbringing.

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

"I've noticed."

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

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

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

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

Ben
organized
about Sig?
Ruby?
AC

any-sided
?

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

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

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

cut Ben...
on
change
lofty?
pudger

Z/urich

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

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

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

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

"Not this time, for some reason. We'll go to him. I'll work it out somehow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cloyce was quietly crying.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

change
Moxie

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

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

"Gone, is what she is."

"Say again?"

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

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

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

*He was
secretly
rehearsed*

“Morning, Captain.”

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

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

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

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

big c
that went
1/2 way
around the
mess

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

Jones shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Possible,” Jake had allowed again. “I can’t see Danzer running his heart out on that hill.”

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

Picking his way through the bunchgrass and prickly pear cactus, he approached the solitary shanty at the coulee edge with no real hope. Other than its usual jittery honor guard of gophers, half a dozen at a time constantly popping from their holes and then receding as he neared, the ramshackle place appeared as short on hospitality as it was on all else; dilapidation never welcomes company. No smoke from the chimney again, although a fresh cord of charity wood was stacked against the tarpaper siding. Every Hill 57 shack he could see had one, the firewood considerately chopped into sticks not much bigger than kindling so heat could be eked out of rusty stoves as long as possible. Even so the woodpiles would not last through the winter and the Indian families would have to scrounge or freeze. He marveled again at the pride of Vic Rennie, trudging down cold to the bone from this

with Man

prairie sidehill slum for four years, never asking anything from the sumptuous university when there were any number of Treasure State football boosters who would have given him a warm place and other favors on the sly.

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

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

“End of the month, you mean?”

“Middle. She’s a thirsty one.”

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

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

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

They each rared back and stared.

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

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

“No. From the base.”

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

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

She took her time about deciding. Finally she provided grudgingly:

“Maybe that’s me.”

“Mrs. Rennie, what I came to--”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Made him? How?”

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

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

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

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

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

“What were they wearing?”

“Raft hats.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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