

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

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

"Not for me," Ben murmured.

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

Half bushed and wet through and through but oddly fulfilled, he reached his hotel room with daylight nearly gone, the rain gathering the gray of dusk to its own. He climbed into dry clothes and poured a scotch, just one, as his reward before settling to the typewriter. The night was his to write. Custom dies hard, and sometimes never at all; before going to the script, he instinctively checked his watch and with it the clock of war, the zone-by-zone whereabouts of the others, those who were left. Earlier by three hours in Fairbanks, whatever the weather

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

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

The P-63 fighter planes, poised as birds of prey, sat in a row of a dozen on the taxiway. To Cass and her pilots, the brand-new aircraft looked like a pepped-up cousin of what they had been flying. Four blades on the propeller instead of three, more bite on the air. A sharper tail, aid to maneuverability. Gone were the despised fuel tanks underneath that had made the P-39 a barbecue waiting to happen in a belly landing. Sensible wing tanks, added bomb racks, a nose gun almost twice the caliber of the old one: all of it added up, at least on paper, to a Lend-Lease attack aircraft that would give the Russians that much better chance of blowing up Germans and their implements of war.

Cass stayed kneeling a further minute, watching her pilots take in the P-63s that would be central to their existence from this day on. She could never get enough of this, the women in their canvas flying suits with manes brown, blonde,

and black flowing over their purposeful shoulders as they eyed the new aircraft, keen as cats looking at available bacon. What needed doing--what was up to her to do--was to train these veteran fliers to take it slow with these hot planes. *Isn't that a joker in the deck--me ending up like those bald coot instructors at Sweetwater.* Holding in a rueful grin, she popped to her feet and gave a dismissing clap of her hands. "Okay, all concerned, find your tail number and go to work. Let's get with it."

The squadron members had drawn slips of paper out of a crush hat, letting chance decide who got stuck with a cantankerous craft and who ended up at the controls of a well-behaved one; it was a WASP article of faith that airplanes had personalities you could not change short of the scrap heap. Cass walked around hers again for familiarity's sake, its unmissable 226323 stenciled large and white on the tail. *Damn the deuces and treys, following me around. Don't be getting superstitious now, though. No time for that.* She prowled the flight line, watching the eleven fliers comb the fighter planes. All of her pilots carried a lucky coin to unscrew the inspection plates. The hands-on testing started with that, reaching in and plucking each control cable to make sure it was hooked up to what it ought to be hooked up to. Up onto each wing next, take off the gas cap and stick a finger in to make sure the tank was full. Then into the cockpit, skepticism exercised on every gauge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Righto," Cass backed that up. "Stay to hell out of one another's prop wash until we get used to handling these buggies." *That especially means you, Maclaine.* Without making a show of it, she grazed a look down over Della, getting back a flip of blonde hair that might have meant anything. When everyone had had their say about the new planes, Cass slowly addressed the gathering:

“We all more than earned our wings on one of the most cockeyed planes in Creation, the P-39, and we’re about to again on the P-63, whatever piece of work it turns out to be. It’s going to be worth it, let me tell you, it would be even if these things were box kites. Friends and officers,” her voice dropped, “flying is the second greatest thrill a woman can know.”

She paused, taking in the expressions on her audience, patently quizzical on some, borderline lewd on others.

“The first, you goofs, is *landing!*”

Over the groans and hoots, she threw a little salute of applause acknowledgment and gave the order, “Five times, everybody, touch and go. Linda’s bunch first, then Ella’s, mine last so I can be right here watching, pilots. Don’t get caught up in the scenery, all it means to us is thermals. Let’s go.” As her aviators headed to their aircraft, she looked around once more at the strange terrain, the ash-colored mountains, the palm tree canyons. Only the military would put pilot training in the California desert for planes the Russians would have to fly across Siberia. Grimacing a bit, she tucked that away for tonight when she wrote either to Dan wherever he was in the festering Pacific or Ben marooned lovelorn back at East Base. She made it a point of honor not to write the same thing to each of them.

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

“Uhm, morning, sir. We’ve got--”

“For crying out loud,” Ben impatiently brushed wet tracks of the weather off his flight jacket, “how many times do I have to tell you not to call me--” The words swerved off in the direction Jones’s eyes were trying to indicate, to the figure perched on the far corner of Ben’s own desk.

--Sir," he finished numbly, staring in recognition of the all too evidently waiting personification of the Threshold Press War Project.

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

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

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

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

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

Jones got out of there fast.

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

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

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

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

"You have every right to be testy about it," the colonel granted. *Testy, my left nut. How about mad as hell? How about terminally pissed off, Mustache Pete?*

“However,” the practiced voice from Tepee Weepy rippled on, “the balloon bombs are a classified secret and no mention can be--”

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

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

“But not the explosive part,” Ben cited darkly. “It worked just fine in blowing Sig Prokosch to bits. And why won’t it do it every time some poor fool who doesn’t know any better comes across a strange gadget on the beach or out in the woods? Somebody who hasn’t read about it because we kept it from them?”

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

Ben broke in:



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

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

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

“Mister Chairman, might I put in about two bits’ worth of questions, just to earn my keep?”

“I yield to my friend, the gentleman from Montana.”

“Thank you kindly.” The Senator pulled at his weathered beak of a nose for a long moment as if tugging loose whatever was stored in his head, then addressed the OWI chief. “There’s one setup here in the scheme of things you’re in charge of that I’m a little curious about. It for some reason gets funded as a ‘project’--year after year, I might add--instead of a line item. I think you know the one I mean.”

The OWI man smoothed back his hair and made his bureaucratic escape. “The colonel, here with me, will need to address that.”

“Trot the fellow on up to the witness chair,” drawled the Senator.

Hastily tucking away the dispatches he had been skimming, the colonel took the seat indicated. He was barely there before the Senator was asking, “How about enlightening us on just what your agency does?”

“Glad to, Senator. At TPWP we--”

“Where I come from,” the Senator interrupted, “big initials like that are only used on the hides of cows. Might we have the full name of your outfit for the record?”

2/2/12

“Naturally.” The colonel cleared his throat. “The Threshold Press War Project was conceived to disseminate news stories about our armed forces that otherwise would not reach the public. To fill a void in the homefront’s awareness, you could say.”

“Why is the government in the business of dishing out news, through you?”

“If I may explain. The larger newspapers have their own war correspondents or the financial wherewithal to subscribe to the wire services. Our mission is to provide items of interest to the less prosperous news enterprises, primarily the smaller dailies and weeklies.”

“That’s all the newspapers, in my neck of the woods,” the Senator noted.

“Would you say people in states such as mine get their picture of the war pretty much from you?”

“A decent proportion of it, Senator, if we’re doing our job right,” the colonel said carefully. “We want the folks at home to know the great service to this country their sons and daughters are providing--it’s all part of the war effort.”

The Senator leaned forward with a long-jawed smile, one old wolf to another. “Furnish them some heroes to help keep their morale up, would you say?”

“The genuine exploits of our fighting men and women deserve to be told, in our view,” the colonel skirted that as wide as he could. “I would submit, Senator, that your constituents are as eager as any others for such news.”

“In Montana we’re a little leery of bragging people up too much ever since General Custer,” the Senator stated, drawing laughter in the hearing room, intentional or not. He studied the colonel as if marking his place in a chapter, then sat back saying: “No further questions for now, Mister Chairman.”

“Let’s have a chin-chin about what’s wanted of you, Captain Reinking,” the colonel came out with now, still occupying a corner of the desk top in all apparent

ease. He paused to tap one of the little Cuban stinkers out of a cigarillo pack and fire it up with a flick of his lighter. Considerately he blew the smoke away from Ben and at the same time fixed total attention on him. "You seem a bit bothered by the recent course of events in your war coverage. I sympathize, over Angelides and Prokosch--'the dear love of comrades,' as I believe a poet put it. But the war did not end with them. There are still your other teammates--"

"That's what's on my mind, sir," Ben could not stop himself. "The way it's turned out, some of the guys barely stood a chance of making it through while others--" He halted, not sure where the next words would take him.

"Share it out bold, captain. It's just the two of us here."

Ben mustered it for all he was worth.

"How much has Tepee--TPWP had to do with where the ten besides me have ended up in the war?"

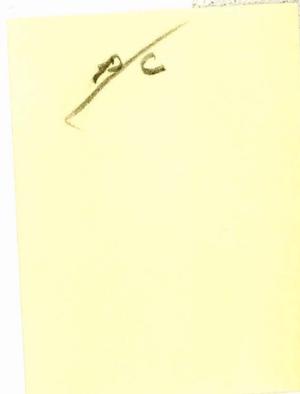
The colonel managed to look surprised. "Why think the fate of your teammates is any of our doing? I grant you, some have had the worst possible luck. Need I point out that war does not necessarily deal the cards fair?"

"Does that mean the deck has to be stacked? Sir?"

"The 'deck,' to call it that, is too much for any of us to get our fingers around," the colonel maintained.

"Maybe so," Ben said, unsatisfied. "But sir, whatever accounts for it, this whole thing with the Supreme Team has turned out way to hell and gone different from what you projected, hasn't it. I mean, why keep on with the series? Shouldn't we just scrap it now? Six men gone--I've tried, but for the life of me I can't see what's to be gained by serving up my buddies in obituary after obituary." He stared squarely at the colonel. "Dead heroes serve a purpose, do they?"

"We are not dealing"--the colonel stopped--"not trafficking in that sort of thing, captain, what kind of cynics do you think we are?" Reaching down to a



waste basket, he mashed out the stub of his cigarillo, and treated himself to another. “Thanks to your talents,” he resumed levelly, “the story of the eleven of you, whatever misfortunes have been along the way, is one of the epics of this war. So we are not, repeat not, going to scrap the series.” The tone softened. “Modify it a bit, perhaps.” He waved away a slight cirrus of smoke. “Let’s proceed to the reason I’m here. I wanted to brief you personally on the war outlook as we at TPWP see it, to provide some needed perspective”--*needed by you to the point where you now shut up and listen or else*, his tone implied--“about your assignments from here on.”

Ben did listen, with every pore. The colonel’s briefing came down to saying he did not have to see himself as a war correspondent into perpetuity, there was optimism at knowledgable levels in Washington that the war could be over within a year. *From their lips to God’s ear, as Jake would say.* The colonel sprinkled in some pep talk about once-in-a lifetime coverage chances as Germany and Japan, in whichever order, were ground down into surrender. *Depends on the lifetime, doesn’t it.* By the time the TPWP view of things had been fully impressed upon him, not a word had been uttered about how he was supposed to handle the due pieces on Dex and Moxie, leaving him as baffled as ever. If that didn’t amount to scrapping the Supreme Team, what did? What was ‘modify’ supposed to mean?

“Now as to your next orders, captain,” the colonel had arrived at. “It may not surprise you that you’ll be going overseas”--

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beyond floored, this time Ben stared at the colonel in shock. The man might as well have said to him, “*Learn the rules of dueling, you’re going to Dan Standish’s outfit.*” All else being equal, he could have understood that the

regiment that had been unendingly fighting up and down the jungle hellholes of the Pacific and now doubtless was destined for the invasion of the Philippines constituted a legitimate story to be written. All else was not equal, not even close, bedtime reading had already happened any number of times and it was indubitably the Braille of unclad lover to unclad lover while a Montaneer was out there in the jungle stuck with a matching wedding band. Still stunned, Ben grappled with two instant convictions, that coming face to face with Cass's husband in the Montaneers' next island assault was by all odds a long shot, and that in the perversity of this war it absolutely would happen.

He stood there stone-still, watched expectantly by the colonel, haunted in every direction he could look. All the times of sitting to the typewriter to turn teammates' foreshortened lives into handfuls of words. The quantities of death he had seen. The unbidden gamble of the flesh that was the greatest and worst venture of his life, the love of another man's wife. Now this.

"Colonel," he finally found his voice, "I've had it. I can't go along with the way you want the war told, any more." His lips were so dry he could barely make them function. He licked them to not much effect. "If it takes a Section Eight, I'm ready."

"You don't want to do that," the colonel said with utmost civility. "A dishonorable discharge follows a person the rest of his life." He shook his head as if regretting that fact, while spelling out: "In a lot of fields, a person won't stand a chance of latching on after the war if he's labeled as a bobtail soldier."

The veil on that was thin as could be. Anyone with a byline knew what fields were meant in that implied threat. Hollywood. Any influential newspaper. The by-the-book wire services. All of the messengers who tended to fall under question for their messages, any time a hole in their patriotism could be found.

wall of  
oblivion

The quantities of death he had seen. All the times...

Bruno's eleven, fingered by fate when the coach's ordained list of varsity starters was drawn up at that last practice. Loudon's eleven, damn his gloryhound hide. The Supreme Team betrayed by the law of averages, a moving wall of oblivion hinged to the war for them, a click at a time claiming another life whatever the odds said. It surpassed understanding, yet the circumference of war plainly was different for these nearly dozen men. Until now Ben had been able to tell himself life went on until proven different, trusting to the unbidden...

None of those was going to want a wordsmith, no matter how good, with a military record that could not be held up to public light. A record of a soldier who quit.

Ben did not really have to say anything. The circumstances ahead, after the war, beyond Tepee Weepy but yet not, spoke it all. But he wanted the choiceless words inflicted on both of them in that room.

“Some decks are more stacked than others, aren’t they, sir.”

As the colonel departed the office, he gave Ben a passing pat on the shoulder, possibly a salute of sorts.

“So what’s your secret?” Jake had just banged the hotel room door shut with his foot, one hand busy trying to undo the clumsy horseblanket the military called an overcoat and the other bearing a rattling sack of beer. “How do you get them to ship you overseas easy as falling off a log, while they confine me to the North American continent?” His big coat went on the bed, the beer onto the dresser, and he faced around to Ben rubbing his hands briskly. “Brr. Getting chilly out there. ‘Frost on the pupkins, the poor curs.’ What’s that from anyway?”

“*Stars Fell on Alamogordo*. Tallulah.” Ben put aside the week-old news magazine--news magazines were always a week old--he had been flipping through. “To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your company, Ice?”

“I thought it was sticking out all over me. *Au revoir* and all that.”

Ben shifted in his chair as if caught. “They’re keeping me in the dark about when I leave. I was going to look you up when I find out, honest.”

“Yeah, with your seabag over your shoulder and ten minutes before you’d have to catch a gooney bird out of here--I’m onto you. Besides, I’m kissing East Base goodbye a while myself. A month on the Fairbanks to Nome run. The Russkies are getting short of pilots, so some of us are detailed to fill in on that last

leg. Some detail, huh? You can about see Siberia from there. Anyway, I brought a proper farewell. Got a church key?"

"Bottom drawer."

Jake pawed out the opener, did the honors on the bottles of beer, and handed Ben one before settling onto the groaning springs of the bed. "This place makes me feel better about the barracks. How come they stick you here?"

"Where commanding officers are concerned, I'm a marked man."

Jake snorted. "Aren't we all, one way or another." They drank a couple of pulls of beer, looking at one another with the awkward affection of men who have become oldest friends in not that long a time.

"Ben? Where they sending you this time?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you, or I would suffer the death of a thousand paper cuts from a manila folder."

"Backtrack Mac country, no crap?" It drew a whistle from Jake. "He's going to take back everything Filipino from the Japs or know the reason why, ain't he." The big man drank deep, then pointed his bottle toward Ben. "I don't want you getting the shit shot out of you out there, hear?"

Ben took a sip of his own before finding the voice to parry. "Look who's talking--the guy who wants to deliver bombs to Hitler on his chamber pot."

"Notice I want to do it from several miles away, straight up," Jake said as if setting him straight on the rules of the game. "I think that's the way the pricks ought to get what's coming to them," he mused. "Just *blam*, something comes out of the sky and wipes them out of the human race."

"That'd be convenient," Ben found to say.

Jake leaned forward, adding gravity in all senses of the word. "Serious, Ben. Don't get fancy out in those islands. Things tend to happen around where you are. The time the Japs jumped you and Carlo," he took to reciting. "Then

two  
straight  
night?  
Nazi

Animal getting it, damn near in your lap.” Listening, Ben had to hear over the pounding of blood in the confines his head. “That walk in the northern woods you took with me.” Jake stopped, then said the rest as though it was the most natural of advice. “Bravery is just another way to die, my friend. Keep in the rear echelon for a change--who knows, it might be kind of nice there. The team is getting thin enough on the ground, without you crossed out.”

“Ice, I intend to do everything I know how to stay on the living list.”

“Good. We’ll drink to that.” Heaving himself off the bed, Jake fetched another pair of beers. In passing, he noticed the page of script in the typewriter. “You still tinkering with that? I thought you said it was done after you got the goods about Purcell.”

“It is. I’m getting going on another one, I seem to be in the habit.” Ben gazed at the waiting paper. “Vic and his grandfather, this is. You never met Toussaint. He’s one they don’t make any more.”

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

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

big  
man  
1

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

As for himself, he kept trying to think only of these last hours with Cass before he climbed on the plane in the morning. Kept trying and failing. These few weeks since she came back from training her squadron to the new fighter planes had been time after time of glimpsed and gone, the P-63s flying north with the red star on their sides whenever he looked up, the stolen bits of love-making with her here at the eternal roadhouse or in his dumpy hotel bed too desperate and brief. All he had told her, all he could stand to tell her, was that he was being shipped out to the Pacific on assignments he would be filled in on when he got there. He meant it as a mercy, in not saying anything about being tossed in with the Montaneers in whatever bloody pocket of the Leyte invasion held them. Whether or not it was the right thing for Cass, it cost him plenty of sleep. *You're quite the specimen, Reinking. What are you going to do if you come face-to-face with Dan Standish out there, stick out your mitt and say 'Hi, I came to cut the cards with you to see which of us gets Cass'?* He still was trying to shoo away these thoughts as he dodged in out of the blustery weather to the permanent blue dusk of the roadhouse.

No sooner was he in the place than the usual bartender leaned across and muttered, "You're in for a ripsnorting time. She's belting drinks down about as fast as I can pour them."

Ben approached the table at the back as if testing thin ice. Cass watched him mutely. She looked half swacked. And the other affected half attributable to something other than alcohol.

"Cass, what in hell--"

"I lost one, Ben. First time."

He sank into a chair and reached across to cover her hand in his, which had the added effect of keeping her from hoisting another glass of scotch. That blonde number in her squadron, the one who always looked ready to climb a guy's leg--

“Cass, don’t be blaming yourself, if that’s what you’re doing. You said last time she’s an ingrown tailender and the new planes weren’t helping any. It probably was just a matter of time before--”

The wobbly sway of her head stopped him.

“Not her.” Cass slipped her hand out from under his and clamped onto the glass, taking a gulp before he could react.

“Beryl,” she said amid the swallow, choking on the name. “My oldest best pilot. The landing gear folded on her and Beryl bellied halfway across Edmonton.” Cass’s head went back and forth again, her voice thickening. “She didn’t stand a chance with that damn engine down her neck. Beryl logged hundreds of hours in that flying piece of crap the P-39, and we get the hot new planes and right away I lose her.” She clutched at the table to stop swaying. “Isn’t that a pisser? We get the ‘new and improved’ goddamn planes and right away--”

“Cass, look at me.” She made the effort, her gaze only approximate by now. “Listen up, you’ve got to. When are you on duty?”

She concentrated. “Tonight?”

“No damn way in this world are you flying tonight, I’ll call the ops section and tell them you’ve caught the twenty-four-hour crud. I know it raises hell with the squadron, but you can’t--”

“Who said anything about flying?” she said belligerently, all the drinks talking. “USO. Liaison officer to the cookie pushers, that’s me. Can’t lead a squadron worth a pork-and-beans’ fart, so might as well herd bashful--”

“Just sit here until I come back, okay? Just sit, don’t try to get up.” There still was a modicum of scotch in her glass, and he downed it so she wouldn’t. Swiftly he was onto his feet and headed to the front of the bar.

“Lit up like a church, whatever’s got into her,” the roadhouse bartender offered his diagnosis as if a second opinion was needed.

Busy digging for silver, Ben specified: "That cabin with the whorehouse tub."

"No can do," the man behind the bar replied with a minimum shrug. "Don't get enough call for that one this time of year, so I shut down the water heater. Freeze your tails off if you was to get to piddling around in--"

"We're trying out to be Eskimoes." Ben unloaded round dollars onto the bar until the bartender pushed them back, then returned to the matter of Cass.

She alternately tended toward limp and impossible to handle as he maneuvered her to the cabin. The massive claw-footed tub stood suggestively not that far from the bed, and he was able to prop her there on the mattress and keep an eye on her while he resorted to the cold water tap. He shed his clothes first, then advanced to where she sat wavering on the bed. "Ben, sugar," she greeted him glassily, "I don't feel so hot. I know you're always ready for a go, and so'm I, but--"

"Radio silence, Captain Standish," he blared, baffling her into shutting up while he went to work on her buttons. He had undressed her in a hurry enough times before, but this one was of a different sort of urgency. Off fell her blouse, the revelatory brassiere, her zippered skirt, the tedious shoes and stockings, the panties as ever the last prize of all.

What is love but random magic? It applies itself in unexplainable ways. Tenderly he swooped Cass up as if carrying her across a threshold, kissed her in the sweet spot between the breasts, crossed the space to where the water was running and dumped her, squawking, in the frigid tub.

Gritting, Ben climbed in after her. It was all he could do to hang on to her, rubbing where he could to get the blood running, while she strenuously thrashed and gasped. Sobering by visible degrees from the shock of the cold water, she let

~~a wildcat~~

herself subside into quivering in his arms. "M-m-maniac," she chattered, gratefully or not, he couldn't tell.

When she looked clear-eyed enough, he helped her from the tub and wrapped a towel around her and then himself around the towel. As warmth began to return with the clasp of body to body, the towel was pitched away and they made full use of the ancient powers of bare skin.

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His day of departure, it was raining hard enough to concuss the gophers of Hill 57. Water was standing all over, as though the Pacific had decided to come to him, and eddies of wind caught at his travel pack in his sprint from the ready room to the C-47 idling on the taxiway. Struggling aboard with him came a couple dozen other dampened officers and airmen, cramming the transport plane to Seattle. Beyond that, he was jumpily aware, awaited the interminable flight to Hawaii, and from there the hopscotch journey to speck after speck of captured island airfields that would ultimately land him to whatever awaited out there. As ever, the tight rounded confines of the plane cabin compressed such thoughts. The flying culverts that passed for Air Transport Command travel accommodations were his living quarters for these next days and so far he was not lucking out at all, his bucket seat next that of a talkative major.

“How do, captain. Can’t help but notice your flight jacket, it’s a beauty. Pilot, are you?”

“The jacket,” Ben conveyed, “has a higher cockpit rating than I do.”

~~E Base~~

The major chortled, the kind that descends from the adenoids. "You still have a sense of humor, you must be passing through this glorified cow pasture on TDY."

"No, I've been attached here. More or less forever."

"Well, you can have Least Base, as far as I'm concerned. I was sent here for a week of detached duty--dot and dash stuff, I'm in the code area--and I'll tell you, it seemed like Noah's forty days and forty nights. I'll be perfectly glad to get back to San Diego." Companionably he looked Ben and his travel pack over again. "And where are you being sent? Somewhere sunny and warm, I hope?"

It was to be Leyte. The news would be on the radio about now, a central island of the Philippines invaded in MacArthur's vaunted return. The coded travel order from Tepee Weepy had come in first thing that morning, and Ben had had to scramble to make this flight. He answered the inquisitive major minimally:

"I'm going to the tropics, probably not for my health."

The C-47's engines revved loud enough to drown out conversation, to Ben's temporary relief. The aircraft shuddered into motion and out onto the runway, lumbering along at the ungainly hopeful uptilt that had given it the nickname of gooney bird. He braced back a bit out of long practice, his mind already racing the war clock ahead to wherever the Montaneers were digging in on some Leyte beach, while the plane strained to build up enough speed for takeoff. Suddenly the major pressed a cheek against the fuselage window. "Oh my God, hang on."

Ben craned to see past him. Down toward the end of the runway, above the meatwagon, dropping through the murk was the comet tail of a red flare which meant 'Abort the mission.'

The transport plane lurched violently as the brakes were slammed on. Ben grabbed the seatframe and doubled over in crash position, all he could do to prepare

if the aircraft was going to whirl into a ground loop on the rainslick runway, buckle its landing gear, and set itself on fire from the friction of the concrete. Beyond that was the terrible acceptance that for him the war, and heartbeat and breath, could end right here, smeared against a dank strip of East Base.

The wheelskid seemed to go on and on, the plane whipping back and forth enough to scare the power of speech out of everyone in the cabin. When finally the aircraft did one last slow half glissade and jerked to a halt, someone said in a hushed voice: "I hope we fight the next war entirely on foot."

The co-pilot surged out of the cockpit, boiling over. "Captain Reinking?" he demanded, his tone questioning why anyone of that rank was cause of this much concern. "The tower radioed. You're to get off this plane. Now." Ben could feel the indignant look from his neighbor the major.

"Here? In this?" Ben gestured in dumfoundedness, not knowing what motion was needed to indicate an obvious deluge. "Pal, it's coming down out there like a cow pissing on a flat rock."

"'Now' means now, the pilot says to tell you. Orders are--"

"I know what the chickenshit damn things are," Ben ground out, uncertainly unmooring from the bucket seat. "How are we supposed to do this in the middle of the runway?"

The co-pilot sandwiched past him. "I'll kick open the hatch and you'll have to swing down--we're supposed to make this snappy."

After as firm a hold as he could get on the bottom of the hatchway, Ben with a grunt dropped the slippery few feet to the runway, and his travel pack was swung down to him, followed by his typewriter case. With the propwash of the C-47's idling engines spewing entire puddles his direction, he had the wild illusion it was raining up out of ground at him. Hunched over, he duckwalked out from

under the wing, around past the tail, and stood in the mud edging the runway as the C-47 taxied away to a fresh tangent of takeoff.

*Welcome back from nowhere, pilgrim. What's next, leaving me out here to drown through my pores?*

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

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

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

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

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

**15**

The war licked its chops over the battle of Leyte Gulf, as it came to be called, with the inevitability from day one that history would speak of such a gang-fight of fleets in the same breath with the Spanish Armada, Trafalgar, Jutland, and Midway. Ben all but moved in to the wire room at East Base to follow reports of the military struggle shaping up around the Philippine Islands. It proved to be like reading *War and Peace* standing up.

The battle unfolded across most of a week, dawning halfway across the world day by late October day as censored reports cautiously kept score of enemy vessels sunk versus the toll on the American fleet. The two American fleets, in actuality, for besides the aircraft carriers and battleships in Admiral 'Bull' Halsey's task force stationed in that part of the Pacific as the U.S. Navy's trustworthy heavy weaponry, on hand also was General of the Army Douglas MacArthur's mongrel fleet. Consigned to the touchy general's command to protect his amphibious assault forces in the island-hopping invasions, this more plebeian navy consisted of battleships that had aged past being top-of-the-line; half-size 'escort' carriers built on merchant ship hulls; and a pack of support ships from pesky destroyers on up. MacArthur's navy was going about its business of bombarding beaches and giving air cover to the Leyte landing when spotty reports began to arrive that the Japanese fleet en masse seemed to be steaming toward those same Philippine waters.

In the end there would be a seafull of dead sailors from both sides, but first came the interlude between strategy and tactics as the navies formed up in modern warfare's unbelievable proportions. Ben experienced those at Guam, but even so, the reports he grabbed out of the teletypes as the fleets maneuvered on the margins of the Philippines made him question the accuracy of his eyes. The same was happening on the bridges of the ships involved. Reconnaissance planes from Halsey's carriers bit by bit counted seven Japanese battleships--two of them the biggest in the world, distinctive floating fortresses with toplofty superstructures like steel pagodas--thirteen cruisers and nearly twenty destroyers in the oncoming battle array. Cloud cover and the labyrinth of islands and straits masked Tokyo's surprise fleet time and again as it kept coming, frustrating Halsey's intelligence evaluations. The one thing clear was the Japanese intent, to do away with MacArthur's navy and devastate the American assault force on the beaches of Leyte.

From the hour the Japanese fleet crept out of an archipelago maze into Leyte Gulf, the battle became, as these nautical epics have been down through time, a contest of seagoing monsters with dim vision. Halsey with all his battleships and heavy carriers chased off after a decoy of Japan's lesser ships. The Japanese battleship commanders dithered and wavered and failed to close the pincers on either the Leyte beachhead or MacArthur's outgunned fleet. That patched-together collection of assault support ships bore the brunt of the fighting, the mightier Japanese vessels slaughtering any escort carrier they found within range but torpedo attacks by the American destroyers and salvos from the second-rank battleships effectively crippling the Japanese attack. Ultimately the sea battle was won from the sky, with U.S. carrier planes hunting and killing enemy warships like exhausted whales.

~~to~~  
urgent  
mistake

Ben kept a reporter's habitual count, day by day, as he inhabited the wire room during this. His own taste of shipboard war clung in him as the reports of sunk ships rattled in on the teletypes. The carrier *Princeton*, gone down; someone he knew back in the distant days of pilot school was a liaison air officer aboard there. One Japanese battleship sunk, another put out of action. The destroyers *Johnston*, *Roberts*, and *Hoel* perished. Two more Japanese battleships and a cruiser destroyed. The escort carrier *Gambier Bay*, gone down; Ben himself had been on that one less than six months ago, a hop in the journey to Australia. Old visions of the gray mass of ships around him and Animal when they talked and joked at Eniwetok gripped him while he endlessly bummed coffee from the communications section clerks and sifted the constant combat reports. The five bells of a wire machine would go off again, and there were two fewer Japanese cruisers on the ocean surface. More clatter of the teletype keys and another chapter of smoke-veiled military engagement came in.

Throughout, he felt the hot breathing presence of history's proposition for a reporter, any true chronicler. The question is brought by Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, high priestess of knowledge, as she steps from the tall grove on Olympus with her closed hands held forth to you. In one is the grant of a long uninflected life, peace without pause to be looked back on. In the other lies the chance, issued only once per lifetime, to witness Waterloo from a spot within range of the guns. And in your most honest self, which would you choose? The oncoming shadow of the sea battle, not to mention the less than divine hand of Tepee Weepy, had done the choosing for him this time, in the shutdown of air traffic to the Philippines. Which hand of fate he would have chosen for himself, he was not perfectly sure. He prowled among the chatter of the teletypes vitally aware of having been spared one more time and conscientiously restless with not being out there when history pivoted on an obscure archipelago. In his reporter's vigil there was not even

closed ->  
each hand  
clipped  
told you.

anyone to talk this over with, Cass back on track on the Edmonton run, Jake among the igloos, Jones scrambling to handle the office by himself. Alone with his insistent sense of something granted and something held back, he haunted the wire machines and drank coffee and waited for the next turn of the war.

It came on the fifth and last day of the Leyte Gulf battle, as the American victory became undeniable. With its fleet cut to pieces, the Japanese high command unveiled a fresh weapon. This lethal new contrivance would be launched more than three thousand times in the remaining months of the war, leaving carnage of an unprecedented kind when it struck, and even when it missed, it distributed terror into all who were anywhere in its way. It was called *kamikaze*--'divine wind,' which in this instance meant fury aimed from heaven, consisting as it did of a sacrificial airplane with a bomb strapped under each wing and a pilot with glazed acceptance of a last mission. Its method was a suicide dive onto whatever American vessel it could find.

Slick with sweat from the heat and tension of that Pacific noon, the officer of the watch stood transfixed on the wing of the *McCorkle*'s bridge, watching indeed as the escort carrier *St. Lo* blew up repeatedly in the near distance. His rational side of mind knew that each thunderous explosion was another of the *Lo*'s bomb and torpedo storage compartments going up, but the spectacle of blast after equally fiery blast erupting through the flight deck was like nothing he had ever seen. The executive officer was there onlooking with him, trying to figure out what hidden way the Japs had managed to sink a ship in the middle of a victorious fleet. The gunnery officer now yelled out from the bridge something about a plane, although the destroyer crew had not spotted any aircraft overhead before the carrier began blowing up, and the exec hustled back inside, leaving the watch officer alone in his spellbound state. None of the past hundred and some hours were supposed

to go anything like this; the *Cork*'s role at Leyte was to have been grandly ceremonial, delivering MacArthur into the bay for the historic moment of his promised return to the Philippines. The Japanese navy got in the way of that. Accordingly, the general found a lesser floating platform for his symbolic wade ashore while the *McCorkle* was scrambled into the battle formation with all other destroyers in the support fleet. In the ensuing near-endless days and nights, the man on watch believed he had done nobly--not heroically; that was a dimension he did not care to approach--at his post inside at the battle status board, keeping straight the tremendous number of ship names and their whereabouts during the constantly changing struggle. Now, sweaty and fatigued as he was, he felt entitled to a markedly more triumphant watch than this was turning out to be. By now Leyte Gulf was signed, sealed, and delivered for the American side, as would be the victory battle ribbons and the commendations to go on one's service record. Yet there was the *St. Lo*, not that far off, still exploding every few minutes.

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

YOUR CHUM KIA CONFIRMED. SORRY. STORY NEEDED SOONEST.

What was there to say? His first thought when the bells began going off on the TPWP teletype had been that it surely must be a case of mistaken identity. How was it conceivable that Danzer, of them all, would not maneuver through the war out of harm's way, until he came home a war-polished version of the Dancer? But that notion nor any other could withstand a suicide plane.

Ben  
interior?

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

The TPWP teletype bell rang five times again.

As Pacific amphibious landings went, Leyte was not as murderous as Tarawa and Peleliu and Guam had been, nor Iwo Jima and Okinawa yet to come. But murderous enough, predictably, where the hard-luck Montaneers were involved.

On Leyte the bloodiest combat moved inland a lot sooner than in most other island assaults, with the Japanese line of defense swiftly pulling back from the usual hellish beach to higher, even more damnable jungle terrain. The day the sailors' long-range battle out in the gulf drew to an end, the Montaneers after most of a week of costly attacks managed to secure a strategic but otherwise worthless ridge called Dry Gulch Hill. Probably there was a Dry Gulch Hill on every island where the Montaneer regiment had seen action--New Guinea, Hollandia, Biak--but none had been any more treacherous than this. This one was about as high as a football field is long, a desolate muddy hump that had been given an artillery haircut, leaving only palm snags and a general air of savage destruction. With a completeness like that of fog, the stench of corpses of Japanese soldiers rotting in the sun hung over the trails up the hill. The fighting had moved on, and high on the

~~4/4/44~~  
~~Danzer~~  
~~made part~~  
~~of~~  
~~atmosphere~~

Slickly?  
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 him,

most recently battered section of slope the first two stretcher bearers to arrive were at work amid the wounded and worse than wounded under an embankment that had become an aid station. The one in charge glanced around as a second pair of bearers came slipping and sliding up the trail, cursing the red mud. "Where you been, sightseeing?"

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

"Couple for us, one for the body squad. The others can still walk, more or less." The man in charge turned to the last of the stretcher squad. "Hey, Murray, you're from Missoula, aren't you?" He pointed to a laid-out figure shaded by a poncho. "That one's Standish--conked out, loss of blood."

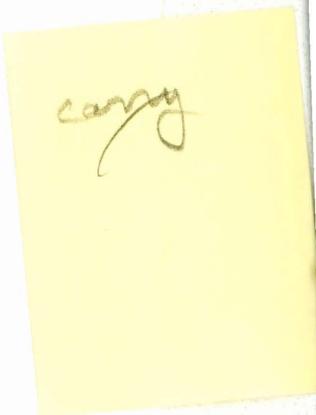
"Yeah, we played pool together," Murray reflected. "Dan's a livewire." He lowered his voice. "Is he going to make it, you think?"

"Got the tourniquet on him in time, he ought to pull through." The first man swung a bothered gaze toward a still body beyond Standish's breathing one. "One there that didn't. Their medic--always hate to see that. Don't know him. You?"

Murray stepped over for a closer look, shaking his head this time. "Never had the chance to. Poor devil didn't have time to get his boots broken in."

"Fish out his tags, Murray--the chaplain is getting finicky, doesn't like to touch guys when he does the mort report. Let's get at this."

The mortal remains of one more man in uniform no longer the business of the stretcher bearers, they turned away from the dogtag-marked body of Dex Cariston.



copy

#

*Good God Almighty, Dex--if you ended up thinking anything like that.*

*Why that conscientious? Couldn't you just sit out the war?*

He could only try to imagine the change of heart or mind or guts or wherever a conscience as restless as Dex's was seated.

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

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

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

And Tepee Weepy fit into this--where? As furiously as Ben searched for its red hand in it all, he could tell that its influence was not necessarily there this time. To his certain knowledge, Tepee Weepy had kept hands off Dex all the while he was at the conscientious objector camp; if it had ever tried to push him into military

*family pack  
Tepee  
weepy pack  
of family  
what's going  
on?*

service, the politically connected Cariston dynasty would have shown the Threshold Press War Project what was real pull was. No, go over it every way possible, it kept coming out the same: Dex surely must have enlisted on his own, and matters took their own course from there. A medic for the smoke jumpers, he offered himself as one for the infantry. Another Montanan built rugged enough to tackle jungle life, off he went to the next jungle awaiting invasion. All Tepee Weepy had to do was sit back and keep track, these past several months, and at the right time send Ben out to the Montaneers and there was the story, Dexter Cariston in change of uniform and conscience. It was heartless, but only heartlessly professional.

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

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

Sourly the telex operator hit the single key.

"?"

The reply came in a matter of minutes.

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

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

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to say  
w/ln. lines

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The eleventh day of the eleventh month came white and gray in Helena, sticky snow in the early morning hours and sullen overcast for the afternoon. At the cemetery, Ben and Jake were encased in the coarse military overcoats besides their dress uniforms, but it was cold on the feet. As they picked their way through the slushy snow toward the graveside where the Cariston clan and what looked like half of Helena were assembling, Jake swore under his breath at the weather and the war and funerals and the Alaska duty he still was stuck with. "Nome was built in a day, by one-eyed carpenters," he was ending up with. "Thanks for getting me out of that frozen dump for this, I guess."

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

Snow lay in the stone folds of the carved monuments in the section of old Helena families where Dex was being interred. The Cariston family plot was granitic in its standing stones. Oddly as if on perpetual guard, not far away stood the commemorative statue of the World War One doughboy, bayonet fixed in readiness. While Jake was at attention with the rest of the pallbearers and the Presbyterian cadence of the minister went on, Ben slipped over to the statue to make sure of what had caught his eye. The bronze plaque was out of proportion to the natural dimensions of the base and as he came nearer he saw it was not simply an artistic misfire; the list of names of the county's World War One dead was so long the plaque barely fit onto the soldier's pedestal of sculpted swatch of battleground. Bill Reinking had always said the so-called war to end all wars

scrips  
scrips

in / enior  
after  
'mored'

- a oo  
her, a oo  
there.

Death in war  
we thought to  
be a random  
harvest

Ben pulled  
to statue

swatch of

drained a generation of lifeblood out of Montana. About like this one, his son thought to himself as he turned back to the graveside service.

Grimly making himself function, Ben wondered what was he looking at in this funeral on this designated day. Was it a thumbing of the nose at any hearers of gossip, any doubters that there had been a brave man--brave enough to risk his life alongside other Montaneers--in Dex Cariston? Was it a salute to Dex's depth of conscience against war, burial on the day the world's aguns stopped taking lives in 1918? The Caristons with their set faces were not a family one could see into.

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

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

"You'll see," Ben said.

He took him along to meet Cass.

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

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

a  
B cost  
to & Jake  
condolences

Cass looked more worn out than Ben had ever seen her. "I don't have as much time as I'd like"--she gazed at him and then included Jake--"I had the nurse tell Dan I was going to the drugstore. He's most likely asleep. He sleeps huge amounts since he was brought back."

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

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

*So much for the notion of a million-dollar wound.* The thought sat there, until it was Jake who rumbled, "That's a rough go, for both of you."

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

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

5/00 #?  
H. a. ton?

Jake gave a sympathetic murmur, and leaving the two of them with that, cleared his throat as if on cue and negotiated his bulk out of the depth of his chair. "I'm going to see if they have a beer anywhere in this mausoleum. Catch you later, Cass." When he had gone, Ben moved to the chair nearer hers, even though the difference was only inches.

"Hi, Scar," she said wistfully.

"How are you holding up?"

"Not so hot." She closed her eyes and knuckled each lightly, as if the strain had collected there. Then a sudden blink, and the straight-ahead hazel-eyed honesty that had been her hallmark with him. "Dan's a handful, with this medical rigamarole. The squadron is a handful, ever since our official boot in the butt. No morale, everybody's flying on empty, why shouldn't they be?" She lifted her shoulders a tiny bit, let them drop just as suddenly, one of her gestures Ben could have traced in his sleep. "End of report. How about you--the Tepee outfit show any signs of sanity?"

"Barely. They haven't come up with any new ways to kill me off yet."

"Please don't keep saying 'yet'."

"Sorry. They're making noises that the war could be over by the end of the year. I'll believe it when I see it."

"Won't we all."

"Cass?" *What a privilege it has been to love you,* the words he did not dare to start saying denied him voice. *Even if you are going back to being his wife, what a privilege it will have always been.* He removed his gaze from her to the snowbound topiary of the hotel grounds until his speech steadied enough. "I--I came to tell you. At the base and"--he gestured in a way that took in everything from there to here--"so on, I'll stay out of the way. From now on. It's the least I can do."

"I'd say it's a lot more than that, Ben." Cass looked like a touch would send her to pieces. "If you don't go, right about now, I'm going to turn into a gibbering idiot."

"I'll drive," Jake let him know in no uncertain manner as they slopped through the wet snow of the hotel driveway to the motor pool sedan. "You look like you walked off a cliff and are still going."

Neither said anything as the car pulled out of town and headed up the long incline out of Helena's valley, past the scrub-forested Scratchgravel Hills, past the slow-flowing passageway of the Missouri River called the Gates of the Mountains, past the historic baronial sheep ranch with sheds broad and long as hangars. The road back to East Base and the war was winding into the bends of Wolf Creek Canyon shared between colored cliffs and gray river before Jake burst out.

"Shit oh dear, Benjamin buddy. You're the one who told me I was asking for trouble when all I was doing was getting my knob polished by a Commie. I guess you were more of an expert on the topic of trouble than I knew, eh?"

"Cass and I didn't set out to cheat on her husband." Ben couldn't speak beyond a monotone. "Just the opposite, at first--we gave each other the porcupine treatment. Then we got to talking, just stuff. Next thing we knew"--by now his voice was down to where pain comes in, and it hurt to listen--"we couldn't live without each other. It gets into your blood before you can turn around, Ice."

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

"I'll have to think about that."

"It takes two, Ben."

With Jake's words lodged in him he sat there lost in himself, seeing her in every phase of their time together--Cass over him, under him, clothes on, clothes

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

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

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

"You guessed it."

Jake gave a large sigh. "First time I was ever picked for that part of the party." He was gauging Ben now. "What did you figure would happen if I hadn't been there?"

"We probably wouldn't have snatched the clothes off each other and gone at it in the lobby, but who the hell knows." He bit the inside of his mouth, a hurt that would shut off. "It doesn't matter now."

"Besides being Mister Priss, do I also get to be Uncle Jake and give you my two bits' worth of advice?"

"I'm in the goddamn car until we get to Great Falls, aren't I."

"You're not the first guy or the last to get in over his head where nature's better half is involved. For what it's worth, you chose an A-1 woman to fall for." The big dark head wagged back and forth as if sure of its ground here. "She's some piece of work. And I mean that in the nicest possible way, okay? So, go a

little easy on yourself. Love is maybe meant to get the best of us. What's it for, otherwise?" Jake braked into a curve. "I'll tell you whose shoes I wouldn't want to be in, Cass's. She's got a tough row ahead."

"I didn't know the inactivation part," Ben said as if it was the last of a bad taste. "She's as batty about flying as you are."

"Pilots are only barely of this earth," Jake said, seeming to mean it.

The next weeks were a muddle.

MANDATORY BURN THIS AFTER YOU READ.

"Loan me your lighter and nab an empty wastebasket for a bonfire." The clerk sullenly complied.

TPWP MINDFUL OF HAW-HAW AND TOKYO ROSE.

NEW UNIT.

He paused over that. Every other correspondent from Ernie Pyle to Hemingway had a soft spot for London and the British, brave in the Blitz.

WITH COMMENDATIONS AND APPROPRIATE CEREMONY.

PROCEED FORTHWITH TO--

He had to think for a moment where Antwerp was.

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out of B

## 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 teletype 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.

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Ben's  
year's  
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in boys  
ahead

“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 SOBs. Answer. Call off the damned series. Or are you going to tell me and the couple of thousand newspaper editors watching for this byline you set me up with that eight dead heroes aren’t enough?*

The days after that, he sent Jones to check for a reply so many times that at last the corporal just gave him a funny look and started off before he could get the words out. Finally, at week’s end a wire room clerk stuck his 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. *So, okay, that does spook them and it’s up to me to keep them spooked.* 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.

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:

SOME. WAITING TO SEE WHAT MEDICINE IS INVOLVED.

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

MANDATORY BURN THIS AFTER YOU READ.

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

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

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

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

“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 and even the rocket buzzbomb attacks were reported to have dropped off sharply. 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.

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?

It was a better bargain than he'd thought he could get: Jake would not be going to Europe, would not be at risk from Nazi flak and concentration camp. 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.

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+ was initially  
was dead.

Belgium had been a main road in two world wars, Ben knew that much, every schoolkid knew that much. It was notoriously easy for the Kaiser's army in 1914 and the Fuhrer's in 1940 to rumble into the supposedly neutral low country where the port of Antwerp faced out alluringly into the entire maritime world. Back to Napoleon and Wellington, back greatly farther than that in the centuries-long swash of war as European monarchies contended for that foothold on the North Sea, the Belgians' lot had been to prosper cautiously during intervals of peace and to suffer foreign occupation as soon as the cannons were fired. Now, glory be to the dazed and half-starved little country, the four-year Nazi grip on Belgium had been wrenched free by a surprise British offensive after the D-Day landings. 'Surprise' scarcely said it; General Montgomery's tanks thrust north out of Normandy with such astounding rapidity that German forces emptied out of Belgian cities in mad haste. In particular, they unwisely abandoned Antwerp without taking time to sabotage the strategic waterfront along the River Scheldt and its mouth into the North Sea. There it sat, the prize port with its nicely intact docks and locks and cranes, and the Allied high command lost no time in turning Antwerp's dockland into the supply conduit for the final push on into Germany.

otherworldly quality to this night, the first of many such the two of them were going to have to get used to.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They did. Ben has a first-hand source.”

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"I just wish he hadn't been so dramatic about leaving it with us," she murmured. "*Mother, Dad--if I don't make it back, do what you can with this, okay?*"

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

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

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

She smiled the slightest bit. "That's what comes of living with newspapermen. If I'd told you, it would have gone right into his ear." The smile flicked off. "As you can tell, I couldn't get the job done. All those family friends in Washington, Bill? People my parents were thick as thieves with in the old days? Not a one of them," her tone deadly level, "would find a safe spot for our only son." It was not like her to curse, but she found the coldness of voice for it now. "The short-memoryed bastards."

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

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

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



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

"Sir? Are you the TPWP captain? I'm from the wire room. Message there for you."

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

*A week. And I didn't have so much as a goddamn hint about it.* Jake's plane had been missing on the flight between Fairbanks and Nome for seven days, the official time for giving an aircraft and its crew up for lost. Oblivion of the worst kind; it was not known whether the B-17 perished in the Alaskan mountains or the Bering Sea. Ben felt as if his soul had been operated on, an essence of life cut out of him. *Why Jake? Why now?* There in the Newfoundland cold, he tried to grapple himself together. Back in to the wire room. Dull jots on the message pad, handed to the clerk to be sent to Tepee Weepy.

I NEED TIME.

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

He spent a terrible day, wrestling the words out.

*Sky-high in his hundred-mission crush hat, loud as a good takeoff, Lt. Jacob Eisman flew through life amending the laws of gravity as he went. He was Jake to the world, and jake with us, those who knew him in all his big ways.*

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

*He came to this war from a thousand years of one-sided battles, his family becoming American--All-American in the finest truest use of those words--out of a*

*past ridden over by cossacks too many times. And by one of the quirks war is so good at, he piloted bombers to Russian comrades waiting in Alaska, back door to Siberia, in the airborne supply line to the Eastern Front where the largest battles in history are being fought.*

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

*'The dear love of comrades,' wrote one of us who knew how to make words sing. Walt Whitman inscribed that out of his service as a nurse in the Civil War, another chapter of lost good men. Jake Eisman would have shaken his big outrageous Cheshire-cat head over those words, but no man in uniform ever earned them more.*

Late that night, he filed the finished piece to TPWP. In the morning, he was back in a plane, somewhere over the gray cold North Atlantic, descending the latitudes to the older world.

Antwerp's airdrome looked like a military costume party. Ben understood that this rear-area supply sector was a joint command, with an American general serving under Belgium's liberator, the British tank tactician Montgomery. But Allied armed forces seemed to have proliferated far beyond that on this airfield. Belgian military types stationed themselves here and there, beaming in welcome but not generally in English. Over by the 'drome canteen a small herd of Free French brass was being met by an American liaison officer who looked overwhelmed. Elsewhere, coveys of soldiers in what appeared to be outmoded British uniforms were gabbling in some dour strange language; Ben at length figured out they must be Polish troops who until now had fought the war from England. Looking around futilely for any sign of a motor pool and a familiar U.S. Army driver to be conscripted, he wondered if he was lingually up to this. *So far, it's as bad as when Sig sneaked up on me in Japanese and I didn't know what the hell to--*

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

“Captain Reinking, is it?”

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

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

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

*Nothing they ever do does, but I get the gist.* “It’s their sweet way of saying hurry up and wait.”

“Ah, well, then, military business as usual, isn’t it. Shall we?” Overby swept the travel pack out of Ben’s grasp, hovered the merest instant over the

① Make  
wait

etiquette of grabbing the typewriter case too, and left that untouched. "I'll drive you to your billet."

Ben did not budge. "Let me catch up with what we're doing--where is it?" He was determined not to be dumped in some Antwerp hotel the Nazis had pillaged for four years.

"Not to worry, captain, we're in bunkers," Overby replied patiently. "It would require a direct hit to do a person in, and there have been comparatively few of those here on the airfield."

Bunkers? Here? The inconspicuous airfield looked like a hastily transformed cow pasture--the runway the plane had trundled in on was composed of the metal mats that engineers could lay down in a hurry and the buildings were drab military prefabs--but now that Ben looked again, the open flat uncamouflaged terrain all around left the the place as exposed as a beached aircraft carrier. Direct hits were a topic worth pursuing. "Comparatively few compared to what?"

"The city, of course." Overby indicated to the low rough skyline of Antwerp barely visible through the gray air a few miles away. "Poor old Antwerpen town," his tone dropped to tragic, "is receiving a battering about like London's was."

*About like--?* Suspicious of being hazed as a newcomer, Ben fixed a dead-level gaze on the RAF junior officer. "You better spell that out for me, too. Where's the battering come from?" He knew any bombardment in this sector could not be from artillery, the German ground forces had been driven back nearly into Germany itself, the fighting front the last he'd heard was in the Ardennes Mountains over a hundred miles away. And while the German air command no doubt could crank up occasional nuisance air raids or Moxie's anti-aircraft battalion wouldn't have been sent here, everyone knew Allied fighter planes ruled the skies

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 away

of Europe by the time of D-Day. "I thought the Luftwaffe was supposed to be on its last legs."

"Quite," came the bland response. "The buzz bombs are ever with us, however. Fifty-some flying bombs in one day, in the worst of last week."

For a marginal few seconds, Ben wondered if it was too late to get back on the plane.

"Not that we censors," Overby raised an eyebrow a cautionary fraction, "like for that to become common knowledge, if you please, Captain."

"'We' censors?"

"I wanted to fly Spitfires, but someone determined a red pencil was more my speed." He hefted the travel pack again. "Ready, are we?"

"No, we are not. The billet can wait. I want to be taken to Captain Moxie Stamper's ack-ack battery. You're informed enough about why I'm here to know where that is, right?"

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

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

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

"Away we go, Captain."

The jeep rattled along a cobblestone road so worn down that the Duke of Wellington's troops might have marched on it. Ben realized Antwerp was farther away than it had appeared from the airfield, the murky constant half-fog of the low

country making it tricky to judge distance. Overby at the steering wheel seemed intent on making up for the lost career as a Spitfire pilot; every time he took a curve at a leaning angle, Ben missed Jones and his old-maid driving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right, lieu--leftenant. Look, can we go by first names?"

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

"Same song, second verse," Ben said. "Does that translate to 'Morris' or 'Moreese'?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know it's only a book that happens to take place where I was bred and raised," nostalgia wafted from behind the steering wheel, "but still, old Sam caught

Christchurch to the very blades of grass. To this day, freshets off his pages play against my pores.”

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

“I professed,” the occupant of the jeep driver’s seat said as though it was perfectly obvious. “I was professor of rhetoric and argumentation there at Canterbury College. The war rather took care of that. The Japanese were closing in on Australia, and New Zealand looked to be next, so I joined up to fight for the homeland”--he looked aside at his uniformed passenger--“didn’t we all. Naturally, the instant I had my commission, I was seconded to London. Plopped into the RAF, plopped again into the communications branch, put in charge of a pencil. Daft of the higher-ups, but there you are.” He glanced over again. “You’re a considerable word man yourself, as I understand it, the byline and all.”

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

“Tepee--? Oh, ha. Very good.”

In what amounted to a blink at the rate Maurice drove, they passed one last open field and were in the city, aged three-and four-story housefronts with steep crenulated gables and tall skinny chimneys suddenly everywhere. An unwilling spectator to misery, Ben had to spectate nonetheless. Antwerp had gone gaunt during the occupation years, the German army had seen to that. The fresher depredation was even more shocking, cavities in the crowded-together streets of homes and shops where buzz bombs had found their target and taken out a building or two. At some such sites, hunched men in flat caps and women in flimsy lace kerchiefs picked through the rubble. At others, everything lay in a dead heap. From the doorways of scarred houses still standing, children so tattered and bony they looked feral jumped out toward the jeep and in Flemish accent shouted the

universal “Hey, Andy, any candy? Any gum, chum?” Ben had steeled himself for this bomb-torn tour with the hope that it would be his last of the war. Even so, as the route wound through scene after scene of devastation he felt dismay to the pit of his stomach; Maurice had not been stretching the truth, this was sickeningly like London during the Blitz. The jeep twisted its way around a set of corners--there did not seem to be a straight street in Antwerp--into a neighborhood of sizable abandoned shops that seemed even more forlorn and tortured than others they had passed. “The diamond district, largely Jewish, before,” Maurice covered a dazzling history of gem merchantry with the sad wave of a hand.

The streets began to show more life near the market squares in the center of the city. Ben stared up at the Old World guildhalls, ornamented to a frenzy. He couldn't tell if the architecture was meant to be baroque or rococo--perhaps barocco--and there were constant glimpses of a stone-lace cathedral spiked atop it all. Everything with the crust of centuries on it. “All older than dirt, isn't it,” Maurice read his thoughts. “Just think,” he expanded on that, “a hundred and fifty years before the first four ships made port in New Zealand and while red Indians still ruled over Montana, Rubens was in there”--another indicative sweep of the hand--“painting fleshy maidens and grazing as he went.”

“What, there?” The tall-standing house with a stepped peak looked like any of Antwerp's others worn down by time and grime. “That was his passion pit?”

“Hypothetically,” Maurice threw into the air, and drove onward through the petrified streets.

Shortly they were going past emplacements of heavy automatic weapons every few blocks, sighted toward the sky and crews at the ready. Ben recognized British Polsten guns, basic and lethal with the telescope-like barrel and prominent fin of magazine, from the airbase outside London where he had last spent time with Moxie. *Two years ago already. If 'already' means anything in this war.* He

remarked on how numerous the anti-aircraft gunners suddenly were, and Maurice allowed as how there were quite a few assigned to Antwerp, twenty thousand or so.

Ben's head snapped around. "An entire army *division* of ack-ack troops?"

"Quite. It's about the port, of course." Maurice simultaneously blew his nose, steered through another avalanche of rubble laying in the street from a set of destroyed buildings, and talked on. "The Huns are damnably serious about putting it out of commission with their buzzbombs. So, the official thinking is, those must be shot down. However much gunnery it takes."

The anti-aircraft guns grew in size and number as Antwerp began to dwindle into villages and countryside. To Ben it all had the feel of a city-size castle, half as old as time, with catapults set at the outskirts to keep invaders at a distance. The strategy, as Maurice laid it out, was to have belts of artillery across the approach path of the flying bombs, which the Germans luckily were only able to launch one by one. If the first arc of ack-ack fire didn't bring down the rocket bomb, the next semi-circle of guns a mile or so farther in still had a crack at it, and last of all, those swarms of heavy automatic weapons they had seen at the near side of the city. The gun battery Moxie commanded was in the outermost belt, the one that had to take on incoming buzz bombs headfirst--*oh hell yes, that's where he would be*, Ben resigned himself to. Open exposed country lay between Moxie's flak alley and the middle one they had just driven through, and Maurice considerately announced: "Hold onto your seat--we go flat to the boards here across this bit." He floored the accelerator and the jeep hurtled across the stretch of smudgy damp landscape.

In the rush of bitterly chill air Ben huddled in his flight jacket, wishing he had the horse blanket overcoat on. Maurice Overby was burning red with cold but

Find  
buzzbombs

seemed unperturbed as he aimed the jeep at a roadblock out from a line of long gun barrels poking out of sandbagged pits.

They were looked over by tommygun-carrying American G.I.'s, obviously primed for business, and let through. Maurice parked the Jeep in the shelter of what he hoped aloud was a parts shed and not a munitions dump. They had no more than climbed out when a figure with a certain familiar slouchy grace detached itself from the crew in the nearest gun pit and approached them.

Even when you knew it was coming, the voice went right under the skin: "Well, well, the famous Captain Reinking. That what brings you here, Ben buddy? To be Rhine King when we whip the Krauts, write up the last chapter for the folks back home?" Ben caught up with the other familiarities: the glint in the eyes as if reflecting off something hard; the complexion like steel dust; and Moxie Stamper still wore a helmet, albeit one meant to withstand falling flak fragments, the same way he had in football, tipped back just a trifle enough to look cocky.

"You know for a fact that we've about got them whipped," Ben refused to be nettled before they even shook hands, "do you, Mox?"

"I sure as shit don't," the voice momentarily lost its edge. On fuller inspection, Moxie looked as tired as a man could and still be on his feet. There was a tic where a dimple would have been on a face less sharp than his. Never one to fuss with clothes, he had let his uniform become a size too big for his war-worn frame. He jerked his head to the province of dim sky over the ack-ack guns. "It gets your attention that the SOBs in Berlin don't seem to run out of these overgrown fireworks."

Ben made up for lost time with a hasty introduction of Maurice, Moxie sizing him up from the brim of his Tommy helmet to the shiny RAF blue trousers. He barked a laugh. "Overby, hey? So I finally get to meet the devil with the red

pen--the intelligence briefers about piss their pants when they talk about 'Baldy the censor.'”

Letting that sail by, Maurice said: “Ah, HQ’s ignorance branch, also known as the intelligence branch--we do have our differences on occasion.” He smiled at Moxie in a reserved way. “Better to be bald on the outside than on the in, I remind myself.”

Moxie scowled. Ben jumped in with: “Before we all get carried away with teatime manners--do you know about Jake?”

The expression on Moxie darkened some more. “You start off that way, it doesn’t sound like the Iceman is in good health.”

“His plane--” When Ben finished the telling, Moxie turned away a step or two and gazed into the gray distance. “Damn it all,” he said over his shoulder. “Who would’ve thought the whole smear of us would end up you and me? I hope you’re carrying a good luck piece, Rhine King. Because,” he swung around to Ben, the gaze hardening, “you have more balls than brains for hauling yourself over here into this.”

*Thanks all to hell, Moxie. Remind me to try to save your life--okay, mine along with it--again sometime. Caught flatfooted by Moxie’s accusing glower, he tried to read what was behind it and was not coming up with anything. What, you don’t get it that we’re each other’s ticket out of the war?*

Patient as pudding, Maurice had stood aside during all this, but now moved in before Ben could say anything. “Captain Stamper, I believe you’re being beckoned.”

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

Moxie took charge before the words were out of the air. “Acknowledged, Smitty. Get on the horn to fire control and the spotters”--Ben could not help but

hear come into the voice the snap of cadence used for good effect in football huddles--“tell them smoke break and grab-ass is over. And chew out the loaders on Charlie gun while you’re at it, yesterday they were slower than a three-legged race.” He glanced at Ben and Maurice as though they were an afterthought. “It’s time to shoot something down. If I was you two, I’d get my butt in back of those sandbags over there.”

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

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

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

“It’s a cocotte clock, in case you’re wondering,” the explanation was diplomatically put. “A chef’s timer, actually, but French prostitutes use these to keep track of the various phases of their services. I have done the necessary research.” Maurice paused dreamily. “Ah, Paris. What was that term you used-- passion pit?” His brow cleared and he returned to the business at hand. “Set it for ten minutes after each buzz bomb. Gives you five to look around for shelter before the next one arrives.”

*Rear area, my rear end. This place is the front line of another Blitz.* Ben sagged against the sandbags to wait, and took stock. In the same opalescent Belgian sky that had looked down on the foot soldiers of Napoleon and Wellington and Ludendorff and Pershing, a robot bomb was on its way. After it blindly fell and did its killing or not, the next one could be tracked in by a timepiece that

ordinarily ticked off sessions of bed games. This was a war like no other. Or did writers always say that.

Ducking lower and yanking at Ben's sleeve for him to do the same, Maurice wordlessly pointed to a metal sliver cutting the sky. Unable to take his eyes off the object clipping toward them at six miles a minute, Ben had the sensation of everything in him pausing, waiting helplessly for the blind bomb with a tail of flame to pass over or not. Then the roars of the anti-aircraft artillery slammed through him.

For something that sought its target by falling from the sky, a V-1 rocket was oddly nautical, built like an oversize torpedo and traveling with the rumble of a loud motorboat. When that throb stopped, terror began. Any V-1 in its silent dive to the ground brought with it a two-thousand-pound warhead primed to go off on impact. During the long weeks of V-1 ordeal, that feeling of the heart skipping its beats while awaiting doom or survival was the erratic pulse of Antwerp.

Puffs of blue smoke clouded the air over the gun pits, the long snouts firing, firing, firing as the crews worked madly. Flak bursts dotted the sky behind the flying bomb, then suddenly nearer as the gunners began to get the range and aim off in front of it, leading it as a hunter would a fast-flying duck. The ack-ack noise was unceasing yet somehow everyone knew to the instant when the throb, the buzz, of the bomb cut off and it began to dive. Right at that moment, a proximity shell exploded alongside it and the V-1 faltered in its trajectory, falling away into a field where it burst with a flash of orange flame.

One more time, Ben felt the moving wall of oblivion shift away, and with the tremor of the exploding buzz bomb, settle to a stop. At least temporarily.

Another tug on his sleeve. Maurice was setting his cocotte clock and reminding him to do the same.

They scrambled out from behind the sandbags and over to where Moxie had emerged from the gun pit. Helmet off, running a hand through his thatch of wiry black hair, he looked drained. To their accolades of “Well done” and “Nice shooting,” he simply stood there, all the swagger gone, eyes fixed on the distant bright spot of burning rocket wreckage. “We get nine out of ten of them,” he said tonelessly. “About as good as can be done.” He glanced down at his steel helmet as though it held something he did not want to see, then put it on and shifted his focus to Ben. “Night control takes over at 0500, it gets dark so christly early here. I’ll meet you at the O Club after chow. I’ve got a bone to pick with you, don’t I.” He turned his back on them and strode off, yelling for the ordnance sergeant to hurry up with the ammunition supply.

“Rough as guts, isn’t he,” Maurice Overby said mildly. “Shall we return to the charms of Antwerp?”

*“Now you hear it, now you don’t.*

*The bomb, the bomb, the abominable flying bomb.*

*If it hits you, then you won’t.*

*The bomb, the bomb, the bastardly buzzing bomb.”*

The gathering of British officers around the piano warbled more closely in tune than any Officers Club songsters Ben had ever experienced. *Must be all those boy choirs.* Despite the Brit monopoly on the music, the crowd in the cavernous bunker had a more American flavor than the one in the airdrome, including an occasional heart-quickenning note of feminine laughter from scattered flocks of Army nurses and such. Some wag had painted up an over-the-door sign in

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Germanic letter christening the place *The Wonder Bar*. It made Ben wonder, all right. Sitting isolated amid the hubbub ten feet underground, wrung out from the double journey through Antwerp's circles of buzz bomb hell--*Why can't the glee club stick with 'The White Cliffs of Dover'?*-- he felt as if this had been the longest day of his life. Overlapping with that was the awareness that he had thought the same thing trekking out of the Canadian woods with Jake. And wading ashore at Guam with Animal. And healing on the hospital ship off New Guinea after the ambush with Carl. The list could go on, nearly as long as the war. *Not that anyone other than you is keeping track, Reinking, but how many longest days can a guy stand in one life?* Beer helped, luckily. Trying to force yourself to relax is much like pouring into the wrong end of a funnel, but sip by sip in the vaulted concrete room full of strangers' racket, he took refuge in that sensation of a place where nobody knows you're you. *Yet.*

He was on his second beer, and the Brits were going operatic about how many balls Hitler, Goering, Himmler, and Goebbels had in total, when Moxie joined him at the table, scowling toward the piano crowd. "That pissant Noel Coward has a lot to answer for, if you ask me--they all think they're him." He checked his watch and slumped down into the chair opposite Ben.

"Here." Ben shoved across a bottle he had put aside for him. "Beer is known to settle the nerves."

"Who said they need settling?" Well, thought Ben, the facial tic, for one. Moxie in the old days had the nerves of a snake handler. He was always the holder for point-after kicks, unfazed by linemen half again his size hurtling at him as he delicately set the ball in place for Vic Rennie's foot. He had commendations and captain's bars to show for courage under those England years of air raids. Now as he did quick damage to the beer and kept darting glances around the room, with a

special dose of contempt for the singing piano warriors, it was all too clear that what had been Moxie's ornery bravado had turned into just ornery.

"Guess what, you're kind of grumpy, for a short-termer." Ben's own mood was not one of his best. "What's eating you?"

"Short-termer," Moxie scoffed, "in an ass-backwards way. I've been extended. But you know all about that from A to Why, don't you?"

The coldly spoken words sent a clammy sense of dread into Ben. "Mox, slow down and talk sense, will you? I don't know a rat's ass worth about you being extended."

Moxie studied him without so much as a blink. "Well, then, let's just go over this, Ben old buddy." As usual, there was about as much give in him as an ice pick. "The adjutant calls me in, the first of the month. Says my new orders have just come in. I'm standing there expecting the million-dollar handshake and the plane home, and instead he tells me I've been extended indefinitely. Back I go, to the goddamn ack-ack and buzz bombs. Next thing, you show up. You think I don't know when somebody screws me over, Rhine King? Was it your own bright idea to get me held until the Germans give up, so you can have your nice story--the last of the team makes it to the end of the war? That is just so shitty, Reinking, and I--"

Slamming a hand down on the table so hard the beer bottles teetered, Ben put a period to Moxie's rush of words. "If anybody is screwing you over, it's not me. I'm here because you were due to get that handshake and a pat on the butt and be sent home, goddamn it." He was furious with Moxie and that mouth of his like a cheap pistol, constantly ready to go off in any direction. "How'd you manage to mess that up--smart off to that adjutant? The general? Eisenhower himself?"

Moxie was sitting back out of the way of any more hand forays. "Hey, not me. I've been keeping my nose clean, up the ranks--no way did I want to queer

↓ ↑ up to me,

that plane ride out of here.” With a mix of disgust and agitation he glanced around the cavernous bunker again. “I don’t go for this living like a mole.”

Tense as a harp, Ben took several strained seconds to decide he was on the level. Moxie had never smarted off to Bruno, even during the worst Letter Hill travesties of football practice. In the perfect season, game after game, the tougher the situation on the field, the more businesslike his quarterbacking became. It added up. In extreme cases--and Antwerp fit that, did it ever--the gambler side of Moxie Stamper was perversely capable of the oldest cardshark survival trick, win by not losing. “Okay, maybe it’s not your doing. I’ll--”

“Your pal Baldy,” Moxie shot in. “Could be he knows what’s up with this? One thing I learned around the Brits, it’s hard as hell to tell when they’re screwing you over.”

“He’s not--” Ben didn’t pursue the issue of nationality. “I’ll put it to him. If he doesn’t have the goods about this, I know who does.” He was half out of his chair before remembering Maurice was on catch-up shift somewhere performing what censors perform. And Maurice was his doorkeeper to the only other source, the wire room. “Tomorrow will have to do,” he muttered as he sank back down. “Damn.” Another set of hours with TPWP in touch only as a pain in the neck. *‘TIMEOUT,’ right, you Tepee Weepy bastards. Until when--the last goddamn buzz bomb is fired? Moxie will shrivel up so much by then he can be sent home in a matchbox. I won’t be much of a specimen of humanity myself.*

Moxie was checking his watch again, and remembering Maurice’s mild mention of an occasional V-1 straying to the airfield, Ben wondered if he should be setting the cocotte clock in his pocket. The weight of the war came down over him once more. “Mox, I’m going to have to get to the wire room early, so I’m calling it a day. I’ll look you up tomorrow after--”

“Hang on a little while, can’t you?” Moxie practically begged. “There’s somebody I want you to--hey, all right, here she is.”

An Army nurse, in off-duty khaki, was forging her way toward them through the packed tables. Busty and broad-beamed, she came with a fixed bedside smile on a square plain face.

Slick as a whistle, Moxie was on his feet and standing proud to greet her. “Hi, angel of mercy. This is my press agent I was telling you about,” he allotted a foxy grin back and forth between Ben and her. “Ben Reinking, Inez Mazzetti.” Moxie winked. “But that’s all the z’s a guy ever catches around her, right, sugarpuss?”

“Knock it off, you,” Inez gave him a tender swat on the arm. “Hi, Ben, gee, I’m glad to meet you.” She kept the smile going as Moxie delivered her into a chair. “You can give me the lowdown on this Stamper guy--did he always have a vocabulary like a garbage can?”

“You should have heard him in football uniform--the Army has cleaned him up.”

“Go right ahead,” their subject of discussion grinned around at them again before embarking for the bar, “gossip about me while I’m hunting down beer for you, ingrates.” Left with no choice, they made small talk, Inez in a practiced way, Ben uncomfortably, until Moxie came back clasping bottles with both hands. “To the oldest profession,” he toasted as soon as he sat down, “nursing!” It drew him another little swat from Inez, smiling all the while. Overflowing with possession, Moxie leaned toward Ben and divulged: “Inez is from Butte. Her old man worked with O’Fallon’s in the mines. How’s that for a small world?”

“Awful small,” Ben vouched, hiding everything more than that behind a long swig of beer. *The damned odds again. Why can’t the numbers just behave and quit giving out coincidences like card tricks?* In all likelihood he had crossed

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paths with that miner father at O'Fallon's wake, back at the start of all this. Back when one life subtracted from eleven was thought to be a lot.

In what passed for conversation from then on, Moxie kidded Inez as if he was playing with a kitten, and she all but purred in response. It would have been plain to a blind person, Ben summed it up to himself, that he was screwing her socks off at every opportunity. The undertow of desire lapping around the table made him want to wade away and flee to higher ground and at the same time dive in and let his imagination soak in it. He stayed helplessly there as with Cass. Cass curled beside him after making love in his hotel room...*I interrupted the greatest movie never made, didn't I.* Cass bright as her uniform buttons the giddy night in Seattle...*One of those that folds down out of the wall? Genius, what's to keep it from folding back up into the wall just when things get interesting?* Cass snuggling next to him in the shelter of the Hill 57 rocks, the Homecoming game losing their interest...*Do I have a better offer?*

"Hey, we're not hearing any fooling-around report out of you, Ben." Moxie was feeling better and better as the beer and the night went on. "Haven't you hooked up with anybody yet?"

Silence was no longer an option, with the two moony faces turned to him. "I did for a while. She's a," he swallowed hard, "a nurse, too--of a kind."

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

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*seventh thousand* when he became aware someone had paused at the office doorway.

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

“Help you with something, captain?”

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

The lights blinked in the Wonder Club bunker. The whole place went momentarily still, then the electricity steadied and the usual officers club din of conversation came back with a rush of relief. One of the music-hall wits at the piano began to belt out, “*I’ll meet you at the Underground, you’ll know it by the rumbly sound, and we will slip away, for a cozy day...*”

“It’s hard to get used to, the rocket SOBs see to that,” Moxie addressed the tight look on Ben’s face, his own expression more constrained than before. “That one must have hit near the power plant by the river. The night gunners have a tough time of it,” he defended the ack-ack brotherhood, “they have to hope the searchlight crews get a fix on the goddamn buzz bomb before it cuts off.” He shook his head and went back to, “It’s hard.”

“You know what, I’m going to go freshen up while there’s light to see by,” Inez said with practicality and headed for the toilet.

Moxie watched her wend her way. All at once he was talkative again. “Funny how things turn out. Back in high school, a carload of us would head into Butte to visit the Walkerville cathouse and we wouldn’t get parked before the Butte kids spotted the Dillon license plate and ganged up to beat the crap out of us. ‘Come and get it, shepherders!’ they’d yell.” He laughed, more bark than amusement in

it. "And we would with our dukes up, and more often than not get our butts kicked good."

Ben knew Moxie was from a sheep ranch in the Dillon country, but he had not known he ever came out second in mouthing off. "That's Butte for you," he contributed, thinking back to the boisterous wake.

"And look at now, me and her--" Moxie held Ben in his gaze. "I know what you're thinking, I'm just using her for reconnaissance in the dark. But she keeps me sane, Ben. And she gets something out of it besides a good time in the sack." He leaned in to drive his point home. "Inez is not the greatest looker, unless you like them on the hefty side. But getting herself seen with me, and now you, gives her a lot of brownie points on this base. There are plenty of guys in this room right now you could shake awake in the middle of the night and they'd know how many touchdown passes I threw and how many you caught." He knocked wood. "Like it or don't, we're not nobodies. Even here."

*No, that's been the trouble.* Ben sat up to pursue that. "Listen, Mox. I found out something about Purcell--"

"Purcell? Haven't thought about him in years," Moxie was shaking his head, "dumb-ass kid." The head shake slowed into solemnity. "All the guys on the team. All the tickets to the marble farm," he said bitterly. "You know the one that really gets me?"

*I'm afraid I do.* Ben would have bet six month's wages he was about to hear a halo put on Danzer, courtesy of the Stomper-to-Dancer mutual admiration society.

"Jake." Moxie choked up on the name. "It is just a goddamn shame he didn't have the last laugh on the Nazi sonsofbitches."

Too much had welled up in Ben for him to say anything. Inez came to his rescue by returning, and he used the chance to exit the drawn-out day. He left the

flirtatious pair with “Have fun, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” and wove through the obstacle course of tables. He stepped outside to the long sunken row of concrete archways topped with more concrete and several acres of the sod of Belgium. It was starting to snow, the first natural thing he had found since arriving to Antwerp. He stood there a minute in the night gone quiet with the weight of snow as the storm came in off the Atlantic, general as the pattern of winter across the war-linked pair of continents and the cold ocean between, the hypnotic flakes accumulating as patiently as the passage of time.

This was a dry snowfall that would not cling long, but Gros Ventre, which had not tasted paint since the war effort was born, appeared grateful for any fresh coating. Behind him he heard the grind of gears as the bus pulled away in the night to other towns too modestly populated to have a depot, a familiar accompaniment as he walked in so many years of his earlier footsteps toward the newspaper office. The burden handed to him by the bus driver seemed heavier as the war went on, although he knew that was allegory. Even so, carrying it in the new-fallen snow he took extra care, stomping every so often so his shoe soles would not cake up and grow slick. Shortly he came to the only other lighted enterprise on the whitened main street, two blocks up from where the *Gleaner* office cast its square of light. He thought to himself he really ought to write a piece about this, how in the everchanging bargain with time one wayspot of civilization would offer up a cathedral while another would answer human yearning with something as homely as this, a place that could be counted on to be open in the snowy dark, a saloon like a book known by heart. What was the saying? Ancient faith and present courage. He smiled at himself a bit crookedly. Tonight he could stand a glass of courage.

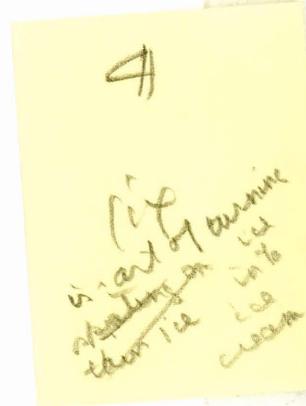
“Haven’t seen you in here in a hell of a while,” he was greeted as he stepped into the Medicine Lodge. “I’d about given you up for lost.”

“A man can’t be in two places at once, Tom,” Bill Reinking replied, slapping snow off his cap and coat. “I’m supposedly running a newspaper.” *Or as Cloyce would say, it’s running me.*

Toweling the dark wood to a trail of gleam as he came, Tom Harry mopped his way down the bar to him. “Liked what you said there in the gizette, back before the election. Franklin D. showed them his rosy red one again, didn’t he.” Beaming as if in response, Roosevelt presided larger than life on the whiskey-laden breakfront behind the bartender, the campaign poster accurately predicting FOUR MORE IN ‘44! Bill Reinking noted with bemusement that right next to it was pasted a faded placard spelling out, in the biggest letters to be found in a printer’s jobcase, FORT PECK--DAMN! Momentarily he was taken back to before the war when those unlikely allies of the time, the President and the Senator, blessed into being the huge Fort Peck Dam and put Montana back to work. There was something to ponder there. Was it possible that the depths of the Depression, so daunting at the time, were no kind of a challenge compared to finding an end to this war? He knew the world was more complicated now, but he also knew that every era makes that excuse for tripping over itself. Pulling himself away from that train of thought, he looked from Roosevelt and the exclamatory placard to Tom Harry as if giving the matter full consideration and said: “Politics is like the cured cotton bug, the necessary weevil.”

“I think maybe I read that in your paper one time,” the bartender snorted. In practically that same gallop of breath, he came out with the essential: “What’s the word from Ben?”

Bill touched the week’s Threshold Press War Project bundle fresh off the bus. “I hope I’m about to find out.”



“Then I suppose I ought to be getting you something to go with that,” Tom Harry said as if they were both falling down on that duty. “What’ll it be--you still drinking that scotch cough syrup?”

Looking longingly at the row of whiskey bottles with plaid pipers on them, Bill shook his head. “I have work to do tonight. Your glorified tap water, please.”

“Turning unpredictable on me, are you.” Tom Harry wagged his head over serving a plain glass of beer, just as if the Medicine Lodge didn’t practically run the stuff in its plumbing. Before he could step to the beer tap, a voice accented with Oslo or beyond quavered from the end of the bar:

“Mister ‘tender! When you isn’t busy, we gunna have some of t’ose jar weiners.”

Bill’s newspapering instinct of keeping track of things took a moment to put a name to the face of the latest keeper of sheep blowing six months of wages in-- Andy Gustafson, an old snoose chewer who herded for the Busby brothers on upper English Creek. Perched elbow to elbow with this splurger was another herder recognizable as practically a fixture in here, Canada Dan, sending down the bar an eager freeloading nod and a mostly toothless grin. Bill pursed back a smile. Some things you could count on. “Catch the faithful, too,” he capitulated, trickling more money onto the bar.

“You hear that, Gufferson, or something wrong with your ears?” Tom Harry called out, heavy with hint.

“Yah, t’anks!”

“Here’s to lookin’ bad and feelin’ good, mister!” Canada Dan mistily chimed out.

“I should of been a milkman instead of a bartender,” Tom Harry grouched as he drew Bill’s beer before moving on to the jar of whatever preservative the Vienna sausages swam in, “I’d only have to look at one horse’s ass at a time.”

4)

Left in peace as Tom Harry marched on the other end of the bar, Bill took out his jackknife and carefully slit the bundle along one side. He grimaced as usual at the hefty halves of boilerplate that were the bulk of the parcel. For an honest editor, patriotism that simply bolted onto the printing press was not true news and he never used the readymade stuff. Reaching into the middle, he slipped out the packet of TPWP handouts and skimmed, head cocked at bifocals angle, until he found the words SUPREME TEAM.

He froze at the next word that caught his eye: *Jake*.

In a sick trance he began to read Ben's piece. When he was finished, he sat looking past himself in the dark mirroring of the saloon front window. This was Cloyce's canasta night. Jake Eisman had been her favorite of Ben's friends from the team. He would have to tell her when she came home, it would be no mercy for her to read it first when the paper came out tomorrow. He himself had the helpless feeling of time rounding on itself and unleashing the same bad news again. As a punk kid reporter in 1917 and '18, underage for military service, he had written obituary after obituary of the same sort as the so-called war to end all wars drained a generation of lifeblood out of Montana. About like this one.

"Well?" Gruffness serving as apology, Tom Harry disturbed both past and present.

"A deep subject, Tom." Bill resorted to his beer, a very long swallow, to gain time to compose himself somewhat. "What's on your mind now?"

"Well, do you need the goddamn Packard for anything?" The bartender sounded shy and grumpy at the same time. "You look like the dog ate your supper, and so I just wondered if the car and some gas rations would help you out any." Tom Harry bunched his shoulders. "Take the wife Christmas shopping in Great Falls or some damn thing--how do I know what you're supposed to do in maddermoany, I never been in front of any preacher."

Bill Reinking dispensed some more money onto the bar and indicated another round for the hopeful denizens at the far end. "Thanks for the offer, Tom, you're a prince among publicans." Rising to go, he hefted the bundle as if it had grown heavier since he came in. "But I have business to tend to at the word shop."

*All right, Reinking, think, damn it, think. Since you can't get your hands on the neck of that colonel or whatever other Tepee Weepy creep is screwing us over--Moxie is right about that much--you have to twist this the other direction somehow. Don't pitch a fit, won't do any good--they've got cast-iron butts in Washington, they can sit on our orders home until they're good and ready. Let's just try the old innocent start-the-show approach and see if that reminds them to be human beings.*

“As you see, Ben, the ticker room is quite the odd collection, your lot and ours squigged together rather like strangers on a trolley.” In the bunkerful of teletypes and other message apparatus where Maurice was showing him around, the British uniforms of blue hue offsetting the khaki drab of American clerks did resemble a rush-hour swatch of contrasts. “I suppose the miracle is that it works at all,” he gestured broadly, “separated as we are by a common language.”

Ordinarily Ben's smile nerves would have twitched at that, but not today. “So how do I send smoke signals to Tepee Weepy, with everyone in here busy running the war?”

“Right. I’ve secured you a ticker, where you have utmost priority--that set of orders that follows you around, Ben, is quite magical--”

*Sure, except when Tepee Weepy uses it as black magic and extends Moxie and leaves the pair of us dangling in the buzz bomb capital of the world.*

“--and I have authority to snaffle a clerk for you as wanted.” Maurice meditatively tweaked his ball-shaped nose as if turning the knob for the next idea. “I thought perhaps a glamor-pants Wren, to add scenery to duty? The Women’s Royal Naval Service has some lovelies bored with typing weather reports.”

Out of the mists of feminine scenery glimpsed beyond the wonders of Cass came the echo of Adrianna, *rub a dub dub*. Ben could readily imagine that seersucker was not the only shapely uniform that sopped up carbon paper, and that an eye-batting invitation to join a scrub in the tub was not unheard of here, either. If Moxie and Inez were any indication, life under buzz bomb siege tended to concentrate minds, downward. But the object of desire he needed to concentrate on was the earliest possible plane out of here. “No go, Maurice, thanks anyway,” he committed to. “No Wrens or sparrows or cuckoos or anything else except a wire clerk in an American uniform that I outrank all to hell.”

Maurice tweaked his nose again, pondering. “It shall be done. Have yourself a cup of mystery beverage”--the lore was that when the Antwerp commandant tasted what was in the hot-pot urn over in the corner, he sputtered “*If this is coffee, bring me tea. If this is tea, bring me coffee.*”-- “while I sort out a clerk of that mode.”

Claiming a spot at a momentarily vacant desk, Ben took gulps of the stuff, figuring it went with Antwerp hardship duty, while he labored over a message pad. He crumpled several versions before the penciled words had the right nudge to them. When Maurice turned up with a bewildered U.S. Army private first class in tow, Ben barely caught his name before handing him the message to be sent.



READY AT THIS END. STAMPER WAITING ROYAL TREATMENT. SOONER BETTER, SOONEST BEST--THIS IS HOME FIELD OF BUZZ BOMBS.

The wire clerk, with prodigious eyeglasses and eyes almost as large behind them, scrutinized the lines. "Sir, I'm supposed to put it into code. Did you want to do this in plain English first, so the other end won't misunderstand what--"

Ben hung a look on him that answered that. "Right away, sir," said the clerk, his rear end practically scorching the seat as he sat to the wire machine. "The two of you seem as happy together as a box of birds," Maurice said drily, "so I shall leave you to this."

TPWP's reply clattered out in a surprisingly short time.

TIMEOUT NOT OVER YET IN HOMECOMING GAME. WORTH THE WAIT.

Two quick darts of Ben's pencil and he held the message pad over the keyboard. The clerk started to ask where the rest of it was, encountered the just-send-it look again, and fired off:

Y?

This time the response from across the ocean came in a long salvo of clacking keys.

YOU SOUND ITCHY TO BREAK HUDDLE, SO HERE IS GAME PLAN.  
STAMPER BLAZE OF GLORY SCHEDULED FOR USO HOLIDAY SHOW DURING TEN DAYS OF CHRISTMAS TOUR, LONDON, PARIS, ETC. ANTWERP SHOW FIRST IN LINE. FULL CHEERING SECTION FOR END OF 'SUPREME TEAM' SAGA--  
NATIONWIDE BROADCAST STATESIDE, 'YOUR USO ON THE GO' NEWSREEL, TED LOUDON IN PERSON TO DEVOTE ENTIRE 'SPORTS REPORT' TO STAMPER AND--

It sunk in to Ben like a stab that kept on penetrating. Tepee Weepy and Loudon. The unholy pair that manufactured the 'Supreme Team' in the first place. Now an entire week of hanging around with the buzz bombs, just so Loudon could mouth off nationally, hell, internationally about--

*Wandly*

“Break in, quick,” he instructed the wire operator while frantically scrawling. The young soldier apprehensively but bravely looked up from the message. “‘Loudmouth,’ sir?”

“Sorry, that got away from me.” Ben grabbed back the paper, cursing and fixing the name at the same time. Off the message went.

CAN'T WE DO THAT STATESIDE, AT TSU STADIUM FOR INSTANCE, SITE OF INITIAL GLORY ETC.? LOUDON NOT A HABITUE OF EUROPE NORMALLY.

There was a pause, giving Ben some faint hope that logic might register on TPWP. Then:

NEGATIVE. LOUDON TO USE ANTWERP OCCASION TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE TREASURE STATE GOLDEN EAGLES OF 1941--'ELEVEN MEN AS BRAVE ON THE ULTIMATE FIELD OF BATTLE AS ON THE GRIDIRON'--ARE HIS ALL-AMERICAN TEAM FOR 1944, IN MEMORIAM. YOU AND STAMPER WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED AS THE SURVIVING TEAMMATES, THUS PRESENCE IN ANTWERP MANDATORY UNTIL AFTER USO SHOW.

Ben stared at the words. *You goddamn grandstander, Loudmouth. You never miss a chance to pluck the patriotic harp, do you. All-Dead is closer to the truth.* Maximum urges contended in him, to sink into a corner laughing insanely or take a kicking fit against the TPWP wire machine. The owl-eyed clerk watched him skittishly.

Pulling himself together, more or less, he gripped the pencil and pad, and with concentration as slow and forced as a grade-schooler's put into block letters the next message.

STAMPER COMING DOWN WITH NERVOUS IN THE SERVICE. SUGGEST IMMEDIATE LEAVE TO TIDE HIM OVER UNTIL USO SHOW. IF HE CRACKS UP, LORD HAW HAW WILL HAVE PLENTY TO HEE-HEE ABOUT. Parsing it to himself,