

he added, sardonically wondering if he had better get a rubber stamp of it made:  
SOONEST BEST.

Tepee Weepy got the message in more ways than one.

SOON IS BEST THAT CAN BE DONE THROUGH ANTWERP HQ CHANNELS,  
BUT WILL HAVE STAMPER PULLED FROM ACK-ACK DUTY, DON'T WORRY.

The teletype machine fell silent for all of ten seconds or so, then burped  
back into action.

NOW TO BUSINESS AS USUAL: EXPECTING THOUSAND-WORD PIECE,  
CLASSIC REINKING STYLE OF SHINE AND SHADOW, ON LIFE IN COMBAT ZONE  
'SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE.'

"Have you gone out of your gourd, Ben? They're supposed to give me  
leave here in a combat zone?" That evening in the Wonder Bar, Moxie was so  
incredulous he was neglecting his beer. "I'll believe that the day after it happens."

"Fine," Ben said tiredly. "You can test your faith when the general calls  
you in, first thing tomorrow. Maurice set it up." He started his bottle to his lips,  
then thought to check on Moxie's facial tic. It was active. *Good, that'll help.* "By  
the way, I had to make you out to be next thing to a nut case. So if people look at  
you a certain way, that's why."

Shaking his head, Moxie laughed, short and sharp. "Rhine King, you  
never did think I threw you the ball enough."

They had to kill seven days waiting for the USO show, every one of those  
a blankwalled twenty-four hours of tedium with a concrete lid on it. It did not help  
that they both thought their underground quarters smelled like Montana earthen  
cellars where potatoes and rutabagas were stored. Moxie, restless as a sidewinder  
even in the best of times, had a particularly hard time with enforced leisure. "If I

wanted to be caged up, I'd have been born a goddamn canary." Growly and still ticcig, he devoted himself to reading Philo Vance mysteries during the day and romancing Inez in the Wonder Bar at night.

For his part, Ben prowled the bunker maze of the base with a simmering case of deadline fever, searching for some way to write about Antwerp's deluges of death from the sky without ever mentioning buzz bombs. "What if," he tried out on Maurice Overby, "I just say it's a mystery weapon the Germans call a *Vergeltungswaffe*?"

"Rather a nice try, Ben, but I'm afraid not," came the prim response. "There are without doubt some among your American readership familiar enough with the German language to connect '*waffe*' to '*Luftwaffe*' and draw the pertinent conclusion, wouldn't you say? No, I realize it's a hard go, but HQ requires that you keep whatever you write about Antwerp"--the squarely-planted censor gestured off generally--"general."

*Great, Maurice. I can just say Antwerp has an unusual share of funerals, can I? You should work for Tepee Weepy.*

When he grew tired of beating his head against a story he was not allowed to tell, he holed up in the windowless concrete room with the scent of root cellar and made tiny editing changes in the "*Ghost Runner*" screenplay, aware all the while how geographically ridiculous it was to be conjuring the Letter Hill in waffle-flat Belgium. All in all, distance maybe lent something, but it did not smell like enchantment. And when he ran out of things to fuss at in the script, he emulated Moxie and read, napped, brooded some more about the piece that couldn't say anything. All the while, the clock slowed to eternal Old World time. Another day in the war. What was the count up to by now?

He was marking the fourth day of the wait by reading a much-passed-around news magazine that breathlessly speculated the war could be over by

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Christmas--*Yeah, right, has anybody told the Germans?*--when Maurice rapped on the doorway in a grand announcing fashion. "A communique for you, in the priority packet." He held up the envelope by the tip of one corner. "Inasmuch as it's addressed in a feminine hand, I thought it wise to deliver it forthwith."

Eyes widening, Ben reached out for the letter. Maurice coughed discreetly. "I shall leave you to it. See you in the dining hall."

*Dear Ben, wherever you are, Scar--*

Already Cass's words had him aching for her. Quickly he turned the letter to take in a line written sideways along the margin near the top: *Your Holy Joe corporal looked like I was about to set his Bible on fire, but he took pity and said he could sneak this to you somehow.* Bedazzled as a kid with a kaleidoscope, he spun the full page of inked lines back into reading position.

*This set of scribbles may surprise you as much as it does me. But I can't hold back--I've been writing this in my head for days on end and the only cure is to put it on paper.*

*So here goes. Remember we used to talk about the million-dollar wound?* He remembered in all ways. The heart never forgets anything; the flesh remembers indiscriminately. *There were all those times I caught myself wishing you'd get a tiny one--just another scar--and be out of the war for good. But if Dan's is any indication, the price is awful damn high. I take him over to Fort Hairry once a week for the bone doc to test how his leg is coming along, and he hates that routine. He's on crutches in between--he hates that, too. Sometime after the first of the year, they'll ship him to the specialist who'll patch that tendon in and then all the time in rehab, as they call it. We go around and around about whether I stay with him in California for all that. I say of course I will. He says like hell I will, he can be a cripple just the same without me around, go do something useful with myself.*



*In some odd way I think he wants to be with other Montaneer guys--you know what a bloody mess Leyte has turned out to be, bunches of the worst wounded from his regiment are ending up there in San Diego--more than with me. I'm not crying on your shoulder, Ben, I just needed to tell somebody who knows up from down when it comes to a man and a woman.*

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

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

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

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

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*Hugs and tickles,*

*Cass*

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

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

There still was Dan Standish.

There still was the war.

And the creeping shadow of fear, always there, that oblivion was not through with the Supreme Team yet.

Even so, he felt distinctly better about life with lines from Cass in his hand even if they led to nowhere.

He figured he must be misunderstanding something.

In the dining bunker he found Maurice poking a fork at chipped beef on overtoasted toast. By a grave misjudgment of joint command, the British had been put in charge of the food and the Americans in charge of the beer. "Saved you a spot," Maurice indicated across the table, "although you may not thank me when you taste this. No bad news from home, I hope, arriving in the fashion it did?"

"Good enough. No news would have been bad news." With the ghost of a grin Ben let the allusion hang in the direction of his host and censor.

"Ah, well, spoken like a journalist. Other than that," Maurice took a sip of tea or coffee, whichever it was, "still passing the time working on the hemstitch of your straitjacket?"

"You nailed it, Maurice," Ben responded with his first outright laugh in days. He couldn't help it, he liked the company of this man who talked as some people sing.

"I do have some allowable news, just between thee and me and the cocotte clock," Maurice brought out. "Intelligence estimates, to flatter them with that, indicate the Huns may be giving up on buzz bombs. It has been most of a week since that last batch. And no matter how many they've sent, they haven't managed to cripple the port at all. Hitler's rocket men may be out of business for lack of results --the German high command putting all that fuel into keeping the rest of its military machine alive, the thinking is."

"The lights aren't been blinking and the ground isn't shaking," Ben said gratefully, "so I hoped something like that was happening."

"Absence of anything in the air at the moment may be the intelligence wizards' full evidence too," Maurice offered his own airy speculation. "We shall have to see." Furrowing his brow and on up into the bald outskirts, he stated: "I have been thinking. As things now stand, it might be possible to get out and about a bit, if that would help with your TPWP matter?"

Ben tossed his fork into the gluey meal, ready to go that minute. "Christ, yes. It'd put legs under the piece."

"We need to be quite cautious," came the voice of prudence across the table. "But the Antwerp outskirts have been less dangerous than the city proper. If there's an all-clear in the morning, we might judiciously explore some area of interest to you." Maurice sent him an inquiring look. "Ben, I have forgotten to ask--which are you, bars-and-brothels or castles-and-cathedrals?"

On the spot, he thought it over. "Somewhere between."

"Wise choice. All horizons kept open, that way," the man from Nowhere spelled backwards declaimed, bouncing it word by word. "I should leave to you

any excursions in the direction of sin, however, personal taste and all that. What would please you in the other direction?"

"What I really want," Ben was somewhat surprised to hear himself say, "is to go to Waterloo."



The next day the two of them set off as soon as there was light enough to see by, before the fog was up. The stonework of Antwerp receded behind them in the thin winter dawn as the Jeep passed through the successive belts of anti-aircraft gun pits, the ack-ack suburbs, and then out onto the main road in company with the around-the-clock line of trucks from the port. Squeezed in between the big six-wheeled cargo carriers, Maurice steered with the patience of a man whose reward was coming. "There are farm roads once we're out a way--those will swing us around Brussels and this clot of lorries." He patted the plasticine map case atop his briefcase. "You're the navigator."

Before long Ben spotted the first of the rural roads and they turned off into a landscape white and quiet. Low ruined houses and sheds stood skeletal every little distance, and even the few farms that the war had not savaged sat empty in a spectral way. Wrapped in his horseblanket overcoat and glad of it, Ben blew on his writing hand whenever he jotted in his notepad. As the stark farmyards went by, he noticed there were no animals in the fields and then caught up with why--all had been eaten during Belgium's starving years of Nazi occupation, including the horses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He sounds about like mine," Ben mused. "Spends his nights in history up to his ears."

"Up to his rifle shoulder, in my father's case," came the response to that. Ben glanced over, sensing why it was put that way. Maurice stayed staring straight ahead over the steering wheel as he spoke, the words suddenly less clipped. "Reads all the military history he can, the old fellow, says he's going to keep on

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until he finds the one that gets it right. He was at Gallipoli, in the first big go. Caught fragments from a Turk grenade in that shoulder, invalidated home by Christmas of 1915. He never afterward could lift that arm enough to comb his hair. Mum has combed it for him for thirty years." A light of remembering, distant and wintry, had come into his eyes. "Even so, he counted himself one of the lucky ones. Some ten thousand New Zealanders and Australians did not make it home from that beachhead, ever." He paused. "My British colleagues can cite chapter and verse about their 'lost generation' in the trenches here, but they shrug off Gallipoli. As though there were a different set of numbers for those of us in the colonies." Breaking his spell of recital, Maurice sent a considerate look to Ben. "But why am I carrying on to you about unjust numbers? Sorry about that."

They drove on in silence, in the white iron winter over the northern half of the world.

The snowglare on the buttes against the clear morning sky lent Great Falls a rim of dazzling ivory. *Wouldn't you just damn know. Perfect flying weather and we're grounded for eternity.* Signing her way through last-minute paperwork, Cass every so often cast a pining look out the ready-room window. Around her, her pilots restlessly filled the wait as best they could, some jokes, some bitten lips to clamp emotion away. Taking extreme care not to show it, she herself was having to fight a case of trembles. So enormously much that was ending today. Everything else that was not. She had survived the war, the P-39, the P-63. Now to survive the situation with Dan. He was a bear some days--a lot of days--in the recuperation that sometimes he did not even seem to want. Other times, his old carnie self came through, he was full of plans, the old notion of barnstorming, flying, wingwalking. She was not sure wingwalking had survived the war.

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*And when I'm not sure, I start dreaming about Ben, don't I. If wishes were fishes, I'd be Jonah.*

One more time, Cass strung herself together. She glanced at the clock next to the flight board, coming onto the hour. "All right, officers, let's get outside and form up."

The eleven women lined up in three ranks at the edge of the long runway. They were in Sunday uniform, white shirt, tan slacks--except for the leather flight jackets worn against the Montana cold, the same dress uniform each of them had worn at graduation from pilot school in Texas, hundreds of flying hours ago. Deep-creased crush hats crowned manes of hair; Cass could have picked every member of her squadron out of a thousand by the way the hat sat. She inspected them one last time as they stood at attention.

"Della, half step right. M.C., half step left. That's Beryl's spot between you."

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

Work on the unpainted bombers and P-63s stilled for a moment as the women mechanics in hairnets and overalls looked around from the wings and platform ladders they stood on to the WASPs crisply saluting the waiting general. The gathering was not large. A perfunctory honor guard, rifles at rest and flag drooping in the still air of the hangar. The fresh-faced Canadian liaison officer, down from Edmonton for the occasion. Jones with a Speed Graphic camera, blazing away with flashbulb after flashbulb; he had worshipfully let Cass know there would be a set of photographs for each pilot. The general at the portable podium his aide had set up shuffled his papers as if this were one more chore, glanced up at Cass as if she were personally responsible for his being saddled with Grady's Ladies all this while, and gruffly began. Standing at attention determined

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

Rising from his chair like a gallant of old, the Senator came around the table and delivered a forehead kiss to his wife as she settled in her seat. "Good morning, Sadie, light of my life." He stayed standing, looking out the lead-paned windows of the breakfast nook at most of a week's worth of lazy flakes still descending on Washington like tired confetti. "Isn't this town the damndest place? It doesn't even know how to have a proper blizzard."

His wife helped herself to what little coffee he had left for her in the pot. "I hope, Luther, you aren't going to put yourself in charge of the weather next."

"Not hardly," he drawled, bemused. "The Pentagon no doubt will be enough of a snow job, as our daughter the sailor would say." Despite his words, his wife knew he was relishing this lame-duck session of Congress, inasmuch as he was preeminently of the opposite species. The war having spawned so many military bases in the western states, the region at last was in line to seat a formidable old cuss of its own in the main chair of the committee that held the purse-strings in such matters, now that the venerable chairman had retired to his peach farm. With his whopping re-election, the Senator fit the bill and he intended to fill it. His plateside reading these mornings was a tome titled *Bureaucracies and Their Foibles*.

Her busy day of holiday chores on her mind with Christmas coming fast, his wife somewhat absently waited for him to pull out his dollar watch, his signal of leaving for the Capitol. Today he made a show of consulting its Roman numerals, but a governing instinct of a murkier sort had taken hold of him as it

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

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

Actually, there was more to it than that. In dismal bunkhouses and drafty line cabins when the century and he were unconquerably young, this gaunt old bone-sprung prairie Caesar had read his way up in the world via weekly compilations of community happenings just such as these; somehow even then he savvied more than was on the page, and the Faustian skills of small-town editors--recording angel one paragraph, gossipmonger the next--he had been careful to reckon with ever since. If nothing else, it appealed to him as cheap insurance for a



man in his position. He could see no sign in the insane modern world that the pen was mightier than the sword, but it was damn sure stronger than most campaign speeches.

As he worked through this day's stack of newsprint about livestock prices and the latest run of bad weather, he checked his watch again. The new power that was coming to him with the gavel of the committee needed judicious exercise in the halls of the Senate and he had to allow time for that. He at last was in a position to do something about alphabet-soup wartime projects that did not point straight to victory and he was not going to waste--

The bold line of type caught his eye as he was paging through the *Gros Ventre Gleaner*.

THOSE WHO GAVE ALL.

At these words something occurred, like a catch of breath but much deeper, in the hardened Senator. He blinked and looked again. He had not seen that heading since World War One. His kid brother had been one of those listed then, mortally wounded in a barrage at Chateau-Thierry in 1918.

Staring, he bent closer over the column of names of young ones grown to military age in the quarter-century since.

*Adamic, Stefan, killed in action in New Guinea.*

*Baker, Raymond, died in military hospital of wounds suffered in the Anzio invasion.*

*Cooper, Samuel, sailor on the USS Yorktown, missing in action.*

*Copenhaver, Theodore, killed in plane crash during training at Sweetwater, Texas.*

*Crosby, Vern, killed in action at Leyte...*

With a chill he ran his finger on down and down the alphabet of death. *Christ, that many? In one county? A county--and an editor--he thought he knew*

like the back of his hand. In their span of political alliances of convenience he considered Bill Reinking a bit soft on Roosevelt, but rock-solid other than that. The list broke at the bottom of the newspaper column, and started anew at top of the next.

*McCaskill, Alex, killed in strafing attack in Tunisia.*

*Peterson, Morton, died as prisoner-of-war in Bataan death march.*

*Petrie, Laura Ann, Army nurse, killed by artillery barrage behind the lines at the battle for Avranches.*

*Quigg, James, shot down over Germany, missing in action.*

*Rennie, Victor, died in England during a bombing raid...*

He felt as if he was reading something direly biblical. Old family names of the Two Medicine country, the soul of the state. Heavy loss in more ways than one, and the *Gleaner* editor must have been driven to do this by its unavoidable weight.

The Senator rubbed his long jaw and rapidly riffled through the rest of the weeklies in that stack. The Choteau *Acantha* also listed it's county's war dead, as did the Lewistown *Argus*, the Sidney *Herald*, the Dillon *Herald-Examiner*. He hesitated, then started going through the next batch of newspapers from the eastern part of the state. Lists of the war dead showed up in several of the papers from there too, so whatever Bill Reinking had caught was still breaking out elsewhere.

Something else, too. Like father, like son. The Senator went back and counted. Of the sixteen weeklies in the two batches, nearly all had run Ben Reinking's story on the last flight of the Supreme Team's ninth man, Lieutenant Jacob Eisman.

The Senator stalked out to the telephone on the hallway stand and dialed as if incising the numbers.

"Mullen, get me the goddamn figures on how many Montana soldiers have been killed in this war. And then for all the other states."

As the general finished up and presented the Senator's letter to Cass, his aide stood ready with the bright-colored service ribbons for her to pin on the chests of her pilots. She hoped her hands would be steady enough; she set her mind to making them steady enough. The women mechanics on the wings of all the planes stood watching now. Someone started it by clanging one wrench against another, and then the others began banging their tools, the thunderous metallic applause filling the East Base hangar and rolling out to the glistening buttes.

The hill, white and pyramidal and alone of its kind in the spongy Belgian countryside ahead, sent a chill through Ben as the Jeep wheeled through the village of Waterloo to the actual battlefield. When he hastily checked, Maurice's guidebook described the area as gentle farmland when the armies of Europe massed there on a midsummer day in 1815, and the out-of-place hill, so artificially perfect in contour, as a mound of earth built to honor one of Wellington's Dutch generals, the Prince of Orange, wounded in the battle but of the kind he could gallantly write home about it that night. Ben already was jotting--*the Butte du Lion, name piled on it as sod was heaped in homage to a royal wound*--when Maurice proposed as if on cue: "What do you say we take the high ground, Ben? If glory does not await us there, luncheon does."

From up there, the winter rumple of the land for a few miles around was hard to read as somewhere history was written in blood, Ben found. Not much had been made of the battlefield. A modest museum across the road from the mound, not yet back in business since the Germans left. A plaque there on the hilltop diagramming the battle, and a colossal cast-iron lion on a pedestal, supposedly



emblematic of the Prince's courage, gazing implacably over the sleeping landscape. Otherwise, the mildly rolling plain of Waterloo looked unaltered since the sea gave it to the land. Yet down at the bottom of the manufactured hill lay the otherwise insignificant low ridge, the Duke of Wellington's high ground, where Napoleon's legions battered themselves to death in charge after charge. Ben measured off a mile with his eye, then another, then a third; incongruous as it seemed, that bit of countryside scarcely big enough to pasture a restless band of sheep had held the army of France, Britain's and armies of other nations scared stiff of Napoleon remaking the map of Europe, and thirty thousand cavalry horses. The only surly aspect at the moment was the weather, low-rolling clouds starting to spit snowflakes, and the forest near Waterloo village that had stood out dark against the snow when they arrived now was gowned in fog. Maurice had brought a thermos of hot drink--it was actually identifiable as tea--and they munched twists of bully beef and squares of chocolate along with it as they deciphered the battle site from the *Trekker's* guide. Then Ben began to write in the notepad and Maurice circled the tight top of the mound clicking photographs to send home to New Zealand.

When the chill began to get to both of them, Maurice at the other end of the lion's parapet sent Ben a look that politely inquired whether he about had enough for his TPWP piece. He did. The notepad held nugget phrases he could refine in the typewriter tonight. Belgium as the unwilling crossroads marched over by contending armies so many times, Waterloo as the sole crossroads in Belgium that counted on a reddened day four generations of soldiers ago. A high-ranking officer on Wellington's general staff who had a mania for resorting to rockets, buzz bombs of the day, although he would have to somehow get that across between the lines. The nearly permanent battlefield dateline, *Somewhere in Europe*, in 1815 here amid fields of Flemish corn and rye, at the moment in the forest and genuine uplands of the Ardennes on the border of Germany. That was part of the hell of

war, you could so readily trace it from the past to now in an undiminished bloodline. "I've had enough if you have," he called across the mound top to Maurice and they descended the steps of the hill to begin the journey back to Antwerp.

They were back on the road along the foggy forest when the jeep popped around a corner near where a telephone line crossed, and on the roadside just ahead were three American G.I.s, surprise all over them, arrayed at the closest pole. The pair in pole-climbing gear were about halfway up while the third one, carrying a rifle, stood guard. "Minions of your Alexander Graham Bell at Waterloo," Maurice remarked, "what next?" He and Ben saw the guard call up to the others, then wave urgently for the jeep to stop.

As they pulled to a halt, the G.I. on guard stepped in close to the jeep and saluted. His winterweight field jacket and olive drab pants showing the grime of duty, his tone carried customary soldierly complaint. "Sure glad to see you, officers, isn't this weather crappy? They"--the universal infantryman's code for those in charge--"dropped us here to fix the line. Can you give us a lift, to catch up with the other fellows?"

"Willingly," said Maurice, elegantly courteous beyond what the soldier seemed to have expected. Ben looked at the reddened hands clutching the rifle. He chipped in some down-to-earth sympathy over standing around in the snow guarding Signal Corps handymen. "They've got you riding shotgun on the spool crew, have they. That can't be fun. Who's going to be around here except tourists like us?"

The soldier, no youngster, glanced around nervously. "Sir, looking out for infiltrators. Strict instructions, sir."

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Maurice lifted an eyebrow skeptically. "This far from the front? That would be ambitious of the Huns." Overhead, Ben could see the pair of linemen feverishly squirreling into work position at the top of the pole, apparently eager for the jeep ride. The one leaning back in his climbing belt at the top said something to the lower one, who fumbled in tool bag at his waist to hand up a set of wire pliers. It occurred to Ben, under the circumstances, to make conversation with the soldier at the side of the jeep. "What did you think of the Army-Navy game?"

"Army beat them good, hah?" the G.I. responded appreciatively. "Twenty-three to seven, right, sir?"

"Navy never stood a chance against guys who can run the ball like Pilchard and Travis," Ben offered his analysis. Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel during this football talk, Maurice looked over at him with abstract curiosity. Ben breezed on, "I didn't get to hear the game, so I missed out on the details--who got the touchdowns?"

The soldier worked at remembering. "Pilchard and Travis had one each, I think, sir."

Ben reached casually to his side and pulled out the .45 pistol. "It's Blanchard and Davis, *kamerad*." Then shot the man in the shoulder before he could yank the rifle up into action.

With that one crying out in German as he writhed on the ground, Ben for good measure fired a couple of shots up at the phone line saboteurs. One hurled the tool bag and hit the hood of the Jeep as Maurice jammed into reverse, while the other sought the skinny shelter of the pole as he tried to pull a pistol from the unfamiliar American holster with a flap. The Jeep careening backward was well out of range down the road, when Maurice swung it around and tromped on the accelerator.



As the jeep roared its way back to the main road, they could already see a confusion of military traffic ahead, tanker trucks and armored jeeps streaming toward the Ardennes front and ambulances forcing through in the opposite direction. It was mid-December, and the moving wall of oblivion that Allied troops would call the Battle of the Bulge was set into motion.

vehicles  
tanker  
trucks  
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## 21

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

*German armored columns pierced the Allied lines in a surprise counterattack today along the Ardennes front. The German offensive, spearheaded by Panzer tanks, took advantage of a ghostly infiltration by English-speaking Germans in U.S. Army uniforms who cut phone lines and changed road signs, sowing confusion behind the lines from the Ardennes forest to Antwerp.*

*Royal Air Force Lieutenant Maurice Overby and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage at a place haunted with history's bloody joust of armies, the battlefield of Waterloo. Our Jeep was hailed by a rifle-carrying soldier, his G.I. uniform appropriately grimy and a footslogger's usual complaints ready on his lips....*

Ben apprehensively watched Maurice read the piece as if chewing every word and letting it digest. The wire clerk, bored, took off his glasses, polished them, held them up to the light, polished them some more.

Finally Maurice issued with a polite but firm frown: "Sorry, Ben, but this simply cannot be let pass."

*No, no, goddamn it, Maurice, oh please. My biggest story of the war and you're going to sit on it. Why couldn't you tell me that before I busted my butt*

*writing it?* Anguished words building in him for what he knew would be a futile protest, he was stopped by the censorious finger significantly tapping the first sheet of copy paper. "Flattering as it would be to have my name entered in posterity in this fashion," Maurice was holding forth, "you must strike it. Regulations." He handed Ben the full set of pages.

"That's it? That's all?"

"Right." Unmoving as a crate, Maurice stood watching Ben's pencil slash out his name and dab in substitute wording. He nodded in satisfaction and walked off as Ben thrust the pages to the waiting wire clerk.

*(New lede--byline Reinking)*

*Allied forces are trying to regroup along a shattered Ardennes front, where German tank columns shadowed by Wehrmacht foot soldiers in snow-colored camouflage uniforms have advanced nearly a quarter of the way to Antwerp. The surprise breakout, bulging 25 miles into Allied lines, was aided by German infiltrators who snarled communication lines before the armored attack. (Pick up previous piece as follows.)*

*A Royal Air Force officer and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage at a place haunted with history's bloody joust of armies, the battlefield of Waterloo....*

As transmissions of combat reports filtered in to the wildly clattering wire room, Ben pieced together the picture and updated his story time and again. He eyed Maurice warily each time he handed him a new first page, but invariably it was handed back with that benign nod.

All that night and into next day--Ben had lost track of time--as the German attack careened through surprised Allied forces, the only interruption to his flow of story was the periodic message from Tepee Weepy: GREAT STUFF, KEEP SENDING.



*(6th new lede--byline Reinking)*

*The bulge in the line of fierce fighting along the Ardennes front has grown hour by hour, as Allied forces fall back from the brunt of the desperate German counterattack. Smoke arose outside abandoned command posts as Christmas mail not yet distributed to American troops was burned to keep it from falling into German hands. Communications among Allied forces still suffer from the snipped phone lines and misdirected road signs inflicted by infiltrators. (Pick up previous piece as follows.)*

*A Royal Air Force officer and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage at a place haunted with...*

"That's it, I must tell you, Ben." Maurice was just back from the command bunker. "HQ has had orders from Supreme Headquarters to halt all news reports except official releases. Which is to say, no news."

"Take a break," Ben blearily told the slumped-over wire clerk and saw him off to the beverage urn. He turned around to Maurice, rubbing his eyes and trying to work the kink out of his neck from all the hours bent over teletype machines. "Just between you and me and the red pencil that didn't come out of your pocket, why did they let me get away with what I sent?"

"Interesting situation," Maurice responded as blandly as if it was a problem in chess. "Our general was quite firm about making it known to the world this German breakthrough is a nasty business for us. What is the American term, to set up a howl?" His tone turned solemn. "All the combat reports indicate the bulge, so-called, is aimed directly here, to retake Antwerp. Shut down the port, cut our forces in two at the same time," he made a sweeping gesture to illustrate the extent of the strategy, "it makes quite good sense from the Hun point of view, doesn't it.

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sabotage

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Therefore HQ here thought wise to put the word out--your words, actually--before Supreme Headquarters clamped down on the embarrassing news that the Germans caught them with their pants very much down."

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

Moxie was taking the Battle of the Bulge personally. Wound tight, he sat on the edge of his bunk as if about to spring. "Those sneaky German SOBs. They're going for broke." It was the best military analysis Ben had heard yet.

"Are they still going to get us out of here?" Moxie demanded with a heated look up at Ben in the doorway.

Propped there, Ben answered with each sentence taking effort. "So they claim. They'll have to get the USO bunch out, we ought to be in the same kettle with them. Maurice keeps checking--the Luftwaffe isn't so much in this, it's more a hell of a ground attack." He looked at the man rooted to the bunk and before he knew it heard himself saying what he was thinking: "You know, Mox, there's no law that you couldn't get off your duff and see what you can find out--"

"I am. I have." Moxie shifted to one side on his perch, then right back. "I was about to tell you. I hunted up our ack-ack intelligence officer, we go back a long ways together. They figure when Supreme Headquarters gets its head out of its butt, they'll be able to stop the Germans about halfway here. Ten days or two weeks. It's going to get worse before it gets better." He gnawed his mouth at the next news. "Ben? They're pulling my crews and some of the others to throw them into it as anti-tank outfits. Those ninety-millimeters can knock the turret off a Tiger tank. But it's front-line fighting, they could get overrun awful damn easy the way the Germans are rolling."

"Then aren't you lucky you're here and not there." Ben teetered away from the doorframe. "I need chow and sleep. Hold the fort, Captain Stamper."

He was forking down scrambled powdered eggs and sausages that tasted like sawdust when the wire clerk came looking for him.

"Sir, the Hollywood major wants to see you."

"The which?"

"The rec officer. He's big on USO shows and the bigger the movie star"--the clerk's glasses glinted as he cupped his hands in front of his chest to indicate the category of big--"the better he likes it."

Food and fork forgotten, Ben tried to see past the opaque gaze of the clerk. Was this the ticket home? Or the next thing the war had up its sleeve? "Does that mean the USO troupe is here? On the ground?"

"Yes, sir. Landed from Prestwick about an hour ago."

Now Ben was halfway up out of his chair. "Where do I find this major?"

Giving him a *where else?* look, the clerk answered: "In the Wonder Bar, sir."

The bunker corridor near the Officers Club looked like a backstage that had dropped into a theater basement. The black pebbled leatherette cases of musical instruments were paraded along the concrete base of the wall. People not in military olive drab, standing out like peacocks, bustled in and out of rooms. Passing one, Ben glimpsed the movie actress famous for choosing the shyest fuzz-cheeked soldier in the audience for the honor of sprinkling delousing powder down her back. Elsewhere, several band members were in a card game with the comedian whose jokes fed off how skinny he was. Picking his way in through the clutter of the USO troupe, Ben found the Wonder Bar all but unrecognizable--a

arrayed



temporary stage across one end and tables and elbow room banished to make space for wall-to-wall rows of folding chairs. Trying to tally it all, he felt cocooned in a weird mix of silly dream and nightmare. Not a hundred miles away soldiers were dying in droves in the German surprise attack, and in here was show business as usual, setting up to manufacture songs, patter, and jokes. Half-heartedly he tried a pep talk on himself: just get through this travesty of Antwerp's war, the Duke of Wellington had danced in Brussels a few nights before Waterloo, hadn't he? Morale of the troops, what antics are committed in thy name--

"Good, good, you're here. Ted has been wanting to see you." The major who had materialized and was patting him on the upper arm had chalky eyebrows and the hatchet face of a deacon. Amid the semi-chaos of entertainment being set up he was looking as pleased as could be. "I'll take you over and intro--"

"That's okay, sir. We've met."

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

"Where do you think you are, back in palookaville?" Even in what passed for conversation, Loudon's pace of talk any more was the fastest an ear could keep up with. "It's the Rex, you're in a country with a king, get it? So what I want is--" he caught sight of ginger hair and an impassive longitudinal face. "Ben Reinking! Captain Reinking. Captain on the gridiron, captain in the service of his country." The idea seemed to entertain Loudon. "What a piece of luck you're here to be on the show with Moxie, two heroes for the price of one." He waved off the newsreel crew. "You know the drill, boys. See you when you get back. Ben, you still look

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like you're in great shape. Bet you could still run down one of Moxie's passes. Hey, I wonder if--"

"Ted, no funny stuff with a football for the show. We're in a goddamn war zone and Moxie and I are both worn down to a thin edge and--"

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

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

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

“Tough.”

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

Ben as if by instinct had zeroed in on the nub of the script. *“The unbeaten Treasure State Golden Eagles of 1941 were a football team without precedent, and tonight I wish to honor them in a way befitting that. That gallant eleven, with every starting player enlisting in the service of our country after Pearl Harbor, went on to another peerless record, in courage. Nine of those football heroes gave their lives in this war, and in honor of how they gave their all, tonight I am naming that ‘Supreme Team’ who so bravely traded football uniforms for military uniforms my All-American team for this year. We are lucky to have with us tonight the two surviving heroes...”* Ben’s temples throbbed. *You never spare the schmalz, do you, Loudon, you bastard.* Script gripped in hand, he rose to get away from the man.

Loudon looked up at him expectantly. “The show’s at midnight, remember, we have to do it that late to hit prime time back home. You’re going to catch some rest, you said. Got an alarm clock?”

“In my pocket.”

Ben left the Wonder Bar with Loudon staring after him in puzzlement.

He flopped down on his bunk with the cocotte clock set to go off in half an hour. He knew better than to drop deep asleep for an extended time, he would still be groggy when it was the time for the show. He had lived with the clock of war for so long, with its unending hours and split-second dangers, that rationing his time for one last night was worth everything. Tomorrow a plane homeward out of

*bastard*  
*2*



the war. In some other tomorrow, a script made into a movie that would reveal Loudon and Bruno for what they were. His tired mind traversed from the one thought to the other, forth and back, as Maurice would have said. He dozed off that way.

When the cocotte clock dinged, he cracked his eyes barely a slit and closed them again against the corridor lighting pouring through the doorway. It was the most welcome indulgence in days just to lie there with the faint rosy nothingness behind the eyelids. The nothingness dimmed for a moment.

He opened his eyes, unsure.

Then the tossed-off words came back. "*Moxie'll be along later, he's getting dressed up.*" Moxie hated dressing up. He had barely managed it for Purcell's funeral. His deliberately careless fashion was that of an unmade bed.

Ben jerked upright on the bunk, put his shoes on in a hurry and went out into the bunker corridor. He asked the officer next door: "Did the lights blink just now?"

"Same like always," came the reply in a used-to-it voice. "The buzz bomb dimmer switch."

He hurried down the corridor to Moxie's room. Empty. *Okay, he must be hanging around the Wonder Bar watching them set things up, is all. Showing Inez the glamorous life.* He couldn't quite convince himself. Moxie was not the kind to sit in a corner watching other people be in charge.

This time he stuck his head in the room across the hall, the senior enlisted men's side. A grizzled gunnery sergeant at the wall niche desk writing a letter home looked around in surprise and started to get to his feet. "At ease, Guns," Ben said quickly. "Any idea where Moxie's wandered off to?"

"Sure thing. Him and that nurse went to the flicks, in town. Some newsreel guys wanted shots of his squiring her somewhere and you know Mox, he wouldn't pass up--"

Ben set off for the wire room at a run.

The entire section was a din of teletypes clacking and phones jangling. WRENS with messages in hand scurried off into the HQ staff's warren of offices. Forging his way through the traffic of messengers, Ben latched on to the owl-eyed clerk blinking up at him in alarm from his keyboard. "Sir, we're on emergency priority, we can't send to TPWP without the commander's--"

"To hell with that. The buzz bomb that hit--where?"

"In the city, right in the center. Bad one, sir. There's a call out for ambulances from units all the way to Brussels." The clerk peered closely at a message pad he was transcribing from. "The Belgian authorities keep calling the place a 'cinema' but our regs say 'movie--'"

Ben whirled, searching the room. Where was Maurice with the damn jeep when needed? *Up to his tonsils in there with the commander and the intelligence dummies who blew this, that's where.*

Abandoning the wire room, he wove his way back to his quarters at a trot, grabbed his flight jacket and crush hat and the pistol belt, and plunged out into the long maze of corridors to the hospital bunker. The scene there was the confusion of the wire room multiplied. Stretcher bearers were bringing in a steady bloodied stream of men, women, children--some so blackened with blast dust and dried blood you could not tell which they were. Army doctors and nurses swarmed around the stretcher cases, scissoring off clothing, shunting the prone patients into surgery or wards. Constantly dodging out of the way, Ben hunted down the medical staffer keeping track of the military wounded and dead, learned most of the victims were Antwerp civilians, and Moxie's and Inez's dogtags were not among

so far

those the staffer had copied onto his clipboard list. *Okay, they're among the missing*, Ben tried to reason himself into, *that's a different list*. They could still be at the theater, Moxie by nature would take over any rescue task he could, she was a nurse--

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

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

"I'm riding with you."

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

Out the back windows of the jouncing ambulance he could see spikes of light driven into the blackness, searchlights on the hunt for buzz bombs. Whenever one was found, tracer bullets streaked toward it, the flaring bursts of larger ack-ack following, the sky over Antwerp like some hectic mosaic of fireworks. All through the careening ride he clung to a support of the triple-decker stretcher rack, watching through a porthole of the war that he knew might be his last view.

As soon as the ambulance stopped alongside others waiting to be loaded, he piled out. Unexpected brightness hit him. The market square with its avalanche of rubble, he saw from under his shielding hand, was like a movie set done by madmen. Huge arc lights illuminated the void in the line of gabled facades where the movie theater had been. Under the glare of the arcs, the mountainous spill of brickwork and rafters, framed by the pale wall of the neighboring building the theater had torn away from, lay at rest in either stark light or grim shadow. Rescue

41



squads were prying up beams, military policemen were trying to direct the erratic traffic of ambulances and trucks bringing more squads. As if sleepwalking, Ben trudged farther into the scene where Hitler's rocket men had done their worst. Off to his left on the side of the square lay blanketed figure after figure. He helplessly counted as he passed the line of corpses; he quit at fifty.

It was cold in the blast-strewn square, his breath smoked from him in ghostly wreaths. Reaching a bit of open space where he could see all around, he scanned the chainlike ranks of rescuers on the rubble heap for Moxie's lean form, Inez's broadset one. Suddenly, across the street from what had been the marquee front of the theater, he spotted the tall newsreel cameraman from the troupe. As fast as he could reach there without slipping on the blood on the cobblestones, he came up beside the man as he was busy reloading the big shoulder camera. "Where's Captain Stamper? *Where's Captain Stamper?*"

The cameraman turned and gave him a foggy look. Then realization came, and the eyes begged. "You didn't hear? Hell, I'm sorry, Mike must have missed you, I sent him back to the base for more film, he was supposed to tell Loudon. I've got to stay here and keep shooting--"

Ben grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Just tell me what happened, goddamn it!"

The cameraman blanched, backing off to his small stack of equipment. He tenderly put down his camera and picked up something from the pile. "Maybe you better see this for yourself." He held the thing out to Ben.

It was a peaked officer's cap with leather brim, the kind that went with dress uniform. Taking it from him, Ben grasped the cap in both hands for a moment and then slowly tipped it over to look inside, already knowing. In the garish light cast by the arcs he could make out the inking on the hatband:

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LIKE HELL IT'S YOURS. THIS CAP BELONGS TO CAPT. MOXIE STAMPER  
SERIAL # 19071353.

He looked the only question left to the cameraman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

"This is what's left of him."

Loudon's eyes darted down, then back to Ben. "Awful, what happened. We've got to make this into a tribute to him. Sit down, why don't you, we'll work over the script with--"

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

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

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

Ben made no move toward the desk. As much as he had always despised the sportswriter, he at last realized Loudon in his darkest unacknowledged self wanted the whole team dead. Dead and buttered. Fit to serve up in his radio show, his newsreel, his newspaper column, probably a book. *The Eleven Who Donned the Uniform*, or something worse.

"Ben? We need to get going on this script. It's less than an hour to airtime and--"

"Shut up, Loudmouth." Ben's hand twitched against the pistol holster. He did not care whether Loudon noticed or not. "You're poison, you and your

goddamn airtime and the rest, you're the death of the whole team. All the way back to Purcell."

Loudon looked at him, blank as a flatfish. The automatic velocity of voice started up: "Hey, let's not say anything we'll regret, I know it hits you hard about Mox--" The yammer stopped as suddenly as it started, something coming into Loudon's eyes now. "Purcell? Why bring that up?"

"You were in on it. You stood there with your hands in your pockets and watched Bruno run him to death."

"Ben, listen, you got it wrong. Bruno didn't have it in for Purcell, he had big plans for him on the team if he could turn him into enough of a man."

"He turned him into a dead kid."

"Sometimes things get pushed harder than anyone intended." Whatever it was in Loudon's eyes was matched now by the insinuation in his words. "It still bugs you that Bruno was turning Purcell into a starter, doesn't it. The team would've looked pretty different to you then, hey, Ben?"

"You slippery bastard, where did you come up with that, Purcell on the starting team? We had almost a week of practices yet before the season, Danzer had plenty of time to get his act--" Ben halted.

"*In for Reinking at left end, Merle Purcell,*" Loudon maliciously mimicked broadcasting the substitution.

"What the hell are you talking about? I was captain of the team."

"That would have changed in a hurry if you were on the bench." The words came out of Loudon as if he couldn't resist the taste of them. "Bruno was going to bump you to the scrub team before the opening game, like that. Told me so, had me hold the story until he could get football religion into Purcell, on the Hill." He snapped his fingers. "He'd never give up on Danzer. Danzer was one of his. You weren't, sucker."

out  
7

It reached all through Ben. "Then I'm not--" Purcell was the eleventh man. The famously fated lineup picked by Bruno at that last practice--*I'm not on the list*. The freedom from the odds built upon that jinx day dizzied him. Death had made its clean sweep. The skew in the law of averages brought on by Bruno's manipulations on the practice field and Loudon's at the microphone, that entire fatal scheme of things was not meant to have a place for Ben Reinking. He was odd man out. *Am*. The inevitability lifted from him. From here on if the war claimed him, it would have to do it on its own terms, not by the Supreme Team's wholesale bad luck. A crazy laugh broke from Ben. No, he realized, the sanest one in a long time.

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

"I'm not going on the show."

Loudon gaped at him.

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

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

A rap on the door and the major was in the room almost before the sound. "I couldn't help hearing the ruckus. Something I can help with?"

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

Talk  
"Drive"



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

"Let's."

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

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

Commotion had spread to the other side of the door, from the sound of it. The major raised his voice, "Quiet, out there! We're in conference in--" He stopped short at the sight of Maurice Overby striding in, military policemen in white helmets and white spats on either side of him, two more taking up a station at the door.

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

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

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

*I hope I heard that right. I hope I'm not hallucinating.*

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

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

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

Within the wedge of MPs, the blue-clad RAF officer and the flight-jacketed American cut through the gathering crowd in the Wonder Bar and swung out into the long bunker corridor where the footsteps were their own. "Maurice, am I dreaming this," Ben asked urgently out the side of his mouth, "or were you bluffing back there?"

"Not at all," came the benign reply. "I might admit to providing a pinch of dramatic effect in the matter, but that's all. No, you are in mightier hands than mine. Your TPWP people had to come clean in their 'urgent' message a bit ago to convince HQ command you're worth high priority. A home-state Senator--is that the phrase for a political old tusker in America?--raised rather a ruckus about the number of soldiers' lives your Montana has contributed to the war. I believe you know whereof I speak." The New Zealander turned a solemn gaze on him, then resumed. "All in all, it has become in Tepee Weepy's best interest to fetch you back alive and in one piece as speedily as can be." Maurice patted the side pocket of his uniform jacket. "I procured you a copy of all that, it should make pleasant reading on the plane. I don't mean to take the cherry off the top ahead of you, but I do think you'd like to know, Ben--you're to be mustered out as soon as you're back at that base in Montana and write the piece about Stamper."

4

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

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

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

The jeep thrummed under him on the steel grid of runway as it raced toward the plane, the guardian MPs riding shotgun front and back, the war behind him in the darkness. With luck--it was an amazing feeling to trust that word again--within three days the hopscotch of flights would deliver him back to East Base. Back within reach of the woman he would never get over. In the whirl of his thoughts the memorized lines of her letter danced to and fro. *"I couldn't Dear John him while he was in the Pacific, and I can't do it to you by letter....Maybe it'll all sort out okay after the war. But that's too far away to think."* But it wasn't, now.

Flooded almost to tears with the rapture of survival, Ben unloaded from the jeep the instant it screeched to a halt and raced toward the hatchway of the revving plane. *You're getting giddy, Reinking. If not now, when?* With his war over, in



his every heartbeat he could feel the surge of his chances with Cass. A woman setting her wings with no regrets behind, two men--

He did not even have to calculate. All the rest of his life, he gladly would take odds that good.

The End

that he  
live  
forever