Problems

Keeping Cass in the picture throughout.

--Dan Stuart is invalided home; she must decide to divorce or not; delays it to see if Ben survives the war?

--Cass must be a strong presence, with her own view of Ben and the war.

Tying the 12th man script in with the plot

Modulating the timespan, from Oct. '43 to May '45

--East Base Oct. '43

--Arlington; D.C. assignment?

--London Xmas '44 to May '45

TPWP's panic as more and more of team gets killed; Senator investigates Montana war deaths

--Should Cass have a rival? Gwen, Howie's sister? Working in hangar @ East Base or somewhere near D.C.?

How much should Ben's movie references be used?

How much "world of war" should be used?

Ted London
Ben's pieces about team members

raw material for MS resumption, Jan. 30+

Give it the Loudon treatment.

Ben on his way into the Sweetgrass Hills thinks about Vic, and Deems; he'd first of all thought this TDY was about Deems. (build flashback scene)

--Toussaint reads letter from Vic: "He ~~xxxxx~~ says, be sure to tell Deems." (i.e., abt his loss of leg in war)
Ben: "I'll take care of it."

--Toussaint: "Your father is good people." B decided 50% us better than nothing.

no mention of Ben's mother. The damned old OO seemed to know something about everyone.

--Ben to Cass: "I keep forgetting. I have to go back to college. Two quarters short of my degree."

--Cass tells him she loves being in the air, opposite of acrophobia.
her training flt if anybody
(possibly flight instructor asked if she had acrophobia)

Ben: "Acrophiliac tendencies."

Cass smiled. "You make it sound dirty."

Ben: "A guy can hope."

--italic sequence of conversation (& camp scene) w/ Deems, revealing he's a conchie.

B asks D about Purcell, what happened that day?

1--Ben aboard bus to Gros Ventre

2--backstory: Ben & Cass meet @ East Base; Howie introduced

3--Ben in GV: Gleaner office w/ his father; Medicine Lodge to borrow car from Tom Harry; Cyprian Buisson @ Ft. Peck; TSU dream team backstory as Ben drives back to GV; Duane's obit, Hill 57.

4--East Base; Ben's WASP story; Ben & Cass; Deems backstory (Ben visits him @ conchie camp?)

5--Howie & Ben fly north, crash. Friessen and Prokosch killed; folders waiting for Ben.

6--Ben to Arlington for funeral. TPWP runaround.

7--East Base. Xmas and/or New Year's, '44. Howie crashes in blizzard, is killed.

9--Ben invokes his uncle Lloyd's influence to get to London, seeking Moxie Stamper (and/or the TSU film guy).

10--Ben in London assignment; Duane killed in torpedoing of ship; Deems killed in New Guinea, Dan Stuart survives. TPWP panicks.

11--Ben tries to get 12th man story out of Moxie, Larry, and film guy. Close calls around Britain, including near-assignment onto Glenn Miller's plane? Moxie's bomber is shot down. Larry is killed by kamikaze.

12--Ben learns from film guy that Purcell was going to start @ R end instead of him; Purcell is the eleventh death of Bruno's "dream team."

Ben's junior year, Bruno's recruits became eligible. They notably were not small-town kids. From Helena, a cocky quarterback named Moxie Stamper. From Livingston, a fast end named Larry Danzer. The other Larry, O'Falllon, came from Butte.

By the third game of that season, Bruno junked the seniors.

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"The Larrys give me the willies. They like that double-teaming a little too much."

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Animal muttered something to Vince and Carl as they left the huddle. When Moxie took the snap, all three missed their blocks. Moxie barely had the football in

his hands before he was smothered under an avalanche of Wyoming linemen. He got up slowly, wiping at a trickle of blood out the corner of his mouth and glowering at the right-side linemen as everyone came into the huddle. But this time the play he called was "Reinking, fly pattern long."

The one time he called Duane "Tonto," Duane hit him in the chest with the base of his fist, the way a person would bang on a door.

"There's the Redeemer, then there's the Deemer."

That fall, Bruno toughened every drill. He also started the punishing runs up the letter hill.

It was a killer of a hill, almost concave (at midpoint)

Bruno leaned forward from the waist as he walked.

Maybe you couldn't stare up at those big white sons of bitches from the practice field all season long and listen to Bruno decide whether you were a one-letter or two-letter man, without coming to hate that slope.

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"Come, let us reason together." Purcell, obviously ashamed, hung back.

Purcell was the only three-letter man among them. Until the yokel kid blew a gasket on his heart,

At one level, Ben knew it was cornball.

Mr. and Mrs. Purcell probably weren't much different from Sig Prokosch's folks, back on the farm at Forsyth. Or Larry O'Fallon's Irish ones, in Smelterville. Bruno's 00s, Stamper and Danzer, were just standing back watching with no expressions, and that told Ben something, too.

"I have gone to the president of this university. Mr. and Mrs. Purcell will be at every game, home and away. And Merle will, too. Our twelfth man. Don't let him down."

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

"So, Reinking. Is your father possibly a Congressman?"

"I'm supposed to produce fighter pilots. I get somebody who looks like the second coming of Von Richthofen, and next thing I know he's detached to psy ops."

"Permission to speak, sir?"

The major glared at him, but nodded.

"Sir, what's psy ops?"

"You'll have a chance to find that out for yourself, Lieutenant. There's a colonel flying in from Washington this afternoon. Just to fetch you."

"Light one if you've got one. Or try one of my Cuban 'rillos?" The colonel held out a pack of thin dark baby cigars.

"I don't smoke, sir."

"Still in training, good." The colonel flipped open his lighter and puffed a cigarillo to life. His sudden question caught Ben off guard. "Did you happen to hear the Ted Loudon show last Saturday?"

Loudmouth? You couldn't pay me enough to listen to that creep. Ben stuck to, "Can't say that I did, sir."

"Too bad. You were mentioned. Here's a transcription."

Armed Forces Radio pickup from Mutual Broadcasting System. Text follows:)

"Good evening, America, and our fighting men and women everywhere. This is Ted Loudon with the latest Sports Lowdown. The undefeated team. All

eleven starting players are serving in the armed forces." On down the list. The one surprise was Deems Anthony. The Deemer must have decided not to wait for the draft.

"Get me rewrite," he delivered out the side of his mouth.

"Sir?"

"Never mind, Jones."

"I have been chastised. Because of you."

Ben tried out *"I was just trying to do my job, sir,"* and decided silence sounded better than that. He waited for the general to go on.

"I am commander of this air base, yet you have orders from somewhere on high that let you do whatever you damn plese. Who is behind this? The President? Joseph Stalin? God?"

"Unless Blake goes deaf, dumb, and blind, or has some other kind of shit fit, you are not to touch those controls. Have I made myself clear?"

"Eminently, sir," Ben responded, and right away wished he had *eminently* back.

"I'll throw him out the cargo hatch if he tries to wrest the controls from me, major," Howie promised with a pious expression.

They were still within sight of the Black Eagle stack when Howie said, "I feel a pimple coming on my butt and therefore deem myself incapacitated. Take over."

"Thanks anyway, but--

"Bullshit, Ben. Be a pilot for a change and fly this piece of junk."

"Don't worry, Uncle Jake is here to hold your hand."

"Then get busy and do it."

"Where's the compass in this beast?"

"What, you don't know north when you see it?"

"Jake, I mean it.

"I feel dumb as hell to ask, but--did they forget to put the compass in this albatross?"

Howie sat there whistling "Johnny Got a Zero Today." He rolled his eyes.

Suddenly Ben looked straight overhead.

"I'm getting Russian tail."

"Well, hurrah for your side, I guess."

"Raisa may have a little of the chosen in her herself. She didn't seem all that surprised by her first look at Mr. Peter."

"What a sad-ass plane that was."

"Oh, hell. It's jungle issue."

They stared at the machetes in their hands.

Howie tried the chocolate and nearly broke a tooth. "Petrified."

"Must be what the machetes are for," Ben said.

the immense silence of the Canadian forest. "Man oh man, this is a shit deal we're in. Where are the Canucks when we want them?"

"As I savvy it, fighting the Battle of Britain. They probably don't have time for us."

They shouted obscenities at the rescue bag festooned in the treetop like Christmas trimmings, until better sense kicked in.

"Firewood, come on. We'd better get to whacking with these goddamn daisy cutters."

"VIP treatment this time around. We rate a P-39." Howie shaded his eyes. "I hope to Christ the guy is bringing us long woolies and his aim is better than that last prick's."

The P-39 tore past low enough they could feel the propwash. Now he was sure it was Cass.

The plane pulled up and settled into circling over them.

"What the hell now?"

"Writing a message," Ben somehow was sure. "Come on, let's get way out in the middle, we don't want the drop bag to end up in a tree."

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

Jumping back until they were certain it was through rolling, Ben and Howie needed a further instant to realize it was a duffel bag. Together they pounced and opened it. They pawed through, inventorying as if it was the wealth of the Indies. C-rations. Wool socks and gloves and watch caps. A down mummy bag.

Matches. Two canteens of water. Two thermoses of hot coffee. Four cans of beer. Nestled amid it all, the message drop bag, and inside, the scrawled note:

Rover Boys:

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

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

Hugs and tickles,

Cass

Howie looked up from the note as the P-39 cut another perfect circle over them, as if they were the bullseye of a target the size of Canada. "Bitch," he said in admiration.

The only acknowledgment Ben could think of was to throw up his hands in the direction of Edmonton--*Go! Go!*

The Beech Staggerwing

Sig Prokosch was dead. Another file fell to the floor.

So was Carl Friessen.

Cass seemed to know no way to extricate herself, from either her marriage or Ben Reinking, either.

Howie and Gwen would crap, if they knew .Actually, there wouldn't be any limit of crap.

caught sight of

Sharp edges of the buttes against the sky, as if embossed.

The highway benchland was in shadow, dusk-like, while the Rockies were in sun, and the eastern horizon was in pastel downwash through the could edge. Wind clouds, huge lenticulars, had formed over Great Falls.

"Hello, sweetums." She gave him a mischievous little salute.

"One day. When they kick out Spaatz and make me general..."

"See this?"

Ben eyed the cardboard roll of toilet paper. "Yeah?"

"Pretend it's your peter. This"--she unrolled the condom--"goes on like this."

Ben sat slack-jawed.

"Pretend this is your penis in an erectile state."

The bored medic fitted a prophylactic over the tube while Ben watched, slack-jawed.

Where you from, Jones?"

"Third Avenue North, sir."

"Here? In the Falls?"

"Yes, sir. Out by the university." Ben kept on looking at him. "I was at TSU."

"In what sequence?"

"Religious Studies, sir."

"Okay, let's get this over with. Were you there in '41?"

"Yes, sir. I was at every game.

or:

"Poor losers. A girl can't help it if

"What's the word from up front?"

"What's the skinny on when we're ever going to get on the ground, Liz?"

"Watch out for flies around the mouth, Mimsie."

"Party poopers."

CPT--before the war as Cass had, and the three of them... They had cut the shirt tails off one another after their first solo flights. and Cass knew she had lucked out in having that many of the most vetern WASPs there were in her squadron.

By now, with their hundreds of hours of air time--all of it with Cass--Mary Catherine and Beryl were the kind of plane handlers the WASP program was designed for, cool heads in the cockpits of unforgiving new aircraft that maybe were finished products and maybe weren't.

"Time to read up on us again, 'Skills equal to those of male pilots.' Is that the best he could do?"

"Notice that he slipped in that they won't let us fly all the way north."

Beryl, you want another one? Della? They say it pays to advertise."

What now? Cass thought when the lieutenant with the fancy jacket strode into the ready room.

"I'm here on business."

"What would that be?"

"You know something about flying."

"A bit. They yanked me out of 00 to do this."

She lifted an eyebrow.

"It has to do with the team."

"Oh. Right. That team."

"Could I take you to the show tonight? 00, downtown."

"I'm married."

Maybe there something in the way she recited those words that made him take such a chance. Incredibly, he heard himself say: "If I was him, I'd guard you like Fort Knox."

"That would be hard. He's in New Guinea."

"I was just there."

A pause followed that. Ben waited. It was the first time he had seen Cass pause over anything.

"Can we use the USO room?"

"Gladly, sir."

"No one comes in here except mad poets and guys sneaking a peek into *Forever Amber.*"

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask, "Which are you?"

"I brought these." New Guinea sketches.

"Yours?"

"Don't I wish. A combat artist named 00." Ben fished through to the last of the drawings. "This is my buddy there, the one I wrote about." Friessen looked...

"I'm afraid it needs something."

"Lt. Reinking, you can't sit in my lap in a P-39."

"Let me see what I can do."

Cloyce Reinking

Ben had figured out their story to a much greater extent than they thought he had. He could never touch it in their lifetimes.

"Howard Blake, he's a Black Eagler too. You happen to know that family?"

"Sure thing."

He felt the excitement grow in him. This would show the old son of a bitch.

Fort Peck

"Good of you to come." Cyprian Bouisson came down the dirt path from the house to meet him. He chuckled when he saw the Packard. "That lumber wagon."

In most ways the town was pathetic.

Cyprian owned the foremost story on a dam project full of stories. He had been the driver for the Corps of Engineers colonel in command. The September day in 1938 when reports began coming in that the soil readings not right at the far side of the four-mile long dam, the colonel and others officers had to go take a look. Cyprian was at the steering wheel, more than halfway across the dam, when the upstream face of the dam began to cave away. Throwing the car into reverse, Cyprian backed off the dam at forty miles an hour.

Beyond that, the aging man in front of Ben was famous in an anonymous way. The dam drew attention and when the photographer came, Cyprian was assigned to drive her, too. There in the middle, his hat still on, Cyprian danced with one of the bar women.

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

Ben shook his head. Duane would go through life in a wheelchair or on crutches with an empty pantleg.

"Cyprian, I'm supposed to write something about Duane. It's my job."

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

You don't know the half of it, Cyprian. "It has a funny name. Nickname, that is. Tepee Weepee."

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As the bus eased around the curve at the edge of town and approached the storefronts that lined a main street much wider than it needed to be, a remnant of the days when freight wagons and their six-horse teams had to have room to turn around, Ben tallied the businesses that had perished since his last visit--Quint's Saddlery, and the upstart gas station that had tried to run competition with Grady Tilton's, hopeless in a time of rationing--and the surviving stalwarts that meant most to him, the Odeon movie theater, the Lunchery, the Medicine Lodge saloon. At the far end of the street, big as ever, the turreted Sedgwick House hotel stood waiting to serve as momentary bus depot. The entire worn-looking town seemed to gasp for a taste of fresh paint, and to know it was not getting any for the duration. The lofty cottonwoods did not know there was a war on,

He had been born here, and his father before him. His mother was quick to tell anyone rash enough to ask that she had not. Within the Reinking household,

her motto was: “The smaller the town, the bigger its eyes. And they don’t come much smaller than Gros Ventre.”

Two weeks' pay? "I can't. I need the money for the school year."

00 handed him a check.

Ben started to protest, then saw that the check was for the full month. "The date got smudged."

"Me and my thumb. Just hang on to that check until the end of the month, why don't you, and the bank won't care."

Bruno brought a bag of tricks with a lot more in it than a football and a whistle. Film for Rotary Clubs and granges all over the state.

Ben's junior year, Bruno's recruits became eligible. They notably were not small-town kids. From Helena, a cocky quarterback named Moxie Stamper. From Livingston, a fast end named Larry Danzer. The other Larry, O'Falllon, came from Butte.

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That fall, Bruno toughened every drill. He also started the punishing runs up the letter hill.

It was a killer of a hill, almost concave (at midpoint)

Bruno leaned forward from the waist as he walked.

Maybe you couldn't stare up at those big white sons of bitches from the practice field all season long and listen to Bruno decide whether you were a one-letter or two-letter man, without coming to hate that slope.

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At one level, Ben knew it was cornball.

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"I have gone to the president of this university. Mr. and Mrs. Purcell will be at every game, home and away. And Merle will, too. Our twelfth man. Don't let him down."

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

East Base

"I only made it through freshman year. Your undefeated year."

"There's a slew of messages, lieutenant. but got told, for your eyes only."

"I have to 00 anything. Don't ask me why." He knew he was hated by innumerable men, around the world, who had never laid eyes on him. Public affairs officers who had to... Code clerks who had to make room for ... All of them wondering, what in the name of brassbound military Hell was this about? "Any skinny about where most of these came in from?"

Sullivan looked uncomfortable until he realized Ben was prompting him to pass along gossip, not . "Pacific theatre, sir.

"Surprised me all to hell, sir."

"Where were you stationed, before?"

"Floyd Bennett Field."

Odd. The war blew people like scraps of paper to far corners of the world, evidently except those who had attended Treasure State University. Great Falls, Montana.

"Howard Blake, he's a Black Eagler too. You happen to know that family?"

"Sure thing."

Would coincidences never cease. "That will be all for this morning, corporal. I'll go through the messages and we'll get to work after chow."

The highest manmade obstacle between Seattle and Minneapolis, and the military had chosen to plop East Base onto the prairie almost under the shadow of the thing. Who in his right mind would have thought Montana would be a staging area for the war, anyway?

"Hello, sweetums." She gave him a mischievous little salut.

"One day. When they kick out Spaatz and make me general..."

"At least I caught up with you in rank."

"But not in length of service--oh God, why did I lay myself open to that?"

"Did Her Highness mention servicing? Which sort does she wish? This, that, or the other?"

For the next several moments Cass let out ecstatic sounds of various kinds as his hands. Ben was startled to see that her eyes were moist. "Damn you. Why

do you have to exist, when I already have a husband?" Crying and kissing, she wetly streaked his desiring body with her own and, atop, wallowed him until they arched fiercely into each other and came together.

"I can fly rings around you."

"Not proven."

"I know it's not. When I went through.... He said you were the most natural pilot he'd ever seen."

"Ben, no."

"We can't have a kid. I won't do that to Dan."

"Rubber love, it lasts and lasts."

"So, Reinking. Is your father possibly a Congressman?"

"I'm supposed to produce fighter pilots. I get somebody who looks like the second coming of Von Richthofen, and next thing I know he's detached to psy ops."

"Permission to speak, sir?"

The major glared at him, but nodded.

"Sir, what's psy ops?"

"You'll have a chance to find that out for yourself, Lieutenant. There's a colonel flying in from Washington this afternoon. Just to fetch you."

"Light one if you've got one. Or try one of my Cuban 'rillos?" The colonel held out a pack of thin dark baby cigars.

"I don't smoke, sir."

"Still in training, good." The colonel flipped open his lighter and puffed a cigarillo to life. His sudden question caught Ben off guard. "Did you happen to hear the Ted Loudon show last Saturday?"

Loudmouth? You couldn't pay me enough to listen to that creep. Ben stuck to, "Can't say that I did, sir."

"Too bad. You were mentioned. Here's a transcription."

Armed Forces Radio pickup from Mutual Broadcasting System. Text follows:)

"Good evening, America, and our fighting men and women everywhere. This is Ted Loudon with the latest Sports Lowdown. The undefeated team. All

eleven starting players are serving in the armed forces." On down the list. The one surprise was Deems Anthony. The Deemer must have decided not to wait for the draft.

"Your next stop, the clap shop."

"What are you talking about? I don't have anything."

"That's what all the boys say," 00 sang out in falsetto. "Commander's orders. He's on a tear about VD. All incoming personnel have to be checked out."

A pilot was in a P-39 testing the flaps.

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

"I'm checking in. Which seems to mean I have to be checked out, they tell me. Look, I'm sorry, miss."

She climbed out of the cockpit. "Try 'Captain,' why don't you."

"Crew chief!" "The points are burned. I want them filed down and reset before I take this crate for a 00 run."

She called after him:

"Nice jacket, Lieutenant."

"See this?"

Ben eyed the cardboard roll of toilet paper. "Yeah?"

"Pretend it's your peter. This"--she unrolled the condom--"goes on like this."

Ben sat slack-jawed.

"Pretend this is your penis in an erectile state."

The bored medic fitted a prophylactic over the tube while Ben watched, slack-jawed.

"So you're here to make us famous." Colonel Hartley looked across the desk at him. "I'm not sure I like that."

Ben immediately was surer than that; he did not like this colonel. "Somebody cut me the orders, sir. Confidentially, I'd prefer to be doing something else in the war."

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

"It depends."

"On what?"

"These ferry pilots were wished onto me, and so were the Russkies. My preference is publicity for my men who fly these planes to Alaska. Is that understood?"

"Duly noted, sir."

"But sir--"

"I am under orders to do other stories."

Ben had been in front of enough base commanders to have perfected a polite stare that nonetheless underlined his standard retort: "Orders from Washington, sir."

The commander dug a finger in his ear. "Dismissed, Lieutenant."

Ben came out of the commander's office seething. He headed straight to the day room, startling the clerk. "Where are the WASP pilots billeted?"

He felt the excitement grow in him. This would show the old son of a bitch.

"You know something about flying."

"A bit. They yanked me out of 00 to do this."

She lifted an eyebrow.

"It has to do with the team."

"Could I take you to the show tonight? 00, downtown."

"I'm married."

Maybe there something in the way she recited those words that made him take such a chance. Incredibly, he heard himself say: "If I was him, I'd guard you like Fort Knox."

"He's in New Guinea."

A pause followed that. Ben waited. It was the first time he had seen Cass pause over anything.

Ben had extreme trouble keeping a straight face. "You draw the line at dancing?"

She slapped him, smiling along with it but plainly delivering something she meant. "I have to fly out of here at 0600. Are you sure we should spend any of that time on a dancefloor?"

Earhart ache

"We were flightline chums on weekends, and got to fooling around with each other, and then one thing followed another and--oh, horse pucky. It sounds so juvenile, put that way."

"Put that way, Adam and Eve sound juvenile."

"We talked about barnstorming. Then right away with the war, Dan's Guard unit was called up."

"It all adds up to, I am as married as a person can get." She poked him in a rib. "So, football hero--why aren't you?"

Ben thought. "I didn't ever have time to."

"Ben." Cass couldn't help laughing. "It only takes two minutes in front of a Justice of the Peace, believe me."

"You come unencumbered."

"Any way you want."

"Get me rewrite," he delivered out the side of his mouth.

"Sir?"

"Never mind, Sully."

The highest manmade obstacle between Seattle and Minneapolis, and the military had chosen to plop East Base onto the prairie almost under the shadow of the thing. Who in his right mind would have thought Montana would be a staging area for the war?

"The whole interior line. Those guys always did have more guts than sense."

"Jesus Christ, Howie, you know there's more to it than that."

"I have been chastised. Because of you."

Ben tried out *"I was just trying to do my job, sir,"* and decided silence sounded better than that. He waited for Colonel Hartley to go on.

"I am commander of this air base, yet you have orders from somewhere on high that let you do whatever you damn plese. Who is behind this? The President? Joseph Stalin? God?"

crash

"What a sad-ass plane that was."

"Oh, hell. It's jungle issue."

They stared at the machetes in their hands.

Howie tried the chocolate and nearly broke a tooth. "Petrified."

"Must be what the machetes are for," Ben said.

""Man oh man, we are in deep shit. Where are the Canucks when we want them?"

"As I savvy it, fighting the Battle of Britain."

They shouted obscenities at the rescue bag festooned in the treetop like Christmas trimmings, until better sense kicked in.

"Firewood, come on. We'd better get to whacking with these goddamn daisy cutters."

"VIP treatment this time around. We rate a P-39." Howie shaded his eyes. "I hope to Christ the guy is bringing us long woolies and his aim is better than that last prick's."

The P-39 tore past low enough they could feel the propwash. Now he was sure it was Cass.

The plane pulled up and settled into circling over them.

"What the hell now?"

"Writing a message," Ben somehow was sure. "Come on, let's get way out in the middle, we don't want the drop bag to end up in a tree."

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

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

Rover Boys:

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

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

Hugs and tickles,

Cass

Howie looked up from the note as the P-39 cut another perfect circle over them, as if they were the bullseye of a target the size of Canada. "Bitch," he said in admiration.

The only acknowledgment Ben could think of was to throw up his hands in the direction of Edmonton--*Go! Go!*

The Beech Staggerwing

world of war

The world of war was like nothing Ben had imagined.

The world of war held its own laws of gravity, from 32,000 feet where B-17s encountered Heinkels and 00s trying to shoot them down, to 000 beneath the oceans where submarines... Men fell. Some fell into pieces, some simply to pieces.

Time zones of the world of war cut back through centuries, indiscriminate of mere clock niceties.

The isobars of the world of war...

all else

Blake will pull through. The medic bought it, though. Shrapnel, in the temple.

"The conchie got it."

Good GodAlmighty, Deems--if you still think that. Why that conscientious? Couldn't you just sit out the war?

"They run that boy and run him."

"Three times, once to each letter.

"No. I counted six. Think to myself, how many times they gonna run that boy. Giselle Buisson: "It was getting good and dark. I went in." Nodded toward the house. "I don't savvy white men's games."

He realized Loudon wanted the whole team dead. Dead and buttered. Fit to serve up in his radio show, his newspaper column, probably a book. *The Eleven Who Gave All.*

"Wait a minute. Purcell was supposed to start? Was that for sure? We had almost a week of practices yet before the season, Danzer had plenty of time to get his act--" Ben halted.

"Bruno was going to bump you to the scrub team, like that." 00 snapped his fingers. "I"ve got it on film. He'd never give up on Danzer. Danzer was one of his. You weren't."

"See you in the movies, 00."

"Captain? The Russians are at the Elbe."

The world of war closed one hemisphere, and it was the one Ben Reinking was in. He was homeward bound. There still was the question of Cass. He figured his odds were no better than even. All the rest of his life, he would take odds that good.

Considerately he blew the pungent smoke away from Ben and at the same time

had cheered him and the others to the skies, the undefeated year. A parade down Central, but then, back across the wide river to the university. Ben had enough mischief in his soul to ponder the proper civic response if TSU had *lost* all its games that year--instead of that parade down Central, but then, back across the wide river to the university. And before anyone knew it, the war. Ben this foursquare city with the renegade river at its edge He peered out the window at the white letters on the slope of the butte. TSU. Zimmerman, sadistic bastard that he was, would make players run to...

"Misery River," Duane had called it when Zimmerman made them run laps. Duane's running days were over.

and bull sessions into the night

You could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, on easier journeys home, Ben Reinking had forked over his fare to this afflicted soul in the drowsy waiting room of the depot and thought no

more about it. Now there was a sallow woman in that job, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out here in asthmatic labor in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, definitely, whatever the slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and nap, but the hunched driver insisted on grabbing it away and stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

Which one?

Keeping that to himself, Ben climbed aboard the Golden Triangle Stageline bus that had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war. He never liked being last at anything, but the four other passengers already had claimed seats on the shady side of the bus and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Wordlessly he nodded in everyone's general direction and with long practice folded his height into the worn confines of the seat. Automatically he turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the warm wool. Winter had only brushed the tops of the

Rockies yet but Ben could feel it coming, and he never shed the fleece jacket on any conveyance, plane or train or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

"Any opening for a printer's devil?" "We usually don't take apprentices who can't keep their feet on the ground."

"Ink-stained wretch.."

The world of war: Lord Haw Haw from Berlin...Tokyo Rose in Pacific (team members hear them).

He settled back as much as his mood would let him, which was not a lot.

Talk about enemy action. The war didn't invent that particular one.

The Treasure State University years. Now this.

He could still feel the tremor of disbelief, and all else, that went through him when the orders reached him...*Detached duty...report soonest...East Base, Great Falls, Montana.*

Standing there with his fists jammed in his jacket, he felt a surge

He felt admiration of every kind for Cass, and the most basic emotion as well.

mysteriously destined to chronicle the rarest unit in the armed forces of the United States of America.

As he sometimes did, *Although I don't see any Claire Trevor. And where is Cass when I need her?*

The journey home had not much more than begun before

Once in a great while, a chance comes to have people live on in the breath of words (such as these). It takes something like a miracle to bring them honest to the page. Beyond OO. Past sentiment. ...

This and more was on the mind of Ben Reniking, wondering how many more times...

A story is like the wind, he remembered the saying from somewhere, it begins in a whisper, by invisible laws of known, it rises and falls...until it runs like a river in the sky.

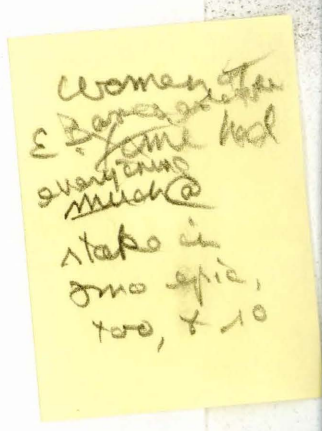
we feel it rushing over us

it murders itself

peaks

or

Theirs was a bold rehearsal for history, they were told, and that is what it was written up as at the time. History they became, at great cost. Yet there is more to life, and for that matter death, than being singled out in an official version gathering the dust of the decades since. Their reckless saga, together and apart, from the very start was an account that had to be vigilantly pieced together. If you happen to need to ascribe a single perspective to their collective story, most often it will be Ben's. He was tapped at the time to chronicle all that happened; to bear it, really. But their kind of epic cannot be told without the presence of women any more than *The Odyssey* ultimately could; and so, among the daring contingent at East Base, Cass Stuart and Gwen Blake will have their say in this.



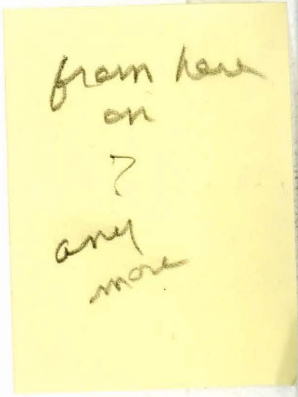
The legendary others, who exist any more only in the breath of these words, amount to an odd number--eleven--whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1940 on a wind-blown prairie football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war.

Now, meet Ben.

It does not matter who I am in this story, nor if I am any one person you may have heard of. When life, and for that matter death, singled out so many of our generation so early for chapters such as ours, voices mingled with the years. And our saga, for that is what it was written up as at the time, from the very start was an account that had to be vigilantly pieced together; a rehearsal for history, we were told. History we became, at great cost. So, our own telling of it, at last, requires an author possessed of the one brand of authority that can never be argued with, anonymity. If you happen to need to ascribe a single perspective to this collective tale, most often it will be Ben's. He was tapped at the time to chronicle our story; to bear it, really. But so fateful a set of events as ours cannot be told without the influence of women any more than *The Odyssey* could; and so, among others, Cass Stuart definitely will have her say in this.

The rest of us, who exist now only in the breath of these words, amount to an odd number--eleven--whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1940 on a wind-blown prairie football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war.

Now, meet Ben.



Voices mingle with the years. Those in this saga, for that is what it was written up as at the time, from the very start were singled out and then pieced together into an account meant to speak for their fate-marked generation: as it marched to its destiny: a rehearsal for history, they were told. History they became, at great cost.

But with the passage of years, chapters flow into each other

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

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

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

"Like *Gone With the Wind* without somebody to neck with," his son responded. "Long."

#

1

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking pointed himself toward the same old tired bus that again and again had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

He was a knowledgable young man, brought up in the forthright Depression schoolings of his generation, and he sometimes thought that was his trouble. If the law of averages had been repealed, he would have read about it somewhere. But he could wrack his brain as much as he wanted over the odds against his tricky assignment--his ongoing mission, the military preferred to call it--and that bus was still there, parked in its usual spot as if waiting just for him.

Well, he told himself as he swung along under the burden of his duffel bag, at least there was one thing new about this trip: Cass, coming out of the blue to

unwanted

him. A slow little conciliatory smile worked its way onto his long face over that, then went away promptly as he once more stepped to the bus.

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, Ben had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued "God bless you real good, sonny," along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out here in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and possibly nap during the familiar trip, but the hunched driver grabbed it away and insisted on stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

Which one?

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

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered away from the depot and rumbled west on Central Avenue, Ben had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. Out of habit he glanced up toward Black Eagle Hill and its smokestack to see which way the wind was blowing. You could do that from a couple of counties away. The Black Eagle stack dominated this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of

smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where he was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above English Creek when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

Ben shifted uneasily in his seat at the notion that this smokestack-marked city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him. First, the Treasure State University years, and now East Base, which the Army Air Force had plopped on the sunrise side of Great Falls like the central maze in the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into.

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

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

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made hardship trips home to where I played football."

There. He had managed to laugh at himself, if nervous laughter counted; maybe he wasn't utterly losing his grip on who and what he was. This still amounted to a hardship trip, though. Facing Duane Buisson's father, after the telegram from the War Department, was going to be the definition of hard.

As the bus nosed across the Missouri River bridge and down tree-columned streets past the sprawling university and the football stadium--Ben tensed; but the bus driver did not seem to recognize him--he tried to think what he could possibly write about Duane and what had happened to him that by any stretch of the imagination might pass muster with the TPWP copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. Of all the perplexities that went with a TPWP byline, the red pencil of the invisible copy officer was the most constant. After a year and half of this, Ben was as mystified as ever by the inner workings of the Threshhold Press War Project, what was let past and what wasn't. He full well understood that the name was meant to invoke the doorstep homefront, the breadbasket America served by small-town weeklies and mid-size dailies; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war, that was providing him a fresh measure of fame. But it never left his mind for long that a threshhold also was where people wiped

their feet on something. He was determined not to let that happen to Cyprian Buisson.

Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. His orders were tucked in there. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing over that, poor duck--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.* Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work up the piece Duane deserved. Although even there, the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

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

While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse, smiling over at it reminiscently. Checking his watch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; good, maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of

late afternoon. The air out here in the Sun River country was beyond the reach of the smelter stack and he exultantly drew in its alfalfa-tinged freshness while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved these blue-and-tan days of the crisp end of October.

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

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the month since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this half a dozen times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Planes poured into East Base from three directions for the Lend-Lease transit onward to Alaska and Russia, but the run from Spokane was all Cass's. Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a

snap, the turbulent peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and unmistakable guideposts abundant on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, where his TPWP minder in Washington wondrously would not exist, the piece he was working on about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. He just might find a way to get it across anyway.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of that roadhouse over there, thoroughly caught up in one another. Uniforms forgotten. Romantic maniacs renting by the hour. The whispered prattle of love talk, after: *"So it's true*

what they say about redheads." "I'm wrongly accused. It's ginger, not red." "Ginger? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot." Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could razz himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. If the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, as quickly as the planes were gone the calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. He drew a sharp breath. How many more times, deposited back here for this kind of thing, then yanked away on assignment to some shot-up corner of the world? He knew perfectly well he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but it stuck with him

day and night any more, the awful hunch that the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that, and after that--might go on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, with him journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And, worse now, Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw with terrible clarity, her letters to him would add up into a string-tied packet in the bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Duane would think I've gone off my rocker. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. *Sometimes* I *think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to touch that new silver bar on his uniform and meanwhile leering at him as effectively as Hedy Lamarr ever did at a leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?" *Not hardly.*

"Ready to go if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the window and shut his eyes to wait out all the road miles yet before home.

Sometimes he dozed and sometimes he didn't, but either way he dreamed of Cass and more Cass.

Considerately he blew the pungent smoke away from Ben and at the same time

Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet but Ben could feel it coming,

had cheered him and the others to the skies, the undefeated year. A parade down Central, but then, back across the wide river to the university. Ben had enough mischief in his soul to ponder the proper civic response if TSU had *lost* all its games that year--instead of that parade down Central, but then, back across the wide river to the university. And before anyone knew it, the war. Ben this foursquare city with the renegade river at its edge He peered out the window at the white letters on the slope of the butte. TSU. Zimmerman, sadistic bastard that he was, would make players run to...

"Misery River," Delbert had called it when Zimmerman made them run laps. Delbert's running days were over.

"All aboard, first stop, Fairfield," the driver called

and bull sessions into the night

You could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, on easier journeys home, Ben Reinking had forked over his fare to this afflicted soul in the drowsy waiting room of the depot and thought no more about it. Now there was a sallow woman in that job, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out here in asthmatic labor in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, definitely, whatever the slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffle bag into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and nap, but the hunched driver insisted on grabbing it away and stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

Which one?

Keeping that to himself, Ben climbed aboard the Golden Triangle Stageline bus that had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

He never liked being last at anything, but the four other passengers already had claimed seats on the shady side of the bus and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Wordlessly he nodded in everyone's general direction and with long practice folded his height into the worn confines of the seat. Automatically he turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the warm wool. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet but Ben could feel it coming, and he never shed the fleece jacket on any conveyance, plane or train or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

"Any opening for a printer's devil?" "We usually don't take apprentices who can't keep their feet on the ground."

"See this?"

Ben eyed the cardboard roll of toilet paper. "Yeah?"

"Pretend it's your peter. This"--she unrolled the condom--"goes on like this."

Ben sat slack-jawed.

"Ink-stained wretch.."

1

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking pointed himself toward the same old tired bus that again and again had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

Even the most familiar ground is subject to human climate. Ben had the feeling he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but this time around it struck him that a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, on easier journeys home, he had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued "God bless you real good, son" along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out here in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians'

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Which one?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod in everyone's general direction the way he imagined someone who looked like a hotshot pilot was counted on to do, as always he deposited himself nearest the door, the coat leather crackling as he folded his considerable height into the worn confines of the seat. In his travels through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. That was before Cass, of course. But crazy love can strike anywhere, and in the labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

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

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

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made crip trips home to where I played football."

There. He had managed to laugh at himself, if nervous laughter counted. This still amounted to a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.*

Ben had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff every so often to tell which way the wind was blowing, and he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where Ben was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above Gros Ventre when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth. A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

As he contemplated the everlasting cloud of power that something like the Black Eagle stack represented, the smile had no reason to stay. He had been raised to despise the Anaconda Copper company and its long coil of grip on the politics and daily newspapers of the state, and to this day he had no trouble doing that. At almost all levels, though, the world at the present moment seemed immeasurably more complicated than any of history's disputatious yesterdays. As brainy and judicious toward life as a man could be at the age of twenty-three, Ben quite realized that every era made that same excuse for tripping over itself. Knowledge of this did not change the feeling of treading in an unpredictable tide, often up to one's neck. Half consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back here under the throne of that smokestack. Authority, in whatever murky form, seemed implacably determined to spin the compass of his life. Spin it in ways he was having trouble keeping up with. *Maybe it's the uniforms.*

"There she is."

The bit of wheeze in that observation alerted Ben to its source. He chose to treat the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction as an announcement the bus

driver offered up every time at this point of the route, and didn't look around yet. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into a gut-spilling conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

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

Ben still pretended that had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. But as he had known he would, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and focused his attention on the much different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football. He felt his throat dry out. But the bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently hadn't recognized him--thank goodness for small favors. For the time being, he was spared one more round of talking about Treasure State University's fabled 1941 season. If the pair of years since were any evidence, he was in danger of being talked to about that until his last day on earth. Ben had too many things on his mind to mull the workings of fable, but the classic elements were there: in that infamous year of pulverizing loss for America, TSU had gone undefeated.

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, he leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur just as if he had never played here; he never knew what detail he might need for the script. *If I can ever get the damned thing written.* It all gripped him as potently as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself, the man in a three-piece suit a few rows back had lurched up to ask the driver if they would reach Fairfield before the grain elevator shut down for the day. A commodity dealer, Ben guessed from that showy suit and vest, checking on this year's harvest. That or a black marketeer trafficking in something to do with grain

elevators. To Ben's relief, the man stayed on in the spot behind the driver and the two of them talked away the miles, sparing him.

STAGECOACH, he decided. Not a bad fit, as movies and life went.

Mentally he tried out the cast of the movie against the one on the bus. The wizened driver did not really make it as Andy Devine handling the reins. His duded-up partner in conversation, however, more than qualified for a number of roles--the corrupt banker, the prissy whiskey salesman, the garrulous drunk doctor. It would be up to the pair of elderly farmers at the back, leaning across the aisle toward one another as they compared impressions from a day in Great Falls, to fill whichever parts the traveling dude didn't. Their wrinkled wives, primly minding their own business by watching the telephone poles go by--Ben pondered, but could not definitively choose which one, in much younger guise, could pass for the good-hearted prostitute and which one was more natural as the haughty young wife new to the West. They would have to flip a coin. As for the dauntless lawman riding shotgun while the stagecoach wended around and around through Monument Valley in front of John Ford's cameras, amazingly here one was, although midway in the bus and less than dauntless--a deputy sheriff nodding off over the star on his gabardine jacket, apparently after a hard day in county court. That left the gum-

chewing railroad brakeman, probably deadheaded into Choteau on a shift changeover on the branch line, and Ben, to vie for the last two parts. About here, the game got more serious than Ben wanted. He doubted he was instrinsically John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. He hoped he was not inherently John Carradine as the doomed gambler.

By now the bus was pulling in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction. It was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but Ben piled off right behind the driver anyway. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to. While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse, checking his watch, scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet. Good; maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. The air out here away from the smelter was so fresh it had a snap to it and he exultantly drew it in while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved this time of year, the crisp blue-and-tan days of late autumn.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying was right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came. Right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new

fighter planes incoming on the hop from Geiger Field in Spokane. Ben felt his heart race; another saying that turned out to be right. Knowing he was seriously skewed by romance, he still gloried in the sight of the P-39s. Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types. In the two weeks since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this four times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Again this time, he watched hungrily--hungry for Cass, among other things--as the Cobras purred through the sky. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a piece of cake, the disturbing peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and Highway 200 to be followed in, with unmistakable guideposts ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian

pilots in Alaska. He resolved again; if he did it just right, his syndicated piece on the flying women of East Base might get that across.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of this roadhouse, showing one another what passion looked like in wartime. The whispered prattle of love talk, after: *"So it's true what they say about redheads." "I'm wrongly accused. It's ginger, not red." "Ginger? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could rib himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. If the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in

World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, deflation set in on him as quickly as the planes were gone. The calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. That repeated question: how many times was he going to be deposited back here for this kind of journey? And, still trying to look ahead, where was there any indication that he was ever going to be permitted to put aside the typewriter and resume, say, the controls of a fighter plane? He could see none whatsoever. What was abundantly clear was the military's habit of trundling him here and there in the war on short notice or no notice at all. Now that he had met Cass and they had fallen so hard for one another, it was going to be even more painful. He had an awful vision of the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that--going on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. Across that time, he foresaw, her letters to him would add up into a string-tied packet in the bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Ben drew a sharp breath. From his Lit Crit class in college he perfectly well knew about the willing suspension of disbelief, but damn, what was a person to do when the situation requiring it happened outside the pages of Tolstoy or Flaubert? Still as dazed over Cass as he had been for most of the past two weeks, he tried one more time to bite down on the fact that he had got himself involved with a married woman. Not just any married woman, either. For her part, Cass had to regularly climb out of bed with him and fly picture-book missions in barely tested aircraft. Neither of them had asked for anything like this, they both had blundered into it, but--

"Ready to go if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the clammy window and forced himself to doze.

It does not matter who I am in this story, nor if I am any one person you may have heard of. Life, and for that matter death, singled out so many of our generation so early for unprecedented chapters that the voices become mingled with the years. Our saga, for that is what it was written up as at the time, from the very start was an account that had to be vigilantly pieced together; a rehearsal for history, we were told. History we became, at great cost. So, our own telling of it, at last, requires an author possessed of the one brand of authority that can never be argued with, anonymity. If you happen to need to ascribe a single perspective to this collective tale, most often it will be Ben's. He was tapped at the time to tell our story; to bear it, really. But so curious a chronicle as ours cannot be told without the influence of women any more than *The Odyssey* could; and so, Cass Stuart definitely will have her say in this.

The rest of us, who exist now only for the sake of these words, amount to an odd number--eleven--whose combined fate began one afternoon in 1940 on a wind-blown prairie football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war.

Now, meet Ben.

It does not matter who I am in this story, nor if I am any one person you may have heard of. Life, and for that matter death, singled out so many of our generation so early for ~~fateful~~ chapters ~~that the~~ voices ~~become~~ mingled with the years, and those of us who comprise this story.... Our saga, for that is what it was written up as at the time, from the very start was an account that had to be vigilantly pieced together; a rehearsal for history, we were told. History we became, at great cost. So, our own telling of it, at last, requires an author possessed of the one brand of authority that can never be argued with, anonymity. If you happen to need to ascribe a single perspective to this collective tale, most often it will be Ben's. He was tapped at the time to tell our story; to bear it, really. But so curious a chronicle as ours cannot be told without the influence of women any more than *The Odyssey* could; and so, among others, Cass Stuart ~~definitely~~ will have her say in this.

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Now, meet Ben.

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

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

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

The uncomprehending look on the bartender was a reminder that not all of the world knew about Vic, at least yet.

"Shit oh dear." Tom Harry rubbed his jaw after Ben told him.. "Knew that kid since he was a pup." He flicked a look at Ben. "Weren't you here for funerals the last couple of times?"

Ben gulped more of his drink than he'd intended, unsteadied by having something like that attached to him. Friessen's and Pennington's, those were. At least he hadn't been sent back for O'Fallon's, TPWP wasn't geared up enough at

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

"Must get kind of old, is all I'm saying." Tom Harry eyed him speculatively one more time. "Drink up. The Packard is out back."

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

"What do you think," Tom Harry grunted, "thin as condom skin. Here, throw these in the trunk." He rummaged in the shed room piled high with amazing items that Medicine Lodge customers with more thirst than cash had put up as collateral for drinks, and rolled two spare tires toward Ben.

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

Gros Ventre

Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last bend in the road, suppertime lights coming on here and there under its roof of trees.

As the bus headed up the wide main street toward the Sedgwick House hotel, where the lobby served as bus depot, Ben saw the single lighted storefront on the block with the bank and the beauty shop. Of course. Thursday night. His father putting the newspaper to bed after this week's press run.

"Here will do," he rapidly told the driver.

The bus driver jammed on the brakes and looked at Ben as if he had just torn off a mask. Using all the breath he could summon, the man let out slowly: "I'll be goddamned. You're him."

Right there in the middle of the street, the driver laboriously dragged out the duffel and presented it to Ben. The man looked tempted to salute. Ben murmured his thanks and turned away toward the premises of the *Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner.*

Bill Reinking was at the back, in the job shop, running the addressograph himself. He looked like a scholar out of place, peering through his bifocals as he

fed the dogtag-sized subscription plates into the little machine for it to stamp those names and addresses onto the mail wrappers. Ben remembered now: the office help, Janie, had gone to Arizona where her husband was stationed. Past his own reflection in the glass of the door, Ben watched his father at his lonesome chore until it began to hurt. As he opened the door and went in, he called out as jauntily as he could: "All the news that fits, again this week?"

started

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

Ben got the bad news over with. "It's only a three-day pass, not the five I put in for. And there's something I have to do out of town, all day tomorrow. Other than that, I'm the perfect guest."

"Better enjoy you in a hurry, hadn't I."

The ginger mustache the tint of Ben's hair.

"Had supper? There's some slaw and fried chicken left." Ben looked at the bucket supper from the Lunchery down the street, then back at his father.

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

· Lapa Players

"Let me get some chicken in me, then I'll help."

"How's it going in the Falls?"

"Red stars over Montana. Aren't you missing a scoop?" Ben described the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Russian air force were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes.

"Half the county probably thinks there's a red star on me, I wrote so many editorials in favor of Lend-Lease."

"You and Franklin D. got it. 00 planes last month."

"Should you be telling me this?"

"Of course not. You're a newspaperman." Ben discarded the chicken bone.

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

"I didn't think you'd like to see these just now. Duane and all."

Alex McCaskill.

"Makes me feel old."

"The team getting by all right?"

He knew precisely where each one of them was, in the war. It was his job to know.

of your brunch?

Howard Blake at East Base.

Moxie Stamper and Sig Prokosch in Europe.

Deems Anthony at the camp that was not supposed to be mentioned.

Larry Danzer on the destroyer *U.S.S. McCorkle* in the Pacific.

Vince Pennington, Animal Angelides, Larry O'Fallon, and Carl Friessen, in graves under military crosses.

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

"Do you ever get to see this?"

He picked out his name, backwards. TPWP Dispatch.

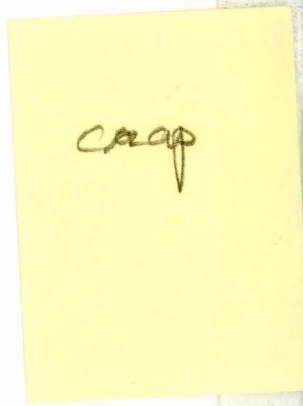
"Never expected to see you get to be boilerplate."

"At least it's better writing it than being it."

"You have anything to do with it?"

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

"You know goddamn good and well what I mean. This goldbrick assignment they've got me on."



Ben walked briskly two blocks up the street and stepped into Medicine Lodge. The saloon was as quiet as if empty, but it was never empty at this time of night. Inert as doorstops, at the far end of the bar sat a bleary pair of sheepherders he recognized--Pat Hoy from the Withrow ranch, and the other had a nickname with an amount of geography attached. Canada Dan, that was it. Puffy with drink but not falling-down drunk, the two evidently were winding down a usual spree after the lambs were shipped, when there was half a year's wages to blow. Ever conscious of his uniform, Ben had a flash of thought that except for polar explorers, these befogged old herders off alone in their sheepwagons somewhere would have been about the last persons to hear of the war, back in December of 1941. It did not seem to be foremost on their minds now, either, as they and the third person in the saloon expectantly looked down the bar in Ben's direction like connoisseurs of the color of money.

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

"Nice to see you again too, Tom." With a ghost of a smile, Ben patted his way along the rich polished wood of the bar as if touching it for luck. The Medicine Lodge was not much changed since his high school Saturdays of wrestling beer kegs and emptying spitoons and swamping the place out with broom and mop. *"Saturday night buys the rest of the week, kid,"* Tom Harry would always say when he paid Ben. Hundreds of such nights produced a saloon that by now had a crust of decor as rigorous as a museum's. Stuffed animal heads punctuated every wall; the one-eyed buffalo in particular was past its prime. The long mirror in back of the bar possessed perhaps a few more age-spots of tarnish than when Ben had been in charge of wiping it down, and the immense and intricate oaken breakfront that framed it and legions of whiskey bottles definitely had more dust. Still pasted to the mirror on either side of the cash register were the only bits of notice taken of the twentieth century: a photo of Tom Harry's prior enterprise, the Blue Eagle saloon in one of the Fort Peck dam project's hard-drinking boomtowns, and a 1940 campaign poster picturing a President Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term that it can only have made any Republican cringe.

Taking all this in, for the narrowest of moments Ben could almost feel he had never been away from it. Illusions had to be watched out for. He got down to

business, which meant Tom Harry. "Do you still sell beverages in this joint or just stand around insulting the customers?"

Tom Harry cast a glance to the far end where the raggedy sheepherders were gaping hopefully in Ben's direction. "Hard to do, on some of them. What can I get you?"

"Whatever's on draft," Ben said before it registered on him that he was home now, he didn't need to nurse away the evening on beer. "No, wait, a brown bomber." He dug into his wallet. "Give the choirboys a round. Catch yourself, too."

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

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

"Hour ago."

"Been places, I hear."

"They ship me around, some."

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

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

"Jesus, gourmets," Tom Harry muttered, carrying the briny crock of preserved boiled eggs down the length of the bar along with his disgust. While the egg transaction dragged on, Ben quietly sipped his strong drink and gazed past the reflections in the plateglass window to downtown Gros Ventre at night. The lofty cottonwood trees that did not know there was a war on. His father's newspaper office, still alight down the street, another timeless pillar of the town. On the next block beyond the *Gleaner*, the Odeon theater where teen-aged Ben Reinking every Saturday night of his life stayed on through the second show--the "owl show" at

nine that repeated the feature movie for a tardy gathering of drunks, late-arriving lovers, and insomniacs --to disect how the makers of movies made them. Centralities of his growing up here, those, along with the one where he sat now. He knew there was no denying the influence of bloodline, but by quite a number of the readings he could take on his life so far, Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, out there in the dark, served as a kind of parentage too. Whatever he was, this was where it came from.

Tom Harry returned, still shaking his head over the jellied egg binge. Ben twirled his glass indicatively on the dark wood. "Any more of this in the well?"

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

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

"Where the hell you think you're gonna drive to with those--Paris, France, to get laid?"

"You ought to know. Fort Peck."

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items that Medicine Lodge customers with more thirst than cash had put up as collateral for drinks, and rolled two spare tires toward Ben.

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Gros Ventre

Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last curve, suppertime lights coming on here and there under its roof of trees. Ben had dozed until the bus leaned into the first sharp swerve of the road south of town, and even before his eyes were open he could tell to the exact mile where he was in the steepening benchlands. He sat up straight for this every time. Now the road did the trick it always did at the shallow gap between the long flat ridges it had been finding its way through, dipping as if taking a bow for what lay ahead.

Filling the western sky, the Rockies changed color as he watched, sunset to dusk, magic purple descending over the crags and reefs, the snow-tipped peaks the last sentries of daylight. There it all was, below and beyond, the willow weave of English Creek in the foreground, the march of the mountains north to Canada, the buttes and benchlands standing out in dusk outline as if embossed. Ben felt the warm mix of exagerrated familiarity and nagging curiosity that the sight of a home town brings.

As the bus headed up the wide main street toward the Sedgwick House hotel, where the lobby served as bus depot, Ben saw the single lighted storefront

on the block with the bank and the beauty shop. Of course. Thursday night. His father putting the paper to press.

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Bill Reinking was at the back, in the job shop, running the addressograph himself. He looked like a scholar out of place, peering through his bifocals as he fed the dogtag-sized subscription plates into the little machine for it to stamp those names and addresses onto the mail wrappers. Ben remembered now: Janie

The ginger mustache the tint of Ben's hair.

"All the news that fits, again this week?"

His father spun around to him. "Ben! We weren't expecting you until the weekend."

Gros Ventre

The curves woke him for good. Even before his eyes were open he could tell, to the exact mile, this was where the highway gathered strength for Gros Ventre by whipping back and forth to make its way up and across the steep benchlands south of town. He sat up and looked around the bus, discovering he was the only passenger left. War time--that is, military time, with its twenty-four hour tablature--was enough to skew anyone's private clock, but even so, he was surprised at himself for staying conked out through the stops at Fairfield and Twin Sulphur Springs and Choteau. Sleep usually didn't come readily, and not just because of wide-awake nights with Cass.

The bus leaned into the next swerve of the road, the driver being kept busy, and Ben braced himself around, half sideways, to watch as the Rockies changed color, sunset to dusk, magic purple descending over the crags and reefs, the snow-tipped peaks the last sentries of daylight. Who could ever get enough of that sight? In the gathering evening he picked out the continent-dividing upthrusts that had been the horizon of his growing up, the grey-rock palisade of Roman Reef stretching across the miles, the more blunt rimrock of Jericho Reef, cloud-scarfed Phantom Woman Mountain peeking from behind them. Once again, the tension of

coming home smacked up against the age-old allure of the Two Medicine country. His mind danced between, back there on that Christmas vacation--in 1940 before the war meant much in America--when Duane Buisson rode home from college with him to go hunting. For a couple of days the two of them walked their legs off in the rough country there under the towering walls of the reefs, never even seeing a deer. The third afternoon, a fine four-point buck strolled out of the timber on the ridgeline above them, nicely silhouetted. Duane was the guest, he had the first shot. He was rusty--a man can't spend his autumns playing major college football and keep his shooting eye up too--and after he fired, the buck simply turned its head, antlers cocked a bit to one side, as if quizzical about all the noise. Ben waited for Duane to touch off another shot, but instead he lowered his rifle and turned toward Ben, poker-face serious. "Isn't that the damnedest thing you ever saw? A dead deer standing there looking at us." Ben was laughing so hard he could not get his own rifle up before the deer bounded off into the jackpines. *We'll never get him now, will we, Duane, old kid.*

Now the road did the trick it always did at the shallow gap between the long flat ridges it had been wandering up, dipping as if taking a bow for what lay ahead. There it all was, below and beyond, the willow weave of English Creek in the

Local Board # 37 of the Selective Service System has notified ye editor that this month's eleven draft registrants reported to the induction center in Great Falls last Monday morning. It brings to 422 the number of Pondera County men and women now serving in the armed forces. This is quite a showing for a county with a population of only three thousand. Remember, mail subscriptions to the Gleaner *are provided free for any of our men and women in military uniform.*

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, Oct. 28, 1943

foreground, the march of the mountains north to Canada, the buttes and benchlands standing out in dusk outline as if embossed. Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last curve down there, suppertime lights coming on here and there under its roof of trees. Ben felt the warm mix of exagerrated familiarity and nagging curiosity that the sight of a home town brings. Whatever he was, this was where it came from.

As the bus eased around the curve at the edge of town and headed up the wide main street toward the Sedgwick House hotel, where the lobby served as bus depot, Ben saw the single lighted storefront on the block with the bank and the beauty shop. Of course. Thursday night. His father putting the paper to press.

"Here will do," he rapidly told the driver.

The bus driver jammed on the brakes and looked at Ben as if he had just torn off a mask. Using all the breath he could summon, the man let out slowly: "I'll be goddamned. You're him."

Right there in the middle of main street, the driver laboriously dragged out the duffel and presented it to Ben. The man looked tempted to salute. Ben muttered his thanks and turned away toward the premises of the *Gros Ventre Gleaner.*