

Sports Lowdown. And have I got a super-size scoop for you tonight.” (Ben could just hear that rat-a-tat-tat radio patter. Not for the first time, however, Loudon’s brand of spiel went beyond anything that could be expected.) “On the gridiron of life, champions now are taking the field in a game for all the world to see. Every true follower of football will remember the war cry of the Golden Eagles of 1941. That Treasure State University team gallantly rallied to the memory of its ‘twelfth man,’ the teammate whose heart tragically gave out on the practice field, and went on to an undefeated season. Now those Golden Eagle players have heroically committed themselves to victory on a field as large as the world. Every starting player of that unforgettable Treasure State team—now get this, fans—those eleven players all are now in the service of their country.

“I have searched the records high and low, folks.”

(—Ben would have bet most of it was low, wherever Loudon was involved—) “and with the natural exception of the military academies of West Point and Annapolis, no college football team has ever before offered up every member in simultaneous service to our country. Count on it, friends, Hitler and Tojo are in for some rough tackling from these fellows. The roster of this supreme team is quite amazing:

Moxie Stamper, the slinging quarterback.

Jake Eisman, ‘the Iceman,’ cool head at fullback who always delivered in All-American fashion when vital short yardage was needed.

Quick Vic Rennie, as fast as a halfback gets.

Dexter Cariston, deceptive as a ghost at the other halfback spot.

Then the outstanding line, beginning with ends Nick Danzer and Ben Reinking, two of the catchingest receivers this side of Don Hutson.”

#

cap 2x
ok?
Yes

—S

—N

On down the list. The one surprise to Ben was Dexter Cariston, who always claimed the only blood he intended to be around any time soon was in med school. Dex must have decided not to wait for the draft.

Ben passed the transcription back to the colonel, wishing he could wash Ted Loudon off his hand. "All due respect, sir, I already knew most of that." Swallowing hard against the possibility that he was going to throw up, he managed to croak out: "Could you possibly tell me why was I yanked out of pilot training to read a wire story?"

"For one thing," the colonel said mildly, "because you know what a wire story is. Two summers with the United Press bureau in Helena ripping and reading the teletype, am I right? And you know how to meet a deadline, as well. 'Letter from the Hill' every week for, what, three seasons?"

Staring at the man, Ben felt a rush of blood through his head, although he couldn't have told whether it was draining from his face or coloring it up. His football diary had run in only the college newspaper; what was the Pentagon doing reading the *Treasure State Nugget*?

"An upbringing in your father's newspaper office on top of that," the colonel was going on, as if he was ordering parts for something he wanted built, "and you were sharp in class, your grades always up there on the dean's list. Plus that famous football season. Quite the pedigree." Abruptly he shifted ground. "Was it a pact? The eleven of you talking it over and deciding to go into the war sooner than later, one for all and all for one, that sort of thing?"

"No, sir." All for one, one for all? However much else this Pentagon whiz knew, he didn't know Stamper and Danzer. Nor, for that matter, Dex. "Sure, a few of us went to the enlistment office together right after Pearl Harbor. But other than that it was strictly one by one, guys trickling in as they felt they had to, from what I hear."

S—
N—

“Pity. But that doesn’t change the essential story, fortunately.”

The colonel sprang it then, the “Supreme Team” coverage for the duration of the war, that Ben’s background singled him out for. He listened in a daze as the colonel brought it all home to him. “Naturally we will accredit you as a full-fledged correspondent. You’ll be on detached duty to TPWP for the duration, and there are a few ins and outs that go with that. But you’ll learn the ropes quickly enough.” Then the brief one-sided joust, with Ben heatedly asking whether he had any choice in this and the colonel replying, “Not really. Your orders already have been cut. In fact, I have them here.” The man patted an attache case of an elegance that had nothing to do with military issue.

full caps

e

Heart thudding, knowing this would take endless sorting out between the writing chance of a lifetime and the loss of flying, Ben ended up blurting what he had to:

“Sir, begging your pardon. But following the team all during the war that way, what are we supposed to do”—*what am I supposed to do*—“if not everybody makes it through?”

A sharp nod from the colonel. “Good, let’s get that contingency out of the way. We’ve had the casualty figures from other wars run,” he said as if Ben had asked that as a favor. Another cigarillo appeared in the manicured hand, another flare of the lighter. The colonel appraised Ben through a puff of smoke before going on. “You aced your statistics course in college, so you’ll be interested in what our stix section came up with. An American male of military age had a greater chance of being killed or maimed in, say, a logging camp or a deep-shaft mine than in the front lines of either the Civil War or World War One. Does that surprise you?” He tapped the slightest dab of ash into the ash-tray on the desk. “It did us, but not unduly. The size of veterans’ groups from both wars indicated that many, many more soldiers survived than people think, and our figures merely back that up. Statistically speaking, in this war we are looking at a nine

3

—S
—N

percent mortality rate for active combatants such as your teammates. Rounding that off to a whole man, as we must”—Ben stared at a human being who could use the law of averages to measure dirt on a grave—“that is one in ten, isn’t it. That unfortunate formula of fate or something very like it would occur whether or not we”—he gestured with the cigarillo as if striking that word—“or rather you, Lieutenant, do this.”

NO UNIFORM OF authority Ben had come up against in the many months since held a candle to that. Now he looked at the red-faced East Base commander and informed him he was not at liberty to divulge who was behind this kink in the chain of command, as the general called it. In the same dead-level tone of voice he added: “General Grady, since you ask, my next piece is about a teammate of mine wounded in action. He has one leg left.”

Warily the base commander took another look at Ben. “That’s a shame, I’m sure. What about the article you said you’d do on Eisman?”

“His turn is coming. Will that be all, sir?”

THE FLIGHT BOARD still was not doing Cass or him any favors. Chalked slots swarmed with on-time departures and arrivals across the entire vast trellis of routes into and out of East Base, every B-17 and P-39 and all the birds of the air evidently having enjoyed a day of fine weather for flying, with the lonely exception of Squadron WASP 1 still sitting in murderous fog in Seattle. Swearing to himself, Ben banged out of the Operations building. He hit the communications section next, to send off the piece on Vic, remembering to threaten the wire clerk with certain demotion and possible dismemberment if he didn’t keep a civil tongue toward Jones.

Back out in the dusk breeze where the runway yawned empty, he stood there so sick with the mix of worry and love he felt in-

S—
N—

capacitated. Nothing prepared a person for this. The way he and Cass had fallen for each other was as unlikely as a collision of meteors. But since it had happened, as hard to sort out, too. The ~~avarice~~ ^{hunger} of love. There was no limit to it. Finally he decided there was nothing to be done but call it a day until further word on her flight. His body agonized that there was little hope now of seeing her tonight, even if her squadron lifted off before sunset in Seattle; his brain tried to fight down the wave of desire and encourage the fog to hold so Cass would bunk there for the night instead of flying blind into murk and mountains.

Jake Eisman wasn't bunked in anywhere, he could count on that. Halfway up the whitewashed walkway to the Officers' Club, Ben caught the sound of his penetrating baritone—in their playing days, Jake was restricted to whispers in the huddle lest he be heard the length of the football field—in the mob of song emanating from within; the O Club always tuned up drastically when a planeload of pilots returned from the Alaska run. Ben never ceased to marvel at how fertile the war was for songs. He intended to write about this someday, just for the havoc to be created at Teepee Weepy by lyrics such as Jake was enwrapped in at the moment:

Oh, the Russians are drinking in Fairbanks,
 While we fly through snow, ice, and shit.
 When we land they shout out, "Thanks, Yanks!
 Now watch us bomb Hitler,
 And Himmler,
 And Fritzie,
 And Mitzi,
 While you fly through snow, ice, and shit!"

Central as a vat in the bibulous bunch ganged around the piano and hoisting another drink at the end of each chorus, Jake jerked his head toward the bar as soon as he spotted Ben. They hadn't seen each other for a week and the ATC's largest and

—S

—N

possibly most boisterous pilot always came back from the far north with more Alaska tales than Robert Service. Tonight Ben was more than ready to let the conversation flow from that direction. Ordering a beer for himself and another as reinforcement for Jake, he drifted to their usual corner table while the bass-and-baritone crowd around the piano roared through a final chorus like sea lions.

Tense as he was about Cass, he didn't manage to have the best face on things when Jake showed up at the table. Jake plainly had been here indulging in beer and song long enough to be justifiably somewhat askew. His dark hair flopped to one side—on him it looked good—and his tie was loosened. His breast pocket nametag was a radical number of degrees off angle; a hand-lettered last name only on everyone else, his as ever notified the world in full: LT. JACOB EISMAN.

“What’s eating you, scribe?” The big man roughed Ben’s shoulder with a mitt of a hand as he went around to a facing chair. “A three-day leave don’t agree with you? Send the next one my way, and you can freeze your ass over the Yukon while I party.”

“Why would they hand me an airplane when they barely trust me with a pencil?” Ben roused himself and got busy deflecting the topic of his leave. “No substitutions allowed anyway, you ought to know that. Grandpa Grady himself told me within this very hour you are the pride of the ATC—”

“Only because I slipped him tickets on the fifty-yard line for the Homecoming game.”

“—so there you go, who’ll mush the flying dogsleds north if not you? The serum must reach Nome, Nanook.”

Jake snorted. “Alaska runs on vodka these days, ain’t you heard?”

“War is heck,” said Ben, cracking a smile in spite of himself.

“I’ll clink to that.” Jake tapped Ben’s beer bottle with his own, drained what he had left, and reached for the next bottle. “Been

meaning to ask you, Ben friend. If I'm so all-fired popular, when do I get my moment of fame again?"

That particular question had more behind it than Ben wanted to deal with. Juggling the "Supreme Team" pieces into some kind of monthly sequence was always tricky, even without what had happened to Vic and what waited in the file after his. Now this. He said shortly, "Dex is next. No cutting in line."

Jake leaned in, covering the table like a cloud but grinning as he came. "Where is he, Ben? C'mon. Where's the dexterous one putting in his war?"

"Goddamnit, Ice, will you lay off that? I still can't tell you. They'd have me cleaning latrines from here to eternity if I did." *And you wouldn't like knowing.*

"That rich sneak," Jake was saying appreciatively. "He's in something like the OSS, isn't he. Greased his way in there with the other blueblood daredevils. The glamorous war, that'd be his. Parachuting into Krautland in the dark of the moon with a knife between his teeth. That it?"

"Have another beer, Jake."

With lazy grace Jake signaled to the bar for another round apiece. "Top secret, huh? Tell Dex to bag a few of the bastards for me."

Just then the hubbub in the Club went up several more notches as yet another flock of pilots came rollicking in. Several of them were shorter guys, fighter plane jockeys who looked even more compact beside the brawn of the bomber pilots, and their particular reason for celebration, Ben could overhear, was that they hadn't had to bounce through the air to the cold of Alaska, only Alberta. Edmonton was the first hop for P-39s, with their limited fuel tanks, and Canadian reserve pilots in need of flying time sometimes ferried the planes onward up the long chain of bush-country airfields to Fairbanks. These flyboys swarming the bar were home from an easy day's work before dark. Glazed, Ben

stared past them out the Club's picture window to where the defining lines of evening were making the buttes across Great Falls stand out like oldest earthen fortresses. Sundown would reach Seattle in less than an hour, on top of fog. Consumed with fret about Cass, he tried not to hate the lucky fighter pilots elbowing to the bar.

During this there had been a distinct lack of words from across the table, and he realized Jake had been studying him critically. A different kind of grin sneaked onto Jake now. "Benjamin, you've been holding out on me another way. But I found out about it, ho de ho. Can't fool Yukon Jake."

Ben's insides lurched. He and Cass had tried to be as hard to spot as chameleons, how did they stand out all the way to Alaska? "You don't want to believe everything you—"

Impatiently Jake wiped that away with a paw: "I have it on good authority. Shame on you, earning yourself a purple one in your spare time over there in the paradise of the Pacific. What are you, some kind of incognito hero?"

"You're too swift for me," Ben exhaled in some relief, although Tepee Weepy did not want it made known that its supposedly unarmed correspondent had a combat exploit and a scar to show for it. "Where did you pick that up?"

"Carlo the Friesian, who else." Jake sat back, folding his fire-log arms in satisfaction. "Probably comes as a surprise to arty-farty ends, but tackles can write and fullbacks can read. Letter from Carl the other day says you and him got a New Guinea welcome from the Japs and you came out of it with the wound, the Purple Heart, the commendation, the whole schmear. How come you didn't tell me about it?"

Ben started to hide behind a swig of his beer, but was afraid it would come right back up. "It was just a graze." It was everything beyond that for the infantryman an arm's length away from him and Friessen. *And the Jap.* The memory churned in him. The

10
or the oldest ...
STET
-again,
for rhythm's sake

;

S—
N—

grotesque hand-to-hand struggle on that jungle trail. His three weeks of impatient mending on the hospital ship. "Don't look at me like that, Ice. I'd have told you about it sooner or later." *Maybe.* "It's not something I'm particularly proud of. Correspondents are supposed to stay out of the way of metal objects flying through the air."

"That your next piece?" Jake pressed. "After Dex? Hell, I'll give up my spot to read about it. Carl said it was pretty hairy."

Ben made a zipper motion across his lips, hoping it would end this.

Jake gave a huge sigh of exasperation. "Then I might as well give you a bad time about something else while I'm at it. I read in the newspaper you went calling on Grady's Ladies. So tell me, how's the hunting there?"

Minimum honesty sounded innocent enough here. "Too many of them are married."

"That's a sonofabitching shame, you know that?" Jake let out over the increased noise, the piano gang lustily singing a filthy tribute to Daisy in the grass. Ben squirmed and wished they would work their way to something that did not rhyme with Cass and the rest.

"I mean, can you imagine a marriage like that?" Jake looked askance at the very idea. "The old lady gets up in the morning, puts on her flying suit and straps on her .45 and goes off to war. Wow."

"Jake, something like that happens these days more than you might think." In the Excelsior Hotel some mornings, for instance. ~~"People do what they do."~~

"I know you," Jake bridged right over that, pointing the neck of a bottle at him, "you were too busy scribbling things down to sniff out the needy bachelor girls for us needy bachelors. Myself, I never get a crack at our sisters in arms. I fly out, they fly in, round and round we go."

—S

—N

Good thing, too. That's all I'd need next after Jones, you linking up with that she-wolf blonde in Cass's flight. "Airships that pass," Ben philosophized hopefully.

"Besides, I don't need any of your hotshot wasps," Jake stated with startling primness. Then leered goofily. "I've got something of my own going. Tell you about her sometime." Ben was surprised. It wasn't like Jake to be mysterious about any female conquest.

"You made them sound pretty good, you know." This time Jake spoke soberly, and Ben went back on guard. "Like maybe they could handle the Alaska run, Ben buddy?"

"All I say in the piece was some of them, all right, a bunch of them have as much flying time as any of you and if they were handed a map could quite possibly find their way to Fairbanks. But I didn't mean—"

"I'm for it," Jake broke in. "Let the wasps fly that run and send me after Germans. Sooner the better."

Ben sat up. "Jake, serious a minute. Bombers over Germany get the guts shot out of them—when I was at St. Eval doing the piece on Moxie I saw them land with holes the size of boxcar doors. You really want in on that?"

"If that's what it takes, hell yes. I don't like what Hitler has in mind for me if the crazy little dipshit wins the war."

"Plenty of those bomber pilots end up bailing out over occupied territory," Ben said slowly. "POW camps are no picnic." His throat was tight as he tried to find a right way to say it. "What I hear is that the first thing they do is check dogtags to sort people out. No telling what they'd do to you, Ice."

"You think that's not on my mind?" Jake replied in the quietest tone he was capable of. "But I figure it this way," the voice took on a calculating timbre, "those ack-ack assholes have to single me out from a lot of guys dropping bombs on them, first."

Goddamn it, don't count on that. Half in despair, Ben stood ready to point out that the law of averages had not been any suit of armor for certain "Supreme Team" members so far, but Jake knew as much about that as he did, almost. It was always a mistake to see the workhorse fullback known as the Iceman, the sportswriters' consensus pick for All-American at that position in hallowed '41, as mainly a physical specimen. Jake stood 6'3" in stocking feet but the upper several inches were brain. The chips in his grammar from smelter work were deliberately maintained, Ben understood; in Black Eagle, the melting pot under the smokestack, someone like him had to make his words register on people high, low, or in between, as needed. Drinking with Jake was treacherous, but in any other human endeavor Ben would have trusted him with his life. Seven years they had been friends, since the high school all-star game that put them together on a team for the first time. Then hundreds of TSU football practices, banter, bull sessions, a long winning streak of camaraderie. Joshing arguments were nothing new between them; this had turned into something far beyond that. Ben felt he had to pierce the matter:

"That's why you wanted me to hurry up and do the piece on you, isn't it. So you could wave it at somebody who might have some influence and say, 'Hey, I'm a famous guy, wouldn't it be great to have me over there bombing the balls off the Germans?'"

"Couldn't hurt, could it?" Jake responded defiantly. Then just as quickly looked sheepish. "Sorry I asked. Sonofabitching war, I don't know what gets into a guy." He set about working himself toward normal with a boost of beer. "I mean it, though, about getting over there somehow. Ben? I'm not saying you got any pull, because if you did, you'd be up, up and away like the rest of us, wouldn't you. But if you ever stumble across any, remember

sevens

-S

-N

your poor deserving teammate, okay?" The old grin came back. "Who's gonna look out for me if not you? What's that poem"— Jake pronounced it *pome*—"O captain! My captain!"

Relieved, Ben responded in the same vein: "You're looking for pull from someone who took a demotion from civilian life, are you? Good thinking, Ice. Didn't I help you crib your way through the logic course any better than—"

Jake was holding up a hand for silence. He cocked an ear at the preliminary commotion from the piano. "It's bad luck not to sing this one. Everybody in." Swinging his beer bottle to the beat, Jake joined in mightily to the swelling roar of music that filled the building:

Bought the farm, bought the farm!
Crashing the plane leads to harm!
There was blood on the cockpit,
and blood on the ground.
Blood on the cowling,
and blood all around.
Pity the pilot,
all bloody and gore,
For he won't be flying
That airplane no more.

After the last chorus tailed off into drinking, Jake looked across at Ben. "You're not singing these days?"

"Frog in my throat."

"You really are off your feed. C'mon, Ben, it's just a song. Lets off the steam."

"I know what it lets off, for Christ's sake." He shoved back from the table and popped to his feet. "Just remembered, I need to check something in Ops. A VIP flight I'm supposed to keep tabs on in case there's any brass worth interviewing. Be right back."

cap 2x

with

He sprinted to the Operations building, slowing only as he walked into the room where the flight board covered one wall, hoping the clamor of his heart was not loud enough for the night Operations staff to hear. As ever, he whipped out his pad and stood there jotting random flight information, scanning the entire board like a good working reporter, but the chalked entry for WASP 1 midway down instantly had told him what he needed to know. Since meeting Cass he had never imagined looking forward to a bed without her in it, but the three white letter—RON—up there for blessed REMAINING OVERNIGHT did the job.

Back at the Officers Club, he veered to the bar. “Fill the tray,” he told the barman.

The bartender crowded beer bottles onto the round serving tray until there were ten or a dozen, Ben didn’t bother to count. He picked it up and steered toward the table.

Jake surveyed the forest of bottles on the tray. “What’s all this?”

“Anesthesia. I have something to tell you about Vic.”

full caps

full caps

4

★ “I INTERRUPTED THE greatest movie never made, didn’t I,” Cass’s murmur came from the region of the hard-used pillow.

“Immortality will just have to wait,” Ben’s came from where his head blissfully rested on her.

“How many t’s in that?”

“You are a merciless woman.” Still hazed over with the spell of their lovemaking, he lay clinging to her in the wreckage of the sheets, every part of the two of them bare except for wristwatches—they hadn’t taken the time to unstrap those. Hers, the type with luminous numerals that was issued to pilots, showed she had slipped into the room at the Excelsior merely twenty minutes ago. Before he could even get up from the typing table to greet her she’d slid the bolt home on the door and turned to him saying, “I guess we have some catching up to do.” In the next breath they were at each other, kissing every direction, and here in the aftermath the creaky room with its flung clothing and kicked-off bedcovers looked like the muss after a spirited rummage sale; the one spot their mess hadn’t touched was the portable typewriter with the page of script Ben had been pecking away at, and he couldn’t help knowing half of that was crossed out untidily as usual.

human
~~?~~
Yes

S—
N—

“Bulletin for you.” She was stroking the back of his head with a motion tender and tense at the same time. “This’ll have to be another short night. I fly out again at 0600.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’d have moved the bed closer to the door.”

She chuckled and swatted him behind the ear. “Fool.”

“Probably.”

Mustering strength enough to lift himself onto one elbow, he gazed down at this woman he should not be with as if committing her every feature to memory. The attentive cheeky face that a few years back could have been of the calendar kind but now could serve on a recruiting poster; Cass was dramatically weather-tanned, a trace whiter around the eyes where the goggles masked her while flying. Dark brown hair naturally wavy, which she kept authoritatively short off her shoulders; she’d told him she cut it herself with a razor blade, there wasn’t ever time to command a squadron and visit a beauty shop both. The invitation of her snug peach-perfect breasts, and the tomboy thrift of her body on down. Already he was hungry for her again, in a way beyond what they had just been doing in bed. Fresh from the night before, when his imagination had given her up for lost, the ache with her name on it cut through to his bones. Life without Cass? Last night had shown that wasn’t life, it was barely existence. What kind of a passion pit was the dark of the mind, where he had struggled every way he knew and still ended up so far gone on this woman at his side? *And if they catch us at this, we’re goners of another kind. Double jeopardy, Cass. The law of averages isn’t doing the two of us any favors either.*

Watching his mood turn, Cass headed off whatever he was about to say. “Save it for the chaplain, okay? We’re not the first ones who ever caught the screw flu and—”

“This is more than that, Cass, you know goddamn good and well it’s more.”

-S

-N

“—call it what you want to, it always comes down to one of two things, doesn’t it. We either quit with this, or go at it like crazy while we still have the chance. Right now we don’t seem to be much good at quitting, I’d say.” She flicked him the urgent smile that showed the irresistible tiny gap between her front teeth, and he melted like a schoolboy and knew it. Deeply and rigorously they kissed again, running their hands silkily here and there, as if keeping track of everything in the book of hotel-room romance. “Welcome back, by the way,” he murmured when their heads were clear enough. “I never knew I hated fog so much.”

Her voice rose from where she lay. “Those shiny-pants lame-brains last night couldn’t make their minds up to scrub that flight when they couldn’t even see to the control tower.” Cass disposed of the Seattle military hierarchy while flat on her back. “They held us in the ready room until full dark, the chickenshits. What did they think, we’d be able to see better in the fog at night, like bats?”

She rolled sharply up onto an elbow, facing Ben from so near he could feel the warmth of her breath on his face. “While I’m at it. Know what, Scar?” she resorted to a mock growl as her free hand lightly traced along the groove in his skin where he had been wounded. “You need a thicker hide in more ways than one. You’d be better off not checking the flight board when I fly.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’d be worried to death that way too.”

Something like a wince came to her hazel eyes. He saw her start on a word, then draw it back.

Finally Cass wrinkled her nose at him. “Hopeless man, I guess there’s no cure for what ails you then. Hey, that reminds me”—she pushed off him, and slick as a seal, flipped herself over and around, instantly onto her feet at the side of the bed—“before we got distracted, I was going to offer a guy a drink. One thing about Seattle, the Navy commissary is never short on scotch.” Not bothering with clothes she padded across the room,

evidently oblivious to the cold linoleum and all else, to where her ready-bag had been dropped by the door.

Ben sat up to take in the sight of her on parade. Stripped, Cass was as slim and wiry as a jockey, medium height for a woman, a perfect fit for the notoriously snug plane she flew; the P-39 carried the reputation that the aircraft company's president, a little guy, had scooted into the mockup of the cockpit not realizing it wasn't full-scale, declared it just right, and started production that very day. The consequence supposedly was that male air cadets had to have their butts measured to see if they could fly the thing, and when that proved to be too much trouble, the P-39s were Lend-Leased off to the Soviet Union where 5'6" Laplanders flew them. Ben was journalistically skeptical of any of that, but he could not argue with the fact that Captain Cass Standish's trim but shapely behind was a commanding one, in or out of a Cobra fighter plane.

Cass knelt at the bag, triumphantly plucking the pint of scotch out. "That's funny," he called over as he appreciatively took in her and the bounty in her hand, "they didn't teach me naked bartending in officer's candidate school."

"Man's world," Cass retaliated. "Women always have it tougher." She picked up the single cloudy tumbler from the dresser, looking around. "Does this dump have two glasses?"

"I keep one in the bottom drawer. For visiting royalty."

"Flattery will get you," she purred.

"I'm not so hot on the rest of my manners. I forgot to ask—survived the USO one more time, did you?" He knew she had been stuck with one of those extraneous duties that are slapped on when an officer isn't looking, East Base liaison to the United Services Organization at the downtown Civic Center. The USO did such things as hold theoretically chaste dances where servicemen could meet young ladies from the leafy neighborhoods around and bring entertainment acts to town; since General Grady in

Per USO Web site

-S
-N

his perpetual tear against venereal disease and other debilitations had put thirty Great Falls whoopee establishments off limits, the Civic Center outfit had no lack of customers. By Cass's telling, the goody-goody nature of the USO just about drove her up the wall. On the other hand, it was the perfect chance for her to sneak the few blocks to this skid row hotel. *They ought to see her now*, bare as the day she was born while she excavated the absent glass from amid the underwear he'd forgotten he dumped in that drawer.

"I just smiled until my back teeth hurt," she was reporting of the earlier part of her evening. "Luckily they don't miss me at all. Joe E. Brown is over there making faces at them right now."

"You passed up Joe E. Brown for me?" Ben's voice rose mischievously. "Where's your sense of humor?"

"Yuk yuk," she obliged. "He has his audience, I evidently have mine." He watched as she poured double wallops of scotch, then dribbles of water from the chipped enamel pitcher: Cass could fly with the boys, Cass could drink with the boys.

He made room for her now as she slid in and propped up against the bedstead next to him, each being careful with the precious scotch. Nonetheless Ben snuggled in on her. Do illicit lovers snuggle? He decided hell, yes, they do in this case. The war was away for the night, even if it was going to be a short night.

Cass, though, interrupted his attentions by clinking her glass against his.

"Hey you, Mister Busy. We need to have a toast. To General Grady, our poor ass-chewn commanding officer."

Very slowly Ben took a sip, eyeing her. "How'd you know he hauled me in to his office yesterday because of that?"

Her turn to be surprised. "I didn't. We just heard tonight about Grady getting reamed out good, along with the change of orders. Mary Catherine's sister is a WAVE clerk back there"—*there* always meant Washington—"and she phoned M.C. to say it was all over the Pentagon, how the prissy old Air Transport

full caps

Command got turned every way but loose over a dozen WASPS in Great Falls.

10
full caps

He took a stronger swig of his drink. "What change of orders?"

"We get to fly on the Alaska run, Ben." She looked at him proudly. "The first leg of it anyway, up to Edmonton. That's a big, big start—WASP 1 crossing the border just like the big boys."

full caps

"The hell you say." It took him no time whatsoever to put it together. "The Senator kicked until they gave in." *The old wire-puller reads a line or two I put in that piece, and Cass and her pilots get Canada handed to them? Tepee Weepy and me, that deadly a combination?*

Cass grinned. "Maybe Mrs. Senator did some kicking of her own."

"Could be. Anyway, screw Grady, let's drink to Luther and Sadie." With that, the state's senior senator and possibly just as senior spouse were accorded their due in scotch.

Cass belted hers down while his was barely to his lips, and scooted to the dresser to fetch the bottle. This time Ben saw not only a lovely lively woman who happened to fit into a Cobra cockpit, but a destined ace pilot of some kind. Captain Cassia Standish and her squadron given the go-ahead to fly in wartime airspace outside the U.S., even if it was only across a couple of Canadian provinces so far: who knew where that would lead? War correspondents read other correspondents, and he was well apprised from Russian dispatches that the Red Air Force already had women flying in combat, surely some of them in the same P-39s—the Laplander legend notwithstanding—that had hop-scotched all the way from East Base. It went through him in a chill mix of clarity and dismay: 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 the Eastern Front and take on the

↗

full caps
11

—S
—N

Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Cass luckily broke in on his tumble of thoughts. "I've been so wound up, I haven't even asked how leave was. Fun?"

"The opposite." He told her the story of Vic.

"That's rough." Without being asked, Cass bolstered his drink. "A leg off—I think I'd rather be dead, put out of my misery."

When Ben didn't say anything, she shifted around on the covers to face him more directly. In bed and out, he was unbeatable company, bright as a mint silver dollar, funny when he wanted to be, but deep-down serious about life; any way she looked at him, he amounted to a first-class passion ration. And while maybe she was stuck with wearing a wedding band, he was the one trapped in a wartime marriage of inconvenience with the shiny-pants Washington outfit with all the initials. *It's going to happen one of these times like that, isn't it, Ben. That Tepee Creepy outfit will yank you off somewhere to chase after another one of your team buddies and make you keep going, no more East Base, no more me. No more us, except pen pals. And that kind of ink never lasts.* Asking, she carefully confined it to: "What's next?"

Sensing treacherous territory, Ben answered with equal care: "Just more of the same, a catch-up piece on one of the guys on the team. He's—someplace I can't tell you about or why."

Cass let her puzzlement show. "Then how do you write about somebody like that?" Jake Eisman the other night had asked the same thing: "How in the hell do you show off Dex without blowing his cover?"

"Goddamn carefully," Ben recited the same answer. "Don't give me that look, you with the airplane. I know better than anybody that what they've stuck me doing in this war is a strange business, stranger some times than others."

"Touchy. All I was going to ask is, are you going to be away? To wherever this mystery gink is?"

"I find that out tomorrow."

"Ben?" Cass swirled the last of her drink, gazing into the bottom of the glass as if fortune-telling. "Something you better know."

At her tone, he braced back a bit against the bedstead. "Ready on the firing line, I guess."

"I'm a wingwalker."

He looked at her cautiously. "The county fair kind?"

"Fairs, air shows, rodeos, you name it. Anywhere people would pay to see somebody swoop over them hanging onto the struts and guywires of a biplane. If it was a woman, so much the better for the take." She tossed her head, as if the whipstream of wind from back then was in her hair again.

"I, ah, more figured you for a stunt pilot."

"That, too. We—"

Her voice caught on the word, Ben waiting unmoving until she could get hold of her self enough to go on. She had told him how she'd haunted the airfield outside Missoula when she was a kid, brassed her way into the Civilian Pilot Training course when there was a tiny opening for women, and in the end linked up with a smokejumper turned aircraft rigger for the Forest Service; the wedding ring there on her finger told the rest of that.

"—Dan and I," she managed to get the words out, "talked about barnstorming across the whole country. Turn into flying gypsies, kind of. We weren't much more than punk kids, it sounded like heaven to us. Off we went, weekends, holidays, giving it a try wherever there was some kind of two-bit show. I'd loop the loop and all that, and for the finale a buddy of ours who flew for the smokies would take the controls and I'd waltz out onto the wing. We were hot stuff on the fairgrounds circuit there for a while. Then right away with the war, Dan's Guard unit was called up—you know all that."

Choosing between perils, Ben turned the topic back to wing-walking: "Uh huh, well, that's quite a talent."

-S

-N

“Know what the first rule of wingwalking is?”

He could tell this was not the time to guess *Don't sneeze?* “I'm here listening.”

“Never leave hold of what you've got, until you've got hold of something else.”

He covered her ring hand with his own, the ache for her now a sharp pain.

“That goes for guys as well as guywires, am I to understand? Husband kind of guy?”

“For the duration, Ben,” Cass said levelly, “like every other damn thing. Even if I wash out of the war somehow or who knows what happens”—he understood that meant even if something took him out of the war in more or less one piece—“I couldn't do it to Dan, leave him while he's out there getting shot at. If I did, you would always wonder what sort of tramp you'd ended up with.”

Her next words stumbled a bit but they came.

“We're loco over each other, but that can't change the fact that I am as married as a person can get.” She poked him in a rib, trying to change the mood, her eyes saying she was desperate to. “So, football hero—why aren't you? It might have saved us a lot of trouble.”

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.”

“Two minutes is a long time for a football player.” He wanted out of the dead end of conversation as badly as she did. “The wingwalking. You're, ah, not going back to that, are you? After the war?”

“Don't know yet. A lot depends.”

He shook his head, resorting to mock rue, some of it not so mock. “A woman who flies a fighter plane with a ceiling of thirty-five thousand feet, and as if that isn't enough fooling around

with altitude, she wants to get out and stroll along the wing of some cropdust clunker. I have to inform you, Captain Standish, that's the long way around to get your kicks. A nuthouse doctor would definitely call that a promiscuous acrophiliac tendency."

Cass's smile crept out and grew impish. "Know what? You make it sound dirty."

"A guy can hope."

She peeked down. "I see he can. And there's still some night left."

THE TELETYPE CLERK looked up nervously when he strode into the wire room, early if not bright, the next morning. Ben was used to causing dismay this way. He knew he was hated by innumerable men around the world who had never laid eyes on him. Public affairs officers required to keep close track of the doings of whatever member of the "Supreme Team" they were unfortunate enough to have in their unit. Code clerks who had to make room for the priority dispatches to some destination known as TPWP. All of them wondering, what in the name of brassbound military rigamarole was this about? Hell, he wondered that himself too much of the time. Resolutely trying to clear his head of the lingering effects of the scotch and Cass, he grabbed the nearest message pad—it happened to be the jittery clerk's—and wrote down in block letters:

ODD MAN OUT STILL OUT. WHAT DO?

As the clerk took it to code it and send it, Ben added an instruction guaranteed to further mess up the man's day: "Let me know as soon as the reply hits that machine. Not a runner. You."

barely

Ben had settled into his desk chair to try to look busy and Jones was assiduously sorting old piles of accumulated paperwork into new piles when the clerk surprisingly soon stuck his head in their office. "It just came in, sir."

full caps

ok?
Yes

-S
-N

What there was of it. Standing over the teleprinter as the clerk fed in the decoded version, he frowned at the sole word that chattered out:

PUNT.

Very funny, you bunch of sadistic deskwarmers. Actually he had no idea whether Tepee Weepy's cryptic messages emanated from an entire bureaucratic swarm or from that mustached colonel single-handedly thrusting pieces of paper at some frazzled wire clerk. Either scenario, it came to the same: orders were supposed to be orders. In the face of that, Ben pulled the message pad to him again and wrote out:

FIELD SLIPPERY HERE, PUNT INADVISABLE. GO TO CAMP?

He didn't even make it back to the office before the clerk chased him down. The reply awaiting him this time was anything but brief.

DO NOT REPEAT NOT GO TO CAMP. MAKE STORY LOUD ON BACKFIELD ANGLE. IMPERATIVE.

Ben's groan alarmed the clerk. *Sonofabitch.* Loudon, of all damn people to be expected to imitate. *If they want the Loudon approach*—twelve hundred overripe words about the glory days of the Treasure State backfield, the cloud-of-horseshit kind of sportswriting Ted Loudon could produce in his sleep—*then why don't they just put the jerk in my uniform and be done with it?* Let him phony it up about Dex.

Ben crumpled the message into his pocket and stalked out. The more he thought about it, the more fed up he got. The likes of Ted Loudon and Grantland Rice and other bards of sentimental slop about sports notwithstanding, the One Great Scorer was not visibly awarding touchdowns to the TSU backfield in the game of war. A misty-eyed glance backward to the season that ended with Pearl Harbor would do no justice to any of the four teammates. Jake would puke. Moxie Stamper would snicker. Vic above all deserved a decent cloak of quiescence over his running

ital

THE ELEVENTH MAN

days. And Dex, whatever he had become, was no soapslick half-back any more. Ben reached the office with his mind made up.

“Jones, old lad, how would you like to go for a little ride tomorrow? Fill us out a motor pool requisition. Under REASON put down: *dogs of war*. And you better fill your pockets with puppy biscuits.”

C
full caps

THE PODS OF parachutes opened prettily, one blossom of silk after another, cloudflowers against the blue field of sky overtopping Seeley Lake and the Mission Mountains beyond. Ben had just joined the large circle of jumpsuited men craning their necks upward; even so, his uniform and flight jacket drew slanted looks from corners of eyes. He knew he had to hold his temper against the automatic hostility here; guys in the situation of these had plenty to watch out for. A groan went through the group as a billow of dust whirled across the landing strip, where strips of canvas were crisscrossed—tentpegged down so as not to blow away, Ben could not help but notice—into a prominent X. Carrying its mischief higher, the gusty wind caught the dozen chutes, dancing the dangling men sideways across the air as if they were dandelion seeds. The first jumper managed to land with a neat tuck and roll, which could not disguise the fact that he had missed the X by fifty yards. The chutists after him, sawing desperately at their lines, landed progressively farther and farther off the mark, until the last few were blown into the chokecherry bushes at the far end of the airstrip.

“God damn it,” the grizzled foreman of the parachutist squad hollered at the windstrewn legion, “if you can’t come any closer to the God damned target than that, you might as well have stayed in the God damned airplane!”

Wincing at the language, the camp director made his way through the canvas-clad younger men and steered Ben off to one side.

-S
-N

“Tough way to get to a spot,” Ben spoke the measure of sympathy he felt for the jumpers. More than once on New Guinea he had seen fliers bail out of flaming planes and be swept behind Japanese lines by tropical easterlies. It seemed to him an unfair fate even for war.

The camp director smiled thinly. Solemnly hatted, with silver showing at his temples and everlasting wrinkles in his thrush-brown suit, he looked like a parson. As Ben knew he was, of some kind.

“The U.S. Forest Service prefers to believe it can prevail over wind,” there was a bit of pulpit in the voice. “Not to mention fire and terrain.” The man was gazing at Ben as though he could see into him if he only were given time enough. “Their belief and ours have been made to coincide here, as we tell all our visitors.”

Ben looked around. The Seeley Lake smokejumper camp was a mix, right enough, old Civilian Conservation Corps buildings together with fresh woodframe ones that somehow appeared more ecclesiastical than governmental. An obstacle course at one end of the layout was balanced off by a restful chapel at the other. The whole place did have the feel of discipline, but not the military kind. Here, he was uncomfortably aware, a war correspondent was the odd man out. Every man at this camp—aside from profane exceptions like the parachutist foreman in a forest ranger hat—was a conscientious objector. “Enlistees in alternative service” by official jargon; “conchies” by rougher account. Somewhere in their number, conscientiously aloof from the fate-willed military brotherhood of the rest of the TSU football team, was Dexter Cariston.

Remember that hunting trip, Dex? I'd be ashamed to tell you, but I've thought many times how that could have come out different, and then this would have. If your rifle had gone off while we were climbing around up there in the rocks, the kind of thing that happens. Shot yourself in the foot—hell, just one toe—that

~~11~~ = 1 (adj)



S—
N—



would have done it. You'd have been safely out of the war and on into med school with nothing said, and I wouldn't be here trying to figure out how to lie about you in a couple of thousand newspapers.

The truth itself, in what he was seeing around him here, was strange enough. A pacifist camp born of wartime needs. Whoever ordained it, here the paradoxical project was in the tall woods of Montana, where the historic peace churches—Quakers, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren—were providing their able-bodied young men in place of other able-bodied young men conscripted for combat. And still were belittled for their pacifism; he regularly heard these rigorous noncombatants with parachute packs on their backs sneered at as draft-dodging yellowbellies, notwithstanding that they were volunteering to tumble out of airplanes into worst mountain country to fight forest fires.

the

Web 3rd

But where was the familiar husky form of Dex, in any of this? Up there in the jump plane doing wind calculations? Or hiding out when he saw the jeep with the stenciled U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS/EAST BASE pull in?

Ben's silent perusal of the camp was brought to a brisk end by the director. "What can I do for you, officer? I don't mean to be inhospitable, but the military is supposed to leave us alone."

"Preacher"—Ben had no idea on earth how to address a minister of these plain-collared denominations—"nothing would make me happier. I'm the palest imitation of 'military' you're ever apt to see, though. Only a pencil-pusher, sent around to write up several of my college buddies doing what they think their duty is. One of them thinks his is here with your bunch." *I will now lead thee into temptation, parson.* "You wouldn't mind seeing his standpoint splashed across most of this country's newspapers, would you?"

cap

"Mysterious are the ways," the camp director granted, again smiling marginally. "Which member of our 'bunch' is this?"

-S
-N

Ben spoke the name, still searching the faces of the sixty or so smokejumpers arrayed on the airstrip as if Dex's familiar one had to be there.

"Ah, our Dexter," the ministerial timbre resounded. "He's in the boneyard, of course."

Everything within Ben, body and soul, turned over. Dex, dead, here in conchie Valhalla? How? There weren't odds steep enough to cover such a thing. The war killed O'Fallon and Havel a predictable way, on the battlefield, and claimed Vic Rennie's leg in the casual accounting on the margin of combat. But this lightning strike straight through any reasonable order of life onto Dexter Cariston in these peaceable woods—through the shock Ben tried in vain to make his voice work.

Nothing marred the camp director's. "You probably ought to hustle across there," he pleasantly indicated to the other side of the airstrip. "His shift is about over."

Then Ben saw it beyond the clustered smokejumpers, the low businesslike building with the mandatory red of a first-aid cross painted on its eave: the "boneyard," right. Broken ankles from hard landings, busted fingers and hands from banging into trees on the way down, those doubtless were the constants of an infirmary at a place like this. Relief pumped through him. *Why didn't I guess, Dex? Follow the trail of bandages toward anything medical and there you'll be.*

Taking quick leave of the director, Ben climbed back into the ragtop jeep Jones had requisitioned. He still felt somewhat guilty about dropping Jones outside Helena, all by his lonesome, to do the dreary photo shoot on military sled dogs and their earnest trainers, but not overly. Jones and everyone else had to be left out of this. The last thing in the world Tepee Weepy wanted made known was that one of its "Supreme Team" heroes was sitting out the war at a pacifist camp. For that matter, it was the last thing the others on the team, up to their necks in the armed

S—
N—

struggle, would want to find out. As he drove around the end of the airstrip and pulled up to the infirmary, Ben found himself half hoping Dexter Cariston, marked down from dead, was in there on crutches with a fractured something-or-other; Injured in Training Camp was a story he could fiddle around with and not have to say just what kind of camp.

Injured
C/SC

A cow bell clattered above the door as he stepped into the infirmary. Medical clutter was everywhere, shelves and tables of it. Over by a rack of crutches a single shabby desk sat unoccupied. Through a doorway toward the back, however, a sandy-haired figure could be seen bent over a microscope. "Be with you in a jiffy," came the glossed voice, as incongruous here as it was in a football huddle, "quick as I dispose of this strep culture."

"Take your time, Dex, it's looking like a long war."

Dex's twiddling of the microscope ceased for a bare instant, but his head did not budge from the eyepiece. "They all are, Ben."

Ben watched him deal with the glass slide beneath the lens, step out to the sink and soap up and wash as exquisitely as a surgeon—Dex had only to come into a room and the air grew rarefied—then with just a hairbreadth of hesitation arrive across the board floor with right hand extended. *Handshakes are the last to go*, Ben thought as their palms met. "Something tells me you're not here to fish famous Seeley Lake," Dex was saying in his easy way. Next, though, a held-in expression twitched across his sturdy Scotch face. "Hated to hear that about Vic. Always has had more than his share of hard luck, hasn't he."

SERIES



The roar of engines drowned out anything Ben might have had to say about how luck was distributed. Landing briskly, a Ford Tri-Motor blasted up dust as it trundled along the airstrip toward the next set of parachute trainees. Dex moved to the window to watch as if it were his sworn duty, leaving Ben to join him or not. After a moment, he went over. *What do I know about how*

-S
-N

they run this preachy outfit, maybe this is some kind of rite—they all worship the Tin Goose every takeoff. Whatever the foreman was hollering now at the chutists ducking aboard was lost in the plane’s racket, but Ben would have bet significant money these next practice jumps would be closer to the mark. He turned and asked:

“I’m curious—how come you’re not out there leaping into thin air with the rest of the smokies?”

“Don’t think I didn’t,” Dex answered tightly, eyes still glued to the shuddering aircraft filling with jumpsuited men. “Twice. Both times I threw up in the face mask. Ever try to steer a parachute into a forest of hundred-foot Ponderosa pines with a faceful of vomit, Ben?” Consciously or not, Dex rubbed his mouth with the back of his thumb before managing to say: “They washed me out of jumper training. All the years of football and Bruno and his Letter Hill, and five minutes of bumpy air does me in. Isn’t that a corker?”

lc Webs

That needed no affirmation. Dex had been the team’s best natural athlete, elastic as a circus performer, comfortable on the field as a cavalier at a lawn party. And here he was, handing out crutches without even earning one. Ben glanced around the infirmary. “You’re it, here? Doesn’t this kind of setup need a medical staff?”

“The Rochester doctor I didn’t get to be, you mean.”

They both laughed in their old way, briefly.

As if remembering his manners, Dex sobered and spoke as he turned from the window. “The way things are, doctors can’t even begin to be everywhere they’re needed. Not in the war, not here either. I’m the equivalent of a medic. I can splint a man up, shoot some morphine in him, until we can get him to the hospital in Missoula. If it’s something besides bones and bruises,” he shrugged, “there’s a registered nurse here in town, comes in twice a week. Don’t grin at me like that, Reinking. She’s married.”

cc ✓

S—
N—

Ben's grin went out like a light. He looked away, across postcard-perfect Seeley Lake to the summer cabins and rowboat docks spaced the distance of a flycast apart. The maintained forest along the shoreline stood sumptuous as fur trim, and even the hackles of brush looked scenic. *Peaceful sonofabitching place.* Skipped over by the clock of war. Cass with a dozen red-hot pistons gobbling combustible aviation fuel at the back of her neck this very minute. Jake Eisman freezing his bodacious butt at the controls of a B-17 while wishing the Alaskan caribou far below were Germans in his bombsights. Carl Friessen in the utmost swamp of Hell that was New Guinea, dug in for another night in a stench-filled foxhole that he didn't dare leave even to take a crap. Every one of the team members in the actual war, those who were left, ticked through Ben's mind like split seconds on a stopwatch. He realized he was breathing harder than he should and tried to steady down, the antiseptic air of the infirmary not helping. What bugged him so much? Conscience wasn't priced by the pound. Dexter Cariston could have found simpler ways to stay the warless one of them all—the purr of money in his family could have taken care of that. Even so. “This does it for you?” the question shot out before he had time to tame it any. “Watching guys hop out of planes into trees? I'm really asking, Dex.”

“I'm doing what I can to keep blood in people,” the words came clipped, “instead of letting it out of them.”

The superior tinge in that answer did it. Anguish went through Ben like a convulsion. *There's more to know about blood than shows up in a microscope, you medical Jesus conchie!* He stood there unsteady, momentarily mindblind, wondering whether he had screamed that in the frozen face of Dexter Cariston.

THE NEW GUINEA jungle, a few months back. Everyone warned him the place dripped voracious insects when it wasn't oozing rain warm as monkey piss, and by the time he tracked down Carl

Friessen in a rear-echelon tent encampment along the Sananda road, the crisp new combat fatigues he'd been issued were wringing wet and he was trying hard not to scratch numerous bites that itched like crazy. *At least nobody's shooting at me. Yet.* Standing there smacking mosquitoes with one hand and then the other, he peeked in through the bug netting that served as a tent flap trying to make sure he had the right man. In their football years Friessen had been rangy enough to plug more than his share of the line at left tackle. Now he was rawboned, worn down to sheer frame. Deliberate as ever, though, he hunched there on his bunk wearing thin black Jap pajamas—Ben thought he had seen every conceivable form of war souvenir, until now—while cleaning his carbine with an old toothbrush.

“How's the hunting been, Carl?”

The lantern jaw that had tempted football opponents to mention the word “horseface”—invariably to their regret—swung around from the rifle-cleaning task. “Lefty! They let just anybody in this bugger of a place, do they?” The same dromedary grin, even if its wearer was a barely passable imitation of the Friessen of old in any other way Ben could see. The nickname he so seldom heard any more twinged in him a little. He was not left-handed, not even close. Back there on the football field, that mattered not a bit to Friessen and the other four; the TSU middle linemen, the brawn brigade, always had their own slant on things, all of them calling him Lefty because he was the left end. The right end, Danzer, they just called Danzer.

Now, as if remembering his manners, the pajama-clad soldier left off work on the carbine and ceremoniously came to unloosen the netting. “Quick, step inside out of the skeeters.”

They whacked one another like kids and talked without letup. One by one, Ben caught him up on the other team members, Carl deliberating over each report. “In on something secret, huh?” he

said to Ben's quick passing over of Dex. "He would be, the sonof-a-gun." The goodnatured grin appeared again, but not for long. "This's been all kinds of fighting, Lefty," he sounded veteran far beyond his years. "Three months nose to nose with the dinks to get this"—he sent a heavy look around the pulverized jungle of the Sanananda battle perimeter—"though I don't know why anybody'd want it." Morale did not stand much of a chance here, Ben had to acknowledge. New Guinea notoriously was a back door of the war, everything about it shabby and short-shrift while the bulk of Allied military effort was addressed to the battle for Europe. Yet a continent was at stake here, too, the Japanese army almost within touch of Australia as long as it clung to outposts on the New Guinea coastal plain. The patchwork force of desperate Aussies and scraped-together National Guard units were assigned to root the enemy out pillbox by pillbox, sometimes sniper tree by sniper tree. The regiment here was called the Montaneers, hardy Montana Guardsmen given the task of spearheading the fighting against the Japanese from the beachheads on up into the overgrown tropical mountains. Even if Ben had not seen the battle reports on the savagery of this death struggle in the jungle, it could be read in the lines of Carl Friessen's face. "We're nowhere near done, either," the bony infantryman was saying. "The hot rumor is a landing up around Salamaua." He estimated Ben with a flat gaze. "You come all this way to go in with us?"

"Alongside you, Carl," Ben replied more calmly than he felt about it, "that's the idea. Although they only let me carry paper and pencil."

Friessen deliberated again. "Suit yourself, Lefty. We've tried all other kinds on the Japs, why not pencil lead?"

A week later, the two of them were on a slippery trail in the head-high grass on the ridge above the Bitoi River, with the other seven men of Carl's squad. Ben intended to called it quits as soon

Webs

Webs

—S

—N

as they made it back to the invasion perimeter. His pad was full with the past days. The pre-dawn scene in the landing craft as it broached in a big wave and seasick soldiers had to dodge a sliding jeep that broke loose from its fastenings. The Australian commandoes guiding them ashore with blinking signal lights after wading in from behind enemy lines through a swamp and swimming to the assault beach, the winks of brightness showing each man of them standing in the sand proudly naked except for his Digger hat. The steady advice from Carl during the endless crawl for the shelter of the tree line as Japanese bullets flew over them: "Keep your head and butt down. Remember gopher hunting? We're the gophers here." By now, abundantly shot at but not shot up, Carl's unit was dug in inland from the beachhead and everyone agreed they had lucked out so far. The Japanese line had bent back up the height of ground overlooking the Bitoi River and the plan was to let the artillery plaster them there for awhile. Sent on patrol before daybreak to sight out a forward observation point, the squad had mapped and azimuthed a good spot and, job done, were heading gingerly back down the trail, the scout out front with a Tommy gun, followed by the buck sergeant in charge, then Carl with Ben tagging close behind, the rest of the column bringing up the rear. When something plopped in the mud at the heels of the scout, it took a split second for them all to realize it hadn't dropped from his pack. That left very little time before the grenade would go off.

"Down!" the buck sergeant screamed. Carl hit the ground, Ben an instant behind him. The grenade's explosion heaved the trail under Ben's belly. He heard somebody cry out, hit by fragments. The trailside grass tore open, Japanese in camouflage uniforms pouring out, five, six, *will they never stop coming*, eight. Carl reared onto his knees and shot one before his rifle was clubbed out of his hands by a Japanese mortarman madly swinging the mortar barrel like a sledgehammer. The American on the other

e

Web

1c

webs

side of Ben was being bayoneted by a surprisingly large enemy soldier. Fumbling for the only weapon he had, a trench knife, Ben rolled that direction and slashed the tendons across the back of the Jap's legs. As Ben scrambled to his feet above the shrieking flopping enemy soldier, a shot came from someplace—he never knew where—and tore a piece of meat off the tip of his left shoulder. It missed bone and bicep by a fraction of an inch, but the impact and pain sent him reeling. Around him the trail had turned into a muddy trench of men clubbing, grappling, firing. Another American went down, then two Japanese blown away by the buck sergeant's .45 pistol. Carl was kicking at the maniacal mortarman who in a final wild sling hurled the mortar and grabbed for a grenade on his belt. Carl swarmed onto him and the two went down in a pile together, the Jap's arm outstretched and the grenade twitching in his hand as he tried to dislodge its pin. Wound and all, Ben flung himself, desperately pinning down the struggling arm, his blood dripping over the tangle of the three of them, until Carl clambered astraddle of the Jap and with no other weapon at hand beat the man to death with his helmet.

enemy soldier

"WHAT'S THIS, THE poor man's Hemingway green around the gills?" Dex's tone turned unmistakably medical and concerned. "Something wrong with you?"

Trying not to let the effort show, Ben forced himself back to the task that had brought him to Seeley Lake.

"Sick of what we're all going through, isn't that enough?" he evaded with another modification of truth. He had led the camp director to believe Dex's decision not to fight could be read between the lines of whatever he wrote about the smokejumper camp; try as he might, people would need something stronger than Dex's microscope to find anything of the sort, Tepee Weepy would see to that. He had told poor Jones before leaving him to

adj.

-S
-N

the dogs that he was going into Helena to spend the day covering a war bonds bingo marathon; half an hour had taken care of it, then he'd headed here. *Big day for the one-man liar's club*. He was starting to feel like he needed a bath. Something had to be said, and he put all he could into it:

"Dex? Guess what, it's your turn to be written about and I'm up against it."

"I thought so." The well-bred Cariston face smiled the slightest bit. "Isn't there a saying from one of your movie moguls, 'Include me out?'"

Ben brought the TPWP patch on his arm around under Dex's nose. "The outfit I'm assigned to believes in all or none, and they're not interested in none."

"Can't they count better than that? I'm only one man out of eleven and—"

"Nine, now. Counting Vic."

Dex winced. "Ben, all right, I am the only one without his rump on the firing line somewhere." He eyed his listener speculatively. "Even yours on occasion, if I don't miss my guess. You have the look of someone who wants 'at them.'"

I've been at them. They've been at me. My shoulder hurts, thinking about it. "Let's don't argue about each other's reasons, Dex. Pearl Harbor and the Luftwaffe are signs enough to me they're out to get us, and I don't like being got."

"Granted. But I believe several million others are 'suited up for democracy'"—Dex took a meaningful look at Ben's flight jacket—"to forestall that. There will never be a shortage of people to fight wars, will there. Would the eleven of us be missed if it wasn't for this mysterious menagerie you write for?" He arched his head to one side as if a thought had just come to him. Ben was remembering the time Dex had stopped football practice cold by asking Bruno why football-field lines always were laid out in skin-eating lime instead of talcum. "Take that further," he

full caps

Hitler invading everywhere
"everyplace"
one word -
Am. Heritage dictionary

S—
N—

THE ELEVENTH MAN

was formulating now, "what if all of us together had said 'No' to induction—"

"You'd have had to hogtie Animal."

"—and instead—"

"And coldcocked Stamper and Danzer because they wouldn't get to show off at parades."

"—shut up a minute, will you; and volunteered for something like this outfit instead? The team that followed its conscience away from war instead of toward it." Dex's gaze at him had grown as intense as it could get. "You're the writer, Ben, what's wrong with a story like that?"

"You want my two-bits' worth? First, we wouldn't be known as the famous Golden Eagles of '41 any more, we'd be called the Golden Chickens. Maybe that'd be a relief, I don't know."

"Not necessarily," Dex put in caustically. "There's still a reputation attached. When we hitchhike to town from here, the local yokels try to run over us." Somewhere overhead the Ford Tri-motor droned around and around, no doubt dropping little weighted windage test chutes. Dex glanced up. "We even have to watch our step around our Forest Service trainers. Some are okay about us, some aren't."

"I imagine. To answer what you asked, though. If the rest of us pleaded conscientious"—he tried to glide nicely over the *conchie* sound in that—"alongside you, I figure we'd all add up to a footnote in some philosophy book someday. A one-paragraph kiss on the cheek from Bertrand Russell, tops. One thing sure, the United States military wouldn't be demanding a piece on you peachy-keen gridiron heroes from me every month."

"We're nothing but trophies, you're saying."

"No, on top of that you're a friend and a pain in the ass." Ben checked his wristwatch and made a face. "Dex, listen, I only came here because I have to know. This is it for you?" He swept a hand around at the camp. "For good?"

1c

webs

C

per ms. pg 114
and tail
Website cap

-S
-N

The uncommon furrow across Dex's brow showed he took that as an affront. Before he could say anything, Ben spelled out:

"For the duration. For however long this damned war takes. If there's any chance you're going to change your mind, get tired of people trying to run you over and decide to waltz off into a medical deferment from a friendly doctor your family might happen to be acquainted with"—he locked eyes with Dex and kept them there—"I need to know now. If I wiggle hard, I could skip writing about you maybe a month or two yet." He paused. "What I can't do, you better understand, is some piece that outright says you're a conscientious objector. They'd throw that away so fast it'd set the wastebasket on fire." Ben shifted from one foot to the other, as if adding body English to what he was about to say. "But I'm not the only scribbler in existence, Dex. If that's the story you want out, you could put it out yourself. The Chicago Tribune loves anything that shows up Roosevelt and his crowd. Or go the other direction, the parson who runs this place likely would have some ideas about how to show you off to the world as pacifist Exhibit A."

"Don't think he hasn't brought it up." Now Dex was the one who looked anguished. "You want to know if I'm here until the last shot is fired. All I can tell you is, I made the hardest choice of my life to be here and I *am* here. Believe me, I've lost sleep over it. Most nights." Ben read his face in a way he had never had to before; Dex was not the confessing sort. "You aren't able to write the plain truth about me," he could hear the cost in the words, "and I don't dare make it known either. One guess why, Ben. Cariston Enterprises. I have two brothers-in-law in the war. I'm the direct heir, but there'll be a family fight for control, down the line. The gaffer"—Ben wondered just how much wealth one had to grow up with to call one's father that—"is backing me, so far. But he doesn't want it shouted around that the last male Cariston

refuses to shoulder arms for his country.” Dex broke off, offering a bleak smile. “There. Secrets of the rich.”

“One size fits everybody,” Ben said thinly.

“So, you have to hide me in plain sight.” The idea seemed to intrigue Dex. “I’ll be interested to see what you come up with.”

So will I, Dex, so will I. Before turning to go, there was one more thing he had to tend to. “I’ll bet an outfit like the Forest Service would have a jerry can of gas they could loan to a man. Particularly if they didn’t know about it.”

“Stuck your neck out to get here, did you?”

“Only about a hundred miles.”

Dex clapped him on the shoulder. “Come on, there’s a back door to the fuel shed.”

THE NEXT DAY, his conscience objecting every word of the way, he wrote Dexter Cariston into undesignated war duty, a medic repairing men who parachuted into fields of fire, the type of fire not specified.

—S

—N

5

★ *YOU'RE HARD TO keep up with, Ben. First time I've ever been on a date on an obstacle course.* The painted stones spelled the way down the steep sidehill, the enormous lettering ghost-white in the bunchgrass. "I've flown over this rockpile a hundred times," Cass said over her shoulder, trying to watch her footing on the path pocked with gopher holes, "and always wondered, What goofball did this?" She and Ben were in civilian clothes, gabardine slacks ~~which~~ cheatgrass and other pestiferous plants theoretically could not penetrate, and good warm canvasback jackets, and battered fedora and granny scarf which they teased each other looked like missionary throwaways. He carried the heavy picnic basket and she had the blanket over one arm.

Shaking his head at the countless chunks of sandstone amassed and laid out side by side into a blocky 5 and 7, Ben answered: "A pickle salesman with time on his hands." Together the numbers took up what looked like half an acre of hillside, sitting prominent enough on the prow of the butte that the dubious eminence of Hill 57 could be read from several miles off. "One guess on how many varieties the guy peddled."

She laughed and skidded a little at the same time.

S—

N—

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We came to watch the game, if you wouldn’t mind some company,” Ben called back. He gestured toward the stadium in

—S

—N

"Are you that Ben friend of his?"

friend of his plenty

the middle distance. "I played football with Victor Rennie, down there. Then we went in the service together."

"Are you that Ben?" The tone had changed markedly. "From up the country, at Gros Ventre? Vic talked about you. Come on down." As they approached, the big-chested man swept a hand around the tan grass-covered slope. "Grab some ground. Want a Shellac?" A case of Great Falls Select beer sat open and obviously in use.

"The lady prefers whiskey." Ben tapped the lid of the picnic basket.

"Smart lady."

Wasting no time, Cass moved off to spread the blanket in a snug spot against the rocks and wink at the shy kids clustering in curiosity. Ben took the chance to steal a look around. The site was right. From up here, the bowl of the stadium was a green swatch amid the prevailing gold and silver of the Homecoming crowd; the band members at midfield blaring out the TSU fight song were the size of toothpicks and faceless, as he and Cass would be to anyone bored enough with football to gaze up here at the denizens of Hill 57. He could relax about that, but he felt keyed up every other way possible. *Game day. Weren't they all, one way or another, with that bastard Bruno?* The other paint-marked sidehill stood almost directly across from him, steeply rising out of the broad coulee where the facing buttes drew back to let the wind into Great Falls: the Letter Hill. He could not take his eyes off the chalky stone insignia there, the broad splay of the r, the coil of the s gripping its stem, the hanging swoop of the u. Every book on scriptwriting warned against the seductions of the sweeping overhead shot—Sam Goldwyn supposedly said that anyone who wanted to spend his money to go that high to look down ought to take the free elevator at the Empire State Building—but the conjured scene coaxed insistently into Ben's movie eye: a long line of figures in football uniforms,

the chesty fellow doesn't know Ben's name yet delete "that".

This is tricky nuanced, to catch the Indian man's speech pattern; I think what I've added does it. Likewise, making it "talked about you plenty."

full caps, right? Yes!

S- N-

strung out on the trail up the Letter Hill as haphazardly as a caravan in distress, toiling toward the interlinked letters high above. Fade to dusk, and one lone runner still struggling against gravity.

The sound effects were not of his choosing. "Treasure State University is proud to welcome its special guests to Homecoming, 1943!" The announcer's voice on the stadium public address system sounded tinny and spectral as his spiel wafted up Hill 57. The Governor, the Senator, the alumni president—ritual tributes echoing from two years back. Ben's mind fastened on the thought of the team then waiting in the maw of that stadium tunnel to trot onto the field, Vic on two good legs, Havel and O'Fallon with breath and soul still in them, Dex and Jake smacking one another on their shoulder pads in jolly superstition, he himself fresh as a colt, the entire eleven of them magically unacquainted with defeat.

He wrenched himself back to present surroundings. Not far down the junk-cluttered slope of Hill 57 stood one shack that appeared more dilapidated than the others, if that was possible. Glancing toward it, he asked their Indian host in a low tone: "Whatever became of Vic's aunt? I keep trying to catch up with her, but she's never home."

"You mean Agnes? Went back to the reservation to mooch a while, last we knew. Got a daughter there."

"If you see her, would you tell her—" Ben broke off. Tell her what? Say he had been pointed to her by an old hunter, nearly as elusive as herself, who despised her and her drinking ways? Pass word to her that he could not get Vic, in despond somewhere in England, to answer his letters? *I'm afraid you were right when you said "That's that," Toussaint.* "Just say I have a mailing address for Vic I can bring her."

The chesty man lifted his shoulders. "If you want. She don't much know how to read, though."

Cass impatiently was motioning that she required the picnic basket. Ben went over. No sooner had he set it down than she reached in and began handing around opera glasses. "I want these back, lords and ladies." In no time the Indian kids were in fits of giggles as they peeked at one another through the wrong end of the lenses, and by kickoff time their elders were dividing their time between beer and binoculars.

Settled onto the blanket beside Cass, Ben nudged her. "I wondered why that basket was so hellishly heavy."

"Might as well get some benefit from having to make nice to the damn USO at the Civic Center, I figured. The Gilbert and Sullivan bunch won't miss these until tonight." She checked to make sure all other eyes were on the football game, then leaned against him and kissed his ear. "I was starting to get lonesome. What were you doing so long with our buddy over there, negotiating a treaty?"

"Just agreeing that Custer had it coming." The petite binoculars nearly lost in his hand, he watched a Treasure State pass fall flat against the Colorado team. It looked like a long game; he nestled closer to Cass. "I forgot to ask. Do you even like football?"

"I like a certain football guy."

Ben smiled; that was good enough. Among women of his acquaintance only his mother evinced understanding of the contrary grace he'd found in playing the rough-and-tumble sport. "I can hardly ever say so, but you take after me in that, Ben. I loved that same feeling in ballet lessons"—girlhood in Beverly Hills had its advantages—"it stays with you, the right muscles still know the rules. Even square-dancing with your father."

Cass was scrabbling in the picnic basket. "Here, Jim Thorpe, have a sandwich. There's Spam or Spam."

"Yum."

"I know, but it's the best I could do." They munched on the

#

Ivan
Ivan-
OK?
Yes

S—
N—

manufactured meat and had nips of scotch as the game went along. Cass scanned elsewhere half the time, often to the planes taking off from East Base in the distance, but Ben was not really conscious of that, lost in his private tunnel of vision back to the scrimmage where everything began in the season of 1941.

THE PLAY WAS whistled dead before the ball could be snapped, the shrill echo in the empty stadium halting the practice game sooner than usual, and varsity and second-stringers alike uncoiled from their stances reluctantly.

Animal Angelides spat toward the sideline. "Here it comes. Why the hell can't he stay over there playing pocket pool with Loudon instead of frying our nuts?"

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

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

As if scripted, Bruno marched straight to the football. He plucked it off the ground and walked back and forth through the players, holding the ball in front of their faces as if all twenty-two

Handwritten annotations in red ink: a checkmark on the left margin, a horizontal line underlining the sentence "In his camelhair topcoat and snapprim hat Lionel Bruno could strut standing still, so when he added some ^{relish} to it as he did now, he was practically parting the grass like the Red Sea.", a circled "wcb" with a crosshair, and the word "swagger" written below it.

-S
-N

of them were nearsighted morons. Ben couldn't even guess which speech it was going to be this time, there were so many.

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

Oh oh, that one.

"—then you just possibly *might* have the makings of a genuine team." At the word *might*, Bruno squeezed the ball so hard it threatened to pop. "Forget nights on the town. Forget desert and the cigarette after. Forget about trying to get into your girlfriend's pants," he preached with rising intensity. "This"—he brandished the football higher—"this is the one and only object of your desire from this moment forward, people. You have to want this ball. You have to lust for this ball. You have to *love* getting this ball and handling it as if you are the only ones on the face of God's green sod it is entrusted to." Pausing for emphasis or maybe it was breath, Bruno nursed his disgust in front of them for all it was worth.

There was more than one audience for this. Ben risked a glance toward the near sideline where Ted Loudon, Bruno's pet sportswriter and nobody else's, was taking in the coach's every word hungrily. *Why? He'll keep making up whatever he wants to about "the team that can't find itself" anyway.* Loudon even triggered himself up in camel-colored topcoat and snapbrim hat in imitation of Bruno but fell short as a fashion plate due to newspaper pay.

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

Nearest across the scrimmage line from Ben, Purcell uncomfortably did. The lanky sophomore was blushing red-hot at the

webs

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

between that
and fast

Bruno paused again, then resumed like a thunderclap:

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

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

Despair followed those words like jackal tracks behind a caravan. The only thing biblical about Bruno's Golden Rule was that

—S
—N

it was blunt-edged and carried the whiff of Hell. The dreaded maxim was actually a catchall for his wrathful coaching canons—no fumbling the football, no missing a tackle, no messing up a play, no timeouts to fix shoulder pads, no anything else that could conceivably offend the exacting eye on the sideline—but what sane person in a football uniform was going to stand out there arguing singular and plural with the gridiron lord and master?

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

His involuntary glance toward the butte looming out there beyond the end zone stands was not the only one. The Letter Hill was roundly hated. Of all Bruno's raging innovations this year, trickier drills, tougher calisthenics, full-length slambang practice games that pitted the varsity against the scrub team twice a week, the punishment runs up to those pale letters halfway into the sky were the hardest to take. Penalty laps around the field were a custom as old as football cleats, but nobody had signed on to clamber up a junior mountainside any time a volcanic coach blew off steam. Dex would be his bet, for the first to shove the Golden Rule in Bruno's face and walk off the team, followed immediately by Animal and Jake. Today could be the day. Even the Butte hardcase at left guard, Kenny O'Fallon, looked mutinous. Sig Prokosch, the other guard, built like an engine block and usually as imperturbable, showed similar signs. Stan Havel would stay, hiking the ball was the one thing he was fluent at. Moxie Stamper and Larry Danzer were Bruno's cubs, they couldn't be driven off this field by any means known to mankind. Carl Friesen could tip either way, easygoing but with a razor streak of sensibility underneath. Ben himself—*God damn it, this isn't football, it's Russian roulette.*

#

adj.

webs

#

Nick

Per ms. page 28

good catch

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

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

It did seem to cross Moxie’s mind tangentially that there were others in the backfield besides him, and on the next play he handed off to Jake for four yards up the middle. Then, though, like a roulette player repeating his bet on one lucky number, he called yet another screen pass to Danzer.

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

“I’ll do the play calling, Angelides, you just do the blocking,” Moxie snapped. Ben could feel the tightening circle of tension in

the huddle. Stamper and Danzer were the only ones on the team who weren't fed up with the Stamper-to-Danzer aerial circus in these practice games. But he couldn't say anything without looking like he wanted more catches for himself. Which was true enough.

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

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

that

conclusive feel of the ball finding the skin of his hands. The pass secured, he raced final yards and was in the end zone.

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

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

天 (adj.)

Eyes downcast as the second-stringers broke their huddle and flooded to the line of scrimmage, Purcell lined up opposite Ben. As ever, Ben felt like he was looking across at wasted evolution. Reedy, long-limbed, big-eyed, Purcell resembled some creature Nature shaped for speed but forgot to give fang or claw. Bred to flee, but not to block and tackle in the flatten-'em-into-the-ground manner preached by Bruno. No coach could resist that tantalizing speed entirely, so he stuck Purcell in at right end on the scrub team. Until the varsity wised up in a hurry, the wispy speedster caught a few passes in the open and gained so much yardage it began to look like mileage. But from the very first pass that the kid juggled and dropped, Ben divined what was going to be Purcell's problem: he heard footsteps. When a defender closed in on him, Purcell would flinch—maybe infinitesimally, but that was enough. It was a matter of guts: the one necessary requirement for an end was to hang in there and catch the ball first, however much of a hit was coming at you. Anybody, Ben included, could look at Purcell's leggy insubstantial build and sympathize, but sympathy couldn't make up for a leak in fortitude.

-S
-N

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yup, coach, I—I'll do better."

"You will also do the Hill," Bruno decreed, "you heard me invoke the Golden Rule. In the meantime, get your drosy butt over there to the bench and wait for me. The rest of you," the coach swept a hand as if to get them out of his sight, "head for

Wags

cap

-S
-N

the locker room and while you're there, see if by any chance you can talk each other into playing some actual football next week. *Seven days, people!*" he flung over his shoulder as he stalked toward the sideline.

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

Four-fifths of them, rather. Already jogging to the locker room, Moxie Stamper looked piously murderous, while Purcell, the object of that, went slinking off the field in the opposite direction. The other eight teammates hung on around Ben. "Purcell got the shaft on that," Carl Friessen stated the case from the linemen. "Could have been any of us on any old thing."

"Moxie underthrew that pass," Vic said quietly.

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

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

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

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

All around Ben the expressions moodily backed up that assessment. "I'll be a while, guys." Everyone else filed off the field,

Hal
Ivan
OK

S—
N—

and he trudged over to speak with the gesticulating coach in one-sided conversation with Loudon.

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

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

“Excuse us, Ted,” Bruno adjusted to that in the bat of an eye. “Catch me in my office later.” He jerked his head at Ben and strode to the middle of the field, out of earshot of the sideline just in case the sportswriter was slow to withdraw. At the fifty-yard line, the stocky coach halted and gazed around the stadium as if he couldn’t get enough of it. “So what’s on your mind?” he asked Ben in a narrow tone. “It better have to do with how to win football games.”

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

—S

—N

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

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

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

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

There still was something strange in Bruno's expression as he faced around to Ben. "You're an interesting case, Reinking." The impression was he could have said vastly more on that score, but that was not what came out: "It's getting late, and I have to deal with a rube three-letter man. You can tell your friends in the locker room they needn't worry about themselves so god-damn much." The coach spun away in a manner that warned off any impulse to follow him. Ben watched his receding back as he stalked toward the gangly figure on the bench, but not needing to see more than that, did his own angry pivot toward the locker room and the task there.

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

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

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

Full cap,
right
yep

And out there in a dried-up homesteader cemetery with tumbleweeds banked against a wire fence, they climbed off the team bus and gathered at the grave, outnumbering Purcell's relatives and townspeople. Ben sensed something as soon as he spotted the metal call-sign initials on the radio microphone at graveside: KOPR, statewide coverage. What unsettled him more was the sight of Ted Loudon instead of a radio newsman stepping to the mike before the funeral service got underway. In a rapid-fire patter he obviously been practicing, Loudon reeled off phrases of pathos: "Not since the sad demise of Notre Dame's George Gipp in the prime of his playing life has football seen a tragedy such as this. . . . Now in the eternal annals of the game, The Gipper is joined by The Ghost Runner, for that is what Merle Purcell's teammates called him for his fleet-footed elusiveness on the gridiron. . . . Every lad of the TSU team is here today to do him honor . . ."

#

Having grown up around journalistic boilerplate, Ben knew beyond the shadow of a doubt Loudon's same words would show up in tomorrow morning's sports column in virtually every daily paper across Montana. The copper company owned those as well

-S
-N

as the statewide radio network. For whatever reason, Purcell was getting a sendoff from the powers that be.

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

Dex and Jake and several others of the team stirred uneasily with Ben at equating a death on the Letter Hill with losing a game played with a ball. Vic, who knew all about treacherous slopes from his daily ascension of Hill 57, listened cold-eyed. Moxie Stamper, in a suitcoat and pants that didn't match, was trying to adjust his slack face to the posthumous promotion of Purcell to The Ghost Runner.

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

Now Bruno sprang it.

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

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

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

Did the eleven of them buy into it? Not fundamentally. But there is always a *but*. Among themselves they were of two minds about the so-called season of the Twelfth Man, seized upon by Bruno and Loudon and their helper bosses to make a football saint out of a yokel kid who blew a gasket on his heart doing something he shouldn't have. There were times in the huddle when Moxie, having had to motion the crowd to settle down so his signals could be heard, would crack something like "Never knew Purcell had lung power like that" and draw cynical laughs. Yet as the victories piled up, something unaccountable had to be credited. Even Ben, their elected skeptic, could feel it. They all, every one of them, were playing every minute as if their lives depended on it. This season was like no other; it was that simple and that complicated. They could try to ignore each weeklong buildup of expectation or joke past the game-day din all they wanted, but Purcell's fate up there on the hill over them sobered their talent to a certain purity. Death was death, no matter how you cut it. Ben did not quite have the words for it yet, but somewhere deep he came to understand that for these inexplicably singled-out young men he was among, one short of a dozen, what had happened to that remindful twelfth man was like an

tried not to feel the pull of

roman
Ivan?
OK

-S
-N

alarm clock going off murderously early in someone's room next to yours.

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

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

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

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

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

"Gee, do I have a better offer?"

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

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

Bolshoya

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

10
↑

“Same as usual. Dodging bullets from the teleprinter.”

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

? continuity
Yes, good

Webs

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

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

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

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

HE HAD TO RESIST yanking his feet off the floor of the Plexiglass nose cone as the bomber shuddered across acres of unforgiving concrete in what seemed to be a never-ending takeoff. Then, like

2

TM

—S
—N

an elevator going up, the B-17 Flying Fortress lifted, turned its tail to the smelter stack, and began the long climb north.

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

"Everybody copacetic? Navigator, the fake bomb jockey still with us? Make sure he doesn't touch anything that can go off."

"I'll slap his hands, skipper."

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

Jake got back to business. "Sparks, how's that weather by now?"

"Clear at Edmonton. It starts to heavy up after that. Cumulonimbus to thirty thousand, the whole ball of horseshit."

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

Christ and a bear, that's seven miles up in one of these things.

"Just don't drop me, Lieutenant Eisman."

"Haven't lost a scribbler yet."

Soon the Sweetgrass Hills crouched beneath the plane, their three ancient summits the only sentinel points in uncountable miles of prairie. For a fleeting moment aligned with the bomb-aiming panel of Plexiglass directly in front of Ben, Devil's Chimney looked like the front sight of a rifle zeroed in. He thought

Web3

back to Toussaint Rennie and hoped a dressed-out elk was hanging in that windsprung barn on the Two Medicine. Scanning the passing geography and jotting frantically, crystals of detail for the Tepee Weepy piece, snatches to write to Vic, his thinking as ever quickened with the vantage point of defied gravity. *Maybe I was meant for thin air. Or is that birdbrain logic?* Either way, he had the giddy feeling of being on top of it all. The colossal modern warp of time claimed everywhere below him; only a man's puny lifetime ago, the swiftest things on this shoulder of the planet were buffalo and Indian ponies. B-17s annihilated every pace of the past and along with it substituted sky for high ground. Space is the bride of time. Elemental Gaussian physics, weirdly brilliant even back there in the stolid print of the college textbook, the blindered genius Carl Friedrich Gauss sitting in Gottingen unaware of the Napoleonic Wars going on around him while he figured out basics of the universe. The goddamn Germans, too bad they were born with brains.

cc ✓

ss

The intercom broke in. "Friendlies at three o'clock, skipper."

"I see them. Our sisters in arms."

"Not in mine," moaned another voice on the intercom.

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

"BRUISER AT NINE o'clock, captain, fifteen hundred yards, same heading as ours."

cap

There could not be a better wingman than Beryl. Cass radioed back, "Roger, over. Hold course, everyone, there's plenty of elbow room." *And our route just as much as theirs, now.* She grease-penciled this portion of the Edmonton hop onto the flight plan map strapped to the right thigh of her flying suit; the

-S
-N

Canadian border stood out down there like the edge of a new jigsaw puzzle, the patterns of its fields contrasting with the American side. Automatically she checked how the rest of her pilots were doing. The other wingman, Mary Catherine, was hanging in perfectly, smooth as a mirror reflection. Even Della, bringing up the rear, matched up with the formation without wandering today. *Damn. You just get something going good and it starts coming apart.* She was going to hate to lose Beryl if her transfer came through. Couldn't blame her, wanting in on the Wichita factory run, closer to her husband. And getting to ferry B-17s like that one, now that the high brass had decided women of a certain height and heft could possibly handle the controls of a bomber in the most wide-open airspace in the country. Cass had to laugh. There wouldn't be all this half-step stuff if it had been the Wright sisters at Kitty Hawk.

AS THE FLIGHT OF P-39s pulled away to the north, Jake's voice crackled on the intercom again. "There they go, Grady's Ladies into the Great Canadian Beyond. You happy now, newspaper guy?"

"All God's chillun got the wings they earned, Ice."

FROM EDMONTON on, the flight was a relay race from one bush-country airstrip to the next, with malicious weather in the way. Between Watson Lake and Whitehorse, Ben had to abandon the nose cone; he hated losing the vantage point, but riding there had become too much like being the hood ornament on a snow tractor. Shaking with chill, he retreated to the table corner offered by the navigator. Then through the earphones came the further numbing news that the aircraft's heater had frozen up and quit. He'd thought it might be a prank back there in sunny Great Falls when Jake made him put on double layers of long underwear, three pairs of heavy socks, a furlined hooded flying suit over

his flight jacket, and a chamois face mask. The Yukon climate was not impressed. The cold, some perverse apex at this altitude, went through fur, fabric, and skin alike. It seemed possible his blood had turned to slush. He not only couldn't take notes, he could not even make a fist. Time seemed frozen to a standstill. What the hell did Jake want missions over Germany for? This was bad enough. Hunched there helplessly in the refrigerated body of the bomber, he could not get beyond wishing he had something to thaw out with. A blowtorch, maybe. When Ladd Field at Fairbanks at last presented its snowy self, he was hoping the frigid chamois would not take his face off with it.

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

"Thawing out."

"Wallflower." Jake delicately fingered a frost-abused ear as if to make sure none of it had dropped off. "Got a little something I better tell you." He took a circumspect look toward the other end of the hut where the rest of the crew was loudly stomping and rubbing warmth into themselves, then leaned in close to Ben and whispered:

"I'm getting Russian tail."

Still numb enough that he was not sure he had heard right, Ben checked the lusty expression on Jake and saw that he had. "Are you." If his enterprising friend had come across some Muscovite hot number in an Alaskan whorehouse, so what? "They owe you some, I guess."

"Yeah, wouldn't the Cossacks just cream their britches?" Jake grinned proudly.

"Who's the unlucky woman?"

"She's a pilot."

Ben stared at him.

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

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

“Jake, or should I just say Bonehead—”

“Ben, Ben, hold it down, okay?”

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

“What are they going to get me for, consorting with an ally?”

S — Ben’s point did cause Jake to reflect. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she diddled a commissar or two along the way to get here. She knows her diddling.”

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

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

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

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

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

cap

commissar

webs

webs

S—
N—

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

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

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

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

"Bomb load, right, three tons," Jake made an expansive gesture, "do you have those back home?"

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

At first Ben had been relieved to see other American uniforms in the roomful of brown drab, a plump major and a couple of shavetail aides sitting with an ascetic-looking Russian major-domo of some sort. The major proved to be the liaison officer, which meant he was there only under obligation, and in a matter of minutes had sent over the more diminutive of the aides to inquire why they were not in their own mess hall with everyone else. *Awful good question, shorty.* Jake pulled out all the stops,

Webb

1

-S
-N

citing Ben as a big shot correspondent chronicling Lend-Lease and the peerless pilots of both nations. When the underling relayed that, the major gave them an edgy look, but he directly departed and so did the thin-featured political commissar or whatever he was. The entire room sat at attention until the man was out the door. The moment he was gone, Katya relaxed and turned to Ben. "You are from *gazeta*?" Her voice was throaty and adventurous, and in spite of himself he could imagine how smoky it would sound in bedroom circumstances.

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

"Thanks all to hell for the comparison," Ben snapped. The Russian airmen were getting to their feet, taking their leave with stiff nods. As the mess hall began to empty out, a contingent dressed like Katya, male and female alike in thick-ply ground crew coveralls, drifted over curiously. She rattled out something and they sat down. *Wonderful, Ice. Now we're the main attractions at the zoo.* Of all there was to worry about in this, he figured he might as well start way up the list. Katya was watching him bright-eyed. "You have the same name as a very famous person," he speculated.

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

Ben wanted that to be true. Zhukov was the titan of the Eastern Front, reputedly able to stand up even to Stalin's midnight military whims, and with geography on his side he had held out until he could start bleeding the German invaders to a slow death. The glut of war on Soviet soil seemed beyond sane comprehension. ~~Three~~ years now since Hitler made Napoleon's old mistake and turned thousands of miles of Russian snow into the blood of both sides; Ben had access in the correspondents' pool reports to the riveting dispatches of the Red Army front-line daredevil

June '41-autumn '43; we'd better round it off to 2 yrs instead of 3.

TWO

S-
N-

Vasily Grossman and discerned from Grossman's crafty coverage that survivors of the struggle had been through hell from both the enemy and their fanatic rulers. His eyes slipped to Katya's right hand and the sacrificed fingers. The million-dollar wound, a piece of body exchanged for a grant of existence. Before he could ask her what kind of aircraft she had flown—he had a spooky feeling it was a P-39, but that very well might have been Cass on his mind—Jake interjected. "They use this place as a canteen after it shuts down. Get ready to toast Mother Russia, Benjamin my boy."

Vodka made an immediate appearance. Glasses were splashed full and hoisted in accompaniment to a unison cry of "Na zdroyva!" Jake winked across at him. "That much Russian I know. 'Good health,' buddy." Wary from Cass's coma cola elixirs, Ben tested what sat so innocently clear in his glass. It tasted like spring water that had been tampered with by a moonshiner. While the Russians tossed theirs down he took a medium swig and clamped his fist around the glass to hide the fact that he hadn't emptied it. Nonetheless the bottle was making the rounds again and another toast was necessary, this one Jake's "To *bolshi semnadtsi!*" The Russians banged the table in homage to big bombers and gulped down. Here came the bottle again. *Holy damn, they inhale the stuff.*

Katya leaned toward him as if what she was about to say was vital. "Kheminveh. You have meet in the war?"

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

"Coal? Kheminveh write about stove thing?"

vodka

vodka

bolshoya

-S
-N

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

"With us *magazin* is on gun." Katya was impatient to reach her point. "Question. Kheminveh famous in Soviet Union, we all read. Hero in *The Sun Up Again*. Is he steer, not bull?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Nacht hexen*." Katya rapped her breast sturdily, then fluttered a hand through the air while giving out an eerie high-

pitched whistle. It was the kind of sound you could feel on your skin, and Ben tried not to twitch.

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

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

Dazed, Ben sat out the rest of the evening that stretched toward morning. He felt he had to, he was Jake’s alibi for consort- ing with allies who happened to be Red as their crimson flag. The conversation whenever toasts weren’t being made crashed along in two languages and in between. At some point Jake volubly told the joke about the dude who was invited to a fancy barbecue and worried whether he would be able to tell cow pie from caviar and which fork to use with which. Katya’s back-and-forth lingo had turned giggly, but Ben was numbly aware she could hold the tongue-tangling booze better than he could, they all could. In the haze of alcohol, muddled images kept coming to him. Cass wingwalking amid the struts of a whopping biplane with a grinning Katya in the cockpit cutting the engine, on and off, on and

—S

—N

off. *Sonofabitching war. Women didn't start it, why does it have to drag them in?* He tried to ward it off, but New Guinea replaced Alaska at terrible intervals, the grassy ambush, gashed bodies everywhere mingling with a teletype ticker absurdly chattering in the middle of the trail.

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

Determinedly he took stock of his massive friend across there amid the merry Russians, and that did it. The broad Slavic faces around the table all at once reminded him of Havel from football. And along with Havel, O'Fallon. Vic with greatly more cut off him than a pair of fingers. The others, out there in the treacherous time zones. He felt like sobbing. The team and its mortal dangers were a mere handful compared to the innumerable slaughtered in the vaster jaws of war, no question there. But they were his handful. God damn Jake and pulling *Pravda* out of the air. He was more than just a mouthpiece for a government propaganda organ, wasn't he? Had to be. Tepee Weepy only had him in its custody, it didn't own him. His mind lurched to the piece waiting to be written about Jake and this polar oasis where big bombers were handed off. *Good old ink, get it down with just enough between the lines, can't even cut it off with an axe, right, Ernie?* He wished he had a typewriter then and there, to capture

S
V

cap

S—
N—

all that was going to seem incredible in the sober light of day. Jake and him, up near the top of the world, frozen though it was, thrust out of the lives they'd thought they would lead and into the company of a female warrior who proudly answered to the name of Night Witch.

A COUPLE OF time zones to the east, Bill Reinking rolled out of bed, careful as always not to disturb his wife. Cloyce was a notably late sleeper. Not many of those in a town like Gros Ventre, and he reflected on the distant passion that had brought this particular woman from satin bedcovers to the quilts they had shared for nearly two dozen years. She was all for any manner of bedding at the time. *As was I.*

This time of year first light detached itself from night in stubborn gray and he put on his glasses to track down his clothes and shoes. Padding across to the window that gave a glimpse of horizon through the giant trunks of the cottonwoods, he checked the sky as usual, not that the weather of the moment meant anything in Montana.

The day ahead of him began cumbrously sorting itself out as he crept down the stairs—the county agent's session at the high school on food production for the war effort, all afternoon given over to typesetting the gleanings sent in by his rural correspondents, a Ladies' Aid pot-luck supper nominally nonpartisan where the Senator would just happen to whip through and speak his mind about the condition of the nation. By now he could forecast those indignant sentiments almost ahead of the words coming out of the Senator's formidable mouth, and the Senator no doubt could parrot off his dogged editorials before they were written. *We're as bad as an old married couple.*

That stray thought stung. He tried to yawn it away, stoking up the kitchen stove in the semi-dark to hurry the coffee. It was a terrible habit for a newspaper editor, rising at dawn after late

webs

webs

-S

-N

nights. Yet he had always done so and figured he always would. *The early bird gets the worm, but is that a balanced diet?* Fumbling for a pencil and pad on the sideboard, he wrote that down to use as a column-bottom filler.

While the coffee perked, he put on his mackinaw and hat to go out and scrape the frost off the car windshield. Another bit of headstart that did not gain a soul much in the long run, but it was something to do. Besides, the dawn air brought him a little of Ben now that he was stationed at East Base once more. That rainbow of planes to Alaska and then Russia: any amount of time Ben put in where virginal aircraft instead of bullets were flying was to be prized. *Praise be, Franklin D. I knew Lend-Lease was worth the abuse I took every week for being for it.*

He paused bent over the whitened windshield, taking in the silence that ushered the slow change of morning light. As a newspaperman he had to hew to the necessary enlistment of all men's sons in this war against the evils of Hitler and Tojo, but as a father he could privately covet any interval of amnesty for Ben.

Scraping off another peel of frost, he paused again to listen. East Base started up even earlier than he himself did. It was an added habit now, delaying out here in the daybreak until he could hear the first distant sound of planes in transit.

HIS BUNK WAS shaking and he wanted it to quit. Any motion made his head feel on fire, approximately to the roots of his hair.

When he finally unclenched his eyelids, Jake was standing over him with one big mitt of a hand rocking the bunkframe. "Another day, another dollar, buddy. How you feeling?"

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

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

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

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

Ben woke up entirely. "Bush plane?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—S

—N

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

Webs

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

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

Series

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

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

cap

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

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

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

Exhausted as the Widgeon OA-14 looked, Ben considered that a possibility. A spiderweb crack across half of the cockpit window—on the co-pilot's side, naturally—lent it a wall-eyed ap-

webs

S—
N—

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

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

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

nonrestrictive

WITH JAKE APPLYING considerable body English to make up for two fewer engines and a couple of thousand fewer horsepower than he was used to, the Widgeon crawled into the air above Fairbanks. After the B-17, which was like traveling in a submarine in the air, to both men the floatplane felt like a flying raft, fickle every time it met a new air current. Slowly, slowly, it wafted over the tin rooftops of Fairbanks, its shadow lagging and shrinking behind it as if reluctant to leave the safety of the city limits. While Jake was busy coaxing the engines to smooth out, Ben peered out his side window at the glistening ice of the Tanana River and the curd of war materiel along its banks, instantly reaching for his pad. The supply dump, as it was aptly called, consisted of an infinite number of crates of aircraft parts,

-S
-N

heaps of tires, long ranks of belly tanks, runway equipment of every sort; some of it tarped over and some of it not, the Lend-Lease mountains of supplies resembled an otherworldly tent encampment, strangely peopleless, strewn beside the frozen river for miles on end. Ben jotted as fast as his hand could go, adding the scene to others of untold weaponry stacked on Pacific atolls and Atlantic docks. He had read that the weight of impounded water in gigantic dams, Fort Peck and Dnieperstro³ and their serpentine ilk, in theory added up to enough to affect the rotation of the earth. Looking down at the enormity of the random arsenal piled up on one Alaskan riverbank, it could be readily imagined that the depots of war were pooling into a mass force certain to make the world wobble on its axis.

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

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

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

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

“My, you are cranky today. We’ll purr into Northway in time for lunch, you’ll see.”

Time slowed, attuned to the stately beat of the engines. Half-hypnotized by the ceaseless tapestry of scenery, Ben sat back and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You damn fool," Ben hurled over his shoulder, his hands clamping onto the controls. Maybe he was imagining, but the Widgeon seemed instantly restless as Jake's weight moving toward the rear of the cabin altered its center of gravity. His hands managing to tame that without any conscious help from the rest of him, Ben scanned the infinite banks of dials, switches and gauges of an instrument panel that now seemed the size and complexity of a cathedral window. Flight school had never

series

-S

-N

included this peculiar breed of aircraft in the first place. He could hear Jake back there humming loudly to himself while peeing, which did not help. Still inventorying the instrumentation, he kept coming up one short. Precisely now, of course, the Tanana River chose to turn cockeyed, twisting away in fresh directions, glinting like a silver snake. Alert in every corpuscle, Ben could see wire-like trees down there on its banks, he could see the carpet of yellow leaves on the ground, he could see the bald tops of hills regularly passing under the wingtips. What he could not spot, somewhere right under his nose, was the most basic aeronautical instrument.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That maybe is one of the things they're gonna modify in this clunker," Jake speculated as Ben sheepishly adjusted course to the compass setting. "Now then, you ready to fly like a sane person?"

"Damn you, you know I am."

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

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

human

webs

“Circle a few times so they can get a good look at us,” Jake unexpectedly turned the plane over to him when they were a few miles out from Newbride. “The radio’s on the fritz, let me work on that.” Slipping his own earphones on, Ben heard static and a voice that sounded a lot farther off than the airfield in the middle distance. Treed hills and straggles of the town penned in the field, but it appeared to be a more substantial runway than the dirt patches they had been putting down on farther north. Ben was ready to be on the ground. The air turned bumpy, and he concentrated on holding the altitude while Jake fiddled with the radio as if profanity was the sure cure. After many oaths, a particularly lurid outburst got through and he turned toward Ben and winked. “Sorry about that, tower. Requesting permission to land. Over.” When the radio back-and-forth was done, Jake checked the altimeter and throttle settings and everything else Ben had conscientiously been trying to mind, but made no move to do more than that. “Want to brush up on your landing skills?”

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

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

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

Ben shouted, “Put the wheels down!”

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

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

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

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

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

They scrambled out as the ambulance crunched to a stop a little distance away and a Royal Canadian Air Force officer came leaping off its runningboard. The back doors flung open and a couple of teams of medics poured out, stretchers ready. They all halted at the sight of Ben and Jake standing nearly to their ankles in the runway gravel, gazing at the furrows made by the Widgeon's thin wheels in the loose surface and cursing violently together. # (webs)

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

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

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

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

—S

—N

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

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

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

Jake killed the engines.

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

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

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

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

ONCE THE GROUND crew had unbolted the passenger seats and lugged them off merrily as scavengers given a shipwreck, Jake lined the lightened plane up with the waiting runway and gave it the gas. Glued to the side window as the twin engines raged and the plane shuddered against the drag of the wheels in the gravel,

S—
N—

Ben saw they were past their previous skid marks and thought they might make it this time. Then, agonizingly, they heard the telltale scrape again and in no time the friction of another skid slewed the Widgeon to another dead stop in the middle of the airfield.

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

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

webs 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

Back at the hangar apron, they ran through the maneuver in the silent plane a number of times. The Canadian ops officer puffed out his ruddy cheeks when Jake told him what was intended, but the truth was, he wanted the high-and-dry floatplane

-S
-N

off his airfield as badly as they did. "Have a go," he bestowed ultimately and went off to alert his ambulance crew.

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

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

"Who?"

"The volunteer fire department from town. They're particular about their trees up here."

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

Jake was shaking him. "Here we go."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—S

—N

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

per Gook style

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

per Gook style

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

Then sky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before the words were out of Jake’s mouth, Ben had craned around to give the stilled engine a looking-over. It only took an instant. Aviation gasoline was whipping away behind the engine in a fine mist. “It’s slobbering fuel like crazy,” he reported hoarsely.

“Then I guess we do without that one, don’t we.” Jake feathered the propeller before the words were out of his mouth. “We’ll have to limp on in to Edmon—”

The other engine quit.

—“aw, shit,” Jake finished his sentence.

In the vacuum after that, the only sounds the wind in the struts and the creaks of a gliding plane, the pair of men stared the question at each other and made the same guess without having to say it. The Widgeon’s repeated rough treatment on the

TM
cap 2x

—S

—N

gravel runway must have ruptured the fuel lines, and the gravity-defying takeoff over the treetops had encouraged leakage. By now Jake was striving to maintain altitude with every stunt he could think of with the controls and the flaps, while Ben twisted in every direction in search of water they could set the plane down on. Off on the horizon a lake gleamed, but too far for any sinking airplane to reach.

“This thing glides like a dump truck,” Jake said with strained calm. “How about we belly in on that clear patch down there?”

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

“That changes things. Raise Newbride, quick”—as Jake spoke, Ben already was on the radio chanting their position—“then grab the chutes. Toss me mine and the bivvie bag and you go first.”

Having no choice, Ben clambered into jumping position, aware of the tail and other portions of the plane that he did not want hitting him when he went out the hatch. *Jump plenty far out when you jump, at least I remember that from flight school.* He gripped the ripcord ring. Great gulps swept through him as he attempted to blot out Dex’s experience of puking in mid-air. Clinging in the hatchway, he stared past the toes of his flight boots, trying to judge. The Widgeon was losing altitude like mad, he could see individual stumps and logs down there; wasn’t the ground too close for jumping?

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

Two opposed things happened almost simultaneously, the sensation of floating as the parachute opened and the uprush of a monstrously large downed evergreen directly beneath him, its