

THE ELEVENTH MAN

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rootball splayed toward him like a natural mantrap. With everything he could muster, dangling and falling at the same time, he tugged at the parachute's lines in an effort to miss the log. At the very end of his mid-air dance of trying to twist aside, a limber root end raked up his body, swatting him under the side of the jaw and taking some face skin with it.

The next thing he knew he was on his side on the ground. The tree, as prone as he was, was close enough he could reach out and touch it. Still foolishly gripped tight in his hand was the ripcord ring.

Raw-faced and wincing from the sideswipe by the tree root, he lay there testing himself for anything broken. Except for his breath, nothing seemed to be. He was gasping his way toward normal intake of air when he heard, somewhere off across the mess of downed trees, the nasty sound of a crash. *Too big for Jake. Had to be the plane.* That started his thought process whirling. Before he even was onto his feet he was calling at the top of his voice:

"Jake! Jake?"

It took several shouts, but then a voice not all that far away answered. "Tone it down, Ben. I don't want my ears hurting too."

"Where are you?"

"How the hell do I know? Over here."

Using the rootball as a rough ladder, Ben managed to climb high enough to see across various logs to where a white drape of parachute indicated Jake's location.

"I'm on my way. Doctor yourself till I get there, can you?" The optimistically named bivouac bag, containing a medical kit and other emergency essentials, was with Jake.

"Who said I need doctoring?"

To Ben, that response did not sound particularly convincing. Wasting no time, he bundled up his own chute in his arms like dirty laundry and began picking his way through the maze of

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downed trees. Mostly the forest here had been tipped over by a big wind, roots and all, like a spill of wooden matches. A good many tree trunks, though, had been snapped off, leaving stray splintery snags tall as totem poles. Here and there stood survivor trees, incongruous loners with their kilts of evergreen branches above it all. The muskeg footing was laborious. Ben was sweating by the time he rounded the last big log and there was Jake, upright but wincing as he stood there flexing the ankle in his unlaced left boot.

"How bad?" Ben asked.

"I feel beat to hell, about like you look."

Another spasm chased across the big man's face as he put weight on that foot. "Think maybe it's a sprain, not a break. Not gonna take the boot off to find out, ~~the way~~ the way the damn thing is swelling."

Jake's eyes met Ben's. "Tell you what really hurts—I dropped the bivvie bag coming out of the plane. Piss-poor time to fumble. Sorry about that, Ben."

"Don't worry," Ben spoke it with effort. "We've still got our chute packs. Can you walk?"

Jake hobbled around to test that out. "More or less. We're not going anywhere for awhile anyway, I guess." Both men turned and gawked south where a pillar of smoke marked the burning aircraft. After a bit, Jake said: "That was a sad-ass aircraft, you know that?"

"Never mind that, let's see what we're supposed to live on." Ben knelt to unzip the pack portion of his parachute for its emergency items, and Jake did the same. Each reached in and pulled out the first thing they found. They stared at the short machetes in their hands.

Next to come out was a tiny fishing kit, followed by rocklike pieces of chocolate called tropical bars.

"Jungle issue," Jake said tonelessly. "Goddamn sonofabitching goddamn supply depot bastards—"

"Quit," Ben ordered. "Eat. We've got to keep our strength up." He tried the chocolate and nearly broke a tooth. "Petrified."

"Must be what the machetes are for," Jake muttered.

They sawed their way through the chocolate and sucked on it while they spread out the white parachute canopies as a marker for any search plane. Around them hung the ear-ringing silence of the Canadian forest. It was at the forefront of both their minds that in country this far north, it was always about five minutes to winter.

"Man oh man, this is not so good," Jake eventually observed out loud. "Where are the Canucks with all their rescue regalia when we want them?"

Wondering that himself, Ben said, "Takes a while to fly here, you know that. We'd better get busy, just in case. Firewood. Come on, let's get to whacking with these daisy cutters."

They had amassed a woodpile of the driest branches they could find to cut and were digging in the muskeg trying to reach water—none too successfully—when they heard the sound of a plane.

A small spotter aircraft of some kind, it looked about the size of a moth as it pattered through the air, in over the forested edge of the windfall and ever so slowly toward them, an arm waving out the co-pilot's window in good cheer as it made a pass over them. No airplane created could land in the jumble of trees, snags, and logs, so both Ben and Jake knew what to expect, the drop of a bag of survival gear. Around again came the plane and again the cheery wave, but no bag was dropped.

"I wish he'd hurry up," Ben muttered as the small plane buzzed off to circle in for another try. "Puddlejumpers like that don't carry all that much fuel." Jake simply fixed a solid glare

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at the visiting aircraft as if the emergency bag could slide down on that.

One more time, here the frail aircraft came, propeller whirling like a child's pinwheel, and a sizable soft object was lobbed toward them. It blossomed out in a little parachute all its own, then decided to ride the breeze, straight toward the topmost branches of one of the taller standing trees nearby which Ben and Jake had paid no particular attention to, until now.

The chute neatly snagged on the worst of the high branches, tangled itself, and dangled the bag sixty feet above the cursing pair of men.

They bayed obscenities at the rescue bag festooned in the treetop like a Christmas trimming, until better sense kicked in. Meanwhile, the light plane wagged its wings—in the circumstances, it seemed more like a regretful shrug—and flew off in the direction of Newbride.

It was Jake, sounding almost pensive, who remarked, "That guy wasn't waving for exercise, was he. He wanted us out away from this shit-eating tree."

Taking stock of the situation, they could tell it was impossible to climb an evergreen that tall and spindly; the upper branches would break off under the weight of a man and so might the whole crown of the tree. On the other hand, the base of the tree looked appallingly substantial when the only thing you had to chop it down with were machetes meant for jungle vines.

The first half hour's worth of excruciatingly careful chopping, so as not to break the blades, produced a notch about as big as a beaver could chew in minutes. Panting and arm-weary, they had just resigned themselves to another hour or so of chipping away, when the sound of a more powerful aircraft engine reached them.

They looked up. This one was arriving from what they figured was the direction of Edmonton and coming like a streak.

Ben identified the silhouette and wondered if he could be imagining.

"VIP treatment this time around, Benjamin." Jake shaded his eyes. "We rate a P-39. Hope the guy is bringing us long woolies and his aim is better than that last prick's."

There were thousands of Airacobras in the sky of war, hundreds of pilots gunning a twelve-piston engine to a full four hundred miles an hour at any given time. This one roaring in on them had no business being flown by her, Ben knew in the deepest reasoning part of himself; Cass could be on the Seattle run, or on the ground at East Base, or anywhere between. But reason did not stand a chance as he craved her into creation there in the sun-glint of the rapidly oncoming cockpit. As he watched, afraid to blink, the P-39 lowered its nose and dove toward them. Jake, waving both arms, froze into semaphore position as the plane skimmed into the clearing in the forest, low as a crop duster and fast as an artillery shell. Facing into the madcap fly-over, Ben no longer knew whether to pray it was Cass or not at those controls.

The P-39 tore past so close over them they could feel the propwash. Now he was sure it was no one but her. He felt queerly responsible: Cass only would have flown a circus stunt like that to see what condition the crash left him in.

"That," Jake declared in the corridor of dwindling roar as the fighter plane climbed sharply, "is one shit-hot pilot." Both men watched the Cobra's ascent as fliers do, as if counting contour lines of elevation.

At around fifteen hundred feet the plane pulled up and settled into circling over them.

"What the hell now?"

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

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Clumsier than vertical bears, they plunged through the fallen-timber maze until they reached a marginally more open patch of muskeg. They planted themselves in anticipation there, and Jake took up waving again. "The goddamn guy doesn't have to check his spelling," he complained as the Cobra kept to its droning orbit over them for the next some minutes. "Just tell us how they're gonna get us out of here."

"He will." Ben had nearly admitted *She*. "Next pass, watch for the drop bag."

Both of them tensed, ready to chase down the weighted leath-
erene bag, like a long yellow stocking, wherever it landed.

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

Jumping back until they were certain it was through rolling, Ben and Jake needed a further instant to realize it was a duffel bag. Together they pounced and opened it. They pawed through like pirates at a treasure chest. C[#]ratulations. Wool socks and gloves and watch caps. A down mummy bag. Matches. Two canteens of water. Two thermoses of hot coffee. Four cans of beer. Nestled amid it all, the message drop bag, and inside, the scrawled note:

Flyboys:

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

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

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

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

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Jake looked at him for a moment, then commenced rummaging through the duffel bag. "Here's a dilemma—coffee or beer?"

"Save the beer." Ben watched the fighter plane go. "It's going to be a long night."

THE FIVE MILES took them all the next day. Jake peglegged the distance, his twisted ankle splinted with halved tree branches, while Ben humped along with the precious duffel and picked out their compass route. At noon, barely halfway and their energy depleting fast, they made the decision to cram down all the C-rations to give their bodies something to work with. Ultimately both men were staggering, but always in the direction pointed by the compass needle in Ben's hand, as they lunged out of the forest to a lakeshore just before dusk. Half a mile away at a mooring buoy, a floatplane revved its engine and began to cruise across the surface of the water. In terror that it was taking off, the two of them futilely tried to shout the roar of the engine. Then the skimming floats beneath the plane cut an arc on the lakewater like skates curving on ice, and the aircraft slowed to a chug, aiming in to shore exactly at them.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS later, with Jake unhappily tractioned in a hospital bed by the Canadian medical authorities, Ben mustered himself as the C-47 shuttle from Edmonton touched down at East Base. He ached in every possible part of himself and his face looked like he had been in a fight with a bobcat and he still had the entire slew of writing about the bomber journey to Alaska to be done. *Am I imagining, or am I losing ground faster than I can type?*

Jones was waiting for him on the runway, faithfully rumpled and homely as a mud fence. "Welcome back, Lieutenant. I spent yesterday going over the regulations about escorting a coffin, but I'm glad it's you instead."

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"Jones, you say the sweetest things." Even as the wind added its pesky greeting, Ben had to admit East Base looked like an oasis after where he'd been.

"Tepee Weepy radioed," Jones reported, awed at having heard the voice in clear air. "They want your first-person story of the crash right away. 'Soonest,' they said—I didn't know that was a word."

"It is with them."

"Uhm, Lieutenant, I'm supposed to tell you. Commander's orders, you're to report to the infirmary before you do anything else."

"If Grandpa Grady thinks I've had time to bring a dose of clap in from Canada—"

Jones surveyed Ben's black-and-blue jaw and skinned-up face. "Somehow I don't think it's that." He leaned in as if giving solace to a parishioner. "My guess is, he considers you a hero and wants to make sure you're all right."

"I'm touched," Ben growled.

"You maybe want to look at this while you're getting checked over—it came yesterday, highest priority." Jones handed him a wax-sealed packet. "The courier didn't want to give it to me, but I told him it was that or he could go find you in the Canadian wilderness."

"You're getting the hang of this, Jones." Throatily Ben pushed the words out past the chokehold of apprehension brought by the packet, the kind his transfer orders to another base ordinarily came in. He didn't want to open it with Jones watching. "Meet you back at the office."

"Don't forget the—"

"—clap shop, I won't, thank you very much, Jones."

Ben stood there at the edge of the East Base runway buffeted by the wind, his thoughts whirling wildly. *If they yank me out of*

notes

here now . . . How will I ever see her . . . When will the war ever quit . . . He trudged toward the nearest hangar—it happened to be the one where he had first laid eyes on Cass—and ducked in out of the wind. Not a P-39 in sight; a B-17 bomber, clean-skinned and somehow the more ominous for that, was being worked over from nose to tail by a swarm of female mechanics. A hairnetted crew chief more muscular than Ben immediately slipped over to him. “Help you with something, Lieutenant?”

“Something sharp, chief, to open this with?”

The brawny woman pointed to a workbench strewn with tools. Ben went over and picked up a chisel. He lightly gouged the wax, the clock of war turning in him. How many time zones away from Cass Standish could a man stand to be? Her husband was seventeen away, if that was any guide. *And look what’s happening to him.*

He reached in and instead of orders pulled out a P-file, the standard military personnel folder, with the name, rank, and serial number inked in the upper right corner. In the opposite corner the file bore a red KIA tag, denoting Killed ~~In~~ Action. Carl Friessen was dead.

Stunned, Ben took in the words—“On patrol to secure the Hollandia perimeter in the New Guinea campaign . . . enemy ambush . . .” No million-dollar wound nor any other kind short of lethal for the laconic lineman he had played next to, in the faraway of two years ago. Somehow Friessen’s number had come up on the wrong side of the law of averages with the earlier two—so much for Tepee Weepy’s goddamn statistical measurement—and a sick fury at the merciless twist in arithmetic filled Ben. Making a fist, he crumpled the envelope to hurl it in the waste barrel at the end of the bench; something inside resisted. He shook the envelope onto the worktable. Another file fell out, also with a KIA tag.

This one was Vic Rennie’s.

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★ THE WEATHER EVER since Christmas had not been able to make its mind up, thawing and then turning cold, and candles of ice hung silvery on the otherwise darkened eaves of Gros Ventre. Now snow flurries and the breeze courting them waltzed across the surfaces of light spread onto the hardened ground from the front windows of the festive house, lit up in more ways than one this last and most celebrated night of the year. All evening long Cloyce Reinking had reminded her husband to keep the drinks flowing, people in this town soaked it in in a fashion that would have put a Beverly Hills crowd under the rug. She appraised the heightened conversations filling the living room from corner to corner and took as much satisfaction as she would allow herself in how the party was going.

"Unfair." Carnelia Muntz materialized at the buffet table as Cloyce was trying to deploy the buffet remnants to better effect. "How am I supposed to top this when I have the canasta club over, spike the angelfood?" Carnelia was the banker's wife and always regally aware of it. She sighted over her glass to the circle of guests around the prize of the evening, the Senator and his wife and daughter. "You're a hard act to follow, Cloycie."

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"You sound like Bill. He accuses me of a pagan passion for New Year's Eve."

"Your night to shine. I see Ben finally made it."

"The bus was late. This weather."

Carnelia negligently nibbled a crumble of the colorless cheese from the local creamery which neither woman would have stooped to if it hadn't been for wartime rationing. "He's quite the hero one more time, isn't he, walking away from that plane wreck."

Cloyce held her tongue, not wanting to further sharpen Carnelia's. She looked across the jammed room past the medleys of the socially positioned of the town—doctor, lawyer, mayor, school superintendent, county agent, on down to postmaster and druggist, and their wives in holiday best—to the kitchen hallway where her son's ginger hair overtopped her husband's. What now? she wondered with a frown as the pair of them in their nook stayed oblivious to the wall-to-wall guests. Midnight was not that far off, and Ben still had not been in general circulation.

"SO WE WON'T BE seeing much of you for a while." Bill Rein-king's knuckles whitened on his bourbon glass.

"Mine not to reason why," Ben responded, tired through and through from trying to do exactly that. "I'll let Mother know tomorrow." What his latest set of orders, courtesy of Teepee Weepy, had in mind for him in the weeks and months ahead passed for creative in the military, but that didn't make it any less daunting to handle. All during the bus trip from East Base, calendar and map of war blended together into a twisty scroll he could see no end of, and arriving home under these circumstances further blurred the proportions of the existence being asked of him. Even the favorite old civilian clothes he had slipped into felt unfamiliar. The rising and falling crescendos of party hubbub seemed otherworldly, echoes from some everlasting spot of time

when mead and feasting greeted a solar change of fortunes. Yet this year's version held one prominent difference from his mother's other annual extravaganzas, there across the room where the Senator was holding forth about something and everyone around him was nodding as if keeping time. "Our hostess with the most-est hit the jackpot tonight, didn't she," Ben acknowledged. "The big sugar himself. How'd you drag him in on this?"

"The incalculable power of the press, of course," came the puckish answer. Bill Reinking elaborated that the lawmaker was in town on the start of a swing to sprinkle reclamation appropriations down the Continental Divide watersheds where his big voting majorities lay county by county. In short, the Senator had his own way of celebrating the onset of an election year. "When his press mouthpiece—sorry, his spokesman—phoned wanting to know if the Senator could get together with a few people while he was here, all I said was, 'How about half the town?'" The proprietor and opinion-setter of the *Gleaner* sighed. "Now I have to give the old boy a hard time in a couple of editorials to show he doesn't have me in his pocket."

"The fun and games of dealing with Washington. I'm going to have to take lessons from you." Ben did not smile as he said it.

"Don't I wish I had the formula to give you," came the swift response. "How hard did TPWP kick about your piece on Vic?"

"Enough to smart for a while," Ben had to admit, the hard-edged teletype messages back and forth still with him. "I finally had to dig in and point out to them they got all the goddamn combat angle they could possibly want in the one I had to do on Friessen."

A cascade of laughter from the contingent surrounding the Senator caused Ben to pause and look over there, then back at his father. "It was just Tepee Weepy's view of the war against mine, Dad. I'm over it." He wasn't. The whole thing with Vic still haunted him. Escorting caskets had that effect. When Corporal

full caps

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Victor Rennie was interred with full military honors in the cemetery up on the hill, the scene drew everlasting lines in the sod of memory. Toussaint ancient and alone on one side of the grave, the Blackfeet relatives at a little distance on the other side. Jake thumping around on his cast served as a pallbearer; Dex sent word he could not. Ben withstood it all except for the final three words in granite. *I managed to wangle out of my story what the lying bastards wanted in, buddy, but I couldn't keep it off the gravestone for you.* He glanced out the nearest window-well of light at the flurries lacing the bases of everything with whiteness; the stone-cut line KILLED IN ACTION soon would be covered until spring, at least.

Bill Reinking shook his head. In his time he had thrown away bales of news releases less fanciful than the Threshold Press War Project version that bestowed a heroic death in combat on a one-legged hospital patient confined to a wheelchair. "What've you been able to find out," he asked low and close, one journalist to another, "about the honest-to-God circumstances?"

"It wasn't pretty," Ben began tightly, "but it wasn't that different from what England has been put through all the time, either." Once more he imagined Vic there in the green and gray countryside where distant skytrails of smoke marked the ongoing battle between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe. "Officially they called what happened a bombing raid on the hospital—that's how they tagged it 'combat' because it's a military installation of a kind and maybe somebody there did take a shot back at a plane." He lifted his shoulders, the universal *who knows?* In the scene in his mind, what counted was the amputee on wheels suddenly left to himself, his perch on the rolling lawn forgotten in the general scurry away from the approaching sounds of bombs. "Since no buildings were hit, my guess is it was some Jerry dumping his load before scooting back across the Channel and a few bombs strayed onto the hospital grounds."

The next words he organized with slow care, not wanting them to be too theatrical. "There's one of those old canals they have everywhere in that part of England, at the bottom of the slope from the hospital where they used to haul supplies in by barge. During all the commotion, Vic's wheelchair went in the water. They didn't find him until the next day."

Ben stopped there, although he need not have. He was certain as anything that while the hospital attendants were ducking for cover, Vic had taken one last sharp look around and given the wheelchair a running start down the slope toward the deep-sided waterway, his chosen exit from a life that no longer held anything for him.

"Not quite like the official handout, was it," Bill Reinking summed that up in the arid tone of a veteran editor. Uneasy with what Ben had to contend with, he asked: "Who makes a decision like that, how they classify that kind of a death?"

"Someone who wants every dead soldier in any uniform of ours to be a shining hero." *Four for four, so far. The Supreme Team stays perfect with a little help from Tepee Weepy and in spite of me. Or Vic.*

Just then Chick Jennings, the postmaster, reeled past on his way to the bathroom. "You sure know how to throw a party, Bill. And how you doing, Ben?" he delivered with a passing clap on the shoulder. "What do you think, this the year the boys will whip the Japs and Krauts and get to come home?" It was common knowledge Chick's son was a Navy quartermaster safely tucked away in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

"Not all of them," Ben said through his teeth.

"Ben," his father began, "people say things they don't—"

"I know, Dad, it's okay. I lost it there for half a second, is all."

Don't get on your high horse, he chided himself, this is just the Officers Club of the home front. He knew he ought to rouse himself to the business of festivity even though he had no stomach for it

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away from Cass. "Any chance to be home, do it," she had urged him to take the holiday pass, a case of use it or lose it. "Get away from this military madhouse. I'm on standby that weekend anyway, you won't be missing any ton of fun here. Go, palooka."

CC SHE AT THAT moment was nursing her one lonely scotch in the back area of the Officers Club known as the 'orphans' corner. It felt odd to be there with the handful of male loners—for some reason, they tended to have tidy little cookie-duster mustaches like department store floorwalkers—who sat one by one staring out darkened windows as they toyed with their drinks. However, it was the safest territory around. A woman sitting alone anywhere else in the building invited the interest of every brass type with a touch of the screw flu. Here Captain Cass Standish was just another withdrawn officer trying to drink slow and write a letter. Besides, at midnight she had to go back on standby in the ready room; unless Germany or Japan directly attacked Great Falls, that meant another stint of killing time until 0800. Nineteen forty-four did not look like anything to celebrate yet; she hoped Ben was having better luck where he was.

Out of sight of Cass although definitely not out of hearing, the throng around the piano player gleefully spotted a target of opportunity as Della MacLaine and her date frisked in from outside. If they were somewhat mussed from fooling around with each other on the way over, in the overriding smudge of cigarette smoke and pall of alcohol no one was paying attention to personal tidiness. What caught the combined choral eye was the sassy tilt of the crush hat on Della's blonde flow of hair and, of course, the pilot's insignia prominent on her chest. The piano bunch was instantly inspired.

Oh, don't give me a P-39,
The engine is mounted behind.

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She'll tumble and spin,
 She'll augur you in,
 Don't give me a P-39!

No, give wasps the P-39,
 Let them cuss the design.
 There'll be medals in baskets
 For flying those caskets,
 Give wasps the P-39!

Della gamely lingered and took it, the motor pool officer she was with nervous at her side. The song done, she sent a honeyed smile to the serenaders and gave them a thumbs ^{up}. No, wait. It was a different digit. Passing the hooting piano gang as her date broke trail toward a table at the quieter far end, she could not help but notice the big pilot with a rakish flop to his dark hair giving her the eye as she went by, but she was not in the market for the glee club type. Better someone with a jeep or ~~better~~ wheels.

On past the singing drinking coterie, she spotted Cass holding down one of the spots for the socially backward. Captain Standoffish, too occupied with herself to join in the celebration along the bar. Seizing the chance, Della cooed an excuse in the ear of her date and promised him better things to come, then headed for Cass.

"Care if I join you, captain ma'am?"

Cass looked up in surprise from her writing paper. "What the hey, Lieutenant Maclaine, sit yourself down."

BEN FELT A HAND, loving but firm, at the crook of his elbow. "Time to break it up, you two. I need to borrow my soldier." Words warm as toast, and the crust there for emphasis. His mother's diction made her a standout in amateur theatricals, the loftier the dialogue the better. Certainly she looked like the

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leading lady tonight, with her hair freshly fixed and her aquamarine party dress on, and both men self-consciously shrugged around in their clothes a bit as if that would help to approach her level. "Bill, I think people are ready for another round."

"Next year I'll just hand out bottles instead of glasses." As his father went off to liquor duty, Ben set himself to escort his mother sociably around the room as she no doubt wanted. But she didn't move toward that and her tone was forgiving—he tried to think for what?—as she said: "Are your ears burning? We were just talking about you."

"And here I thought that was frostbite from the bus ride," he endeavored to make it sound teasing. "So," he watched his mother for a further moment to see where this might go, "what did you conclude?"

She had not expected that he would treat her remark as more than a pleasantry to warm him up for the meeting and greeting ahead. But then Ben was inadvertently dramatic tonight, the last healing traces of scrapes from that plane crash like character lines drawn strong on his face. "If it were up to me," she decided to venture, "I'd say that you look like you could use more than a night off. I'm worried about you, you've been all over the map without letup. Doesn't that strange unit of yours ever have furloughs?"

Ben drained the last of his drink. "The war doesn't take furloughs, Mother, so TPWP sees no reason to. I'm theirs for the duration, lock, stock and typewriter."

She looked at him critically, hoping Carnelia Muntz didn't cross paths with him while he was like this. "Are you tight?"

"Sober as a gravedigger." The old saying fit his frame of mind, if not the moment.

"Ben." His mother's intensity broke the spell of debate. "I know you've had a hard time of it recently, but heavens, it's New Year's Eve. Can't you enjoy yourself for that long?"

The prowess of more than one small-town drama director rested on Cloyce Reinking's ability to use her voice the way a hypnotist uses a watch fob. The trouble was, the two men in her own house had built up a certain level of resistance down through the years. *I'm here, Mother. Your competition is on standby tonight or you'd really have a vacant spot where I'm standing.*

Smiling winningly, she slipped her arm in his. "Come on over and meet the Senator's daughter. Adrianna is in the service too. She's stationed in Washington. You'll have a lot to talk about."

So that was it. Glancing across the gathering, he picked out the significant young woman in the cluster around the Senator and his wife; no male of military age in sight there or for that matter anywhere else in the room. He nearly laughed out loud, wishing Cass were here to see what happened when good intentions met up with his mother's designs.

CASS TOOK A QUICK look at the moonstruck officer Della had left parked at a table to wait for her; another new one, chronically the case with Della. *Playing the field. I wonder what that's like. I hope to hell I never find out.* The question of Dan or Ben constituted as much choosing as she ever wanted to have to do in one lifetime.

"Tough night to draw standby." Della's sympathy did not sound overwhelming. Actually, Cass was unprepared for any at all from her after their run-in at Edmonton just before Christmas. On that flight up, Della had piloted like a Sunday driver, lagging the formation and straying off the radio beam. Luckily the group of planes hadn't hit heavy weather or Cass would have had a lame duck back there to worry about along with everything else. It had taken a monumental chewing-out and a threat to ground Della if she didn't shape up, but it had worked, for the time being. Right now she had her eyes modestly down on the

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blue air-letter paper Cass's pen rested on. "Catching up on your correspondence?"

"To my husband. Della, what's on your mind?"

"I'm thinking of putting in for a transfer. To ground duty."

Happy New Year to you too, gutless wonder.

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THE ENTIRE PARTY seemed to somehow have shifted about a step and half toward the far wall of the living room, leaving a pocket of expectation where he and Adrianna were left together to make the most of this chance to get acquainted. *The young people, herded together as if nature intended. You'd think the two of us were being bartered by our tribes.*

"I heard you on Meet the Forces," she was saying, wasting no time, "telling about your plane crash. You made it sound all in a day's work."

"They put anybody who can deal in consecutive sentences on that show."

"That's awfully modest of you." She studied the traces on his face as though they were gladiator souvenirs. "You maybe can guess—my folks have followed your doings ever since football. They tell me when you set out to do something, you're the best at it."

It took just a few such battings of the eyes for Ben to realize that she was being a good deal more than daughterly civil in making talk with him. And he had to admit, being around her was not hard duty. Adrianna was cute and a dash exotic in the same glance. Slender but substantial in the right places and in a snug maroon skirt and matching sweater that showed that off well enough. Caramel-colored hair that no doubt received a hundred brush strokes a day. Almond eyes and olive complexion. It was well-known that she was adopted, the senatorial couple setting an example of humanitarianism after that first inhumane

world war. From somewhere on the Adriatic, or was he simply mixing that up with her name? She was a WAVE, that much he was sure of; the Senator had a practiced chuckle when he'd introduced her as his daughter the sailor.

For the next few minutes they kept on trading generalities—she told him she was just another of fifteen thousand Navy women serving in Washington wartime offices; he told her he was just a typewriter soldier being sent off on an overseas assignment early in the new year—until he came around to asking, “What do they have you doing?”

“I’m in the wire room.”

Ben tried not to show any sign of the disputes he'd had with teletype clerks of many kinds down through time. Maybe she wasn't one of those, maybe she was in charge of changing the spools of telex ribbon. Which he immediately doubted; a Senator's daughter would not be doing the chores.

“Keys to the kingdom, A to Z,” he said guardedly.

“There's one bad part of the clerk job.” Adrianna made a face. “Carbon paper. Our seersucker uniforms sop it up.” She leaned a trifle closer, confidentiality coming with it. “Know how I get it off?”

“I have to confess I don't.”

She looked around, then right up at him. “I climb in the bathtub with the uniform on and scrub the carbon off. It's kind of like using a washboard. Rub a dub dub.” Hands in front of her chest, she surreptitiously pantomimed washerwoman motion on that handy part of herself for him. “Then drain out the blue water, take off the uniform and hang it to dry,” she continued ever so innocently, “and go ahead and have my bath. It works.”

“I'll bet it does.” The back of his throat felt dry. There was a great deal more than a fleck of attraction in the thought of rub a dub dub. A debate had started up in him like dueling lightning.

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When someone such as Adrianna handed herself to him on a platter, was he obliged to do his best to drop it? After all, you can cordon sex off from love. Soldiers did it all the time.

"THAT'S UP TO YOU," Cass was saying to the problem pilot across the table from her. Leave it alone, she told herself. Let her turn into a groundpounder if that's all she has the brains to do. And heard herself asking: "How come, Della?"

A flip of the blond hair heralded the answer. "There's no room for me to move up in the squadron, is there. I'm always going to be Tail End Charlie."

Cass lifted her hands from the table and let them fall back.

"I'm not kicking about that, understand," Della hastened to say. "It's the way things are, seniority is something I can't do anything about. Buy you a drink, to show there are no hard feelings?"

THE ALASKA VODKA lesson staying with him, he sipped cautiously as Adrianna steered the conversation.

"TPWP is sort of hush-hush, isn't it." She treated this as though it were a secret between just the two of them. "You have your own code—it's off-limits to us."

"Mysterious are the ways of Tepee Weepy, I'm the first to agree."

"Tepee Weepy," she laughed low in her throat, "oh, that's funny. We have all kinds of those insane abbreviations in Washington. My father gets a charge out of saying the government is nothing but one big pot of alphabet soup."

Ben glanced now at that senatorial father, still holding forth to the other half of the room as inexhaustibly as if he were filibustering. *Sharp-cornered old devil. To look at him, you'd never know he's busy shopping for a son-in-law.* Right there in the fray, feeding the occasion in more ways than one, was the zealous hostess of all this. Ben had the passing thought that his mother

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should be the one writing a movie script. *Mr. Touchdown Goes to Washington*, by Cloyce Carteret Reinking.

UNCOUNTABLE DOWN through the terms in office—like a canine's, a politician's years measured differently—these home-state gatherings out away from that company town, Washington, were part campaign ritual and part self-schooling for the Senator. In the crisscross of conversations loosened by a bit of booze, he often picked up matters of interest that might otherwise surface unpleasantly on election day. He himself was a restrained drinker at these, as was Sadie, Adrianna a little less so. At the moment the daughter they had so fondly adopted and raised was, to his understanding eye, a sailor on leave, chatting up the pick of the evening, Cloyce and Bill Reinking's prize son. He and Sadie had needed to learn that Adrianna was rapid in her affections—at Thanksgiving it had been the Free French naval attache. One of these times, something would have to come of these acquaintanceships sparked by the war. Gazing around the living-room party in apparent benevolence, the Senator marked Ben Reinking as one would a passage in a book worthy to return to.

THE DRINK OFFER was the only good thing Cass had heard out of Lieutenant Maclaine since she plopped down at the table. "Can't. Going on duty at midnight." Which, she figured, Della well knew when she volunteered to buy. *Why the hell can't she strut her stuff when it counts?* "It's a shame, though," Cass said as if the words were too stubborn to keep in. "You throwing away your wings." *Messing up the squadron just when I was finally starting to get you straightened out.*

Della checked her for sarcasm. "What do you mean, a shame?"

"Don't you remember?" Cass waved accusingly in the general direction of Texas. "From day one at Sweetwater, those bald old

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coots who called themselves flight instructors said that about us. 'Most of you women won't stick around in that pilot seat,' she mimicked their seen-it-all drawl. "Something will git on your nerves and you'll take up being a pedestrian again."

That set off a blond flare in the chair opposite. "Cass, that is in no way fair. My nerves are perfectly fine and I am not most women."

"It's rough," Cass led into, "to be low schmoe on the totem pole, I know. I've been there." She drained the last of her lonely drink and took a quick look at the clock. "But lack of seniority doesn't last forever, if you keep on breathing." She mulled how to say the rest of this, knowing she should be strenuously debating with herself about saying it at all. *What the hey, bluff on through, you have nothing to lose but a Tail End Charlie.* She honored the fact that Beryl did not want her request for a transfer to the Wichita bomber factory run bandied about, but a hint would serve the same purpose, would it not. "There are a dozen slots in the squadron, there just might be some turnover."

It changed Della's approach markedly. "I'd have a shot at being wingman?"

Cass rose to go on duty. "Only if you hang onto your wings. Happy new year, Lieutenant."

ONE THING WAS leading to another more precipitously than Ben wanted to be led, all signs pointing to a celebratory kiss at midnight to start off the Adrianna era. He could wish dozens of things for the coming year, starting with Cass and him in circumstances that did not know war or inconvenient husband. All that went onto the tosspile of dreams, however, if he got involved with what was standing in front of him in snug ma-roon. "My father just gave me the high sign about something," he resorted to. "Let me get you a drink while I go see what's on his mind."

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"I'll hold out for champagne," Adrianna said with a wink. "Hurry back."

A sign of some sort, in fact, was what Ben had spotted across the room, the back of his father as he slipped away from the party hubbub to the quiet book-lined room upstairs. Hearing Ben step in, Bill Reinking turned from the window where he was looking out at the snow sifting down. "What's this, another absconder from the merrymaking?" He smiled faintly. "You needn't take after me in that bad habit."

"The merrymaking can stagger along without us for a little while, Dad."

His father nodded. Swirling his glass, he turned back to the snow scene of the window. "Vic Rennie," he said barely above a murmur. "I owe it to Toussaint to write a little something more about him." He chugged the last of what was in the glass. "Don't worry, I'll stay away from how he died. I'll keep to the soldier-from-the-Reservation peg, although I goddamn sure won't make it heartwarming." He shook his head one more time. "Poor divvied-out kid, always caught between. What was he, halfbreed, quarter-?"

"I don't even know," Ben answered. "When anybody would ask, he'd say 'Enough.'"

Bill Reinking grunted and moved off from the window-well to the bookshelves that walled the room. His son followed him with his eyes, the old feel of the words in wait enwrapping the two of them. Ben never forgot the touchable value of the books in this room, his boyhood times of running his fingers across the collected spines standing on the shelves like delicately-done upright bricks. All the goodnights when he would pad in to find this bespectacled man deep into Thucydides or Parkman or Tolstoy, and there would come the brief contented smile and the adage, time and again, "History writes the best yarns." As Ben watched now, his father scanned the rows of titles as if reminding

I meant here Ben nightly saying "Good night" to his dad; might we hyphenate this to better show that?

himself there was this room to come back to after tonight. Thinking aloud, the older man said: "Your mother will nail both our hides to the wall if we don't pitch in at the party pretty quick."

"Mine, anyway," Ben conceded. "I'm supposed to be down there making out like mad with fair maiden Adrianna."

His father took down a book and put it back without looking at it. "Peril is not confined to the theaters of war, son."

This from the man known to have put in as the filler at the bottom of a newspaper column *The matrimony vine is also called boxthorn*. Ben shifted restlessly. He had pieced together the story of his father and his mother considerably beyond even the evidence he grew up around in this house. The opening scene: the glamorous set of grandparents he had never met, Clyde and Joyce Carteret, early Hollywood royalty, silent-movie producer and actress. In 1919 the Carterets had brought their film company to Glacier National Park and the adjacent Blackfoot Reservation, to shoot a quickie movie full of Indians and headdresses. While there, their teenage daughter Cloyce met and fell for the young man on assignment from the *Gleaner*, Bill Reinking. They bedded and wedded, in a hurry both times; natural inquisitive reporter that he was, Ben long since had figured out that his parents' was a shotgun wedding. And early in that marriage, the Carterets of Hollywood and Beverly Hills were killed in a car accident on location and Cloyce, reluctantly of Gros Ventre from then on, was left with another of those utterances fit to sneak beneath a column of type, "*God made the country, man made the city, and the devil made the small town.*"

Family, the oldest argument on earth. Ben gazed across the room at the male half of the one that endured under this roof. "I'm open to ideas that won't put both of us in the doghouse, Dad."

Bill Reinking paused in his roaming of the bookshelves as if he had come to what he was looking for. "If you want to head

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down to the Medicine Lodge,” he said over his shoulder, “I’ll cover for you. I’ll tell your mother you just remembered you had to cadge some gas coupons, she really can’t argue with those.”

Ben grinned for the first time that night. “The daughter of a senator up for re-election can’t afford to be seen trotting off to a saloon with a soldier, would you say?”

“I would. Don’t forget the gas coupons.”

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★ THE PACIFIC WAS anything but pacifying as he picked his way along a shore completely foreign to him. To one side of his narrow line of march, giant logs gray as archeological bones had been tossed by storms into an endless pile he could not see over, while just beyond the driftwood barricade the forest came crowding in, thick and bristling as bear hair. On the ocean side, a short distance offshore towered dark contorted seastacks like the Great Wall of China fractured by eternal assault. The tide, thick cream-colored surf changing eerily back to milk as it slid up the beach, seemed particularly determined to hem him in; every step of the way he had to monitor the tideline from the corner of his eye or the hissing white water would flood over his boots. Meanwhile the footing shifted from gentle sand as black-gray as gunpowder one minute to rugged gravel the next and then to roundbacked rocks, without rhyme or reason that he could see. *And this is the easy part*, Ben reasoned with himself.

He had hiked his full share of the arch of North America, the high hunting country that crisscrossed the continental divide back in Montana, but this was his first time to explore any of the other national extremity, the coastal sill where the land mass wrested itself from the sea. Out here in the state of Wash-

Webs 3

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ington was the American shore at its most remote, dangling like a coarse fringe from the huge cape where the Strait of Juan de Fuca angled into the continent. Its isolation spooked Ben. He'd slogged the beach for three hours from the barely extant salmon fishing village of LaPush without seeing another living soul or even a footprint, and now nearly another hour from the prefabricated military hut where the Coast Guardsman he roused from off-duty sleep told him Prokosch was on patrol somewhere around the next big rocky headland. Somewhere translated to anywhere, Ben discovered as he neared the rugged point of rocks backed by a clay cliff fully a hundred feet high and there still was no least evidence of Prokosch.

"SIG!" he shouted again through cupped hands. "HEY, BUDDY, YOU'VE GOT COMPANY." The guardsman at the hut had warned him sentry duty here tended to make a person jumpy and it would be a good idea to yell out for Prokosch every so often. The problem with that was, the crash of the surf obliterated all shouts. Checking back at the crescent beach he had just crossed, Ben still saw only the solitary string of his own tracks, no other human sign, and with consummate dread he faced around to the headland. *It just doesn't let up.* Surf poured onto the outermost ledge of stone with a power he could bodily feel, the spray spewing into the air like a school of geysers. The cliff was too steep and slick to tackle, so the only route lay across jumbled boulders in avalanche repose at the base of the headland. He wiped from his lips the saltwater taste that clung in the air and took a swig from his canteen while he eyed the situation some more. The question remained whether he could work his way across that rockfield without the tide catching him there. This notorious coast frequently drowned entire ships, it wouldn't hesitate a smatter of an instant on him. Yet Prokosch somehow navigated this shore on foot, didn't he, proving it could be done. *Or maybe he's learned amphibious rockclimbing by now.*

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= Guardsman?

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Feeling like a tightrope walker about to launch into space between tall buildings, he nerved himself up and was testing the first footholds in the rock mass when a voice and a growl broke out in startling duet close behind him. The growl was universal, but whatever the voice was saying, it was in Japanese.

A nest of saboteurs: that was the first terrible thought flashing into his mind. Followed by the immediate one that this was prelude to an invasion, the follow-up on Pearl Harbor by the Empire of the Rising Sun. Whatever trick of war he had stumbled into on this alien coast, the enemy language numbed him like a bite by something poisonous. Spreadeagled upright, he could do nothing but cling motionless there while, ever so slowly, a mansize form and a lower one crept into the edge of his vision.

"Sonofagun, Lefty," Sig Prokosch spoke in English this time. "You aren't a Jap at all. Come on down."

Unsticking himself from the rockface, Ben dropped none too gracefully to the beach sand. He turned all the way around to a chesty gray-helmeted figure much more bulkily outfitted than when they had been in football uniform together. A radio pack rode high on Prokosch's back and above that waved the antenna like a giant insect feeler; his field jacket bulged with other military items, including a .45-calibre pistol holstered on one flank of a web belt around his sturdy waist. Hooked into the other side of the web belt was a leash, with a copper-red Irish setter at its end.

The dog ceased its steady growl when Sig dropped a hand to it. Recovering his voice, Ben could only blurt: "You're a tough pair to find."

"Supposed to be," came the modest reply. By now Sig had slung his Tommy gun around into proximity with the radio pack and had a hand free to shake with Ben. "Been me, I'd of waited at the hut."

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Ben did not go into reportorial reasoning, which was that his previous piece on this old teammate happened to occur during the Coast Guard's version of basic training and amounted to a look at a taciturn block of young male trudging a treadmill of routine; in short, snooze news. This time around, he had come determined to portray Sigmund Prokosch, ~~Seaman~~ ~~Second~~ ~~Class~~, true-blue Coastie, on an unknown foreshore of the war. First question: "How'd you get so fancy in Japanese?"

"All it means, 'Don't move or I'll shoot.'" Sig shrugged. "They give us these phrase books."

"Well, it sure as hell did the job on me." With the indiscretion of acquaintances who had not laid eyes on one another since their world changed, the two of them traded extended looks. Not that the practiced sentry could be matched at that. One of Sig's traits was a prairie gaze; he seemed to blink only half as much as other people. Those pale blue eyes under wheat-colored hair, in a meaty mess of a face; a fairly alarming combination staring out from a football helmet or a metal military one. Prokosch had played guard next to Animal Angelides at tackle on the right-hand side of the line. Ben would not have wanted to be on the other team opposite those two, one a marauder, the other a boulder. Mindful that he knew the habits more than the person, he unshouldered his pack and searched into it. "Before I forget, I brought you some Hersheys."

The box of candy bars produced a bashful acknowledging smile on the recipient. During football road trips he'd had the reputation of practically living on chocolate sundaes.

"Thanks a bunch, Lefty," Ben received in return. He was going to have to get used to this for the next few days. The nickname applied to him by only five people in the entire world—three now dead—like a tattoo he hadn't asked for.

The candy transaction was watched by the Irish setter with keen interest to the point where his master broke off a square

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of chocolate and carefully fed it to him. As man and canine chomped in unison, Ben used the chance to ask, "What's the dog about?"

"I say 'Get him' and he gets you." Delivered with a straight face, this was either what passed for a joke with Prokosch or the stolid actuality. Another shrug. "Give you my guess, I think he's supposed to be company for us." The dog's back was stroked with a beefy hand. "Naw, though, Rex here is trained to sniff out Japs, aren't you, boy."

Catching Ben's skeptical glance at the untrodden shore, Sig laid it out tersely: "Fresh water. Their submarine crews sneak in on rubber rafts to fill up." His listener envisioned the possibility. Constant creeks with water the color of tea had intersected the beach all during Ben's hike to here, some he'd been able to scramble across on logs, others he had needed to ford up to his thighs. As he unsheathed his notepad, the thought that he could have stumbled onto Japanese submariners replenishing their drinking supply from this seeping shore made the whole place more creepy than ever to him.

What Prokosch was saying furthered the feeling. "Raft rats, I call them. If I ever catch them at it and they give me any trouble, I'll put Tom to working on them." He patted the stock of his Thompson submachine gun.

Ben took due reportorial care over *if*. "These rafts, Sig—ever laid eyes on them yourself?"

Prokosch indicated *Not yet*. "Just signs. The buggers can't resist taking a crap on dry land, for sure. Find piles around the creek mouths." His expression registering offense at that, he petted the dog again. "Rex here smells out that stuff and any drag marks that look like where a raft came in and so on. If the signs look fresh enough, we call in the depth charge boys from the air base at Port Angeles. Done it a couple of times already."

"Have you." Ben groped for any certainty in this. If ever there was a coastline that would breed phantoms, it was this murky Pacific Northwest one. But Prokosch must be able to tell human crap from bear shit, mustn't he? Or was all this just classic jumpy nerves of an isolated sentinel? By any sum it was more than a notepad-carrying visitor bargained for. How would Tepee Weepy react to the story of a Supreme Team member in hide-and-seek with Japanese naval forces, genuine or imagined, in America's own backyard? There was one way to find out. "Any luck?" Ben inquired as he scribbled away.

"Never know," the sentry blunt as the coast he walked. "The flyboys think they spotted an oil slick after they bombed like hell one of those times. Could have been a decoy or from a sunk tanker." He kicked some sand as if his next thought might be hidden under it. "Those tin fish are out there, though. We got a report a while back that a Jap sub came up in broad daylight down in Oregon. Fired a few shells onto some beach. Just to prove they could, I guess." The contemplative Coast Guardsman scanned out past the curling white sets of breakers to the vaster ocean as if mildly daring the enemy to try that on his patrol route, then turned unblinking eyes to Ben. "About time to head for the hut. Ready for a hike, Lefty?"

IT WAS WORK every step of the way, trying to fathom Sig Prokosch those next days on the challenging coast. Trudging the hours of patrol with him, Ben would catch himself yearning for Jake Eisman's wisecracks or even Dex Cariston's highflown sparring. Somewhere between shy and offhandedly mum, Sig went his route like a man who had left his conversation at home. Questions to him had to be doled out, circled back to, followed to conclusions somewhere down the road, and there were times Ben felt he would have better luck talking to the dog.

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Gradually, though, the thickset guard gave out glimpses of himself unsuspected in four years on the football field and in the locker room. Sig liked to cook; at the hut it invariably fell to him to prepare any meal fancier than fried Spam with canned pineapple atop. He was a twin, a truly startling thought; his sister was a missionary in the Yukon Territory. *If she's anything like him, the natives will convert just to see what's on her mind.* The Prokosch family came from Devon, one of the depot towns sprinkled out of an atlas in the last century when the Great Northern Railway needed names for its stops in the middle of nowhere across the top of Montana. The wrong side of the tracks of Devon at that, Ben divined: the father had always worked as a common section hand, riding a speeder on the rails across the prairie to wrestle creosoted ties into place and disgorge brush and muck from clogged roadbed culverts. A modern coolie. Sig with his accounting degree aspired to one of those American human cannonball advancements in a single generation, a desk job at the railroad home office in St. Paul. Ambition, incentive, a path in the mind with sufficient byways: little by little, the personality practically buried under that gray Coastie uniform began to assume shape as Ben made notes. Yet something kept nagging about Sig's enlistment in the Coast Guard and Ben could not get at it. Phrase it every which way, no clear answer could be drawn as to why someone from one of the most landlocked towns imaginable had chosen to turn into a beachpounder.

Until it emerged that Prokosch had a girl waiting for him back home in Devon. Inasmuch as Sig would have been a serious contender in an ugly contest, this constituted news. It also prompted in Ben a sense of relief that he was not sure he could defend, that the not particularly imaginative man at his side had chosen, with marriage aforethought, to put in his military time away from the front lines. Back at East Base in the farewell round

this is adjectival,
meaning premeditated

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of beers at the Officers Club, Jake Eisman had leaned back and shrewdly observed, "Benjamin, you're maybe just as glad some of us are stationed stateside." How deny it? Given the toll on overseas members of the Supreme Team, if any of the others could be hoarded to safer duty, so much the better. Obituaries were the dregs of writing; if he never had to write another one it would be soon enough. Now Ben took a fresh look at Seaman Prokosch and asked, "What's this wonder woman's name?"

This brought a bashful dip of the head and the smitten intonation:

"Ruby."

When Sig spoke it, the word glowed as if it were her namesake gem. Love and the salt taste of absence, old as Odysseus, thought Ben as they tromped onward up the beach with the punctual waves always at their side. Wide open at the heart now, Sig poured forth the life he and Ruby were trying to plan in the time to come; that touchstone of all soldiers, *after the war*. Look that in the face long enough, and you begin to question the current sorry state of things. Sig at length reached the point where he brought out:

"Been going to ask you something. You get around in the war. You know about those balloon bombs?"

Ben merely nodded, to see where this would go. As if in some final desperate frenzy, Japan on its side of the Pacific had begun launching slim long-range balloons with explosive devices attached. The aim was to set the forests of the western United States on fire. Some of the balloons, weirdly like miniature paratroopers, had drifted as far as the Rockies. No great damage had been reported as yet, but the devices were worrisome if, as intelligence estimates had it, they were launched hundreds at a time.

Sig indicated the oceanic sky. "We spot any coming, we're supposed to shoot them down, ha." His gaze dropped to the

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watery horizon and stayed. "Maybe Animal will get first crack at them—Marines are supposed to take the lead, aren't they." A considering tilt of the head. "Kind of funny to think of him at the other end of this water, somewhere." Ben noticed he did not include Danzer, on destroyer duty in what was equally the Pacific, in this musing.

Reflection evidently over, Sig fixed his attention back toward Ben. He for once looked bothered. "They tell us the Japs even have their little kids in school making those balloons. Think that's so?"

"I don't really doubt it."

Sig's expression changed for the worse, which was saying a lot. "There's no limit to what people will do, I guess."

Just then they were coming to a creek mouth, and the Irish setter tugged at the leash.

"Rex thinks he's got something," Sig murmured as he swiftly unslung his ~~T~~Tommy gun. In the next motion he handed Ben the .45 pistol from his holster. "Just in case."

Ben took in the situation uneasily. Where the brown-colored creek snaked out of the forest, vegetation proliferated. The dense greenery, too thick to see into, could handily hide a rubber raft and a raftload of touchy Japanese. The American jungle: he had never expected to be going into combat here. Sig showed no such concern.

Weapons ready, the pair of them stayed out of sight as best they could behind driftlogs and approached the verge of the overgrown patch, led by the stalking dog. The question ran in Ben's mind, what armaments would Japanese submariners bring to shore with them? *Probably a hell of a lot more than one ~~T~~Tommy gun and one pistol.* As he and Sig edged in, far enough apart not to be raked by a single burst of gunfire, the bloody path above the Bitoi River came back to him full-toned as a film on a screen.

In New Guinea the cover for ambush had been tall boonie grass; here it was salal, brush, fir forest. He tried to creep silently through the undergrowth that crowded the flow of water, watching the twisting creekbank ahead for any movement. Sig, with the dog now alertly obedient behind him on the leash hooked into the web belt, was in view one moment and then wasn't. Ben braced, reminded himself to blaze away with the pistol rather than sight in—the .45 would knock an enemy down if it so much as nicked him—and parted the last underbrush into a glade of grass.

Sig was standing there peering at the beaten-down vegetation. "Deer," he called over and shouldered his ~~Tommy~~ gun. The dog wagged, awaiting praise. (10)

It was when they resumed their line of march on the other side of the creek, raft rats receding back into the hypothetical, that Sig's line of thought circled around to:

"You got somebody like Ruby?"

"I do." Ben was surprised both by the question and his own answer. By any reading of law civil or military, Cass was anything but that definite in his prospect. And the war was not nearly done with either of them. Yet, for the life of him, he could not have replied other than he did. "She'll be in Seattle when I get there."

"Good for you."

So it went, those days of pounding the beach side by side with Prokosch. Bit by bit Ben absorbed the feel of the continental coast, the inevitable linkage of the Pacific to national destinies. *The ocean named for peace now rims the widest war in history*, his piece would begin. *The circumference of war takes in even those who lived farthest from the muster of the surf*. And Prokosch himself he liked in the way you like an oddball cousin met up with at a family gathering. Let him be vigilant against raft rats, quite possibly more imagined than real; it put a human boulder into

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place out here among the shore rocks, Ben could attest to that. For once he felt he was writing about duty without bloodshed hanging over it like a red cloud about to burst. Prokosch's modest odyssey, a saltwater watchman on watch, suited the coastal subject with the ease of a hearthside tale. So he thought.

"Lefty?"

On the last day, patrol nearly over, the hut within welcome distance, Sig had halted. He kicked at the sand, a sign Ben recognized. Then came out with it:

"I want to get up north. The Aleutians."

The grimness of a chronicler whose storyline had abruptly veered off the page took Ben over. *You and Jones. That makes two of you out of the entire human race, maniacs for the Ablution Islands.* He knew that a rain-quiet snuggery in which to read the Bible was not Sig's reason. He asked anyway:

"Why there instead of here?"

"Better chance to actually see what a Jap looks like before the war is over," Sig reasoned thinly as if still rehearsing this. "Instead of just their turds." He looked at Ben with gathered determination. "Sea duty on a patrol frigate, is what I'm thinking. Wondered if you could help any on that?"

"There's real war up there," Ben argued. The newsreel of the Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor, smoke boiling above Alaskan soil, brought that home to America; he wondered if it had missed Prokosch. "Coast Guard service, though, that's still considered home waters, right? Won't bring you any overseas points toward discharge."

"Naw, it's not that." The unblinking gaze stayed on Ben. "I want to get back at them some for the other guys." O'Fallon, Havel, Friessen, Rennie. Three fellow linemen and everyone's favorite backfield teammate. The outsize loss that preyed on those who were left. The mortal arithmetic that nullified reason. The war did this to people.

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Two men and a dog, they stood there in the surf sound, its grave beat upon the shore. Finally Ben said, "Sig, I don't have that kind of pull." Fully aware of his unsureness whether he would use it in this instance if he had it.

"You ever get some, Lefty," came the stolid reply, "keep me in mind."

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10 ★ "I HATE IT WHEN I'm late. What's on the menu here besides you, ~~Good-looking?~~" Scooting in across from him in the booth, Cass shot him a smile with the teasing little slot between the teeth like a central promise of mischief later.

Ben just sat there taking her in. The crush hat, pilots' cachet in its rakish touch of crumple and scuffed visor brim; only veterans of the air were permitted to wear it without the loop band in the top that way. Her hair casually cut to mid-length but nice as ever. The army-tan tie knotted just so, spacing the twin silvers of captain's insignia on her collar tabs. Standard-issue trenchcoat worn against the Seattle damp, over her light khaki dress uniform, both trimly tailored to the snug body he knew so well. This was essential Cass to him, managing to look both proficient and snazzy, and the smile added to it as she eyed him back. "What are you so busy grinning about?"

"You. And how baboon lucky I am to be with you."

"Hey. I'm not so sure I'm a lucky charm." Shedding the crush hat and coat with dispatch, she took in the weathered waterfront atmosphere of the eating establishment. "More like a busted-flush flier trying to wind down. What's to drink?"

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"Beer by the pound." He indicated the generous golden schooner in front of him.

"Mmm, tempting." A little beat of deliberation before she said: "I need something stiffer than that, though, after fighting off the MP's."

"That's not funny, you know."

"I know."

No, the military police were not a kidding matter. Besides whatever "fighting them off" meant. *Where did this come from, Captain Standish? Only one night together for who knows how long, and something already is in the way.* Resolutely he flagged down a gray-haired waitress built along the lines of an old work-horse, who creaked off to fetch a scotch for Cass.

"So tell me," he could not keep the apprehension out of his voice, "what introduces you to the MP's?"

"The uniform," she answered bitterly. "Those idiots didn't know what a WASP is." Recounting it riled her up to the degree of combustion the military policemen must have faced. "They stopped me down the street. I don't know what they thought, that I'd rolled some soldier for his getup or I was a streetwalker ready to play games or what. It burns me up, Ben. I've been in this damn war as long as anybody, and so have plenty of other women. And we still get chickenshit treatment like that. Why should we?"

He took a chance and gawked off in the direction where it had happened. "I hope there's not a couple of MP's bleeding in the street out there."

It raised her mood. "Close," she laughed. With a mock air of insouciance she touched the captain's bar on her collar. "It ended up I had them calling me 'sir.'"

Relieved, he signaled for another round of drinks in tribute to that. With lifted spirits, they locked onto what the rest of

the MP's
let's make this verbatim ok?
yes

full caps

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the evening promised. The waitress decided they were worthy of menus, and they teased each other into ordering oysters. Angels on Horseback, he picked out, how could he pass up a chance at something so grandly named? She would go him one better, she growled in her best poker-player guise, Oysters Rockefeller. The shambling restaurant was situated above the harbor, tacked on to the arcade and stalls of the public market, and out on Puget Sound ferryboats found their way back and forth with navigation lights that shimmered on the water. Seattle these nights had a military bearing, sailors in from the Bremerton fleet, soldiers unwinding from training at Fort Lewis, pilots from anywhere, and he and she for once sat comfortable as could be in the anonymity furnished by the surround of so many uniforms like theirs. The rouseful smells of things grown in the earth and things harvested from the sea clung to the old set of structures hosting the market. The two of them imbibed it all, wanting to be nowhere else and in no other company. *Why can't it be like this*, they shared the thought without having to say so, *on and on*?

Catching up on their weeks apart, Ben told of his time with Prokosch on coastal patrol. "I hope to hell he's imagining those rafts," he finished up, "and keeps his finger off the trigger. He's kind of like a jumpy sheepherder with a lot of gun. Spending all his time with himself can do funny things to a guy."

Cass in turn recited the latest twists and turns of keeping Lieutenant Maclaine in the air. "Last time up to Edmonton she was next thing to an ace, and this time we had to go on instruments and she was ready to quit by the time she found the ground. That's Della for you."

He sat back, reflective. "So you have one you're trying to keep in the war, and I have one I hope never gets near it."

"There are times life doesn't cooperate worth a damn. How's that, newspaper guy?"

"I'll pass that right along to my father for filler. Guess what, we pay off in angel morsels." He speared his last oyster wrapped in bacon and held it across for her, and she leaned in and royally ate it off his fork. They traded a gaze of love well-flavored with lust. Or was it the other way around?

"Christ, Cass, I'm glad you showed up." The mention of flying blind in Canadian weather reminded him he hadn't asked her about getting here. "Any trouble cutting loose from East Base for this?"

"No, I flew a hospital ship over," she tossed it off along with a gulp of scotch.

The startled expression on Ben said if that wasn't a definition of trouble, he didn't know what was. An aircraft flown back to the factory with something internally wrong was called that because the hospital was where you might end up from flying it. He helplessly studied this woman he wanted so bad it made his ears ring and who came with all manner of peril attached. First the MP's, now this news. He always had to be aware Cass was a good deal more complicated than anyone gave her credit for. However, he would gladly do without further surprises along this line tonight. "Don't give me that look, you," she fended, trying for innocence. "I'm not the one who cracked up a floatplane in high-and-dry Canada, am I. The hospital crate didn't give me any trouble. The engine didn't conk or anything."

He resisted saying what a good thing that was, inasmuch as P-39s had the reputation of gliding like a brick. "I'm no authority," he graveled out, "the only damn thing they let me fly is a mahogany desk. But I don't want you risking your neck for me, Cass."

"Look who's talking." She said it lightly enough, but there was stiff meaning behind it. "If I remember right, you're the one with the scar—"

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rom "The wound was only skin deep, that isn't anything like—"

"Don't give me that, hero. Skin is deep, when it comes to a bullet. You got that scar from following your football buddies around to places where people mainly get shot at. And you're about to do a bunch more of it."

"Only partly. The next one I go to is having as nice and safe a war as anybody can." Omitting the one after that isn't.

If Cass was reassured by the semi-alibi, she didn't show it. Cocking her head, she looked across as if needing to memorize him. "So how long do I have to get along without you?"

"Until summer sometime," he came out with it. "Teepy Weepy keeps feeding more stuff between the Supreme Team stories. I'm going to be all over the Pacific."

Cass smiled differently. "Next you're going to say, 'Write to me.'"

"Took the words right out of my mouth, grabby." Ben put his own best face on it. "I'll be a moving target, but letters—"

She reached over and flicked a blunt-nailed finger against one of his knuckles hard enough that it smarted. "I'd just as soon you didn't call yourself that."

Shaking the sting out of his hand, he made a bid for truce. "Before I get any deeper into trouble, how about we have another drink and I show Madame to our room?"

Playing along, she leaned her arms way out onto the table of the booth and propped her chin on her hands before purring: "And will the accommodations be up to Madame's expectations?"

"I'll have you know," he gave back haughtily, "the hotel room, the last one available in Seattle, is actually larger than a closet. By a foot or two, at least. It even has a special feature. A Murphy bed."

She hooted. "One of those that folds down out of the wall? Genius, what's to keep it from folding back up into the wall just when things get interesting?"

enough
Skin is deep enough
sounds better to me
here Nice!

"Murphy the bed has experience longer than a flatfoot's lunch hour," he gave it the tough-guy treatment, "at such matters as this. The first time Murph lays his mattress-button eyes on the likes of you, he's gonna say, This is a lollapalooza I could happily fold away with forever—"

"See!"

"—but she is too classy to do that to. No, I'm gonna keep my frame on the floor for her, just to show my respect. The second I seen her I says, Murph, this dame takes the icing—"

"That's Captain Dame to you and Murph," she snipped in, "or I'll call my buddies, the MP's."

"—and like I was saying, it ain't many femmes in the land of Murphy that's also an officer and a gentleman, in a manner of speaking. No, I tell you, Murph the bed has seen his share and then some, and this woman is like the royal jewels shined up. Like the Taj Mahal in a skirt. Like—"

"Like a lunatic about to be with the guy for the last time in a blue moon," she took over the formulation, voice husky.

"That, too," he conceded wistfully. "Let's make this drink a quick one."

Out in the night the ferries came and went, shuttles on the dark loom of water. The port city in its nightspots and unbuttoned privacies settled to the business of such places down through time, harboring lovers and warriors.

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★ WHY HAVE I NEVER been able to stand Danzer? Let me count the ways. On the team, there was no love lost between the Dancer out there at right end grabbing glory with his jersey clean and the rest of the linemen beating their brains out throwing blocks for him with never any thanks. The only good word he ever had in the huddle would be for Moxie. "Good call, Stomp," I can still hear it, as if a Stamper-to-Danzer pass play didn't take the other nine of us to make it work. Jake used to say Danzer was so stuck on himself he had gum in his fur.

That was football, only a game, supposedly. Games have any number of outcomes, though, personal scores that are not settled. If the ground of chance that brought us together had been in England, no doubt I'd be remembering a cricket match with Danzer in the whitest pants—and it still would be called only a game and count as eternally as if score was being kept in the Doomsday Book.

"Chief" in this case is a chief petty officer, so it should be capped as we're doing with officers.
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"YOU'RE SURE THIS is the only way to get there, Chief?"

Ben arrived alongside the USS McCorkle to find a chasm of disturbed gray-green seawater between it and him, with canyon walls of ship steel on either side. Consistently the swell of the

10 This is interior monologue, so I think it's justifiable for Ben to be knowingly colloquial and use Doomsday for the sound of it.

open ocean lifted the destroyer, across there, atop a foaming crest while wallowing the oil ship he was aboard in the trough of the wave. The ships then would dizzily trade elevations. Between the rising and falling hulls stretched the pulley rope that was supposed to carry him across. The line looked to him as thin as spiderspin.

"The motor launch might get crushed between if we tried that, sir," the oiler's bowlegged chief petty officer replied, unflapably tugging the breeches buoy into place around Ben's hips like an oversize canvas diaper. "Not to worry, lieutenant. We'll haul you across in a jiffy and you'll get a real nice reception on the *Cork*—the mail sack is following you over. Ready, sir?"

"No, and never going to be, so let's get it over with."

Legs sticking out of the canvas sling and arms tight around the ring buoy that the sling hung from, he was sent bobbing into mid-air, dipping and soaring with the teeter-totter rhythm of the ships, the line with its dangling human cargo above the viciously sloshing water but not that far above it. The sleek gray hull of the destroyer loomed nearer and nearer until he began to be afraid the next toss of ocean would splatter him against it like a lobbed egg. Then there was a powerful yank from the crewmen handling the haul rope attached to the pulley and he spun up over the side of the hull into a sprawling descent onto deck.

A helping hand came down to him, and an unmistakable dig along with it. "Welcome aboard, eminent war correspondent. You're just in time for the invasion of Europe."

Great start. Looking at my reflection in the Dancer's famous shoes. Unharnessing himself from the apparatus, Ben got up off his hands and knees and sought his footing, the deck of the destroyer livelier than that of the slow-rolling oil supply ship the past many days.

Meanwhile Danzer stood planted like a yachtsman in an easy breeze. Even though both men knew it did not fit their

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acquaintanceship, he had put on for general show his languid smile, as if about to say something then disdaining to.

Already irked—*What was that Europe crack about?*—Ben gave back the briefest of handshakes. “One of us has his oceans mixed up, Nick. I was under the distinct impression this is the Pacific.” Without taking their eyes off the new arrival a number of sailors went about rote chores around them, their faded blue work attire a contrast to Danzer’s khaki uniform, crisp in every crease.

Elaborately considerate, Danzer drew him away from the rope-and-pulley rig. “Stand aside, Ben, here’s the real cargo.” The mail sack came zinging down the line to the cheers of the sailors, followed anticlimactically by Ben’s travel pack. “Come on to the wardroom and catch the broadcast of how the war is being won for us.”

He realized Danzer wasn’t just woofing him. There in officers’ country it was standing room only, those who were off-duty awakened by the news and joining the morning watch in listening to the transmission piped in from the radio room. The entire compartment fell silent as General Eisenhower’s crackling voice, half around the world on the Atlantic side of the globe of war, addressed his cross-Channel invasion force. “You are about to embark upon the great crusade toward which we have striven these many months . . . In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine . . . The tide has turned. The free men of the world are marching together to victory. . . .” Ben furiously scribbled down snatches of it, needing to do something while history was dispensed without him. *D-Day somewhere on the coast of France and I’m out here with the albatrosses. Thanks a whole hell of a lot for the heads-up, Tepee Weepy.*

In the wardroom’s explosion of speculation that followed the Allied supreme commander’s brief pronouncement, Danzer

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murmured aside to Ben: "A gentleman's C, on that pep talk by El Supremo?"

You're the one who would recognize one. "You were spoiled by Bruno," Ben came back at that. "Half-time ²dramatics don't sound that good with real blood involved." This was not a time he wanted to be standing around trading smart remarks, however. Like a change in the weather sensed in the bones, he could feel the time coming when the dateline on what he wrote would read SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE. "Moxie's ack-ack outfit is in that invasion force," he thought out loud, "you can about bet."

Did he imagine, or did Danzer draw back a little in surprise at those words?

Ben shot him a curious look, but the Dancer was elusive there in his naval crispness. He still was as lean as when he lined up at opposite end from Ben and as apart. "You knew he was stationed in England, didn't you?"

"Merry ¹⁰Old Moxie," Danzer said as if that constituted an answer. "You're bunking in the sick bay. I'll show you to it."

Nicholas Edwin Danzer. ^{SB} "Ned" when he was growing up in Livingston, but 'Nick' as soon as he hit Treasure State University and figured out what rhymed nicely with 'slick.' His family has the Paradise Gateway Toggery, outfitter to moneyed tourists on their way to Yellowstone Park. The snappy Stetsons. The gabardine slacks, men's instant fittings by a male tailor right there on the premises, women's by a female one. The specialized cowboy boots with walker heels, which takes the nuisance of cowboying out of them. How it all must have rolled into the cash register, and out of that, the vacation home up the Paradise Valley, the fishing trips with the Governor, the high school football camp at the Rose Bowl while most of the rest of us were teenage muscle sweating through summer jobs at a dollar a day. Born with a silver shoe horn in his booties and he took advantage of it.

Whoops---this is all italic, interior monologue by Ben. I know it's unusually long, but Danzer is really on his mind.

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Give Slick Nick the benefit of the doubt, allow as how it was okay for him to be the clothes horse of the locker room and a mile around, for that matter. The more-wised-up-than-thou attitude he wore, that was not okay.

It was Vic, rest his soul, who shut him off at the mouth. Sooner or later it might have been Jake or Animal or, I like to think, me, but Vic drew first honors. That day Bruno had run us ragged in practice, all of us were out of sorts, and Danzer made the mistake of pushing past Vic into the showers with "Move it along, Tonto." Vic hit him in the chest with the base of his fist the way a person would bang hard on a door and that finished that. From then on, Danzer's attitude still showed but he kept it buttoned.

And here he is, supply officer on the destroyer U.S.S. McCorkle, on station probably a thousand miles from the nearest Japs. As cushy an assignment as there is in a theatre of combat, however he snagged it. He makes Dex Cariston look like an amateur at foreswearing war. For once, I wish I had less knowledge of the person I'm supposed to write about.

But that's not how it is, or ever going to be, with the Dancer. I know him right down to his shoe size. Or in his case, to his shoe polish.

The story galloped among the former teammates, after Animal Angelides picked it up from a troopship navigator who went through officers' candidate school at Great Lakes with Danzer. Inspections were ferocious in their barracks, a terminally picky commander stalking through the squad bays handing out gigs—demerits—for specks of dust imaginary or not. Always with one exception. Danzer's shoes dazzled the man, as well they should have; shiny as black glass, sheerly flawless as obsidian. It reliably drew Danzer an approving nod and a squint at his nametag, and everyone knew that the good regard of the commander was the

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one sure route around wading the chickenshit that customarily awaited an officer candidate. Danzer's shoeshine secret, whether he bribed it out of some crafty yardbird at Great Lakes or more likely devolved it from making those fancy boots gleam to best advantage in the show window of the Toggery, was to press the polish into the leather with a spoon made hot by a cigarette lighter, buff it, melt some more polish in, buff some more. It wrecked the shoes for wearing—Danzer had to hop into an ordinary pair when inspection was over—but could not be beat for display.

"Better have another pork chop, Ben. I had to practically buy out the hog farms of Queensland to get them." The gloss on Danzer these days shone up from the capacious plates the officers of the *McCorkle* ate off of. It had the reputation of a ship that fed exceedingly well.

"No thanks. My stomach still wants to be back on land."

Which he knew would take another week yet, before the destroyer put in at Brisbane. *And Slick Nick can keep on with the war effort by bargaining the Aussies out of groceries.*

Supply and demand were immaculately matched in Danzer and this ship, he had already determined. By whatever flick of fortune in the chain of command, the vessel was something like a palace guard to the commander-in-chief in the Pacific, General MacArthur, headquartered in the Australian port. Or as those less kind put it, driven into exile there by Japanese triumphs. MacArthur's war thus far had been an early series of ghastly defeats—Bataan, Corregidor, then the entire Philippines—now somewhat assuaged by amphibious invasions that had rolled back the enemy from New Guinea and a handful of other strategic map spots strewn down the South Pacific. The *McCorkle's* war this far along consisted of patrol duty and support chores here in the conquered waters central to MacArthur's realm. Ben didn't think he could get away with writing it, but the Southern

Cross in the night sky was a constellation of extreme luck for the crew of this ship.

"Lieutenant Reinking? I can't resist telling you"—this was on its way from a redheaded officer so young and junior in rank that he practically shined—"I read one of your pieces in JWP at Northwestern. The one where they held the wake for your team-mate in a bar."

Ben wished the junior ranker had resisted speaking up; there were too many faces in that messroom plainly ready to savor morsels beyond any found on the plates. "Kenny O'Fallon, that was," he reeled off to try to get rid of this. "Butte knows how to give a person a sendoff." He sent a knotted look back along the table. "What's JWP?"

"Journalistic Writing Practice," the young admirer reddened as he said it. As he spoke, a white-jacketed mess attendant went around the table pouring coffee and dealing out fresh forks for pie. The Navy's ways made Ben feel at sea in more ways than one. Except for whoever was on the bridge the dozen or so officers all ate together at the one long table in obligatory lingering fashion, which meant the talkers got to talk endlessly and the listeners got to listen eternally. Cliques showed through the crevices in conversation; this nonfighting destroyer mostly was officered by a mix of merchant marine retreads, such as the gray slump-shouldered captain who sat at the head of the table regarding Ben without pleasure, and ninety-day wonders (example: Danzer) turned out by officer candidate school. All meal long, Ben had to behave like an anthropologist tiptoeing between tribes.

Right now, with more pluck than sense the redheaded one-striper was back at what he had read in college:

"I'm trying to remember, in that piece. Your football buddy, your and Lieutenant Danzer's—he was killed out here in New Guinea, wasn't he?"

Ben sat there struggling to measure out a more civil reply than *No, shavetail, that was another dead one of us.*

HE WAS AWARE OF being worn to a thin edge by the time he reached the destroyer. Ever since shipping out of Seattle in what seemed an eon ago, he had filed stories from latitudes of the Pacific theatre of combat. The Pacific conflict was a strange piece-meal war, fought from island to island, mapping itself out more like a medieval storming of castles, if the castles had been of coral and moated by hundreds of miles of hostile water and defended by men committed to die for their emperor rather than surrender. Out here, a war correspondent's movements from one jungle-torn place to another were like continually journeying into the black fire of nightmare. He had seen things it took all his ingenuity to put into words that TPWP would let pass into print, and some that would never surface in civilized newspapers.

The dirt road at Rabaul, the dust carpeted with excrement, where the retreating Japanese had evacuated their hospital patients in some manner of forced march, the sick and wounded defecating while they walked like cows with the drizzles.

Constant corpses, the accumulations of death on every fought-over island, decay and flies always ahead of the burial squads.

The pilot who fell to earth—New Guinea again—near enough the American forces that a patrol was sent out to recover him.

Ben was with them when the spotter plane dropped its flare where the dive bomber had failed to come out its dive and they thrashed through the jungle in search of the pilot. No one had seen his parachute open for sure, nor did it. The lead man practically fell in the hole the body made in the jungle floor, three feet deep. Then and there Ben had been seized with a stomach-turning fear for Cass, the altitudes at which she did her job a deadly chasm as constant as the sky over him after that. No

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remedy in sight. He had tried to shake that feeling in his gut—he had enough of those already—but the thought of life without her refused to quite go away. It was going with him throughout this ocean of war, a hue of loneliness always accompanying him now, like another depth to his shadow.

SOLITARY IN THE company of the destroyer officers, he at last came up with a response to the question that had pasted O'Fallon's fate onto Friessen's. "No, you're thinking of another teammate of ours. We've lost more than our share."

Danzer had been watching throughout, grey-eyed as a stone visage. He showed no sign any of this fazed him. "It's strange how war has imitated life," he said as if mastering the philosophy for them all. "The middle of the line has taken the hits. Ben and I had the luck to be the ends." Smiling to take the edge off mortal matters, he knocked on the wood trim of the mess table.

"We're jealous of Danzer, you know," one of the older officers said in a joshing tone, if that's what it really was. "You're here to make him famous back home, and as dog robber he already gets to be the first one off the ship when we hit port."

"You wouldn't want the burden of being Slick Nick," Ben answered the officer oratorically enough to draw a laugh. Danzer joined in.

"Still, it's an interesting morale device, isn't it," the executive officer spoke up briskly. The exec was a Naval Academy man, and chafing at this becalmed post in his career climb if Ben did not miss his guess. "Giving people a periodic glimpse—not that your talents can be entirely captured at any one time, Nick—of someone all throughout the war. Rather like time-lapse photography."

Before the executive officer could hold forth further, Ben put in "Right now I'm the one lapsing," barely covering a yawn. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen"—he tried to intone it without irony

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and could not be sure he succeeded—"I'm going to have to hit the sack."

THE ONE ADVANTAGE of bunking in the sick bay was privacy, which he craved in the crowded confines of the ship. *Just me and the aspirin and the sawbone's slab.* Those and the unsettling sense of being cast backward in time.

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

That and ten cents would buy a person a dime's worth of difference in this life, wouldn't it. He swung up off the bunk, determined to leave the mood there, and crossed over to his typewriter on the cubbyhole desk. First, though—another habit back from that other sick bay stay—he flicked on the radio tuned to Tokyo Rose. As ever, the sultry voice was there, alternating between taunting American soldiers all over the Pacific and playing the likes of "Tuxedo Junction," the rhythm that began swelling out

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now. The Japanese were good at such propaganda, he acknowledged; the German counterpart, Lord Haw-Haw, sounded like P.G. Wodehouse construing Bertie Wooster. Swing music outdid a drone any old night. Something to keep in mind, would-be scriptwriter, he told himself. He tuned the sound just low enough to be background, and settled to his routine.

His things were laid out on the slablike medical table and he reached over for fresh paper and rolled a page into the typewriter. He took his time at this, which would have astounded Jones or anyone else back at East Base who had ever seen him put a typewriter to work. On TPWP pieces he wrote as fast as the keys could tolerate, never needing to glance down—one of the blessings he owed his father was those boyhood sessions at the training typewriter in the *Gleaner* office, with bunion pads hiding the letters on the keyboard. But nights on his movie script, which were many, he deliberately slowed to a sculptor's pace, letting the imagination feel its way toward the shape of trueness. The scene he was working on took place on the Letter Hill. The character based on Purcell was the last player to reach the whitewashed rocks—*Camera: the slope below him appears steep and endless*, he tapped onto the paper—and others of the football team sagged against the stone emblem trying to catch their breath. His fingers resting on the keyboard, he tried out dialogue in his inner ear, trying to catch words out of the air. It was a pursuit that enabled him to stand the slow, slow passage of military hours, the way some other man in uniform somewhere might endure the duration by nightly reading in *War and Peace*, and upon finishing it, starting over. (He made a mental note to find out what Danzer did to pass the time, if he did anything.) It was an abiding mystery, the script, that promised to reveal itself only in the measured workings of his mind and his fingers. And it was something Tepee Weepy could not reach.

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full caps

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

Meanwhile the long lean destroyer itself was never at rest. The Cork was aptly nicknamed, bobbing with every bit of weather. Yet that was the only discernible peril it faced. There were moments, staring out at the methodical ocean, when he pined for a genuine storm to shake matters up into something he could write about with some life to it, before snapping back to his senses. *Think about it, Reinking. Throwing up your guts doesn't help you do your job. Just ask Dex.*

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

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

STET
Kid Galahad

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Ivan can't find the movie
Compromised
anywhere -
KG only
movie
these two
in it
OK?

David -- sorry about the wild goose chase here; I made up Compromised, never dreaming Edward G. and Bette were in anything better. Becky and I want to keep my invented flick.

together

near the Anzio beachhead. The announcer had just begun to boom in when someone in the wardroom spoke up:

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

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

Ben tensed, glad his face could not be seen in the dark. *Oh, goddamn. Here comes the load of crap.* Slouching down in his seat in a way he had not done since he was a kid captive to the screen back in Gros Ventre, he took in Bob Hope rattling off jokes and the McGuire Sisters spunkily harmonizing. Then the soundtrack music trumpeted off in the direction he was expecting and dreading, and here came the voice like hail on a tin roof, resounding back from the season of the Twelfth Man into the darkened compartment.

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

Loudon had the knack, Ben had long ago divined, of spreading himself like a weed. Newspapers, airwaves, celluloid, the so-called sportscaster was everywhere but the backs of matchbooks and that was probably next. Ben set himself to endure another kaleidoscope of clichés, still trying to figure out Danzer's purpose in thrusting this in front of him. *There's no football this time of year. Is he just throwing Loudmouth at me to see what will stick?* Meanwhile in close focus there on the wardroom wall, Loudon himself was grandiosely shepherding an over-the-hill heavyweight boxer onto a hangar stage at the big air base in Newfoundland. In the space of the next breath, he was spouting

THE ELEVENTH MAN

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his way through Opening Day of baseball season, replete with himself among the wounded troops in the box seats at the Washington Senators game.

Then the projector beam gave a wink of light between scenes, composed itself into gymnasium bleachers full of cheering soldiers, and onto a basketball court surged a pair of teams, one wearing no jerseys and the other wearing beards that reached to the chest letters on theirs. "For the troops at Fort Dix gathered in the USO fieldhouse, it's basketball, down to hide and hair!" Ben jolted up in his seat. "Yes, folks, it's the Carlisle 'Skins versus the House of David! These barnstorming teams have entertained America from coast to coast, playing a brand of ball that their ancestors would not recognize but they have adapted for their own." Eerily he watched five fleet ghosts of Vic Rennie racing up and down the hardwood floor, the Indian team in just its trunks running and shooting like boys let loose. For their part, the big bearded men on the other team set up passwork plays of geometric grace. In between the pure basketball there were stunts of showmanship nonsense, as one of the bearded giants held the basketball in one hand over his head and a couple of the shorter Indians jumped and jumped and couldn't come close to reaching it, then in the next sequence the Indians sped upcourt passing to one another so swiftly through the windmilling House of David players that the ball seemed to be in two places at once. It was all circus to Loudon, who in his patter managed to ignore superb run-and-gun plays to concentrate on exaggerated pronunciation of names like Hunts at Night and Buffalo Scraper, and for that matter, Perlmutter and Rosenthorn. Numbly Ben blocked out all of that he could, summoning instead the intrinsic memory of Vic with his hopes set on the 'Skins, on the playing career beyond football that would take him anywhere but Hill 57. Until his leg disappeared from under him. And then his life.

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

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

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

"Poor American boys. Your ships go up in flames every day and your planes are shot from the sky every hour of that day. There are too many islands where your death waits for you, while slackers at home sit out the war. Go home, G.I.s, before a bullet brings you the sleep that lasts forever." Out wafted the eternal strains of Brahms' "Lullaby."

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

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

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THE ELEVENTH MAN

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

"It's your boat, Nick." Ben gestured him in.

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

"Brahms."

"Same difference?"

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

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

"Nope. Bullshit stays green for quite a while."

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

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

any amount of money

"bottom dollar" is used in dialogue later

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a storekeeper. What rankled was Danzer being Danzer, his every pore exuding the attitude that he was entitled to a free pass through the war.

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

That drew a chuckle of sorts. "I'm the first to admit, patrolling MacArthur's backyard is a tolerable tour of duty. There's a nice amount of leisure." Danzer pronounced it as if it rhymed with *pleasure*. "But don't forget it's a long war for me, too. They also wait who only stand and serve." Ben could tell it was not nearly the first time that line had been trotted out.

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

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

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

THE ELEVENTH MAN

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

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

"Is that so. You're busier than you look, Nick."

Danzer spread his hands. "This fell in the family lap. A boot representative"—it took his listener a moment to translate that to traveling shoe salesman—"we deal with has a line of work wear he thought might interest the Forest Service. Just right for smokejumpers, you know? The Cariston stores are one of his accounts too, so imagine his surprise when he paid a call to Seeley Lake and spotted Dex in there with the conchies. The rest of the conchies, I think it's safe to say."

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

"Are you spreading this around, back home?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If you have to know, it's a screenplay."

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

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

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

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

"It's about an accident of nature, then," the chiseled voice quickly recovered, at least. "Two of them. That freak kid himself

and what happened to him on the Hill. I'm surprised you can't find anything more worthy of your talent, Ben."

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

Sitting there gratified at discovering a way to get under Danzer's skin, Ben still was finding it murky territory to try to explore. True, in the famous '41 season Purcell became the most glorified scrub there ever was, but still a scrub; he made the team only posthumously. What was there about the raw kid from nowhere to upset, even now, the receiving end of that impervious passing combination, Stamper-to-Danzer? "Stomp and Dance, the touchdown prance." Ted Loudon always went nuts over that, he had plugged it into his column all season long. *You had your share of fame, Danzer, did you want Purcell's leftovers too?*

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

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

Danzer regarded him stonily for a moment, then in turn tapped the radio where the Brahms had been. "Do you know your trouble, Ben? You let your heart be moved too easily. Dex. Purcell. The list doesn't stop there, I'm sure. You're the type lame puppies and roundheeled women sniff out, would be my guess." That last was flicked lightly enough, but the lash was unmistakably there. "Whatever it is, you let it get to you too much."

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

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know about Cass, too. Can he? “And here I thought it was an old pain from football acting up.”

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

“GENERAL ^{SC}QUARTERS. ALL HANDS, MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS.”

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

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

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

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

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

Feeling like he was in a severely bad dream, Ben in haste donned the helmet and life jacket he had been given and tumbled out of the sick bay into a passageway full of tousled sailors pulling on battle gear of their own. The general scurry conveyed him out onto deck, where the crew members spilled toward gun mounts and fire control hoses and other stations to which they were assigned. Pandemonium? Expertly drilled response to the worst of alarms? He couldn’t tell which. The one thing he knew

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

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

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

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Not reassured by the scene on the bridge, he backed out to hunt up Danzer and found him in equally ghostly circumstances in the busy chart room, the combat analysis center. The dim greenish light etched ashen shadows beneath the battle helmets and into the hollows of cheeks. Here the executive officer was in charge, leaning over a translucent tabletop where the careening course of the destroyer was being plotted and exchanging aggravated questions with the strained-looking young communications officer and other distressed types crowded around the massive table. From what Ben could catch it amounted to an argument over whether to cut and run or turn and fight, and he didn't like any of what he was hearing or seeing. Faces that had not shown a worry in the world in the wardroom now appeared aggrieved, unsure. One person or another around that table swallowed hard too often. Fear not sliding down easily. Not ever. Now he had his own sudden taste of that lodged in his throat, the apprehension of dying in company such as this, *unavailing, insufficient. How'd they get us into this in the first place?* Among other things, a destroyer was a submarine-hunting machine. How had this one managed to become the hunted?

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's dark out in case you haven't noticed," Danzer muttered sarcastically. "Sonar picked it up. Can't you hear it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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Sea air rushed by, there on the steel promontory into the dark. A mane of moonsilver flowed back from the destroyer's bow, and a matching tail of wake behind it. As his eyes adjusted, Ben could just make out the long narrow deck below, armaments jutting ready if they only had a target, faces of the gun crews pale patches foreshortened by helmets. Whatever discussion the executive officer had with the captain did not take long. The ship cut sharply to one side and kept on leaning like a skater fashioning a circle. Standing there witnessing the might of a fully armed vessel turning on its nagging foe could have been thrilling, Ben was duly aware, except for the distinct chance of being blown out of the water at any second. Drowned like a kitten in a sack. He tried to swallow such prospects away, down a throat dry as paper. The lack of any least sign of the enemy out there in the total surround of ocean seemed to him the worst part. On land he had been shot at by experts and never felt this much fear.

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

"FIRE ONE!"

"FIRE TWO!"

The firing kept on, each charge sprung into the air like a fat ejected shell, out away from the ship, then to sink to the depth that would detonate it. Nothing happened for long enough that Ben began to suspect duds. Then he felt the shudder up from the water. Astern, explosions bloomed white in the darkness. Know-

ing this to be one of the sights of a lifetime, he watched with an intensity near to quivering. Not often is it given to you to stare away death, see it go instead in search of your sworn enemy. There in the destroyer's wake, the geysers of destruction blew and blew. It was impossible to imagine anything human surviving in that cauldron of concussions.

Poor bastards. They'll never see the surface again. On the wing of the bridge, existence seemed benignly extended, stable as the feel of steel underfoot. Forgiving the *Cork* and its lucky-star crew all their sins of leisure, Ben raced back into the chart room to see how they marked the sinking of an enemy submarine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

STET
~~death~~
ok?

No, this is something I made up--fictional license--for the sake of plot.

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

Danzer stepped in looking dazed.

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

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

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

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

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

full caps

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

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

Confronted with Ben's orders, the deck officer made the usual face of discomfiture. "Ordinarily we could stow you in the sick

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