

bay, but we're crammed with assault force officers and there's no way—"

"Don't sweat it, I'll bunk below."

Below meant four decks down, each more fetid than the one before. The transport seemed cavernous after the destroyer. Ben's head swam a bit as he laboriously maneuvered his travel pack and typewriter case deeper into the sweltering hold of the ship. He wondered if he was coming down with something tropical. Three months in the Pacific had convinced him humidity by the skinful ought to be in the medical texts.

He came out at the bottom of the labyrinth of ladders and hatchways to a steel bay the width of the hull, where dozens of sweating men were stacked in racks of bunks that reached from deckfloor to ceiling. Most were shirtless or in their skivvies as they tried to read or nap or clean their already cleaned rifles. Amidst everything, a permanent poker game of the sort to be found in the countless coin pockets of the war was underway. Ben could tell from the cash in the pot it was too rich for his blood. He sidled through the alleys of bunks, his shoulder patch drawing quizzical squints, inquiring until someone pointed him past the toilets to the showers. "The large sarge, you mean? He's either smarter or crazier than the rest of us, he takes about half a dozen a day."

Leaning his pack and typewriter against the bulkhead, Ben stepped to the hatchway and called in to the naked personage camped under a drizzle from a showerhead: "Is that the usual Marine uniform in these parts, Sergeant Angelides?"

"I'll be go to hell, it's our recording angel, right out of nowhere," came the response just short of a shout. "How'd you ever find this stinking rustbucket, Lefty?" *That again. Remember it's me, not the nearest southpaw.*

Reaching behind to turn off the shower with one hand, Angelides grabbed Ben for a sopping handshake with the other.

"Somebody sent me your piece on Sig. Going right down the strong side of the line, are you."

"Danzer jumped in front of you this time," Ben manufactured a dismissive smile, "so I'll have to make it up to you by playing up your saintly side, Animal."

Angelides guffawed and began toweling himself rigorously. "Got your work cut out for you. So is the Dancer still defending Backtrack Mac with the gleam of his shoes?"

"Still is."

A shake of the broad-browed swarthy head and a glance so quick it was more like a glint. "What would we do without Danzer, prick of the month all year long." Angelides wrapped the towel around his hairy middle like a king kilting up. "Come on, we'll get you set up in a fart sack and you can see how Uncle Sam's finest live."

UP ON DECK out of the stifling quarters as soon as Ben's things were bunked in, the two of them found a sliver of shade beneath the superstructure to hunch under and talk.

"These tubs are the ass-end of the Navy," Angelides declared of life cooped up on one troop ship after another. "The swabbies lug us around to wherever the Japs are holed up on the next chunk of coral"—he flipped a hand disparagingly toward Eniwetok and its recent past—"and we hit the beach. Never know how that'll go. Waipu was a breeze, we walked right in. Tarawa was total hell, they threw everything at us. One way or the other, it all counts toward getting our outfit's part of the war over." Shoulders set, he prowled over to the deck rail as he spoke, all the old impressions coming back to Ben as he watched that lithe restless motion. Indestructible on the football field, Andros Angelides had been rechristened "Animal" by the team for the fallen prey surrounding his spot in the line—offense or defense, it didn't matter, where Animal roved opposing players ended up strewn

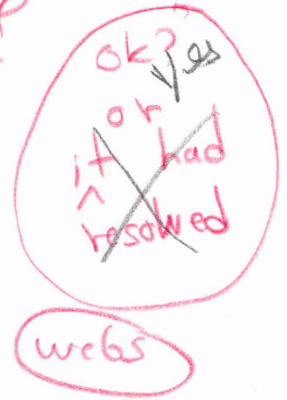
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in the grass. To Ben's mind, Animal most resembled the creature of nature he had seen once on a high-country hunting trip. A ripple of tan against the timberline caught his eye, and by the time he blinked had resolved itself into a cougar on the move. The resemblance was still there in the man at the deck edge. The extensive body, muscled everywhere that counted. The large rough hands, quicker than paws that size could be expected to be. The deep flicker of the eyes back under the bonebox of brow. All that taut animal vitality coming out now as the impatience of a fighting man ready to march into Tokyo and trapped amidship on a transport scow going nowhere fast.

Another of those glinting glances that Ben could practically feel as Angelides turned from the railing. "So what you're in for with us is the Marine Corps tradition of practicing a thing to death." He bared his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Next worst thing to Bruno and his stinking Letter Hill." He jerked his head for Ben to come have a look over the side of the ship. All along the hull a hefty web of ropes hung down from the deck to the water.

"You want to see a bunch of trained grunts who can climb down a cargo net in their sleep, that's us," Angelides was saying conversationally. "Samey same, over and over on maneuvers like this—the landing craft takes us in, dumps us in the water up to our peckers, and we storm the shores of Eniwetok one more time. It's a wonder the Red Cross isn't there selling us coffee and doughnuts when we drag up onto the sand." He fixed the kind of resigned gaze known as a thousand-yard stare on the practice island. "Aw, hell, it's pretty much necessary. A lot of our guys are cherries, replacements after Tarawa. Anyway, Lefty, you get to see this good stuff yourself tomorrow at 0500," the Marine top-kick batted Ben's shoulder with the back of a hand as if to make sure he'd be awake, "and then the real thing whenever the hell some general makes his mind up."



"You sound like you can't wait, Animal."

Angelides cut him a telling look. "You know what, any more I go by 'Andy.' It's just easier around the guys in the unit."

Ben seized the chance to trade. "Funny, that's how I feel about 'Lefty.' It's been a long time since I lined up at opposite end."

Angelides belly-laughed his agreement to the deal. "I guess this retires us from football for goddamn sure."

The squawk of a loudspeaker in some tuck of the ship broke in on them. Overhead came the shufflefoot sounds of sailors doing whatever sailors do. Ben waited for those to pass before testing out: "The real thing when it comes—you know where?"

It drew a shrug. "Scuttlebutt says it'll be Guam."

That was how Tepee Weepy figured it, too, Ben knew, or he probably would not have been on this troop deck with this particular member of the Supreme Team at this moment. No other target in the island-hopping campaign would rate bigger headlines. Guam had been surrendered in the war's earliest days when American garrison troops in pie-tin helmets found themselves facing a Japanese invasion juggernaut; there wasn't an admiral or a general in the Pacific who didn't want it back with a vengeance. Ben felt he needed to share his reading of the situation. "Andy? Say it is Guam. The big brass will pull out all the stops if it is. But the Japs aren't saps. They aren't about to say, 'So sorry, here, have your famous island back.' It could be a bloodbath."

Angelides looked at him solemnly and turned to go below. "I prefer showers."

AT BARELY FIRST light, the side of the troop ship gray as a lingering shade of night, the Marines in full combat gear descended the cargo nets.

Below in the landing craft that kept bumping against the ship hard enough to jar him half off his feet, Ben craned up at the mass of humped forms as they came. Angelides was a marvel to

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watch. Somehow keeping an eye on the entire teeming shipside, he shambled down the mesh of rope rungs one-handed, reaching to any of his unit who needed steadying on the swaying net, injecting alacrity into those who lacked it: "Come on, you guys, you're slower than smoke off of shit. Move, move!" Only after the last of his men thudded safely into the boat did he swing free of the net and give the high sign to the coxswain at the tiller.

Ben's notepad could not hold it all. The bay was a serrated wall of troop ships, the landing boats busy around each in the choppy moat of ocean, helmeted men collected in shoulder-to-shoulder embarkation as ancient as Troy. As soon as a landing craft was loaded to crowded capacity, it revved away into the coral shallows just offshore. Ramps flopped down like drawbridges and the Marines waded into the crotch-deep surf.

Ben piled off with the others, struggling against the weight of the water. Angelides, large sarge to the life, surged ahead while steadily prodding his outfit. "Everybody spread out. Six feet apart. Benson, don't you know what six feet looks like? It's the size of your goddamn grave if you don't spread out, meathead. Michaels, Krogstad! Haul that sonofabitching thing in closer, I don't give a rat's ass if it is bigger than you are." That pair was pulling a rubber raft, empty but still all they could handle in the surf swirl. The footing was treacherous on the sharp coral and more than once Ben had to catch himself from going face-first into the water. Around him by the dozens, and along the shoreline by the hundreds, Marines advanced at an encumbered gait with their rifles held high and dry. After about a hundred yards of this, the assault force clambered off the coral reef to the sands of Eniwetok. By all evidence visible to Ben the practice landing had gone as well as such things could. On the other hand, on the slight lift of land beyond the beach were situated volleyball courts rather than Japanese gun emplacements.

Panting and soaked to his midriff, Ben stayed close to Angelides as he lustily deployed his forces. When the order came down the line to halt the landing exercise, Angelides turned to check on him. "How do you like island-hopping so far?"

Ben squeezed water out of a pocket ruefully. "Why couldn't you have joined the ski troops or some other outfit that isn't half-drowned all the time?"

"And miss tropical paradise like this? No way." The big sergeant got busy again issuing orders, one of which sent a couple of men back down to the waterline to collect the small rubber boat, and Ben asked what it was for.

"What, that?" Angelides looked bemused to be asked. "You're looking at our hospital ship."

At those words, Ben felt the shiver of memory of his shipboard infirmary stay—the Purple Heart suite—after the shoulder wound. "Part of the Corps lore," Angelides was saying as if he had been asked that section of the Marine manual. "Get the wounded to shore with the rest of us. That thing's the best way I know how." He rumbled a humorless laugh. "A lifeboat for the wet-ass infantry, you could call it."

Ben gazed at the rubber boat, Angelides' seagoing ambulance. He thought of Prokosch, the width of the ocean away, on watch for the enemy floating in to a creek mouth. Rafts. In the middle of the most mechanized war in history. *What are the odds? Huck and Tom against the gods of war.*

BACK ABOARD THE troop ship, the entire lower half of his uniform stiff with salt from the surf, Ben had barely made it to his bunk when a seaman stuck his head through the main hatchway and bawled: "Reinking? Lieutenant Reinking?"

"Over here, sailor."

"Message for you, topside."

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DANZER PIECE A DANDY. WILL BE EXCELLED ONLY BY YOUR NEXT, SPOKEN AS WELL AS WRITTEN: NEW FIELD FOR YOU TO STAR, ARCHIVAL RECORDING OF BEACHHEAD INVASION. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ASKED THIS FAVOR AFTER ARMY, NAVY AND AIR CORPS ALL NIXED IT. TPWP KNOWS POSTERITY WHEN IT FALLS IN LAP, THUS RECORDING EQUIPMENT BEING RUSHED TO YOU. FOLLOW MARINES ASHORE AT WHATEVER ASSAULT BEACH WITH EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT AND ALL POSSIBLE SOUND EFFECTS. HISTORICAL RECORD, ORAL AND AU-RAL, IS THE GOAL.

P.S. TECHNICAL AIDE ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT, DON'T FRET.

Ben read it again with just as much disbelief as the first time through. *Where do the bastards come up with these ideas? They're turning me into the khaki version of Loudon. A play-by-play of an invasion.* Starring, naturally, a certain keyed-up sergeant and the outfit he would lead against enemy fire.

The ship's radioman and the code clerk both were watching him with apprehension. "Any reply, sir?" the coder asked as if he very much hoped not.

"Yes. Send: POSTERITY DOESN'T KNOW WHAT IT'S GETTING."

WHEN HE WENT back down into the hold to tell Angelides he was going to be famous of a kind, the bunk compartment was in such uproar he figured the poker game had drawn blood. It turned out to be simply mail call. Squirming through clamorous Marines clutching letters and packages from home, he worked his way to his bunk hoping to hear his name called, but it was all already there on the blanket, postal riches in a heap.

Flat on his back in the next bunk reading the sole V-mail letter that had come for him—from his uncle—Angelides com-

mented: "You're a popular guy. I must have answered up for you twenty times."

"The stuff's been chasing me all over the Pacific, thanks for nabbing it," Ben rattled out his gratitude. As if fondling gifts, he sorted the pieces of mail into piles. The long-awaited treasure, Cass's letters. Weeks' worth of *Gleaners*, his father's fillers at the bottom of columns peeking out: *The only hope a person can be sure of is his own hatful*. Envelopes with his mother's well-schooled penmanship. A couple of blunt cheery notes from Jake Eisman done in pencil and beer. So many patches of his life, suddenly catching up with him. Almost reverently he slit open the letters from Cass and sped through the first one and the last, saving the others to savor more leisurely.

Ben, love—

How does a person write to a writer? I feel like a backward kid with a crayon. Maybe I can start with saying how much there is of you to miss. I can't turn around without remembering some crazy thing we did together. You've only been gone a week and I already have such a bad case, what is this going to be like from here on? . . .

. . . Nine weeks gone, letter no. 9 to you, and I at least know you're okay so far by reading you in the paper. You look good as ever in print, but no substitute for the warm body. Must sign off for now, we take off for Edmonton in an hour. I'll waggle my wings toward Hill 57 as we go.

Keep low out there, you with the typewriter.

Cass

Her P-39 met the first of the rough air at the Sweetgrass Hills that afternoon.

It was an ordinary Edmonton run, although Cass long since had absorbed the cockpit wisdom that flying through thin air is never exactly ordinary. On a summer day of this sort, however,

David--shouldn't this be caps/s.c. to show it's a change of scene?

OK

Des?

Caps of A.C.

SB

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1/2 line OK so there won't be more space than there is above letter? -comp

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from fifteen thousand feet above these borderland plains between Montana and Alberta, usually you could see around the world and back again. But right now in the telltale tremor of air above the humpbacked hills her eyes would not leave the sight of the weather making itself, big prairie clouds ahead where none should be, building up alongside the Rockies over toward Calgary. *Who came up with that meteorology briefing we got, a blind man? "Clear and calm," my fanny.* Customarily the squadron could scoot in behind such weather cells before the cloud piles sucked the energy of heat from the prairie and rolled off eastward building into major thunderstorms. What was coming at the squadron looked major enough. *We get caught in glop like that, we'll be lucky to know where our own wingtips are.*

She checked around on her pilots. Beryl waggled her wings, showing she was watching the same cloud pattern. Off Cass's other wing, Mary Catherine made the universal hand signal as if pinching her nose against stinko weather. The plane in back of Cass was steady as if being towed, and she felt both relieved and guilty about that. Della Maclaine was on compassionate leave—a death in the family, it happened to everybody sooner or later. The TDY pilot filling in from the Michigan group was always on the mark, where Della as a rule was casually acquainted with the mark. Cass knew she should not be thinking about how much better the squadron flew without Della, but it was the kind of thing the mind does. Instinct was fully working during all this. She radioed the others and Linda's B flight and Ella's C flight farther back: "Instrument conditions, everybody. We need to try to bust through ahead of the worst of it."

The worst, however, was approaching at whatever a thunderstorm's top speed was, coupled with the fighter planes' velocity of three hundred and fifty miles an hour. In mere minutes the P-39s were bucketing uncomfortably in unpredictable air, and the cloud pile had closed in around and above. Within the

murk, in the tight cave of the cockpit Cass constantly scanned her ranks of dials, flying the radio beam that would lead to the Edmonton airfield wherever the other side of this weather was, having to trust that her pilots one and all were doing the same.

She was straining to see if there was any sign of this box canyon of clouds giving way ahead, when blue crackles of light danced along her wings.

Whoa. This isn't so good.

St. Elmo's fire, playful static electricity, was known to forecast lightning. No pilot wanted a bolt of electricity sparking through the instrument panel. Already Cass was back on the radio: "Heads up, everybody. We're going downstairs to get under this. Prepare to descend to fifteen hundred feet, repeat, fifteen hundred." *That's low, but it's like the damn Fourth of July up here.* Down there, her hope was, lightning would be drawn to the ground instead of to P-39s. "Ride the altimeter real careful. Let's don't add to the magic number, hear?"

The magic number, sarcastically named, was a figure Ben had looked up when he wrote his piece about the squadron. One of the points of pride Cass and the others wore as openly as the WASP patch on their sleeves was that their safety record was better than the male pilots' in the chancy endeavor of ferrying unproven aircraft. Out of roughly a thousand WASPs, he found at the time, a total of twenty-two had been killed in crashes. Since then, of course, the so-called magic number had kept creeping higher as the women pilots' time in the air mounted up.

Like a bird flock seeking a pond of calm, the dozen airplanes nosed downward, shimmying and bucking in the turbulence of the storm. Accustomed as every P-39 pilot was to the ungainly torque of the engine mounted behind, this was like flying at the mercy of a cyclone. When her altimeter reading touched fifteen hundred feet on the nose, Cass leveled off, scanning right, left, and behind through the sheeting rain for the other planes. She

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could make out something that in all likelihood was the fuselage of Mary Catherine's aircraft and she had every confidence in Beryl off her other wing. *At least we're not lit up like neon signs.* The malicious upper-atmosphere wind reached down this far, however, and the sluggish progress was consuming fuel at a disturbing rate. Cass checked and re-checked the plasticine map strapped to the thigh of her flying suit. They would make it to Edmonton without dry tanks if they could feel their way down out of the headwind. The lack of contour lines on the map attested to flat country below. Even so. "All pilots. Descend to a thousand feet, we'll hold there if we can see the ground, repeat, if. Nobody get to thinking too much, just keep riding the beam. Edmonton is there, it always has been. Let's just damn do it and get this flight over with, officers."

This day, the magic number did not change.

THE HOURS OF the day in their circling of the earth returned now to the troop ship. Spellbound by the immediate presence of Cass in the inked words, Ben read the letters over again, knowing all the while there was another recipient of her lines of love or whatever approximated it.

Life was a sum of unlikelyhoods, but in his wildest imagining he could not have seen ahead to this, sharing professions of love from another man's wife. Were those letters to a long-absent husband somewhere at mail call on a jungle island like these? They couldn't be, the soul issued assurance. Why wouldn't they be? said the demons of the heart.

Only belatedly did he become conscious of being observed in his troubled seance with the set of letters. He tried not to show the extent of his embarrassment, and missed by far.

Angelides gruffly offered up: "This appears serious."

"I have to hope she is," Ben trying a doomed grin along with it.

Angelides waited, attentive to more to come.

"I'm in a fix, Andy. She's married."

The sentences escaped from him before he knew it. He hadn't told Prokosch when he had the opening. Never would he have told Danzer. He had not even confided in Jake, repository of life's complications that he was. Angelides in alert stillness on the next bunk he would have trusted with his life, but the confession he had just made came under another category entirely. *I'm not equipped for this*. Ben creased the letters closed. "Keep it under your hat, okay? I can't take any pride in being a homewrecker. If that's what I turn out to be, even."

"Sorry, I'm no help to you there," Angelides said as if it was a test he hadn't taken. "All I've ever been round is love 'em and leave 'em. I got left."

Ben looked over at him. One spill of guts for another. It seemed his turn to come up with something medicative. "You'll have better luck later on. Civvie life will be full of lovelies looking for Marines in shining armor, you'll see."

In an exceedingly swift motion Angelides no longer was flat on his back but sitting tight as a coil on the edge of his bunk. "Ben? Something you maybe better know. In case it affects what you want to write or something like that. When the shooting match is over"—that always meant the war in conversations like this—"I'm staying in." He worked up a rough grin behind the exchange of confidences. "True-blue to the stinking Corps."

Ben did not say anything immediately, confounded once again by a teammate he was supposed to know like an open book. War mocked the notion of some sort of order in the human race. The only sane route he thought he knew—it was also true of Cass, Jake, anyone he would lay down his life for and they for him—was to serve as dutifully as you could during the duration, then reconstitute yourself when peace came in whatever measure. Get on with the existence you were cut out for, or, in

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terms blindingly similar to the argument he would have made to Dex Cariston, we are servants of war forever. Yet here was Angelides, capability itself, turning his back on the TSU degree and probably married life, to stay on in uniform as a glorified groundpounder foreman, rewarded with stripes on his arm and little else. A garrison career for enlisted men was boredom with bad surprises sewn in; just ask the poor suckers stationed on Guam in 1941 when the Japanese imperial army showed up.

By now Ben's silence was saying much in itself. "You're sure," he tried with Angelides, "you just want grunt life to go on and on?"

The bared smile. "You can't tell by looking? It fits me like a cork in a virgin."

WORD CAME THAT a piece of cargo with highest priority and his name all over it awaited at the airfield, and when Ben went to fetch the dreaded recording equipment, it was attended by the wearer of the most disheveled uniform on Eniwetok.

"Hi, Lieutenant. Gosh, it's hot here."

"Jones!" Elated to see that familiar ugly puss under the crumpled fatigue cap, he fought back the impulse to ask a torrent of questions about East Base, especially the WASP side of things. "Old home week, right here in equatorial Eden. I can't believe Tepee Weepy took a fit of sanity and sent you along. I can use all the help there is." Saying so, Ben circled the recorder in its carrying case distrustfully. It basically resembled the bulkiest suitcase imaginable. He looked around the cargo shed for the technician whiz promised with it, then realized.

"Jones, I hate to take your name in vain, but please don't tell me you're the tech aide, too."

"That was the order that came down," this stanza of the enlisted men's repertoire practically sang from the bedraggled corporal. He puckered in contemplation and came up with a morsel

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of solace for Ben: "They did give me the manual and I read it on the flight over."

Oh, great. He can pray over the machine when it goes flooey. "Let's get this thing to the ship," Ben said in resignation. "Posterity beckons."

THE MARINE ASSAULT force command plainly regarded the TPWP pair and their recording assignment as a nuisance, and just as plainly had been ordered in no uncertain terms to put up with them. Angelides was mostly amused. "Seems dumb-ass to me—who needs more proof people are shooting at us out here?"

The machine when Jones opened its case and started trying to figure out its workings was not the Pandora's box Ben had anticipated, it was worse. It ran on a battery as heavy as a concrete block. It had delicate reels and a delicate needle. ~~It was corded~~ to the hand microphone ~~at not much~~ longer than a dog leash. His brow creased, Jones at length looked up from the so-called portable recorder. "You know what, Lieutenant? If we're going to pack this thing from here to shore, what we really need is—"

"—a jeep," Ben admitted like someone coming down with a headache. "Excuse me while I beg my way through the Marine chain of command."

ACROSS THE NEXT couple of days, with Jones in earphones as he fiddled madly with the recorder's dials, Ben stood on the fantail of the troop ship and practiced until his vocal cords were tired. Speaking into the microphone required an entirely different mentality from what he was used to at the typewriter. How did Edward R. Murrow do it? For that matter, how did that moron motormouth Loudon do it?

"Eniwetok's harbor is jammed with ships of the assault force," he stared around at the obvious and could only recite it in strained fashion. Wanting to say: *Cass, you should see this. You*

can't imagine the steel mills it took to do this, wall an entire island with ships. "The Marines aboard this one say they are ready for the real thing after weeks of practice landings here." They say it in the filthy language of war, naturally—pilots aren't the only ones with the vocabulary, Cass. Poor Jones goes around the ship looking like his ears hurt. Angelides these days has a mouth on him like a blowtorch. Invasion is a hellish thing to go through. Nobody is actually ever prepared to die, are they—it's not human nature, the imagination can't handle obliteration. And so the guys below decks talk tough, so the fear doesn't have a chance to speak up. Again aloud: "Equipment of all sorts is in the cargo bays waiting to roll aboard the landing craft. Artillery, half-tracks, jeeps—"

"Sorry, start again," Jones muttered, repeatedly, from where he hovered over the temperamental recorder. Oh God, Jones, so to speak. At Guam are we going to stick our necks out from here to Thomas Edison and only get a reel full of blank air out of it?

When at last they got done with the rehearsal reel and played it back, Ben winced over his voice. He sounded dry and stiff as sticks rubbed together. As for the quality of what he was coming up with to say, if he had it on typing paper in front of him he would have been wildly crossing things out and scribbling in changes.

In the silence at the end of the reel, he gloomily turned toward Jones. "So what do you think, maestro?"

"Maybe it would help if you had some kind of a script?"

GUAM WAS ear-shattering.

Fiery salvo after salvo from the big muzzles of the American battleships and cruisers, more rapid fire from the guns of the rest of the convoy spread across the horizon of ocean, the bombardment ahead of the invasion was like all the sky's lightning dropping all its thunder at once. Explosions erupted on shore every

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few seconds, smoke and dust spewing as if from volcano vents. After enough of this the entire island looked like it was on fire.

While Ben struggled to jot the scene down amid the jostling swarm of Marines along the deck rail of the troop ship, his memory tunneled back to the Salamaua beachhead in New Guinea. The advantage of darkness there. Friessen's temporarily lucky National Guard unit crawling ashore unhit. The worn-down Japanese defenders heading for the hills. A victorious landing if there ever was one. *And I still ended up shot, didn't I.* He looked out again at the island being smashed by shells and bombs from the invasion armada. Guam was an ugly lump in the ocean, rocky bluffs and jungle ravines looming behind the crescent of shore called the Devil's Horns. At least he and Jones did not have to follow on inland to the hand-to-hand fighting here, their task ended at the beach. *Look where the damn place is, though. This isn't anything like Eniwetok.* There the distance from where the landing craft disgorged the assault troops to the practice beach was about the length of a football field. Here, for real, the shore of Guam lay beyond what looked more like a quarter of a mile of coral shelf. The assault force would have to wade it all. Prowling through his riflemen as he checked over their packs and combat equipment hung all over them, Angelides looked ready to leap over the side and swim the distance. He had been through two of these to Ben's one. *You're the professional soldier, Animal. If the odds on this don't make you look bothered, maybe I worry too much about the difference between practice and the real thing. Shelling the living hell out of the place this way ought to even things up some. When we go in with the damn recorder, dead silence on shore would suit me.*

Struggling through the Marine mass toward him was Jones, a steel helmet somewhat lopsided on him. He had to shout to make himself understood to Ben a foot away. "They're telling us, 'Load up.'"

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"Then let's go do it."

After a maximum of administrative runaround they had been allowed the back seat of a jeep assigned to Headquarters Company. It and a few others of a small motor convoy would follow—more aptly, wallow—in over the broad reef behind an armored half-track mounted with a 75 mm. cannon and a machine gun. Angelides' contingent wading in would be in clear sight off to the side. The jeep had nothing else to recommend it as a battle vantage point; a temporary steel panel had been installed where the windshield ordinarily was, with a slit for the driver to see through.

"It's still awful open, Lieutenant," Jones had pointed out when they looked over the vehicle in the cargo hold.

"Don't I know it. We'll need to crouch down until we're kissing the floorboards."

Now as they started to make their way below to get themselves established in the motor convoy's landing craft, the din of the invasion bombardment growing even louder overhead, a hand gripped Ben's shoulder. Startled, he in turn grabbed Jones to a halt and turned around. Angelides, looking lethal in his camouflage helmet, was there roaring in his ear: "Get in the half-track. You and Bible boy. Not the jeep, savvy? I fixed it with the loading officer and he fixed it with the trackie crew."

Ben hesitated. The half-track, which was half tank and half truck, would be in the lead crawling across the coral and draw enemy fire accordingly. "You're sure?"

Angelides winked. "One of us ought to keep his pecker dry in case fun in the sack ever comes back into style. Might as well be you." He slapped Ben on the shoulder, purposely right on the TPWP patch. "See you on the beach, recording star." Ben watched the big figure draped in ammunition bandoliers and grenade pouches recede back to his men at the deck rail.

All was commotion in the flotilla of landing craft bobbing against the ship. Jones had been down earlier to secure the re-

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corder in the jeep, and now he and Ben wrestled the hefty equipment case out and into the back of the half-track and climbed in after it. The gunners there turned and met them with dubious looks. One cracked: "Hitchhikers, huh? That gorilla sergeant says we're gonna make history taking you along."

"That's the theory," Ben vouched. His voice sounded tight, and he rubbed his throat to try to relax it. Jones squirmed down beside the recording equipment, manipulating plugs and scanning dials as though they were compasses in a stormy sea.

The minutes of waiting before launch dragged by. The gunners slouched amid their stocks of ammunition and smoked, which maybe helped their nerves but not those of the pair at the recorder. At last the dispatching officer, lordly on the troopship, gave the signal and their landing craft and the one with Angelides' group of Marines putt-putted away like ducks abreast.

The half-track a metal box within a larger floating metal box, Jones and Ben could not see out during the short yet endless voyage. Engine noise and wave slosh and ominous clatter from the gunners as they made ready seeped through the crashing intervals of the bombardment. As best as Ben could tell, the shelling so far was all one-way, the naval barrage suppressing whatever waited on shore. At least the landing craft was not being blasted out of the water. Yet. "Waipu was a breeze, we walked right in," Angelides' recapitulations played unrelentingly within Ben, "Tarawa was total hell, they threw everything at us," the one experience against the other. Either outcome, he had to somehow summon into the microphone in his hand. Jones had traded his helmet for earphones—Ben hoped that kind of faith would be rewarded—and looked up expectantly with his finger over the ON switch, but Ben signaled him to hold off. "Not until we're on the reef. This is recess."

As soon as the broad-beamed craft ground to a halt against the shelf of coral and the landing ramp descended, everything

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changed as if a single order had been given to every enemy soldier bunkered against the bombardment. Guam erupted back at the invasion force. Geysers in the surf met the half-track as it clanked down the ramp, the Japanese artillery opening up. Bullets pinged off the armored sides like terrible hail. "Inhospitable bastards," one gunner grouched. Grimacing, Ben held the microphone out the back of the half-track to catch the sounds of being under fire. When Jones gave him thumbs up that the recorder was functioning for sure, he climbed over the tailgate and slid into the water to his thighs, holding the mike up out of the wet.

"War has many calibres," he began speaking from the shelter of the rear of the half-track. "The Marines wading ashore here at Guam are getting an earful of the Japanese arsenal." A nasty *sploosh* nearby punctuated that. When his flinching was over, Ben reported: "That was a mortar shell, fairly close." No sooner had he said so than a larger eruption sent jarring tremors through the water and the air. "And that was big artillery, probably a howitzer in a shore emplacement. In the background you can hear Nambu machine guns. Their muzzle flashes are red, like Fourth of July rockets going off everywhere on the bluff above the beach. The Marines make the joke, if it is a joke, that if you listen enough those machine gun bursts sound like 'R.I.P.- R.I.P.,' although resting in peace is not how any man hopes to come out of this day." Tallying such details in words as exact as he could make them was crazily vital to him right then, something other than fear for the mind to try to hold onto in the midst of battle. Jones' suggestion of a script turned out to already exist in him, accumulated from as many combat zones as the correspondent patch on his arm had taken him to. The lore of war. An unsought education. Spectator to himself in this, he talked on into a seeming abyss of time, the assault occurring in unreal slow-motion, infantrymen moving at a heavy-legged slog against the water and

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the coarse shelf of reef. He clung to the tailgate with one hand to help his own footing, the half-track creeping over the rough coral at the same methodical pace as the wading Marines on both sides of him.

"Off to my left the rank being led in by Sergeant Andros Angelides is strung out wide. Bullets are hitting the water around them." So far, though, the rubber raft rode high and empty near the medical corpsmen as it was towed. Ben described that, the infantry lifeboat voyaging into the sea of hostilities. Leading the wave of men ahead, Angelides surged steadily along, turning sideways occasionally to present less of a target as he looked things over and bawled an order. Keeping up the running commentary with whatever arrived to him—the distinctive whumping sound of a Japanese mortar round; the carcasses of landing craft burning on the reef in back of the men in the water; the confused mix of smells, fine fresh salt air, stinking exhaust fumes, gunpowder odor from the half-track's cannon firing furiously—Ben consistently tried to estimate how far the first of the Marines were from the beachhead. By any measure it was too long a way while being shot at. While he looked on, soldiers near Angelides crashed over into the surf, one, two. All along the advance line of wading troops were other dark blobs of bodies in the water.

"Men are being hit as they come into closer range of enemy fire," he somehow kept the words coming, "too many to count. Someone's helmet just floated by upside down."

Just as he was at the point of describing the medical corpsmen splashing to the rescue of the pair in Angelides' unit but having to give them up for dead, an explosion close behind the half-track flung him against the tailgate. Breath knocked out of him, he cringed there as metal debris sailed through the air, miraculously holding the microphone up enough to catch the sound of it striking the water around them. Leaning out over the

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tailgate, a white-faced Jones had hold of him with one arm. Not knowing if the recorder was still working, beyond caring, Ben in a raw voice spoke into the mike for their own posterity if no one else's:

"That was the sound of a jeep blowing up in back of us, from a direct hit."

Jones vanished into the well of the half-track then came up nodding, twirling a finger to indicate the reel remained running. Wiping salt water out of his eyes and ears and the corners of his mouth, Ben groggily mustered himself and swung around in the surf to take stock, checking on Angelides and his men—I owe you one, don't I, Animal, for stuffing us in the half-track instead of that jeep—as the line of them advanced like walkers with lead in their boots. Halfway to shore. He gave the distance out loud, words tumbling from somewhere. The next ones that reached the microphone did not come from him.

"SARGE IS DOWN! CORPSMAN, CORPSMAN!"

The cry—it was more of a wail—arose from a young Marine near the leading edge of Angelides' outfit. Where the stalking broad-shouldered shape had been a moment before, there now was a sodden form face-down, and Marines on either side struggling to hoist him up long enough for the raft to come.

"Sergeant Angelides has been hit," Ben instinctively reported in a voice he would not have recognized as his own. "His men are bringing the rubber boat they use to carry their wounded." Even as he spoke that last word, he could tell this was no million-dollar wound, no ticket out of the war. He watched heartsick as the medics splashed their way to the big figure with a torso drenched darker than water would do, checked his vital signs, shook their heads at each other, and made the stark decision to leave his body to the tide. Numbly Ben told of this, finishing up:

"The life raft is there, but passing him by."

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He choked up. One more time, death had won. Animal Angelides the indestructible, no more.

"Lieutenant?" A hand from somewhere, grappling away the microphone. "Lieutenant, climb in!" Jones was frantically tugging at him, trying to wrestle him upward into the back of the half-track. "It's over, Lieutenant. We're out of reel."

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11

★ *I HAVE TO HAND it to you, Ben. You made it back here in one piece. From the neck down, anyway.*

In the ice-blue twilight that passed for illumination in the roadhouse, Cass drank him in from across the table. His months out there under the ocean sun had tanned him to a light bronze. The ginger hair was briskly cut in a way he must have caught from being around Marines, a curt bristle her fingers wanted into whenever they weren't otherwise engaged in the cabin out back a half hour ago. His face in its weary extent held both more and less than she remembered. Whatever else the Pacific trip had done to him, it had honed him down almost to thin, his every feature accentuated as if all excess had been pared away, bone truth underneath. *You were serious before, you're damn near drastic now.* The loss of his buddy at Guam was still with him any given moment, echoing off the stars and every surface between, but that was not all. Even when he was joking with her about the skunk juice the roadhouse passed off as scotch, there was a steady intensity to Ben, like a lamp flame trimmed low, burning through the night.

"Cass?" He spun his glass in the spot of condensation under it, as if studying the direction of the swirl. "Cass, how much longer do we have?"

Is this the right word break, rather than long-er? Just asking.

1 is correct

She could tell he did not mean from then to morning. Her tongue caught on the words a little as she spoke back. "You could have talked all night, soldier, and not asked that."

"Just wanted to brush up on how things stand." He kept on watching the twirl of the glass as if it was going to do a new trick. "With us. The incurable ungodly galloping case of us, remember?"

They'd both had too much to drink, which still was not nearly enough. Right away their reunion had all but gone through the roof of that cabin. They climbed all over one another in the beat-up bed, fast and furious in their need. Their first lovemaking since Seattle, both of them went about it as if it was the last ever. Afterward, a bit dazed and winded, they adjourned out here to take a look at the matter of themselves through the comparatively cool reflection of drinks.

Carefully Cass steadied herself, both elbows on the table, chin up. Funny how a dive like this place was the one spot that didn't care how tangled you were, showed some mercy. The jukebox was turned low into a kindly monotony, "Deep Purple" swinging along invisibly for about the dozenth time. On down the long bar from their corner, the place was empty this far into the night except for the roadhouse bartender and a local codger idly taking turns at playing the punchboard. *So at least we don't have to make fools of ourselves in front of anybody that counts. Yet.* Braced, she looked Ben full in the face. "You're the one who's been out there in Tokyo's back yard, you tell me when the man I'm married to is likely to be told he doesn't have to invade any more islands."

Ben thought about it, showing the effort to get past the effects of the so-called scotch. Everyone in the Pacific theatre of combat was betting MacArthur would try for the Philippines pretty soon. *That "I shall return" yap he let out in '42. As if he's going to come back to Manila and whip the asses of the Japs single-handed.*

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Whenever the supreme general did try to retake the Philippine Islands, he would throw in all the troops he could find. Ben could not bring himself to tell Cass the overpowering likelihood, that jungle-veteran units such as her husband's would be used to mop up whatever MacArthur wanted mopped up. "It's anybody's guess, what'll happen out there," he came out with, aware it was hardly worth it.

Cass looked away. "Dan's got overseas points, up the gigi, but his whole National Guard bunch keeps getting extended. He's on some wreck of an island called Biak, they let them say that in a letter finally." She paused to do some thinking of her own. "He wrote me that it's supposed to be a recuperation area now, but it's sure as hell no Australia or Hawaii—his outfit figures they're being held there for one last shooting match." She broke off to take a hard sip of her drink.

This was a moment Ben knew he should feel honorable remorse or worse for trespassing into Cass's life with another man. As far back as their first time as lovers, qualms of that sort were somewhere just beyond the edge of the bed. But stronger emotions would always push those away, if he and she had a hundred years at this. The nature of love is that it catches you off-guard, subjects you to rules you have never faced, some of them contradictory. All of the ones about fidelity of heart and life knotted him to Cass, and as far as he could tell, always would.

He scrunched in his chair, not saying it until he could no longer stand to hold it in. "What happens then? When he does come home?"

"I don't damn know. I do not know, Ben, how can I? I'm going to be faced with a man I haven't seen in two years, it'll have to decide itself from there." Watching her from across the table, he listened desperately, trying to determine if he was hearing ground rules of wingwalking again—*Never leave hold of what*

you've got—or something more hopeful—until you've got hold of something else. Cass was gazing steadily at him as she finished up. "If you were him, you'd feel entitled to that much."

"If I were him, I'd hate me."

"Hey, don't get going in that direction." She shook her head in warning. "If anyone is going to be accused of messing up a marriage, start with me. Nobody held a gun on me and said, 'Go fall for that dishy war correspondent in the fleece jacket,' did they. I could have looked the other way and stayed in the rut I'm meant to for the rest of the war, one more pilot going nowhere."

"Come off that, will you?" he appealed. "Since when doesn't having a squadron count? I sure to Christ don't have one. You aren't anybody's idea of a pilot going nowhere."

"Not now. Wings on my brisket, bars on my collar, I'm a pretty good imitation of a fighter plane jockey on these ferrying runs, you bet I am. But what happens the minute the boys come marching home? Is the good old Army Air Corps going to treat WASPS like guys? No sign of it so far." Cass jerked her glass up to her lips, found it empty, and set it down disconsolately. "I want the war over as much as anybody, but the war is what keeps me in that cockpit. There's a pisser, isn't it? And Ben?—us, chronic us? How do I know I could keep up with you after the war? If we did stay together? You're probably going to be famous—what am I saying, you're famous or next thing to it already—"

"Only as long as bullets are flying."

"—and all in the damn world I'm good for is handling one half-assed kind of fighter plane."

He lurched his chair forward. "Cass, we can't put together life after the war until the sonofabitching thing shows us it's going to be over, but we can stick together until we can figure out—" Breaking off, he peered across at her and demanded, "Are you bawling? Because if you are, I'm afraid then I'll have to."

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"Damn you, Ben Reinking," she said, fierce but snuffling. "I haven't had a crying jag since I was eleven years old." She wiped her eyes, then her nose. "Until you."

For some moments he gulped back moist emotions of his own. Why of all the people in this war did the two of them have to be on the receiving end of something like this? What was wrong with backing away from this and snapping up an Adrianna instead, sweetly available and nowhere near as troublous? What was wrong with him? "This is just crazy hopeless," he said at last, his expression pretty much fitting that description itself. "I'm stuck on you even when we're doing our double damnedest to have a fight."

"Swell," Cass sniffled, "that's me, too." She straightened herself up so sharply it jarred the table. "There's another kink to this, you know," she went on, wiping the tears away with determination now. "Dan's not the only one they keep throwing out there to get shot at, is he. I don't pretend to know squat about what the types in Washington have you doing. I just herd airplanes. The wear is starting to show through on those stories about the team, though, isn't it? I don't need to tell you that's getting to be an awful lot of dead heroes. Your guys are catching hell. And you're always going to be plunked right out there with them, Ben, you and just a pencil and paper, brave as anything—"

"I don't feel brave. I'm just doing it."

"—while every fool on the other side tries to draw a bead on you. Look what just happened to your pal the Marine. It could have been you. I am never going to be in favor of that part of your Teepee Weepy doings, you'd better know."

"Listen, they've got me under orders the same way you are, and I—"

"It isn't quite the same." She slapped the table for emphasis. "You've got some clout, you've got the name you've made for yourself."

"That works once in a while. And generally doesn't. I was about to say, if I ever get the chance to drop the 'supreme team' stuff, I'll do it in the next breath. For right now, the worst thing I've got to do is cover Angelides' funeral." He tried to move along to a better face on things and did not quite get there. "Maybe it's just as well to have some practice at crying, hmm? Cass, the night's getting away from us. What would you think about seeing if the cabin is still standing?"

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Her try at a better face came out ~~more to everyone's benefit~~ than his. "You haven't lost any of that ginger, is what I'd think."

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He pretended a huff. "If you're not interested all of a sudden—"

"Didn't say I wasn't interested, preacher," she sounded more like herself. "Pay the man again."

much

"Gladly. And just maybe I'll get us another drink along with it."

He headed up to the cash register, digging a few silver dollars out of his pocket as he went. *What a hell of a thing, that all we've got is sack time together. But at least it's something.*

The bartender, an older man bald as a peanut, was sitting there alone nursing a cigarette. He cut a squinty look at Cass, then back at Ben. "You and the little lady figure on playing a double-header?"

2 webs

Ben pushed the money toward him on the bar. "That's what these nice round silver things are about, yeah."

The bartender still looked at him, one eyelid pulled down against the cigarette smoke perpetually drifting toward it. "Soldier, ain't you?"

Oh, please. Now the citizenry of Vaughn Junction is going to get picky about who it rents out hot sheets to? Crossly Ben indicated to Cass. "The both of us. Why?"

The man behind the bar plucked a shred of tobacco off his tongue, then asked: "Been overseas any?"

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"I was in on Guam."

The bartender shoved the money back to him. "It's on the house."

When Ben returned to the table with both drinks and dollars in hand, Cass had the immediate question, "What was that about?"

"My guess is he lost a son in the Pacific."

They drank silently for a bit. Then he peeked over in the dimness at her luminous wristwatch. "Is it tomorrow yet, Captain?"

She checked. "Just past midnight. What's special about tomorrow?"

He made a satisfied sound. "I have a VIP coming in, although he doesn't know it yet. I don't know who they're going to get to stand sentry over the rocks and sand, but I sprung him for a leave to come to Animal's funeral."

Cass caught on. "The guy out on the coast? The one you were afraid would shoot up everything in sight and himself with it?"

"That's him. Prokosch the Tommy gunner."

"No crap?" Cass sat up in surprise and awe. "The guy isn't even kin and you hassled them into letting him come to the funeral? You must've had to pull strings the size of anchor ropes, all up and down the line."

He nodded pious affirmation. "Right to the top." If Tepee Weepy constituted the apex of things military. "At least it gets him away from submarine games for a few days, and he can see his girl along with it."

"WAKE UP, KID. Hey, hear me? Roust out, coastie."

The off-duty sentry rolled away from the hut wall and with a groan elbowed up in his bunk. Two men with beach packs bulking on them were standing over him. The skinny sour-looking

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one was the chief petty officer from the Coast Guard station down the coast, the other was a peach-fuzzed seaman second class much like himself. "What's happening? The war over?"

"Dream some more, kid. Where's Prokosch?"

The off-duty man rubbed sleep crust from his eyes. "Sig? Out on patrol like he's supposed to be."

"Come on, I know that. Where the hell at?"

"How am I supposed to know, Chief?" Squinting at the twenty-four-hour clock on the radio table, he made an effort to concentrate. "He took off out of here this morning like his tail was on fire, him and the pooch. Must be up the beach quite a patch by now."

The other seaman was slinging belongings out of his pack onto Prokosch's bunk. "Hurry it up, Quince," said the chief petty officer. He glanced at the face of confusion trying to take this in from across the hut. "Quincy's his relief while he goes on leave, so get used to Quincy."

"Sig don't have leave coming."

"He does now. Something about a funeral. There's a plane waiting for him at Port Angeles." Waiting impatiently for Quincy to restow the pack, the chief petty officer ducked to the window facing the ocean and the rugged line of shore beyond, looked out and rolled his shoulders. "Hell if I know what it's about, but I'm supposed to walk him out of here and put him on that plane. The way these orders smoked down the line, you'd think he was Jimmy Roosevelt."

The man still in the bunk looked more bewildered than ever. "You got to go after him on foot? Can't you just call him in?"

The chief petty officer turned from the window in final agitation. "Radio blackout. Jap sub sank a tanker, down off Oregon last night, the pricks. No transmissions that they might pick up until we get the all-clear. Ready, Quincy?" He tromped toward

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the door whether or not Quincy was ready. "Let's go. Maybe we can catch him before he gets to hell and gone up the beach."

The off-duty sentry rolled back into his bunk. "You don't know Prokosch."

FARTHEST OUT ON the Pacific horizon from where Sig Prokosch happened to be patrolling, waves broke violently on a shelf of reef as if the edge of the world was flying apart.

Scanning from the distant mix of spray and drab rumple of the ocean, the Coast Guardsman strived to find a low-lying streak of white out there, a chalk trace on the greater gray, that would be the wake disclosing a periscope. He was keyed up, convinced this might very well be the morning he nailed the Japanese submariners. If not him personally, then the plane carrying depth bombs after he radioed in, blasting away beneath the surface in a relentless search pattern that would crack open the hull of the sub and give the damn Japs all the water they wanted.

Sig felt like winking at the oval moon, paling away as daylight approached. He was highly pleased at having figured it out, nights awake while waiting for sleep to catch up with him, gazing out the window of the hut at the moon furrow on the ocean—the enemy's evident pattern for those sneak raft trips to the creeks for their drinking water. The raft rats had to be using the lunar cycle. Not the round bright full moon, the obvious. Coast Guard headquarters had thought of that and orders from on high were for extreme vigilance along the coast during each such phase. But that had not produced anything except eyestrain among the nighttime sentries. No, the Japanese must be timing their shore excursions some number of nights either side of that, using the moon when it was just luminous enough to cast a skinny path to shore, Sig would have bet anything. That

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way the raft rats could paddle alongside the moonbeam glow on the water without having to use a torch and with less chance of being seen than during full shine. It made every kind of sense to him, and lately he had matched it up with times he found fresh crap at a creek mouth.

He cradled the Tommy gun. There was reassurance in the highly tooled grip of it that one of these times he would jump the raft rats, the odds could not stay in their favor forever. On this coast he was the constant, they were the variable, and all those accounting classes at TSU had taught him that the basic determinant was to be found in constancy. One of these times, the raft would get a late start from the submarine or be held up by choppy waves on the way in or happen into some other inconstant circumstance, and he would have them where he wanted them. Maybe this fresh morning.

THE PAIR FROM the Coast Guard station slogged down from the hut to the strand of sand between waves rolling in and the tumble of driftlogs lodged against the forest. Awaiting them were bootprints of considerable size and the much more delicate scuffs made by dog paws. The tracks went straight as a dotted line the length of the sand and disappeared around the clay cliff of the headland ahead. The chief petty officer swore. "I hate to do it to you in this sand, Quince. But we've got to quick-march or we'll be chasing him all damned day."

ONCE MORE PROKOSCH scanned outward from the thin crescent of beach. Stirred up by some distant storm, the waves coming to shore tumbled themselves into sudden rolling tunnels, crashing apart moments after they formed. A froth of spume piled itself high at tideline, chunks of it flying off in the wind like great flecks of ash.

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At his side the Irish setter nosed at one of the spume clumps and brought on itself a wheezy dog fit of sneezing.

"Bless you, Rex," Sig said as if speaking to an equal. "But that's what you get for not paying attention to business, isn't it. Heel, boy." He lately had written to Ruby that he figured it was okay to talk to the dog, as long as he didn't start hearing the dog answer him. He smiled to himself, thinking back to all the conversation during Ben Reinking's stay. Starting with Japanese, when he had come upon the figure that turned out to be Lefty spraddled on that rock face. Funny at the time, but good practice for whenever he got the jump on the—

The leash sprang taut in his grasp.

"What's the matter, boy?" Sig's voice dropped low, sentry caution even though no one, no sign of anybody, had appeared. Growling, the dog tugged toward the dark band of vegetation that fringed the outlet of a creek not far ahead.

Sig at once angled inland, steering the dog toward the bulwark of driftwood. The pair of them skirted along it, out of sight from the creek, until they were almost to the dunelike bank. There he silenced the dog with a whispered command and, ~~Tommy~~ gun ^{1c} ready, cautiously took a look over the bank. Below, at the edge of the brush at the creek mouth, there were marks in the sand that looked as if a rubber raft might have been skidded up out of the surf. Excitement came with the sight. Plain as anything to him, the Japs had been here at low tide. An hour or two ago.

THE CHIEF PETTY officer clambered up onto the rocky snout of the headland and took a long look north along the shore. Below him, the light blue of ocean clashed against chocolate brown of rocks covered with seaweed. Where the sand resumed, the crescent of beach bowed around for a quarter of a mile or so before a brushy creek came wandering out of the thick forest.

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The young seaman panted up behind him, tugging against the pack straps that cut into his shoulders. "Any sign of him yet, Chief?"

"No, but he's got to be up around that creek somedamn-where—he didn't have any too much head start on us."

"How about we fire a shot?"

The chief debated with himself. "We don't want to spook him, if he's at all touchy around the trigger finger. Try yelling again. Put everything into it—with this surf you can't hear yourself think."

"PROKOSCH! WAIT FOR US! YOU'VE GOT LEAVE, BUDDY!"

SQUINTING OUT AT the ocean again in search of a telltale periscope wake, Sig was unshucking his pack to use the radio when the dog reared to the end of the leash, whining in agitation. "Rex, down," he hissed without effect. The dog was definite, straining now not in the direction of the creek but toward the salal and ferns and overhanging forest.

"Easy, boy," he whispered. "What is it you think you've got?" Alert to the possibility that the Japs were still ashore, holed up there in the woods, he weighed his options. Using the radio was slow and cumbersome and they might hear him talking into it. On the other hand, if they hadn't spotted him by now, he had the advantage of surprise. He knew these woods, the raft rats didn't. If he left the radio pack, he could ease ever so slowly into the undergrowth and see what was what. Although there was the matter of the dog.

He hesitated. If he tied the dog here to a limb of driftwood, it might bark. Besides, the Irish setter's nose was the quickest guide to any Japs. Patting Rex's head and murmuring soothingly to keep him quiet, he hooked the leash into his web belt and crept toward the forest.

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Sniffing constantly, the dog led him on the leash through the head-high barrier of brush and into the forest-floor growth, until shortly yanking to a halt. With his weapon up and every nerve afire for action, Sig even so was surprised, confused, by what awaited almost within touch of him. Not Japs at all, but a sizable wad of what looked like some odd kind of fabric. A pale shroud of it, crumpled in the salal. *Parachute*, he thought immediately. Before realizing it was balloon material.

In that fatal instant he saw the dog sniff at the explosive device tangled beneath and put a paw to it.

12

★ “WILL YOU LAY OFF that damn hymn? You’re driving me ape.”

Jake Eisman’s humming snapped off, but not his dolorous expression as he looked sidewise at Ben behind the steering wheel. “I for sure don’t want to be trapped in a moving vehicle with a pencil pusher gone apeshit, do I.” He mopped at his neck with his hand. “Man, I hope sweating is good for the health. How about cranking the windshield open?”

“Now there’s an original idea,” Ben changed his own tune. “Let’s give it a whirl, until we get grasshoppers in the teeth.”

The pair of them were in a ragtop jeep, all that Jones had been able to snag for them out of the East Base motor pool, heading down the height of bluff south from Shelby toward the brief green ribbon of trees in the Marias River bottomland. Each man had shed the jacket of full-dress uniform, and the cloth doors of the jeep were tied back to let air in both sides, and still it was like traveling in an oversize oven. The fields along the shimmering highway the next couple of hours to Great Falls, they well knew, would be the cooked results of summerlong sun, the waiting grain baked golden, the mown hayfields crisp and tan, the distant dun sidehills further tinted with broad scatters

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of sheep. Behind them were a good many miles of the same. They had buried Angelides the day before five counties away, Prokosch that morning in the remote little railroad burg of his upbringing.

Jake rested a foot the size of a shoebox against the dashboard and slouched back in the confines of his seat. He yanked at his tie again even though it was already loosened. Honor-guard pallbearer was not a role he was suited to. "At the rate we're putting people in the ground," he brooded to Ben, "you'd think the Japs had invaded Montana."

"I've noticed."

It was hard to say which funeral troubled the tired pair more, but Angelides' at Fort Peck yesterday had been the stark one. Only the bushy mustached uncle, off shift from the power house at the monumental earthen dam, to see the casket into the clay. Towering among the five other pallbearers rounded up by the funeral home, Jake throughout looked upset and angry over the scant farewell in the scarcely populated cemetery among some Missouri River badlands. Ben knew the feeling. He said now, "You've had more than your share of lifting coffins lately, Ice. Any chance you can spring a weekend pass for yourself?" At some level they were aware they were making talk so as not to be alone with their thoughts.

"Hah. It's back to chauffeuring bombers to the Russkies again tomorrow," came the glum reply. "I have to make up for all this inspiring funeral duty, don't I. Aw, shit, what am I saying? Sig and Animal would've done it for me." Jake's gaze went distant, then came back. "Anyway, Benjamin, it was good to see your folks there this morning, huh? Your mother is a real pussycat."

Ben looked across. Jake did not appear to be kidding.

"Your dad didn't miss a lick of what was going on," the one-

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sided conversation from the passenger side of things persisted.

"Figure he'll be writing about the funeral?"

"I'd bet my bottom dollar on it."

THE PACKARD CRESTED the long pull up from the Two Medicine River and slowed as if made shy by the sudden cliff-faced mountains—Jericho Reef, Phantom Woman Peak, Roman Reef—that stood up into view in the direction of Gros Ventre. It was considerably more car than Bill Reinking was accustomed to, and he drove in a skittish way that had Cloyce itching to take over. Montana men did not believe that a woman's grasp in life included the steering wheel. It mattered not that she'd had use of the family roadster whenever she wanted, at the country place among the orange groves, when she was sixteen. As her husband nursed the high-powered automobile around another curve, she told herself yet again this was only to be expected; a shopworn luxury car running on black-market gasoline, both provided by a saloonkeeper (and presumably worse), was just the sort of thing that came with Gros Ventre, with marrying the complete town when you wed its newspaperman.

They had not said much on this trip back from the packed foursquare church across the tracks from the Devon depot out east of Shelby, Bill busy in his head, Cloyce in extensive thoughts of her own. Try as she would, she could not get over the Prokosch boy's watery-eyed mother and father, in sagging funeral clothes that they looked like they'd been sacked into. There but for the grace of something or other—despite what the preacher said in the funeral service, she could not credit an all-wise divinity in charge of every life and death in this immense war—wept Bill and herself, if Ben had not survived Guam and those other places. Even yet she could feel fate narrowly brushing past, back at the start of this unnatural week. She had been out in the back yard coddling her

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roses with root food, the shade of the cottonwood trees pleasant in the already warm summer morning. Around the corner of the house came Bill, a telegram in his hand. If she had not already been kneeling, she would have been thrust to her knees by the sight of the yellow message form known for carrying the savage words: WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON—

With his head dipped to make out the dappled yard through his bifocals, Bill did not spot her soon enough, then froze at the look on her face. He fumbled out the sentences in contrite haste:

"Ben is back from the Pacific, he's all right. He has funeral duty. Twice."

"Is he coming home"—it caught in her throat to say it—"as usual?"

"Not this time, for some reason. We'll go to him. I'll work it out somehow."

Attending the Prokosch boy's funeral had been better than nothing, she gave Bill that much, even though there had not been nearly enough time afterward with Ben before he and nice Jake had to start back to East Base. Back to the madhouse of war. How she wished Ben had gotten hold of himself and made the most of the chance she'd set up so perfectly at New Year's—

"Dear?" She jumped ~~a moment~~ at the surprise of her husband's voice, after the constant miles of silence. "Take something down for me, will you? There's a notepad and Eversharp in my suit coat."

more than a little

Now she really was startled. Bill never did this. His work was kept so separate as to be almost holy, done either at the *Gleaner* office or in private in his upstairs library, and they would be home in Gros Ventre in no time if he would floor the gas pedal a little. She twitted him, "Isn't the usual line, 'Get me rewrite!?' Whatever are you thinking, Bill, this isn't exactly the set for *The Front Page* and I'm not—"

"Cloyce, will-you-please-just-do-this."

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just a bit

Speechless at the steel in that burst, she reached around into the back seat for the writing materials in the coat.

"Ready?" His voice bristling as much as his mustache, he started dictating at a deliberative pace. *"You have seen the ready-made insignia of the homefront all across our state, in our neighborhoods, on our ranches and farms, wherever there are window casements framing proud but anxious parents. The small satin banner no larger than a tea towel—cross out 'small'—hangs from the lock on the middle sash of the window. The gold-colored string, tasseled at the ends, holds a thin—no, make that 'slender'—dowel, and down from that the banner hangs like a quiet flag. Red-bordered, with a field of white, centered with a star. A blue star shows the world that a member of that family is serving in the military. A gold star testifies that the household has lost a family member in the war."*

"In the trackside house where Sigmund Prokosch grew up, the blue star—let me think a moment—has been eclipsed by one of gold." Working on the next sentence, he took his eyes off the highway only enough to make sure she was keeping up.

Cloyce was quietly crying.

Bill Reinking set his jaw. At the next turnoff onto a ranch road, he sideslipped the big car to a sharp stop. Resolute as a man with a mission from on high, he faced around to Cloyce. "You drive, while I write."

CONTRARY TO HIS custom, the Senator did not arise from behind the piles of books at his end of the table and plant a kiss on his wife's brow as she settled to her breakfast spot that morning. Suspiciously she peeked over at the reading material strewn around him to see if the Bible lay open somewhere there. His habit before an election was to thumb through until he found a pertinent verse about afflicting one's enemies, then righteously set out to do so by the lethal means known as Montana politics.

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The rough-and-tumble of another campaign did not seem to be this morning's order of business, however, as the volumes surrounding his plate of drying egg yolk and bacon grease were the usual maroon tomes of military history and green-and-gilt biographies and memoirs of political figures. She looked on with fond exasperation as he pored over dense pages, taking notes in his leatherbacked notebook. Beaky old cowboy that the national press made him out to be, the husband and mealtime companion known to her all these years feasted on the holdings of the Library of Congress as no other member of the United States Senate ever did. Whatever was immersing him this particular day, she could be sure it was all part of the strong old scripture of seniority and power.

At length the Senator roused himself enough to rumble, "Good morning, Sadie, late-sleeping lady."

"Morning yourself, Luther. You wouldn't be so quick to hop out of bed either if knitting Red Cross socks with Eleanor while photographers watch was waiting for you." Such relationship as this politically apostate household had with the White House—scant—was by way of the Senator's wife. She held her tongue now as the broadbeamed cook marched in bearing her breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and crisp toast. As soon as the servant was out of the room, she arched a look at her still musing spouse. "And what is your own Christian mission this fine tropical day in Babylon-on-the-Potomac?" The honey she was trying to spread on the toast already was runny in the Washington heat.

"Roast an admiral or two," he anticipated, patting the volume *The Fate of Fleets*. "The fools still think they can yell 'Pearl Harbor!' and we'll forgive them any goddamn thing. The hearing may take a while before they're whimpered out. Don't look for me home till supper, my love."

As if reminded of the unremitting passage of time, he yanked out the dollar watch that had regulated his day through four

terms of political infighting at the highest levels. There never were enough hours in the day, especially in wartime. Even so, he stayed sitting a little longer to dab more verbal ammunition into the cowhide notebook, his wife covertly watching. He still was riled up from Sunday when Adrianna was home on overnight pass and they had listened to *Meet the Forces*, the special broadcast of the recording of the Guam landing by Bill Rein-king's son. That young man was quite something. He did the job there in the hellish water in fine style. It about took your heart out, particularly what happened to that Marine sergeant, but the Senator had also heard something gutwrenching before that in the description of the quarter-of-a-mile wade from the so-called landing craft to the beach. He'd had his staff check, and that was as close in as those craft could maneuver against the reef. Accordingly he would peel the hide off the Navy at this afternoon's hearing—the gold-braid ninnies had taken half a dozen tries and most of the war so far trying to develop landing craft that could actually put men and trucks and tanks onto a beach instead of depositing them into the surf, and look at the Guam result: dead Marines thick in the water.

He clapped the notebook shut, ready for political battle even though it seemed unending. Targets in the military popped up almost faster than he could keep up with. He still steamed over those Air Transport Command nitwits who had spent taxpayer dollars training women to fly and then wouldn't let them take the planes as far as Canada; hell, you could spit into Canada from Montana.

"THIS IS SOME WAR. Our guys are knocked off right and left," Jake lamented huskily, "and I can't even talk my way past a paper-ass general to get overseas and drop bombs on the worst human beings in history." He sneaked a glance at Ben, rigid behind the wheel again. "You don't happen to be doing it to me, are you?"

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"What, keeping you on the Eskimo run? You give me too much credit, Ice." *You're not alone in that kind of wondering, though. You flying nowhere but to Alaska, apparently ever. Prokosch turned down for sea duty before he got blown up anyway, poor luckless kid. Danzer's soft assignment to MacArthur's palace guard was handed to him from somewhere, such as from way on high? While Animal gets flung onto beachhead after beachhead until a Jap bullet finally finds him, and Moxie is over there month after month trying to shoot down planes that are trying to bomb him. It looks just random, the war cuts some guys unhealthier orders than others. But a setup would want to be made to look like that, too, wouldn't it. If Tepee Weepy is picking and choosing who is supposed to stay safe and who goes into combat—*

"I wish Grandpa Grady would get off my case," Jake was saying. "Hell, it was only one floatplane, it wasn't as if we—"

"We? I was only the sandbag, remember?"

"—wrecked the whole goddamn Eighth Air Force. Hey, watch it!"

Ben saw it at the same time. Just ahead, in the middle of the highway, a magpie was eating a skunk. The long-tailed bird took a last impertinent peck, then lifted into the air, stunningly black and white as if having intensified its colors with those of its prey. Steering with one hand, with the other Ben frantically tried to crank the windshield closed.

Not in time. As the wheels straddled the squashed skunk, the smell swept into the jeep like a stink bomb through a transom. "Yow." Jake was blinking the sting out of his eyes, as was Ben. "That was some ripe polecat."

"The Montana state flower, Dex always called one like that," Ben managed after gasping.

"Dexter the Dexterous. That sounds like him, let the peasants scoop those striped pussies out of his way." Still fanning at the linger of the skunk, Jake thought of something. "Hey, our secret-

mission guy must be about due to get his turn at fame from you again, ain't he? Then the milk-run pilot Eisman, specializing in pallbearing? My ma's got her scrapbook open, waiting."

"Tepee Weepy has loosened up a little about that, so if you treat me right, I might squeeze you in ahead of him this time," Ben hedged, aware it was drawing him a deeply inquiring look. Hastily he skipped on past the situation of Dex: "That doesn't mean I'm going to fly into the cold blue yonder with you like last time. Besides, you've got enough company in Alaska without me." He was secretly relieved Jake was shelved there in the ATC icebox. *That's what comes of climbing into a Red bed, my friend.* "Fill me in, Yakov—how's the bewitching Katya?"

"Gone, is what she is."

"Say again?"

"She's vanished." Jake looked even more bleak. "I ask the other Russians about her and they just look at me and give the galoot salute." Illustratively he shrugged his more than sizable shoulders up around his ears. "Nothing I can do about it, Ben. Like everything else."

Governments and their coin tricks, with people instead of pocket change. Ben fell silent, into hard thinking about Tepee Weepy, as the jeep went up a rise from the Teton River bridge and there a couple of dozen miles ahead on the horizon stood the Black Eagle smelter stack, its plume dark against the sky. Off the western edge of the smoke cloud a set of specks separated from the smudge and kept on going, a flight of bombers setting out for Alaska.

"Home sweet home," Jake crooned. Somehow it came out pensive.

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★ "MORNING, CAPTAIN."

Yawning his way into the office, Ben met those words and looked back down the corridor apprehensively. No such intruding rank in sight. "You're getting absent-minded, Jones," he chided as he came on in and situated into his desk chair for another day on the calendar of limbo. "The captain's the guy around the corner, runs the mess hall, remember?"

The next surprise of the morning was the corporal's Wanted-poster face breaking into a grin that went halfway around his head. "'The worthy shall be risen,'" he quoted as if he had been waiting for the chance and passed across a ditto set of papers. "Your promotion orders came in today's packet. Congratulations, Captain Reinking," he delivered with nice emphasis. Leaning closer, Jones squinted around as if to make sure they were alone in the dinky office. "The personnel clerk let me in on something. General Grady is going to pin the new bars on you himself at next commander's call."

"Jesus ten-fingered Christ! What's he want to do that for?"

The expostulation turned Jones prim and enlisted. "No one shared the General's thinking with me."

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"Any other surprises from our lords and masters?" Ben immediately went to, trying to sort by eye the thin contents of the daily TPWP packet spread in front of Jones. "Like maybe the Prokosch piece miraculously set in type?"

Jones shook his head.

Which caused Ben to twist his as if trying to relieve a pain in the neck. *You think General Grady's thought process is a mystery, Jonesie, what does that make Tepee Weepy's?* Leave it to the military to think up its own form of purgatory and then not define it for you. Ever since he alit back at East Base from the Pacific, life with the Threshold Press War Project was every kind of a puzzle. The unseen powers in Washington had done everything with his Guam recording but play it over loudspeakers in place of the national anthem, and the account he wrote of Angelides' burial on the loneliest of prairies had likewise been punched up into maximum headline treatment. And the subsequent "Supreme Team" treatment that he had cobbled together about Jake—steadfast service hand-in-hand with our stalwart Russian allies; the kind of thing his father called a Ph.D. piece, Piled Higher and Deeper—also went out and into newspaper pages across the country like clockwork. Yet the weeks since Sig Prokosch was blown to bits on American soil were turning into months, and that story still was spiked somewhere. Tepee Weepy was even less forthcoming, in Ben's baffled estimation, over Dex and Moxie. It was not a pure silence, the distracted kind, either.

WHAT DO? he had telexed in frustration at the point on the schedule where he was due to write about one or the other of them and had heard nothing, and a message shot back short and cryptic: TIME OUT IN THE GAME. ADJUST PADS ACCORDINGLY.

Well, by now he and Jones indeed were padding desperately, doing articles about scrap drives and Red Cross blood draws. Top off the situation with this unlooked-for promotion (major,

full caps

webs

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lieutenant colonel: he gulped at the thought that there were only two more ranks between him and the ghostly brass who operated TPWP) and Ben could not tell whether it was the altitude or the servitude that was getting to him.

"All right, Corporal," he braced up with a deep breath, "what journalistic exploit do we face today?"

"A twelve-year-old kid here in town invented a military vocabulary crossword puzzle," Jones recited. "Tepee Weepy wants a picture and a thousand words."

"One across, an unexploded shell, three letters," Ben said tiredly. "Dud."

HILL 57 HAD ITS hackles up, bunchgrass stiffly trying to resist the wind, as Ben started down the rutted path at the end of that afternoon. In off-duty civvies, he had on the canvasback coat he had worn that time here with Cass but was wishing for the flight jacket, at the rate the wind was breathing down his neck. As ever he had to be mindful of what the gusts might bring; Great Falls collected weather from all around. Over toward the Rockies, the waiting clouds were thickly gray and flat-bottomed as if ready to be sponged against the earth. The benchlands surrounding the leafy city were another picture entirely, with half a dozen squalls around the horizon, isolated showers that almost stopped at fencelines. By his estimate, the cylinder of none-too-warm autumn sunshine here between the storm systems just might last long enough for what he needed to do. *It better. Could be the last chance at this.* How many times now had he watched the zigzag route to the white rocks, here and on the Letter Hill, turn to mush in spring and twisted iron in summer and then utterly sink off out of sight into snow for most of the rest of the year? Come winter, there was no telling where he would be, either. Somewhere on the continent of Europe where Moxie Stamper was among those taking aim at the heart of the

full caps

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Third Reich, if Tepee Weepy had any sense about "supreme team" assignments any more. *Big if. On top of all the others.*

At the base of the laid-out rocks, he squatted out of the wind temporarily in the shelter of the broad numeral 5. No Cass beside him this time with scotch and opera glasses handy. The sky equally empty of any P-39 piloted by her, spearpoint at the lead of a squadron turned phantom now. He tensed nearly to the point of agony against thinking about it. If there was a more lonely time in his life, he did not want to bring it to mind. Although that at most amounted to only ~~to~~ a postponement; his nightly craving did not know what to do with itself, without her. *There's always the USO, right, Cass? The cookie-and-nookie crowd, as you liked to call it.* Every faculty in him from his loins upward jeered at the notion of any substitute for Cass Standish.

Turning his head from the vacant spot next to him in the snug area against the rocks, he sent his gaze to the interlinked letters of the butte across the way. He had devoted so many otherwise soulless nights to the script about the twelfth man that the Letter Hill was branded into his mind, yet he scanned the ~~TSU~~ again now as if, in the right light, it would spell out his hunch. He had tried the supposition out on Jake during that long drive on funeral duty.

"TELL ME IF THIS is too crazy, Ice. But out there on the tin can with Danzer, I got to wondering why he was so rattled when I brought up Purcell's name. Remember that last practice, when our mad genius of a coach for some reason yanked him and stuck Purcell in? What if that wasn't just some lame-brain substitution, what if Purcell was being seriously promoted to the starting team?"

"You figure Bruno was as tired of the Slick Nick act as the rest of us were?" Jake's jackrabbit mind took a moment to go

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back and forth over that. "Possible, I suppose. The Dancer could catch the ball and keep it, both, though."

"But Purcell could run circles around him, and if Bruno could knock the dropping habit out of Purcell he had something better."

"Yeah," Jake agreed without quibble. "The kid was a ring-tailed wonder except for that one thing."

"Then all that sonofabitch Bruno had to do," Ben savagely rewrote that central page of the past, "was not be so hepped up about his damnable Golden Rule and simply play it straight with Purcell: 'Hang on to the ball, Merle boy, and you're the varsity end for the season. You'd like to be our eleventh man, wouldn't you, kid? It's yours for the taking.' It shifts the whole thing, Ice. No twelfth man. No 'supreme team' crap, then or now."

"Possible," Jake had allowed again. "I can't see Danzer running his heart out on that hill."

THAT HILL OFFERED no more answer today than ever as Ben drew his eyes over it. So be it, one more time. He stood up, the wind keenly waiting for him, and started down to the shoulder of the coulee between that mute slope and Hill 57's tarpaper collection of shacks.

Picking his way through the bunchgrass and prickly pear cactus, he approached the solitary shanty at the coulee edge with no real hope. Other than its usual jittery honor guard of gophers, half a dozen at a time constantly popping from their holes and then receding as he neared, the ramshackle place appeared as short on hospitality as it was on all else; dilapidation never welcomes company. No smoke from the chimney again, although a fresh cord of charity wood was stacked against the tarpaper siding. Every Hill 57 shack he could see had one, the firewood considerably chopped into sticks not much bigger than kindling so heat could be eked out of rusty stoves as long as pos-

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sible. Even so the woodpiles would not last through the winter and the Indian families would have to scrounge or freeze. He marveled again at the pride of Vic Rennie, trudging down cold to the bone from this prairie sidehill slum for four years, never asking anything from the sumptuous university when there were any number of Treasure State football boosters who would have given him a warm place and other favors on the sly.

Ben walked up to the weatherbeaten door and knocked strongly, the sharp sound like a punctuation of echo from another time and place.

"Catch her sober, after she gets over the shakes. That's the trick with a wino. Wait until allotment money's gone."

"End of the month, you mean?"

"Middle. She's a thirsty one."

Three months in a row he had made the try, and Toussaint's formulation notwithstanding, not even come close to catching the aunt whom Vic had lived with here. Rapping on the door was bringing no result this time either.

Well, hell, does she live here at all or doesn't she? He tromped around the corner of the house to see whether any firewood had been used from the stacked cord.

And practically sailed face-first into the mad-haired figure moseying from the other direction.

They each ~~rared~~ back and stared.

The woman looked supremely surprised, but then, so did he. Scrawny and askew, she swayed there all but lost in a purple sweater barely held together by its fatigued knitting and a dress that hung to her shoetops. The mop of steel-gray hair looked no less of a mess on second inspection. Fragile as she appeared to be, Ben felt wild relief he hadn't collided with her; in the raveled sweater her arms seemed no larger around than the thin-split sticks in the woodpile. The scrutiny she was giving him during this was more than substantial, however. She had eyes black as

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the hardest coal; bituminous is known to burn on and on, those eyes stated.

"Spooked me," she recovered a voice first. "Been visiting Mother Jones." She jerked an elbow to indicate the outhouse behind her. The coaly stare stayed right on him. "You aren't from here."

"No. From the base."

"Hnn: flyboy. What's a flyboy doing here? Looking for coochy?" She made the obscene circle with thumb and first digit and ran a rigid finger in and out. "Tired of white meat?" She chortled. "Long time too late for that, around here."

"I'm not here tomcatting," he tried to say it as though that were a reasonable possibility. The years of drinking had blurred age on her; she could have been fifty or seventy. "It's about Vic. We were friends, played football together across the way. You maybe saw us at it." He watched the woman closely as he said that, but the set face and burning gaze did not change. "I'm looking for Vic's aunt," he went back to ritual. "There's a thing I need to find out from her. It would have meant something to Vic."

She took her time about deciding. Finally she provided grudgingly: "Maybe that's me."

"Mrs. Rennie, what I came to—"

"Hwah, you crazy? If I had that name I'd cut my throat and let it out of me."

Too late, he remembered the family battle lines of the Reservation. "Excuse me all to pieces, Mrs. Rides Proud. I just thought, because Vic's last name—"

"Not his fault he was named that," she conceded. Absently she primped the nearest vicinity of flying hair. "You can call me Agnes. Everybody and his dog does." With that settled, she eyed him in bright negotiating fashion. "You came for something. Got anything on you to wet the whistle first?"

anthracite

Whoops, just occurred to me: bituminous is soft coal, anthracite is hard coal.
Wow!

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"It just so happens." He produced the bottle of cheap wine from his coat's deep side pocket and held it out to her for inspection.

Belatedly he remembered *"She don't much know how to read,"* but she was nodding appreciatively at the spread-wing symbol on the label. "Thunderbird. Now you're talking." She quickly stepped past him and wrenched the door open. "Come in out of the weather."

The prairie came inside with them, bare dirt of the floor except for a splotch of torn old flowered linoleum under the kitchen table. Boxes of belongings far outnumbered the derelict furniture. A drafty-looking back area that elled off from the one big room must have been where Vic slept and studied, Ben decided. As he glanced around from tattered bedding to cardboard heaps, the woman was fussing at the cookstove. "I'll make a little fire. Usually don't until it gets cold as a witch's tit." Vaguely she gestured toward the table and rickety chairs. "Make yourself to home."

Wasting no time, she fired up the stove with a shot of kerosene, from the smell of it, and joined him. A pair of jelly glasses clinked as she shoved them toward the Thunderbird bottle he had put in the center of the table. "Do the honors."

He poured her a full glass of the sweet red wine and without regret set the bottle aside. "None for me, thanks."

She would not hear of that. "You better have something so I don't drink all alone. Kool-Aid, how about?"

"Sounds good," he fibbed for etiquette's sake.

Grunting, she got up and navigated into the kitchen clutter to try to find the drink mix for him. To keep any kind of conversation going, he called over: "They told me you *were* at your daughter's."

"She kicked me out. Thinks she is somebody—like her grunny don't stink."

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One binge too many, Ben thought. "There are people like that." Still trying to sound conversational, he asked: "Agnes, were you mostly here when Vic was in college?"

Now the ~~bituminous~~ eyes showed a different temperature entirely. "I never went nowhere when Vic was getting his learning." anthracite

She followed that statement back to the table and slid a packet of Kool-Aid to Ben. "Here you go." The water bucket and dipper were within reach from the table—a lot of things were—and he mixed the stuff for himself. She waited standing until he was done, then declared: "Bottoms up." Blithe as a bird, she alit into a chair and in the same motion leaned way forward and sipped from her glass where it stood on the table, touching it with only her lips. Not until then did he realize how bad she had the shakes.

Readying with a dry swallow, he kept his end of the bargain with a swig of the Kool-Aid. The flavor was grape, as purple as her sweater, and about as tasty as the wool dye would have been. He sleeved off the bruise-colored stain he suspected was left on his lips. Surprisingly, his drinking companion was sitting back watching him sharp-eyed instead of trying another guzzle. "You're not drinking up," Ben remarked.

She blinked at the extent of his ignorance. "Even Jesus stretched the wine."

This is getting me nowhere. He plunged in. "You remember when that fellow Vic and I played football with died on the hill, across the coulee?" He was not even sure what he was asking with this. "Just before the war?"

"That time." She shook her head, gray hair flopping. "They run that boy too much. I never saw that"—with both hands she managed to lift her glass and take a trembling drink—"before."

Ben felt his heartbeat quicken. "You saw him run up to the letters—the white rocks?"

"Used to watch all of you when I'd be outside. Wasn't anything before like that boy, though. They run him and run him. Made him do it."

"Made him? How?"

"The football boss kept making him run. He'd yell and wave his arm. You know, like when you're herding sheep and send a dog way around them?" She demonstrated the sweeping overhand gesture.

"Up and back one time, I know," Ben prompted. "But then on his own did the boy—"

"Hwah, one time? Where do you get that?" This shake of the head dismissed Ben's arithmetic as silly. "Crazy number of times. Up and back to that first rock thing." Agnes approximated a T in the air over the table. "Then up and back to—what's that next one?" She waved the notion of an s away, saying: "Then he runs up again, pretty pooped now, I bet, and touches the third one of those. That football boss, maybe he couldn't count so good?"

"He could, all right." Bruno. Coach Almighty making his point that last practice day. *I have to deal with a rube three-letter man. The bastard meant the ones on the hill. He was going to drill it into Purcell about no fumbles, once and for all.* Something else surfaced in Ben. "Agnes, you started off saying 'They.'"

"The two of them, sure. Football boss and, I don't know, little boss?"

"What were they wearing?"

"Raft hats."

Stumped, he labored to come up with the kind of hats people on rafts wore.

"George Raft," Agnes broke in, impatient again with his capacity for not understanding. "Vic took me to a movie when he had a jingle in his pocket, you know."

Snap-brim hats. The cinematic emblem of tough guys. Bruno and his copycat pet sportswriter. *Loudon was in on it, bastard*

full cap,
right?

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number two. Ben's mind was working furiously. "So you saw them make him run the hill three times. Then what?"

"After that?" Both hands around the glass again, Agnes sipped with shaky delicacy. "It was getting good and dark. I came in the house. The bosses maybe were getting tired of watching, they kind of were wandering off, but the football boss gave another one of those waves. The boy still was on the hill. I just about couldn't believe it. Think to myself, how many times they gonna run that boy?"

She jerked her head toward the Letter Hill. "I don't savvy white men's games."

Ben sat there unmoving, everything she had described passing in order behind his eyes like camera shot after camera shot, the full scene playing out into dusk. Merle Purcell struggling to the dimming rocks, legs and the organ in his chest pumping in determination that could not be told from desperation. Running one lap too many on the steep zigzag path, either from the command of a coach who then turned blindly away or from his own excess will to measure up. In either case, pushed to the brink of what a body could stand, before the lifeless collapse at the stem of the T.

"You told Vic?" It was as much an assertion as a question.

"Told him enough, you bet," Agnes vouched, draining her glass as if in a toast to the Hill 57 way of doing things. "Watch your fanny where those football people are involved, I said to him. End up like that white boy if he don't be careful."

Vic's silences. The scales of friendship are roomy, but nothing human is infinite. Ben sorted through the realization that the one person he thought he knew as well as himself had held back a thing this size. He could see the reason, seated as it was across the table from him. In *wino veritas*? Not in any court of law a half-bright defense attorney could find his way into. The word of Agnes Rides Proud did not stand a drunkard's prayer

full cap
right
yes

STET
V

or is this
intentional
yes

a good
joke if
the reader doesn't
go with
the mistake
first

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against whatever sworn version Bruno and Loudon would come up with.

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

"Not for me," Ben murmured.

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

HALF [↑]BUSHED AND wet through and through but oddly fulfilled, he reached his hotel room with daylight nearly gone, the rain gathering the gray of dusk to its own. He climbed into dry clothes and poured a scotch, just one, as his reward before settling to the typewriter. The night was his to write. Custom dies hard, and sometimes never at all; before going to the script, he instinctively checked his watch and with it the clock of war, the

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

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

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

Cass stayed kneeling a further minute, watching her pilots take in the P-63s that would be central to their existence from this day on. She could never get enough of this, the women in their canvas flying suits with manes brown, blonde, and black flowing over their purposeful shoulders as they eyed the new aircraft, keen as cats looking at available bacon. What needed doing—what was up to her to do—was to train these veteran fliers to take it slow with these hot planes. *Isn't that a joker in the deck—me ending up like those bald coot instructors at Sweetwater.* Holding in a rueful grin, she popped to her feet and gave a dismissing clap of her hands. "Okay, all concerned, find your tail number and go to work. Let's get with it."

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

Spotting an opportunity, she eased her way over to where Beryl, with her swiftness of experience, already had the hood up on her plane. Cass clambered up next to where the tall matronly figure was studying the engine in back of the cockpit.

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"The factory geniuses didn't get this off the back of our necks, did they," Cass joined the appraisal. Then, low enough so only Beryl could hear: "Sorry it's not your four-barreled bomber, Bear. I tried again on your transfer, but it's still hung up."

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

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

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

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

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

"Righto," Cass backed that up. "Stay to hell out of one another's prop wash until we get used to handling these buggies." *That especially means you, Maclaine.* Without making a show of it, she

grazed a look down over Della, getting back a flip of blonde hair that might have meant anything. When everyone had had their say about the new planes, Cass slowly addressed the gathering:

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

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

"The first, you goofs, is *landing*!"

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

"HOW GOES IT this fine filthy day of Great Falls sleet, Jones?"

"Uhm, morning, sir. We've got—"

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

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“—sir,” he finished numbly, staring in recognition of the all too evidently waiting personification of the Threshold Press War Project.

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

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

“Spare your eyes,” the colonel advised. “Officially I’m not here.”

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

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

Jones got out of there fast.

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

“Jones is washed in the blood of the lamb, sir.”

“Admirable, I’m sure.” The colonel went right to business. “One of your ‘supreme team’ articles—very nicely done, let me say—has been conspicuous by its absence in the newsprint of the land, hasn’t it, Captain. Your piece about Seaman Prokosch. We had to spike that piece, and I must tell you it will remain spiked.”

“I didn’t figure you were saving it for the gold-leaf edition.”

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

Tepee Weepy rippled on, "the balloon bombs are a classified secret and no mention can be—"

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

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

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

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

Ben broke in:

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

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

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

"Mister Chairman, might I put in about two bits' worth of questions, just to earn my keep?"

"I yield to my friend, the gentleman from Montana."

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

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

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

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

"Glad to, Senator. At TPWP we—"

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

"Naturally." The colonel cleared his throat. "The Threshold

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Press War Project was conceived to disseminate news stories about our armed forces that otherwise would not reach the public. To fill a void in the home front's awareness, you could say."

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

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

"That's all the newspapers, in my neck of the woods," the Senator noted. "Would you say people in states such as mine get their picture of the war pretty much from you?"

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

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

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

"In Montana we're a little leery of bragging people up too much ever since General Custer," the Senator stated, drawing laughter in the hearing room. He studied the colonel as if marking his place in a chapter, then sat back saying: "No further questions for now, Mister Chairman."

"LET'S HAVE A chin-chin about what's wanted of you, Captain Reinking," the colonel came out with now, still occupying a corner of the desk top in all apparent ease. He paused to tap one of

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

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

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

Ben mustered it for all he was worth.

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

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

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

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

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

"We are not dealing"—the colonel stopped—"not trafficking in that sort of thing, captain, what kind of cynics do you think

David, do we need a second dash here? Ben is catching himself from saying "Tepee Weepy" and managing to say "TPWP" instead. no

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

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

"Now as to your next orders, captain," the colonel had arrived at. "It may not surprise you that you'll be going overseas—"

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

"—you'll need to tidy up with your clerk, finish up any pieces you're working on, you may be gone a good while—"

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Or a bad one, Colonel, given the history of this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He stood there stone-still, watched expectantly by the colonel, haunted in every direction he could look. The quantities of death he had seen in the world of war. All the times of sitting to the typewriter to turn teammates' foreshortened lives into handfuls of words. Bruno's eleven, fingered by fate when the coach's ordained list of varsity starters was drawn up at that last practice. Loudon's eleven, damn his gloryhound hide. The "supreme team" betrayed by the law of averages, with something that amounted to a moving wall of oblivion hinged to the war for them; a click at a time, it claimed life after life whatever the odds said. It surpassed understanding, yet the circumference of war plainly was different for these nearly dozen men. Until now Ben had been able to tell himself life went on until proved different, trusting to the unbidden gamble of the flesh that was the greatest and worst venture of his life, the love of another man's wife. Now this.

"Colonel," he finally found his voice, "I've had it. I can't go along with the way you want the war told, any more. Kick me out for 'nervous in the service' or some goddamn thing, I don't care." His lips were so dry he could barely make them function. He licked them to not much effect. "If it takes a Section Eight, I'm ready."

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

The veil on that was thin as could be. Anyone with a byline knew what fields were meant in that implied threat. Hollywood. Any influential newspaper. The by-the-book wire services. All of the messengers who tended to fall under question for their messages, any time a hole in their patriotism could be found. None of those was going to want a wordsmith, no matter how good, with a military record that could not be held up to public light. A record of a soldier who quit.

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

"Some decks are more stacked than others, aren't they, sir."

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

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

"*Stars Fell on Alamogordo*. Tallulah." Ben put aside the week-old news magazine—news magazines were always a week old—he

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had been flipping through. "To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your company, Ice?"

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

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

"Yeah, with your seabag over your shoulder and ten minutes before you'd have to catch a gooney bird out of here—I'm onto you. Besides, I'm kissing East Base goodbye a while myself. A month on the Fairbanks to Nome run. The Russkies are getting short of pilots, so some of us are detailed to fill in on that last leg. Some detail, huh? You can about see Siberia from there. Anyway, I brought a proper farewell. Got a church key?"

"Bottom drawer."

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

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

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

"Ben? Where they sending you this time?"

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

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

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

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

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

Jake leaned forward, adding gravity in all senses of the word. "Serious, Ben. Don't get fancy out in those islands. Things tend to happen around where you are. The time the Japs jumped you and Carlo," he took to reciting. "Then Animal getting it, damn near in your lap." Listening, Ben had to hear over the pounding of blood in the confines of his head. "That walk in the northern woods you took with me." Jake stopped, then said the rest as though it was the most natural of advice. "Bravery is just another way to die, my friend. Keep in the rear echelon for a change—who knows, it might be kind of nice there. The team is getting thin enough on the ground, without you crossed out."

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

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

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

"Busy hands keep a guy out of trouble," Jake proclaimed piously. "Sometimes." They clinked bottles. "That's one more rea-

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son you've got to keep yourself in one piece, you know—I've got a date with that movie of yours." The big man grinned crookedly. "I want to see you fry Bruno's nuts for him."

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

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

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

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

"Cass, what in hell—"

"I lost one, Ben. First time."

He sank into a chair and reached across to cover her hand in his, which had the added effect of keeping her from hoisting another glass of scotch. That blonde number in her squadron, the one who always looked ready to climb a guy's leg—"Cass, don't be blaming yourself, if that's what you're doing. You said last time she's an ingrown tailender and the new planes weren't helping any. It probably was just a matter of time before—"

The wobbly sway of her head stopped him.

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

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

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

She concentrated. "Tonight?"

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

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

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

"Lit up like a church, whatever's got into her," the roadhouse bartender diagnosed as if a second opinion was needed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gritting, Ben climbed in after her. It was all he could do to hang on to her, rubbing where he could to get the blood running, while she strenuously thrashed and gasped. Sobering by visible degrees from the shock of the cold water, she let herself subside quivering into his arms. "M-m-maniac," she chattered, gratefully or not, he couldn't tell.

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

14

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

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

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

The major chortled, the kind that descends from the adenoids.

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"You still have a sense of humor, you must be passing through this glorified cow pasture on TDY."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The transport plane lurched violently as the brakes were slammed on. Ben grabbed the seatframe and doubled over in crash position, all he could do to prepare if the aircraft was going to whirl into a ground loop on the rainslick runway, buckle its landing gear, and set itself on fire from the friction of the

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concrete. Beyond that was the terrible acceptance that for him the war, and heartbeat and breath, could end right here, smeared against a dank strip of East Base.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They scrapped your trip, Captain. Better climb in."

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

"Jones, cool down and don't skid this thing into a parked plane. Now, in English if you can, what is up?"

"The Philippines. All heck is breaking loose out there."

15

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

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

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Leyte landing when spotty reports began to arrive that the Japanese fleet en masse seemed to be steaming toward those same Philippine waters.

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

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

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rier planes hunting and killing enemy warships like exhausted whales.

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

Throughout, he felt the hot breathing presence of history's proposition for a reporter, any true chronicler. The question is brought by Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, high priestess of knowledge, as she steps from the tall grove on Olympus with each hand cupped to you. In one is the grant of a long uninflected life, peace without pause to be looked back on. In the other lies the chance, issued only once per lifetime, to witness Waterloo from a spot within range of the guns. And in your most honest self, which would you choose? The oncoming shadow of the sea battle, not to mention the less than divine hand of Tepee Weepy, had done the choosing for him this time, in the shutdown of air traffic to the Philippines. Which hand of fate he would have chosen for himself, he was not perfectly sure. He prowled among

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the chatter of the teletypes vitally aware of having been spared one more time and conscientiously restless with not being out there when history pivoted on an obscure archipelago. In his reporter's vigil there was not even anyone to talk this over with, Cass back on track on the Edmonton run, Jake among the igloos, Jones scrambling to handle the office by himself. Alone with his insistent sense of something granted and something held back, he haunted the wire machines and drank coffee and waited for the next turn of the war.

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

SLICK WITH SWEAT from the heat and tension of that Pacific noon, the officer of the watch stood clutching the railing on the wing of the *McCorkle's* bridge, transfixed by the sight of the escort carrier *St. Lo* blowing up repeatedly in the near distance. His rational side of mind knew that each thunderous explosion was another of the *Lo's* bomb and torpedo storage compartments going up, but the spectacle of blast after equally fiery blast erupting through the flight deck was beyond reckoning. In equal disbelief, the executive officer next to him cursed methodically while trying to figure out how the Japs had unobtrusively struck a ship in the middle of a victorious fleet; no sonar trace of a sub-

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marine had been reported. The gunnery officer now yelled out from the bridge something about a plane, although the destroyer lookouts had not spotted any aircraft overhead before the carrier began blasting apart, and the exec hustled back inside, leaving the watch officer alone in his spellbound state. None of the past hundred and some hours were supposed to go anything like this; the *Cork's* role at Leyte was to have been grandly ceremonial, delivering MacArthur into the bay for the historic moment of his promised return to the Philippines. The Japanese navy got in the way of that. Accordingly, the general found a lesser floating platform for his symbolic wade ashore while the *McCorkle* was scrambled into the battle formation with all other destroyers in the support fleet. In the ensuing near-endless days and nights, the man on watch believed he had done nobly—not heroically; that was a dimension he did not care to approach—at his post inside at the battle status board, keeping straight the tremendous number of ship names and their whereabouts during the constantly changing struggle. Now, sweaty and fatigued as he was, he felt entitled to a markedly more triumphant watch than this was turning out to be. By now Leyte Gulf was signed, sealed, and delivered for the American side, as would be the campaign ribbons and the commendations to go on one's service record. Yet there was the *St. Lo*, not that far off, still exploding like a gunpowder factory every few minutes.

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

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YOUR CHUM KIA CONFIRMED. SORRY. STORY NEEDED SOONEST.

What was there to say? His first thought when the bells began going off on the TPWP teletype had been that surely it must be a case of mistaken identity. How was it conceivable that Danzer, of them all, would not maneuver through the war without so much as getting a toenail broken, until he came home a medal-polished version of the Dancer? But that notion or any other could not withstand a suicide plane.

Helplessly clutching the teletype message as if it had attached itself to him, it took him a little time to stop trying to outstare the blind numbers it brought with it. The Pacific war, its odds askew, now had chosen both Animal and Danzer for death out of what should have been statistical security. One wearing a uniform for what he could put into it, and the other for what he could get out of it, and it made no difference to the creeping wall of oblivion. *"We've had the casualty figures from other wars run. . . . Many more soldiers survive than people think, and our figures merely back that up . . ."* Sure, colonel, tell that to Bruno's eleven, marked down to four all of a sudden. When the hell is it ever going to let up?

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

Behind him, the TPWP teletype bell rang five times again.

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

On Leyte the bloodiest combat moved inland a lot sooner than in most other island assaults, with the Japanese line of defense swiftly pulling back from the usual hellish beach to higher, even more horrendous jungle terrain. The day the sailors' long-range battle out in the gulf drew to an end, the Montaneers after most of a week of costly attacks managed to secure a strategic but otherwise worthless ridge called Dry Gulch Hill. Probably there was a Dry Gulch Hill on every Pacific island where the Montaneer regiment had seen action, but none had been more treacherous than this. This one was about as high as a football field is long, a desolate muddy hump that had been given an artillery haircut, leaving only palm snags and a general air of determined destruction. With a completeness like that of fog, the stench of corpses of Japanese soldiers rotting in the sun hung over the trails up the hill. The fighting had moved on, and high on the most recently battered section of slope the first two stretcher bearers to arrive were at work amid the wounded and worse than wounded under an embankment that had become an aid station. The one in charge glanced around as a second pair of bearers came slipping and sliding up the trail, cursing the red mud. "Where you been, sightseeing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOOD GOD ALMIGHTY, Dex—if you ended up thinking anything like that. Why that conscientious? Couldn’t you just sit out the war?

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

“I’m doing what I can to keep blood in people,” back there amid the warless parachutes of the smoke-jumper camp, “instead of letting it out of them.”

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

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

And Tepee Weepy fit into this—where? TPWP and the colonel, simply lost in the forest of good intentions? He felt entitled to doubt that. Yet as furiously as Ben searched for its red hand in it all, he could tell that Tepee Weepy's influence was not necessarily there this time. To his certain knowledge, it had kept hands off Dex all the while he was at the conscientious objector camp; if it had ever tried to push him into military service, the politically connected Cariston dynasty would have shown the Threshold Press War Project what real pull was. No, go over it every way he could find, it kept coming out the same: Dex surely must have enlisted on his own, and matters took their own course from there. A medic for the smoke jumpers, he offered himself as one for the infantry. Another Montanan built rugged enough to tackle jungle life, off he went to the next jungle awaiting invasion. All Tepee Weepy had to do was sit back and keep track, these past several months, and at the right time send Ben out to the Montaneers and there was the story, Dexter Cariston in charge of uniform and conscience. It was heartless, but only heartlessly professional.

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

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

Sourly the operator hit the single key.

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The reply came in a matter of minutes.

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

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

THE ELEVENTH DAY of the eleventh month came white and gray in Helena, sticky snow in the early morning hours and sullen overcast for the afternoon. At the cemetery, Ben and Jake were encased in the coarse military overcoats besides their dress uniforms, but it was cold on the feet. They picked their way through the slushy snow toward the graveside where the Cariston clan and what looked like half of Helena were assembling, Jake grousing at the weather and the war and funerals and the Alaska duty he still was stuck with. "Nome sweet Nome, they ought to give the place back to the Eskimos," he was ending up with. "Thanks for getting me out of that frozen dump for a couple of days for this, I guess."

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

Snow lay in the stone folds of the carved monuments in the section of old Helena families where Dex was being interred. The Cariston family plot was granitic in its standing stones. Oddly as if on perpetual guard, not far away stood the commemorative statue of the World War One doughboy, bayonet fixed in readiness. While Jake was at attention with the rest of the pallbearers and the Presbyterian cadence of the minister went on, Ben was pulled to the statue to make sure of something that had caught his eye. The bronze plaque appeared to be out of proportion to the natural dimensions of the base and as he drew nearer he saw this was not simply an artistic misfire; the list of names of the county's World War One dead stretched so long the plaque barely fit onto the soldier's pedestal of sculpted patch of battleground. Death in war was thought to be a random harvest, but the outsize crop of young lives taken here made a person wonder. Bill Reinking had always said the so-called war to end all wars drained a generation of lifeblood out of Montana. About like this one, his son thought to himself as he turned back to the graveside service.

was Grimly making himself function, Ben wondered what was he looking at in this funeral on this designated day. Was it a thumbing of the nose at any hearers of gossip, any doubters that there had been a brave man—brave enough to risk his life alongside other Montaneers—in Dex Cariston? Was it a salute to Dex's

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depth of conscience against war, burial on the day the world's guns stopped taking lives in 1918? The numerous Caristons with their set Scotch faces were not a family one could see into.

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

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

"You'll see," Ben said.

He took him along to meet Cass.

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

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

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

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

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

The thought sat there, until it was Jake who rumbled, "That's a rough go, for both of you."

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

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

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

"Hi, Scar," she said wistfully.

"How are you holding up?"

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

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

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

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

"Won't we all."

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

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

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

Neither said anything as the car pulled out of town and headed up the long incline out of Helena's valley, past the scrub-

forested Scratchgravel Hills, past the slow-flowing passageway of the Missouri River called the Gates of the Mountains, past the historic baronial sheep ranch with sheds broad and long as hangars. The road back to East Base and the war was winding into the bends of Wolf Creek Canyon shared between colored cliffs and gray river before Jake burst out.

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

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

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

"I'll have to think about that."

"It takes two, Ben."

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

he wouldn't

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