

being sent someplace where people were getting knocked off? I can't blame Cass."

The car moved on in the silence of the canyon, the cuts of the road hemmed to the river now with seams of snow. This was territory for black ice and Jake tapped the brakes a few times to gauge the road surface. Between, he asked:

"So I was the chaperone, back there at the hotel?"

"You guessed it."

Jake gave a large sigh. "First time I was ever picked for that part of the party." He was gauging Ben now. "What did you figure would happen if I hadn't been there?"

"We probably wouldn't have snatched the clothes off each other and gone at it in the lobby, but who the hell knows." He bit the inside of his mouth, a hurt that would shut off. "It doesn't matter now."

"Besides being Mister Priss, do I also get to be Uncle Jake and give you my two bits' worth of advice?"

"I'm in the goddamn car until we get to Great Falls, aren't I."

"You're not the first guy or the last to get in over his head where nature's better half is involved. For what it's worth, you chose an A-1 woman to fall for." The big dark head wagged back and forth as if sure of its ground here. "She's some piece of work. And I mean that in the nicest possible way, okay? So, go a little easy on yourself. Love is maybe meant to get the best of us. What's it for, otherwise?" Jake braked into a curve. "I'll tell you whose shoes I wouldn't want to be in, Cass's. She's got a tough row ahead."

"I didn't know the inactivation part," the words came out of Ben like the last of a bad taste. "She's as batty about flying as you are."

"Pilots are only barely of this earth," Jake said, seeming to mean it.

delete extra space

16

★ DAYS AT EAST BASE were a muddle after that. Ben avoided the flight line, the ready room, any flying-suited flock of WASPS in the distance, all the avenues of everyday that might conceivably lead to Cass. Putting in his time in the office and the wire room, he looked tensed up and narrowed in, like a man out on a limb that no one else could see. And he was.

full caps
TC

Dex's death rattled him to his depths. What shook him even harder was that he found himself seriously questioning the amount of life he himself had ahead. It went against his nature. When you have not yet seen your twenty-fifth birthday you necessarily must feel you are unkillable. Why were you given all that vim if life was not meant to go on? Over and over he told himself to keep a sense of proportion. Eight men killed, when millions were being lost in this insatiable war. Yet from a group you knew best, it was a lot of dead men. And he had been counted into that hexed group from day one, hadn't he, back there on the TSU practice field. What kind of coach's witch's brew was it at that last practice, eleven names on a list jotted by Bruno to start the fatefilled season and sanctified by Loudon's Twelfth Man nonsense? Every man of them destined one after another, their lives

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issuing out in the war like rain falling in an open grave? Ben did not believe in omens and he did not want to believe in jinxes. Statistical quirks were something else, though, if the war kept on being so overpowering it jiggled the odds on almost everything. Sure, you could believe for all you were worth that you were too young and fit and lucky to be chased down by death, but all of accumulated history yawns back, why not you?

STET
that

cap

Ben did not have to struggle with the obvious any too long. *I can't just go on being a target every place Tepee Weepy can think up.* Already unstrung by Cass being gone from him, he did his best to assemble his scattered self, knowing worse consequences were out there waiting if he did not. *Any infirmary sawbones will tell you there's no prescription that works on nervous in the service, Reinking, so get a grip of yourself.* At least Jake had not managed to wangle his way into the flak-filled skies over Germany and remained stuck on the milk run—all right, icewater run—from Fairbanks to Nome. At least Moxie was in some anti-aircraft rear echelon, getting to shoot first at any threats overhead. *I'm going to give it a try, guys. Screwed-up law of averages or not, there's no rule I can see that we have to end up with the others.*

on

↑

OK - matches earlier use

He started what he knew had to be the last battle of words with Tepee Weepy the day after Dex was buried.

The funeral piece he filed spared nothing about the highborn Cariston name joining the oversize list of Helena sacrificial soldiery beneath the doughboy statue, but that was not the issue. Apprehension behind every word, that next day he fed the block-letter sentences one by one to the teletype operator.

cap

END SUPREME TEAM SERIES NOW? GETTING LONELY, JUST WE THREE.

The final line was trickiest of all to come up with, possibly because it was hard to write with fingers crossed.

WHAT IF TOKYO ROSE AND LORD HAW-HAW KNOW HOW TO COUNT.

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S—
N—



"Don't you want me to put a question mark on this, sir?"

"It's not a question, soldier, it's a supposition. Just send it."

Nothing came back that day, no matter how much Ben hung around the wire room and mooched coffee and sprang alert every time a teletype bell went off. *Come on, you TPWP SOB's. Answer. Call off the damned series. Or are you going to tell me and the couple of thousand newspaper editors watching for this byline you set me up with that eight dead heroes aren't enough?*

full caps ital

The days after that, he sent Jones to check for a reply so many times that at last the corporal just gave him a funny look and started off before he could get the words out. Finally, at week's end, a wire room clerk stuck his face in the doorway and said there was a five-bell message waiting.

TPWP MINDFUL OF HAW-HAW AND TOKYO ROSE.

FULLY INTEND ENEMY PROPAGANDA WILL NOT SCORE BIG ON SUPREME TEAM. SERIES WILL BE MODIFIED. DETAILS FOLLOW SOON.

full caps

cap 2x

Ben read and re-read the sheet of wire copy for what it said and did not say. That damned "modify" again. The Tepee Weepy meaning of SOON was also clear as mud. He plainly enough had their attention, though, with that dig about what the master propagandists in Berlin and Tokyo could do with the obliteration of any more of the team. *So, okay, that does spook them and it's up to me to keep them spooked.* Immediately he holed up in his office and went back to block-letter work.

e

MODIFY IS MIDDLE NAME HERE AT EAST BASE. HOW ABOUT WRAPUP PIECE ON STAMPER AND EISMAN AS SURVIVORS?

cap 2x

Again, a last line onto that was the hard stunt. Before deciding whether to send all three, he had Jones bring him the regulations to see what it took to be court-martialed for insubordination. Not that much. He sucked in his cheeks and had the third sentence sent anyway. FIRST THEY MUST SURVIVE.

-S
-N

Tepee Weepy's response practically jumped out of the teletype, the bells chorusing before he had even turned around to leave the wire room.

WRAPUP PIECE IS SHARED GOAL. YOU WILL GIVE IT SHINE AND SHADOW AT RIGHT TIME, RIGHT PLACE.

Ben waited expectantly for the clerk to pass him the next decoded sentences. The clerk shrugged and held up empty hands.

"That's it? It can't be, look again."

"I already did. That's all they wrote, sir."

Fuming, Ben stoked up on coffee and claimed a vacant desk there in the wire room. He jotted and wadded three versions before hitting on the one that upped the ante unmistakably enough.

UNSURE I CAN TOUGH IT OUT UNTIL RIGHT TIME, RIGHT PLACE. ILLNESS DISCUSSED WHEN COLONEL HERE MAY RECUR. DIAGNOSIS NOT SO HOT, DETAILS MIGHT HELP WITH CURE.

Get it, Colonel and your partners in manufacturing the news? I damn sure am sick of guys from the team turning into dead men whenever the sonofabitching war feels like it, whatever the odds are supposed to be. If you can't pull strings to save Jake's skin and Moxie's and for that matter mine, then kick me out with a dishonorable piece of paper for refusing orders, see if I goddamn care. I may be blackballed for life, but at least I'll be in one piece. He sent this message knowing he really was playing a thin hand now, but gambling that Tepee Weepy had its own stake in keeping him in the game.

ILLNESS UNDERSTOOD, the answer clattered back within minutes. PLAN IS TO HONOR STAMPER, EISMAN, YOU, AS SURVIVORS OF SUPREME TEAM SAGA. FEELING BETTER?

Hovering at the clerk's shoulder, he sent right back:

cap

cap (2x)

SOME. WAITING TO SEE WHAT MEDICINE IS INVOLVED.

The wait this time stretched his nerves to the sagging point. It was growing dark enough outside for the five bells of the TPWP wire machine to constitute a vesper serenade before the return message began coming in.

full capes

MANDATORY BURN THIS AFTER YOU READ.

I guess I have their attention. "Loan me your lighter and nab a clean butt can for a bonfire." The clerk sighed and complied.

The whacking teletype keys seemed to spell out the message with particular emphasis now.

STAMPER IS FINAL STORY, BLAZE OF GLORY, ALL THAT.

"Quick, shoot this off to them." Ben was grabbing for the notepad.

"You want me to break in on a priority message from Washington?"

"You heard me." He jotted the words big and bold and handed them to the reluctant clerk. WHERE IS STAMPER, ANYWAY?

STAMPER STATIONED WITH NEW ACK-ACK UNIT AT HQ EUROPEAN THEATRE. VITAL DRAMATIC STORY THERE.

Ben paused over that. Supreme headquarters where the invasion of Europe had been planned and carried out ~~were~~ in England. England meant London, and every correspondent from Ernie Pyle to Hemingway had a soft spot for London and the British, so dauntless under the bombing of the Luftwaffe in the first years of the war. He had learned to love the old city himself in his early stint of reporting there, and now the Luftwaffe bombers had been driven from the sky over Great Britain and even the rocket buzz bomb attacks were reported to have dropped off sharply. There was second allure in what Tepee Weepy was proposing; while he could not have put a name to her, Mnemosyne once more was gliding forth from the eternal grove with that double handful of tantalizing choice. If the Allied forces took Berlin by the end of

was
?
Style: should this be "was"?
Up to you.

-S
-N

the year, as everyone was saying could happen, London would be a fine place to write the one thing guaranteed to preserve Jake and Moxie and himself, the story that the war itself was dead.

Ben cast his lot. I'M LISTENING.

AS WE WERE SAYING, the TPWP teletype implacably resumed. STAMPER A SHORT-TERMER NOW IN ACK-ACK DUTY. HE WILL BE MUSTERED OUT WITH COMMENDATIONS AND APPROPRIATE CEREMONY, OVER THERE, THEN BRING HIM HOME AS HERO. EISMAN TO BE HERO BY THEN TOO, LONGEST-SERVING ATC PILOT ON ALASKA RUN, ALSO WILL BE MUSTERED OUT. SATISFIED?

full gaps

It was a better bargain than he'd thought he could get: Jake would not be going to Europe, would not be at risk from Nazi flak and concentration camp. With a sense of relief, he sent back: FEELING BETTER ALL THE TIME.

GLAD CURE IS TAKING HOLD. WIND UP AFFAIRS AT EAST BASE NEXT FEW WEEKS. EARLY DECEMBER YOU WILL PROCEED FORTHWITH TO—

At first he thought the clerk at the Tepee Weepy end had garbled together some wrong keys in typing the ultimate word. Then he still had to think for a moment where Antwerp was.

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★ BELGIUM HAD BEEN a main road in two world wars, Ben knew that much, every schoolkid knew that much. It was notoriously easy for the Kaiser's army in 1914 and the Führer's in 1940 to rumble into the supposedly neutral low country where the port of Antwerp faced out alluringly into the entire maritime world. Back to Napoleon and Wellington, back greatly farther than that in the centuries-long swash of war as European monarchies contended for that foothold on the North Sea, the Belgians' lot had been to prosper cautiously during intervals of peace and to suffer foreign occupation as soon as the cannons were fired. Now, glory be to the dazed and half-starved little country, the four-year Nazi grip on Belgium had been wrenched free by a surprise British offensive after the D-Day landings. "Surprise" scarcely said it; General Montgomery's tanks thrust north out of Normandy with such astounding rapidity that German forces emptied out of Belgian cities in mad haste. In particular, they unwisely abandoned Antwerp without taking time to sabotage the strategic waterfront along the River Scheldt and its mouth into the North Sea. There it sat, the prize port with its nicely intact docks and locks and cranes, and the Allied high command lost no time in turning Antwerp's dockland into the supply conduit

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Field
 Marshal
 by 1944
 OK, good

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-N

for the final push on into Germany. Which, Ben could see, meant defending Antwerp against air raids as the Germans might seek to make up for their error of hasty evacuation. Which, also as far as he could see, meant duty as usual for anti-aircraft batteries such as Moxie Stamper's. *Keep your damn head down for a few weeks more, Mox, and we're home free.*

DAYS WERE HECTIC, nights were forlorn, as he readied to leave for Europe. There was a last quick visit home for Thanksgiving, his mother to be soothed, his father to be bolstered. The soldier's oldest ordeal before shipping out, how much to say to loved ones, how much not to say.

Afterward, expecting it day after day as he was, the message from TPWP finally came like a blurted order:

DEPART TOMORROW.

First, a farewell to Jones that they both found hard to deal with.

Next, in an icy December dawn at East Base, he boarded a C-47, acutely conscious he was carrying with him what little was left of the law of averages.

full caps

"BILL, IT'S NEARLY midnight, you know. Or maybe the time got away from you."

"You're not exactly tucked into bed yourself, Cloyce."

"I needed an aspirin." She hesitated at the doorway, then came into his lair of books and snuggled into the easy chair across from his desk, tucking the lacy hem of her nightgown under her knees. Unaccustomed as they were to this any more, they glanced at each other a bit shyly and then out the window to the whitened town. Flakes were coming down featherlike, yet every so often the wind dislodged a branchload from the cottonwood trees, producing a commotion like white dust rising back

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up, more clods falling within it. The all-but-silent crash of snow lent an otherworldly quality to this night, the first of many such the two of them were going to have to get used to.

“Where do you think he is by now?” Cloyce asked in a hushed voice.

Bill cleared his throat. “The Long Island field, maybe.” All during the day he had studied Ben’s route on the wall map of the *Gleaner* office every time he glanced up. New York. Newfoundland. Greenland. Iceland. England. Europe and whatever that portended.

“At least we did get to see him,” she mused, as if still trying out for her role as mother. “Even if it was slim pickings as holidays go.”

It was not a Spam Thanksgiving as she had warned Ben in his last-minute phone call that it might need to be, but it was venison pot roast, dry and gamy, procured by Bill in some manner that he would not divulge. The guests’ dishes similarly tasted of improvisation: Carnelia Muntz’s tomato-soup-and-olives aspic, without the olives; Mae Vennaman’s dried apple pie, craftily achieved with saved sugar coupons. A decidedly mixed review, Cloyce told herself, but better than none. The duration sat right up to the table with them all, and the talk among the older people, which was everyone but Ben, kept coming back to whether the war would be over by the end of the year. “Sure,” Ben had replied, “I just don’t know what year.” It had drawn a laugh from everyone except his parents.

Now Cloyce gauged her husband and what was stacked in front of him on the desk. “You’ve been reading it again, haven’t you.”

Nodding, he reached around and squared the pages of the script. “You’re the expert, but I’d call it one hell of a movie.”

“You’re right, it’s a wonderful work.” She paused, the tip of

→ 2x (adj.)

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her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "They actually did that to the Purcell boy?" It both was a question and not.

"They did. Ben has a first-hand source."

"I just wish he hadn't been so dramatic about leaving it with us," she murmured. "Mother, Dad," his words still were in the air of the house, "if I don't make it back, do what you can with this, okay?"

Bill Reinking smiled gently. Just sitting there in her nightgown, she looked ready for a director to sing out *Action!* "I can't imagine where he gets it from."

She gave back a soft laugh, then looked out into the sift of snow again. "I would give years off my own life to have kept Ben from being sent into danger all the time." She turned her gaze to Bill. "I did try, you know."

"How would I?" His head dipped as he looked at her through the very tops of his glasses. "You never said so, Cloyce."

She smiled the slightest bit. "That's what comes of living with newspapermen. If I'd told you, it would have gone right into his ear." The smile flicked off. "As you can tell, I couldn't get the job done. All those family friends in Washington, Bill? People my parents were thick as thieves with in the old days? Not a one of them," her tone deadly level, "would find a safe spot for our only son." It was not like her to curse, but she found the coldness of voice for it now. "The short-memored bastards."

Bill touched the script again. "If—we have to do something with this, do you think you can?"

Her chin came up. "That's different, thank goodness. The Carteret name still means something at Zanuck's studio and some of the others." She nodded slowly. "I can get them to read *The Ghost Runner* and that's all it will take, I guarantee you. Ben's movie will be made, it's too good not to."

Cloyce saw her husband's mood uncloud just a bit and smiled

e webs

further encouragement to him. "Ben will get to tend to that himself," she said firmly. "I told him I was counting on him for New Year's again."

HE WAS COOLING his heels in a few hours' layover in Newfoundland when a clerk tracked him down.

"Sir? Are you the TPWP captain? I'm from the wire room. Message there for you."

Wondering *What now?*, he let the soldier lead him to the communications building. The teletype sheet was ripped and ready, waiting for him. He read it, went outside and threw up in the snow.

A WEEK. AND I didn't have so much as a goddamn hint about it. Jake's plane had been missing on the flight between Fairbanks and Nome for seven days, the official time for giving an aircraft and its crew up for lost. Oblivion of the worst kind; it was not known whether the B-17 bomber perished in the Alaskan mountains or the Bering Sea. Ben felt as if his soul had been operated on, an essence of life cut out of him. *Why Jake? Why now?* There in the Newfoundland cold, he tried to grapple himself together. Back in to the wire room. Dull jots on the message pad, handed to the clerk to be sent to Tepee Weepy.

I NEED TIME.

Tersely TPWP arranged a layover until the next morning's flight to Europe.

HE SPENT A terrible day, wrestling the words out.

Sky-high in his hundred-mission crush hat, loud as a good takeoff, Lt. Jacob Eisman flew through life amending the laws of gravity as he went. He was Jake to the world, and jake with us, those who knew him in all his big ways.

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A line, two, would come, and then he would have to abandon the typewriter, go outside to clear his head in the elemental Newfoundland weather.

He came to this war from a thousand years of one-sided battles, his family becoming American—All-American in the finest truest use of those words—out of a past ridden over by Cossacks too many times. And by one of the quirks war is so good at, he piloted bombers to Russian comrades waiting in Alaska, back door to Siberia, in the airborne supply line to the Eastern Front where the largest battles in history are being fought.

At the end, he sought out the base library to look it up.

“The dear love of comrades,” wrote one of us who knew how to make words sing. Walt Whitman inscribed that out of his service as a nurse in the Civil War, another chapter of lost good men. Jake Eisman would have shaken his big outrageous Cheshire-cat head over those words, but no man in uniform ever earned them more.

Late that night, he filed the finished piece to TPWP. In the morning, he was back in a plane, somewhere over the gray cold North Atlantic, descending the latitudes to the older world.

ANTWERP’S AIRDROME LOOKED like a military costume party. Ben understood that this rear-area supply sector was a joint command, with an American general serving under Belgium’s liberator, the British tank tactician Montgomery. But Allied armed forces seemed to have proliferated far beyond that on this airfield. Belgian military types stationed themselves here and there, beaming in welcome but not notably in English. Over by the ’drome canteen a small herd of Free French brass was being met by an American liaison officer who looked overwhelmed. Elsewhere, coveys of soldiers in what appeared to be outmoded British uniforms were gabbling in some dour strange language; Ben at length figured out they must be Polish troops who until now

full caps

had fought the war from England. Looking around futilely for any sign of a motor pool and a familiar U.S. Army driver to be conscripted, he wondered if he was lingually up to this. *So far, it's as bad as when Sig sneaked up on me in Japanese and I didn't know what the hell to—*

An officer, stubby and bright-eyed, stepped in front of him. Amid the wardrobe explosion of uniforms it took Ben a moment to identify this one as British, the sainted Royal Air Force.

"Captain Reinking, is it?"

The mellifluous accent issued from a boyish ruddy face with a nose on it like the round end of a hammer. From that ballpeen nose on down, the blue-clad officer was built about as square as a man could be without a loading pallet under him. "I trust you had a good flight? I'm Leftenant Overby. Assigned to you, it seems. Your liaison to the sector communications branch."

Ben did not like the looks of this. By this stage of the war, he had caught the enlisted men's aversion to fresh-faced lieutenants; that first syllable dangerously rhymed with "new" and green loo-eyes were trouble in combat. He wasn't looking for combat, but he wasn't looking for whatever trouble might come with this British version of shavetail, either. "Lieut—Leftenant," he acknowledged this one with a dubious nod.

"I'm instructed to see to your needs," the pleasant tumble of words ensued again, "show you the ins and outs of the ticker room, and all that. Oh, and your mother branch—TPWP, if I have the alphabet mix right?—sends its regards. Let's see, I copied it off: 'END ZONE IN SIGHT. BRIEF TIMEOUT. HUDDLE UP, SCORING PLAY IS ON WAY.'" The RAF man glanced up at him with polite reserve. "A bit over our heads in the code department, I'm afraid, and we do hope we managed to decipher it correctly. Make sense to you, does it, captain?"

Nothing they ever do does, but I get the gist. "It's their sweet way of saying hurry up and wait."

webs

full caps

cap

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“Ah, well, then, military business as usual, isn’t it. Shall we?” Overby swept the travel pack out of Ben’s grasp, hovered the merest instant over the etiquette of grabbing the typewriter case too, and left that untouched. “I’ll drive you to your billet.”

Ben did not budge. “Let me catch up with what we’re doing—where is it?” He was determined not to be dumped in some Antwerp hotel the Nazis had pillaged for four years.

“Not to worry, captain, we’re in bunkers,” Overby replied patiently. “It would require a direct hit to do a person in, and there have been comparatively few of those here on the airfield.”

Bunkers? Here? The inconspicuous airfield looked like a hastily transformed cow pasture—the runway the plane had trundled in on was composed of the metal mats that engineers could lay down in a hurry and the buildings were drab military prefabs—but now that Ben looked again, the open flat uncamouflaged terrain all around left the place as exposed as a beached aircraft carrier. Direct hits were a topic worth pursuing. “Comparatively few compared to what?”

“The city, of course.” Overby indicated to the low rough skyline of Antwerp barely visible through the gray air some little distance away. “Poor old Antwerpen town,” his tone dropped to tragic, “is receiving a battering about like London’s was.”

About like—? Suspicious of being hazed as a newcomer, Ben fixed a dead-level gaze on the RAF officer. “You better spell that out for me, too. Where’s the battering come from?” He knew any bombardment in this sector could not be from artillery, the German ground forces had been driven back nearly into Germany itself, the fighting front the last he’d heard was in the Ardennes Forest over a hundred miles away. And while the German air command no doubt could crank up occasional nuisance air raids or Moxie’s anti-aircraft battery wouldn’t have been sent here, everyone knew Allied fighter planes ruled the skies of Europe by

10

cap

the time of D-Day. "I thought the Luftwaffe was supposed to be on its last legs."

"Quite," came the bland response. "The buzz bombs are ever with us, however. Fifty-some flying bombs in one day, in the worst of last week."

For a marginal few seconds, Ben wondered if it was too late to get back on the plane.

"Not that we censors," Overby raised an eyebrow a cautionary fraction, "like for that to become common knowledge, if you please, Captain."

"We' censors?"

"I wanted to fly Spitfires, but someone determined a red pencil was more my speed." He hefted the travel pack again. "Ready, are we?"

"No, we are not. The billet can wait. I want to be taken to Captain Moxie Stamper's ack-ack battery. You're informed enough about why I'm here to know where that is, right?"

The lieutenant sent him a quick hard look. Down went the pack, and he took off his cap and ran a hand contemplatively over a dome of bald head. With the cap absent, Ben could see Overby was a good deal older and more seasoned than he'd first seemed. A lip was being chewed dubiously in the ruddy face. "It's a bit of a step—a fair number of miles, forth and back."

"I don't care how far it is."

"Not a problem, then." Overby set his cap as if aiming it on a compass heading and moved off with the travel pack, leading Ben to a hard-used jeep. "Away we go, Captain."

THE JEEP RATTLED along a cobblestone road so worn down that the Duke of Wellington's troops might have marched on it. Ben realized Antwerp was farther away than it had appeared from the airfield, the murky constant half-fog of the low country

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making it tricky to judge distance. Overby at the steering wheel seemed intent on making up for the lost career as a Spitfire pilot; every time he took a curve at a leaning angle, Ben missed Jones and his old-maid driving.

"The heater's up as much as it will go," Overby informed him as if he had asked. "Comfy?"

"Enough." Actually he felt highly uncomfortable with the weighty .45 automatic strapped on his right hip. When the Britisher or whatever he was proffered the weapon, web belt, and holster to him before setting out, he'd tried to turn it down with "I'm a correspondent, I don't pack a gun."

"I'm afraid you're in for a lot of bother if you decline to," Overby had launched into. "Top command's orders. The military police are instructed to pick up anyone off-base without at least a sidearm, and it must be loaded at all times. Of course, it is an individual decision whether or not one puts the gun to use, but that is a different cup of tea from whether one must carry—"

"Okay, okay," he had cut off the discourse, "give me the damn thing. You're responsible if I shoot my foot off." Now he was back to trying to figure out how much to trust this Overby. *Assigned to me in what way? To keep an eye on me for Tepee Weepy so I don't mess up their hoopla for Moxie? To lay down his coat for me every time I cross a mud puddle? To pull out his red pencil when I—*

Brakes screeching, the jeep pulled to a stop, facing a moving wall of military trucks and a frowning MP directing traffic. They had come to a ring road, at what looked to be a couple of miles out from the edge of Antwerp. "Convoys run day and night from the port," Overby raised his voice to be heard over the rumble of the trucks. "You're seeing the main supply line to the front." They watched the big Army 6x6's carrying food, fuel, medicine and munitions roll by as if on an assembly line until at last there was a slight break in the traffic. The MP danced aside in the intersection and motioned hurry-up, and the jeep shot across.

"You were posted to England," Overby picked right back up, evidently duty-bound to make conversation, "earlier in the war, Captain? You saw something of the Blitz, then?"

"That's right, Lieu—Leftenant. Look, can we go by first names?"

"Assuredly, if you prefer." He tapped an attache case lodged between the seats with Lt. Maurice Overby RAF stenciled on it.

"Same song, second verse," Ben said. "Does that translate to 'Morris' or 'Moreese'?"

"Either, actually. Whichever I try to specify, half of the human herd get it wrong anyway."

"I'll go with 'Moreese,' it makes me feel like I'm in distinguished company." He still was trying to solve the RAF subaltern's mannerisms. "I wouldn't say I can always tell Hackney from cockney, but you don't sound like anyone I was ever around on bases in England."

"Oh, heavens no," accompanied by a scoffing chuckle at any trace of Englishness. Maurice was navigating past spates of Belgians on bicycles, men and women both and nearly all as thin as living scarecrows, close enough to reach out and touch. "New Zealand's my home—the real country, south of the Bombay Hills. Place called Christchurch."

"Well, sonofagun," Ben pulled his attention away from Belgium moving past on spokes and wheels, "Erewhon, huh?"

"You know of it? This is magical!" Maurice showed genuine enthusiasm for the first time. "Not many people can locate 'no-where' spelled backwards, more or less. A devotee of the works of old Samuel Butler, are you then, Ben?"

"Not especially, read him some in college. Odd facts run in the family."

"I know it's only a book done where I was bred and raised," nostalgia wafted from behind the steering wheel, "but still, old Sam caught the country around Christchurch to the very

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c/se roman

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blades of grass. To this day, freshets off his pages play against my pores.”

“Maurice? Not to put too fine a point to this, but what in hell did you do in civilian life?”

“I professed,” the occupant of the jeep driver’s seat said as though it was perfectly obvious. “I was professor of rhetoric and argumentation there at Canterbury College. The war rather took care of that. The Japanese were closing in on Australia, and New Zealand looked to be next, so I joined up to fight for the homeland”—he looked aside at his uniformed passenger—“didn’t we all. Naturally, the instant I had my commission, I was seconded to London. Plopped into the RAF, plopped again into the communications branch, put in charge of a pencil. Daft of the higher-ups, but there you are.” He glanced over again. “You’re a considerable word man yourself, as I understand it, the byline and all.”

Ben shifted the aggravating .45 on his hip. “Tepee Weepy seems to think so or they wouldn’t keep sending me to places like this.”

“Tepee—? Oh, ha. Very good.”

In what amounted to a blink at the rate Maurice drove, they passed one last open field and were in the city, aged three- and four-story housefronts with steep crenulated gables and tall skinny chimneys suddenly everywhere. An unwilling spectator to any more misery of war, Ben had to spectate nonetheless. Antwerp had gone gaunt during the occupation years, the German army had seen to that. The fresher depredation was even more shocking, cavities in the crowded-together streets of homes and shops where buzz bombs had found their target and taken out a building or two. At some such sites, hunched men in flat caps and women in flimsy lace kerchiefs picked through the rubble. At others, everything lay in a dead heap. From the doorways of scarred houses still standing, children so tattered and bony they

looked feral jumped out toward the jeep and in Flemish accent shouted the universal “Hey, Andy, any candy? Any gum, chum?” Ben had steeled himself for this bomb-torn tour with the hope that it would be his last of the war. Even so, as the route wound through scene after scene of devastation he felt dismay to the pit of his stomach; Maurice had not been stretching the truth, this was sickeningly like London during the Blitz. The jeep twisted its way around a set of corners—there did not seem to be a straight street in Antwerp—into a neighborhood of sizable abandoned shops that seemed even more forlorn and tortured than others they had passed. “The diamond district, largely Jewish, before,” Maurice covered a dazzling history of gem merchantry with the sad wave of a hand.

The streets began to show more life near the market squares in the center of the city. Ben stared up at the Old World guild-halls, ornamented to a frenzy. He couldn’t tell if the architecture was meant to be baroque or rococo—perhaps barocco—and there were constant glimpses of a stone-lace cathedral spiked atop it all. Everything with the crust of centuries on it. “All older than dirt, isn’t it,” Maurice read his thoughts. “Just think,” he expanded on that, “a hundred and fifty years before the first four ships made port in New Zealand and while red Indians still ruled over Montana, Rubens was in there”—another indicative sweep of the hand—“painting fleshy maidens and grazing as he went.”

“What, there?” The tall-standing house with a stepped peak looked like any of Antwerp’s others worn down by time and grime. “That was his passion pit?”

“Hypothetically,” Maurice threw into the air, and drove onward through the petrified streets.

Shortly they were going past emplacements of heavy automatic weapons every few blocks, sighted toward the sky and crews at the ready. Ben recognized British Polsten guns, basic and lethal with

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the telescope-like barrel and prominent fin of magazine, from the airbase outside London where he had last spent time with Moxie. *Two years ago already. If "already" means anything in this war.* He remarked on how numerous the anti-aircraft gunners suddenly were, and Maurice allowed as how there were quite a few assigned to Antwerp, twenty thousand or so.

Ben's head snapped around. "An entire army *division* of ack-ack troops?"

"Quite. It's about the port, of course." Maurice simultaneously blew his nose, steered through another avalanche of rubble laying in the street from a set of destroyed buildings, and talked on. "The Huns are damnably serious about putting it out of commission with their buzz bombs. So, the official thinking is, those must be shot down. However much gunnery it takes."

The anti-aircraft guns grew in size and number as Antwerp began to dwindle into villages and countryside. To Ben it all had the feel of a city-size castle, half as old as time, with catapults set at the outskirts to keep invaders at a distance. The strategy, as Maurice laid it out, was to have belts of artillery across the approach path of the flying bombs, which the Germans luckily were only able to launch one by one. If the first arc of ack-ack fire didn't bring down the rocket bomb, the next semi-circle of guns a mile or so farther in still had a crack at it, and last of all, those swarms of heavy automatic weapons they had seen at the near side of the city. The gun battery Moxie commanded was in the outermost belt, the one that had to take on incoming buzz bombs headfirst—*oh hell yes, that's where he would be*, Ben resigned himself to. Open exposed country lay between Moxie's flak alley and the middle one they had just driven through, and Maurice considerably announced: "Hold onto your seat—we go flat to the boards here across this bit." He floored the accelerator and the jeep hurtled across the stretch of smudgy damp landscape.

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In the rush of bitterly chill air Ben huddled in his flight jacket, wishing he had the horse blanket overcoat on. Maurice Overby was burning red with cold but seemed unperturbed as he aimed the jeep at a roadblock out from a line of long gun barrels poking out of sandbagged pits.

They were looked over by tommygun-carrying American G.I.s, obviously primed for business, and let through. Maurice parked the jeep in the shelter of what he hoped aloud was a parts shed and not a munitions dump. They had no more than climbed out when a figure with a certain familiar slouchy grace detached itself from the crew in the nearest gun pit and approached them.

Even when you knew it was coming, the voice went right under the skin.

“Well, well, the famous Captain Reinking. That what brings you here, Ben buddy? To be Rhine King when we whip the Krauts, write up the last chapter for the folks back home?”

Ben caught up with the other familiarities: the glint in the eyes as if reflecting off something hard; the complexion like steel dust; and Moxie Stamper still wore a helmet, albeit one meant to withstand falling flak fragments, the same way he had in football, tipped back just a trifle enough to look cocky.

“You know for a fact that we’ve about got them whipped,” Ben refused to be nettled before they even shook hands, “do you, Mox?”

“I sure as shit don’t,” the voice momentarily lost its edge. On fuller inspection, Moxie looked as tired as a man could and still be on his feet. There was a tic where a dimple would have been on a face less sharp than his. Never one to fuss with clothes, he had let his uniform become a size too big for his war-worn frame. He jerked his head to the province of dim sky over the ack-ack guns. “It gets your attention that the SOBs in Berlin don’t seem to run out of these overgrown fireworks.”

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Ben made up for lost time with a hasty introduction of Maurice, Moxie sizing him up from the brim of his Tommy helmet to the shiny RAF blue trousers. He barked a laugh. "Overby, hey? So I finally get to meet the devil with the red pencil—the intelligence briefers about piss their pants when they talk about 'Baldy the censor.'" lc

Letting that sail by, Maurice said: "Ah, HQ's ignorance branch, also known as the intelligence branch. We do have our differences on occasion." He smiled at Moxie in a reserved way. "Better to be bald on the outside than on the in, I remind myself."

Moxie scowled. Ben jumped in with: "Before we all get carried away with teatime manners—do you know about Jake?"

The expression on Moxie darkened some more. "You start off that way, it doesn't sound like the Iceman is in good health."

"His plane—" When Ben finished the telling, Moxie turned away a step or two and gazed into the gray distance.

"Damn it all," he said over his shoulder. "Who would've thought the whole smear of us would end up you and me? I hope you're carrying a good luck piece, Rhine King. Because," he swung around to Ben, the gaze hardening, "you have more balls than brains for hauling yourself over here into this."

Thanks all to hell, Moxie. Remind me to try to save your life—okay, mine along with it—again sometime. Caught flatfooted by Moxie's accusing glower, he tried to read what was behind it and was not coming up with anything. What, you don't get it that we're each other's ticket out of the war? λ

Patient as pudding, Maurice had stood aside during all this, but now moved in before Ben could say anything. "Captain Stamper, I believe you're being beckoned."

A gunnery sergeant was poking his head out of the pit. "One incoming, Cap," he called out. "Five minutes."

Moxie took charge before the words were out of the air. "Acknowledged, Smitty. Get on the horn to fire control and the

spotters”—Ben could not help but hear come into the voice the snap of cadence used for good effect in football huddles—“tell them smoke break and grab-ass is over. And chew out the loaders on Charlie gun while you’re at it, yesterday they were slower than a three-legged race.” He glanced at Ben and Maurice as though they were an afterthought. “It’s time to shoot something down. If I was you two, I’d get my butt in back of those sandbags over there.”

The pair of them hustled behind the head-high stack between gun pits, Ben asking: “They can track the things that far out?”

“Radar, yes, but it’s not so much that,” Maurice replied, checking his wristwatch. “When the Germans are at this, they launch one every quarter of an hour. They’re quite Teutonic about that habit, in the worst sense. Oh, right, that prods the old memory box. Here,” he dug in a flap pocket of his uniform for something, “as a healthy measure, carry this with you when you’re out and about.”

Ben looked in bafflement at what he had been handed. It appeared to be a pocket watch, but with only one hand and no crystal.

“It’s a cocotte clock, in case you’re wondering,” the explanation was diplomatically put. “A chef’s timer, actually, but French prostitutes use these to keep track of the various phases of their services. I have done the necessary research.” Maurice paused dreamily. “Ah, Paris. What was that term you used—passion pit?” His brow cleared and he returned to the business at hand. “Set it for ten minutes after each buzz bomb. Gives you five to look around for shelter before the next one arrives.”

“Swell, Maurice. I’ll see if I can get used to kissing myself goodbye on short notice.” Ben sagged against the sandbags to wait, and took stock. In the same opalescent Belgian sky that had looked down on the foot soldiers of Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, a robot bomb was on its way. After it blindly fell

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and did its killing or not, the next one could be tracked in by a timepiece that ordinarily ticked off sessions of bed games. This was a war like no other. Or did writers always say that.

Ducking lower and yanking at Ben's sleeve for him to do the same, Maurice wordlessly pointed to a metal sliver cutting the sky. Unable to take his eyes off the object clipping toward them at six miles a minute, Ben had the sensation of everything in him pausing, waiting helplessly for the blind bomb with a tail of flame to pass over or not. Then the roars of the anti-aircraft artillery slammed through him.

FOR SOMETHING THAT sought its target by falling from the sky, a V-1 rocket was oddly nautical, built like an oversize torpedo and traveling with the rumble of a loud motorboat. When that throb stopped, terror began. Any V-1 in its silent dive to the ground brought with it a two-thousand-pound warhead primed to go off on impact. During the long weeks of V-1 ordeal, that feeling of the heart skipping its beats while awaiting doom or survival was the erratic pulse of Antwerp.

PUFFS OF BLUE smoke clouded the air over the gun pits, the long snouts firing, firing, firing as the crews worked madly. Flak bursts dotted the sky behind the flying bomb, then suddenly nearer as the gunners began to get the range and aim off in front of it, leading it as a hunter would a fast-flying duck. The ack-ack noise was unceasing yet somehow everyone knew to the instant when the throb, the buzz, of the bomb cut off and it began to dive. Right at that moment, a proximity shell exploded alongside it and the V-1 faltered in its trajectory, falling away into a field where it burst with a flash of orange flame.

One more time, Ben felt the moving wall of oblivion shift away, and with the tremor of the exploding buzz bomb, settle to a stop. At least temporarily. Another tug on his sleeve. Mau-

rice was setting his cocotte clock and reminding him to do the same.

They scrambled out from behind the sandbags and over to where Moxie had emerged from the gun pit. Helmet off, running a hand through his thatch of wiry black hair, he looked drained. To their accolades of "Well done" and "Nice shooting," he simply stood there, all the swagger gone, eyes fixed on the distant bright spot of burning rocket wreckage. "We get nine out of ten of them," he said tonelessly. "About as good as can be done." He glanced down at his steel helmet as though it held something he did not want to see, then put it on and shifted his focus to Ben. "Night control takes over at 0500, it gets dark so christly early here. I'll meet you at the O Club after chow. I've got a bone to pick with you, don't I." He turned his back on them and strode off, yelling for the ordnance sergeant to hurry up with the ammunition supply.

"Rough as guts, isn't he," Maurice Overby said mildly. "Shall we return to the charms of Antwerp?"

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Now you hear it, now you don't.
The bomb, the bomb, the abominable flying bomb.
If it hits you, then you won't.
The bomb, the bomb, the bastardly buzzing bomb.

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The gathering of British officers around the piano warbled more closely in tune than any Officers Club songsters Ben had ever experienced. *Must be all those boy choirs.* Despite the Brit monopoly on the music, the crowd in the cavernous bunker had a more American flavor than the one in the airdrome, including an occasional heart-quickenng note of feminine laughter from scattered flocks of Army nurses and such. Some wag had painted up an over-the-door sign in Germanic letters christening the place The Wonder Bar. It made Ben wonder, all right. Sitting isolated amid the hubbub fifteen feet underground, wrung

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We need to indicate this is a change of scene.

out from the double journey through Antwerp's circles of buzz bomb hell—*Why can't the glee club stay to "The White Cliffs of Dover"?*—he felt as if this had been the longest day of his life. Overlapping with that was the awareness that he had thought the same thing trekking out of the Canadian woods with Jake. And wading ashore at Guam with Animal. And healing on the hospital ship off New Guinea after the ambush with Carl. The list could go on, nearly as long as the war. *Not that anyone other than you is keeping track, Reinking, but how many longest days can a guy stand in one life?* Beer helped, luckily. Trying to force yourself to relax is much like pouring into the wrong end of a funnel, but sip by sip in the vaulted concrete room full of strangers' racket, he took refuge in that sensation of a place where nobody knows you're you. *Yet.*

He was on his second beer, and the Brits were going operatic about how many balls Hitler, Goering, Himmler, and Goebbels had in total, when Moxie joined him at the table, scowling toward the piano crowd. "That pissant Noel Coward has a lot to answer for, if you ask me—they all think they're him." He checked his watch and slumped down into the chair opposite Ben.

"Here." Ben shoved across a bottle he had put aside for him. "Beer is known to settle the nerves."

"Who said they need settling?" Well, thought Ben, the facial tic, for one. Moxie in the old days had the nerves of a snake handler. He was always the holder for point-after kicks, unfazed by linemen half again his size hurtling at him as he delicately set the ball in place for Vic Rennie's foot. He had commendations and captain's bars to show for courage under those England years of air raids. Now as he did quick damage to the beer and kept darting glances around the room, with a special dose of contempt for the singing piano warriors, it was all too clear that what had been Moxie's ornery bravado had turned into just ornery.

“Guess what, you’re kind of grumpy, for a short-termer.” Ben’s own mood was not one of his best. “What’s eating you?”

“Short-termer,” Moxie scoffed, “in an ass-backwards way. I’ve been extended. But you know all about that from A to Why, don’t you.”

The coldly spoken words sent a clammy sense of dread into Ben. “Mox, slow down and talk sense, will you? I don’t know a rat’s ass worth about you being extended.”

Moxie studied him without so much as a blink. “Well, then, let’s just go over this, Ben old buddy.” As usual, there was about as much give in him as an ice pick. “The adjutant calls me in, the first of the month. Says my new orders have just come in. I’m standing there expecting the million-dollar handshake and the plane home, and instead he tells me I’ve been extended indefinitely. Back I go, to the goddamn ack-ack and buzz bombs. Next thing, you show up. You think I don’t know when somebody screws me over, Rhine King? Was it your own bright idea to get me held until the Germans give up, so you can have your nice story—the last of the team makes it to the end of the war? That is just so shitty, Reinking, and I—”

Slamming a hand down on the table so hard the beer bottles teetered, Ben put a period to Moxie’s rush of words. “If anybody is screwing you over, it’s not me. I’m here because you were due to get that handshake and a pat on the butt and be sent home, goddamn it. If it was up to me, we’d both be out of here before I finish this sentence.” He was furious with Moxie and that mouth of his like a cheap pistol, constantly ready to go off in any direction. “How’d you manage to mess it all up—smart off to that adjutant? The general? Eisenhower himself?”

Moxie was sitting back out of the way of any more hand forays. “Hey, not me. I’ve been keeping my nose clean, up the ranks—no way did I want to queer that plane ride out of here.”

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With a mix of disgust and agitation he glanced around the cavernous bunker again. "I don't go for this living like a mole."

Tense as a harp, Ben took several strained seconds to decide he was on the level. Moxie had never smarted off to Bruno, even during the worst Letter Hill travesties of football practice. In the perfect season, game after game, the tougher the situation on the field, the more businesslike his quarterbacking became. It added up. In extreme cases—and Antwerp fit that, did it ever—the gambler side of Moxie Stamper was perversely capable of the oldest cardshark survival trick, win by not losing. "Okay, maybe it's not your doing. I'll—"

"Your pal Baldy," Moxie shot in. "Could be he knows what's up with this? One thing I learned around the Brits, it's hard as hell to tell when they're screwing you over."

"He's not—" Ben didn't pursue the issue of nationality. "I'll put it to him. If he doesn't have the goods about this, I know who does." He was half out of his chair before remembering Maurice was on catch-up shift somewhere performing what censors perform. And Maurice was his doorkeeper to the only other source, the wire room. "Tomorrow will have to do," he muttered as he sank back down. "Damn." Another set of hours with TPWP in touch only as a pain in the neck. "TIMEOUT," right, you Tepee Weepy so-and-sos. *Until when—the last goddamn buzz bomb is fired? Moxie will shrivel up so much by then he can be sent home in a matchbox. I won't be much of a specimen of humanity myself.*

Moxie was checking his watch again, and remembering Maurice's mild mention of an occasional V-1 straying to the airfield, Ben wondered if he should be setting the cocotte clock in his pocket. The weight of the war came down over him once more. "Mox, I'm going to have to get to the wire room early, so I'm calling it a day. I'll look you up tomorrow after—"

"Hang on a little while, can't you?" Moxie practically begged. "There's somebody I want you to—hey, all right, here she is."

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An Army nurse, in off-duty khaki, was forging her way toward them through the packed tables. Busty and broad-beamed, she came with a fixed bedside smile on a square plain face.

Slick as a whistle, Moxie was on his feet and standing proud to greet her. "Hi, angel of mercy. This is my press agent I was telling you about," he allotted a foxy grin back and forth between Ben and her. "Ben Reinking, Inez Mazzetti." Moxie winked. "But that's all the z's a guy ever catches around her, right, sugarpuss?"

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"Knock it off, you," Inez gave him a tender swat on the arm. "Hi, Ben, gee, I'm glad to meet you." She kept the smile going as Moxie delivered her into a chair. "You can give me the lowdown on this Stamper guy—did he always have a vocabulary like a garbage can?"

"You should have heard him in football uniform—the Army has cleaned him up."

"Go right ahead," their subject of discussion grinned around at them again before embarking for the bar, "gossip about me while I'm hunting down beer for you, ingrates."

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No, he's playfully addressing them that way.

Left with no choice, they made small talk, Inez in a practiced way, Ben uncomfortably, until Moxie came back clasping bottles with both hands.

"To the oldest profession," he toasted as soon as he sat down, "nursing!" It drew him another little swat from Inez, smiling all the while.

Overflowing with possession, Moxie leaned toward Ben and divulged: "Inez is from Butte. Her old man worked with O'Fallon's in the mines. How's that for a small world?"

"Awful small," Ben vouched, hiding everything more than that behind a long swig of beer. *The damned odds again. Why can't the numbers just behave and quit giving out coincidences like card tricks?* In all likelihood he had crossed paths with that miner father at O'Fallon's wake, back at the start of all this. Back when one life subtracted from eleven was thought to be a lot.

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In what passed for conversation from then on, Moxie kidded Inez as if he was playing with a kitten, and she all but purred in response. It would have been plain to a blind person, Ben summed it up to himself, that he was screwing her socks off at every opportunity. The undertow of desire lapping around the table made him want to wade away and flee to higher ground and at the same time dive in and let his imagination soak in it. He stayed helplessly there aswim in times with Cass. Cass curled beside him after making love in his hotel room . . . *I interrupted the greatest movie never made, didn't I.* Cass bright as her uniform buttons the giddy night in Seattle . . . *One of those that folds down out of the wall? Genius, what's to keep it from folding back up into the wall just when things get interesting?* Cass snuggling next to him in the shelter of the Hill 57 rocks, the Homecoming game losing their interest . . . *Do I have a better offer?*

“Hey, we’re not hearing any fooling-around report out of you, Ben.” Moxie was feeling better and better as the beer and the night went on. “Haven’t you hooked up with anybody yet?”

Silence was no longer an option, with the two moony faces turned to him. “I did for a while. She’s a,” he swallowed hard, “a nurse, too—of a kind.”

NINE TIME ZONES away, Jones was trying to make a readable press release out of East Base’s announcement of another one thousand Lend-Lease aircraft successfully transported into Russian hands. He hummed a snatch of hymn when he was alone and bored, and he was humming now; there were six previous announcements of this sort and even he did not regard this as the freshest of news. He was trying to decide whether it was worth it to change *seven thousand* to *the seventh thousand* when he became aware someone had paused at the office doorway.

He glanced around, and for this officer rose nicely to his feet as he had been taught to do at home.

“Help you with something, Captain?”

“If you’re feeling full of Christian charity,” said Cass with a lump in her throat.

THE LIGHTS BLINKED in the Wonder Club bunker. The whole place went momentarily still, then the electricity steadied and the usual officers club din of conversation came back with a rush of relief. One of the music-hall wits at the piano began to belt out, “I’ll meet you at the Underground, you’ll know it by the rumbly sound, and we will slip away, for a cozy day . . .”

“It’s hard to get used to, the rocket SOBs see to that,” Moxie addressed the tight look on Ben’s face, his own expression more constrained than before. “That one must have hit near the power plant by the river. The night gunners have a tough time of it,” he defended the ack-ack brotherhood, “they have to hope the searchlight crews get a fix on the goddamn buzz bomb before it cuts off.” He shook his head and went back to, “It’s hard.”

“You know what, I’m going to go freshen up while there’s light to see by,” Inez said with practicality and headed for the toilet.

Moxie watched her wend her way. All at once he was talkative again. “Funny how things turn out. Back in high school, a carload of us would head into Butte to visit a cathouse and we wouldn’t get parked before the Butte kids spotted the Dillon license plate and ganged up to beat the crap out of us. ‘Come and get it, shepherders!’ they’d yell.” He laughed, more bark than amusement in it. “And we would with our dukes up, and more often than not get our butts kicked good.”

Ben knew Moxie was from a sheep ranch in the Dillon country, but he had not known he ever came out second in mouthing off. “That’s Butte for you,” he contributed, thinking back to the boisterous wake.

“And look at now, me and her—” Moxie held Ben in his gaze. “I know what you’re thinking, I’m just using her for reconnaissance

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in the dark. But she keeps me sane, Ben. And she gets something out of it besides a good time in the sack.” He leaned in to drive his point home. “Inez is not the greatest looker, unless you like them on the hefty side. But getting herself seen with me, and now you, gives her a lot of brownie points on this base. There are plenty of guys in this room right now you could shake awake in the middle of the night and they’d know how many touchdown passes I threw and how many you caught.” He knocked wood. “Like it or don’t, we’re not nobodies. Even here.”

No, that’s been the trouble. Ben sat up to pursue that. “Listen, Mox. I found out something about Purcell—”

“Purcell? Haven’t thought about him in years,” Moxie was shaking his head, “dumb-ass kid.” The head shake slowed into solemnity. “All the guys on the team. All the tickets to the marble farm,” he said bitterly. “You know the one that really gets me?”

I’m afraid I do. Ben would have bet six months’ wages he was about to hear a halo put on Danzer, courtesy of the Stomper-to-Dancer mutual admiration society.

“Jake.” Moxie choked up on the name. “It is just a goddamn shame he didn’t have the last laugh on the Nazi sonsofbitches.”

Too much had welled up in Ben for him to say anything. Inez came to his rescue by returning, and he used the chance to exit the drawn-out day. He left the flirtatious pair with “Have fun, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” and wove through the obstacle course of tables. He stepped outside to the long sunken row of concrete archways topped with more concrete and several acres of the sod of Belgium. It was starting to snow, the first natural thing he had found since arriving to Antwerp. He stood there a minute in the night gone quiet with the weight of snow as the storm came in off the Atlantic, general as the pattern of winter across the war-linked pair of continents and the cold ocean between, the hypnotic flakes accumulating as patiently as the passage of time.

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★ THIS WAS A DRY snowfall that would not cling long, but Gros Ventre, which had not tasted paint since the war effort was born, appeared grateful for any fresh coating. Behind him he heard the grind of gears as the bus pulled away in the night to other towns too modestly populated to have a depot, a familiar accompaniment as he walked in so many years of his footsteps toward the newspaper office. The burden handed to him by the bus driver seemed heavier as the war went on, although he knew that was fanciful. Even so, carrying it in the new-fallen snow he took extra care, stomping every so often so his shoe soles would not cake up and grow slick. Shortly he came to the only other lighted enterprise on the whitened main street, two blocks up from where the *Gleaner* office cast its square of light. He thought to himself he really ought to write a piece about this, how in the everchanging bargain with time one wayspot of civilization would offer up a cathedral while another would answer human yearning with something as homely as this, a place that could be counted on to be open in the snowy dark, a saloon like a book known by heart. What was the saying? Ancient faith and present courage. He smiled at himself a bit crookedly. Tonight he could stand a glass of courage.

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“Haven’t seen you in here in a hell of a while,” he was greeted as he stepped into the Medicine Lodge. “I’d about given you up for lost.”

“A man can’t be in two places at once, Tom,” Bill Reinking replied, slapping snow off his cap and coat. “I’m supposedly running a newspaper.” *Or as Cloyce would say, it’s running me.*

Toweling the dark wood to a trail of gleam as he came, Tom Harry mopped his way down the bar to him. “Liked what you said there in the gizette, back before the election. Franklin D. showed them his rosy red one again, didn’t he.” Beaming as if in response, Roosevelt presided larger than life on the whiskey-laden breakfront behind the bartender, the campaign poster accurately predicting FOUR MORE IN ’44! Bill Reinking noted with bemusement that right next to it was pasted a faded placard spelling out, in the biggest letters to be found in a printer’s jobcase, FORT PECK—DAMN! Momentarily he was taken back to before the war when those unlikely allies of the time, the President and the Senator, blessed into being the huge Fort Peck Dam and put Montana back to work. There was something to ponder there. Was it possible that the depths of the Depression, so daunting at the time, were no kind of a challenge compared to finding an end to this war? He knew the world was more complicated now, but he also knew that every era makes that excuse for tripping over itself.

Pulling himself away from that train of thought, he looked from Roosevelt and the exclamatory placard to Tom Harry as if giving the matter full consideration and said: “Politics is the art of turning ice into ice cream.”

“I think maybe I read that in your paper one time,” the bartender snorted. In practically that same gallop of breath, he came out with the essential: “What’s the word from Ben?”

Bill touched the week’s Threshold Press War Project bundle fresh off the bus. “I hope I’m about to find out.”

“Then I suppose I ought to be getting you something to go with that,” Tom Harry said as if they were both falling down on that duty. “What’ll it be—you still drinking that scotch cough syrup?”

Looking longingly at the row of whiskey bottles with plaid pipers on them, Bill stayed resolute. “I have work to do tonight. Your glorified tap water, please.”

“Turning unpredictable on me, are you.” Tom Harry shook his head over serving a plain glass of beer, just as if the Medicine Lodge didn’t practically run the stuff in its plumbing. Before he could step to the beer tap, a voice accented with Oslo or beyond quavered from the end of the bar:

“Mister ’tender! When you isn’t busy, we gunna have some of t’ose jar weiners.”

Bill’s newspapering instinct of keeping track of things took a moment to put a name to the face of the latest keeper of sheep blowing six months of wages—Andy Gustafson, an old snoose chewer who herded for the Busby brothers on upper English Creek. Perched elbow to elbow with this splurger was another herder recognizable as practically a fixture in here, Canada Dan, sending down the bar an eager freeloading nod and a mostly toothless grin. Bill pursed back a smile. Some things you could count on.

“Catch the faithful, too,” he capitulated, trickling more money onto the bar.

“You hear that, Gufferson, or something wrong with your ears?” Tom Harry called out, heavy with hint.

“Yah, t’anks!”

“Here’s to lookin’ bad and feelin’ good, mister!” Canada Dan mistily chimed out.

“I should of been a milkman instead of a bartender,” Tom Harry grouched as he drew Bill’s beer before moving on to the jar of whatever preservative the Vienna sausages swam in, “I’d only have to look at one horse’s ass at a time.”

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Left in peace as Tom Harry marched on the other end of the bar, Bill took out his jackknife and carefully slit the bundle along one side. He turned up his nose as usual at the hefty halves of boilerplate that were the bulk of the parcel. For an honest editor, patriotism that simply bolted onto the printing press was not true news and he never used the readymade stuff. Reaching into the middle, he slipped out the packet of TPWP handouts and skimmed, head poised at bifocals angle, until he found the words SUPREME TEAM.

He froze at the next word that caught his eye: *Jake*.

In a sick trance he began to read Ben's piece. When he was finished, he sat looking past himself in the dark mirroring of the saloon front window. This was Cloyce's canasta night. Jake Eisman had been her favorite of Ben's friends from the team. He would have to tell her when she came home, it would be no mercy for her to read it first when the paper came out tomorrow. He himself had the helpless feeling of time rounding on itself and unleashing the same bad news again. As a punk kid reporter in 1917 and '18, underage for military service, he had written obituary after obituary of the same sort as the so-called war to end all wars drained a generation of lifeblood out of Montana. About like this one.

"Well?" Gruffness serving as apology, Tom Harry disturbed both past and present.

"A deep subject, Tom." Bill resorted to his beer, a very long swallow, to gain time to compose himself somewhat. "What's on your mind now?"

"Well, do you need the goddamn Packard for anything?" The bartender sounded shy and grumpy at the same time. "You look like the dog ate your supper, and so I just wondered if the car and some gas rations would help you out any." Tom Harry bunched his shoulders. "Take the wife Christmas shopping in Great Falls

THE ELEVENTH MAN

357

or some damn thing—how do I know what you're supposed to do in madder moany, I never been in front of any preacher.”

Bill Reinking dispensed some more money onto the bar and indicated another round for the hopeful denizens at the far end. “Thanks for the offer, Tom, you're a prince among publicans.” Rising to go, he hefted the bundle as if it had grown heavier since he came in. “But I have business to tend to at the word shop.”

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—N

19

★ *ALL RIGHT, REINKING, think, damn it, think. Since you can't get your hands on the neck of that colonel or whatever other Tepee Weepy creep is screwing us over—Moxie is right about that much—you have to twist this the other direction somehow. Don't pitch a fit, won't do any good—they've got cast-iron butts in Washington, they can sit on our orders home until they're good and ready. Let's just try the old innocent start-the-show approach and see if that reminds them to be human beings.*

“As you see, Ben, the ticker room is quite the odd collection, your lot and ours squidged together rather like strangers on a trolley.” In the bunkerful of teletypes and other message apparatus where Maurice was showing him around, the British uniforms of blue hue offsetting the khaki drab of American clerks did resemble a rush-hour swatch of contrasts. “I suppose the miracle is that it works at all,” he gestured broadly, “separated as we are by a common language.”

Ordinarily Ben's smile nerves would have twitched at that, but not today. “So how do I send smoke signals to Tepee Weepy, with everyone in here busy running the war?”

“Right. I've secured you a ticker, where you have utmost pri-

ority—that set of orders that follows you around, Ben, is quite magical—”

Sure, except when Tepee Weepy uses it as black magic and extends Moxie and leaves the pair of us dangling in the buzz bomb capital of the world.

“—and I have authority to snaffle a clerk for you as wanted.” Maurice meditatively tweaked his ball-shaped nose as if turning the knob for the next idea. “I thought perhaps a glamor-pants WREN, to add scenery to duty? The Women’s Royal Naval Service has some lovelies bored with typing weather reports.”

Ben could readily imagine that seersucker was not the only shapely uniform that sopped up carbon paper, and that an eye-batting invitation to join a scrub in the tub was not unheard of here, either. If Moxie and Inez were any indication, life under buzz bomb siege tended to concentrate minds, downward. But the object of desire he needed to concentrate on was the earliest possible plane out of here. “No go, Maurice, thanks anyway,” he committed to. “No WRENS or sparrows or cuckoos or anything else except a wire clerk in an American uniform that I outrank all to hell.”

Maurice felt at his nose again, pondering. “It shall be done. Have yourself a cup of mystery beverage”—the lore was that when the Antwerp commanding officer tasted what was in the hot-pot urn over in the corner, he sputtered, “If this is coffee, bring me tea. If this is tea, bring me coffee.”—“while I sort out a clerk of that mode.”

Claiming a spot at a momentarily vacant desk, Ben took gulps of the stuff, figuring it went with Antwerp hardship duty, while he labored over a message pad. He crumpled several versions before the penciled words had the right nudge to them. When Maurice turned up with a bewildered U.S. Army private first class in tow, Ben barely caught his name before handing him the message to be sent.

Handwritten red annotations: a circle containing the symbol $\bar{\pi}$ and another circle containing the word "adv".

Handwritten red annotation: a circle containing the words "Full caps".

Handwritten red annotations: a circle containing the words "Full caps" and another circle containing the number "10".

Handwritten red annotation: a small "u" character.

Handwritten red annotation: an upward-pointing arrow.

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READY AT THIS END. STAMPER WAITING ROYAL TREATMENT. SOONER BETTER, SOONEST BEST—THIS IS HOME FIELD OF BUZZ BOMBS.

The wire clerk, with prodigious eyeglasses and eyes almost as large behind them, scrutinized the lines. "Sir, I'm supposed to put it into code. Did you want to do this in plain English first, so the other end won't misunderstand what—"

Ben hung a look on him that answered that. "Right away, sir," said the clerk, his rear end practically scorching the seat as he sat to the wire machine. "The two of you seem as happy together as a box of birds," Maurice said blandly, "so I shall leave you to this."

TPWP's reply clattered out in a surprisingly short time. TIMEOUT NOT OVER YET IN HOMECOMING GAME. WORTH THE WAIT.

Two quick darts of Ben's pencil and he held the message pad over the keyboard. The clerk started to ask where the rest of it was, encountered the just-send-it look again, and fired off:

Y?

This time the response from across the ocean came in a long salvo of clacking keys.

YOU SOUND ITCHY TO BREAK HUDDLE, SO HERE IS GAME PLAN. STAMPER BLAZE OF GLORY SCHEDULED FOR USO HOLIDAY SHOW DURING TEN DAYS OF CHRISTMAS TOUR, LONDON, PARIS, ETC. ANTWERP SHOW FIRST IN LINE. FULL CHEERING SECTION FOR END OF "SUPREME TEAM" SAGA—NATIONWIDE BROADCAST STATESIDE, "YOUR USO ON THE GO" NEWSREEL, TED LOUDON IN PERSON TO DEVOTE ENTIRE "SPORTS REPORT" TO STAMPER AND—

It sunk in to Ben like a stab that kept on penetrating. Tepee Weepy and Loudon. The unholy pair that manufactured the "Su-

full cap

cap

↑



1c 2x cap

cap

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preme Team" in the first place. Now an entire week of hanging around with the buzz bombs, just so Loudon could mouth off nationally, hell, internationally about—

"Break in, quick," he instructed the wire operator while frantically scrawling. The young soldier apprehensively but bravely looked up from the message. "Loudmouth, sir?"

"Sorry, that got away from me." Ben grabbed back the paper, cursing and fixing the name at the same time. Off the message went.

CAN'T WE DO THAT STATESIDE, AT TSU STADIUM FOR INSTANCE, SITE OF INITIAL GLORY ETC.? LOUDON NOT A HABITUE OF EUROPE NORMALLY.

There was a pause, giving Ben some faint hope that logic might register on TPWP. Then:

NEGATIVE. LOUDON TO USE ANTWERP OCCASION TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE TREASURE STATE GOLDEN EAGLES OF 1941—'ELEVEN MEN AS BRAVE ON THE ULTIMATE FIELD OF BATTLE AS ON THE GRIDIRON'—ARE HIS ALL-AMERICAN TEAM FOR 1944, IN MEMORIAM. YOU AND STAMPER WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED AS THE SURVIVING TEAMMATES, THUS PRESENCE IN ANTWERP MANDATORY UNTIL AFTER USO SHOW.

Ben could not take his eyes off the words. *You goddamn grandstander, Loudmouth. You never miss a chance to pluck the patriotic harp, do you. All-dead is closer to the truth.* Maximum urges contended in him, to sink into a corner laughing insanely or take a kicking fit against the TPWP wire machine. The owl-eyed clerk watched him skittishly.

Pulling himself together, more or less, he gripped the pencil and pad, and with concentration as slow and forced as a grade-schooler's put into block letters the next message.

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STAMPER COMING DOWN WITH NERVOUS IN THE SERVICE. SUGGEST IMMEDIATE LEAVE TO TIDE HIM OVER UNTIL USO SHOW. IF HE CRACKS UP, LORD HAW HAW WILL HAVE PLENTY TO HEE-HEE ABOUT.

Handwritten red circle containing a symbol resembling a stylized 'A' or '3'.

Parsing it to himself, he added, sardonically wondering if he had better get a rubber stamp of it made: SOONEST BEST. Tepee Weepy got the message in more ways than one.

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

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

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

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

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

Handwritten red 'the' with an arrow pointing to the word 'next' in the following paragraph.

Handwritten red circle containing the word 'webs'.

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

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THEY HAD TO KILL seven days waiting for the USO show, every one of those a blankwalled twenty-four hours of tedium with a concrete lid on it. It did not help that they both thought their underground quarters smelled like Montana earthen cellars where potatoes and rutabagas were stored. Moxie, restless as a sidewinder even in the best of times, had a particularly hard time with enforced leisure. "If I wanted to be caged up, I'd have been born a goddamn canary." Growly and still ticcing, he devoted himself to reading Philo Vance mysteries during the day and romancing Inez in the Wonder Bar at night.

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

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

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

When he grew tired of beating his head against a story he was not allowed to tell, he holed up in the windowless concrete room with the scent of root cellar and made tiny editing changes in the *Ghost Runner* screenplay, aware all the while how geographically ridiculous it was to be conjuring the Letter Hill in waffle-flat Belgium. All in all, distance maybe lent something, but it did not smell like enchantment. And when he ran out of things to fuss

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at in the script, he emulated Moxie and read, napped, brooded some more about the piece that couldn't say anything. All the while, the clock slowed to eternal Old World time. Another day in the war. What was the count up to by now?

He was marking the fourth day of the wait by reading a much-passed-around news magazine that grandly speculated the war could be over by Christmas—*Yeah, right, has anybody told the Germans?*—when Maurice rapped on the doorway in a grand announcing fashion. “A communiqué for you, in the priority packet.” He held up the envelope by the tip of one corner. “Inasmuch as it’s addressed in a feminine hand, I thought it wise to deliver it forthwith.”

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

Dear Ben, wherever you are, Scar—

Already Cass’s words had him aching for her. Quickly he turned the letter to take in a line written sideways along the margin near the top:

See attached

Your Holy Joe corporal looked like I was about to set his Bible on fire, but he took pity and said he could sneak this to you somehow. *Bedazzled as a kid with a kaleidoscope, he spun the full page of inked lines back into reading position.*

1/2 line #

rom regular text

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

1/2 line #

run in

So here goes. Remember we used to talk about the million-dollar wound? *He remembered in all ways.*

1/2 line #

rom regular text

The heart never forgets anything; the flesh remembers indiscriminately. There were all those times I caught myself wishing you'd get a tiny one—just another scar—and be

1/2 line #
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David--wow, I unwittingly got us into a typographical morass here, didn't I. Can we change the italics to roman and use line spaces and regular margins to intersperse Ben's reactions as he reads the letter? It looks to me like we have enough chapter-end space, p. 368, to do so without throwing the pagination off. I'm not sure I have the proofreading symbol skills to do the change, but I've made a stab at it.

My computer's version of how we can straighten out the letter/reaction section on pp. 364-5:

use 1/2 line spaces

Dear Ben, wherever you are, Scar--

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He remembered in all ways. The heart never forgets anything; the flesh remembers indiscriminately.

There were all those times I caught myself wishing you'd get a tiny one--just another scar--and be out of the war for good.

But if Dan's is any indication, the price is awful damn high. I take him over to Fort Hairy once a week for the bone doc to test how his leg is coming along, and he hates that routine. He's on crutches in between--he hates that, too. Sometime after the first of the year, they'll ship him to the specialist who'll patch that tendon in and then all the time in rehab, as they call it.

We go around and around about whether I stay with him in California for all that. I say of course I will. He says like hell I will, he can be a cripple just the same without me around, go do something useful with myself. In some odd way I think he wants to be with other Montaneer guys--you know what a bloody mess Leyte has turned out to be, bunches of the worst wounded from his regiment are ending up there in San Diego--more than with me. I'm not crying on your shoulder, Ben, I just needed to tell somebody who knows up from down when it comes to a man and a woman.

Enough of that. This is the last time you'll ever hear from Capt. Standish--

His eyes misted instantly at that.

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

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

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

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Handwritten annotations in red ink:

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- 11/2 line #
- regular text
- full caps
- 11/2
- webs
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I suppose I could tell you I miss you something awful. But too much truth is maybe not a good idea, given the situation. You are always going to be a part of me, despite the gold string on my finger that ties me to Dan. I couldn't Dear John him while he was out in the Pacific, and I can't do it to you while you're over there. I think of you more than is healthy, and I just want you to know I regret not one damn thing of our time together.

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+2

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

Hugs and tickles,
Cass

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

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

There still was Dan Standish.

There still was the war.

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

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

He figured he must be misunderstanding something.

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IN THE DINING bunker he found Maurice poking a fork at chipped beef on overtoasted toast. By a grave misjudgment of

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joint command, the British had been put in charge of the food and the Americans in charge of the beer. “Saved you a spot,” Maurice indicated across the table, “although you may not thank me when you taste this. No bad news from home, I hope, arriving in the fashion it did?”

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

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

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

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

“The lights aren’t blinking and the ground isn’t shaking,” Ben said gratefully, “so I hoped something like that was happening.”

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

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

full caps

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

2-#

On the spot, he thought it over. “Somewhere between.”

“Wise choice. All horizons kept open, that way,” the man from Nowhere spelled backwards declaimed, bouncing it word by word. “I should leave to you any excursions in the direction of sin, however, personal taste and all that. What would please you in the other direction?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Up to his rifle shoulder, in my father's case," came the response to that. Ben glanced over, sensing why it was put that way.

Maurice stayed staring straight ahead over the steering wheel as he spoke, the words suddenly less clipped. "Reads all the military history he can, the old fellow, says he's going to keep on until he finds the one that gets it right. He was at Gallipoli, in the first

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

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

THE SNOW GLARE on the buttes against the clear morning sky lent Great Falls a rim of dazzling ivory. *Wouldn't you just damn know. Perfect flying weather and we're grounded for eternity.*

Signing her way through last-minute paperwork, Cass every so often sent a pining look out the ready-room window. Around her, her pilots restlessly filled the wait as best they could, some jokes, some bitten lips to clamp emotion away. Taking extreme care not to show it, she herself was having to fight a case of trembles. So enormously much that was ending today. Everything else that was not. She had survived the war, the P-39, the P-63. Now to survive the situation with Dan. He was a bear some days—a lot of days—in the recuperation that sometimes he did not even seem to want. Other times, his old carnie self came through, he was full of plans, the old notion of barnstorming, flying, wing-walking. She was not sure wingwalking had survived the war.

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

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

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

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

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

Work on the unpainted bombers and P-63s stilled for a moment as the women mechanics in hairnets and overalls looked around from the wings and platform ladders they stood on, to the wasps crisply saluting the waiting general. The gathering was not large. A perfunctory honor guard, rifles at rest and flag drooping in the still air of the hangar. The fresh-faced Canadian liaison officer, down from Edmonton for the occasion. Jones with a Speed Graphic camera, blazing away with flashbulb after flashbulb; he had worshipfully let Cass know there would be a set of photographs for each pilot.

The general at the portable podium his aide had set up shuffled his papers as if this were one more chore, glanced up at Cass as if she were personally responsible for his being saddled with Grady's Ladies all this while, and gruffly began.

Standing at attention determined to show him not so much as a quiver, she wondered if there would have been a ceremony at

all if the general hadn't had to read out the special letter of commendation—the renowned flying women of East Base. . . service above and beyond the call of duty—from the Senator.

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

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

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

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

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a little.” His wife made a face as he left the table; she didn’t like *futz*.

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

Actually, there was more to it than that. In dismal bunkhouses and drafty line cabins when the century and he were unconquerably young, this gaunt old bone-sprung prairie Caesar had read his way up in the world via weekly compilations of community happenings just such as these; somehow even then he savvied more than was on the page, and the Faustian skills of small-town editors—recording angel one paragraph, gossip-monger the next—he had been careful to reckon with ever since.

If nothing else, it appealed to him as cheap insurance for a man in his position. He could see no sign in the insane modern world that the pen was mightier than the sword, but it was damn sure stronger than most campaign speeches.

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

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

THOSE WHO GAVE ALL.

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

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

Adamic, Stefan, killed in action in New Guinea.

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

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

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

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

With a chill he ran his finger on down and down the alphabet of death. *Godalmighty, that many? In one county? A county—*

Handwritten circled 'a' with an arrow pointing up.

Handwritten circled 'e #'.

Handwritten circled 'ital'.

Handwritten circled 'Godalmighty' with a vertical line to its left.

Handwritten circled 'S' and 'N' with 'OK' written next to it.

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

McCaskill, Alex, killed in strafing attack in Tunisia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mullen, get me the goddamn figures on how many Montana soldiers have been killed in this war. And then compared to the other states.”

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

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

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

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

When the chill began to get to both of them, Maurice at the other end of the lion's parapet sent Ben a look that politely inquired whether he about had enough for his TPWP piece. He did. The notepad held nugget phrases he could refine in the typewriter tonight. Belgium as the unwilling crossroads marched over by contending armies so many times, Waterloo as the sole crossroads in Belgium that counted on a reddened day four generations of soldiers ago. A high-ranking officer on Wellington's general staff who had a mania for resorting to rockets, buzz bombs of the day, although he would have to somehow get that across between the lines. The nearly permanent battlefield date-

full caps

line, *Somewhere in Europe*, in 1815 here amid fields of Belgian corn and rye, at the moment in the forest and genuine uplands of the Ardennes on the border of Germany. That was part of the hell of war, you could so readily trace it from the past to now in an undiminished bloodline.

"I've had enough if you have," he called across the mound top to Maurice and they descended the steps of the hill to begin the journey back to Antwerp.

NO SOONER WERE they on the road along the foggy forest than the jeep popped around a corner near where a telephone line crossed and on the roadside just ahead were three American G.I.s, surprise all over them, arrayed at the closest pole. The pair in pole-climbing gear were about halfway up while the third one, carrying a rifle, stood guard.

"Minions of your Alexander Graham Bell at Waterloo," Maurice remarked, "what next?" He and Ben saw the guard call up to the others, then wave urgently for the jeep to stop.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

American and British
German breakthrough
on the

David--for clarity's sake,
and readers who don't know
WWII lore, the above should
read: armored vehicles
streaming toward the German
Breakthrough on the
Ardennes front and ambulances
forcing through in the
opposite direction.

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(TPWP priority dispatch—Antwerp—byline Reinking)

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

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

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

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

No, no, goddamn it, Maurice, oh please. My biggest story of the war and you're going to sit on it. Why couldn't you tell me that before I busted my butt writing it? Anguished words building in him for what he knew would be a futile protest, he was stopped by the censorious finger significantly tapping the first sheet of copy paper.

"Flattering as it would be to have my name entered in posterity in this fashion," Maurice was holding forth, "you must strike it. Regulations." He handed Ben the full set of pages.

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

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

(New lede—byline Reinking)

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

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

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

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

(6th new lede—byline Reinking)

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

A Royal Air Force officer and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage . . .

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

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

“Interesting situation,” Maurice mused over it as if it were a problem in chess. “Our general was quite firm about making it known to the world this German breakthrough is a nasty business for us. What is the American term, to set up a howl?” His tone turned solemn. “All the combat reports indicate the bulge, so-called, is aimed directly here, to retake Antwerp. Shut down

the port, cut our forces in two at the same time,” he made a sweeping gesture to illustrate the extent of the strategy, “it makes quite good sense from the Hun point of view, doesn’t it. Therefore HQ here thought wise to put the word out—your words, actually—before Supreme Headquarters clamped down on the embarrassing news that the Germans caught them with their trousers very much down.”

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

full caps

MOXIE WAS TAKING the Battle of the Bulge personally. Wound tight, he sat on the edge of his bunk as if about to spring. “Those sneaky kraut SOB^ss. They’re going for broke.” It was the best military analysis Ben had heard yet. “Goddamn it, Reinking, are we still going to get out of here tomorrow?”

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Propped in the doorway, Ben answered with each sentence taking effort. “If the USO bunch gets here, I don’t see why not. The brass will have to get them back out, and they can squeeze us onto the plane. Maurice keeps checking, the flying looks OK—the Luftwaffe isn’t so much in this, it’s more a hell of a ground attack.” He looked at the man rooted to the bunk and before he knew it heard himself saying what he was thinking: “You know, Mox, there’s no law that you couldn’t get off your duff and see what you can find out—”

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“I am. I have.” Moxie shifted to one side on his perch, then right back. “I was about to tell you. I hunted up our ack-ack intelligence officer, we go back a long ways together. They figure when Supreme Headquarters gets its head out of its butt, they’ll be able to stop the Germans about halfway here. Ten days or two weeks. It’s going to get worse before it gets better.” He gnawed his mouth at the next news. “Ben? They’re pulling my crews and some of the others to throw them into it as anti-tank outfits.

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Those ninety-millimeters can knock the turret off a Tiger tank. But it's front^line fighting, they could get overrun awful damn easy the way the Germans are rolling.

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

HE WAS FORKING down scrambled powdered eggs and sausages that tasted like sawdust when the wire clerk came looking for him.

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

"The which?"

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

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

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

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

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

THE BUNKER CORRIDOR near the Officers Club looked like a backstage that had dropped into a theater basement. The black pebbled leatherette cases of musical instruments were arrayed along the concrete base of the wall. People not in military olive drab, standing out like peacocks, bustled in and out of rooms. Passing one, Ben glimpsed the movie actress famous for choosing the shyest fuzz-cheeked soldier in the audience for the honor of

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sprinkling delousing powder down her back. Elsewhere, several band members were in a card game with the comedian whose jokes fed off how skinny he was. Picking his way in through the clutter of the USO troupe, Ben found the Wonder Bar all but unrecognizable—a temporary stage across one end and tables and elbow room banished to make space for wall-to-wall rows of folding chairs. Trying to tally it all, he felt cocooned in a weird mix of silly dream and nightmare. Not a hundred miles away soldiers were dying in droves in the German surprise attack, and in here was show business as usual, setting up to manufacture songs, patter, and jokes. Half-heartedly he tried a pep talk on himself: just get through this travesty of Antwerp's war, the Duke of Wellington had danced in Brussels a few nights before Waterloo, hadn't he? Morale of the troops, what antics are committed in thy name.

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

“That's okay, sir. We've met. Long ago.”

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

“Where do you think you are, back in palookaville?” Even in what passed for conversation, the sportscaster's pace of talk any more was the fastest an ear could keep up with. “It's the Rex, you're in a country with a king, get it? So what I want is—” He caught sight of ginger hair and an impassive longitudinal face. “Ben Reinking! Captain Reinking. Captain on the gridiron,

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captain in the service of his country.” The idea seemed to entertain the contriver of the Supreme Team and much else. “What a piece of luck you’re here to be on the show with Moxie, two heroes for the price of one.” He waved off the newsreel crew. “You know the drill, boys. See you when you get back. Ben, you still look like you’re in great shape. Bet you could still run down one of Moxie’s passes. Hey, I wonder if—”

“Ted, no funny stuff with a football for the show. We’re in a goddamn war zone and Moxie and I both are on our last legs and—”

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

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

“Sam?” Loudon yelled across the room to the show director. “Doing a walkthrough with my guest star. Come on up, Ben.” The singing-and-dancing sister act was rehearsing on the stage, in gowns that looked spun from cotton candy. “Excuse us, ladies,” Loudon pushed past with Ben following, “All-American coming through.” At the far end of the stage was a folding mockup of a stadium broadcasting booth, pennants painted on and The Loudon Lowdown lettered large amid those. Rapidly the sportscaster rehearsed Ben in coming onstage when the ‘Supreme Team’ cue was given and slipping into a seat behind the microphone in the fake booth. “It’s tight for three,” he jabbed a thumb at the empty seat on the other side, “but we’ll make it work. Moxie’ll be

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along later, he's getting dressed up. Hey, wasn't that tough about Bruno's team not making the Rose Bowl? One lousy touchdown short in the Stanford game."

"Tough."

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

Ben as if by instinct had zeroed in on the nub of the script.

The unbeaten Treasure State Golden Eagles of 1941 were a football team without precedent, and tonight I wish to honor them in a way befitting that. That gallant eleven, with every starting player enlisting in the service of our country after Pearl Harbor, went on to another peerless record, in courage. Nine of those football heroes gave their lives in this war, and in honor of how they gave their all, tonight I am naming that 'Supreme Team' who so bravely traded football uniforms for military uniforms my All-American team for this year. We are lucky to have with us tonight the two surviving heroes . . .

Ben's temples throbbed. *You never spare the schmalz, do you, Loudon.* Script gripped in hand, he rose to get away from the man.

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

"In my pocket."

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

HE FLOPPED DOWN on his bunk with the cocotte clock set to go off in half an hour. He knew better than to drop deep asleep for an extended time, he would still be groggy when it was the time for the show. He had lived with the clock of war for so long, with its unending hours and split-second dangers, that rationing his time for one last night was worth everything. Tomorrow a plane home-ward out of the war. In some other tomorrow, a script made into a movie that would reveal Loudon and Bruno for what they were. His tired mind traversed from the one thought to the other, forth and back, as Maurice would have said. He dozed off that way.

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

He opened his eyes, unsure.

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

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

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

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

This time he stuck his head in the room across the hall, the senior enlisted men's side. A grizzled gunnery sergeant at the

wall niche desk writing a letter home looked around in surprise and started to get to his feet. "At ease, Guns," Ben said quickly. "Any idea where Captain Stomper's wandered off to?"

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

Ben set off for the wire room at a run.

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

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

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

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

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

full caps

down the medical staffer keeping track of the military wounded and dead, learned most of the victims were Antwerp civilians so far, and Moxie's and Inez's dogtags were not among those the staffer had copied onto his clipboard list. *Okay, they're among the missing*, Ben tried to reason himself into, *that's a different list*. They could still be at the theater, Moxie by nature would take over any rescue task he could, she was a nurse—

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

The driver stiffened but the cigarette stayed cupped in his saluting hand. “Probably all night, Captain, why?”

“I’m riding with you.”

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

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

As soon as the ambulance stopped alongside others waiting to be loaded, he piled out. Unexpected brightness hit him. The market square with its avalanche of rubble, he saw from under his shielding hand, was like a movie set done by madmen. Huge arc lights illuminated the void in the line of gabled facades

where the movie theater had been. Under the glare of the arcs, the mountainous spill of brickwork and rafters, framed by the pale wall of the neighboring building the theater had torn away from, lay at rest in either stark light or grim shadow.

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

It was cold in the blast-strewn square, his breath smoked from him in ghostly wreaths. Reaching a bit of open space where he could see all around, he scanned the chainlike ranks of rescuers on the rubble heap for Moxie's lean form, Inez's broadset one.

Suddenly, across the street from what had been the marquee front of the theater, he spotted the tall newsreel cameraman from the troupe.

As fast as he could reach there without slipping on the blood on the cobblestones, he came up beside the man as he was busy reloading the big shoulder camera. "Where's Captain Stamper? *Where's Captain Stamper?*"

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

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

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

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

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

He looked the only question left to the cameraman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The long tunnel of bunker corridors resounded to his footsteps as he headed for the Wonder Bar, his mind cold and clear. Inevitability was claiming him. The wall of oblivion had moved closer one more notch, its tenth, Moxie the next to last off the living list. The others, back at the start—O'Fallon, Havel—and on up the black climb of odds—Friesen, Vic, Prokosch, Animal—and off the chart of any foretelling—Dex, even Danzer, Jake—teamed one final time in his resolve. He was giving himself over. With Moxie gone he was the eleventh man, the perverse odds now solely out to get him and they would, he could see them piled overhead as if he were in the bottom of an hourglass looking at the deathly sand above. He knew it would happen according to the war's whim of time, when he would go out into the Antwerp night after doing this. If a buzz bomb did not find him this night, something else ultimately would. A leftover booby trap in whatever hiding place he sought out. A guildhall wall, wearied by the constant return of war, collapsing on him. The Germans barreling into the city, if the Bulge was not turned back, and dooming him in their pogrom of able-bodied defenders. He accepted, he

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couldn't not, that the war would see to him, one fatal way or another. But first, this. He could find no reason in himself not to rid the world of Loudon. The .45 still had bullets in its clip.

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

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

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

"This is what's left of him."

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

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

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

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

Ben made no move toward the desk. As much as he had always despised the sportswriter, he at last realized Loudon in his darkest unacknowledged self wanted the whole team dead. Dead

and buttered. Fit to serve up in his radio show, his newsreel, his newspaper column, probably a book. *The Eleven Who Donned the Uniform*, or something worse.

“Ben? We need to get going on this script. It’s less than an hour to airtime and—”

“Shut up, Loudmouth.” Ben’s hand twitched against the pistol holster. He did not care whether Loudon noticed or not. “You’re poison, you and your goddamn airtime and the rest, you’re the death of the whole team. All the way back to Purcell.”

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

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

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

“He turned him into a dead kid.”

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

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

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

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

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

cc

cc

I see I got the illustrative finger-snapping in the wrong place. Move it up to after "like that", OK?

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

varsity

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

“I’m not going on the show.”

Loudon gaped at him.

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's."

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

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

Commotion had spread to the other side of the door, from the sound of it. The major raised his voice, "Quiet, out there! We're in conference in—"

He stopped short at the sight of Maurice Overby striding in, military policemen in white helmets and white spats on either side of him, two more taking up a station at the door.

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

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

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

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I hope I heard that right. I hope I'm not dreaming this.

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

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

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

Within the wedge of MPs, the blue-clad RAF officer and the flight-jacketed American cut through the gathering crowd in the Wonder Bar and swung out into the long bunker corridor where the footsteps were their own.

"Maurice, am I completely wacko," Ben asked urgently out the side of his mouth, "or were you bluffing back there?"

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

full caps
10

think you'd like to know, Ben—you're to be mustered out as soon as you're back at that base in Montana and write the piece about Stamper."

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

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

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

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

Flooded almost to tears with the rapture of survival, Ben unloaded from the jeep the instant it screeched to a halt and raced

I think of you more than is healthy, and I just want you to know I regret not one damn thing of our time together.

David--the version I had here doesn't ring true to me with Ben's mood; he's exultant, suddenly wild with hope, and wouldn't be thinking about who's getting Dear Johned. Rather, he'd be dwelling on the most promising parts of Cass's letter, now that it's (for them) after the war.

See attached

Per ms page 442

out

about

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sped

while you're out there

just

the changed version near the end (p. 401-2) is to read this way:

The jeep thrummed under him on the steel grid of runway as it sped toward the plane, the guardian MPs riding shotgun front and back, the war behind him in the darkness. With luck--it was an amazing feeling to trust that word again--within three days the hopscotch of flights would deliver him back to East Base. Back within reach of the woman he would never get over. In the whirl of his thoughts the memorized lines of her letter danced to and fro. *"I think of you more than is healthy, and I just want you to know I regret not one damn thing of our time together... Maybe it'll all sort out okay after the war."*

Flooded almost to tears with the rapture of survival, Ben unloaded from the jeep the instant it screeched to a halt and raced toward the hatchway of the revving plane. *You're getting giddy, Reinking. If not now, when?* With his war over, in his every heart-beat he could feel the surge of his chances with Cass. A woman with no regrets, two men--

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

toward the hatchway of the revving plane. *You're getting giddy, Reinking. If not now, when?* With his war over, in his every heart-beat he could feel the surge of his chances with Cass. A woman with no regrets, two men—

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS IS A WORK of fiction, and so my characters exist only in these pages. There is, however, a breath of actuality to the plot premise of World War Two's disproportionate toll on a given number of young men who had played football together: by the accounts available, eleven starting players of Montana State College in Bozeman did perish in that conflict. I am indebted to my late friend, Dave Walter of the Montana Historical Society, for providing me the pieces of that quilt of lore. Research virtuoso of the state's past that he was, Dave also furnished a vivid sense of conscientious objector life in the Montana woods during the war in his history of the Civilian Public Service Camp at Belton, Montana, *Rather Than War*.

Montana's war losses are summed up in another key historical study, *Montana, A History of Two Centuries* by Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang: "As in World War I, Montana contributed more than its share of military manpower—roughly forty thousand men by 1942—and the state's death rate in the war was exceeded only by New Mexico's."

A number of the women who piloted military aircraft in 1942-44 as ~~WASPS~~—Women Air Force Service Pilots—learned to fly in the Civilian Pilot Training program before the war, as I

Full caps
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had Cass Standish do. There were 916 ~~WASPS~~—141 of those in the Air Transport Command, as Cass's ferry squadron would have been—when their branch of the service was disbanded (“inactivated”) in December, 1944. Thirty-eight women military pilots lost their lives in the course of duty. While East Base in Great Falls, Montana, was indeed a hub of ferrying Lend-Lease fighters, bombers, and cargo planes north to Alaska and Soviet Union aircrews waiting there—the total is listed as 7,926 aircraft—the presence of Cass's flying women at East Base and on the route to Edmonton is my own creation.

full caps / lc

Similarly, I have taken literary leeway with a few settings in the book. Citizens of Great Falls will find that I have put non-existent Treasure State University on about the site of C.M. Russell High School, and the Letter Hill in back of it. Hill 57 did exist. The Reinkings' town of Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country remain as I originated them in my Montana Trilogy, imagined versions that draw on the actual geography in and around Dupuyer, the hospitable armful of town of my high school years.

right break on Trilogy? Just asking. Okasis
 April-0-99

The Office of War Information from 1942 until 1945 had various sections involved in war news for domestic consumption, but the Threshold Press War Project, “Tepee Weepy,” was foisted on it by my imagination.

In my characters' combat experiences, I have sometimes drawn on oral history accounts, memoirs, and unit histories for touches of detail. One source in particular I would like to single out, my late writing colleague and friend, Alvin Josephy. When we coincided at the Fishtrap “Writing and the West” Conference at Wallowa Lake, Oregon, in 1994, I heard Alvin's recording of the amphibious landing at Guam, and his memoir *A Walk Toward Oregon* has a further account of his wading the bullet-pocked surf with that microphone as a Marine combat correspondent. Ben Reinking's narration and specific experiences of

the Guam invasion are invented by me, but the spirit of Alvin Josephy surely goes ashore with him. As to a few other military instances of where actuality leaves off and the author begins:

—Many Montana soldiers did serve in the long and terrible jungle fighting in New Guinea, Biak, and the Philippines. The Montaneers regiment that held Carl Friessen, Dexter Cariston, and Dan Standish is my own version of such a unit.

—The U.S. Coast Guard in the middle years of the war did patrol the Olympic Peninsula coastline with dogs. The balloon bombs launched by Japan occurred a bit later in the war than I have portrayed; the first of the 32-foot balloons with an incendiary device was reported in November, 1944, and across the remainder of the war an estimated one thousand of nine thousand launched may have reached the American mainland. At least six persons were killed, although I know of no instance of a Coast-guardsmen encountering a balloon bomb as Sig Prokosch did.

—Antwerp in the last autumn and winter of the war did suffer attacks of a severity reminiscent of the Luftwaffe's earlier bombing blitz of London: more than five thousand buzz bombs were launched against the Belgian city and its strategic port in 154 days. The casualty figures are given as 3,752 civilians and 731 Allied servicemen killed. Behind a screen of heavy news censorship, a combined Allied anti-aircraft artillery command of 22,000 personnel was deployed against the V-1, and later V-2, flying bombs.

In this novel's inflections of life in uniform, certain phrasings and observations are drawn from my own military experience as an Air Force reservist on active duty during the Cuban missile crisis.

Lastly, a considerable community of friends, acquaintances, and research institutions provided me information, advice, or other aid, and I deeply thank them all: the University of Washington libraries, and Sandra Kroupa, Book Arts and Rare Book

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curator; the Coast Guard Museum of the Northwest, and director Gene Davis; the Montana Historical Society, and Molly Kruckenberg, Brian Shovers, Lory Morrow, Becca Kohl, Jodie Foley, Ellie Arguimbau, Zoe Ann Stoltz, Rich Arstad, Karen Bjork; Marcella Walter, for shelter, conversation, and half the laughing again; the University of Montana library, and archivist Donna Macrae; the Great Falls Public Library; Curt Shannon, director of the Malmstrom AFB Museum; Judy Ellinghausen, archives administrator of the High Plains Heritage Center; Christine Morris, executive director of the Cascade County Historical Society; Les Nilson; Bradley Hamlett for providing me with his memoir of missions against the bridge on the River Kwai, *Bombing the Death Railroad*; Wayne and Genise Arnst, for hospitality and friendship as ever; Jean Roden, and John Roden for advice on flying and parachuting; Diane Josephy Peavey; Betty Mayfield, super-librarian and savvy friend; Paul G. Allen's Flying Heritage Collection, for letting me hang around its World War Two planes; Rex Smith; Laurie Brown, David Hough, Linda Lockowitz, and Tom Bouman, for their customary literary wizardry; Liz Darhansoff, for magic in the clauses; and my wife Carol, first reader for the dozenth time.

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space break (SB) <u>15</u>	other:
footnote (FN)	other:

Special considerations:

ILLUSTRATIONS

B/W Photos: Total quantity: print w/ text reflective: insert tip in transparencies:

Color Photos: Total quantity: print w/ text reflective: insert tip in transparencies:

Illustrations: Total quantity: line: halfone: combo:

Maps: Total quantity: print w/ text endsheets 1-C 2-C 4-C

herewith map source materials, specs, and setting copy:

herewith due:

Special considerations:

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS & CONCERNS

Copyediting listed below see attached consult ...

Design listed below see attached consult ...

Production listed below see attached consult ...