paid for the indulgence of being a small-town editor, Bill Reinking liked to say.
Just this moment, Ben spotted him there at the back of the office in the job shop, running the addressograph himself. As ever, his father looked like a schoolmaster out of place, peering foggily through his bifocals while he fed the dogtag-sized subscription plates into the small machine for it to stamp those names and addresses onto the out-of-town mail wrappers. Ben remembered now: the office help, Janie, had moved to Arizona, where her husband’s tank corps was in training.

Past his own reflection in the glass of the door, Ben watched his father at his lonesome chore until it started to hurt. *This part doesn’t get any easier either, does it.* *Two bylines under one roof. At least we both write with the pointed end,* *he taught me that.*

With that he stepped inside to the subtle smell of ink fresh on newsprint, calling out as cheerfully as he could manage: “All the news that fits, again this week?”

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

“Well, guess what, the Air Transport Command turns out to be full of surprises. It’s only a forty-eight-hour leave, not the seventy two I put in for.” He tried to cover the next with a shrug. “And there’s something I have to do out of town tomorrow. Other than that, I’m the perfect guest.”
“Like Gone With the Wind without somebody to neck with,” his son said and laughed in a way he did not recognize. “Long.”

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, early that afternoon he had stepped out into the familiar blowy weather of Great Falls and pointed himself toward the same old tired bus that again and again had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, he had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued “God bless you real good, sonny,” along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians’ suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, without doubt, although that did not seem what the sloganeers intended to convey.

He tried to slip his duffel into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and possibly nap during the familiar trip, but the hunched driver grabbed it away and insisted on stowing it for him. “Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant,” he panted.

Which one?
“It’s highly classified, but since you asked so nicely—I set the record for making hardship trips home.”

There. He had managed to laugh at himself, if nervous laughter counted; maybe he wasn’t utterly losing his grip on who and what he was. It still amounted to too much hardship, though. Compassionate leave. Vic wouldn’t have had any trouble laughing over that, poor buddy—I get the leave and he’s stuck with the compassion and a folded flag in what’s left of his lap.

“Can’t ever get used to the size of that stadium,” he heard come his way, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source. Always wary of this sort of thing, he kept on staring out his side of the bus, as if the remark was an announcement the bus driver routinely offered up at this point on the route.

“Big old sister, ain’t she,” the driver persisted. “They don’t build ‘em like that any more.”

For a few seconds longer, Ben carried on pretending that the remark had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. Then, as he had known he would, he pulled his gaze away from the dominating smokestack and turned it to a very different landmark coming up, the mammoth Treasure State University stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football.

He felt his throat dry out. If the pair of years since were any evidence, he was in danger of unwanted conversation about TSU’s fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time, thanks be, he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, evidently had not recognized him.
was meant to invoke the doorstep homefront, the breadbasket America served by mid-size dailies and small-town weeklies such as his father’s; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war. But it never left his mind for long that a threshold also was where people wiped their feet on something.

Not this time. The cherished name, the bit about the ringless hands at the P-39 controls, all that was still in there. *Foxed the bastard. Can’t every time, but* [1]

His father had been watching in surprise. It wasn’t like Ben to nuzzle his own prose. “Maybe I had better go through that piece again myself. What did you sneak in there, an invitation to neck on the bus?”

“Bad business, giving away a trade secret to an editor,” Ben intoned, his expression saying he couldn’t wait to. “My minder back at Tepee Weepy went for a decoy. I threw in a graf about Red stars over Montana, and he cut that clean as a whistle.” He described to his father the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Soviet Union were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes before they were delivered north. “No way they’d ever let that graf stand, I figured, and maybe I’d get away with the rest of the piece. It worked out.”

“Shame on you,” said his father, reaching for a pencil and paper. “I don’t suppose you’d remember that particular paragraph?”

Ben recited it as his father jotted. When he was done, the older man sighed. “I’ll need to be a little careful with this. Probably half the county thinks there’s a Red star on me, I wrote so many editorials in favor of Lend-Lease.”
She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he’d learned Cass Standish also had a reputation for bringing in her flights safely no matter what the weather or visibility. (”She can navigate in zero visibility like a wild-ass Eskimo,” a crusty tower officer had provided the apt quote, although Ben had to clean it up.) He stirred up inside just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women Air Force Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17 bombers and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, where his TPWP minder in Washington wondrously would not exist, his piece about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. Getting something like that across between the lines was becoming a specialty of his.

Still mesmerized, he stood in the parking lot with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the fighter planes as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of that roadhouse over there, uniforms cast off and forgotten, romantic maniacs renting by the hour. The whispered prattle of love talk, after: “So it’s true what they say about redheads.” “I’m wrongly accused. It’s ginger, not red.” “Ginger? That’s a spice. No wonder.” Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of four hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking.

That was hoping for too much. The flight swept over with a roar, the
P-39s as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Watching them glint in the
sun as they diminished away toward East Base, Ben jammed his fists deeper into
his pockets. As quickly as the planes were gone, frustration filled him again. He
drew a harsh breath. He knew perfectly well he was thinking about these matters
more than was healthy, but it stuck with him day and night any more, the
overriding hunch that for him the war’s next couple of years--and, who knew, the
next couple after that, and after that--might go on and on as his first two years of
so-called service had, yanking him away on non-combatant assignment to some
shot-up corner of the world and then depositing him back here for this kind of
thing, time after time. And, worse now, Cass always out of reach. At this rate, he
could foresee with excruciating clarity, her letters to him would add up to a string-
tied packet in the bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there
would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Lovesick. Try as he would, he could not clear away the relentless feeling.
Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. An
incurable case of Cassia Standish he was definitely suffering from, its symptoms
rapture and queasiness simultaneously. *Vic would think I’ve gone off my rocker.*
Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to
khaki. No surer way to risk loss of rank and beyond that, dishonorable discharge,
the Section Eight “deemed unfit to serve” bad piece of paper, him and her both.
*Sometimes I think I’ve gone off my rocker.* “My, my,” Cass had kidded him,
reaching out naked from bed the other night to stroke that new silver bar on his
Nick Danzer on the destroyer *U.S.S. McCorkle* in the Pacific.

Dexter Cariston at the camp that was not supposed to be mentioned.

Stanislaus Havel and Kenny O’Fallon in graves under military crosses.

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

Every soldier, in the course of time, exists only in the breath of written words. The gods that govern saga have always known that. There were times Bill Reinking stood stock-still in this newspaper office, hardly daring to breathe, as he tore open the week’s Threshold Press War Project packet and pawed through the drab handouts until he spotted the words *The “Supreme Team” on the Field of Battle...by Lt. Ben Reinking.* It awed him each time, Ben’s unfolding epic of them, impeccably told. Taken together, they amounted to an odd number—eleven—whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1941 on a windblown football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war. Montana boys, all, grown into something more than gridiron heroes. One by one, the Treasure State teammates—the much-heralded entire varsity now enlisted one way or another—were individuals rehearsing for history, in newsprint across America. The one with the TPWP patch on his shoulder, with the mandate from somewhere on high to write of them all, now pocketed away the dogtag-sized piece of metal cold in his fingers, as his father wordlessly watched.

The bitter arithmetic was not anything Ben could put away. “Two dead and Vic a cripple, how’s that for being a ‘chosen’ team? If this keeps on, we can play six-man.”
hate to bring up a remote possibility, but just maybe you were picked out for this because you’re the natural person for it.”

“You don’t know how the military works,” Ben scoffed. But there was no future in arguing his TPWP servitude with his father, not tonight. “Speaking of that.” He reeled off what he needed for his trip out of town in the morning.

“I wish we’d known,” dismay took over his father’s voice. “Your mother has been putting on the miles, these rehearsals—”

“Never mind, Dad, don’t look like that, it’s all right. I know where I can always get it.”

His father sighed. “We both know that. Why don’t you go tend to it before he closes for the night? Then you can give me a lift home so I can ride in style for a change.”

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

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

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

poster picturing President Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term that it would have made any Republican cringe.

Taking all this in, for the narrowest of moments Ben could almost feel he had never been away from it. Illusions had to be watched out for. He got down to business, which meant Tom Harry. “Do you still sell beverages in this joint or just stand around insulting the customers?”

The sole proprietor and entire staff of the Medicine Lodge glanced to the far end where the raggedy shepherders were gazing hopefully in Ben’s direction. “Hard to do, on some of them. What can I get you?”

“Whatever’s on draft,” Ben said before it registered on him that he was home now, he didn’t need to nurse away the evening on beer. “No, wait, something with a nip to it—an Old Fashioned, how about.” Still in the mood, Cass.

The other night in the roadhouse when they were priming themselves by playing coma cola roulette—each buying the other some unlikely concoction off the mixed drinks list before adjourning to the cabin for the night—she’d wickedly ordered him up one of these, saying it might put him in the mood for an old-fashioned pilot like her. Now he dug into his wallet. “Give the choirboys a round. Catch yourself, too.”

“Thanks, I’ll take mine in the register. Save you the tip.” Schooners of beer flew down the bar, the whiskey and paradoxical bitters and sugar was magically mixed, Ben watching fascinated as ever at the skill in those hands. Tom Harry could never be cast as a bartender, he decided. He overfilled the part. The slicked-back black hair, the blinding white shirt, the constant towel that
with the one where he sat now. He knew there was no denying the influence of
bloodline, but by quite a number of the readings he could take on his life so far,
Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, out there in the dark, served as a kind
of parentage too. Whatever he amounted to, this was where it came from.

The keeper of the bar returned, still wagging his head over the jellied egg
binge. Ben twirled his glass indicatively on the dark wood. “Any more of this in
the well?”

“The war must be teaching you bad habits,” Tom Harry grumbled as he
mixed the refill.

“Speaking of those.” Ben watched for a reaction, but could see none.

Standing there lightly twirling the towel, the saloonman showed no sign he had
ever been acquainted with practices such as providing working quarters for
prostitutes, bootlegging, and, now with the war, operating in at least gray margins
of the black market. “Here’s what it is. I need a car and a bible of gas coupons.”

“Well, you think you’re gonna drive to with those--Paris, France, to get
laid?”

“You ought to know. Probably all over hell, but I’ll start at the Two
Medicine.”

The uncomprehending look on his listener was a reminder that not all of
the world knew about Vic, at least yet. He again told what the minefield had done.

“What a hell of a thing to go through life like that.” Eyes reflective, Tom
Harry wiped slowly at the bar wood after Ben told him. “Knew that kid since he
down if a person blew his nose in its vicinity. All right, he conceded, maybe pursuit of elk was the only business Toussaint did have. But where in this rugged upper end of the Two Medicine country would the old reprobate have a favorite hunting ground?

For a moment--more than that, actually--he was tempted to give this up and concoct whatever he could, from football times together, for the TPWP piece about Vic. Give it the Loudon treatment for once. Loudmouth it, as the Treasure State team had learned to refer to the guff put out week by week by the sportswriter climbing to fame on their backs in ’41. Ted Loudon’s coarsest lead followed Vic’s four-touchdown game: *Wyoming was scalped on its home field today, by a halfback marauder from the northern plains named Vic Rennie.* Ben would have given plenty, then and now, to see the copy Loudon handed in and verify whether the sonofabitch had actually written *halfbreed halfback* and a queasy editor struck it out, or if Loudon had chosen to let it just smirk there in the shadows of *marauder* and *scalped.* He and Jake Eisman and most of the rest of the team had wanted to go to Bruno and tell him to shape up his mouthpiece buddy Loudon, but Vic only said he was used to that kind of crap.

Conscience makes tough company, Ben found again. Concocting would not do--this was Vic, and the last time he would be written about, possibly ever--and besides, in the zipper pocket of the flight jacket was what he was supposed to give to the old man who had raised his friend; he would have sworn he could feel the weight of the thing in there, feather-light though it was. No, at the very least he had to ask around. *This is such a famously friendly neighborhood, right, Vic?*
Ben resisted the impulse to whip out his higher set of orders and wipe the smirk off the clerk with them. He didn’t want that reputation until he knew more about what this damn base had become. Stoically he listened to the clerk recite the daily schedule of the shuttle bus between the base and downtown Great Falls. Meanwhile a fresh-faced private with an armband marking him as the runner from the orderly room had come in, and was hovering nearby. He broke in:

“Lieutenant Reinking?”

“I was when I got here.”

“General Grady wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“The commanding officer of the base, sir. Wants to see you.”

“As in, this minute?”

The runner nodded nervously.

Ben slung his duffel behind the desk where the clerk had no choice but to watch it. Before turning to go, he asked: “Do you have a Lieutenant Eisman bunked here?”

The clerk showed a sign of life. “Sure do—the football All-American? Ever see him play? I bet he didn’t even have to run, he could just walk through the other team.”

“Tell him the moving target is back.” Ben glanced at the orderly room runner waiting edgily to escort him to the headquarters building. “Lead on, Moses.”

As if some signal had been given, East Base began to hum with activity while the runner walked him through the military maze of buildings. Fire engines
“These females were wished onto me, and so were the Russkies,” the commander blared; for a moment Ben wondered if the man was deaf from too much propwash. “That doesn’t mean everybody and his dog has to read about them.” He shot a non-negotiable look across the desk. “Those *Supreme Team* write-ups of yours, bunk like that, that’s all right. Good for the war effort. Lieutenant Eisman has a wild hair up his ass whenever he’s on the ground, but he’s a good flier--write your brains out about him for all I care. As long as I’m in charge here, that’s the kind of thing I want to see, due tribute for my men who fly these planes to Alaska. Is that understood?”

“Duly noted, sir. I’ll be doing a piece on Jake Eisman as soon as--”

“That’s all, Reinking,” the commander swung around in his chair to peruse some imagined event out on the flightline. “Go see the adjutant,” came the imperial drift of order over his shoulder, “he’ll fix you up with desk space somewhere.”

*Where does the military find these types, Central Casting?* Ben let silence do its work before he cleared his throat and uttered:

“But sir?”

The general’s chair grudgingly swiveled in his direction again.

“The situation is,” Ben stated as if he had been asked, “I’m under orders to do other stories, too, wherever I see them.” He had been in front of enough base commanders to have perfected a polite stare that nonetheless underlined his standard message: “Orders from Washington, sir.”

“Lieutenant, shit’s sake, we’re all under orders from Washington!”
shine of newness, however. Toussaint chuckled again. “Sold a cow to get the gun to hunt elk. Don’t know if that’s progress.”

He gestured hospitably. “Pull up a rock, Ben.” Ben settled for a log end. Dark eyes within weathered folds of skin were contemplating him as if measuring the passage of years. “Haven’t seen you since Browning,” Toussaint arrived at. “You were catcher.”

Ben smiled. “End. It’s called ‘end’ in football, Toussaint.”

“Did a lot of catching, I saw.”

A dozen catches, in that final high school game against the reservation town; good for three touchdowns. Gros Ventre always pounded Browning into the ground in football, just as Browning always ran up the score sky-high against Gros Ventre in basketball. That game, though, Ben and his teammates had a terrible time handling a swift Browning halfback named Vic Rennie. “Vic damn near ran the pants off us.”

“He knew how to run.”

Ben’s heart skipped when he heard the past tense. Had word reached Toussaint already? It couldn’t have. He bought a bit more time with an inquisitive jerk of his head toward the far-off Rockies. “The last I knew, the Two Medicine country had elk. Why hightail it all the way over here to hunt?”

“Those buffalo.”

Toussaint spoke it in such a way that Ben nearly looked around for shaggy animals with horned heads down in the high grass.
discard pile. The new cards might as well have gone straight there, too. *Lucky in love doesn’t seem to count in poker either, Ben.* Even so, when Della upped the ante, she stayed with her. Della raised her again, which mercifully was the limit. Cass met the bet and, fingers crossed, produced the jacks.

“Pair of ladies.” Della laid down queens and scooped up cash. “Thank you for the money, y’all, it’ll go for good causes, widows and orphans and the home for overmatched poker players.”

Cass looked at Mary Catherine, and Mary Catherine at Beryl. Simultaneously they reached to their piles and each flung a dollar into the cuss pot. “*Piss in the ocean, Della!*” they chorused.

“My, my,” Della drawled, cocking a delicate ear. “Do I hear a whine in one of the engines?” Cass had to hand it to her; shavetail latecomer or not, she was sharp as a porcupine on most things. The full lieutenants, Beryl Foster and Mary Catherine Cornelisen, had earned their wings in the very first contingent of WASPs, as Cass herself had. The three of them together had endured the bald old goat of a flight instructor at Sweetwater, Texas, who claimed women pilots would never amount to anything because they couldn’t piss in the ocean--the Gulf of Mexico, actually--from ten thousand feet through the relief tube like the male pilots. If that had been deliberate motivation toward every other kind of flying skill, it worked in their case. Sometimes the aircraft they ferried from the plant were finished products and sometimes they weren’t. Mary Catherine once had been going through a cockpit check on the factory floor when the engine of the shiny new fighter burst into flames; pure textbook but against all human
another when he showed up to interview her and the other WASPs, as was to be expected after that run-in in the hangar. The atmosphere started to thaw as soon as he discovered she gave a straight answer, no matter what the question, and she found out he knew his business about flying. He’d done his homework on P-39s, was familiar with the Cobra’s reputation as a tricksome aircraft, with the engine mounted in back of the cockpit creating a center of gravity different from more stable fighter planes. And he had looked into the Lend-Lease lore that what was gained from the radical design was ideal room up front for a 30-millimeter cannon poking out of the propellor hub like a stinger; the Russians were said to adore P-39s for strafing, just point the nose of the plane at German tanks and convoys and blaze away. Cass drew a grin from him when she agreed it was a *flighty* aircraft, one you had to pilot every moment, but she confessed she didn’t mind that about the Cobra, weren’t you supposed to pay total attention when you were in the air? As to the funeral ticket always there in that big engine right behind the pilot’s neck, she offhandedly said the answer was to not get in a situation where you had to make a belly landing. That drew somewhat less of a grin from him. The true tipping point came, though, when she climbed into a tethered P-39 to show him the cockpit routine, automatically slipping off her wedding band as she slid into the seat and he wanted to know what that was about. Somehow willpower—*won’t power, too,* she ruefully corrected herself—*went out of control from then on.*

"My husband is too busy to mind about something like a ring, he’s in New Guinea."
"With the Montaneers? So is one of my football buddies—I was there a little while back."

"You were? Is it as bad as they say?"

"I'll bring you the piece I wrote there, you can decide."

All that. Then before they knew it, nights at the roadhouse or his room at the Excelsior. She had done anything like this only once before, during the spree in Dallas after winning her wings, when that well-mannered tank officer as viewed through a celebratory haze of drinks looked too good to resist. That was strictly a one-nighter, and she had no illusions that Dan Standish refrained from similar flings when he was loose on leave in Brisbane and Rockhampton among the Sheilas of Australia. Supposedly it was different for men, their urges painted as almost medical, "the screw flu"; to hear them tell it, nature was to blame. But what about the strain of being a woman in singular command of a squadron of nerve-wracking planes and pilots both, and Ben Reinking happens into your life, nature's remedy for desolate nights if there ever was one? In the world of war, turn down such solace just because chance made you female? It had started off as only friendly drinks, Ben still asking her this and that as he worked over his piece about her squadron, the two of them sudden buddies over the topics of planes and New Guinea, until all at once he was revealing to her that he'd been wounded during his correspondent stint there. Every word that followed had stayed with Cass ever since:

"Where?"
“Place called Bitoi Ridge. Kind of a jungle hogback, in from the bay at Salamaua.”

“Modest. I meant on you.”

Ben paused. “I don’t generally show it off.”

She bolted the last of her drink, but there was a challenging dry tingle in her mouth as she spoke it: “Never make an exception?”

And ever since, the part she hated: if she wanted to hang onto her marriage and officer’s rank, they didn’t dare get caught at it. Tell no one. Show nothing. Staying casual as you hid a lover was a surprising amount of work, but now she managed to shrug at Beryl’s remark. “I’ve just always done it, Bear. Dan and I knew a mechanic who slipped off a ladder, caught his ring on a bolthead. Pulled it right off.”

“The ring?” Della was deep in admiration of the newspaper photo, where the flip of her blond hair showed to advantage. “So what?”

“The finger, fool.”

“Yipe. Guess I better stay single, keep on playing the field.”

“Is that where you head out to with that warrant officer who has the jeep,” Mary Catherine wondered, “the nearest field?”

“Nice talk, Mary Cat. I don’t see you around the nunnery.” Della tucked the newspaper into her ready-bag. “Maybe I ought to set my sights higher, a war correspondent. Anybody find out, is he up for grabs?”
“He’s engaged,” Cass made up on the spot. “Head over heels for the lucky
girl, from the sound of it. Everybody, strap on those chutes in case this moron
pilot isn’t any better at reading a fuel gauge than the weather.”

Mary Catherine couldn’t resist a last dig on Della. “You’re losing your
touch, Delly. You might have known that dreamboat of a correspondent is taken.”
She spoke with the air of one who had been through enough men to know. “The
good ones always are.”

“Lieutenant Reinking, sir? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

_Not again. Doesn’t that damn general have anything else to do, like run
the base?_ On edge anyway, Ben had intended to slip into his office only for a
minute before heading to the communications section and checking the flight
board again. The last two times, the board showed NTO ZV--no takeoff, zero
visibility--for Cass’s WASP 1 squadron. It spooked him--possibly more than it
should, but it spooked him nonetheless. Fog induced crashes. That 1200-
horsepower engine situated directly in back of the pilot seat, like a cocked
catapult. _Seattle wrote the book on fog, surely to God they’ll scrub the flight,
won’t they?_

Along with fretting about Cass and trying to wind down from leave, he
had spent the afternoon with his typewriter in a back room at the base library,
wrapping up the piece on Vic. The war did not recognize Sunday, but somehow it
was the slowest day of message traffic and his intention was to send in the piece
while the sending was good. In the way of that stood a squat broken-nosed
hardcase in rumpled uniform, nervously fiddling with his cap. Ben eyed him distrustfully until he realized there was no armband—day-room runner on this one.

“All over is the right place to look for me,” Ben admitted. “What’s on your mind, soldier?”

“Didn’t they tell you, sir? I’m your new clerk.”

Caught off guard, Ben shot a glance at the desk in the corner; it had been swept clean of everything except the typewriter and the Speed Graphic camera, making his own chronically overloaded desk look even more like a dump. “What happened to Wryzinski?”

“Nobody told me that, sir.” The anthem of the enlisted man.

Ben had just been getting used to Wryzinski. “Right, why did I even ask. Tepee Weepy taketh away and Tepee Weepy giveth.” He offered the new man a handshake. “What do I call you?”

“Jones, sir.”

“Nobody’s named that,” Ben responded, grinning to put him at ease. “It’s taken.”

“I don’t quite catch your meaning, sir.”

This was going to require some care, Ben realized. “Let’s do this over, corporal. First off, I’ll try to remember to wiggle my ears when I’m making a joke and you try to pretend there is such a thing as a joke. Second, drop the ‘sir’ when there’s no one here but us, and that’s all the time.” The makeshift office that had been tossed to Ben—in earlier life it was some kind of overgrown storage bin, for
onions from the smell of it, at the rear of the mess hall--at least provided
seclusion. “Maybe then we can get along reasonably well, okay?” The plug-ugly
face indicated it was determined to try. “So, Jones, enlighten me--what did you
do in civvie life to condemn yourself to being assigned to me?”

“College. Religious Studies, ahead of seminary.”

Ben examined him. Jones looked as if any study time he had put in likely
would have been with Murder Incorporated. “No kidding. At any place I ever
heard of?”

“Out at the university.” This drew him closer scrutiny from Ben. “I was a
freshman in ’41. Yelled my head off at every game, lieutenant. What a team you
guys were.”

“Then you know what this is about,” Ben indicated the overloaded small
office. “Go ahead and move into that desk. I’m just on my way over to the wire
room and--”

“Sir--I mean, lieutenant? I was just over there. Figured I could at least
check on things until you showed up.” The incipient clerk looked uncomfortable.
“There’s a slew of messages, but they said for your eyes only. They told me to,
uhm, get lost.”

_They told you to go screw yourself six ways from Sunday, didn’t they,
Parson Jones. Welcome to the East Base version of close combat._ “I’ll have a
word with them about giving you confusing directions like that. Just so you
know, I need to sign off on all messages. Don’t ask me why, I don’t write the
regulations.” The war clock ticking in his head, he suddenly asked: “Any skinny
about where these came in from?”

Jones pursed his lips as if calculating where gossip fell on the scale of sin.

“Uhm, I did pester the teletype operator until he’d tell me that much. Pacific
theatre, lieutenant.”

Friessen and Animal Angelides and Danzer. Rest camp in Australia and
troop ship in convoy and destroyer on noncombat station. Those should be okay;
routine reports this time of day. Relieved, Ben grabbed up the materials from his
desk that he had come for and turned to go. Jones still stood there fidgeting.

“Lieutenant, I better tell you, I don’t have the least idea what I’m supposed
to be doing here. I never heard of this TPWP outfit until I was assigned to you.”

By now Ben could have recited it in his sleep, the same spiel he had given
Wryzinski, and Torvik before him, and Sullivan before that, that the government
was in the habit of setting up special projects for certain war priorities. There was
one for lumber production, and one for the artificial rubber called guayule, and a
rumored strange one going on out in the desert at Hanford, Washington, that no
one would talk about officially, and who knew how many others. “In ours, we
produce boilerplate for the newspapers, to put it politely. You do know how to
handle a typewriter and a camera, right? Where is it you were stationed, before?”

“The Aleutians. I was on the base newspaper at Adak, the Williwaw.” A
mistily nostalgic expression came over the thug face. “They really had the
weather up there. It was great for Bible study.”
“I’ll just bet.” If the Aleutian Islands were known for anything, it was sideways rain. That remote Alaska outpost was about as distant as possible from Montana and any logical assignment to this office. Another of those chills blowing through a gap in the law of averages crept up Ben’s spine as he inspected the unexpected corporal again. The war tossed people like scraps of paper to far corners of the world, except those who happened to have attended Treasure State University in ’41; those it was busily sifting back to Great Falls. Jake Eisman, first. Then himself, and now this clerk with nothing standing out on his record except piety. Would coincidences never cease: the tangled situation with Cass, and all of a sudden a Ten Commandments officemate who would definitely know which number the one against adultery was.

“Tell you what, Jones, things are kind of slack at the moment and it’s late in the day,” he resorted to, wanting time to think over this latest circumstance, “so why don’t you just get settled in the barracks. I’ll collect the messages and we’ll start work in the morning—-with any luck, the two of us will have the war won by noon.”

Jones cleared his throat. “Sir? We have company.”

Another soldier was standing in the office doorway wringing a cap. This one wore an armband.

“I have been reprimanded,” the base commander set fire to each word. “Because of you, Lieutenant Reinking.”
Standing at attention in the same old spot at eyechart distance from the desk nameplate that read GENERAL GRADY, Ben mentally tried out "I was just trying to do my job, sir," and decided silence sounded better.

The general continued, at volume. "A certain United States Senator from here read your article on the WASPs. Ordinarily that wouldn't matter a shit's worth, but he's a busybody on a committee the Pentagon has to get along with. It seems he wants to know why, if women have the training to fly these airplanes of ours in American air, they can't cross a meaningless line on the ground called the Canadian border and do the Alaska run. The interfering old fart."

"Sir?" Ben risked. It drew him a glare, but also a nod for him to speak if he dared. "Could you maybe fill me in as to why the WASPs can't fly north?"

The general said sardonically, "I thought you were supposed to be bright, Reinking. I use the Alaska run to weed my pilots. It's the next thing to combat flying."

He whirled in his chair and slammed a hand to the wall map behind him. "Shit's sake, man, just look at the terrain! The hop from here to Edmonton, anybody in ATC can fly that with one eye closed. But then comes the real flying, every goddamn Canadian mountain there is and then the Alaskan ones. That flight is long, the weather is bad half the time and worse the rest, the Fairbanks airport is no cinch--do you see what I'm driving at? Those who can hack it on the northern hop"--the general reached high to resoundingly slap the Alaska portion of the map--"I see to it that they have a good shot at transferring over to be fighter or bomber pilots. Those pilots, perhaps you have noticed, lieutenant, according to
United States Army Air Corps regulations need to be m-e-n.” The general spelled it out for him ever further: “Letting the goddamn WASPs onto that run would get in the way of that.”

“I see, sir.” Does the Senator?

General Grady slumped back in his chair as if under the weight of that thought. “Not that it matters, now that I have to screw the mongoose on this”-- Ben did not let his face show how much he savored that description--“but what do I have to look forward to next from you, Reinking? I am supposedly in charge of all personnel on this air base, yet you have orders from somewhere on high that lets you flit around here doing whatever you damn please. Exactly who is behind this kink in the chain of command?” The general leaned far forward. “The President? Joseph Stalin? God?”

A colonel with a Gable mustache, actually.

Ben’s war then had not yet become an endless maze of map-plastered base offices and florid commanding officers discomfited by his existence, but it was about to. That last spring morning in 1942 at the pilot training base outside Nashville, reporting as ordered but so mad he could barely see straight, he stepped into the briefing room the visiting colonel had borrowed. He still was reeling from the epic chewing out inflicted by his training squadron CO, minutes before.

“So, Reinking, is your father possibly a Congressman? He’s not? Then where the hell does your pull come from? I’m supposed to produce fighter pilots. I get somebody who looks like the second coming of Von Richthofen, and ten days from
graduation he chickens out. First thing I know he's detached to the goddamned puzzle palace in D.C. A colonel flies in from Washington just to fetch you--if that isn't pull, Reinking, I don't know what is. Have a nice safe war, and get out of my sight."

Torn between outrage and trepidation, Ben approached the waiting colonel prepared to plead this as a case of mistaken identity. His rigid salute went unanswered, the officer waving him to stand at ease. That and the way the Pentagon man casually perched on the edge of a desk instead of requisitioning it said he was not a military lifer, Ben deciphered. Instead he looked like someone off the cover of TIME, the slicked-back hair, the dapper pencil-thin mustache, the executive attitude; there was always a smokestack or an assembly line over the tailored shoulder on the magazine cover.

Colonel Whoever-he-was meanwhile had given Ben an equal looking-over and now said, as if it was the first of many decisions, “Light one if you’ve got one. Or try one of my Cuban'lirillos?” He held out a pack of thin dark baby cigars.

“I don’t smoke, sir.”

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

Loudmouth? You couldn't pay me enough to listen to that creep. Ben stuck to, “Can’t say that I did, sir.”
gestured with the cigarillo as if striking that word--"or rather you, lieutenant, do this."

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

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

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

The flight board still was not doing Cass or him any favors. Chalked slots swarmed with on-time departures and arrivals across the entire vast trellis of routes into and out of East Base, every B-17 and P-39 and all the birds of the air evidently having enjoyed a day of fine weather for flying, with the lonely exception of Squadron WASP 1 still sitting in murderous fog in Seattle. Swearing to himself, Ben banged out of the Operations building. He hit the communications section next, to send off the piece on Vic, remembering to threaten the wire clerk with certain demotion and possible dismemberment if he didn't keep a civil tongue toward Jones.
never imagined looking forward to a bed without her in it, but the three white letter--RON--up there for blessed 'REMAINING OVERNIGHT' did the job.

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

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

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

"Anesthesia. I have something to tell you about Vic."
“Could be. Anyway, screw Grady, let’s drink to Luther and Sadie.” With that, the state’s senior senator and possibly just as senior spouse were accorded their due in scotch.

Cass belted hers down while his was barely to his lips, and scooted to the dresser to fetch the bottle. This time Ben saw not only a lovely lively woman who happened to fit into a Cobra cockpit, but a destined ace pilot of some kind. Captain Cassia Standish and her squadron given the go-ahead to fly in wartime airspace outside the U.S., even if it was only across a couple of Canadian provinces so far: who knew where that would lead? War correspondents read other correspondents, and he was well apprised from Russian dispatches that the Red Air Force already had women flying in combat, surely some of them in the same P-39s--the Laplander legend notwithstanding--that had hopscotched all the way from East Base. It went through him in a chill mix of clarity and dismay: if the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to the Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

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

“The opposite.” He told her the story of Vic.

“That’s rough.” Without being asked, Cass bolstered his drink. “A leg off--

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

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

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

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

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

“I find that out tomorrow.”
Ben thought. "I didn’t ever have time to."

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

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

"Don’t know yet. A lot depends."

He shook his head, resorting to mock rue, some of it not so mock. "A woman who flies a fighter plane with a ceiling of thirty-five thousand feet, and as if that isn’t enough fooling around with altitude, she wants to get out and stroll along the wing of some cropdust clunker. I have to inform you, Captain Standish, that’s the long way around to get your kicks. A nuthouse doctor would definitely call that a promiscuous acrophiliac tendency."

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

"A guy can hope."

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

The teletype clerk looked up nervously when he strode into the wire room, early if not bright, the next morning. Ben was used to causing dismay this way. He knew he was hated by innumerable men around the world who had never laid eyes on him. Public affairs officers required to keep close track of the doings of whatever member of the "Supreme Team" they were unfortunate enough to have
from banging into trees on the way down, those doubtless were the constants of an infirmary at a place like this. Relief pumped through him. *Why didn't I guess, Dex? Follow the trail of bandages toward anything medical and there you'll be.*

Taking quick leave of the director, Ben climbed back into the ragtop jeep Jones had requisitioned. He still felt somewhat guilty about dropping Jones outside Helena, all by his lonesome, to do the dreary photo shoot on military sled dogs and their earnest trainers, but not overly. Jones and everyone else had to be left out of this. The last thing in the world Tepee Weepy wanted made known was that one of its “Supreme Team” heroes was sitting out the war at a pacifist camp. For that matter, it was the last thing the others on the team, up to their necks in the armed struggle, would want to find out. As he drove around the end of the airstrip and pulled up to the infirmary, Ben found himself half hoping Dexter Cariston, marked down from dead, was in there on crutches with a fractured something-or-other; *Injured in Training Camp* was a story he could fiddle around with and not have to say just what kind of camp.

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

“Take your time, Dex, it’s looking like a long war.”
this death struggle in the jungle, it could be read in the lines of Carl Friessen’s face. “We’re nowhere near done, either,” the bony infantryman was saying. “The hot rumor is a landing up around Salamaua.” He estimated Ben with a flat gaze. “You come all this way to go in with us?”

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

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

A week later, the two of them were on a slippery trail in the head-high grass on the ridge above the Bitoi River, with the other seven men of Carl’s squad. Ben intended to called it quits as soon as they made it back to the invasion perimeter. His pad was full with the past days. The pre-dawn scene in the landing craft as it broached in a big wave and seasick soldiers had to dodge a sliding jeep that broke loose from its fastenings. The Australian commandoes guiding them ashore with blinking signal lights after wading in from behind enemy lines through a swamp and swimming to the assault beach, the winks of brightness showing each man of them standing in the sand proudly naked except for his Digger hat. The steady advice from Carl during the endless crawl for the shelter of the treeline as Japanese bullets flew over them: “Keep your head and butt down. Remember gopher hunting? We’re the gophers here.” By now, abundantly shot at but not shot up, Carl’s unit was dug in inland from the beachhead and everyone agreed they had lucked out so far. The Japanese line had bent back up the height of ground overlooking the Bitoi River and the plan was to
kicking at the maniacal mortarman who in a final wild sling hurled the mortar and
grabbed for a grenade on his belt. Carl swarmed onto him and the two went down
in a pile together, the Jap’s arm outstretched and the grenade twitching in his hand
as he tried to dislodge its pin. Wound and all, Ben flung himself, desperately
pinning down the struggling arm, his blood dripping over the tangle of the three of
them, until Carl clambered astraddle of the Jap and with no other weapon at hand
beat the man to death with his helmet.

“What’s this, the poor man’s Hemingway green around the gills?” Dex’s
tone turned unmistakably medical and concerned. “Something wrong with you?”

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

“Sick of what we’re all going through, isn’t that enough?” he evaded with
another modification of truth. He had led the camp director to believe Dex’s
decision not to fight could be read between the lines of whatever he wrote about
the smokejumper camp; try as he might, people would need something stronger
than Dex’s microscope to find anything of the sort, Tepee Weepy would see to
that. He had told poor Jones before leaving him to the dogs that he was going into
Helena to spend the day covering a war bonds bingo marathon; half an hour had
taken care of it, then he’d headed here. Big day for the one-man liar’s club. He
was starting to feel like he needed a bath. Something had to be said, and he put all
he could into it: “Dex? Guess what, it’s your turn to be written about and
I’m up against it.”
"--and instead--"

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

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

"You want my two-bits’ worth? First, we wouldn’t be known as the famous Golden Eagles of J41 any more, we’d be called the Golden Chickens. Maybe that’d be a relief, I don’t know."

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

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

"We’re nothing but trophies, you’re saying.”
Wasting no time, Cass moved off to spread the blanket in a snug spot against the rocks and wink at the shy kids clustering in curiosity. Ben took the chance to steal a look around. The site was right. From up here, the bowl of the stadium was a green swatch amid the prevailing gold and silver of the Homecoming crowd; the band members at midfield blaring out the TSU fight song were the size of toothpicks and faceless, as he and Cass would be to anyone bored enough with football to gaze up here at the denizens of Hill 57. He could relax about that, but he felt keyed up every other way possible. Game day.

_Weren't they all, one way or another, with that bastard Bruno?_ The other paint-marked sidehill stood almost directly across from him, steeply rising out of the broad coulee where the facing buttes drew back to let the wind into Great Falls: the Letter Hill. He could not take his eyes off the chalky stone insignia there, the broad splay of the **T**, the coil of the **S** gripping its stem, the hanging swoop of the **U**. Every book on scriptwriting warned against the seductions of the sweeping overhead shot—Sam Goldwyn supposedly said that anyone who wanted to spend his money to go that high to look down ought to take the free elevator at the Empire State Building—but the conjured scene coaxed insistently into Ben’s movie eye: a long line of figures in football uniforms, strung out on the trail up the Letter Hill as haphazardly as a caravan in distress, toiling toward the interlinked letters high above. Fade to dusk, and one lone runner still struggling against gravity.

The sound effects were not of his choosing. "_Treasure State University is proud to welcome its special guests to Homecoming, 1943!_"
this moment forward, people. You have to want this ball. You have to lust for this ball. You have to love getting this ball and handling it as if you are the only ones on the face of God’s green sod it is entrusted to.” Pausing for emphasis or maybe it was breath, Bruno nursed his disgust in front of them for all it was worth.

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

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

Nearest across the scrimmage line from Ben, Purcell uncomfortably did. The lanky sophomore was blushing red-hot at the coach’s choice of language. Where the hell was he raised, in a Sunday school? A walk-on from six-man nowhere, Merle Purcell had been turning pink since the first day of practice when he stepped into the locker room wearing a droopy high school sweater that showed he had lettered in football, basketball, and track. Instantly he became known as the three-letter man and crude suggestions were made as to what those letters stood for. He wasn’t necessarily hazed any harder than any other
messing up a play, no timeouts to fix shoulder pads, no anything else that could conceivably offend the exacting eye on the sideline--but what sane person in a football uniform was going to stand out there arguing singular and plural with the gridiron lord and master?

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

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

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

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

“Moxie underthrew that ball,” Vic said quietly.

“Maybe not by accident,” Dex fitted on to that.

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

“All right, I know. I’ll try my goddamnedest to make Bruno hear us on this,” Ben promised. “But I want to do it out of range of Loudmouth.”
It did and it didn’t. That always seemed to be the case where Purcell was involved. Resolutely Ben indicated to the troublesome figure slumped on the bench waiting for his Letter Hill fate. “It’s him. That was his first play on the starting team, remember, and he didn’t have any time to settle down. Besides, Moxie didn’t get quite enough zip on that pass.” He watched the eyes that should have seen that, but the coach yielded nothing. “The guys pretty much think you ought to go easy on Purcell this once.”

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

“Not so as you would notice. The Hill is on everybody’s nerves, coach, we all think you should lay off it now. You’ve made your point.” And made it and made it.

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

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

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

Having grown up around journalistic boilerplate, Ben knew beyond the shadow of a doubt Loudon’s same words would show up in tomorrow morning’s sports column in virtually every daily paper across Montana. The copper company owned those as well as the statewide radio network. For whatever reason, Purcell was getting a sendoff from the powers that be.

Stepping up to the mike, Bruno dramatically cleared his throat and the ears of countless listeners. “We at Treasure State University, and indeed this great state for which is named,” he boomed his words out as if to make sure they reached from border to border, “have suffered a loss before the football season of record has even begun.”
Afterward, Ben could look back and see the team had been trapped. By
the trappings draped all over TSU home games from then on, if nothing else. The
stadium-shaking stomping roars of "Merrrle!" led by the student section as
Twelfth Man pennants flew in their hands. Purcell’s awkwardly dressed-up
parents unmissable in the guest seats of honor. While up there in the KOPR
booth, inflated to sportscaster by the heady vapors given off by his prose back
there at graveside and the days of headlines after, Loudon rattled on about the
uncanny inspiration driving the team to destiny.

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

“Hey.” Long thoughts left him at halftime as Cass passed the scotch bottle back and forth under his nose like smelling salts. “Better revive yourself, your team could stand a shot of something, too.”

“Nothing a wholesale bunch of touchdowns couldn’t cure.” He’d have felt better about the shellacking TSU was taking if Bruno still were the coach. Naturally the bastard had parlayed the¹⁴¹ season into the job at a California football powerhouse. Scum always rises.

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

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

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

“Gee, do I have a better offer?”
boot grease. Feeling as if he was in another world, he spooned up the formidable soup and devoured hunks of bread while Jake alternately ate and banked his hands through the air in testimony to the maneuvering capabilities of B-17s. Across the table, Russian pilots who looked like either plowboys or middle-aged pirates—the generation between had largely been wiped out by the Germans’ demonic sieges from Leningrad to Sevastopol—listened monastically. Amid the bulky men, a woman who was not at all what Ben had expected—trim, keen, authoritative; she reminded him alarmingly of Cass—translated Jake’s effusions and Russian spatters of questions.

“Yakov, they say, how big bomb pile?”

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

“Tonna,” Katya reported and translated the tonnage, drawing the first smiles from the Russian airmen.

At first Ben had been relieved to see other American uniforms in the roomful of brown drab, a plump major and a couple of shavetail aides sitting with an ascetic looking Russian majordomo of some sort. The major proved to be the liaison officer, which meant he was there only under obligation, and in a matter of minutes had sent over the more diminutive of the aides to inquire why they were not in their own mess hall with everyone else. *Awful good question, shorty.* Jake pulled out all the stops, citing Ben as a big shot correspondent chronicling Lend-Lease and the peerless pilots of both nations. When the underling relayed that, the major gave them an edgy look, but he directly departed and so did the thin-
When he finally unclenched his eyelids, Jake was standing over him with one big mitt of a hand rocking the bunkframe. “Another day, another dollar, buddy. How you feeling?”

“Next thing to dead, if you really have to know.”

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

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

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

Ben woke up entirely. “Bush plane?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That is precisely what he needs to be. Reinking, is that your name?" The ops officer appeared dubious about even that. "Unless Eisman goes deaf, dumb
himself and his face looked like he had been in a fight with a bobcat and he still had the entire slew of writing about the bomber journey to Alaska to be done. *Am I imagining, or am I losing ground faster than I can type?*

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

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

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

“It is with them.”

“Uhm, lieutenant, I’m supposed to tell you. Commander’s orders, you’re to report to the infirmary before you do anything else.”

“If Grandpa Grady thinks I’ve had time to bring a dose of clap in from Canada—”

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

“I’m touched,” Ben growled.

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

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

“Don’t forget the--”

“--clap shop, I won’t, thank you very much, Jones.”

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

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

The brawny woman pointed to a workbench strewn with tools. Ben went over and picked up a chisel. He lightly gouged the wax, the clock of war turning in him. *How many time zones away from Cass Standish could a man stand to be? Her husband was seventeen away, if that was any guide. And look what’s happening to him.*
would help to approach her level. "Bill, I think people are ready for another
round."

"Next year I'll just hand out bottles instead of glasses."

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

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

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

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

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

He had hiked his full share of the arch of North America, the high hunting country that crisscrossed the Continental Divide back in Montana, but this was his first time to explore any of the other national extremity, the coastal sill where the land mass wrested itself from the sea. Out here in the state of Washington was the American shore at its most remote, dangling like a coarse fringe from the huge cape where the Strait of Juan de Fuca angled into the continent. Its isolation spooked Ben. He’d slogged the beach for three hours from the barely extant
lead, aren’t they.” A considering tilt of the head. “Kind of funny to think of him at the other end of this water, somewhere.” Ben noticed he did not include Danzer, on destroyer duty in what was equally the Pacific, in this musing.

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

“I don’t really doubt it.”

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

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

“Rex thinks he’s got something,” Sig murmured as he swiftly unslung his .45 pistol Tommy gun. In the next motion he handed Ben the weapon from his holster. “Just in case.”

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

Weapons ready, the pair of them stayed out of sight as best they could behind driftlogs and approached the verge of the overgrown patch, led by the stalking dog. The question ran in Ben’s mind, what armaments would Japanese submariners bring to shore with them? Probably a hell of a lot more than one
“Took the words right out of my mouth, grabby,” Ben put his own best face on it. “I’ll be a moving target, but letters--”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“See!”
somewhere on the coast of France and I’m out here with the albatrosses. Thanks a whole hell of a lot for the heads-up, Tepee Weepy.

In the wardroom’s explosion of speculation that followed the Allied supreme commander’s brief pronouncement, Danzer murmured aside to Ben: “A gentleman’s C, on that pep talk by El Supremo?”

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

Did he imagine, or did Danzer draw back a little in surprise at those words? Ben shot him a curious look, but the Dancer was elusive there in his naval crispness. He still was as lean as when he lined up at opposite end from Ben and as apart. “You knew he was stationed in England, didn’t you?”

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

Nicholas Edwin Danzer. ‘Ned’ when he was growing up in Livingston, but ‘Nick’ as soon as he hit Treasure State University and figured out what rhymed nicely with ‘slick.’ His family has the Paradise Gateway Toggery, outfitter to moneyed tourists on their way to Yellowstone Park. The snappy
periodic glimpse—not that your talents can be entirely captured at any one time, Nick—of someone all throughout the war. Rather like time-lapse photography.”

Before the executive officer could hold forth further, Ben put in “Right now I’m the one lapsing,” barely covering a yawn. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen”—he tried to intone it without irony and could not be sure he succeeded—“I’m going to have to hit the sack.”

The one advantage of bunking in the sick bay was privacy, which he craved in the crowded confines of the ship. *Just me and the aspirin and the sawbone’s slab.* Those and the unsettling sense of being cast backward in time.

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

That and ten cents would buy a person a dime’s worth of difference in this life, wouldn’t it. He swung up off the bunk, determined to leave the mood there, and crossed over to his typewriter on the cubbyhole desk. First, though—another habit back from that other sick bay stay—a year ago—he flicked on the radio tuned to Tokyo Rose. As ever, the sultry voice was there, alternating between taunting American soldiers all over the Pacific and playing the likes of “Tuxedo Junction,” the rhythm that began swelling out now. The Japanese were good at such propaganda, he acknowledged; the German counterpart, Lord Haw Haw, sounded like P.G. Wodehouse construing Bertie Wooster. Swing music outdid a drone any old night. Something to keep in mind, would-be scriptwriter, he told himself. He tuned the sound just low enough to be background, and settled to his routine.

His things were laid out on the slablike medical table and he reached over for fresh paper and rolled a page into the typewriter. He took his time at this, which would have astounded Jones or anyone else back at East Base who had ever seen him put a typewriter to work. On TPWP pieces he wrote as fast as the keys could tolerate, never needing to glance down—one of the blessings he owed his father was those boyhood sessions at the training typewriter in the Gleaner office, with bunion pads hiding the letters on the keyboard. But nights on his movie script, which were many, he deliberately slowed to a sculptor’s pace, letting the imagination feel its way toward the shape of trueness. The scene he was working on took place on the Letter Hill. The character based on Purcell was the last
Ben tensed, glad his face could not be seen in the dark. Oh, goddamn.

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

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

Loudon had the knack, Ben had long ago divined, of spreading himself like a weed. Newspapers, airwaves, celluloid, the so-called sportscaster was everywhere but the backs of matchbooks and that was probably next. Ben set himself to endure another kaleidoscope of cliches, still trying to figure out Danzer’s purpose in thrusting this in front of him. *There’s no football this time of year. Is he just throwing Loudmouth at me to see what will stick?* Meanwhile in close focus there on the wardroom wall, Loudon himself was grandiosely shepherding an over-the-hill heavyweight boxer onto a hangar stage at the big air base in Newfoundland. In the space of the next breath, he was spouting his way through Opening Day of baseball season, replete with himself among the wounded troops in the box seats at the Washington Senators game.
Then the projector beam gave a wink of light between scenes, composed itself into gymnasium bleachers full of cheering soldiers, and onto a basketball court surged a pair of teams, one wearing no jerseys and the other wearing beards that reached to the chest letters on theirs. "For the troops at Fort Dix gathered in the USO fieldhouse, it's basketball, down to hide and hair!" Ben jolted up in his seat. "Yes, folks, it's the Carlisle Skins versus the House of David! These barnstorming teams have entertained America from coast to coast, playing a brand of ball that their ancestors would not recognize but they have adapted for their own." Eerily he watched five fleet ghosts of Vic Rennie racing up and down the hardwood floor, the Indian team in just its trunks running and shooting like boys let loose. For their part, the big bearded men on the other team set up passwork plays of geometric grace. In between the pure basketball there were stints of showmanship nonsense, as one of the bearded giants held the basketball in one hand over his head and a couple of the shorter Indians jumped and jumped and couldn't come close to reaching it, then in the next sequence the Indians sped upcourt passing to one another so swiftly through the windmilling House of David players that the ball seemed to be in two places at once. It was all circus to Loudon, who in his patter managed to ignore superb run-and-gun plays to concentrate on exaggerated pronunciation of names like Hunts at Night and Buffalo Scraper, and for that matter, Perlmutter and Rosenthorn. Numbly Ben blocked out all of that he could, summoning instead the intrinsic memory of Vic with his hopes set on the Skins, on the playing career beyond football that would
take him anywhere but Hill 57. Until his leg disappeared from under him. And then his life.

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

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

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

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

"Sweet dreams to you too, Rosie," Ben mocked back but kept the music as he twirled a half-finished page of script into the typewriter. A warm awareness different from other writing nights kept coursing through him. As much as he hated to admit Ted Loudon could possibly amount to any kind of inspiration, that rapidfire voice worked as a goad, evoking the Golden Eagles stadium, the cleated team poised to charge onto the football field, the gilded season that led to so much
“It’s about an accident of nature, then,” the chiseled voice quickly recovered, at least. “Two of them. That freak kid himself and what happened to him on the Hill. I’m surprised you can’t find anything more worthy of your talent, Ben.”

_You think you’re surprised. Purcell does the trick on Slick Nick: that’s a surprise._

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

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

“Don’t judge my script too soon, Nick,” Ben flicked the page resting in the typewriter. “Maybe it’ll turn out to bring back valuable memories for you.”
coming out now as the impatience of a fighting man ready to march into Tokyo and trapped amidship on a transport scow going nowhere fast.

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

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

“You sound like you can’t wait, Animal.”

Angelides cut him a telling look. “You know what, any more I go by Andy. It’s just easier around the guys in the unit.”
Ben seized the chance to trade. "Funny, that's how I feel about Lefty. It's been a long time since I lined up at opposite end."

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

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

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

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

Angelides looked at him solemnly and turned to go below. "I prefer showers."
how.” He rumbled a humorless laugh. “A lifeboat for the wet-ass infantry, you
could call it.”

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

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

“Over here, sailor.”

“Message for you, topside.”

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

P.S. TECHNICAL AIDE ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT, DON’T FRET.
Ben read it again with just as much disbelief as the first time through.

Where do the bastards come up with these ideas? They're turning me into the khaki version of Loudon. A play-by-play of an invasion. Starring, naturally, a certain keyed-up sergeant and the outfit he would lead against enemy fire.

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

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

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

Flat on his back in the next bunk reading the sole V-mail letter that had come for him--from his uncle--Angelides commented: "You're a popular guy. I must have answered up for you twenty times."

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

_Ben, love—_

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

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

*Keep low out there, you with the typewriter.*

_Cass_

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

It was an ordinary Edmonton run, although Cass long since had absorbed the cockpit wisdom that flying through thin air is never exactly ordinary. On a summer day of this sort, however, from fifteen thousand feet above these borderland plains between Montana and Alberta, usually you could see around the world and back again. But right now in the telltale tremor of air above the humpbacked hills her eyes would not leave the sight of the weather making itself,
the letters over again, knowing all the while there was another recipient of her
lines of love or whatever approximated it.

Life was a sum of unlikelihoods, but in his wildest imagining he could not
have seen ahead to this, sharing professions of love with another man’s wife.

Were those letters to a long-absent husband somewhere at mail call on a jungle
island like these? They couldn’t be, the soul issued assurance. Why wouldn’t
they be? said the demons of the heart.

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

Angelides gruffly offered up: “This appears serious.”

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

Angelides waited, attentive to more to come.

“I’m in a fix, Andy. She’s married.”

The sentences escaped from him before he knew it. He hadn’t told
Prokosch when he had the opening. Never would he have told Danzer. He had
not even confided in Jake, repository of life’s complications that he was.

Angelides in alert stillness on the next bunk he would have trusted with his life,
but the confession he had just made came under another category entirely. I’m not
equipped for this. Ben creased the letters closed. “Keep it under your hat, okay?
I can’t take any pride in being a homewrecker. If that’s what I turn out to be,
even.”
bad surprises sewn in; just ask the poor suckers stationed on Guam in 1942 when
the Japanese imperial army showed up.

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

The bared smile. “You can’t tell by looking? It fits me like a cork in a
virgin.”

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

“Hi, lieutenant. Gosh, it’s hot here.”

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

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

“That was the order that came down,” this stanza of the enlisted men’s
repertoire practically sang from the bedraggled corporal. He puckered in
contemplation and came up with a morsel of solace for Ben: "They did give me
the manual and I read it on the flight over."

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

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

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

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

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

"Eniwetok's harbor is jammed with ships of the assault force," he stared around at the obvious and could only recite it in strained fashion. Wanting to say: *Cass, you should see this. You can't imagine the steel mills it took to do this, wall an entire island with ships.* "The Marines aboard this one say they are ready for the real thing after weeks of practice landings here." *They say it in the filthy language of war, naturally--pilots aren't the only ones with the vocabulary, Cass.*

*Poor Jones goes around the ship looking like his ears hurt. Angelides these days has a mouth on him like a blowtorch. Invasion is a hellish thing to go through. Nobody is actually ever prepared to die, are they--it's not human nature, the imagination can't handle obliteration. And so the guys below decks talk tough, so the fear doesn't have a chance to speak up.* Again aloud: *"Equipment of all sorts is in the cargo bays waiting to roll aboard the landing craft. Artillery, half-tracks, jeeps--"*

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

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