

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking 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, Ben 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 here 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,

add a #
personalizing
Baa?
law of
averages said
some that not be
occurring
happening

definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod in everyone's general direction the way he imagined someone who looked like a hotshot pilot was counted on to do, he deposited himself nearest the door as always, the coat leather crackling as he folded his considerable height into the worn confines of the seat. In his travels through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River

add a
next line
o Ben.

2 uses
of "giving"
Wadding
crisply

bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. That was before Cass, of course. But love seemed to like to strike in inconvenient places, and in the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. How the hell is it possible? How's this for a scene, Mr. Zanuck:

"What did you do in the war, my boy?"

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made crip trips home to where I played football."

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. This still amounted to a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.*

He
squirmed

He wondered again what he was going to write about Duane Buisson and what had happened to him that by any stretch of the imagination might pass muster with the TPWP copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. After a year and half of this, Ben still was mystified by some of the capricious workings of the Threshold Press War Project. He full well understood that the name was meant to invoke the undermost homefront, the breadbasket America served by small-town weeklies and mid-size dailies, but it never left his mind for long that a threshold also was where people wiped their feet on something.

And why'd they give me this all of a sudden? Self-consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindsides orders that landed him back here. *I don't have time in grade or anything else going for me. What are the bastards up to?*

Even an active mind, and Ben's was about as acrobatic as a bright twenty-three-year-old's can be, is at the mercy of the other senses. He had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. An involuntary glance up toward Black

Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where he was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above English Creek when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture, trying to make believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver

offered up every so often at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into this kind of conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

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

Ben still pretended that had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. But as he had known he would, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and put all his attention to the much different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the 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 incessant conversation about TSU’s fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently had not recognized him.

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, Ben leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur almost as if he had never played here. The art deco golden eagles, wingtip to wingtip up there around the entire edifice. The colosseum archways that funneled in the biggest crowds in the state’s history, to watch the unbeatable ’41 team. The perimeter of flagpoles around the entire top of

the stadium, like unlit candles on a whopping birthday cake. Ben took in each morsel of detail in writerly fashion, digesting them for the script. *If I can ever get the damned thing written at all.* It had been, what, half a year since he last did this, but he was finding that all of it gripped him as determinedly as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the famous starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, everlasting bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself, the man in a three-piece suit a few rows back had lurched up to ask the driver in a self-important tone whether they would be sure to reach Fairfield before the grain elevator shut down for the day. A commodity dealer, Ben guessed from

that showy suit and vest, checking on this year's harvest. That or a black marketeer trafficking in something to do with grain elevators. To Ben's relief, the man stayed on in the spot behind the driver and the two of them talked away the miles, sparing him.

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a temporary cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable. With Duane on his mind, the sway of the bus reminded him of their countless trips together. TSU's away games. The Christmas trips home from college, when Duane always came for a few days of deer hunting together, up under the mountain reefs. If he were here now--this brought the second smile of the day to Ben--the other passengers on the bus already would be on their way out of real life to reel, wouldn't they.

Movies were in Ben's blood, and Duane had a trick memory for the damndest things, such as the exact intonation of arch lines of dialogue. *"I can't understand why a person will take a year or two to write a novel, when he can easily buy one for a few dollars."* The two of them, faces scrupulously straight, had murmured together many a scenario like that.

temporary

ee

Surreptitiously Ben took a look around the bus. *STAGECOACH*, he decided, given the circumstances, and on Duane's behalf as well as his own tried out the cast of the movie against the one spotted around in the seats. The wizened driver did not really make it as Andy Devine handling the reins; *Have to put the fat suit on him*, Duane would have solved that. His duded-up partner in conversation, however, more than qualified for a number of roles--the corrupt banker, the prissy whiskey salesman, the garrulous drunk doctor. It would be up to the pair of elderly farmers at the back, leaning across the aisle toward one another as they compared impressions from a day in Great Falls, to fill whichever parts the traveling dude didn't. Their wrinkled wives, primly minding their own business by watching the telephone poles go by--Ben gave it some thought, but could not definitively choose which one, in much younger guise, could pass for the good-hearted prostitute and which one was more natural as the haughty young wife new to the West. A coin would have to be flipped, he decided, giving Duane the call. As for the dauntless lawman riding shotgun while the stagecoach wended around and around through Monument Valley in front of John Ford's cameras, Ben knew to a certainty Duane would have demanded that one for himself: *It's about time my side got the badge and some firepower*. That left the gum-chewing railroad brakeman, probably

deadheaded into Choteau on a shift changeover on the branch line, and Ben, to vie for the last two parts. About here, the game got more serious than Ben wanted. He doubted he was intrinsically John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. He hoped he was not inherently John Carradine as the doomed gambler.

“Vaughn!” the driver suddenly expelled as if throwing out a name for a casting call, startling Ben.

It took him a second to realize that the bus was pulling in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction. The little place was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but he piled off right behind the driver anyway. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to.

While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse, smiling over at it reminiscently. Checking his watch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; good, maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here was beyond the reach of the smelter stack and he exultantly drew in its freshness while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it

was football or what, he had always greatly loved these blue-and-tan days of the crisp end of October.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying turned out to be right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came. Right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new fighter planes incoming on the hop from Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the few weeks since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this half a dozen times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a snap, the turbulent peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and unmistakable guideposts abundant on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation

for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s 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, the piece he was working on about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. He vowed again to try to get it across anyway.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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, thoroughly caught up in one another. Uniforms 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* 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 two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious

lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could razz himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. 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 Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, as quickly as the planes were gone the calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. He drew a sharp breath. How many more times, deposited back here for this kind of thing, then yanked away on assignment to some shot-up corner of the world? 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 awful hunch that 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, with him journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And, worse now, Cass

always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw with terrible clarity, her letters to him would add up into 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.

Duane would think I've gone off my rocker. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. *Sometimes I think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to touch that new silver bar on his uniform and meanwhile leering at him as effectively as Hedy Lamarr ever did at a leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?" *Not hardly.*

"Ready to go if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the clammy window and shut his eyes to wait out all the road miles yet before home. Sometimes he dozed and sometimes he didn't, but either way he dreamed of Cass and more Cass.

1

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking 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.

Even the most familiar ground is subject to human climate. Ben had the distinct feeling he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but this time around it struck him that a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, 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 here in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the

3

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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod in everyone's general direction the way he imagined someone who looked like a hotshot pilot was counted on to do, he deposited himself nearest the door as always, the coat leather crackling as he folded his considerable height into the worn confines of the seat. In his travels through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. That was before Cass, of course. But crazy love can strike anywhere, and in the labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. How the hell is it possible? How's this for a scene, Mr. Zanuck:

"What did you do in the war, my boy?"

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made crip trips home to where I played football."

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. This still amounted to a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had*

~~strange~~

any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable and working at shutting out all thoughts except those of Cass and more Cass. An active mind is at the mercy of the other senses, however. He had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where Ben was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above Gros Ventre when he was a boy, he

an
evolutionary

fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

As he contemplated the everlasting cloud of power that something like the Black Eagle stack represented, the smile had no reason to stay. "Those eternal bastards," his editor father always said. Ben had been raised to despise the Anaconda Copper company and its long coil of grip on the politics and daily newspapers of the state, and to this day he had no trouble doing that. At almost all levels, though, the world that had turned Ben Reinking into a soldier--if that's what he amounted to--seemed immeasurably more complicated than history's argumentative yesterdays. As brainy and judicious toward life as a man could be at the age of twenty-three, Ben surmised that every era since the dawn of time made this same excuse for tripping ridiculously over itself. Knowledge of this, if he was any example, did not change the feeling of treading constantly in an unpredictable

tide, often up to one's neck. Half consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. "My, my," Cass had ruthlessly kidded him, leering at him in the manner Hedy Lamarr did at her leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?" In point of fact, the promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back here under the throne of that smokestack. The uneasy thought returned. Authority, in whatever murky form, seemed determined to spin the compass of his life whenever it wanted to. Spin it in ways he was having one hell of a hard time keeping up with. *Maybe it's the uniforms.*

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture. Good grief, he didn't make that smart remark about uniforms out loud, did he? He was pretty sure he hadn't. Not looking around yet, he made believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver offered up every time at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into a gut-spilling conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

a
^

play w/
 Play w/d
 an increasingly
 hard time

God damn,

Train:
 - making
 believe

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

Ben still pretended that had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. But as he had known he would, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and put all his attention to the much different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football. He felt his throat dry out. But the bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently hadn’t recognized him--thank goodness for small favors. For the time being, he was spared one more round of talking about Treasure State University’s fabled 1941 season. If the pair of years since were any evidence, he was in danger of being talked to about that until his last day on earth. Ben had too many things on his mind to mull the workings of fable, but the classic elements were there: in that infamous year of pulverizing loss for America, TSU had gone undefeated.

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, he leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur just as if he had never played here. The art deco golden eagles, wingtip to wingtip up there around the entire edifice. The

But you
time he
luculent.

comprised?
train?

alt

colosseum archways that funneled in the biggest crowds in the state's history, to watch the unbeatable '41 team. The perimeter of flagpoles around the entire top of the stadium, like unlit candles on a whopping birthday cake. Ben gnawed on each detail in writerly fashion, digesting them for the script. *If I can ever get the damned thing written at all.* It had been, what, half a year since he last did this, but he was finding that all of it gripped him as powerfully as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, eternal bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, staircase-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself, the man in a three-piece suit a few rows back had lurched up to ask the driver in a self-important tone whether they would be sure to reach Fairfield before

compellingly

the grain elevator shut down for the day. A commodity dealer, Ben guessed from that showy suit and vest, checking on this year's harvest. That or a black marketeer trafficking in something to do with grain elevators. To Ben's relief, the man stayed on in the spot behind the driver and the two of them talked away the miles, sparing him.

Coaxing himself to relax while he had the chance, he took a casual look around at the other passengers. Movies were in his blood, and a surprising number of times, he liked to think, reel and real overlapped. *STAGECOACH*, he decided, given the circumstances, and mentally tried out the cast of the movie against the one on the bus. The wizened driver did not really make it as Andy Devine handling the reins. His duded-up partner in conversation, however, more than qualified for a number of roles--the corrupt banker, the prissy whiskey salesman, the garrulous drunk doctor. It would be up to the pair of elderly farmers at the back, leaning across the aisle toward one another as they compared impressions from a day in Great Falls, to fill whichever parts the traveling dude didn't. Their wrinkled wives, primly minding their own business by watching the telephone poles go by--Ben gave it some thought, but could not definitively choose which one, in much younger guise, could pass for the good-hearted prostitute and which one was more

passed.
Time
mentally

natural as the haughty young wife new to the West. They would have to flip a coin. As for the dauntless lawman riding shotgun while the stagecoach wended around and around through Monument Valley in front of John Ford's cameras, amazingly here one was, although midway in the bus and less than dauntless--a deputy sheriff nodding off over the star on his gabardine jacket, apparently after a hard day in county court. That left the gum-chewing railroad brakeman, probably deadheaded into Choteau on a shift changeover on the branch line, and Ben, to vie for the last two parts. About here, the game got more serious than Ben wanted. He doubted he was intrinsically John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. He hoped he was not inherently John Carradine as the doomed gambler.

"Vaughn!" the driver suddenly expelled as if throwing out a name for a casting call, startling Ben.

It took him a second to realize that the bus was pulling in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction. The little place was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but he piled off right behind the driver anyway. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to. While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse, checking his watch, scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only

smiling over
@ it
reminiscently.
He kept
scanning

brushed the tops of the Rockies yet. Good; maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here away from the smelter was so fresh it practically crackled and he exultantly drew it in while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved this time of year, the crisp blue-and-tan days of lingering autumn.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying turned out to be right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came. Right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new fighter planes incoming on the hop from Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the two weeks since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this four times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route

October

was a snap, the turbulent peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and unmistakable guideposts everywhere on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. He resolved again; if he did it just right, his syndicated piece on the flying women of East Base might get that across.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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, showing one another what passion looked like in wartime. Uniforms 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* Now, for

He knew
it ed get
him into
Y trouble
A more
perfect world..
He might find it
a way to stay it

thoroughly
caught up
in / another

one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could rib himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. 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 Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, deflation set in on him as quickly as the planes were gone. The calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. That repeated question: how many times was he going to be deposited back here for this kind of journey, then yanked away on assignment elsewhere? Now that he had met Cass and they had hopelessly fallen for one another, it was going to be even harder to bear. He had a sudden terrible vision of the war's next couple of years--

7022

and, who knew, the next couple after that--going on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw, her letters to him would add up into 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.

Ben drew a sharp breath. He still had trouble believing it of himself: that along with everything else in what his worst superior officer so far--the East Base one--pompously liked to call the fog of war, he had got himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. Fog was not a bad description of the extreme lack of clarity in his and Cass's predicament, actually. From his Lit Crit class in college he perfectly well knew about the willing suspension of disbelief, but damn, what was a person to do when the situation requiring it happened outside the pages of Tolstoy or Flaubert?

"Ready to go if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the clammy window and forced himself to doze.

Duane,
we think
it's nuts.
S. James +
think I'm
nuts.

God Conduct
Not badly

rest of
away home

1

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking 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.

Even the most familiar ground is subject to human climate. Ben had the distinct feeling he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but this time around it struck him that a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, 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 here 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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod in everyone's general direction the way he imagined someone who looked like a hotshot pilot was counted on to do, he deposited himself nearest the door as always, the coat leather crackling as he folded his considerable height into the worn confines of the seat. In his travels through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. That was before Cass, of course. But crazy love can strike anywhere, and in the labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. How the hell is it possible? How's this for a scene, Mr. Zanuck:

"What did you do in the war, my boy?"

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made crip trips home to where I played football."

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. This still amounted to a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had*

any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable and working at shutting out all thoughts except those of Cass and more Cass. An active mind is at the mercy of the other senses, however. He had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where Ben was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above Gros Ventre when he was a boy, he

fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

As he contemplated the everlasting cloud of power that something like the Black Eagle stack represented, the smile had no reason to stay. "Those eternal bastards," his editor father always said. Ben had been raised to despise the Anaconda Copper company and its long coil of grip on the politics and daily newspapers of the state, and to this day he had no trouble doing that. At almost all levels, though, the world that had turned Ben Reinking into a soldier--if that's what he amounted to--seemed immeasurably more complicated than history's argumentative yesterdays. As brainy and judicious toward life as a man could be at the age of twenty-three, Ben surmised that every era since the dawn of time made this same excuse for tripping ridiculously over itself. Knowledge of this, if he was any example, did not change the feeling of treading constantly in an unpredictable

tide, often up to one's neck. Half consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindsides that landed him back here under the throne of that smokestack. The uneasy thought returned. Authority, in whatever murky form, seemed determined to play with the compass of his life whenever it wanted to. Play with it in ways he was having an increasingly hard time keeping up with. *Maybe it's the uniforms.*

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture, making believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver offered up every time at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into this kind of conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

"Big old sister, ain't she," the driver persisted. "They don't build 'em like that any more."

Ben still pretended that had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. But as he had known he would, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and

playa

put all his attention to the much different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the 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 incessant conversation about TSU's fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently hadn't recognized him

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, Ben leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur almost as if he had never played here. The art deco golden eagles, wingtip to wingtip up there around the entire edifice. The colosseum archways that funneled in the biggest crowds in the state's history, to watch the unbeatable '41 team. The perimeter of flagpoles around the entire top of the stadium, like unlit candles on a whopping birthday cake. Ben gnawed on each detail in writerly fashion, digesting them for the script. *If I can ever get the damned thing written at all.* It had been, what, half a year since he last did this, but he was finding that all of it gripped him as compellingly as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, eternal bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge

letters TSU, staircase-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

“Vaughn!”

When the driver expelled that, Ben was keyed up and ready. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to. As soon as the bus pulled in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction, he piled off right behind the driver.

While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse, smiling over at it reminiscently. Checking his watch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet. Good; maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here away from the smelter was so fresh it practically crackled and he exultantly drew it in while he watched the sky and waited. Whether

it was football or what, he had always greatly loved this time of year, the crisp blue-and-tan days of lingering autumn.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying turned out to be right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came. Right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new fighter planes incoming on the hop from Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the two weeks since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this four times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a snap, the turbulent peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and unmistakable guideposts everywhere on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a

reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, his syndicated piece on the flying women of East Base would outright say that. He might find a way to get it across anyway.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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, thoroughly caught up in one another. Uniforms 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* 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 two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn

Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could razz himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. 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 Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, deflation set in on him as quickly as the planes were gone. The calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. That repeated question: how many times was he going to be deposited back here for this kind of journey, then yanked away on assignment elsewhere? Now that he had met Cass and they had hopelessly fallen for one another, it was going to be even harder to bear. He had a sudden terrible vision of the war's next couple of years-- and, who knew, the next couple after that--going on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw, her letters to him would add up into a string-tied packet in the

were
hopelessly
hooked
~~on~~
compelling

bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Duane would think I've gone nuts. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. *Sometimes I think I've gone nuts.*

"My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to touch that new silver bar on his uniform and meanwhile leering at him as stirringly as Hedy Lamarr ever did at a leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?"

Not hardly.

"Ready to go if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the clammy window and forced himself to doze the rest of the way home.

gone of
my
rocker.

effectively

1

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking 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.

{ Even the most familiar ground is subject to human climate. Ben had the distinct feeling he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but } this time around { it struck him that } a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. { In better times, } on easier journeys home, ^{Ben} 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 here 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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod in everyone's general direction the way he imagined someone who looked like a hotshot pilot was counted on to do, he deposited himself nearest the door as always, the coat leather crackling as he folded his considerable height into the worn confines of the seat. In his travels through the world of war, he had learned never to shed the fleece jacket on any means of transport, whether it was plane, train, ship, jeep, or bus, until he had proof the heater worked.

In this case it did not, at least to any noticeable degree, and by the time the bus lumbered out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben had turned up the coat collar for the full effect of the wool. In more ways than one, he had never really warmed to Great Falls. That was before Cass, of course. But love can ambush a person anywhere, and in the crazy labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. How the hell is it possible? How's this for a scene, Mr. Zanuck:

"What did you do in the war, my boy?"

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made crip trips home to where I played football."

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. This still amounted to a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had*

seemed to
like to
itself in
incumbent
places,

any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.

Ben had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where Ben was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above Gros Ventre when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the

He wondered
what hell
he was
going to
write a
Duane Ben
of what had
happened to

that was
pass muster
w. DWP
not having other
cause, really,
uncensored
thoughts

world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture, trying to make believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver offered up every time at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into this kind of conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

"Big old sister, ain't she," the driver persisted. "They don't build 'em like that any more."

Ben still pretended that had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. But as he had known he would, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and put all his attention to the much different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the 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 incessant conversation about TSU's fabled

1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently hadn't recognized him

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, Ben leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur almost as if he had never played here. The art deco golden eagles, wingtip to wingtip up there around the entire edifice. The colosseum archways that funneled in the biggest crowds in the state's history, to watch the unbeatable '41 team. The perimeter of flagpoles around the entire top of the stadium, like unlit candles on a whopping birthday cake. Ben gnawed on each detail in writerly fashion, digesting them for the script. *If I can ever get the damned thing written at all.* It had been, what, half a year since he last did this, but he was finding that all of it gripped him as compellingly as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, eternal bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. Maybe in these next few days he would be able

to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work on the script. Although the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself, the man in a three-piece suit a few rows back had lurched up to ask the driver in a self-important tone whether they would be sure to reach Fairfield before the grain elevator shut down for the day. A commodity dealer, Ben guessed from that showy suit and vest, checking on this year's harvest. That or a black marketeer trafficking in something to do with grain elevators. To Ben's relief, the man stayed on in the spot behind the driver and the two of them talked away the miles, sparing him.

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable and working at shutting out all thoughts except those of Cass and more Cass.

Coaxing himself to relax while he had the chance, he took a casual look around at the other passengers. Movies were in his blood, and a surprising number of times, he liked to think, reel and real overlapped. *STAGECOACH*, he decided,

Diana
1

given the circumstances, and mentally tried out the cast of the movie against the one on the bus. The wizened driver did not really make it as Andy Devine handling the reins. His duded-up partner in conversation, however, more than qualified for a number of roles--the corrupt banker, the prissy whiskey salesman, the garrulous drunk doctor. It would be up to the pair of elderly farmers at the back, leaning across the aisle toward one another as they compared impressions from a day in Great Falls, to fill whichever parts the traveling dude didn't. Their wrinkled wives, primly minding their own business by watching the telephone poles go by--Ben gave it some thought, but could not definitively choose which one, in much younger guise, could pass for the good-hearted prostitute and which one was more natural as the haughty young wife new to the West. They would have to flip a coin. As for the dauntless lawman riding shotgun while the stagecoach wended around and around through Monument Valley in front of John Ford's cameras, amazingly here one was, although midway in the bus and less than dauntless--a deputy sheriff nodding off over the star on his gabardine jacket, apparently after a hard day in county court. That left the gum-chewing railroad brakeman, probably deadheaded into Choteau on a shift changeover on the branch line, and Ben, to vie for the last two parts. About here, the game got more serious than Ben wanted.

He doubted he was intrinsically John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. He hoped he was not inherently John Carradine as the doomed gambler.

“Vaughn!” the driver suddenly expelled as if throwing out a name for a casting call, startling Ben.

It took him a second to realize that the bus was pulling in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction. The little place was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but he piled off right behind the driver anyway. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to.

While the mail bag was being dealt with, he stretched his legs in the parking lot by the roadhouse, smiling over at it reminiscently. Checking his watch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet. Good; maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here away from the smelter was so fresh it practically crackled and he exultantly drew it in while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved this time of year, the crisp blue-and-tan days of lingering autumn.

Something else he greatly loved became just visible over the mountains now--at least one military saying turned out to be right, it took a pilot's eyes to see other pilots. Here they came. Right on the button. The four specks in the sky, factory-new fighter planes incoming on the hop from Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the two weeks since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this four times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. Again this time, he watched hungrily as the Cobras cut through the clear sky, high overhead. From what she had told him, when the flying weather was good this last leg of the route was a snap, the turbulent peaks of the Rockies abruptly dropping behind at Rogers Pass and unmistakable guideposts everywhere on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he

could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, his syndicated piece on the flying women of East Base would outright say that. He might find a way to get it across anyway.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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, thoroughly caught up in one another. Uniforms 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* 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 two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war,

why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could razz himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. 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 Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, deflation set in on him as quickly as the planes were gone. The calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. That repeated question: how many times was he going to be deposited back here for this kind of journey, then yanked away on assignment elsewhere? Now that he had met Cass and they had hopelessly fallen for one another, it was going to be even harder to bear. He had a sudden terrible vision of the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that--going on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw, her letters to him would add up into 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.

Duane would think I've gone nuts. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. *Sometimes I think I've gone nuts.*

"My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to touch that new silver bar on his uniform and meanwhile leering at him as stirringly as Hedy Lamarr ever did at a leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?"

Not hardly.

"Ready to go if you are, Lieutenant." The bus driver had come up behind him, sounding curious about what kept a man standing in a roadhouse parking lot watching planes go over. Ben clambered back on and reclaimed his seat. He leaned against the clammy window and tried to doze. There were a lot of road miles yet before home.