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.

He was a knowledgable young man, brought up in the forthright Depression schoolings of his generation, and he sometimes thought that was his trouble. If the law of averages had been repealed, he would have read about it somewhere. But he could wrack his brain as much as he wanted over the odds against his tricky assignment--his ongoing mission, the military preferred to call it--and that bus was still there, parked in its usual spot as if waiting just for him.

Well, he told himself as he lugged his duffel bag along in burdened gait, at least there was one thing new about this trip: Cass, who had lately come into his life and heart. She’d be on view, if he was far-sighted enough for it. A slow little
conciliatory smile worked its way onto his long face over that, then went away promptly as he once more stepped to the bus.

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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben 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?*
Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last bend in the road, suppertime lights coming on here and there beneath its roof of trees. As the bus headed up the quiet main street toward the hotel, where the lobby served as bus depot, Ben Reinking saw the single lighted storefront on the block with the bank and the beauty shop. Of course. Thursday night. His father putting the newspaper to bed after this week’s press run.

“Here will do,” he briskly told the driver.

The bus driver jammed on the brakes and looked around at Ben as if he had just torn off a mask. Using all the breath he could summon, the man let out slowly:

“I’ll be goddamned. You’re him. Sorry, Lieutenant, I didn’t--”
“I’ll live.” Most civilians could not read the obscure shoulder patch on his flight jacket anyway, and any camouflage he could get suited Ben.

Right there in the middle of the street, the driver laboriously dragged out the duffel bag from the luggage bay and presented it to him. The man looked tempted to salute. Ben murmured his thanks and turned away toward the premises of the *Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner*. Well, he told himself as he swung along under the burden of his duffel, now to see whether his father had picked up any news about the repeal of the law of averages, as it apparently had been.

The town still looked as if the world of war had nothing to do with it, but he knew better; it was simply that buildings didn’t read casualty lists. Gros Ventre, he had learned growing up here, was the same age as the tree rings in the mature cottonwood colonnade along its streets, and altered itself as slowly. Only the season had changed appreciably since the last time he was here, early evening unrolling a frosty carpet of light from the front of the *Gleaner* building now as he approached.

He stopped to read the window. Posted beneath the gilt lettering on the plate glass were handbills announcing a war bonds box supper and a farm machinery auction on lower English Creek. Both were set in the familiar
exclamatory typeface his father called Visual Braille. Fooling around as a printer, Bill Reinking liked to say, paid for the indulgence of being a small-town editor.

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 gone to Arizona where her husband was stationed.

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.*

Taking a deep breath and opening the door, he called 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.”
By now Ben was better at bad news than he’d ever imagined he could be.

“Well, guess what, the Air Transport Command turns out to be full of surprises. It’s only a three-day pass, not the five 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.”

“Better enjoy you in a hurry, hadn’t I,” his father said in his dry way as they shook hands. Ben could tell he was dying to ask what was behind this trip home, but doing his best to be a father first and a newspaperman second. That was fortunate, because he himself did not have the right words anywhere near ready. In the strange labyrinth of TDYs—temporary duty assignments—that Ben Reinking’s war somehow had turned into, this one was the hardest yet to talk about.

Not wanting to prompt, Bill Reinking ventured only: “You’ve seen a lot of the world lately.”

More than enough. England, bombed stiff by the Luftwaffe. New Guinea, beachheads backed against Japanese-held mountains two miles high. The close call from ack-ack over Palau on the B-17 ride. Not exactly pleasant conversation, any of it. Ben got rid of it for now in mock heroic fashion: “It was hell out in them islands.”
His father laughed uncertainly. After a moment, the bifocals tilted up in appraisal. “Nice addition to your uniform, by the way. Ernie Pyle and Margeurite Higgins don’t have that.”

“This?” Self-consciously Ben rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. Another hole in the law of averages. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back at East Base yet again. He lacked the time in grade, base commanders were never glad to see him coming, and for its own murky reasons the Threshold Press War Project did not bother with fitness reports—*Why boost me from shavetail all of a sudden? What do the bastards have in mind for me next?* For his father’s sake, he forced a grin. “It doesn’t amount to that much, Dad, to outrank civilians.”

All during this they looked one another over to see how each was holding up, since last time. Bill Reinking was bald to the back of his head, but his ginger mustache still matched the color of Ben’s hair. His strong glasses, windows on his eyes, schooled a square-cut face on a chunky man into the most eager kind of lookout—a newsdigger’s close curiosity that he had passed on to his son. That and the ginger follicles and not much else. Ben had the Hollywood lineaments of his mother’s people—the bodily poise, the expressive hands. Those and that unbuyable
mark of character: a deeply longitudinal face, with latitudes of experience—a surprising amount for a twenty-three-year-old—evident in the steady sea-blue of the gaze. The difference in stature between the two men was longstanding. Tall enough that he just skimmed under the Army Air Force height limit, Ben had an altitude advantage over his father in a number of ways, although he usually tried not to press it. The college education, the football fame, the TPWP correspondent patch, the bylines and datelines from his stopovers in the world’s many combat zones, those all came home with him every time he had to do this, and both men stood back from it a bit.

“How was the trip up here?” his father asked, to be asking something.

“Like Gone With the Wind without somebody to neck with,” Ben responded. “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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. 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?

Keeping that to himself at all costs, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers, farm people with their city shopping clutched in their laps, long since had claimed specific seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to
draw. *If they only knew.* Swiftly nodding 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 away from the depot and rumbled west onto the bridge across the Missouri, he 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. Scrunched in the perpetual bus seat he felt less comfortable than ever with the thought that this smokestack-marked city—the Anaconda Copper smelter stack over there on Black Eagle Hill was the world’s tallest, five hundred feet into the sky of centermost Montana and with a constant plume of smoke that could be seen from forty miles in any direction—seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

*Three times in a little over a year. 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 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. This still amounted to too many hardship trips, 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.

"Can’t ever get used to the size of that stadium,” he suddenly 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, making believe the remark in his direction was an announcement the bus driver routinely offered up at this point of the route.

"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, ultimately he pulled his gaze away from the dominating smokestack and put all his attention to
the very 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 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.

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 giant birthday cake. Not for the first time he
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 tenaciously as ever.
The team’s story, his, Vic’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; and Loudon's, sniveling bastard as sportswriter. 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. The mental camera in Ben moved across it all with deliberation, panning
the scene for the screen, until at last the bus reached the highway and veered north.

He 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 even there, the
world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

Bill Reinking had missed out on war--younger than wanted in the first
worldwide one, old enough to be ignored in this one--but he knew the calibre of a
war story when he saw one. "Quite the piece you did on those pilots," he was
saying with professional gruffness. "It should have people all over the country
burning their tongues on their coffee in the morning." He plucked a Gleaner off
the top of the mailing pile and pitched it to his son. "I gave it three columns of page
dfive. More than I gave myself, I'll have you know."
“Christ, is that in already? I can’t keep up.” Ben rattled the newspaper open, and the headline his father had put on the piece all but hit him in the face:

Rainbow of Planes from Montana to Russia. Hastily he read his lead to make sure it had survived—The pulse of war can be felt the minute you step onto East Base, a former buffalo prairie on the sunrise edge of Great Falls, Montana, where the ground vibrates under you not from eternal stampede but modern 12-piston fighter plane engines— and skimmed on down, holding his breath. Of all the perplexities that went with a TPWP byline, the most constant was the red pencil of the invisible copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. Inimical to logic. After a year and half of this, Ben was as mystified as ever by the inner workings of the Threshold Press War Project, what was let past and what wasn’t. He full well understood that the name 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--
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 Russian air force 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.”

“You and Franklin D. got it, you clever devils,” Ben’s voice imitated newsreel pomposity. “Two hundred planes to our esteemed Soviet allies last
month. Three hundred a month by the end of the year, if East Base doesn’t freeze up solid.”

Bill Reinking cocked his head. “Should you be telling me all this, Lieutenant?”

Ben wasn’t listening. Eyes down into a certain section of the newspaper piece, he was back in the world of pilots.

The sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great Falls, but he had piled off right behind the bus 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. A slow little conciliatory smile worked its way onto his extensive face as he thought about the other times here, with her. A laugh helplessly followed the smile. At least there was one thing new about this trip: Cass, coming out of the blue to him.

Checking his wristwatch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; a bit of hope there, maybe, that the
weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the afternoon sun. The air was good, out here in the grassland beyond the reach of the smelter stack, and he savored it 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 dart-nosed silhouette of P-39s; Airacobras, 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 month 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. Planes poured into East Base from three directions for the Lend-Lease transit onward to Alaska and Russia, but the run from Spokane was all Cass’s. 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
grand Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle smokestack. His imagination
soared up there with her, her cat-quick hands on the controls, her confident wiry
body in the tight-fit cockpit of the lead P-39.

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. (‘‘She can navigate in snow like a
fucking Eskimo,’’ a crusty tower officer had provided the quote he used after
cleaning it up.) He shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could
not see why the Women’s Air Force 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, 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 at Vaughn Junction 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 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? Isn’t that a spice? That explains a lot. Kiss me again.” 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 three hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking.

That was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over with a roar, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Watching the Cobras 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, the frustration filled him again. He drew a sharp 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 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 chilling 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.

Lovesick. Shaking his head, try as he would he could not clear away the feeling. Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. A serious case of Cass, 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.

*Sometimes I think I’ve gone off my rocker.* “My, my,” Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to stroke 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 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.

“Don’t let me interrupt your enjoyment of great literature,” the imperative note in his father’s voice snapped him out of his absorption in the Cass he had put into newsprint. “But I have to get back at it.” Bill Reinking indicated toward the job shop and the table where the addressograph waited. “Had any supper? There’s some macaroni salad and fried chicken left.”

Ben looked at the bucket supper from the Lunchery down the street, then back at his father.

“Your mother is in Valier,” came the explanation. “Play rehearsal. They’re doing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and she couldn’t pass up being Lady Bracknell, could she?”

“Can’t imagine it,” Ben conceded in the same deliberately casual tone his father had used. “Let me get some chicken in me, then I’ll take over on the addresser, how about.”
“No, that’s fine,” his father said hastily, “I’m used to this by now. You can help wrap when I get to that.” Turning away, he started up the addressograph again and, a sound his son had grown up on, the name-and-address plates began clattering through like metal poker chips as each alphabetical stack of half a dozen was fed in. Ben left him to it and moved toward the other end of the worktable to put together a semblance of supper. About to reach into the meal bucket, he stopped short when he heard a lapse in the addressing machine’s rhythmic slap-slap on the wrappers. Out the corner of his eye he watched his father quickly palm a subscription plate off the stack he was working with and slip it into a pants pocket. Ben frowned. His father always chucked aside any discards into a coffee can, there by the addressograph for that purpose, until there were enough to be dumped into the linotype melt pot.

“Hey,” Ben called softly. “I saw that.” He held out his hand for the discard. “Gimme, gimme, my name is Jimmy.”

His father stood frozen there with his hand still in his pocket.

“Dad? What’s up?”

A stricken expression came over the older man. “I—I didn’t want you to come across this one in the wrappers. Ben, I’m sorry if—”
He handed the flat little piece of metal to his son as if it were a rare coin.

Flipping it over to the raised side, Ben instantly spelled out the inverted letters of type. Reading backward was a skill that came with growing up in a newspaper office, and right then he wished he didn’t have it.

**VICTOR RENNIE**

**1ST REGIMENT, THIRD DIVISION**

**C/O U.S. ARMY OVERSEAS POST OFFICE**

**NEW YORK N.Y.**

Confounded, he stared at his father. “How’d you already know it’s Vic?

They sit on the names until I—” He gestured futilely.

“I didn’t, really.” Bill Reinking’s face was at odds with his words; father and newspaperman both, he had been able to tell from the outset this was not quite like the other times Ben showed up on unexpected leave. “If it turned out to be some other reason you’re here, I was going to hand-address this one at the post office.”

Ben swallowed hard. Tonelessly he told his father what had happened to Vic Rennie in the North African minefield.

Bill Reinking blanched; two years of hardening from handling war news didn’t help with this. It had to be asked:
“Everybody else--?”

“All accounted for, Dad, relax. I checked this morning.” As he did every morning. Day by day he knew exactly where each one of them was, in the world of war. It was his job to know.

Carl Friessen in New Guinea.

Howie Blake piloting at East Base.

Animal Angelides on a Marine troop ship.

Sig Prokosch with the landing force in Sicily.

Moxie Stamper at a bomber base somewhere in England.

Larry Danzer on the destroyer *U.S.S. McCorkle* in the Pacific.

Deems Anthony at the camp that was not supposed to be mentioned.

Vince Pennington and Larry O’Fallon in graves under military crosses.

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

And Ben, the one with the TPWP patch on his shoulder, with the mandate from somewhere on high to write of them all.

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. One by one, the much-
heralded Treasure State teammates were individuals rehearsing for history, in
newsprint across America; and the one entrusted to record their chronicle--to bear it,
really--now pocketed away the dogtag-sized piece of metal cold in his fingers.

The bitter arithmetic was not anything Ben could put away. “Three
casualties, *bang bang bang*, how’s that for being a ‘chosen’ team? If this keeps on,
we can play six-man.”

“Ben. I know you’re having it rough, the whole bunch of you, but--”

“Never mind.” He looked over at his father, the shielding eyeglasses, the
oblique composure. *This won’t do. We skimp past this every time.* “This stuff is
getting to me, Dad,” he huskily spoke the necessary. “You have anything to do
with it?”
“I wouldn’t be much of a newspaper editor if I didn’t point out that’s an indefinite pronoun.”

“You know goddamn good and well what I mean. This crap assignment they’ve got me on. Anybody you happen to know happen to be behind it, just for instance?”

His father’s tone turned dry again. “I assume you mean the Senator. Just because I throw the awesome weight of the Gleaner behind him every six years doesn’t mean we’re in bed together. I would remind you, the Senator doesn’t want anything to do with this war—the only side he wants us on is Switzerland’s.”

“Then is it Mother’s doing? Hers and Uncle Lloyd’s?” The words exploded from Ben with a force that shook both men. The level of his voice came down but his vehemence did not. “Did she talk him into picking up the phone and calling Robert Sherwood or Elmer Davis or Jesus D. Christ in the White House himself and say, ‘Guess what, there’s somebody I’d like to see grounded and stay glued to a typewriter for the next dozen years or the end of the war, whichever comes first.’ Well? Did she?”

“Ben, will you kindly quit? Unlike you, your mother and I are a bit grateful you’re not stationed somewhere getting shot to pieces.” His father took off his
glasses and polished the lenses clean with the page of a torn *Gleaner*; only window-washers and newspapermen knew that stunt. “To answer you for once and all, though—we know better than to pull strings for you, even if we had any. You made that clear to us long ago.” Bill Reinking went on in a milder tone. “I 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 sheepherders he recognized—Pat Hoy from the Withrow ranch, and the other had a nickname with an amount 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 the third person in the saloon expectantly looked down the bar in Ben’s direction like connoisseurs of the color of money.

“Goddamn,” said Tom Harry from behind the bar. Ben was beginning to wonder why the sight of him made people mention damnation. “You’re back, huh? I thought you’d be up in an aeroplane 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 poster picturing a President Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term that it can only 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?”

Tom Harry cast a glance to the far end where the raggedy shepherders were gaping 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, an Old Fashioned.” Trying to get in the spirit, Cass. He had made the joke to her the other night when they hoisted a few drinks in the roadhouse before adjourning to the cabin, that the only clear way he saw to ever becoming an old-fashioned pilot again was to drink them. 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
sleeked-back black hair, the blinding white shirt, the constant towel that swabbed the bar to a gleam. He frowned now in the direction of the shepherders, which seemed to make them remember their manners. In one voice they quavered a toast to Ben: “Here’s at you.”

With that tended to, Tom Harry put his towel to work on the trail of the glass after he slid it to Ben. “Just get in?”

“Hour ago.”

“Been places, I hear.”

“They ship me around, some.”

“Gonna be anybody left on the face of the earth when this war gets done?”

During this the shepherders conferred in mumbles. Celebrating their largesse of beer, the two were counting out their pooled small change, pushing the coins together with shaky forefingers. “Barkeep?” Canada Dan cleared his throat importantly. “You got any of them jellied eggs?”

“Jesus, gourmets,” Tom Harry muttered, carrying the briny crock of preserved boiled eggs down the length of the bar along with his disgust. While the egg transaction dragged on, Ben quietly sipped and gazed past the reflections in the plate glass window to downtown Gros Ventre at night. The civil old trees. His
father's newspaper office, still alight down the street, another timeless pillar of the
town. On the next block beyond the Gleaner, the Odeon theater where teen-aged
Ben Reinking every Saturday night of his life stayed on through the second show--
the “owl show” at nine that repeated the feature movie for a tardy gathering of
drunks, late-arriving lovers, and insomniacs—to dissect how the makers of movies
made them. Centralities of his growing up here, those, along 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 was, this was where it came from.

Tom Harry returned, still shaking 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, Tom Harry 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.”

“Where 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 the bartender was a reminder that not all of the world knew about Vic, at least yet.

“Shit oh dear.” Tom Harry rubbed his jaw after Ben told him. “Knew that kid since he was a pup.” He flicked a look at Ben. “Weren’t you here for funerals the last couple of times?”

Ben gulped more of his drink than he’d intended, unsteadied by having something like that attached to him. Friessen’s and Pennington’s, those were. TPWP wanted every drop of drama from the ‘supreme team.’ “There’s a war on,” he managed to say levelly. “Things happen to people.”

“Must get kind of old, is all I’m saying.” Tom Harry eyed him speculatively one more time. “Drink up. The Packard is out back.”
The long black car, its grandeur a bit faded from ten years of imaginative use, seemed to fill half the alley behind the saloon. Ben circled the streamlined old thing as Tom Harry stood by, proprietorially. “How are the tires?”

“What do you think,” Tom Harry grunted, “thin as condom skin. Here, throw these in the trunk.” He rummaged in the shed room piled high with amazing items that Medicine Lodge customers with more thirst than cash had put up as collateral for drinks, and rolled two spare tires toward Ben.

“Reinking.” Tom Harry tossed him the keys to the car, then the packet of gas ration coupons. “Tell Toussaint for me I’m sorry his grandkid got it that way. If you can find the old coyote.”
How did you ever stand it out here, Vic? Or should the question be, how did he ever stand being crammed into Army life after so much of an existence populated only by wind, buffalo grass, and a wraith of a grandfather? *I don’t know about you, buddy, but it would tie my guts in knots.* Ben checked his wristwatch again; half the morning was gone just getting here. Leaving the Packard on what passed for a road along the rocky upper gorge of the Two Medicine river, he picked his way on foot through the braid of ruts that led down to the Rennie ranch buildings huddled at the river’s edge. The log house did not show any activity as he approached, although all too plainly a car on the road was a rare thing here.
There was a bad sign, literally, the moment he stepped into the front yard; a blotch of something written in red on the stark weathered door, like lipstick on a witch. Walking up to it with a sinking feeling, he found it was a shingle tacked to the door and lettered on it in barn paint the message: ELK SEASON.

Incredulous, Ben squinted west, met there by half the mountains in North America. Oh Christ, how can I hunt a hunter in one day? It was all too absurd. Toussaint Rennie must be crowding eighty-five. He didn’t have any business hunting elk alone.

While Ben stood there stewing, the silence of the forlorn little ranch seemed to reprove him. 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—several, actually—he was tempted to give this up and concoct whatever he could, from football times together, to hand in. TPWP wouldn’t know the difference. But this was Vic, and the last time he would be written about, possibly ever.

Besides, Ben had in the zipper pocket of his flight jacket what he was supposed to give to the old man who had raised Vic; he would have sworn he could feel the weight of the damn things in there, feather-light though they were.
Call off your dogs, conscience, I’ll ask around--this is such a famously friendly neighborhood.

He trudged back up to the Packard, patted it in apology, and navigated it across a barely wide enough stringer bridge to the reservation side of the river, to look up Toussaint’s Blackfeet relatives. In-laws, rather, and that proved to be the problem.

“That skunk fart--why would I keep track of him?” was the extent of the answer at the first ranch of the Rides Proud family clan that he tried.

He had been afraid of this. Toussaint notoriously did not get along with his Blackfoot wife, Mary Rides Proud, while she was alive, and to judge by how good a job her blood relations were doing of keeping up hostilities in memory of Mary, even long after. Twice more Ben went through it, amiable leather-faced men emerging from corral or barn in greeting, then turning away at the mention of the name Toussaint Rennie. Christ, you’d think they were the Germans and the Russians.

As he pulled in to the last ranch on that stretch of the river, he was watching warily for the next Rides Proud man on the prod. This time, though, a Blackfoot
woman came out on the front steps, her hands in the folds of her checkered dress, and told him in the flattest of voices her husband was up on the bluff fixing fence.

Something in her features reminded Ben of Vic. He gave it a try: “I’m looking for Victor’s grandfather.”

“Victor,” the woman repeated that name and ignored the rest. “His mother was my cousin.”

Ben gingerly fished into the tangle of family. “All the immediate family Victor had left by the time I knew him was his grandfather. It’s important that I find him. Where would he go to hunt elk, do you think?”

The woman kept her gaze on Ben for some seconds, then came down off the steps. She turned her back to the mountains and pointed. “Likes to say he has his own herd.”

Totally surprised, Ben stared east into the deep vee of the river valley and the distant patches of prairie captured between the outline of the bluffs. He had never in his life heard about any elk herd in the Two Medicine bottomlands. She’s putting me on. What do I do now? Then it sank in on him. The woman was pointing all the way east, to the horizon. To the Sweetgrass Hills, rising like three mirage islands on the earthbrim where the sun came up.
Back in the car, before starting it up he stared again at the ghostly trio of distant hills. He figured the trip at a hard two hours' drive. He did not mind that as much as the direction. The law of averages still was not working. Something was cockeyed; every point on the compass since this set of orders caught up with him in New Guinea was east.

East Base had changed beyond sane recognition when he alit there, the month before. Only the Black Eagle smokestack stood the same as ever on the transformed prairie—the military in its inexplicable fashion having chosen to install an airfield almost under the shadow of the highest manmade obstacle between Seattle and Minneapolis. Reporting in, fatigued from bucket-seat flights in C-47 transports to reach there, Ben presented his paperwork in the same tired routine as he’d done at countless places, including this one, twice before. This time the processing clerk, a bald corporal, furrowed up over the orders before stamping them and handing them back with a dubious “There you go, lieutenant”—they all did that—then jabbed a finger to the base map on the wall. “Here’s your next stop, the clap shop.”
“Cut the crap, okay? I don’t have anything.” In no mood for dealing further with a cynical paper-pusher, Ben was trying in vain to spot the Bachelor Officers Quarters on the crowded map; whatever else the Air Transport Command transported, it brought buildings.

“That’s what all the boys say, sir,” the clerk sang out. “Commander’s orders. He’s on a tear about VD. All incoming personnel have to be checked out, first thing.”

Drawing on his annoyance to plot how he could get away with *infectious* in a piece on the level of enthusiasm here, Ben stepped out into the world of East Base. Now that he had a chance to take a good look around, there wasn’t a trace of the tar-paper infirmary he remembered before, nor anything else from four months ago. Mammoth tin-colored hangars yawned open onto the longest runway he had seen yet in his war travels. Deep inside the hangar nearest him, swarms of mechanics on platform ladders squirmed into open bays of fuselages. Fresh new bombers and fighter planes had to undergo shakedown here after delivery flights from the factories and before being handed over to Russian pilots waiting in Alaska, he knew that much. But he puzzled over the relatively empty flightline, no clusters of aircraft rolled out and sitting ready to go. Instead, great batches of
unpainted planes were lined up on an apron behind the hangars, like shorn sheep trying to get out of the weather. A sudden wild gust that had him grabbing at his crush hat made him laugh in spite of himself. *Think about it, Reinking. You’re in Great Falls, home of the seventy-yard punt when the wind is up.* Those planes were tied down to mooring rings back there so they wouldn’t blow over.

At least the wind was something familiar. He had not paid enough attention to where the irksome clerk pointed on the map. Casting around for directions, he wandered into the hangar and over to the nearest P-39 where a lone mechanic was up on a wing and head-down in the engine compartment. “Hey, buddy, which way to the clap shop?”

The figure in coveralls withdrew from the engine and a fluff of brunette hair and hazel eyes with temper in them came with it. “Cozying up to strange women,” the voice was feminine but oh how it carried, “is usually a good start toward it.”

Ben stood there startled. Other heads popped out of other planes: a set of blonde curls here, a hairnet there, and everywhere chest-high indications in the coveralls. The place was all women. A majority of them, it seemed to him as he tried not to gape, were devoting full attention to him and this vixen high over him on the airplane wing.
Wiry within the folds of the coveralls, she was wiping her hands savagely on a grease rag while she eyed Ben up and down. If looks could kill, she did not need a fighter plane on her side. Squinting up as she glared down, he parked his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket, hoping a casual approach might simmer her down. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m only checking in. Which means I have to be checked out, they tell me. Look, miss, I’m not trying to be fresh.”

She did a little something to the collar of her greasy coveralls, and an insignia flashed out. “Try ‘Captain,’ why don’t you.”

Too late he caught sight of the ready-bag sitting in the cockpit hatch, with WASP wings and a squadron leader’s striped star stenciled on it. Just my luck with this base, I light in here and brush up against a queen bee. “Next time I’ll be sure to, Captain. Steer me to the infirmary and I’ll have my IQ checked along with the rest, how about.”

“Three buildings down from Ops, where the control tower is, and ask for the short-arm inspector. If your IQ is where I think it is, you can have both done at once.” She finished him off with a last scorching look. “Crew chief!” she was moving on to her next victim even before he turned away. “The points are burned. I want them filed down and reset before I take this crate for a checklist run.”
Glad to get out of there, Ben went and presented himself at the infirmary. A clean bill of health promised to be his only gain for the day, however. The BOQ clerk did not even make a pretense of looking up an empty bunk for him. “You’re billeted downtown, transient basis. The Excelsior Hotel.”

A memory clicked from college days; the Alka-Seltzer was one of the wino flophouses on First Avenue South. “How the hell come?”

“Because it says so here. Orders from headquarters, sir.”

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 schedule of the cattle-wagon bus between the base and downtown Great Falls. A fresh-faced private with an armband marking him as the runner from the day room had come in, and was hovering nearby. He broke in: “Lieutenant Reinking?”

“I was when I got here.”

“The base commander wants to see you.”

“As in, now?”

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 Blake bunked here?”

The clerk showed a sign of life. “Sure do—the football guy? Ever see him play?”

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

The officer in charge of East Base evidently had been building up a head of steam while he waited for the TPWP interloper. Base commanders generally did. Ben sometimes wondered if that’s why they were called generals. Ben’s salute still was in the air when this one, an obvious old ranker with a face like he’d been eating fire, started in on him. “So you’re here to make us famous. I’m not sure I like that.”

Nice even-tempered base you run here, General—everybody mad as hell all the time. Ben stood his ground by holding his salute until the man behind the desk was forced to say, “At ease, shit’s sake, man. Well? Why us? Why can’t we get on with what we’re doing without your outfit, whatever it is”—he glanced with distaste at the TPWP patch on Ben’s shoulder—“sticking its nose in?”
“Somebody cut me the orders, sir. Confidentially, I’d prefer to be doing something else in the war.”

The confidentially did not go down well with the general. “Then tell me this. Are you here to play up the women pilots?”

The presence of WASPs and the hangerful of female mechanics had come as big news to Ben when he blundered into it all. The commander’s resistance sharpened his instinct some more. “It depends, sir.”

The commander dug a finger in his ear. “On what?”

“What you mean by ‘play up.’ General”—Ben had a moment of panic; he had been in front of so many of these one-star lifers in charge of obscure bases he’d lost track of the name here. “General Giddings,” he picked it up from the nameplate on the desk and plunged on, “I am an accredited correspondent as well as a soldier. Those hats don’t always fit the way other people would like to see them, but I’m supposed to wear both. That’s my duty, see, sir, to figure out things of interest to—”

“These women ferry pilots 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. “The ‘supreme team’
write-ups, that kind of crap, that’s all right. Good for the war effort. Howard
Blake is a perfectly capable pilot, write your ass off 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 story on Howie Blake as soon as--”

“That’s all, Reinking,” the commander swung around in his chair to look
out at the flightline. “Go see the adjutant, he’ll fix you up with desk space
somewhere.”

“But sir?” The general’s chair grudgingly swung around in his direction
again. “I am under orders to do other stories.” Ben 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!”

_Not like mine, buster._ He reached to the zipper pocket of his jacket. “May
I?”

Eyeing him more narrowly now, the general reached for the folded orders.
He opened them with impatience and read at top speed. Then went back over the
words, slowly. Sucking a breath, he handed the paper back to Ben. “Why didn’t you say so? Carry on, Lieutenant.”

On the way out, Ben took a closer look at a base map to locate the WASP ready room.

The first thing the next morning, Ben strode into the day room, startling the sergeant there. “Where’s the WASP ready room?”

“The lieutenant with the fancy jacket.

“I’m here on business.”

“What would that be?”

“You know something about flying.”

“A bit. They yanked me out of 00 to do this.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“It has to do with the team.”

“Could I take you to the show tonight? 00, downtown.”

“I’m married.”