

world's many combat zones, those all came home with him every time, and both men stood back from it a bit.

"How was the trip up here?" Bill Reinking asked, to be asking something.

"Like *Gone With the Wind* without somebody to neck with," his son said and laughed in a way he did not recognize. "Long."

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

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, he had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued "God bless you real good, sonny," along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, although that wasn't what the sloganeers intended to convey. He tried to slip his duffel into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and possibly nap during the familiar trip, but the hunched driver grabbed it away and insisted on stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

Which one?

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

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w/o doubt,
did not
seem

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 stack there above the Black Eagle smelter dominated the sky of centermost Montana 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 there. 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, Jake’s, Dexter’s, the rest of the unique starting eleven. More

than ever now, Vic's story; Slick Vic, most slippery runner in the conference, leaving after practice every afternoon to walk back to the Indian shacktown on Hill 57 over there. Bruno's story, everlasting bastard as football coach; and Loudon's, ruthless bastard as sportswriter. Under and over all the others, Merle Purcell's story, the most famous substitute who never played a game: the twelfth man's story. 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; the Letter Hill. 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 five. More than I gave myself, I'll have you know."

"I was hoping that'd be in. Christ, they held it long enough." 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 Soviet Union were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes before they were delivered north. "No way they'd ever let that graf stand, I figured, and maybe I'd get away with the rest of the piece. It worked out."

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

Ben recited it as his father jotted. When he was done, the older man sighed. “I’ll need to be a little careful with this. Probably half the county thinks there’s a Red star on me, I wrote so many editorials in favor of Lend-Lease.”

“You and Franklin D. got it, you clever devils,” Ben’s voice imitated newsreel pomposity. “Two hundred planes to our noble 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. First snow 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 Seattle. 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 validated 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 Seattle 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 Standish also had a reputation for bringing in her flights safely no matter what the weather or visibility. ("*She can navigate in zero visibility like a wild-ass Eskimo,*" a crusty tower officer had provided the 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-17 bombers and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, where his TPWP minder in Washington wondrously would not exist, his piece about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. Getting something like that across between the lines was becoming a specialty of his.

Still mesmerized, he stood in the parking lot with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the fighter planes as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of that roadhouse over there, 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? That's a spice. No wonder."* Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of four hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking.

That was hoping for too much. 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 harsh breath. He knew perfectly well he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but it stuck with him day and night any more, the overriding hunch that for him the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that, and after that--might go on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, yanking him away on non-combatant assignment to some shot-up corner of the world and then depositing him back here for this kind of

thing, time after time. And, worse now, Cass always out of reach. At this rate, he could foresee with excruciating clarity, her letters to him would add up 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. Try as he would, he could not clear away the relentless feeling. Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. An incurable case of Cassia Standish, he was definitely suffering from, its symptoms rapture and queasiness simultaneously. *Vic would think I've gone off my rocker.* Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. No surer way to risk loss of rank and beyond that, dishonorable discharge, him and her both. *Sometimes I think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out naked from bed the other night to stroke that new silver bar on his 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 hit the road 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 version of her 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 spoke 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. He still felt off balance about being back amid the comfortable inky clutter of the newspaper office after so much military life. Food would be a good idea, even the Lunchery’s.

He was reaching into the meal bucket 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 CPL. SERIAL #20929246
C CO., 11TH REGIMENT, 1ST INFANTRY 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, his first look at Ben told him this was not anything like the other times he had come home 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 minefield in the Sicilian countryside.

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.

Jake Eisman piloting at East Base.

Animal Angelides on a Marine troop ship.

Sig Prokosch patrolling a shore in the Coast Guard.

Moxie Stamper with a tank corps somewhere in England.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instantly he wanted that choice of words back. *That's what gave us Purcell. Does it all start there?* Not a one of the '41 starters came up out of six-man football, but Merle Purcell had, the newcomer from nowhere who met his doom in eleven-man. Two years hadn't made any of it less raw on the nerves. Fast

and skittery as an antelope, Purcell materialized from some tiny high school out in the sagebrush where they played six-man, which was pretty much a cross between football and hundred-yard dash, and given a chance on the scrub team he ran circles around the Treasure State varsity in practice until he would poop out. And subsequently ran himself to death on the Letter Hill trying to toughen up enough for the TSU relentless steamroller brand of football. To this day Purcell was there in Ben's mind's eye, in the script ingredients, struggling up the giant slope to the white rocks after practice and even on his own on weekends; strange jinxed kid who by the miracle of modern sportsmongering had been made to live on as the inspirational 'twelfth man' of the perfect season. Ben knew it wasn't fair, he had barely known Purcell, but the interior truth was that he would not have traded a dozen of him, or any like him, for Vic Rennie.

"Son." Bill Reinking did not use that word much, in the presence of the tall man in uniform across the table from him. "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 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."

"Don't hand me that, you know as well as I do what I mean. This haywire 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?" 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 some old family friend in Beverly Hills 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."