

"Downtown, drunk," Toussaint grunted as though he could see the woman from where he sat. "Catch her sober. That's the trick. Wait until allotment money's gone."

"End of the month, you mean?"

"Middle. She's a thirsty one."

"I'll give her another try." Ben touched the bowed shoulder again as he edged past.

"So long, Ben." The old man shifted his weight, settling deeper on the spindly chair. "See any elk, shoo them this way."

It was forming in his head by the time he reached the car. He could have kicked himself for not having brought the typewriter. He ransacked the glove compartment and came up with some old whiskey invoices billed to the Medicine Lodge. The backs of those gave him enough to write on. First he carefully tore out the notepad pages the letter was copied onto and laid them in order on the car seat, reading them over a couple of times. Then he began to scrawl, sheet after sheet, more like scribbling than writing, things crossed out often, but the words that survived felt right to him. He worked like fury at it, and the piece grew under the pencil.

In the hills he had made his own, the grandfather heard from the world of war only by farthest echoes. Little Bighorn. Wounded Knee. San Juan Hill. Montana boys, neighbors' sons, at a place from Hell called the Argonne Forest. Pearl Harbor. He knew death did not send a letter, but harm was likely to. He opened this hand-delivered one past the return address of the grandson he had raised--Cpl. Victor Rennie, somewhere in England.

"Old man, the friend who will bring you this will tell you what happened. All I will say is that it was like dynamite going off under me.

expression twitched across his sturdy Scotch face. "Hated to hear that about Vic. Always has had more than his share of hard luck, hasn't he."

The roar of engines drowned out anything Ben might have had to say about how luck was distributed. Landing briskly, a Ford Tri-Motor blasted up dust as it trundled along the airstrip toward the next set of parachute trainees. Dex moved to the window to watch as if it were his sworn duty, leaving Ben to join him or not. After a moment, he went over. *What do I know about how they run this preachy outfit, maybe this is some kind of rite--they all worship the Tin Goose every takeoff.* Whatever the foreman was hollering now at the chutists ducking aboard was lost in the plane's racket, but Ben would have bet significant money these practice jumps would be closer to the mark. He turned and asked:

"I'm curious--how come you're not out there leaping into thin air with the rest of the smokies?"

"Don't think I didn't," Dex answered tightly, eyes still glued to the shuddering aircraft filling with jumpsuited men. "Twice. Both times I threw up in the face mask. Ever try to steer a parachute into a forest of hundred-foot Ponderosa pines with a faceful of vomit, Ben?" Consciously or not, Dex rubbed his mouth with the back of his thumb before managing to say: "They washed me out of jumper training. All the years of football and Bruno and his bastardly Letter Hill, and five minutes of bumpy air does me in. Isn't that a corker?"

That needed no affirmation. Dex had been the team's best natural athlete, elastic as a circus performer, comfortable on the field as a cavalier at a lawn party. And here he was, handing out crutches without even earning one. Ben glanced around the infirmary. "You're it, here? Doesn't this kind of setup need a medical staff?"

"The Rochester doctor I didn't get to be, you mean."

They both laughed in their old way, briefly.

next

As if remembering his manners, Dex sobered and spoke as he turned from the window. "The way things are, doctors can't even begin to be everywhere they're needed. Not in the war, not here either. I'm the equivalent of a medic. I can splint a man up, shoot some morphine in him, until we can get him to the hospital in Missoula. If it's something besides bones and bruises," he shrugged, "there's a registered nurse here in town, comes in twice a week. Don't grin at me like that, Reinking. She's married."

Ben's grin went out like a light. He looked away, across postcard-perfect Seeley Lake to the summer cabins and rowboat docks spaced the distance of a flycast apart. The maintained forest along the shoreline stood sumptuous as fur trim, and even the hackles of brush looked scenic. *Peaceful sonofabitching place.* Skipped over by the clock of war. Cass with a dozen red-hot pistons gobbling combustible aviation fuel at the back of her neck this very minute. Jake Eisman freezing his bodacious butt at the controls of a B-17 while wishing the Alaskan caribou far below were Germans in his bombsights. Friessen, dug in for another night in a cramped stench-filled foxhole that he didn't dare leave even to take a crap, Friessen in the utmost swamp of Hell that was New Guinea. Every one of the team members in the actual war, those who were left, ticked through Ben's mind like split seconds on a stopwatch. He realized he was breathing harder than he should and tried to steady down, the antiseptic air of the infirmary not helping. What bugged him so much? Conscience wasn't priced by the pound, Dexter Cariston could have found simpler ways to stay the warless one of them all--the purr of money in his family could have taken care of that. Even so. "This does it for you?" the question shot out before he had time to tame it any. "Watching guys hop out of planes into trees? I'm really asking, Dex."

"I'm doing what I can to keep blood in people," the words came clipped, "instead of letting it out of them."

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The superior tinge in that answer did it. Anguish went through Ben like a convulsion. *There's more to know about blood than shows up in a microscope, you medical Jesus conchie!* He stood there unsteady, momentarily mindblind, wondering whether he had screamed that in the frozen face of Dexter Cariston.

The New Guinea jungle, a few months back. Everyone warned him the place dripped voracious insects when it wasn't oozing rain warm as monkey piss, and by the time he tracked down Carl Friessen in a rear-echelon tent encampment along the Sanananda road, the crisp new combat fatigues he'd been issued were wringing wet and he was trying hard not to scratch numerous bites that itched like crazy. *At least nobody's shooting at me. Yet.* Standing there smacking mosquitoes with one hand and then the other, he peeked in through the bug netting that served as a tent flap trying to make sure he had the right man. In their football years Friessen had been rangy enough to plug more than his share of the line at left tackle. Now he was rawboned, worn down to sheer frame. Deliberate as ever, though, he hunched there on his bunk wearing thin black Jap pajamas--Ben thought he had seen every conceivable form of war souvenir, until now--while cleaning his carbine with an old toothbrush.

"How's the hunting been, Carl?"

The lantern jaw that had tempted football opponents to mention the word 'horseface'--invariably to their regret--swung around from the rifle-cleaning task. "Lefty! They let just anybody in this bugger of a place, do they?" The same dromedary grin, even if its wearer was a barely passable imitation of the Friessen of old in any other way Ben could see. The nickname he so seldom heard any more twinged in him a little. He was not left-handed, not even close. Back there on the football field, that mattered not a bit to Friessen and the other four; the TSU middle

linemen, the brawn brigade, always had their own slant on things, all of them calling him 'Lefty' because he was the left end. The right end, Danzer, they just called 'Danzer.'

Now, as if remembering his manners, the pajama-clad soldier left off work on the carbine and ceremoniously came to unloosen the netting. "Quick, step inside out of the skeeters."

They whacked one another like kids and talked without letup. One by one, Ben caught him up on the other team members, Carl wagging his head at each report. "In on something secret, huh?" he said to Ben's quick passing over of Dex. "He would be, the sonofagun." The goodnatured grin appeared again, but not for long. "This's been all kinds of fighting, Lefty," he sounded veteran far beyond his years. "Three months nose to nose with the dinks to get this"--he sent a heavy look around the pulverized jungle of the Sanananda battle perimeter--"though I don't know why anybody'd want it." Morale did not stand much of a chance here, Ben had to acknowledge. New Guinea notoriously was a back door of the war, everything about it shabby and short-shrift while the bulk of Allied military effort was addressed to the battle for Europe. Yet a continent was at stake here, too, the Japanese army almost within touch of Australia as long as it clung to outposts on the New Guinea coastal plain. The patchwork force of desperate Aussies and scraped-together National Guard units were assigned to root the enemy out pillbox by pillbox, sometimes sniper tree by sniper tree. Even if Ben had not seen the battle reports on the savagery of this death struggle in the jungle, it could be read in the lines of Carl Friessen's face. "We're nowhere near done, either," the bony infantryman was saying. "The hot rumor is a landing up around Salamaua." He estimated Ben with a flat gaze. "You come all this way to go in with us?"

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

Friessen wagged his head again. "Suit yourself, Lefty. We've tried all other kinds on the Japs, why not pencil lead?"

A week later, the two of them were on a slippery trail in the head-high grass on the ridge above the Bitoi River, with the other seven men of Carl's squad. Ben intended to called it quits as soon as they made it back to the invasion perimeter. His pad was full with the past days. The pre-dawn scene in the landing craft as it broached in a big wave and sea-sick soldiers had to dodge a sliding jeep that broke loose from its fastenings. The Australian commandoes guiding them ashore with blinking signal lights after wading in from behind enemy lines through a swamp and swimming to the assault beach, the winks of brightness showing each man of them standing in the sand stark naked except for his Digger hat. The steady advice from Carl during the endless crawl for the shelter of the treeline as Japanese bullets flew over them: *"Keep your head and butt down. Remember gopher hunting? We're the gophers here."* By now, abundantly shot at but not shot up, Carl's platoon was dug in inland from the beachhead and everyone agreed they had lucked out so far. The Japanese line had bent back up the height of ground overlooking the Bitoi River and the plan was to let the artillery plaster them there for awhile. Sent on patrol before daybreak to sight out a forward observation point, the squad had mapped and azimuthed a good spot and, job done, were heading gingerly back down the trail, the scout out front with a Tommy gun, followed by the buck sergeant in charge, then Carl with Ben tagging close behind, the rest of the column bringing up the rear. When something plopped in the mud at the heels of the scout, it took a split second for them all to realize it hadn't dropped from his pack. That left very little time before the grenade would go off.

"Down!" the buck sergeant screamed. Carl hit the ground, Ben an instant behind him. The grenade's explosion heaved the trail under Ben's belly. He heard somebody cry out, hit by fragments. The trailside grass tore open, Japanese in

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The sound effects were not of his choosing. *"Treasure State University is proud to welcome its special guests to Homecoming, 1943!"* The announcer's voice on the stadium public address system sounded tinny and spectral as his spiel wafted up Hill 57. The Governor, the Senator, the alumni president--ritual tributes echoing from two years back. Ben's mind fastened on the thought of the team then waiting in the maw of that stadium tunnel to trot onto the field, Vic on two good legs, Havel and O'Fallon with breath and soul still in them, Dex and Jake smacking one another on their shoulder pads in jolly superstition, he himself fresh as a colt, the entire eleven of them magically unacquainted with defeat.

He wrenched himself back to present surroundings. Not far down the junk-cluttered slope of Hill 57 stood one shack that appeared more dilapidated than the others, if that was possible. Glancing toward it, he asked their Indian host in a low tone: "Whatever became of Vic's aunt? I keep trying to catch up with her, but she's never home."

"You mean Agnes? Went back to the reservation, last we knew. Something about her allotment check."

"If you see her, would you tell her--" Ben broke off. Tell her what? Say he had been pointed to her by an old hunter, nearly as elusive as herself, who despised her and her drinking ways? Pass word to her that he could not get Vic, in despond somewhere in England, to answer his letters? *I'm afraid you were right when you said "That's that," Toussaint.* "Just say I have a mailing address for Vic I can bring her."

The chesty man lifted his shoulders. "If you want. She don't much know how to read, though."

Cass impatiently was motioning that she required the picnic basket. Ben went over. No sooner had he set it down than she reached in and began handing around opera glasses. "I want these back, lords and ladies." In no time the Indian

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