Candles of ice hung silvery on the otherwise darkened eaves of Gros Ventre while snow flurries and the breeze courting them waltzed across the surfaces of light spread onto the hardened ground from the front windows of the house, lit up in more ways than one this last and most celebrated night of the year. Cloyce Reinking appraised the heightened conversations filling the living room from corner to corner and took as much satisfaction as she would allow herself in how the party was going; she had reminded her husband to keep the drinks flowing, people in this town soaked it in in a fashion that would have put a Hollywood crowd under the rug.

"Unfair." Carmelia Muntz navigated her way to the buffet table as Cloyce sliced at the dwindling ham. "How am I supposed to top this when I have the canasta club over, spike the angelfood?" Carmelia was the banker's wife and
always regally aware of it. She sighted over her glass to the circle of guests around
the prize of the evening, the Senator and his wife and daughter. “You’re a hard act
to follow, Cloycie.”

“You sound like Bill. He accuses me of a pagan passion for New Year’s Eve.”

“Your night to shine. I see Ben finally made it.”

“The bus was late. This weather.”

Carnelia negligently nibbled a crumble of the colorless cheese from the local
creamery which neither woman would have stooped to if it hadn’t been for
rationing. “He’s quite the hero one more time, isn’t he, walking away from that
plane wreck.”

Cloyce held her tongue; other people’s only further sharpened Carnelia’s.
She gazed across the jammed room past the medleys of the socially positioned of
the town--doctor, lawyer, mayor, school superintendent, county agent, on down to
postmaster and druggist, and their wives in holiday best--to the kitchen hallway
where her son’s ginger hair overtopped her husband’s. What now? she wondered
as the pair of them in their nook stayed oblivious to the wall-to-wall guests. When
they were like this she knew not to bother catching the eye of either of them, it
would only draw her an abstracted nod and no other result whatsoever. Midnight was not that far off, however, and Ben still had not been into general circulation.

"Excuse me a minute, Carnelia, maternal duty calls."

"So we won't be seeing much of you for a while." Bill Reinking's knuckles whitened on his bourbon glass.

"Mine not to reason why," Ben responded, tired through and through from trying to do exactly that. "I'll let Mother know tomorrow." What had in mind for him in the weeks and months ahead passed for creative in the military, but that didn't make it any less slippery to handle. All during the bus trip from East Base, the calendar and the map of war blended together into a twisty scroll he could see no end of, and arriving home under these circumstances further blurred the proportions of the existence being asked of him. Even the favorite old civilian clothes he had slipped into felt unfamiliar. The rising and falling crescendoes of party hubbub seemed otherworldly, echoes from some sorrowless spot of time when mead and feasting greeted a solar change of fortunes. *Don't get on your high horse, this is just the Officers Club of the home front.* Still chiding himself, he knew he ought to rouse himself to the business of festivity even though he had no
stomach for it. Across the room the Senator was holding forth about something
and everyone around him was nodding as if keeping time. “Our hostess with the
mostest hit the jackpot tonight, didn’t she,” Ben acknowledged. “The big sugar
himself. How’d you drag him in on this?”

“The incalculable power of the press.” His father elaborated that the
Senator was in town on the start of a swing to sprinkle reclamation appropriations
down the Continental Divide watersheds where his big voting majorities lay county
by county. In short, the Senator had his own way of celebrating the onset of an
election year. “When his press mouthpiece--sorry, his spokesman--phoned
wanting to know if the Senator could get together with a few people while he was
here, all I said was, ‘How about half the town?’” Bill Reinking sighed. “Now I
have to give the old boy a hard time in a couple of editorials to show he doesn’t
have me in his pocket.”

“The fun and games of dealing with Washington. I’m going to have to take
lessons from you.” Ben did not smile as he said it.

“Don’t I wish I had the formula to give you,” came the swift response.

“How hard did TPWP kick about your piece on Vic?”
“Enough to smart for a while,” Ben admitted, the welts from the hard-edged telex messages back and forth still with him. “I finally had to dig in and point out to them they got all the goddamn combat angle they could possibly want in the one I had to do on Friessen.”

A cascade of laughter from the contingent surrounding the Senator caused Ben to pause and look over there, then back at his father. “It was just Tepee Weepy’s view of the war against mine, Dad. I’m over it.” He wasn’t. The whole thing with Vic still haunted him. Escorting caskets had that effect. When Corporal Victor Rennie was interred with full military honors in the cemetery up on the hill, the scene drew everlasting lines in the sod of memory. Toussaint ancient and alone on one side of the grave, the Blackfoot relatives at a little distance on the other side. Jake thumping around on his cast served as a pallbearer; Dex sent word he couldn’t. Ben withstood it all except for the final three words in granite. I managed to wangle out of my story what the lying bastards wanted in, buddy, but I couldn’t keep it off the gravestone for you. He glanced out the nearest window-well of light at the flurries lacing the bases of everything with whiteness; the stone-cut line KILLED IN ACTION soon would be covered until spring, at least.
Bill Reinking in his time had thrown away bales of news releases less fanciful than the Threshold Press War Project version that bestowed a heroic death in a combat action on a one-legged hospital patient confined to a wheelchair.

“What’ve you been able to find out,” he asked now, one journalist to another, “about the honest-to-God circumstances?”

“It wasn’t pretty,” Ben began tightly, “but it wasn’t that different from what England has been put through all the time, either.” Once more he imagined Vic there in the green and gray country where distant skytrails of smoke marked the ongoing battle between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe. “Officially they called what happened a bombing raid on the hospital--that’s how they tagged it ‘combat’ because it’s a military installation of a kind and maybe somebody there did take a shot back at a plane.” He lifted his shoulders, the universal who knows? In the scene in his mind, what counted was the amputee on wheels suddenly left to himself, his perch on the rolling lawn forgotten in the general scurry away from the approaching sounds of bombs. “Since no buildings were hit, my guess is it was some Jerry dumping his load before scooting back across the Channel and a few bombs strayed onto the hospital grounds.” He organized the next words with care, not wanting them to be too theatrical. “There’s one of those old canals they have
everywhere in that part of England, at the bottom of the slope from the hospital where they used to haul supplies in by barge. During all the commotion, Vic’s wheelchair went in the water. They didn’t find him until the next day.” Ben stopped there, although he need not have. He was certain as anything that while the hospital attendants were ducking for cover Vic had taken one last sharp look around and given the wheelchair a running start down the slope toward the deep-sided waterway, his chosen exit from a life that no longer held anything for him.

“Not quite like the official handout, was it,” Bill Reinking spoke in the dry tone of a veteran editor. Uneasy with what Ben had to contend with, he asked:

“Who makes a decision like that, how they classify that kind of a death?”

“Someone who wants every dead soldier in any uniform of ours to be a shining hero.” _Four for four, so far. The Supreme Team stays perfect with a little help from Tepee Weepy and in spite of me. Or Vic._

A hand, loving but firm, at the crook of his elbow. “Time to break it up, you two. I need to borrow my soldier.” Words warm as toast, and the crust there for emphasis. His mother’s diction made her a standout in amateur theatricals, the loftier the dialogue the better. Certainly she looked like the leading lady of tonight with her hair freshly fixed and her aquamarine party dress on, and both men self-
consciously shrugged around in their clothes a bit as if that would help to approach her level. “Bill, I think people are ready for another round.”

“Next year I’ll just hand out bottles instead of glasses,” the response came nonchalantly enough it was not clear whether it was a joke or a vow.

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

“And here I thought that was frostbite from the bus ride,” he tried to make it sound teasing. Right then Chick Jennings, the postmaster, reeled past on the route to the bathroom. “What do you think, Ben, this the year we’ll whip them all?” he delivered with a clap on the shoulder as he passed. Chick’s son was a Navy quartermaster safely tucked away in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

“Not all of them at once,” Ben responded as he figured he would have to a number of times that night, the war correspondent as ersatz expert, “there’s a long ways to go.” He swung back to his mother and the prior line of talk. “My ears are still on simmer. What did you conclude?”
She showed surprise that he was treating her remark as more than a pleasing to warm him up for the meeting and greeting ahead. But then Ben was inadvertently dramatic tonight, the last healing traces of scrapes from that plane crash like character lines drawn strong on his face. “If it were up to me,” she decided to venture, “I’d say that you look like you could use more than a night off. I’m worried about you, you’ve been all over the map without letup. Doesn’t that strange unit of yours ever have furloughs?”

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

She looked at him critically, hoping Carnelia Muntz didn’t cross paths him while he was like this. “Are you tight?”

“Sober as a gravedigger.” The old saying fit his frame of mind, if not the moment.

“Ben.” His mother’s intensity broke the spell of debate. “I know you’ve had a hard time of it recently, but heavens, it’s New Year’s Eve. Can’t you enjoy yourself for that long?” She slipped her arm in his. “Come on over and meet the
Senator’s daughter. Adrianna is in the service too. She’s stationed in Washington. You’ll have a lot to talk about.”

So that was it. Glancing across the gathering, he picked out the significant young woman in the cluster around the Senator and his wife; no male of military age in sight there or for that matter anywhere else in the room. He nearly laughed out loud, wishing Cass were here to see what happened when good intentions met up with his mother’s designs. “Any chance to be home, do it,” Cass had urged him to take the leave, a case of use it or lose it. “Get away from this military madhouse. I’m on standby that weekend anyway, you won’t be missing any ton of fun here. Go, palooka.”

Cass at that moment was nursing her first scotch in the back area of the Officers Club known as the Orphans’ Corner. It felt odd to be there with the handful of male loners— for some reason, they tended to have tidy little cookie-duster mustaches like department store floorwalkers—who sat one by one staring out darkened windows as they toyed with their drinks. However, it was the safest territory around. A woman sitting alone anywhere else in the building invited the interest of every brass type who had ever had a touch of the screw flu. Here she
was just another withdrawn officer trying to drink slow and write a letter. Besides, at midnight she had to go back on standby in the ready room; unless Germany or Japan directly attacked Great Falls, that meant another stint of killing time until 0800. Nineteen forty-four did not look like anything to celebrate yet; she hoped Ben was having better luck where he was.

In the piano realm of the Club, out of sight of Cass although definitely not out of hearing, the throng around the piano player was belting out "Pistol Packin' Momma" as Della Maclaine and her date frisked in from outside. They each were a bit mussed from fooling around on the way over, but in the overriding smudge of song, cigarette smoke, and general pall of alcohol, no one was paying attention to personal tidiness. The motor pool officer Della was with gallantly broke a trail through the packed bar toward a table at the quieter far end. Passing the piano, she could not help but notice the big pilot with a rakish flop to his hair giving her the eye as she went by, but she was not in the market for the glee club type. Better someone with a Jeep or better wheels.

To her surprise she spotted Cass holding down one of the spots for the socially backward in the Orphans Corner. Captain Standoffish, out in the open. Too occupied with herself to join in the celebration along the bar. Della cooed an
excuse in the ear of her date and promised him better things to come, then headed for Cass.

“Care if I join you, captain ma’am?”

“What the hey, Lieutenant Maclaine, sit yourself down.”

Cass took a quick look at the moonstruck officer Della had left parked at a table to wait for her; another new one, chronically the case with Della. Playing the field. I wonder what that’s like. I hope to hell I never find out. The question of Dan or Ben constituted as much choosing as she ever wanted to have to do in one lifetime.

“Tough night to draw standby.” Della’s sympathy did not sound overwhelming. Actually, Cass was unprepared for any at all from her after their run-in at Edmonton just before Christmas. On that flight up, Della had piloted like a Sunday driver, lagging the formation and straying off the radio beam. Luckily the group of planes hadn’t hit heavy weather or Cass would have had a lame duck back there to worry about along with everything else. It had taken a monumental chewing-out and a threat to ground Della if she didn’t shape up, but it had worked, for the time being. Right now she had her eyes modestly down on the blue air-letter paper Cass’s pen rested on. “Catching up on your correspondence?”
The Pacific was anything but pacifying as he picked his way along a shore completely foreign to him. To one side of his narrow line of march, giant logs gray as archeological bones had been tossed by storms into an endless pile he could not see over, while just beyond the driftwood barricade the forest crowded in, thick and bristling as bear hair. On the ocean side, a short distance offshore towered dark contorted seastacks like a fractured great wall amid the waves. Even the tide seemed ready determined to hem him in. Monitoring the tideline from the corner of his eye, with the heavy cream-colored surf changing eerily back to milk as it slid up the beach, he had to or the hissing white water would flood over his boots. The footing as he hiked went from gentle sand as black-gray as gunpowder one minute to rugged gravel the next and then to full-fledged rocks, without rhyme or reason that he could see. *And this is the easy part,* thought Ben to himself.