9

Why have I never been able to stand Danzer? Let me count the ways. On the team, there was no love lost between the linemen beating their brains out throwing blocks for him with never any thanks and the Dancer out there at right end grabbing glory with his jersey clean. The only good word he ever had in the huddle would be for Moxie. "Good call, Stomp," I can still hear it, as if a Stamper-to-Danzer pass play didn't take the other nine of us to make it work. Jake used to say Danzer was so stuck on himself he had gum in his fur.

That was football, only a game, supposedly. Games have any number of outcomes, though, personal scores that are not settled. If the ground of chance that brought us together had been in England, no doubt I'd be remembering a cricket match with Danzer in the whitest pants--and it still would be called only a game and count as eternally as if score was being kept in the Doomsday Book.

"You're sure this is the only way to get there, Chief?"

Ben arrived alongside the USS *McCorkle* to find a chasm of disturbed gray-green seawater between it and him, with canyon walls of ship steel on either side. Consistently the swell of the open ocean lifted the destroyer, across there, atop a foaming crest while wallowing the oil ship he was aboard in the trough of the wave. The ships then would dizzily trade elevations. Between the rising and falling hulls stretched the pulley rope that was supposed to carry him across. The line looked to him as thin as spiderspin.

"The motor launch might get crushed between if we tried that, sir," the oiler's grizzled chief petty officer replied, unflappably tugging the breeches buoy into place around Ben's hips like an oversize canvas diaper. "Not to worry, lieutenant. We'll haul you across in a jiffy and you'll get a real nice reception on the *Cork*-- the mail sack is following you over. Ready, sir?"

"No, and never going to be, so let's get it over with."

Legs sticking out of the canvas sling and arms tight around the ring buoy that the sling hung from, he was sent bobbing into mid-air, dipping and soaring with the teetertotter rhythm of the ships, the line with its dangling human cargo above the viciously sloshing water but not that far above it. The sleek gray hull of the destroyer loomed nearer and nearer until he began to be afraid the next toss of ocean would splatter him against it like a lobbed egg. Then there was a powerful yank from the crewmen handling the haul rope attached to the pulley and he spun up over the side of the hull into a sprawling descent onto deck.

A helping hand came down to him, and an unmistakable dig along with it. "Welcome aboard, eminent war correspondent. You're just in time for the invasion of Europe."

Great start. Looking at my reflection in the Dancer's famous shoes. Unharnessing himself from the apparatus, Ben got up off his hands and knees and sought his footing, the deck of the destroyer livelier than that of the slow-rolling oil supply ship the past many days.

Meanwhile Danzer stood planted like a yachtsman in an easy breeze. Even though both men knew it did not fit their acquaintanceship, he had put on for general show his languid smile, as if about to say something then disdaining to.

Already irked--*What was that Europe crack about?*-- Ben gave back the briefest of handshakes. "One of us has his oceans mixed up, Nick. I was under the distinct impression this is the Pacific." Without taking their eyes off the new

arrival a number of sailors went about rote chores around them, their faded blue work attire a contrast to Danzer's khaki uniform, crisp in every crease.

Elaborately considerate, Danzer drew him away from the rope-and-pulley rig. "Stand aside, Ben, here's the real cargo." The mail sack came zinging down the line to the cheers of the sailors, followed anticlimactically by Ben's travel bag. "Come on up to the wardroom and catch the broadcast of how the war is being won for us."

He realized Danzer wasn't just woofing. Up there in officers' country it was standing room only, those who were off-duty blearily awakened by the news and joining the morning watch to listen to the transmission piped in from the radio room. The entire room fell silent as General Eisenhower's crackling voice, half around the world on the Atlantic side of the globe of war, addressed his cross-Channel invasion force. "--the great crusade--bring about the destruction of the German war machine--" Ben furiously scribbled down snatches of it, needing to do something while history was dispensed without him. *D-Day somewhere on the coast of France and I'm out here with the albatrosses. Thanks a whole hell of a lot for the heads-up, Tepee Weepy.* "--great reserves of trained fighting men--free men of the world--marching together to victory."

In the wardroom's explosion of speculation that followed the Allied supreme commander's brief pronouncement, Danzer murmured aside to Ben: "A gentleman's C, on that pep talk by El Supremo?"

You're the one who would recognize one. "You were spoiled by Bruno," Ben came back at that. "Half-time dramatics don't sound that good with real blood involved." This was not a time he wanted to be standing around trading smart remarks, however. Like a change in the weather sensed in the bones, he could feel the time coming when the dateline on what he wrote would read *Somewhere in France.* "Moxie is somewhere in that invasion force," he thought out loud, "you

can about bet." Did he imagine, or did Danzer draw back a little in surprise at those words? Ben shot him a curious look, but the Dancer was elusive there in his naval crispness. He still was as lean as when he lined up at opposite end from Ben and as apart. "You knew he was stationed in England, didn't you?"

"Merry Old Moxie," Danzer said as if that constituted an answer. "You're bunking in the sick bay. I'll show you to it."

Nicholas Edwin Danzer. 'Ned' when he was growing up in Livingston, but 'Nick' as soon as he hit Treasure State University and figured out what rhymed nicely with 'slick.' His family has the Paradise Gateway Toggery, outfitter to moneyed tourists on their way to Yellowstone Park. The snappy Stetsons. The gabardine slacks, men's instant fittings by a male tailor right there on the premises, women's by a female one. The specialized cowboy boots with walker heels,which takes the nuisance of cowboying out of them. How it all must have rolled into the cash register, and out of that, the vacation home up the Paradise Valley, the fishing trips with the Governor, the football camp at the Rose Bowl while most of the rest of us were teenage muscle sweating through summer jobs at a dollar a day. Born with a silver shoe horn in his booties and he took advantage of it. Give Slick Nick the benefit of the doubt, allow as how it was okay for him to be the clothes horse of the locker room and a mile around, for that matter. The more-wised-up-than-thou attitude he wore, that was not okay.

It was Vic, rest his soul, who shut him off at the mouth. Sooner or later it might have been Jake or Animal or, I like to think, me, but Vic drew first honors. That day Bruno had run us ragged in practice, all of us were out of sorts, and Danzer made the mistake of pushing past Vic into the showers with "Move it along, Tonto." Vic hit him in the chest with the base of his fist the way a person would

bang mightily on a door and that finished that. From then on, Danzer's attitude still showed but he kept it buttoned.

And here he is, supply officer on the destroyer U.S.S. McCorkle, on station probably a thousand miles from the nearest Japs. As cushy an assignment as there is in a theatre of combat, how ever he snagged it. He makes Dex Cariston look like an amateur at foreswearing war. For once, I wish I had less knowledge of the person I'm supposed to write about.

But that's not how it is, or ever going to be, with the Dancer. I know him right down to his shoe size. Or in his case, to his shoe polish.

The story galloped among the former teammates, after Animal Angelides picked it up from a troopship navigator who went through officers candidate school at Great Lakes with Danzer. Inspections were ferocious in their barracks, a terminally picky commander stalking through the squad bays handing out gigs--demerits--for specks of dust imaginary or not. Always with one exception. Danzer's shoes dazzled the man, as well they should have; shiny as black glass, sheerly flawless as obsidian. It reliably drew Danzer an approving nod and a squint at his nametag, and everyone knew that the good regard of the commander was the one sure route around wading the chickenshit that customarily awaited an officer candidate. Danzer's shoeshine secret, whether he bribed it out of some crafty yardbird at Great Lakes or more likely devolved it from making those fancy boots gleam to best advantage in the show window of the Toggery, was to press the polish into the leather with a spoon made hot by a cigarette lighter, buff it, melt some more polish in, buff some more. It wrecked the shoes for wearing--Danzer had to hop into an ordinary pair when inspection was over--but could not be beat for display.

"Better have another pork chop, Ben. I had to practically buy out the hog farms of Queensland to get them." The gloss on Danzer these days shone up from

the capacious plates the officers of the *McCorkle* ate off of. It had the reputation of a ship that fed exceedingly well, and did just as well for itself at the greater table of chance besides.

"No thanks. My stomach still wants to be back on land." Which he knew would take another week yet, before the destroyer put in at Brisbane. *And the Dancer can keep on with the war effort by bargaining the Aussies out of groceries.* Supply and demand were immaculately matched in Danzer and this ship, he had already determined. By whatever flick of fortune in the chain of command, the vessel was something like a palace guard to the commander-in-chief in the Pacific, General MacArthur, headquartered in the Australian port. Or as the unkindly said, driven into exile there by Japanese triumphs. MacArthur's war thus far had been an early series of ghastly defeats--Corregidor, Bataan, the entire Philippines--now somewhat assuaged by amphibious invasions that rolled back the enemy from New Guinea and a handful of other strategic map spots strewn down the South Pacific. The *McCorkle*'s war this far along consisted of patrol duty and support chores here in the conquered waters central to MacArthur's realm. Ben didn't think he could get away with writing it, but the Southern Cross in the night sky was a constellation of extreme luck for the crew of this ship.

"Lieutenant Reinking? I can't resist telling you"--this was on its way from a redheaded officer so young and junior in rank that he practically shined--"I read one of your pieces in JWP at Northwestern. The one where they held the wake for your teammate in a bar."

Ben wished the man had resisted. "Mike O'Fallon, that was," he answered moderately. "Butte knows how to give a person a sendoff." He sent a knotted look back along the table. "What's JWP?"

"Journalistic Writing Practice," the young admirer reddened as he said it. As he spoke, a white-jacketed mess attendant went around the table pouring coffee and

dealing out fresh forks for pie. The Navy's ways made Ben feel at sea in more ways than one. Except for whoever was on the bridge the dozen or so officers all ate together at the one long table in obligatory lingering fashion, which meant the talkers got to talk endlessly and the listeners got to listen eternally. Cliques showed through the crevices in conversation; this nonfighting destroyer mostly was officered by a mix of merchant marine retreads, such as the gray slump-shouldered captain who sat at the head of the table regarding Ben without pleasure, and ninety-day wonders (example: Danzer) turned out by officer candidate school. All meal long, Ben had to behave like an anthropologist tiptoeing between tribes.

Right now, with more pluck than sense the redheaded one-striper was back at what he had read in college: "I'm trying to remember, in that piece. Your football buddy, your and Lieutenant Danzer's--he was killed out here in New Guinea, wasn't he?"

Ben sat there struggling to measure out a more civil reply than *No, shavetail, that was another dead one of us.*

He was aware of being worn to a thin edge by the time he reached the destroyer. Ever since shipping out of Seattle in what seemed an eon ago, he had filed stories from latitudes of the Pacific theatre of combat. The Pacific conflict was a strange piecemeal war, fought from island to island, mapping itself out more like a medieval storming of castles, if the castles had been of coral and moated by hundreds of miles of hostile water and defended by men committed to die for their emperor rather than surrender. He had seen things it took all his ingenuity to put into words that TPWP would let pass into print, and some that would never surface in civilized newspapers.

The dirt road at Rabaul, the dust carpeted with excrement, where the retreating Japanese had evacuated their hospital patients in some manner of forced

march, the sick and wounded defecating while they walked like cows with the drizzles.

Constant corpses, the accumulations of death on every fought-over island, decay and flies always ahead of the burial squads.

The pilot who fell to earth--New Guinea again--near enough the American forces that a patrol was sent out to recover him. Ben was with them when the spotter plane dropped its flare where the Hellcat dive bomber had failed to come out its dive and they thrashed through the jungle in search of the pilot. No one had seen his parachute open for sure, nor did it. The lead man practically fell in the hole the body made in the jungle floor, three feet deep. Then and there Ben had been seized with a stomach-turning fear for Cass, the altitudes at which she did her job a deadly chasm as constant as the sky over him after that. He had tried to shake that feeling in his gut--he had enough of those already--but the thought of life without her refused to quite go away. It was going with him throughout this ocean of war, a hue of loneliness always accompanying him now, like another depth to his shadow.

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add sentence>

Solitary in the company of the destroyer officers, he at last came up with a response to the question that had pasted O'Fallon's fate onto Friessen's. "No, you're thinking of another teammate of ours. We've lost more than our share."

Danzer had shown no sign any of this fazed him. "It's strange how war has imitated life," he said as if mastering the philosophy for them all. "The middle of the line has taken the hits. Ben and I were lucky to be the ends." He knocked on the wood trim of the mess table.

"We're jealous of Danzer, you know," one of the older officers said in a joshing tone, if that's what it really was. "You're here to make him famous back

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-talent is luck - he smiled along table - 6 we were...

home, and as dog robber he already gets to be the first one off the ship when we hit port."

"You wouldn't want the burden of being him," Ben answered the officer oratorically enough to draw a laugh. Danzer joined in.

"Still, it's an interesting morale device, isn't it," the executive officer spoke up briskly. The exec was a Naval Academy man, and chafing at this becalmed post in his career climb if Ben did not miss his guess. "Giving people a periodic glimpse--not that your talents can be entirely captured at any one time, Nick--of someone all throughout the war. Rather like time-lapse photography."

Before the executive officer could hold forth further, Ben put in "Right now I'm the one lapsing," barely covering a yawn. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen"--he tried to intone it without irony and could not be sure he succeeded--"I'm going to have to hit the sack."

The one advantage of bunking in the sick bay was privacy, which he craved in the crowded confines of the ship. *Just me and the aspirin and the sawbone's slab.* Those and the unsettling sense of being cast backward in time.

It had been, what, nearly a year since his impatient period of mending on the ship off New Guinea, the radio in that similar compartment tuned to Tokyo Rose as she perpetually alternated between taunting American soldiers all over the Pacific and playing the likes of *"Deep Purple"* and *"Tuxedo Junction."* (The Japanese were good at such propaganda, he acknowledged; the German counterpart, Lord Haw Haw, sounded like P.G. Wodehouse construing Bertie Wooster.) The swollen thoughts of that time returned to him, as haunting as they were contrary. A main one, borne back by that dinner episode, why couldn't Carl Friessen have come out of the hand-to-hand combat on that bloodslick trail with just enough sacrifice of flesh to retire him from the war? The million-dollar wound,

shrapnel in the back, a stray bullet in the lower leg, that sent a soldier home for good. His own seemed to him the two-bit variety, scarcely deserving of a Purple Heart or anything else, yet the twinge in his shoulder was a message of what might have been. At the time he was disturbed with himself for wanting any of the Supreme Team out of the war; Friessen, Vic, the others were in it of their own choice and who was he to wish carefully calibrated harm to any of them? With what he knew now, he should have called down the heavens in support of such wish.

Steady. Don't come down with South Seas whimwhams. You saw enough of those lately. He made himself move off the cot where he had dropped into this mood and go over to his typewriter on the cubbyhole desk. His things were laid out on the slablike medical table and he reached over for fresh paper and rolled a page into the typewriter.

He took his time at this, which would have astounded Jones or anyone else back at East Base who had ever seen him put a typewriter to work. On TPWP pieces he wrote as fast as the keys could tolerate, never needing to glance down--one of the blessings he owed his father was those boyhood sessions at the training typewriter in the *Gleaner* office, with bunion pads hiding the letters on the keyboard. But nights on his movie script, which were many, he deliberately slowed to a sculptor's pace, letting the imagination feel its way toward the shape of trueness. The scene he was working on took place on the Letter Hill. The character based on Purcell was the last player to reach the whitewashed rocks--*Camera: the slope below him appears steep and endless*, he tapped onto the paper--and others of the football team sagged against the stone emblem trying to catch their breath. His fingers resting on the keyboard, he tried out dialogue in his head, trying to catch words out of the air. It was a pursuit that enabled him to stand the slow, slow passage of military hours, the way some other man in uniform

somewhere might endure the duration by nightly reading in *War and Peace*, and upon finishing it, starting over. (He made a mental note to find out what Danzer did to pass the time, if he did anything.) It was an abiding mystery, the script, that promised to reveal itself only in the measured workings of his mind and his fingers. And it was something Tepee Weepy could not reach.

He lurched through the next days at Danzer's side, listening over and over to him regulate a cook here, a baker there, a storeroom swabbie down in some gloomy hold at the bottom of the ship. All of it about as exciting as the derring-do of the corner grocer. 'SUPREME TEAM' MEMBER BATTLES ENEMY WITH BISCUITS, he could just see the headline. Tepee Weepy would be thrilled to the gills with this piece. Sure it would. As military service went, what he was reporting on aboard the *U.S.S. McCorkle* amounted to the essence of quiescence.

Meanwhile the long lean destroyer itself was never at rest. The "*Cork*" was aptly nicknamed, bobbing with every bit of weather. Yet that was the only discernible peril it faced. There were moments, staring out at the methodical ocean, when Ben pined for a typhoon to shake shipboard routine up into something he could write about with some life to it, before snapping back to his senses. *Think about it, Reinking. Throwing up your guts doesn't help you do your job. Just ask Dex.*

movie, shown on wardroom wall. newsreel months old, Ted Loudon, spring training. (or basketball, Carlisle 'Skins vs. House of David)

Hours refused to budge, yet before he knew it a day had gone to no good use.

Ben goes to his compartment, flips on Tokyo Rose for distraction. *Sentimental Journey.*

So, it seemed like just another helping of the smooth life on this nonfighting destroyer when Danzer turned to him over dessert one dinnertime and announced for all to hear: "You can't deprive us of your company this evening, Ben. It's movie night."

change

Well, why not? he figured. *Let's see if the Dancer supplies popcorn and soda pop along with the main feature.* He trooped into the wardroom with the topside contingent and the petty officers invited up from below, anticipating a session of John Wayne bringing down the Japanese empire by being gruff, or some other officially approved Hollywood propaganda. What ultimately flickered onto the white metal wall at the end of the room, though, ...Ben blinked, glad his surprise could not be seen in the dark. Months ago, he and Cass had sneaked out of Great Falls to see this in the Cascade movie theater. Jane Russell notoriously was acting with her chest. *"Is that all her, do you think?"* So he had his share of loin fever, and then some,...

But first came the newsreel.

"Nick, we saw this last week," a voice complained.

"Our guest didn't. Humor us old athletes."

He knew some of what was coming.

"Poor Amercan boys. Your ships go up in flames every day and your planes are shot from the sky every hour of that day. There are too many islands where your death waits for you, while slackers at home sit out the war. Go home, G.I.s, before a bullet brings you the sleep that lasts forever." Out wafted the eternal strains of Brahms' *"Lullaby"*.

"Sweet dreams to you too, Rosie," Ben mocked back but kept the music as he twirled a half-finished page of script into the typewriter. He hated to admit Ted Loudon was any kind of inspiration, but that rat-at-tat voice evoked the stadium, the cleated team poised to charge onto the football field, the gilded season that led to so much else.

His stare at the waiting white space had just begun to find the ghost forms of words when a rap on the door broke the trance.

He hoped it would be any other of the officers, even the lecture-prone exec, and naturally it wasn't.

"You scooted out of the wardroom before I could catch you, Ben." Danzer stood there in the passageway as crisp as the cutout of a naval recruiting poster. "I thought we ought to have a chat, auld lang syne and all."

"It's your boat, Nick." Ben gestured him in.

Gliding by, Danzer assumed a seat on the bunk and cocked an ear as he did so. "Blotting out the war with Beethoven?"

"Brahms."

"Same difference?"

"Hardly. 'Beethoven's is music to move the universe, Brahms' is to move the heart.'" Ben reached over and clicked the radio off. "Sorry. I picked that up somewhere and it's always stuck with me."

"You were the word man among us and that hasn't changed," came the response from behind the held smile. "Our old friend Loudon hasn't lost his touch either, has he."

"Nope. Bullshit stays green for quite a while."

That did not appear to be the reaction Danzer had been counting on. He scrutinized his host briefly, then leaned forward, hands steepled together as if aiming a prayer. "I hope this isn't stepping on your toes, Ben, but I wanted to make sure you're coming along all right on your article. Two more days until we're in Brisbane, and you're off to wherever's next. It would be on my conscience if I haven't provided everything you need."

Ben studied the slick source of those words. *You're a provider if there ever was one.* Danzer, monarch of the cold storage locker and master of the cooks and bakers and servers; the story that really interested Ben was how he had cozied himself into this slot in the American logistical empire. Some alliance of convenience made back there in shiny-shoe OCS? Some influential Yellowstone tourist, togged out by the Toggery, who knew someone on MacArthur's staff? Pull was involved somewhere, Ben would have bet his bottom dollar. There was nothing wrong with being a storekeeper. What rankled was Danzer being Danzer, his every pore exuding the attitude that he was entitled to a free pass through the war.

"Well, Nick, I'll tell you. It's a little tough to make the commissary sound like a knife at Japan's throat. I'll come up with something along those lines, though. Breadknife, maybe."

That drew a chuckle of sorts. "I'm the first to admit, patroling MacArthur's backyard is a tolerable tour of duty. There's a nice amount of leisure." Danzer pronounced it as if it rhymed with *pleasure*. "But don't forget it's a long war for

me, too. They also wait who only stand and serve." Ben could tell it was not nearly the first time that line had been trotted out.

"We haven't exactly kept in touch," Danzer was saying as though it was considerate of him to notice that. "How about you? Seen much action yourself?"

"Enough," Ben answered shortly. "With Friessen, before he was killed." He did not want to go over that territory, the team's lives taken by the war, in the clammy companionship of Danzer. "Moxie's all right, by the way. I checked. His tank column hit a lucky pocket at Normandy, not much resistance."

"Is that what that was about, the code traffic ahead of the captain's morning messages," the other said drily. "The skipper thinks you have more radio priority than Roosevelt." He thought to tack on, "Good for Moxie," before bringing the conversation to where Ben saw it had been aimed all along.

"I have a bit of news of my own," Danzer delivered it with relish on the side. "I know where our buddy Dex is and the reason why."

Ben felt a lurch the ship was not responsible for. He shifted in the chair as he eyed his now truly unwelcome caller.

"Is that so. You're busier than you look, Nick."

Danzer spread his hands. "This fell in the family lap. A boot representative"--it took his listener a moment to translate that to traveling shoe salesman--"we deal with has a line of work wear he thought might interest the Forest Service. Just right for smokejumpers, you know? The Cariston stores are one of his accounts too, so imagine his surprise when he paid a call to Seeley Lake and spotted Dex in there with the conchies. The rest of the conchies, I think it's safe to say."

Knowing what the answer would be, Ben grimly asked anyway:

"Are you spreading this around, back home?"

"Word might get out, I imagine. You know how these things are. People have no idea the heir to Cariston Enterprises is taking the yellow road through the war otherwise, do they." The offhand manner in which Danzer said it made Ben realize he had underestimated the man's disdain for the rest of humankind. He was the sort whose contempt you couldn't tell from the wallpaper. It was always there in back of whatever he said or did.

"That was one of your pieces I did happen to see, on Dex"--Ben stared back while Danzer delivered this straight at him--"and 'conscientious objector' did not leap out at me. At any rate, it might not reflect on him any too well, do you think? What with the rest of us putting in our tour of duty."

I get the message, you manipulating bastard. Make you look good or you and your Toggery bunch smear Dex and me along with it for covering for him. Silently Ben wrung the neck of the words he had just heard. Tour of duty. That's what Danzer was doing with it, all right, touring duty like a cynical sightseer for every spot of advantage it might offer him. The pampered tourist of the war who knew how to keep on pampering himself. For several seconds he did not trust himself to respond to Danzer, because the response he most wanted to give was to knock some teeth out of that smile.

"Nobody's perfect," he at last managed to keep it to, too much at stake not to, "but I do my goddamnedest to give everyone I write about a fair shake."

"Then I've been speaking out of turn about Dex and all, haven't I," Danzer provided with the grace of one who had won. "A man's best is all he can do." Showing every appearance of being pleased with that bromide, he made as if to go, but paused when the paper in the typewriter caught his eye. He cocked a look at the ragged margins of the typing, as when he had deigned to notice the classical music. "Writing poetry in your spare time?"

"If you have to know, it's a screenplay."

"Is it." Danzer seemed to weigh that information. "As I suppose they used to ask of Shakespeare, what's it about?"

None of your goddamn business. Something contrary sparked in the back of Ben's mind, and he gambled it on out.

"Purcell. The twelfth man. Football as we knew it, Dancer, war by another means."

Danzer's expression slipped several degrees of control. Ben thought he saw bleak surprise in those flinty eyes, something buried threatening to come out.

"It's about an accident of nature, then," the chiseled voice quickly recovered, at least. "Two of them. That freak kid himself and what happened to him on the Hill. I'm surprised you can't find anything more worthy of your talent, Ben."

You're surprised. Purcell does the trick on Slick Nick: that's *a surprise.*

Sitting there gratified at discovering a way to get under Danzer's skin, Ben still was finding it murky territory to try to explore. True, in the famous '41 season Purcell became the most glorified scrub there ever was, but still a scrub; he made the team only posthumously. What was there about the raw kid from nowhere to upset, even now, the receiving end of that impervious passing combination, Stamper-to-Danzer? 'Stomp and Dance, the touchdown prance.' Ted Loudon always went nuts over that, he had plugged it into his column all season long. *You had your share of fame, Dancer, did you want Purcell's leftovers too?*

Something had colossal staying power from back then, but what? The time since had changed the mortal balance in too many ways that Ben had seen, but not in this case. The Dancer was still scoring plentifully in the game of life, the Twelfth Man was still dead. Whatever grasp the specter of Purcell had, let Danzer squirm under it, he decided.

"Don't judge my script too soon, Nick," Ben flicked the page resting in the typewriter. "Maybe it'll turn out to bring back valuable memories for you."

Danzer regarded him stonily for moment, then in turn tapped the radio where the Brahms had been. "Do you know your trouble, Ben? You let your heart be moved too easily. Dex. Purcell. The list doesn't stop there, I'm sure. You're the type lame puppies and roundheeled women sniff out, would be my guess." That last was flicked lightly enough, but the lash was unmistakably there. "Whatever it is," the adversary on the bunk was finishing up, "you let it get to you too much."

"Is that what's wrong with me?" Ben acted surprised although he had to work to hold it to that. *The sonofabitch can't know about Cass, too. Can he?* "And here I thought it was an old pain from football acting up."

Danzer smiled that sterile smile as he got up to leave. "Those last on and on, don't they. Good night, Ben."

"GENERAL QUARTERS. ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS."

He woke up fighting mad at Navy games in the middle of the night and trying simultaneously to put on a light and his clothes.

Country club Sunday sailing sonsofbitches. If that captain thinks he is going to give me something to write about besides Danzer's pork chops by pulling a drill, he has another think coming.

The squawkbox in a corner of the ceiling still was blatting the alarm when the compartment door flung open and the medical officer hustled in. He made a face at the clutter on the operating table. "I need that cleared," he said matter-of-factly and with the sweep of an arm began gathering Ben's belongings and dumping them under the bunk.

"Hey!" Half-dressed, Ben lumbered across the room and protectively scooped up his typewriter and its carrying case. "What's all the rush?"

"A submarine is trailing us," the medico recited as if it were common knowledge. "You need to put your gear on and get out on deck, fast."

Feeling like he was in a bad dream, Ben hastily donned the helmet and flak jacket he had been given and tumbled out of the sick bay into a passageway full of tousled sailors pulling on battle gear of their own. The general scurry conveyed him out onto deck, where the crew members spilled toward gun mounts and fire control hoses and other stations to which they were assigned. Pandemonium? Expertly drilled response to the worst of alarms? He couldn't tell which. The one thing he knew for dead sure was to stay out of the way, and he ducked off clear of any doors or deckpaths to let all the traffic pass. For whatever crazy reason he took notice of the full moon over the bow of the ship, like a searchlight barely on. In a rolling motion that made him stagger to keep his balance, the destroyer could be felt surging to a new speed and heeling in a fresh direction at the same time. He tried to think where in the maze of the ship Danzer's battle station might be, cursing himself for not having paid any real attention to that. Bolstering against the steel side of the superstructure while more figures in helmets pounded past, he was nearly knocked over by a crewman skinning down a ladder. He grabbed the man, recognizing him as one of the mess attendants. "Where's Lieutenant Danzer?"

"Chart house, should be, sir," the man stammered and raced off to pass ammunition.

Staying wary of anyone else plunging down the rungs from overhead, Ben climbed in spurts toward the bridge of the ship. There he slipped into the warren of tense officers and lookouts with binoculars pressed to their eyes. That frieze of unmoving figures glued to the night horizon could not have been more different from the scramble below. In the low level of light everything looked sepulchral.

Out beyond, it was a perfect Pacific night, the water trembling under the stars. Catching himself on tiptoe as he tried to see everywhere at once on the moonlit ocean, he realized the futility of that; long before he ever could, the binoculars would pick up any deadly white streak that was the wake of an oncoming torpedo. *Too late then anyway . This thing can't outrun one of those.* All during this, the captain snapped out orders and the orders went down the line of command into the nerve system of the ship, to what effect Ben couldn't discern. The destroyer was zigzagging, dancing with an invisible devil, but was that enough? He had to hope the *McCorkle*'s evasive action was as unreadable to a sub captain at a periscope as it was to him.

Not reassured by the scene on the bridge, he backed out to hunt up Danzer and found him in equally ghostly circumstances in the busy chart room, the combat analysis center. The dim greenish light etched ashen shadows beneath the battle helmets and into the hollows of cheeks. Here the executive officer was in charge, leaning over a translucent tabletop where the careening course of the destroyer was being plotted and exchanging aggravated questions with the strained-looking young communications officer and other distressed types crowded around the massive table. From what Ben could catch it amounted to an argument over whether to cut and run or turn and fight, and he didn't like any of what he was hearing or seeing. Faces that had not shown a worry in the world in the wardroom now appeared aggrieved, unsure. One person or another around that table swallowed hard too often. Fear not sliding down easily. Not ever. Now he had his own sudden taste of that lodged in his throat, the apprehension of dying in company such as this, unavailing, insufficient. *How'd they get us into this in the first place?* Among other things, a destroyer was a submarine-hunting machine. How had this one managed to become the hunted?

Danzer was off to one side, near the forward bulkhead, looking removed from the intense debate at the plotting table. Ben edged around to him. Danzer's duty station there, he deciphered, must have been to maintain the battle status board with code-names and whereabouts of other U.S. ships in the fight. The problem with that was that there were not any, none nearer than somewhere around the Australian port in one direction and New Guinea in the other. Just the *Cork* and the enemy. *Different war than it was a couple of minutes ago, isn't it, Dancer.*

Reaching Danzer, he whispered: "How are they going to get us out of this?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Danzer whispered back and for once sounded nervous.

"What's a Jap sub doing way down here? Who spotted the thing?"

"Who do you think? I was officer of the watch."

"No crap? You saw it?" Ben began surreptitiously scrawling in his notepad, trying to hear what was being said at the plotting table and listen to Danzer at the same time. Here of all things was the heroic piece on Slick Nick. If he stayed alive to write it.

"It's dark out in case you haven't noticed," Danzer muttered sarcastically. "Sonar picked it up. Can't you hear it?"

The pips registered on Ben then. PING *ping* ping. PING *ping* ping. Until that moment, the pulsations of sound had gone by him as some piece of the destroyer's equipment that might contribute to raising hell with the submarine. Now that it was identified as the pulse of hell coming the ship's direction, the pinging sounded louder.

Ben peered at the stiffnecked supply officer anew. If Danzer turned out to be the Paul Revere of the South Seas, the only thing to do was to write him up that way. "What then?" he resumed the under-the-breath interview urgently. "You got on the horn and ordered general quarters? On your own?"

2 hell
OK?

"No, that's not by the book," Danzer said between his teeth. It was remarkable how nettled a whisper could sound. "There's a standing order to call the captain."

Which in this case meant waking him up with maximum bad news. Danzer's drawn expression suggested it was an experience that stayed with a person. Just then the exercise in exasperation around the plotting table broke up. "We're not shaking the bastard at all," the exec was saying, striding for the bridge. "We need to tell the skipper our only chance is to go at it."

Hearing that, Ben banged Danzer roughly in the vicinity of the collarbone for luck--he only later realized it was the old shoulder-pad slap the team traded before the game started--and bolted out onto the wing of the bridge to watch.

Sea air rushed by, there on the steel promontory into the dark. A mane of moonsilver flowed back from the destroyer's bow, and a matching tail of wake behind it. As his eyes adjusted, Ben could just make out the long narrow deck below, armaments jutting ready if they only had a target, faces of the gun crews pale patches foreshortened by helmets. Whatever discussion the executive officer had with the captain did not take long. The ship cut sharply to one side and kept on leaning like a skater fashioning a circle. Standing there witnessing the might of a fully armed vessel turning on its nagging foe could have been thrilling, Ben was duly aware, except for the distinct chance of being blown out of the water at any second.

Determinedly not watching for a salvo of torpedoes--mostly--he strained instead to follow the burst of action at the *McCorkle*'s fantail, farthest back. Dimly he see the depth charge crew crouching read, their barrel-like explosives neatly racked for firing. At some chosen point in the attack maneuver--he wondered whether it was decided by hunch, or some definitive echo out of the sonar

equipment; on this ship, it likely did not come from combat experience--the commands were hurled out:

"FIRE ONE!"

"FIRE TWO!--"

--the firing kept on, each charge sprung into the air like a fat ejected shell, out away from the ship, then to sink to the depth that would detonate it. Nothing happened for long enough that Ben began to suspect duds. Then he felt the shudder up from the water. Astern, explosions bloomed white in the darkness. Knowing this to be one of the sights of a lifetime, he watched with an intensity near to quivering. Not often is it given to you to stare away death, see it go instead in search of your sworn enemy. There in the destroyer's wake, the geysers of destruction blew and blew. It was impossible to imagine anything human surviving in that cauldron of concussions.

Forgiving the *Cork* and its lucky-star crew all their sins of leisure, Ben burst back into the chart room to observe the celebration of sinking the sub. He could have spared himself the effort. The jammed room was as still as a funeral parlor except for the pinging.

"It's still there, sir," the sonar operator called out, perhaps in case anyone's hearing had gone bad. In the greenish gloom, Danzer's face was a study in trepidation.

The executive officer at last spoke up. They must have taught logic at Annapolis. "Something's fishy about this. They can't shadow us that close after we blew up half the ocean floor."

Once more, the exec went calling on the captain. This time, their conference produced a marked slowing of the vessel. All hands stayed at battle stations as the sonar deepfinder was reeled in for inspection. Ben was there, scribbling like mad,

when the sonar technician took a look at the sound head at the end of the cable and sourly gave his diagnosis:

"It's all chewed to hell. A shark must have got at it."

Ben waited until general quarters was called off, waited while the decks emptied of cursing sailors and sheepish officers, waited as the medical officer vacated the sick bay, waited until he was alone in the soundless compartment. Then he put his hands to his face and laughed into them until he had to gulp for breath.

Trying to calm down enough tow work, little chortles still coming like hiccups, he sat up to the typewriter in its restored spot. He was at full speed on the keys by the time the rap on the door came.

A depleted Danzer stepped in. Ben looked at him with interest. "I guess next time you'll roust out the sonar tech ahead of everybody else, huh?"

With visible effort, Danzer let that pass. He squared up as much as he was able and began: "I'm on a bit of a spot. The captain sent me to ask if you'll be writing anything about"--Danzer looked as if he would rather bite off his tongue than say it--"what happened tonight."

Ben couldn't help but grin and tap the typing paper in answer. "The case of the phantom sub. Can't you see the headline? THE HUNTING OF THE SHARK. Beware the frumious Bandersnatch, Lieutenant Danzer."

Danzer's brow darkened. "Ben, damn it, if you--"

Ben held up a hand. "Don't. As much as I'd like to, I'm not going to skin you in public. The outfit I have to answer to isn't going to let you look ridiculous, don't worry. Oh, I could write it that way, hell yes, and it'd be red-penciled beyond recognition. So I'll do up tonight's stunt and then TPWP will take its turn. And in the end it'll come out as just one more unpleasant thing that can happen in war, Dancer."