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.* 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.

“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 home, and as dog robber he already gets to be the first one off the ship when we hit port.” 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 behaved like an anthropologist tiptoeing between tribes.

“You wouldn’t want the burden of being him,” he now 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, 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 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.

*In which case, I need to somehow tolerate my own company, don’t I.* 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.*