unused or altered in New Guinea scene in 11th Man:

The New Guinea jungle. Everyone warned him the place dripped voracious insects when it wasn't oozing rain warm as 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 hell. *At least nobody's shooting at me. Yet.* Peering in through mosquito net that served as a tent flap, he had to look twice to make sure he had the right man. In their football years Friessen had been hefty enough to plug more than his share of the line at right guard. Now he was rawboned, worn down to bodily 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. "Benny! They let just anybody in this bugger of a place, do they?" The same slow goofy smile, even if its wearer was a barely passable imitation in any other way Ben could see. "Better step inside out of the skeeters."

They whacked one another like schoolboys and talked without letup. 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 smile appeared again, but not for long. "This's been all kinds of fighting, Benny," he sounded weary far beyond his years. "Three months nose to nose with the dinks to get this"--he sent a heavy look around the chewed-up jungle of the Sanananda 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 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 held 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 the death struggle in the jungle, it could be read in the lines of Carl Friessen's face. "We're nowhere near done, either. 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, Benny. 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, Benny. 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 camouflage uniforms pouring out, five, six, *Christ, will they never stop coming*, eight. Carl reared onto his knees and shot one before his rifle was clubbed out of his hands by a Japanese mortarman madly swinging the mortar barrel like a sledgehammer. The American on the other side of Ben was being bayoneted by a surprisingly large enemy soldier. Fumbling for the only weapon he had, a trench knife, Ben rolled that direction and slashed the tendons across the back of the Jap's legs. As Ben scrambled to his feet above the shrieking flopping enemy soldier, a shot came from someplace--he never knew where--and tore a piece of meat off the tip of his left shoulder. It missed bone and bicep by a fraction of an inch, but the impact and pain sent him reeling. The trail had turned into a muddy trench of men clubbing, grappling, firing. Another American went down, then two Japanese blown away by the buck sergeant's .45 pistol. Carl was kicking at the maniacal mortarman who in a final wild sling hurled the mortar and grabbed for a grenade on his belt. Carl swarmed onto him and the two hit the ground together, the Jap's arm outstretched and the grenade twitching in his hand as he tried to dislodge the pin.

Ben flung himself, desperately pinning down the arm, his blood dripping over the tangle of the three of them, until Carl clambered astraddle of the Jap and with no other weapon at hand beat the man to death with his helmet.

Later, nobody could figure it out. In the madhouse combat of New Guinea neither side was taking prisoners, so the Japanese could not have been out to capture them. It had to have been a patrol, like theirs, but probably half-starved and short of ammo, with no time to set up an ambush and improvising crazily.

Ben felt as if he'd been cut. It took a piece of meat off his side. This bastard was big enough. Choking

As Ben desperately pinned down the arm groping for the grenade, Carl Friessen his blood dripping over all three of them, clambered until he was astraddle of the Jap

"You here 'cause something's gonna happen?"

"Remember gopher hunting? We're the gophers."

in the Sanananda sector the crisp new combat fatigues he'd been issued were a sodden mess

Green as parrot puke and

would have nominated it as the most oppressive atmosphere imaginable.

Ben produced his pad and pencil

"I didn't figure you're here sightseeing."

irreparably regarded as

A slow goofy smile lit Carl's stubbled face as he looked up.

between them and control of the Pacific from Tokyo to Tasmania. was bound to be bitter about being thrown had been struggling to contain the Japs.

a sheaf he Montana outfit, the 163rd Infantry, had been heavily involved in and he could read it all again

. That won't be any picnic."

I don't guess you're here sightseeing.

The flight from Port Moresby to 00 through Kokoda Pass

"Wish I was, but the backfield was always quicker than us grunts up front."

sodden and mud-caked up to his knees

with Carl's platoon abundantly shot at but not shot up in the invasion and now dug in inland along the Bitoi River, Ben could have called it quits.

Carl had already saved him from misfortune in the night. He was rising out of the foxhole when

"I need to crap, bad."

"Do her here in the foxhole. The rule is, at night anything that moves gets its butt blown off."

"I'll lug supplies."

unused or altered in Alaska scene in 11th Man:

The doorway was filled with Jake Eisman.

Grinning, Jake lobbed a bundled flying suit which Ben instinctively caught. "Want to go for a ride to Alaska?"

Bone music. Saxophones not allowed.

"When's the transport leave?" *Do I have time to throw up?*

"It's gone."

as if on loan from some land cousin of the Widgeon a bit higher up the evolutionary chain,

whom he loved and could not reach in any number of ways.

Alaska was greeting them in autumn plaid. Directly below their aerial path, reds and purples of groundcover were mixed with the yellow of low willows--a vast tapestry, wonderfully dyed. Off a little farther on long, long ridges were golden splashes of birch foliage. On the horizon to the south stood a contrasting range of mountains, white as a mirage.

In vanguard advancing across Volturno River near Naples...sniper fire...

A safety pin and a duck feather apiece.

Flying not only over earth, but over time, too.

Down there, thirty-five thousand feet of defied gravity beneath them,

The 00 range Christmas baubles of blue and white. Logging roads stood out with fresh snow, like huge hieroglyphics.

"Weather's starting to heavy up."

Will cannot take you past all barricades. But some.

The bottle traveled faster than he was able to keep count.

It was the coldest he had ever been, the coldest he could imagine.

Hell of a thing to be your own boss

It never lets up.

Think how busy I'd be if anything genuine ever happened here.

1

He was a knowledgable young man, brought up in the forthright Depression schoolings of his generation, and he sometimes thought that was his trouble. If the law of averages had been repealed, he would have read about it somewhere. But he could wrack his brain as much as he wanted over the odds against his tricky assignment--his ongoing mission, the military preferred to call it--and that bus was still there, parked in its usual spot as if waiting just for him.

Out of habit he glanced up toward Black Eagle Hill and its smokestack to see which way the wind was blowing. You could do that from a couple of counties away. The Black Eagle stack dominated this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where he was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above English Creek when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

Ben shifted uneasily in his seat at the notion that this smokestack-marked city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him. First, the Treasure State University years, and now East Base, which the Army Air Force had plopped on the sunrise side of Great Falls like the central maze in the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into.

. Facing Duane Buisson's father, after the telegram from the War Department, was going to be the definition of hard.

As the bus nosed across the Missouri River bridge and down tree-columned streets past the sprawling university and the football stadium--Ben tensed; but the bus driver did not seem to recognize him--he tried to think what he could possibly write about Duane and what had happened to him that by any stretch of the imagination might pass muster with the TPWP copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. Of all the perplexities that went with a TPWP byline, the red pencil of the invisible copy officer was the most constant. After a year and half of this, Ben was as mystified as ever by the inner workings of the Threshhold 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 small-town weeklies and mid-size dailies; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war, that was providing him a fresh measure of fame. But it never left his mind for long that a threshhold also was where people wiped their feet on something. He was determined not to let that happen to Cyprian Buisson.

Ben patted the typewriter case on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. His orders were tucked in there. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing over that, poor duck--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.* Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work up the piece Duane deserved. Although even there, the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

The sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but Ben piled off right behind the 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, smiling over at it reminiscently. Checking his watch, he kept scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; good, maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here in the Sun River country was beyond the reach of the smelter stack and he exultantly drew in its alfalfa-tinged freshness 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 Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Airacobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid 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 Spokane 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 Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation

for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s 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, the piece he was working on about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. He just might find a way to get it across anyway.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* 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 two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could razz himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. If the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, as quickly as the planes were gone the calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. He drew a sharp breath. How many more times, deposited back here for this kind of thing, then yanked away on assignment to some shot-up corner of the world? 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 awful hunch that 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, with him journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And, worse now, Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw with terrible 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.

Duane would think I've gone off my rocker. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. *Sometimes* I *think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to touch 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 go 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.

Its main claim to fame, aside from TSU football, was that you could always tell which way the wind was blowing in Great Falls from sixty to eighty miles away in any direction. Currently Ben thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter, and a glance up toward Black Eagle Hill and its billowing smokestack verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. All the way to the Two Medicine country where he was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above English Creek when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

It did not help his frame of mind now. In the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he still found it incomprehensible that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. 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 made hardship trips home to where I played football."

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 a hardship trip, though. Facing Duane Buisson's father, after the telegram from the War Department, was going to be the definition of hard.

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable while he ran through all that was on

his mind. By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself,

An active mind still is at the mercy of the other senses, and he had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing. Currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill and the world's biggest smokestack verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. *How's that for a sendoff, Duane?*

He wondered again what he could possibly write about Duane Buisson and what had happened to him that by any stretch of the imagination might pass muster with the TPWP copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. After a year and half of this, Ben still was mystified by some of the capricious workings of the Threshhold Press War Project. He full well understood that the name was meant to invoke the undermost homefront, the breadbasket America served by small-town weeklies and mid-size dailies. But it never left his mind for long that a threshhold also was where people wiped their feet on something. He was determined not to let that happen to Cyprian Buisson.

Ben patted the typewriter cane on the seat beside him, which he had refused to yield to the bus driver. His orders were tucked in there. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing over that, poor sonofabitch--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.* Maybe in these next few days he would be able to steal a bit of time in his father's office to work up the piece about Duane. Although even there, the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

He was a knowledgable young man, brought up in the forthright Depression schoolings of his generation, and he sometimes thought that was his

trouble. If the law of averages had been repealed, he would have read about it somewhere. But he could wrack his brain as much as he wanted over the sky-high odds against his assignment--his ongoing mission, the military preferred to call it--and that bus was still there, parked in its usual spot as if waiting just for him.

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, Ben 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 here 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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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 long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Briskly 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 on Central Avenue, Ben 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. An active mind still is at the mercy of the other senses, and he had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing. Currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill and the world's biggest smokestack verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction in this centermost part of Montana. All the way to the Two Medicine country where he was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above English Creek when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile worked its way onto Ben there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

As he contemplated the everlasting cloud of power that something like the Black Eagle stack represented, the smile had no reason to stay. In the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. 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 made crip trips home to where I played football."

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 a crip trip, though. *Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing, poor sonofabitch--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag. Compassionate leave.*

He wondered again what he could possibly write about Duane Buisson and what had happened to him that by any stretch of the imagination might pass muster with the TPWP copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. After a year and half of this, Ben still was mystified by some of the capricious workings of the Threshhold Press War Project. He full well understood that the name was meant to invoke the undermost homefront, the breadbasket America served by small-town weeklies and mid-size dailies, but it never left his mind for long that a threshhold also was where people wiped their feet on something.

And why'd they give me this all of a sudden? Self-consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a first lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back here at East Base. *I don't have time in grade or anything else going for me. What are the bastards up to?*

On top of it all, he had not found the right time to talk this out with Cass. They had too many other things on their minds in the mad month since they first met.

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, Ben Reinking 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, Ben 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 here 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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod 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 out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben 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. That was before Cass, of course. But love seemed to like to strike in inconvenient places, and in the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

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 a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.*

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back here. *I don't have time in grade or anything else going for me. What are the bastards up to?*

Even an active mind, and Ben's was about as acrobatic as a bright twenty-three-year-old's can be, is at the mercy of the other senses. He had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. An involuntary glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where he was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above English Creek when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture, trying to make believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver offered up every so often at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into this kind of conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

"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, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and put all his attention to the much 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 incessant conversation about TSU's fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently 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 here. 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 whopping birthday cake. Ben 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 determinedly as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the famous starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, everlasting bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben 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 the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself, the man in a three-piece suit a few rows back had lurched up to ask the driver in a self-important tone whether they would be sure to reach Fairfield before the grain elevator shut down for the day. A commodity dealer, Ben guessed from that showy suit and vest, checking on this year's harvest. That or a black marketeer trafficking in something to do with grain elevators. To Ben's relief, the man stayed on in the spot behind the driver and the two of them talked away the miles, sparing him.

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a temporary cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable. With Duane on his mind, the sway of the bus reminded him of their countless trips together. TSU's away games. The Christmas trips home from college, when Duane always came for a few days of deer hunting together, up under the mountain reefs. If he were here now--this brought the second smile of the day to Ben--the other passengers on the bus already would be on their way out of real life to reel, wouldn't they. Movies were in Ben's blood, and Duane had a trick memory for the damnedest things, such as the exact intonation of arch lines of dialogue. *"I can't understand why a person will take a year or two to write a novel, when he can easily buy one for a few dollars."* The two of them, faces scrupulouslly straight, had murmured together many a scenario like that.

Surreptitiously Ben took a look around the bus. *STAGECOACH,* he decided, given the circumstances, and on Duane's behalf as well as his own tried out the cast of the movie against the one spotted around in the seats. The wizened

driver did not really make it as Andy Devine handling the reins; *Have to put the fat suit on him*, Duane would have solved that. His duded-up partner in conversation, however, more than qualified for a number of roles--the corrupt banker, the prissy whiskey salesman, the garrulous drunk doctor. It would be up to the pair of elderly farmers at the back, leaning across the aisle toward one another as they compared impressions from a day in Great Falls, to fill whichever parts the traveling dude didn't. Their wrinkled wives, primly minding their own business by watching the telephone poles go by--Ben gave it some thought, but could not definitively choose which one, in much younger guise, could pass for the good-hearted prostitute and which one was more natural as the haughty young wife new to the West. A coin would have to be flipped, he decided, giving Duane the call. As for the dauntless lawman riding shotgun while the stagecoach wended around and around through Monument Valley in front of John Ford's cameras, Ben knew to a certainty Duane would have demanded that one for himself: *It's about time my side got the badge and some firepower.* That left the gum-chewing railroad brakeman, probably deadheaded into Choteau on a shift changeover on the branch line, and Ben, to vie for the last two parts. About here, the game got more serious than Ben wanted. He doubted he was instrinsically John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. He hoped he was not inherently John Carradine as the doomed gambler.

"Vaughn!" the driver suddenly expelled as if throwing out a name for a casting call, startling Ben.

It took him a second to realize that the bus was pulling in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction. The little place was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but he piled off right behind the 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, smiling over at it reminiscently. Checking his watch, he kept

scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet; good, maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here was beyond the reach of the smelter stack and he exultantly drew in its freshness 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 Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the few weeks 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. 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 Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s 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, the piece he was working on about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. He vowed again to try to get it across anyway.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* 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 two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could razz himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. If the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, as quickly as the planes were gone the calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. He drew a sharp breath. How many more times, deposited back here for this kind of thing, then yanked away on assignment to some shot-up corner of the world? 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 awful hunch that 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, with him journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And, worse now, Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw with terrible 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.

Duane would think I've gone off my rocker. Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. *Sometimes I think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out from bed the other night to touch 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 go 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 clammy 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.

Even the most familiar ground is subject to human climate. Ben had the distinct feeling he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but this time around it struck him that a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, 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 here 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, definitely, whatever the tiresome slogan was supposed to mean. Ben tried to slip his duffel bag 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?

Soberly keeping that to himself, Ben boarded. He never liked being last at anything, but the half dozen other passengers long since had claimed strategic seats and were giving him the gauging looks that young men in fleece-lined flight jackets tended to draw. *If they only knew.* Giving a brisk nod 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 out of downtown Great Falls and rumbled across the Missouri River bridge in the direction of the university district, Ben 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. That was before Cass, of course. But love can ambush a person

anywhere, and in the crazy labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into, he kept coming back to the disquieting fact that this smokestack-marked smelter city seemed to have some kind of unquenchable claim on him.

Three times in eighteen months. 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 made crip trips home to where I played football."

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 a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.*

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable and working at shutting out all thoughts except those of Cass and more Cass. An active mind is at the mercy of the other senses, however. He had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. An involuntary glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any

direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where Ben was headed. Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above Gros Ventre when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the Treasure State University campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

As he contemplated the everlasting cloud of power that something like the Black Eagle stack represented, the smile had no reason to stay. "Those eternal bastards," his editor father always said. Ben had been raised to despise the Anaconda Copper company and its long coil of grip on the politics and daily newspapers of the state, and to this day he had no trouble doing that. At almost all levels, though, the world that had turned Ben Reinking into a soldier--if that's what he amounted to--seemed immeasurably more complicated than history's argumentative yesterdays. As brainy and judicious toward life as a man could be at the age of twenty-three, Ben surmised that every era since the dawn of time made this same excuse for tripping ridiculously over itself. Knowledge of this, if he was any example, did not change the feeling of treading constantly in an unpredictable tide, often up to one's neck. Half consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. "My, my," Cass had ruthlessly kidded him, leering at him in the manner Hedy Lamarr did at her leading man, "what's next, a Good Conduct medal?" In point of fact, the promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back here under the throne of that smokestack. The uneasy thought returned. Authority, in whatever murky form, seemed determined to spin the compass of his life whenever it wanted to.

Spin it in ways he was having one hell of a hard time keeping up with. *Maybe it's the uniforms.*

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture. Good grief, he didn't make that smart remark about uniforms out loud, did he? He was pretty sure he hadn't. Not looking around yet, he made believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver offered up every time at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into a gut-spilling conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

"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, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and put all his attention to the much different landmark coming up, the mammoth presence on this side of town, the stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football. He felt his throat dry out. But the bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently hadn't recognized him--thank goodness for small favors. For the time being, he was spared one more round of talking about Treasure State University's fabled 1941 season. If the pair of years since were any evidence, he was in danger of being talked to about that until his last day on earth. Ben had too many things on his mind to mull the workings of fable, but the classic elements were there: in that infamous year of pulverizing loss for America, TSU had gone undefeated.

Alert all the way to his fingertips now, he leaned forward and studied the big stadium and its Romanesque hauteur just as if he had never played here. 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 whopping birthday cake. Ben gnawed on each 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 powerfully as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth man's story. Bruno's story, eternal bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben 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 the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

By the time the bus nosed northward onto Highway 89 as if it knew the way itself, the man in a three-piece suit a few rows back had lurched up to ask the driver in a self-important tone whether they would be sure to reach Fairfield before the grain elevator shut down for the day. A commodity dealer, Ben guessed from that showy suit and vest, checking on this year's harvest. That or a black marketeer trafficking in something to do with grain elevators. To Ben's relief, the man stayed on in the spot behind the driver and the two of them talked away the miles, sparing him.

Coaxing himself to relax while he had the chance, he took a casual look around at the other passengers. Movies were in his blood, and a surprising number of times, he liked to think, reel and real overlapped. *STAGECOACH,* he decided,

given the circumstances, and mentally tried out the cast of the movie against the one on the bus. The wizened driver did not really make it as Andy Devine handling the reins. His duded-up partner in conversation, however, more than qualified for a number of roles--the corrupt banker, the prissy whiskey salesman, the garrulous drunk doctor. It would be up to the pair of elderly farmers at the back, leaning across the aisle toward one another as they compared impressions from a day in Great Falls, to fill whichever parts the traveling dude didn't. Their wrinkled wives, primly minding their own business by watching the telephone poles go by--Ben gave it some thought, but could not definitively choose which one, in much younger guise, could pass for the good-hearted prostitute and which one was more natural as the haughty young wife new to the West. They would have to flip a coin. As for the dauntless lawman riding shotgun while the stagecoach wended around and around through Monument Valley in front of John Ford's cameras, amazingly here one was, although midway in the bus and less than dauntless--a deputy sheriff nodding off over the star on his gabardine jacket, apparently after a hard day in county court. That left the gum-chewing railroad brakeman, probably deadheaded into Choteau on a shift changeover on the branch line, and Ben, to vie for the last two parts. About here, the game got more serious than Ben wanted. He doubted he was instrinsically John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. He hoped he was not inherently John Carradine as the doomed gambler.

"Vaughn!" the driver suddenly expelled as if throwing out a name for a casting call, startling Ben.

It took him a second to realize that the bus was pulling in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction. The little place was only the first stop, barely out of sight of Great falls, but he piled off right behind the 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, checking his watch, scanning the sky to the west. Winter had only brushed the tops of the Rockies yet. Good; maybe the weather would hold off during his leave. He moved around restlessly, his shadow in lengthened antics behind him as he faced into the sun of late afternoon. The air out here away from the smelter was so fresh it practically crackled and he exultantly drew it in while he watched the sky and waited. Whether it was football or what, he had always greatly loved this time of year, the crisp blue-and-tan days of lingering autumn.

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 Geiger Field in Spokane. The unmistakable silhouette of P-39s; Aircobras, in the virulent military method of naming aircraft types.

Ben felt his heart race; another saying that was perfectly valid now that he had met Cass. In the two weeks since his fresh set of orders landed him at East Base and the Air Transport Command, he had seen this four times now, Cass and her WASP squadron ferrying in the sleek gray fighters. 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 everywhere on the prairie ahead--the Sun River, the Missouri, and for that matter, the Black Eagle stack. She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Stuart also had a reputation for bringing in her flights on impeccable instrument landings during whiteout blizzards. Ben shook his head just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women's Air Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17s and anything else that flew, onward north to

the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. He resolved again; if he did it just right, his syndicated piece on the flying women of East Base might get that across.

Still mesmerized, he stood there with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the P-39s 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, showing one another what passion looked like in wartime. Uniforms 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? Isn't that a spice? That explains a lot."* 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 two hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking. But that was hoping for too much. As the flight swept over Vaughn Junction and onward toward Great Falls and East Base, the P-39s were as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not? Watching the Cobras out of sight, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. He could rib himself when he felt like he needed it, and he was trying to now. If the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to Russia's Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Although he tried to ward it off, deflation set in on him as quickly as the planes were gone. The calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. That repeated question: how many times was he going to be deposited back here for this kind of journey, then yanked away on assignment elsewhere? Now that he had met Cass and they were hopelessly gone on one another, it was going to be even

harder to bear. He had a sudden compelling vision of the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that--unspooling on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle. And Cass always out of reach. Across that time, he foresaw with terrible 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.

Ben drew a sharp breath. He still had trouble believing it of himself: that along with everything else in what his worst superior officer so far--the East Base one--pompously liked to call the fog of war, he had got himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. Fog was not a bad description of the extreme lack of clarity in his and Cass's predicament, actually. From his Lit Crit class in college he perfectly well knew about the willing suspension of disbelief, but damn, what was a person to do when the situation requiring it happened outside the pages of Tolstoy or Flaubert?

"Ready to go 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 clammy window and forced himself to doze.

Even the most familiar ground is subject to human climate. Ben had the distinct feeling he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but this time around it struck him that a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. In better times, 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

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"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I made crip trips home to where I played football."

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 a crip trip, though. *Compassionate leave. Duane wouldn't have had any trouble laughing, poor devil--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag.*

For anyone as practiced at it as Ben was, travel could become a cocoon, and he burrowed into it now for all he was worth, shouldering the bus window until he found the seat spot that was most comfortable and working at shutting out all thoughts except those of Cass and more Cass. An active mind is at the mercy of the other senses, however. He had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff now and then to tell which way the wind was blowing, and currently he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. All the way to the Two Medicine country where Ben was headed.

Hunting jackrabbits on the benchlands above Gros Ventre when he was a boy, he fully remembered, he could keep track of where he was by that distant dark-topped shaft, defying the curve of the earth.

A small reflective smile--*See? I'll be rolling in the aisle hysterically next, Duane*--worked its way onto him there in the perpetual bus seat. Evidently he had been no better at figuring out omens back then than he was now; in spite of the world's biggest smokestack significantly muddying the air over the TSU campus, he had chosen to come to college here, hadn't he.

As he contemplated the everlasting cloud of power that something like the Black Eagle stack represented, the smile had no reason to stay. "Those eternal bastards," his editor father always said. Ben had been raised to despise the Anaconda Copper company and its long coil of grip on the politics and daily newspapers of the state, and to this day he had no trouble doing that. At almost all levels, though, the world that had turned Ben Reinking into a soldier--if that's what he amounted to--seemed immeasurably more complicated than history's argumentative yesterdays. As brainy and judicious toward life as a man could be at the age of twenty-three, Ben surmised that every era since the dawn of time made this same excuse for tripping ridiculously over itself. Knowledge of this, if he was any example, did not change the feeling of treading constantly in an unpredictable tide, often up to one's neck. Half consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back here under the throne of that smokestack. The uneasy thought returned. Authority, in whatever murky form, seemed determined to play with the compass of his life whenever it wanted to. Play with it in ways he was having an increasingly hard time keeping up with. *Maybe it's the uniforms.*

"There she is," he heard as if on cue, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source.

Ben froze in his window-gazing posture, making believe the over-the-shoulder remark in his direction was merely an announcement the bus driver offered up every time at this point of the route. The last thing he wanted was to get drawn into this kind of conversation all the way to Gros Ventre.

"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, gradually he pulled his gaze away from the smokestack and the Black Eagle smelter hill and put all his attention to the much 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 incessant conversation about TSU's fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, apparently hadn't 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 here. 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 whopping birthday cake. Ben gnawed on each 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 compellingly as ever. The team's story, his, Duane's, Howie's, the rest of the starting eleven. Merle Purcell's story; the twelfth

man's story. Bruno's story, eternal bastard as football coach. The story coded somehow there in the white alphabet, those painted rocks arranged into the huge letters TSU, stairstep-style, high on the side of the butte that loomed over the stadium. Ben 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 the world of war was always in the way. It was in the way of everything.

"Vaughn!"

When the driver expelled that, Ben was keyed up and ready. This was the one part of the journey home he had been looking forward to. As soon as the bus pulled in at the sparse crossroads called Vaughn Junction, he piled off right behind the driver.

Local Board # 37 of the Selective Service System has notified ye editor that this month's eleven draft registrants reported to the induction center in Great Falls last Monday morning. It brings to 422 the number of Pondera County men and women now serving in the armed forces. This is quite a showing for a county with a population of only three thousand. Remember, mail subscriptions to the Gleaner *are provided free for any of our men and women in military uniform.*

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, Oct. 28, 1943

He was a knowledgable young man, brought up in the forthright Depression schoolings of his generation, and he sometimes thought that was his trouble. If the law of averages had been repealed, he would have read about it somewhere. But he could wrack his brain as much as he wanted over the odds

against his assignment--his ongoing mission, the military preferred to call it--and the bus was still there, parked in its familiar spot as if waiting just for him.

The bus did not seem to have heard any such news either, parked there as if waiting just for him.

Right now, he had many things on his mind, but the first was the usual in his damnable assignment--his ongoing mission, the military liked to call it--to be paid attention to the familiar one, catch the bus. Since he hadn't, once more his damnable assignment--his ongoing mission, the military liked to call it--seemed to run against all the odds. He tried to turn off his imagination, but the thought sneaked through that every chapter started, like a 00 dream, this same way: *catch the bus.*

thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up Neither had Duane. At football practice Duane would mimick the Great Falls habit of sniffing the air to tell which way the wind was blowing, then face the direction of the giant smokestack at the Black Eagle smelter and keel over like a dead canary.

On top of it all, he had not found the right time to talk this out with Cass. They had too many other things on their minds in the mad month since they first met.

It does not matter who I am in this story, nor if I am any one person you may have heard of. When life, and for that matter death, singled out so many of our generation so early for chapters such as ours, voices mingled with the years. And our saga, for that is what it was written up as at the time, from the very start was an account that had to be vigilantly pieced together; a rehearsal for history, we were told. History we became, at great cost. So, our own telling of it, at last,

requires an author possessed of the one brand of authority that can never be argued with, anonymity. If you happen to need to ascribe a single perspective to this collective tale, most often it will be Ben's. He was tapped at the time to chronicle our story; to bear it, really. But so fateful a set of events as ours cannot be told without the influence of women any more than *The Odyssey* could; and so, among others, Cass Stuart definitely will have her say in this.

The rest of us, who exist now only in the breath of these words, amount to an odd number--eleven--whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1940 on a wind-blown prairie football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war.

Now, meet Ben.

Theirs was a bold rehearsal for history, they were told, and that is what it was written up as at the time. History they became, at great cost. Yet there is more to life, and for that matter death, than being singled out in an official version gathering the dust of the decades since. Their reckless saga, together and apart, from the very start was an account that had to be vigilantly pieced together. If you happen to need to ascribe a single perspective to their collective story, most often it will be Ben's. He was tapped at the time to chronicle all that happened; to bear it, really. But their kind of epic cannot be told without the presence of women any more than *The Odyssey* ultimately could; and so, among the daring contingent at East Base, Cass Stuart and Gwen Blake will have their say in this.

The legendary others, who exist any more only in the breath of these words, amount to an odd number--eleven--whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1940 on a wind-blown prairie football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war.

Now, meet Ben.

"How's it going in the Falls?"

"Red stars over Montana. Aren't you missing a scoop?" Ben described the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Russian air force were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes.

"Half the county probably thinks there's a red star on me, I wrote so many editorials in favor of Lend-Lease."

"You and Franklin D. got it. 00 planes last month."

"Should you be telling me this?"

"Hell, no--you're a newspaperman. Is it my fault you're listening?" Ben discarded the chicken bone.

"Do you ever get to see this?"

He picked out his name, backwards. TPWP Dispatch.

"Never expected to see you get to be boilerplate."

"At least it's better writing it than being it."

"You have quite a gift."

"I had quite a teacher."

"That doesn't explain football."

Ben held up the long hands that in some quarters had him compared to Don Hutson of the Packers. "Not your fault in the artistes ran in the other side of the family."

Bill Reinking smiled, but not much.

First, the Treasure State University years, and now East Base, which the Army Air Force had plopped on the sunrise side of Great Falls like the central maze

in the strange labyrinth of TDYs--temporary duty assignments--that Ben Reinking's war somehow had turned into.

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 a hardship trip, though. Facing Vic Buisson's father, after the telegram from the War Department, was going to be the definition of hard.

As the bus nosed across the Missouri River bridge and down tree-columned streets past the sprawling university and the football stadium--Ben tensed; but the bus driver did not seem to recognize him--he tried to think what he could possibly write about Vic and what had happened to him that by any stretch of the imagination might pass muster with the TPWP copy officer back in Washington. Censor, really. Of all the perplexities that went with a TPWP byline, the red pencil of the invisible copy officer was the most constant. 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 small-town weeklies and mid-size dailies; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war, that was providing him a fresh measure of fame. But it never left his mind for long that a Threshold also was where people wiped their feet on something. He was determined not to let that happen to Cyprian Buisson.

He was a knowledgable young man, brought up in the forthright Depression schoolings of his generation, and he sometimes thought that was his trouble. If the law of averages had been repealed, he would have read about it somewhere. But he could wrack his brain as much as he wanted over the odds

against his unwanted assignment--his ongoing mission, the military preferred to call it--and that bus was still there, parked in its usual spot as if waiting just for him.

Well, he told himself as he swung along under the burden of his duffel bag, at least there was one thing new about this trip: Cass, coming out of the blue to him. A slow little conciliatory smile worked its way onto his long face over that, then went away promptly as he once more stepped to the bus.

since he was sixteen was half a head taller, narrower Ben's father was root and trunk of the Two Medicine country--homestead, one-room school, printer's devil at fifteen, owning and running the *Gleaner* by the time he was twenty-five--and Ben, standing there in his Army Air Force uniform,

Even so, he had come down with at least one Great Falls habit through the years, a sniff every so often to tell which way the wind was blowing, and he thought he caught a faint whiff of sulphur, even this far from the smelter. A glance up toward Black Eagle Hill verified that the wind had decided to carry in the bus's direction for the time being. Not that there ever was any escaping the dominating Black Eagle stack, staring back at him through the bus window, anywhere in this centermost part of Montana. Five hundred feet tall and with a constant plume of smoke, the industrial spire stuck up over the horizon, giant chimney to Anaconda Copper's ore furnaces, for sixty or eighty miles in any direction. "Those eternal bastards," his editor father always said. Ben had been raised to despise the Anaconda Copper company and its long coil of grip on the politics and daily newspapers of the state, and to this day he had no trouble doing that. At almost all levels, though, the world that had turned Ben Reinking into a soldier--if that's what he amounted to--seemed immeasurably more complicated than history's argumentative yesterdays. As brainy and judicious toward life as a man could be at the age of twenty-three, he already had surmised that every era since the dawn of time made this same excuse for tripping ridiculously over itself. Knowledge of

this, if he was any example, did not change the feeling of treading constantly in an unpredictable tide, often up to one's neck. Half consciously he rubbed the new silver bar of a full lieutenant on the tab of his shirt collar. The promotion had caught him by surprise almost as much as the blindside orders that landed him back here under the throne of that smokestack. Authority, in whatever murky form.

Three times in eighteen months. 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 made hardship trips home to where I played football."

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 a hardship trip, though. Facing Vic Buisson's father, after the telegram from the War Department, was going to be the definition of hard.

"Good thing you're back, this place could use a foreman."

Ben raised his eyes piously to the sky. "Thank heavens for editors who look the wrong way." He broke out in a grin, and his father found himself grinning along without knowing why. Ben had that effect on people. my TPWP minder went for my decoy. I had a graf in there about Red stars over Montana, and he cut that clean as a whistle." He described the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Russian air force were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes before they were delivered north. "I knew they'd never let that stand."There, now. Aren't you missing a scoop?"

"Other way around."

"Red stars over Montana."

"You lost me."

Making the most of the mood, he couldn't resist "Red stars over Montana."

"Shouldn't give away a trade secret to an editor," he teased, "but my TPWP minder went for my decoy. I had a graf in there about Red stars over Montana, and he cut that clean as a whistle." He described the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Russian air force were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes before they were delivered north. "I knew they'd never let that stand."There, now. Aren't you missing a scoop?"

"Hell, no--you're a newspaperman. Is it my fault you're listening?"

The one time he went up with her, a spin over the Rockies on the excuse of the newspaper piece, it was immediately evident Cass could fly circles around most males.

Ben shook his head now just thinking of it.

Women at the controls; in the world of war, why not?

The world of war: he shook his head just thinking of it, a woman pilot at the controls of each deadly P-39 and the one woman he desired most in the world in command of their flights.

"Makes me feel old."

"I was afraid that might be it."

carried the weight of their numbers everywhere he went in the war.

No further casualties on the supreme team,

Lend-Lease is the devil's doing

As he would professionally fast-read the piece, he knew to a certainty that other editors in other offices across America

The bitter arithmetic got the best of Ben.

we should have just strung barbwire along the beaches of both oceans and let the rest of the world fight."

Ben slammed a hand on the table, startling himself along with his father. He was more wound up than he'd known, but he couldn't stop now.

Things had reached the point where he had to bring this into the open.

Level with me,

blindly brought the matter into the open

Although he tried to ward it off, as quickly as the planes were gone the calendar of dread began flapping itself in his face again. He drew a sharp breath. How many more times, deposited back here for this kind of thing, then yanked away on assignment to some shot-up corner of the world? 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 awful hunch that 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, with him journeying like a ceaseless tourist in uniform, chronicling what he did not want to chronicle.

chronicling what he did not want to chronicle.

Fort Peck

In most ways the town was pathetic.

Cyprian owned the foremost story on a dam project full of stories. He had been the driver for the Corps of Engineers colonel in command. The September day in 1938 when reports began coming in that the soil readings not right at the far

side of the four-mile long dam, the colonel and others officers had to go take a look. Cyprian was at the steering wheel, more than halfway across the dam, when the upstream face of the dam began to cave away. Throwing the car into reverse, Cyprian backed off the dam at forty miles an hour.

Beyond that, the aging man in front of Ben was famous in an anonymous way. The dam drew attention and when the photographer came, Cyprian was assigned to drive her, too. There in the middle, his hat still on, Cyprian danced with one of the bar women.

"See this?"

Ben eyed the cardboard roll of toilet paper. "Yeah?"

"Pretend it's your peter. This"--she unrolled the condom--"goes on like this."

Ben sat slack-jawed.

"Pretend this is your penis in an erectile state."

The bored medic fitted a prophylactic over the tube while Ben watched, slack-jawed.

As the bus eased around the curve at the edge of town and approached the storefronts that lined a main street much wider than it needed to be, a remnant of the days when freight wagons and their six-horse teams had to have room to turn around, Ben tallied the businesses that had perished since his last visit--Quint's Saddlery, and the upstart gas station that had tried to run competition with Grady Tilton's, hopeless in a time of rationing--and the surviving stalwarts that meant most to him, the Odeon movie theater, the Lunchery, the Medicine Lodge saloon. At the far end of the street, big as ever, the turreted Sedgwick House hotel stood

waiting to serve as momentary bus depot. The entire worn-looking town seemed to gasp for a taste of fresh paint, and to know it was not getting any for the duration.

He had been born here, and his father before him. His mother was quick to tell anyone rash enough to ask that she had not. Within the Reinking household, her motto was: "The smaller the town, the bigger its eyes. And they don't come much smaller than Gros Ventre."

By the time the crew chief undid the door of the C-47, Ben was already holding on to his crush hat against the Great Falls wind.

Peering out the boxy window of the C-47 transport as it taxied in, Ben puzzled it out.

In one of these Great Falls gales, Vic Buisson had punted eighty yards.

there wasn't a trace of the tar-paper construction site this had been in his previous two stationings here.

Given what whooshed in as soon as the door of the C-47 transport was opened, he realized the point was to get

with markings that made him blink in disbelief.

Who in his right mind would have thought Montana would be a staging area for the war?

Cyprian Bouisson came down the dirt path from the house to meet him. He chuckled slightly when he saw the big black car.

debated with himself whether to take the time to go into Browning and have it fixed. In the end,

In the annals of Toussaint Rennie stories, especially the ones he told himself,

It's hunting season. I'll go hunt him.

That fit with the rest of this.

It made him uneasy, all the logical headings falling off the compass

For whatever reason,

The next day, it was noon and flat tire number one before he and the Packard escaped, barely intact, from what passed for a road along the rocky upper gorge of the Two Medicine river. As he changed the tire in a wind that threatened to blow the hubcap away, Ben still smarted from his reception in Toussaint Rennie's historic vicinity. *How did you ever stand it out here, Vic?* There had been a bad sign, literally, the moment he pulled into the scabby yard of the Rennie place; a blotch of something written in red on the weathered door, like lipstick on a witch. Walking up to it with a sinking feeling, he found it was a shingle tacked to the door and lettered on it in barn paint the message: ELK SEASON. Ben knew better than to try to guess where in the forest-quilled foothills there along the hem of the Rockies a lone hunter, himself nearly as old as those hills, would go in search of elk. He patted the Packard in apology and navigated it across a barely wide enough stringer bridge to the reservation side of the river, to look up Toussaint's Blackfeet relatives. In-laws, rather, and that proved to be the problem.

"That skunk fart--why would I keep track of him?" was the extent of the answer at the first ranch of the Rides Proud family clan that Ben tried.

It went that way the next couple of times, amiable leather-faced men emerging from corral or barn in greeting, then turning away at the mention of the name Toussaint Rennie. Ben thought he knew a thing or two about family squabbles, but the rampant grudges here rocked him back on his heels. *Christ, you'd think they were the Germans and the Russians.* Bloodline seemed to be behind it--Toussaint's own hazy tribal background, his people somewhere in the

Dakotas, likely a French fur trapper named Reynaud thrown in somewhere back there--that and his picking off a Blackfoot bride named Mary Rides Proud for a life together which by all evidence was prolific and antagonistic in about equal measure. Certainly her blood relations were doing a good job of keeping up hostilities in memory of Mary, and Ben looked around warily for the next Rides Proud man on the prod as he pulled into the last ranch. This time, a Blackfoot woman came out on the front steps, her hands in the folds of her dress, and told him in a flat voice her husband was up on the ridge fixing fence.

Totally surprised, Ben stared east into the deep vee of the river valley and the distant patches of prairie captured between the outline of the bluffs. He had never in his life heard about any elk herd in the Two Medicine bottomlands. *She's putting me on. What do I do now?* Then it sank in on him. The woman was pointing all the way east, to the horizon. To the Sweetgrass Hills, rising like three mirage islands on the earthbrim where the sun came up.

Speculatively, he looked there again now, as he let down the jack and the Packard stood restored on four equal if bald tires. He figured the trip at a hard two hours' drive. In a cockeyed direction. Something seemed determined to spin the compass of his life lately, every heading crazily coming up *east.*

knew better than to try to guess where in the forest-quilled foothills there along the hem of the Rockies a lone hunter, himself nearly as old as those hills, would go in search of elk.

Toussaint, with his own tribal background hazy but decidedly not Blackfeet--and likely with a French fur trapper named Reynaud thrown in somewhere back there--was renowned in the Two Medicine country that and his picking off a Blackfoot bride named Mary Rides Proud for a wife, and a life together which by all evidence was prolific and antagonistic in about equal measure. It went that same way at the next couple of ranches, amiable leather-faced men emerging from corral or barn in

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Speculatively, he looked there again now, as he let down the jack and the Packard stood restored on four equal if bald tires. He figured the trip at a hard two hours' drive. In a cockeyed direction. He did not believe in omens, or at least did not want to, but the compass headings of his life lately, every crazily coming up *east.*

watched slack-jawed as a medic gave him rote instruction in use of a condom by unrolling the prophylactic and fitting it over the cardboard tube from a roll of toilet paper. He bit his tongue against asking

He felt the excitement grow in him. This would show the old son of a bitch.

She called after him:

"Fancy jacket, Lieutenant."

and at he headed for The infirmary's drop-your-pants-and-let's-have-a-look-at you

Glad to get out of there, even if the infirmary and a humiliating short-arm inspection was next. His ears stopped burning after he had dropped his pants, pulled them back up and been given a clean bill of health by a doctor mostly interested in talking about football.

Ben immediately was surer than that; he did not like this colonel.

This"--he touched the TPWP lettering emblazoned on the arm patch--"says so." "Reinking, I've already checked with ATC higher-ups and I am told I have to swallow having you on my base.

Ben came out of the commander's office seething.

The red face reddened more.

He had dealt with sharp-edged women before, but this one seemed deadly.

The curves woke him for good. Even before his eyes were open he could tell, to the exact mile, this was where the highway gathered strength for Gros Ventre by whipping back and forth to make its way up and across the steep benchlands south of town. He sat up and looked around the bus, discovering he was the only passenger left. War time--that is, military time, with its twenty-four hour tablature--was enough to skew anyone's private clock, but even so, he was surprised at himself for staying conked out through the stops at Fairfield and Twin Sulphur Springs and Choteau. Sleep usually didn't come readily, and not just because of wide-awake nights with Cass.

The bus leaned into the next swerve of the road, the driver being kept busy, and Ben braced himself around, half sideways, to watch as Once again, the tension of coming home smacked up against the age-old allure of the Two Medicine country.

At least he was reasonably sure the other hills, the big hogback of West Butte and the bare cone called Gold Butte,

Swearing with military fluency at Toussaint Rennie and his

His mind danced between, back there on

. The only ammunition expended was the joking calibre.

, who was made of iron,

When Vic and Dex, natural runners but laggard walkers,

The backfield trio kidded one another relentlessly,

Vic said running was one thing, all that goddamned walking was another.

had considerable footing into the earth

"Good of you to come." Cyprian Bouisson came down the dirt path from the house to meet him. He chuckled slightly when he saw the big black car. "That Packard. Stories it could tell."

They must be higher up, haven't come down to water yet.. If Toussaint is tracking them, he'll be above them so they can't get over the shoulder of that ridge.

but the only creatures to be seen were a pair of magpies preening on a dead pine.

"The whistler--what do you call him when you play?"

"The referee."

He wondered how far Toussaint Rennie was ahead of him in this.

"Ten years of that. Then no buffalo."

I don't know about you, buddy, but it would tie my guts in knots.

Oh Christ, how can I hunt a hunter in one day?

Call off your dogs, conscience, I'll ask around--this is such a famously friendly neighborhood.

That didn't make it right.Tepee Weepy wouldn't know the difference. targeting each other with their kidding

reefs for a couple of days, never even seeing a deer but their spirits high anyway. Jake, who was mass and momentum combined, forged past Vic and Dex on the trail when they stopped to catch their breath and loudly told the world it was conclusive proof that two halfbacks did not add up to a fullback. The pair mutually gave him the finger and agreed between themselves they were fortunate to have someone the general size and mentality of a horse along to pack out all the meat they were going to get.

"Makes me awful sad," Toussaint said simply. Followed by:

So many ways the war warped humanity. He could foresee this much: at the end of this, guilty with survival, he and Jake would go to the Officers Club and cry in their beer over Vic.

"What they call a 'bituary?"

. Ben had seen the place from the air

Victor Rennie would go through life in a wheelchair or on crutches with an empty pantleg.

Putting the notebook in his zipper pocket,

The deep-set eyes measured Ben again.

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world of war

The world of war was like nothing Ben had imagined.

The world of war held its own laws of gravity, from 32,000 feet where B-17s encountered Heinkels and 00s trying to shoot them down, to 000 beneath the oceans where submarines... Men fell. Some fell into pieces, some simply to pieces.

Time zones of the world of war cut back through centuries, indiscriminate of mere clock niceties.

The isobars of the world of war...

This was not mere winter, this was a white coma on the land. Off to the east lay a shroud of thousands of miles of this, where the Russians fought the Germans year after year.

Death-cold weather, as if the sun had vanished for good and the earth was giving over to ice and snow.

The wind perturbing the snow outside the chilly bivouac.

Old slabs of dirty snow lay like 00 sidewalks between the tank tracks.

Beyond the black trees the blank of gray snow and gray sky ran rogether.

He and Moxie sat listening to the sound of snow sifting steadily against the window--the softest of nature's keening, and the most deadly.

A rime of frost on the tank fender...

Walking on the slope, Ben carried the rifle on the uphill side, to better his balance (with its inward pull).

Moxie scooped snow from the rock, took off his left glove, put it on the rock and then sat on it.

The cold burn of that wind.

Thorns of frost on bushes and dead tree limbs.

The flakes were coming down like feathers, but every so often the wind dislodged a branchload from the 00 trees and that produced a half-minute or so of snow like white dust, with clods falling within it. The all but silent crash of snow...

It was falling so hard now, there seemed to be more snow than space between the flakes.

The land quiet with the weight of snow. Until a shot rang out.

When the silver winter began to tarnish,

The flecked sky, filled with plump snowflakes.

The thinnest like curtain material, other days were like living in a bowl of milk.

stacked in sacrifice. Enough of a pyre to cause

then how about running it with the budget sense of, say, a weekly newspaper?
If the U.S. was stuck with being at war, he wanted it
Wouldn't piss on an Anaconda executive if the man's heart was on fire.

He stepped over to the mounds of waiting newsprint as if they were spread with a picnic.

Besides, the written word from back there, whether it was about grain prices or the latest run of bad weather, sometimes said more to him than was on the actual page. Call it useful apprehension.

The Senator's wife fanned herself with a hand and sighed.

, bland-looking and gossipy as only a Washington, D.C., servant could be,

The gold-braid bastards had managed to lose the *Indianapolis.*

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Kerz, Kenneth

Martin, Bruno.

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This was the lame-duck session of Congress, and with his whopping re-election he was definitely of the opposite species, robustly exercising the seniority which led to the gavel of a prime committee. His wife looked across to his breakfast spot to see what he had been reading. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws.* chairmanships. forging its way up and up in committee assignments. a power from the West in line for .

Contrary to his custom, the Senator did not arise from behind the piles of books at his end of the table and plant a kiss on his wife's brow as she settled to her breakfast spot. Suspiciously she peeked over at the reading material strewn around him to see if the Bible lay open somewhere there. His habit before an election was to thumb through until he found a pertinent verse about afflicting one's enemies, then righteously set out to do so by the lethal means known as Montana politics. The rough-and-tumble of another campaign ought to be months down the road yet, however, and the volumes surrounding his plate of drying egg yolk and bacon grease appeared to be the usual maroon tomes of military history and green-and-gilt

biographies and memoirs of political figures. She looked on with fond exasperation as he pored over dense pages, taking notes in his leatherbacked notebook. Beaky old cowboy that the national press made him out to be, the husband and mealtime companion known to her all these years feasted on the holdings of the Library of Congress as no other member of the United States Senate ever did. Whatever was immersing him this particular day, she could be sure it was all part of the strong old scripture of seniority and power.

At length the Senator roused himself enough to rumble, "Good morning, Sadie, late-sleeping lady."

"'Morning yourself, Luther. You wouldn't be so quick to hop out of bed either if knitting Red Cross socks with Eleanor while photographers watch was waiting for you." Such relationship as this politically apostate household had with the White House--scant--was by way of the Senator's wife. She held her tongue now as the broadbeamed cook marched in bearing her breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and crisp toast. As soon as the servant was out of the room, she cocked a canny look across at her still musing spouse. "And what is your own Christian mission this fine tropical day in Babylon-on-the-Potomac?" The honey she was trying to spread on the toast already was runny in the Washington heat.

"Roast an admiral or two, most likely," he anticipated, patting the volume of Mahan on naval warfare. "The fools still think they can yell 'Pearl Harbor!' and we'll give them as big a fleet as they goddamn want. The hearing may take a while before they're whimpered out. Don't look for me home till supper, my love." As if reminded of the unremitting passage of time, he yanked out the dollar watch that had regulated his day through four terms of political infighting at the highest levels.

he marveled at Washington, thereby inaugurating his fifth senatorial term of doing so.

There never was enough time. He would ambush the Navy at this afternoon's hearing--the gold-braid bastards had taken half a dozen tries and most of the war so far to develop a landing craft that could actually put trucks and tanks onto a beach instead of depositing them into the surf to conk out--but targets in the military budget popped up almost faster than he could keep up with. He still shook his head over those Air Force nitwits who had spent taxpayer dollars training women to fly and then wouldn't let them take the planes as far as Canada; Christ, you could spit into Canada from Montana.

What he was against currently, however, with all his being, was wartime waste. Now that we were in the mess, any fool could see the U.S. had to be the so-called arsenal of democracy, but that didn't mean there could be unending expenditure of--

Bill Reinking was not a precipitous person.